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God's Eye

by Todeswind
Harry Dresden gets misplaced after the events of the Darkhallow. Suffice it to say tossed to the edge of the galaxy, he still manages to stir up trouble. After all, the universe exists to trouble Harry Dresden.

Cowl kept on chanting, and I saw his body arch with tension. Over the next minute or so, he actually, physically rose above the ground, until his boots were three or four inches in the air.

His voice had become part of the wild storm, part of the dark energy, and it rolled and boomed and echoed all around us. I began to understand the kind of power we were dealing with. It was power as deep as an ocean, and as broad as the sky.

It was dark and lethal and horrible and beautiful, and Cowl was about to take it all in. The strength it would give him would not make him a match for the entire White Council. It would put him in a league so far beyond them that their strength would mean virtually nothing.

It was power enough to change the world. To reshape it after one's own liking.

The tip of the vortex spun down, danced lightly upon Cowl's lips, and then slipped gently between them. Cowl howled out the last repetition of his chant, his mouth opening wide. I ground my teeth. Bob hadn't been able to help me, and I couldn't let Cowl complete the spell. Even if it killed me. I drew in my magic for the last spell I would ever throw, a blast to slam into Cowl, disrupt the spell, let that vast energy tear him to bits. Kumori sensed it and I heard her let out a short cry. The knife burned hot on my throat.

And then the dinosaur I'd summoned plunged through the clouds of wild spirits and headed directly for Kumori, her eyes blazing with brilliant orange flames. Tyrannosaur Bob let out a bellow and swiped one enormous talon at Kumori. Cowl's apprentice was tough and competent, but no amount of training or forethought can prepare you for the sight of an angry dinosaur coming to eat your ass.

She froze for the briefest second, and I turned, shoving away from her. The knife whipped against my throat, I felt a hot sting. I wondered if that was what Grevane had felt.

There was no more time. I flung myself across the grass, gripped my staff in both hands, and swung it like a baseball bat at Cowl's head.

The blow connected, right on what felt like the tip of his upturned jaw, snapping his mouth shut and knocking him to the ground. The vortex abruptly screamed and filled with a furious red light. I choked out a cry and fell down on my right side to the ground, bringing up my shield bracelet and holding it over me in an effort to protect myself from the vast forces now flying free from the botched spell.

There was more sound, so loud that no word could accurately describe it, incandescent lightning, screaming faces, and forms of spirits and ghosts, and trembling earth beneath me.

And blackness fell.
When I came to my senses there was no vortex of dark magic, no lightning, no storm, no rain. No signs that there had been a battle between necromancers at all. There was also no field and no signs that I was anywhere remotely in Chicago.

I lay there for a moment, the aching throb of my ribs competing with the swirling pains in my head. I slowly gathered my wits, assessing my surroundings. The dark quiet sounds of night echoed around me, tiny chirps and soft cries of night-time creatures murmuring passively in the shadowy forest around me.

Something furry and rodent like sniffed my face inquisitively before scuttling away in fear, monkeyish in its gait. I looked down and saw that I had fallen around Bob the skull and curled my body around him as I had shielded myself.

Orange flame flickered to life in the eye sockets. "Some show, huh?" Bob said. He sounded exhausted.

"You had to go get the dinosaur, eh?" I said. "I figured you'd just grab a handy zombie."

"Why settle for wiener when you can have steak?" the skull said brightly. "Pretty good idea, Harry, talking to me once Cowl sat me on the ground. I didn't want to work for him anyway, but as long as he had the skull... well. You know how it is."

I grunted. "Yeah. What happened?"

"The spell backlashed when you slugged Cowl," Bob said. "Did a bit of property damage."

I coughed out a little laugh, looking around me. "Yeah. Cowl?"

"Most likely there are little pieces of him still filtering down," Bob said brightly. "And his little dog, too."

"You see them die?" I asked.

"Well. No. Once that backlash came down, it tore apart every enchantment within a hundred miles. Your dinosaur sort of fell apart." He blinked in surprise as he realized where we were.

"Oh," Bob said, "Uh... Harry we aren't where we're supposed to be."

I grunted, "I noticed Bob."

"That's not supposed to happen boss," The flickering flames in the skull's eyes narrowed in annoyance, "I mean, sure it should have killed you or well made you into a god but not just moved you..."

"Don't sound so disappointed," I shook my head frustratedly, "It figures, I never follow any of the rules with any other thing in my life. Why should this happen logically?"

Bob snorted impressively for someone without lungs, "It doesn't work like that, the laws of physics have to operate in a certain way. Murphy's law doesn't apply to magic."

I lifted myself to my feet gingerly, stretching my legs and trying to massage the stiffness out of my body, "Well apparently there are a couple of laws of physics we didn't take into account because this isn't Kansas Dorothy."

Bob didn't really have much to say to that.
I lifted the silver pentacle my mother gave me, a representation of the five elements bound by a circle of control, and put a small effort of will into it. The forest came into view bathed in the dull bluish white luminescence of my magic. The interweaved branches of the tightly packed trees spread dark and spidery patterns of light in the distance, only hinting at the path beyond.

"Any guesses at where we are Bob?"

"Not a clue boss," Bob's voice became pensive, "Could you give me a better look at those trees?"

"Uh, yeah sure," I lifted the skull and put its face nearly up to the bark.

"Oh no," Bob coughed, "Er... Boss... these trees are tropical. As in not in America."

"Ok," I sighed, "So where are we then?"

"Laos, Cambodia, Brazil, Australia, how should I know? Trees aren't really my thing," Bob said scathingly,

"Just open a portal to the Nevernever so we can go back home."

I gave Bob an inquisitive look. Opening a way wasn't the same as just opening a door. Opening an unmapped way into the Nevernever could easily drop me in the middle of some big nasty faeries or the center of a cloud of poison. As a creature of the Nevernever Bob knew this better than I did.

"You sure about that Bob?"

"There are a lot of nasty creatures in the rainforest Sahib, without knowing what you're doing it's probably less dangerous for you to deal with the Fairies. Between poisonous snakes, crocodiles, piranhas and armed rebels you're probably better off there."

I didn't really have a counter argument to that. I waved my staff across the air in front of me and whispered,

"Aparturum." A shimmering hole of air appeared in front of me, a small portal into the world between ours and what lay beyond. I tucked Bob's skull back into the makeshift pouch tied to my waist and walked through. The thin skin of magic between spaces felt different than it usually did, some how more greasy than the sensation I usually associated with crossing over. A tingling sensation of menace, I was not somewhere nice.

The light of my pendant shone out into the pitch black space of the Nevernever, illuminating jagged spikes and spires of stone. I winced as I turned and one of the razor sharp spines cut the back of my hand, spreading a narrow spray of blood.

It dripped down my fingers and to the ground before I had even realized my hand was cut, sticky wet redness dropping the the ground. Nothing good ever comes from blood in the Nevernever.

"Uh oh... I take back what I said about the snakes," Bob said, the single eye light peeking out of the makeshift skull carrier I'd made from an old T-shirt tentatively, "Uh Harry... we should leave..."

"Where are we Bob?"

"Don't worry about that Harry. Just go, now." Bob was worried. Bob was never worried. Annoyed, angry, frustrated but never afraid. As a spirit of intellect he generally felt such mortal concerns were beneath his interests.
"Where Bob!" I hissed under my breath, wrapping my hand in a strip of my shirt.

"The Outside. We're on the border of the Outside."

"Oh, god no."

The Nevernever was the space between our world, the real world, and what lay beyond. Demons and Faeries came from the Nevernever and while they weren't nice by anyone's standards they obeyed certain physical laws, followed certain metaphysical constants. The Outside was different, outsiders weren't bound by the sorts of magics and physics the rest of us had to deal with, the servants of the Old Gods they had unimaginable powers of nightmare and corruption.

Though shalt not open the outer gates was a law of magic so profound the White Council would consign someone to death for committing, a crime on par with murder or necromancy. Anything that chose to live on the edge of Nevernever wasn't something I wanted to meet. The creatures of the outside were so evil that even speaking of them risked death. Demons and faeries were callous and evil, outsiders were something else entirely. Unnatural and wrong.

Not something I wanted to tangle with at the best of times, especially not when every fibre of my being was screaming to just lie down for a week and sleep. I was barely standing on my own two feet, in no shape to be battling the creatures who chose to sleep in the shadow of the outer realms.

It was time to leave.

I turned to re-enter my portal and discovered, much to my horror, that it was no longer there, "Bob what happened?"

"It's the border to the outside Harry, ways to the real world don't last long here. You're going to have to open another one." Bob whined, "And you'd better do it quick."

I waved my staff and chanted the spell to open a door. Nothing happened, "Bob it's not working."

"That's not good." Bob looked out into the distance with his glowing eye in the direction of a distorted howl echoing out in the darkness where some nightmare creature smelled blood, "Because it sounds like the natives are restless."

I ran.

There's no shame in avoiding something you can't handle taking on directly, not when your life is on the line. It may not have been the most manly thing for me to do but I stand by my decision. I fled, stumbling in the near blinding darkness scampering over the razor sharp outcroppings of rock. They cut into my shoes and my duster, the magically enhanced leather of my coat weathering the treatment far better than the rubber of my Nikes.

Engineered for the most perfect running experience my ass. They have yet to make a pair of shoes that can survive more that a couple weeks of my lifestyle before reverting to a sneaker like mass of torn fabric and laces barely fit to cover a foot.

I caught a glimpse of something lithe and cloying launched itself at me from above, howling bloody murder as it leapt towards me with outstretched claws. The burned flesh of my arm puckered as I raised my own mangled paw skywards, spreading my fingers and shoving a barrier of force between myself and the screaming thing. With a fleshy crack the creature bounced off my shield and into the razor sharp spines of stone, slicing its chest into a mess of gore and forcing me to my knees with a
starling impact.
I rolled to the left as Bob screamed, "Behind you boss!"

A second fanged mess of matted fur wriggled past me, serpentine and slithering. Six glowing red pits shone in the darkness, undulating in a way eyes had no right to move. It sprung forwards, jaw dislocating wide enough to swallow me whole. I shoved forward with my staff, channeling momentum in the opposite direction of the creature. The wood collided with the inside of the creature's jaw like a cannon shot, the exploding viscera of the creature's head punctuated by my scream of, "Forzare."

Creatures jabbered, chittered and howled in the distance, promising further violence to come. My staff, still covered in the thick ichor of the creature's blood, crackled with the unsightly power of the outer realms. Playing a hunch I splashed my staff down into the pooling blood beneath the creature and yelled "Apartum," all too aware that the screaming voices were less and less distant with every second.

A narrow tear in the fabric of the Nevernever punched through the air, ephemeral and feeble by powered by the unnatural energies of the creature's blood. I dived through it and into a wide desert, stopping abruptly as a clawed hand shot out through the portal to the Nevernever and grabbed me by the ankle, talons sinking into the soft meat of my leg.

I screamed in pain and smashed my staff across the oblong face that jutted out of my way to the Nevernever, bursting a bulbous mass that might have been an eye. With a blunt screech of annoyance and a snuffling whoop the creature dragged me towards its fanged proboscis.

I reached out with my hand and punched forward, releasing the small reserve of energy left in them. The creature's hand buckled and twisted, breaking from it's arm at the wrist, severing tendons and ichor from the chitinous bundles of flesh. The creature's snarl of fury turned to a yelp of fear as the force of my attack disrupted the delicate magical energies of the doorway to the Nevernever, breaking the connection and collapsing the gateway with an immediate sucking gust.

Its distorted face fell to the dune, dissolving into ectoplasm. The viscous fluid quickly evaporated in the heat of the desert sand. That was one of the good things about creatures from the Nevernever, they tended not to leave a mess.

I sat on the dune massaging my leg waiting for the pain to subside, surveying my surroundings. I'd gone from Tarzan to a scene out of Lawrence of Arabia. The desert was surprisingly hospitable by comparison to the part of the Nevernever it opened up on. White tufts of sand billowed with the gentle breeze, sending shimmering patterns along the haze of heat on the horizon.

My coat, enchanted to never be too hot or too cold, was blissfully cool in the baking sun. Sometimes it's really cool to be a wizard, what can I say.

Falling back on my survival skills I pulled the pocket compass I keep in my duster pocket out and held it in the palm of my hand, watching the red and white needles as they spun backwards and forwards. The little red arrow finally came to a halt, shivering unhelpfully in the direction of my shadow. I tapped the compass to be sure but be damned, that little red arrow kept pointing to my shadow.

There was something in these dunes messing with the magnetic fields of the area I supposed, there are places like that in the Rocky Mountains. They screw with all sorts of things like cell phones and GPS's, or so I hear. I've never really gotten the chance to use a cell phone or a GPS. Anything more complex than a toaster oven has a bad habit of going wonky around a Wizard, even my old rotary telephone has to be repaired ever year or so due to the buildup of magical feedback.
Lucky for me I wasn't looking for north.

For all intents and purposes I was stranded in the desert till I could nurse my wounds and find a safe way into the Nevernever. I sure as hell wasn't going to risk opening up another way so close to the outside. Hell's bells, I might open up a door inside of it.

Staying in the desert meant finding water, and finding it fast. Even with my climate controlled coat, I would sweat out a dangerous amount of water in this heat. Magic can't make something from nothing and even a Wizard was only human. I would get dehydrated.

I hawked a lugie onto the back of the compass and whispered, "Agua dondé." Admittedly not the most impressive somatic component to a spell but I'd not been particularly poetic in my high school days. Casting is mostly about intent, if you believe that a certain set of words will invoke a certain power then it will. The more you believe it and the more you practice it the more it becomes part of your magic.

My spanish may have been downright awful, but my spell worked like a charm. The little red arrow spun in the opposite direction, eagerly pointing me to the nearest source of drinkable water. Humming the theme to Aladdin I trudged out across the desert.

Walking in sand isn't fun. Not the sort of packed and prepared sand you have on most beaches, that stuff is pretty much groomed to make it as nice for tourists as it can be, the real stuff. Sand dunes are more difficult to walk through than some of the worst backwoods trails. The deceptively smooth skin of the dunes conceals its shifting and treacherous nature.

The ground is uneven and unsteady, putting your foot in the wrong spot can just as easily agitate something venomous underground as cause an avalanche and bury you alive. There's a reason desert nomads tend to be no-nonsense types, when walking ten feet over open ground can kill you it tends to weed out optimism.

I hobbled forwards through the dunes, testing my path with my staff to make sure that no snakes or scorpions were in my way. I didn't think I was in America, I've been in the American Southwest enough to be able to recognize that sort of rocky, flat desert terrain. And I'd have remembered the blue and green striped lizards if I'd seen them.

They looked a bit like an iguana, but the nose was wrong. It was scrunched and angled upwards like some sort of deep sea fish. They lay in the dunes with their mouth's open in imitation of a flowering shrub. They waited for flies and small birds to try to harvest nectar before snapping shut, swallowing their prey whole.

Either venomous or unaccustomed to predators they observed me with disinterested casual aplomb, mildly aware of my existence. They weren't going to allow something so obviously unimportant to interrupt their meal. The regal disdain in their upturned noses reminded me of my own cat, Mister.

I'd been adopted by the Tomcat after I found him on the streets. We'd come to the arrangement that in exchange for caring for all of his needs and desires I would be allowed to continue cohabiting with his august personage. With time I'd come to realize that I'd been accepted into his apartment and was a member of his family. He'd been a fixture in my daily life for years, a 30lb ball of fluff and muscle eager for a scratch behind the ears and whatever food was available.

I could trust Thomas to feed him while I was gone. Thomas would make sure Mister and Mouse, my dog, were cared for in my absence. After all, what was family for? He may have been an Vampire of the White Court, an Incubus, but Thomas was my brother. I trusted him.

We'd both grown up lonely, he and I. Both of us desperately wanting a family, a real family. The sort
that loves you and is there for holidays and the like. Our mother died giving birth to me. My father died when I was young and my foster parent, Justin DuMorne, was the closest thing to Darth Vader you'll find this side of Tatooine. I killed him with magic to save my own life when he tried to enslave my mind. Thomas' father and his twisted excuse for a family still lived, but when I compare my childhood and his I'm not sure who had it worse.

And more than likely he currently believed I was dead. I had to get home, had to let him know that I was alive and well. Thomas was a good man but if he didn't have my support any more he might well fall to his darker urges. For a vampire of the White Court that could easily get someone killed.

Too preoccupied with my own worries about Thomas' safety to worry about my own I stumbled over my own feet, rolling down a large dune uncomfortably clutching my body in a protective ball around Bob's skull. If it shattered and exposed Bob to sunlight it would burn the magic that made up his body to cinders, killing him. It was worth a few extra bruises to avoid that.

I landed at the base of the dune upside down in a substantially less than graceful pose. My staff thumped down into my kneecap, bouncing off it and onto the ground next to me. I swore angrily, cursing the dune, the staff, my knee, and the disciples of Kemmler for sending me to this godforsaken scrap of nowhere.

The sound of giggling shook me from my furious self pity. A muscular teenage boy sat on a rock not ten feet from me, juggling stones and apparently enjoying my discomfort greatly. The course wool and linen of his tunic and turban mirrored the browns and whites of the desert sand and stones, unpretentious and utilitarian. A long knife, almost a sword, hung from a loop on the boy's belt next to what looked tantalizingly like a waterskin.

I righted myself, brushing the sand from my front and held my hands up placatingly palms forward hands open in the most non-threatening gesture I could think of. I smiled and tried to speak to him, "Do you speak English?"

He yammered on unhelpfully in his native language, shaking his head in confusion. What did I expect, it's not like everyone learns English.

I'm terrible with languages, just ask anyone who's heard me speak latin if you don't believe me. You need a spell I'm your guy. You need a translation look elsewhere. Hey, just because I'm a wizard doesn't mean I know everything. Not that I'll ever admit it out loud but it's true.

Lucky for me I don't have speak the language to understand it. I'm a wizard. I cheat. I closed my eyes and focused on a walled off section of my thoughts, sending a question into my own mind, "Do you understand what he's saying."

A warm feeling of satisfaction that was decidedly not my own echoed in the recesses of my consciousness. They were the feelings of the creature residing within my own mind, the fallen angel Lasciel.

Well, that's not exactly true. She isn't really Lasciel.

She was a psychic construct who's abilities and mindset mirrored that of the real Lasciel. The fallen angel's coin was buried and warded underneath my apartment, but her shadow persisted offering me temptations. She would offer help and power all with the intention of getting me to take up the mantle of the Denarians. She was a dangerous and untrustworthy ally, only to be enlisted sparingly.

Lash's cheerful voice replied in a chipper glee titter that mirrored song as I felt the distinct sensation of a phantom hand, warm and friendly, on my shoulder, "Yes my host, of course I can."
"You know I hate it when you do that," I brushed my hand across my shoulder, dismissing the phantom hand. A subtle pang of regret for the loss of closeness and I clenched my teeth in annoyance. I would not allow Lash to manipulate me.

"Just speak my host, and the words will come out as you need them to be."

Lash's smile rang in the back of my head as the boy's words twisted into English, incongruous with the natural movements of his lips like a dubbed Kung Fu flick. He'd apparently taken my silence for anger.

"Not that it couldn't have happened to anyone," he looked me up and down, taking in the substantial mass of my tall lanky frame, "I mean... you're big and have a lot of... not that you're fat... just... Talk damn you!"

"I'm looking for water," I interrupted his ranting, startling him into silence, "Where is it?"

"Oh," he sighed in relief, "Thank the gods, I feared the sea of sand had left your mind addled. The Eye of Ra often leaves men with little in the way of sanity."

"The eyes of Ra?" I repeated in confusion.

The boy pointed up to the sky, gesturing to the sun the way one might to a child who was a bit slow. His smile was a bit too placating and friendly, in an unnecessarily convivial way, "Ra looks down on us always."

He ran a hand across his head, scratching at a mess of curly hair under his turban and exposing a tattoo in the center of his forehead. An elaborate design of raised arms around a twisted pair of snakes stood out glaringly on the dark skin of his face.

"If you say so," I waved vaguely in the direction he'd apparently come from dismissively ignoring his comment about gods, "So about this water."

"You haven't run away from one of the camps have you?" The boy's hand strayed to his dagger, "A deserter."

I glared at him in annoyance, "Kid I don't even know what country I'm in. So how about we skip ahead in this conversation to the point where we get me to that water."

"I am not just some mere child I am a Jaffa warrior," He balked at my insult, "Chosen by the gods, you will show me respect!"

"Uh huh," I leaned on my staff and shook my head, "Nope I don't think so."

"You challenge my honor?"

"No, I defy a petulant teenager too caught up in himself to realize that he's bullying a man lost in the desert," I gave him my most ominous wizardly glare, the one I reserve for fairy queens and members of the DMV, "Now I'm going to ask one more time before I stop being nice. Which way is water?"

"Enough Dera," A stern voice echoed across the dunes, "That will do."

A man in thick skirted chain-mail armor strode across the dunes surveying me over the lip of his high-necked armor. He held a heavy metal mace longer than my own wizard's staff tipped with a bulbous protrusion at each end covered in nicks and dents, a well used weapon. His broad mass and barely controlled muscles paired with a serene self confidence marked him as a uniquely dangerous individual.
The boy blushed and sheathed his sword, taking care not to look into the armored man's eyes, "Master Ul'tak, he challenged my honor."

"No Dera, you challenge your own honor. He only challenges his thirst," The older man reached over and slapped the boy across the back of the head, "The gods have no use for a foolish warrior who pulls out his blade when he could simply point to the road."

"Master I tried," The boy protested vehemently.

"Do not question me Dera, you are not so far past your prim'ta that you can claim to know more than I. You will go back to the village and see Ferun for additional training today. As you seem determined to use your blade you will do so against someone who can be expected to fight back," His dismissive appraisal of me was closer to the truth than I would have liked. I wasn't sure if I could fight off a cocker spaniel at the moment.

"Yes master," the boy bowed and ran up the dune, leaving me alone with the armored man.

"Uh, hi," I greeted him somewhat lamely.

He turned to me and eyed me the same way one might look at a disobedient hound. He tilted his head one way, then the other, memorizing my features. After a few minutes of close examination he finally spoke, "Who are you and how did you get here."

"The name's Harry Dresden. I got lost and ended up here," I flashed my most dazzling smile, "It was an accident."

"No," He shook his head, "It was not. People do not come here by accident. They are here by the will of the gods." His hand caressed the club in subtle menace, "They leave at their pleasure. You do not belong."

"No disagreement there," I slapped a particularly large insect off my neck that was so big it probably should have registered its flight plan with the FAA, "I'll be out of your hair as soon as I can, I'm not here to cause trouble. Just give me some water and point me in the direction of America."

"Perhaps Dera was correct," he glared imperiously into my eyes, "You have altogether too much arrogance for a Tau'ri."

"Try it," I held my staff in both hands, taking up an offensive posture and standing my ground, "I'll give you one hell of a fight if I have to."

The man started laughing heartily, "You truly have no idea who I am do you?"

"Not a clue," I shrugged apologetically, "But if it makes you feel any better I'd probably do the same if I did."

"I can't tell if you're fearless, ignorant, or a skilled liar," the man shook his head, "But it is not for me to decide."

"Who does decide?" I licked my chapped lips, "And do they have water?"

"Come with me Harry of Dresden and we will see to your needs for now," The man held out his hand in a gesture of friendship, "The great god Heka will decide what to do with you when he arrives through the Eye of the Gods."

I took his hand into my own and shook firmly, going with it when he moved his arm to a hold further
down my forearm and imitating in kind. His face broke into a genuine smile, "I think I like you Tau'ri. Do not make me regret this decision."

I followed the man's loping pace as he turned at waded across the dunes, ignoring the hissing chirp of Lasciels stifled gales of laughter. Somehow I got the distinct sense that the joke was on me.
After an hour of trudging through the sandy paths that led to the city of Nekheb I was absolutely convinced that I deeply needed to get in better shape. Beaten and battered from my recent necromancer punch up, I was huffing and puffing to keep up with Ul'Tak's long-shanked strides.

Thank god he'd shared from his water-skin or I wouldn't have made it. The water was hot and tasted vaguely of the animal the leather pouch had been cured from but as thirsty as I was it might as well have been ambrosia. I lapped up the water greedily as we walked, taking him at his word that he wouldn't need any.

Which brought me to my second conclusion. Ul'Tak wasn't human, at least not wholly so. There was something in his physical presence that was too deliberate for him to be vanilla mortal. His eyes focused a bit too far into the horizon, his heavy metal staff shouldn't have been carried one handed, and his heavy links mail troubled him no more than a T-shirt might have.

And I don't care how tough you are or how manly you think you are, you aren't going to be able to wear metal armor hot enough to fry an egg in the desert without sweating. Even Michael would have had trouble managing that, fist of God or no. But there he was, not even looking like he noticed the heat.

I hadn't been able to place his species yet, though I could be reasonably sure he wasn't a creature of the Nevernever. A fairy wouldn't ever willingly wear a jewelery of iron, the ferrous metal would burn their skin like acid.

That still left an unimaginably wide range of creatures to chose from. He referred to himself as a Jaffa, but I couldn't be sure if that were a nation, tribe, cast, or species. I could narrow that down once Bob and I had some privacy. For the moment 'not actively trying to kill me' was good enough for government work.

Which was just as well, because I kind of liked the guy.

He wasn't especially talkative, using few words and wasting fewer, but in his own way he had a rich sense of humor. I didn't get the half of it, but it spoke of a culture steeped in old ways and ancient tradition.

“Step too close to the servants of Apophis and you suffer his displeasure,” he'd say when I stepped too close to the den of some poisonous creature or “The Tau'ri must walk on their own two feet before they try to fly,” when he would step on loose shale and nearly fall.

He clearly considered me, a mere 'Tau'ri,' to be beneath him but there wasn't any malice in it. Humans were weak and frail, Jaffa were not. Ten miles of skirting disused goat paths and I was inclined to agree with him.

He could at least have pretended to be winded for my benefit, a man has his ego after all.

I whooped with joy when we climbed the summit of a particularly unpleasant hill made up of jagged rock formations and looked out into the valley beyond. Ul'tak, unamused by my antics, pointed over the wide sands to a vision in the distance, shimmering with the heat haze of the evening sun.

“Holy Pharaohs Batman,” I whispered under my breath in amazement, “We are not absolutely not in Kansas any more Toto.”
“Woof,” Bob weakly whispered in reply from my waist as he looked out at the city beyond in equal shock.

There stood a secret city of pyramids and palaces untouched by the ravages of time and generations of grave robbers. Great structures pierced the sky that would have made Giza crawl up into a ball in shame, glittering with mirrored panels of gold and the shining white of polished marble. My inner nerd squealed in glee at the sight of several buildings which were unquestionably floating around the central pyramid.

Not flying, freaking floating as though gravity didn't apply to them. Many hundreds of tiny pyramid shaped ships flew in and out of the pyramids without any visible method of propulsion.


He didn't have to tell me twice. We all but sprinted down the mountain, following a winding goat path covered in the footprints of mail boots. If I'd been halfway conscious and not totally delirious from hunger and thirst it might have occurred to me that running towards the village full of preternaturally agile and strong creatures might not be the best idea.

Had I been paying attention I might not have run face first into a transparent barrier of energy blocking the outer gate to the city. I hit it with enough force to set my ears ringing and numb my lips from the discharge of electricity. My tongue, numbed by the abrupt electric shock, slurred my words drunkenly as I used a creative mix of profanity to demonstrate my displeasure.

“By the Gods I pray you are a spy,” Ul'tak chuckled to himself as he waved to the guardhouse atop the wall, “Would that our enemies send such obvious infiltrators.”

“I... but, wha?” Articulacy escaped me as the barrier shimmered out of existence then snapped back into place as we past. Stars and stones, the magical forces required to create a permanent barrier of that size had to be monumental. It would require concentrated geomancy and a level of skill that I'd only ever heard of as rumor before, “How on Earth?”

Clearly pleased at my reaction, Ul'tak slapped me across the shoulders, “The magics of the gods are not for us to understand, only to obey.”

His claims of serving a god were starting to worry me. There were powerful beings on Earth, creatures who'd forged their magic through rites and rituals too terrible for moral man to comprehend. The gate to the White Council citadel in Edinburgh might have been just as strong as the gate to Nekheb but the gate had a physical form to it. Covered with runes and protective symbols to channel power the citadel’s magics were a collective work of the bygone wizard-craft. The gate of Nekheb was power, pure and simple. No runes, no wards, no props, just a pure projection of power.

It was freaking scary.

I didn't know much about the Egyptian deities, other than that they were particularly nasty and fond of necromancy on a level that defied belief. If one of the ancient gods of the middle east really was in the city I wouldn't be able to take him one on one in a fight, not so close to his place of power. It would be like fighting Mab or Titania in the Nevernever.

It was madness to attack an old god close to his seat of power, it granted creatures of magic insight and abilities to dwarf my own at the best of times. If Heka wasn't friendly to your friendly neighborhood wizard bad things were on the horizon.
We would just have to hope the god was friendly.

Yeah, sure. Keep dreaming Harry.

Greeting my companion with a salute and a declaration of “first prime” a dozen Jaffa fell into step around Ul'Tak, oblong maces at the ready and faces devoid of emotion. The whole situation felt a bit 'sig heil' for my taste.

They marched me down the streets of the great city in a protective phalanx, as much to trap me in as keep dangers out. It was just as well to have them, or I might have gotten lost in the sea of humanity. In contrast to the great desert outside, Nekheb was a thriving metropolis.

As far as the eye could see there were people everywhere, real human people. A good head shorter than the Jaffa and clad in the sort of practical white linens one would expect from the Bedouin. Countless stalls sold savory meats and spiced vegetables that wafted their alluring smells across the city, mingling with the bitter but oh-so-glorious scent of coffee from behind the canvas sun screens of a the numerous cafés. Two blocks of delicious smells and enough was enough, “I need to eat something.”

Ul'tak shoved me forwards, pushing hard into the middle of my back. “After you have spoken to Heka.”

I dug my heels in and turned to face the man's stoic visage, taking care to have my own most wizardly glare, “No. I need to eat now. I'm no good to you hungry. It's in your best interest for me to eat.”

The Jaffa tilted his head in confusion, “Explain.”

“Look, if I actually am a spy you need me to be strong enough to withstand questioning. You can't get much out of me if I'm dead,” the Jaffa laughed in amusement and I tried not to think too hard about the Egyptian death magic. They very well might have been able to get something out of me even after I'd died. I'd just have to make sure my death curse made that impossible.

I continued as though I hadn't noticed their laughter, “And if I'm not a spy it would be a violation of the rules of hospitality not to feed a weary traveler. If I am to defend myself I need the energy.”

The laws of hospitality are a big deal to the supernatural community, even the biggest and baddest of them wouldn't consider violating them. Especially not the biggest and the baddest of them. So much of their power is tied up in rules that a violation of them would be dangerous, potentially fatally so.

A young Jaffa to Ul'tak's left chimed in, “Master Ul'tak let me teach this Tau'ri his place.” He cracked his knuckles soundly to leave no doubt what he meant by it.

“No, no Bashir,” Ul'tak shook his head and gestured with a finger to a street vendor. The astonished woman scurried over with her cart, bowing her head to avoid eye contact with the Jaffa, “Defeating a weak enemy proves nothing.”

He pushed a thick coin into the woman's hands and pointed to me, “Feed him.”

I took the pocket of meat and vegetables shoved into an unleavened bread from the woman with the most sincere “thank you” I could remember having given anyone, and bit into it with relish, enjoying the taste of spiced meat and yogurt sauce, “Move over Burger King, we have a new contender for the crown.”

The Jaffa looked at me in stoic incomprehension. My wit is wasted on the supernatural community.
I devoured two of them, licking the wax paper they were served on to make sure none of the food was wasted, then drank a full flagon of water before nodding to Ul'tak, “I'm ready for anything. Thank you.”

“You will earn that meal Dre'su'den.” Ul'tak growled, “The hospitality of Heka is not without its price.”

Slaked of hunger and thirst I followed my guide in apprehension as we marched through the city, wandering through avenues and paths that just hinted at many thousands of years of culture and development. Seemingly ancient hieroglyphs covered ziggurats stood atop multicolored frescoes of the Egyptian deities doing all sorts of godly things that couldn't have been more than a decade old.

It would have been beautiful if I hadn't been so god damned terrified. No longer hungry and starving my brain caught up to me enough to remind me why the name Heka sounded so freaking familiar. Heka was the Egyptian god of Magic, the king muckity-muck of all ritual magic.

And I had trespassed on his land. Stars and stones, just once I'd like for things to be easy.

“No good Harry,” Bob whispered to me as we walked past a row of spike mounted heads displayed as a warning to any would be heretics, “This is not good. The Egyptian pantheon was really not nice... Kemmler was fascinated with them... obsessed even... and you know nothing good ever came from something he liked.”

“Shut up,” I whispered back to the skull, “They'll hear you.” I didn't need Bob reminding me of exactly how totally screwed I was. I knew that well enough on my own. And something told me that these people weren't going to react well to a disembodied head carrying a servitor spirit. Call it a hunch but I wasn't going to risk it.

I had to squint my eyes as we walked into the largest pyramid, the reflection of torchlight on the polished gold made it impossible to see through the blinding brightness. Stars blinked in my eyes as we walked the length of the corridor, passing servants and slaves dressed in altogether too little for my own sense of modesty.

“Donald Trump eat your heart out,” I chuckled to myself as we passed a particularly nubile woman covered in piercings in places best left unmentioned as she sanctified a three story high statue of the god Heka.

Alluring chamber maidens dressed in even less than nothing kneeled on either side of the door, their shaved heads tattooed with a thick mess of hieroglyphics that implied sorceries of the darkest sort. The women pulled apart a set of thick purple velvet curtains, allowing Ul'tak to pass into the inner chamber.

The Sanctum Sanctorum of Heka, god of Magic.

Stars and stones it was gaudy.

At the far side of a wide chamber a man of Middle Eastern heritage lounged upon a throne that appeared to have been cut from a giant hunk of ruby. He sat in indolence, idly watching as two humans attacked each other with swords within circle ten yards wide surrounded by a barrier glowing with the same energy as the city gate. Even at a distance it made my skin pulse with the energy of ambient magic.

I gasped in horror as one of the men in the circle made a clumsy lunge with his blade, overbalancing and exposing himself to his opponent. The fatal blow echoed around the room with a fleshy thump
of metal on bone. The winner severed his opponents head and held it up in triumph to the charnel 
cheers of the watching Jaffa. The sound echoed with their joyous blood lust.

The human servants continued with their everyday chores in the place, paying the lethal violence no 
attention at all. Years of such violent displays doubtlessly left them anesthetized to their appeal. In a 
way their silent acceptance disturbed me far more than the blood lust of the Jaffa ever could.

I could understand anger, lust, fear, death and hunger. But apathy? Total apathy? It terrified me.

I don't know what possessed me to open up my wizard's sight, curiosity or madness. I looked out at 
the crowd of cheering men and their god, only to see the glowing hateful eyes of serpents staring 
back at me in boundless lust. They protruded from the bellies of men, wrapping round their bodies 
like fleshy, barbed manacles.

Heka wore a noose of serpent that curled up over the head of him like a crown, preening regally 
whilst he screamed in eternal horror. A river of blood flowed from Heka's robes, soaking the ground 
as far as the eye could see with sorrowfully sticky red blood. A million arms reached out of the river, 
clawing at the hem of his robes in impotent fury. They bellowed their ghostly challenges calling him 
murderer and demon, but they couldn't even muss the hem of his garment.

I didn't vomit, but it was a close call as I closed all three of my eyes in horror. Heka was evil, plain 
and simple evil.

Evil and powerful, it was a dangerous combination.

Heka, amused by the gristy spectacle clapped his hands twice and dissolved the barrier. Speaking an 
a voice that rumbled with inhuman power he strode forward and accepted the severed head from his 
kneeling supplicant, “See how my faithful obey me. He has slain the unworthy and bolstered me 
with his power. I am Heka, and I am merciful.”

He reached down and cradled the man's head, examining the deep cuts and bruises. He waved to a 
golden armored jaffa, “Take him to the Sarcophagus and see to his wounds. He has done well.”

The man stumbled to his feet with the Jaffa's assistance, struggling to walk on a severed hamstring. 
His god watched him leave in mild paternal amusement, observing him like a favored pet, “Very 
well indeed.”

He pointed a finger at the dismembered corpse and three bolts of lightning shot out from a device on 
his wrist, dissolving the corpse into vapor. No ash, no char, just two chirping bursts of lightning and 
the body vanished into thin air.

Ul'tak grabbed me by the nape of my neck and shoved me face first to the ground as his god crossed 
the circle. Unprepared for the rough treatment I squawked in protest as my face hit the stone, earning 
me a punch to the kidney for my troubles and knocking the wind out of me.

On bended knee he put his balled fist over his heart in salute, bowing his head in reverence, “My 
Lord Heka. I discovered this trespasser in the badlands at the edge of the Teeth of Sokkar.”

“How interesting,” The Egyptian deity examined me with predatory eyes covered in thick black 
makeup, pulling at a long braided beard on his chin. The thick jewelry on his right hand clacked and 
clattered against a palm sized ruby in his fist. The gem glowed with ambient power, hinting at the 
sorcerous might it concealed. I swallowed nervously wondering what other magics were up his 
sleeve, “No matter, it will provide what it knows before it dies.”

“He claims not to be a spy,” Ul'tak continued, “And I believe him.”
“You are too credulous my first prime,” Heka tutted malevolently, “However we can discover the truth of it. There are ways of making even the tightest of tongues loosen.”

“I'm not a spy,” I tried to lift my head, only to get kicked in the side by a Jaffa. Spitting up a mouthful of blood I repeated myself, “My name is Harry Dresden. I'm from Chicago. I am not a spy. I'm here by accident.”

Heka reached down and touched the silver pentacle dangling from my neck, hissing in disgust. “A symbol of Osiris of the Ba Duat. And you claim not to be a spy?” The god laughed, a cruel echoing menace, “Unlikely.”

“Hold on a second,” Oh crap. This was not good, “Who gives you the right to tell me who I am?”

“A god need not justify himself to a mortal ant,” Heka's eyes glowed with fury, shimmering with preternatural energies, “Jaffa kill him.”

“I request that he be given Tek'pa'kor to prove his honor,” Ul'tak bowed his head deferentially and put himself between Heka and myself, “Let him die with honor if he is to die.”

“A right of combat? For a spy?” Heka laughed uproariously in his cruel cackle, “And does the Tau'ri consent to a trial by combat, knowing the price of failure. The fight is to the death.”

“You aren't exactly giving me a whole heck of a lot of options,” I gritted my teeth and looked up at the Heka in defiance, “I'm not going quietly. And if possible I'm not going at all.” I wouldn't be able to fight my way out past a thousand soldiers, but I might be able to take a single Jaffa in combat. Better to rely upon the protection of old world hospitality.

God bless the predictability of ancient supernatural beasties.

“Arrogance, defiance, pride,” The god waved vaguely to the raised stone circle, “Rob him of these Ul'tak. I wish for this to end. I would have another Jaffa do the deed though. Ge'mok is in need of the training.”

“As you wish my Lord,” Ul'tak stood, lifting me to my feet one handed. Considering that I'm about seven feet tall and just shy of two hundred pounds that's no small feat.

Hundreds of tattooed faces watched us walk to the circle, eying me with mild amusement. I caught distant whispers of amusement from the Jaffa, none of them seemed to think I had a chance. Well to hell with them. It was time to show them what a Wizard of the White Council, a Warden no less, could do when backed into a corner.

“You may use any weapons you have on you Tau'ri. Once you step into the ring the barriers will rise and you will fight till one of you no longer lives,” Ul'tak whispered into my ear as we went, doing his best to inform me of the rules in the seconds before the battle, “Ge'mok is not without a heart, he will allow you to wound him before he goes for the kill so that you may be buried with honor.”

“And if I kill him first?” I cracked my knuckles and stretched my arms over my head, trying desperately not to notice the seven foot tall wall of pure muscle selecting weapons off the opposite wall. The man's biceps were the size of my entire torso, “What happens then?”

“It will be a shame for such foolish bravery to be extinguished,” Ul'tak sighed disappointedly and quirked his brow in bemusement, “To the victor goes the prize, your life.”

I pulled the glove from my mangled hand, balling the desiccated appendage into a fist, “I'll just have to make sure not to lose then.”
Ul'tak incredulously watched the crippled human stride onto the stage like a conquering hero. I had to look absolutely absurd, haggard and still covered the detritus of the Darkhallow; more vagrant than fighter.

Well it's what you do that counted, not how you looked. And I had more than my share of doing left in me, “Bob, any suggestions?”

“Hit him till he doesn't move any more?” Bob's eye narrowed, focusing on the Jaffa, “Duels aren't exactly my specialty boss.”

“Christ Bob,” I snorted, “I could have figured that out on my own. What am I paying you for?”

“Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer,” Bob hissed in reply, “I don't have the answer to every question, just the ones that matter.”

“I kind of feel like this one counts,” I snarled in annoyance as I watched Heka recline into his ruby seat.

The godling surveyed us from behind the barrier, reclining in his throne as he smiled and bellowed, “You who are about to die, we salute you.”

The giant stepped into the ring, stamping the heel of his staff on the ground twice and bowing in salute to me as the blue energies of the barrier snapped into place. I cracked my staff in reply, tilting my heady sightly by way of reply before falling into a defensive posture.

Not that it did me any good.

With a speed entirely unfair for his size the massive man crossed the two yards between us, driving his staff into my midriff like a spear. I rolled with the impact, spinning around and cracking him across the back of the head with my own staff. The Jaffa roared in fury, jabbing backwards with the flaring silver cobra head on the bottom and catching me at my ankle in it's crook.

I had the time to yelp a surprised, “woah,” before he'd flipped me onto my back and stomped a booted foot into my sternum with a kick that cracked bone audibly. My eyes bulged with pain and shock as he leaned into my fractured ribs, grinding his food backwards and forwards as he rose his staff for the killing blow, “I take no pleasure in this Tau'ri. May you find peace in the afterlife.”

No more mister nice wizard. I raised my hand and tapped into the energies in my rings, splaying my fingers and shoving them upwards into Ge'mok's chest. His pity turned to astonishment as a shockwave of magical force flung him into the air, tossing him to collide with the hard stone a yard back.

I give the guy credit, he recovered from the shock of facing a wizard fast.

He rolled with the impact, tucking his body into a ball and twisting into a panful kneel before righting himself and advancing on me. He whirled his staff around his body in a complex motion that was nearly a dance, the glittering silvery metal flashing with reflections of the torchlight.

Then, without warning the end of his mace opened up like a blooming flower and a basketball sized burst of light rocketed out towards me with a thunderous squelch of energy. I raised my shield winched as the blinding force of it collided with the barrier, exploding into a thunderous burst of sound.

I ducked to avoid another two bursts of energy from the staff before screaming, “Vintas servitas.”
My attacker fumbled with his weapon as a gust of sorcerous wind tried to tear it from his fingers, shouting in frustration. It gave me enough time to focus my mind and prepare what came next.

My battle magics weren't as powerful as they once had been. I hadn't used fire magic since losing my hand, even simple evocations of candle flame had been too much for me to manage. But fire wasn't the only elemental magic at my disposal.

My mentor, Ebeneezer McCoy, had insisted that I learn at least one application of earth magic. It would more or less tap me out on earth magic for the next week but given my adrenaline and my need it would have to do. I reached out to the energies around me, tapping into the ambient power bled off by the barrier trapping us inside the circle.

As Ge'mok righted his grasp on his staff I smashed the bottom of my staff into the ground, its runes glowing red hot and smoldering sulfurously as I tapped into the power of hellfire. The stone floor split in two, widening into a cavernous maw of empty earth into which the terrified Jaffa plummeted. I swung my gnarled paw in a cutting motion across my chest and pulled apart the magics keeping the earth split.

The Jaffa screamed in incomprehensible pain as the walls of the stone pit collided in a horrible wet twisting of pulverized flesh. Utter and complete silence filled the room as the blue barrier dropped, leaving me to face Heka as what remained of his servant bubbled up through cracks in the stone circle. Wet charnel syrup pooled into a puddle at the center of the circle.

I expected Heka to be angry, annoyed, possibly even furious. But when he looked into my eyes, all I saw was hunger. I pulled away as I felt the first tugs of a soul gaze, the last thing I wanted to know was what lay behind those terrible glowing eyes.

“I trust that satisfies your test,” I growled in anger. I hadn't wanted to kill Ge'mok, shouldn't have needed to kill him. Something about being forced to kill a man for some lesser god's amusement was pissing me right the hell off, “Now let me go.”

“I think not,” The god smiled eagerly, “I couldn't possibly part with such a promising specimen. No, I have plans for you.”

“Like hell!” I growled, “You promised me my freedom.”

“I promised you honor,” Heka grinned predatory, “There is no greater honor than being the host to your god. Jaffa kree.”

I heard a chirruping sound that reminded me of crickets echoing from behind me, and then everything faded to black. Just not my day all around, today was just awful. And tomorrow wasn't fixing to be any better.

Stars and stones I needed a vacation.
Chapter 3

Getting shot hurts a lot. It's not something I'd choose to repeat but it's happened to me more than once. When it does happen I deal with it and do what I can to move on till the next thing clobbers me even worse. It's a shitty life but I make due.

In the course of my career as a wizard I've been beaten, shot, stabbed, mauled, gored, flayed, cooked, scorched, and scourged but nothing - and I mean nothing - hurt as bad as waking up from that damn lightning. Every single muscle and fiber of my body was clenched up, a fact exacerbated by the thick manacles keeping me strapped to the wall.

Hell, I had a freaking charlie horse in my spleen and I'm not even sure what that part of the body does. Hey, GED remember? Human biology isn't exactly my thing. I can tell you what parts are supposed to be on the inside and how to do basic first aid, but more that that and you're out of luck.

Peering into the near darkness of the room, I could barely see anything. What I could see didn't do much to enhance my calm. Flickering torchlight illuminated the vague outlines of ornately carved furniture, shaped into beasts and birds. Sneering jackals and ibis stared back at me through the dusky shadows, jeweled eyes sparkling with anticipatory glee in the near dark.

I breathed in, and hated myself for it. I breathed out and hated myself more as I blinked the starlight out of my eyes.

Get a grip Harry, I thought to myself. You're a wizard, you're unstoppable, you're... naked….

The jerks didn't need to take my clothes. That was just cheating.

They'd even taken my rings and shield bracelet and they'd bathed me. That was... new, even for me.

I'd been knocked out a bunch of times before, but this was the first time I woke up clean for my troubles. Now if only my ears would stop ringing it might even be a nice upgrade from the usual post-knockout capture. I could still smell the odor of flowers and perfume on my skin. And, unless I was highly mistaken, my face had been shaved.

Wait- my face and my head?

Not just my head - Oh hells bells, my everything had been shaved bald.

That was just wrong on so many levels.

I didn't know what Heka had planned for me that required me to be hairless but I damn well didn't plan to stick around and find out. I focused my magic to break the locks on my cuffs and screamed in pain. A searing sensation of pure agony shot from the manacles into my body, pulsing through me without mercy. I managed not to pass out, but just barely.

I tried to do it a second time when soft hand caressed my cheek and a beautiful voice whispered softly, “I would not do that, my host. They were made to restrain your kind.”

The fallen angel ran her hands over my chest, pearly white digits glowing slightly as they caressed my muscles with delicious deliberation. Every place she touched went blissfully numb, agony dissipating under her ministrations. God it felt so good I didn't even have the heart to stop her.
"Those were created in the time before we were allowed to return to Earth, forged by the old gods to restrain your kind. Nicodemus made his thorned manacles in imitation of them." She sighed sadly. "Magic will not avail you my host. The more you try to channel, the more pain you will inflict upon yourself."

"But you could numb the pain then?" I groaned petulantly, looking for something to talk about that wouldn't draw my attention closer to the ethereal woman's prominent and exposed bosom as she drew close to me, massaging my arms.

"Enough for those? In my current form?" She chided, "Unlikely, there are limits to my power."

"Let me guess?" I snorted derisively, "Call the coin, join you and we shall rule over the galaxy together as fallen angel and mortal puppet?"

"I prefer to think of it as a working partnership." Lasciel sighed irritatedly, caressing my face. "Have I done anything to earn your mistrust?"

"I've seen what happens to long term members of the Nickelheads Lash, it aint happening to me. Not while I can still draw breath." I winced in agony as she pulled back her hands and scowled at me, a hard edge working into her voice.

"That may cease to be relevant sooner than you think my host. I do not think you appreciate the gravity of your situation." Her lip curled in disgust. "The old gods were nightmares, skilled in ferromancy beyond your wildest imagining. Whatever you think of Nicodemus, I assure you Heka is worse."

"Oh come on," I groaned. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Dresden," My ears twitched at Lasciel's use of my proper name. "Fear of the Egyptian pantheon is why we were first allowed to interact with mortals after the death of the Son."

That the we in question was the cadre of fallen angels attached to a handful of silver coins needed not be said. That it scared me silly hardly needed be voiced either. "Come again?"

"My host, have you never stopped to ask why groups like the Vampire Courts came to be? Have you simply assumed that the creatures that go bump in the night have always been there?"

"Uh." I'd never even begun to consider it.

"The Drakul? The Incubus? The blood-born? The sons of Jade?" The Fallen angel leaned in and whispered into my ear, her hot breath tickling tantalizingly against my skin. "They have not. Weapons, all of them, forged to expel those who do not belong. Even they have forgotten, but the memory of the fallen is eternal. The desperate will seek what allies they may."

"What?" I squawked, agitating my neck in a way I immediately regretted.

"The usurper gods swam the stars in their husk like bodies, leathery snake-like monsters red in tooth and claw. Monstrous scavengers of the ruins of the children of Eden. They conquered all creatures in the sky, slaughtering the things they met till they came to a land touched by the first blood of Eden," The Angel spoke clinically. "And they found the fruits of Eden, the children of the first blood."

"Fruits of eden." I sighed. "Want to give me the cliffs notes on that one Lash?"

"The Old Gods adore mortal bodies." Lasciel sighed. "They were taken with a deep lust for manflesh."
"Lusted for?" I blanched, looking down at my nude form.

"Not that way my host." She snorted in amusement at my relieved expression. "Don't get too relaxed. He still desires your flesh, but as his host. You are far preferable to his current mortal man flesh or even the flesh of their nigh immortal monsters."

"Uh… why would a 'nigh-immortal' creature be a worse host than humans? It's not like we -" I swore as it hit me. "Hell's bells and buckets of blood. Wizards, they want wizards."

"Yes my host." She smiled approvingly. "Precisely. And you know what is coming."

The soul gaze I'd nearly been drawn into with Heka played back across my mind. Oh my god, the soul of his host was still there, trapped like Rasmussen had been. A slave to his own body, it was a fate I didn't care to contemplate.

"So why haven't they been back if they wanted us so much?" I queried, shivering as breeze swept past a part of me not used to breezes. "If we're so ideal?"

"Wizards are long lived stock, but even the talents of the usurpers gods can only extend the lives of their shells so long. They do not have the fires of hell or creation burning in their veins. What wizards they took were hollow and insane after the first millennia, useless husks that had to be replaced." A superior note of satisfaction eked into her voice at the idea of the 'usurper gods' being inferior. "By which time there were too many predators seeded within the mortal races, too many hidden wizards to control. They forfeited the mortal realms for their hiding places in the shadow of stars and hidden realms of creation. But their lust continues long after for the forbidden fruit."

"Lash what are you saying?" I swallowed nervously.

"Dresden, today you will become a host. " The fallen Angel's lip curled in satisfaction. "To me or to the usurper but it will happen."

"Oh fuck that!" I growled, twisting in my bindings till the pain became too much and I hung there, panting. Lash stood there in her Roman tunic, arms crossed beneath her generous bosom, chuckling to herself. To hell with her, I wasn't anybody's sock puppet.

I was so busy glaring at her and trying to figure a way out of the room that I hadn't even noticed that we weren't alone any more. Three women walked into the room carrying clay pots, naked as the day they were born. Carmel skinned and tattooed with sweeping patterns of ornate hieroglyphs that led up to a thick gold collar covered in hanging hunks of jade, they sauntered over to me, chanting in high pitched unison as they approached me.

"Uh, hi." So it wasn't my most articulate moment, sue me.

They ignored me, busying themselves with paintbrushes and clay pots. They mixed tones of henna from them and approached me with brushes, continuing their chant. Ritual magic, it had to be.

"Get away from me, You slutty knock-off Cleopatra wannabes!" I snarled, trying to knee them away from me.

The shackles binding my arms and legs yanked back hard, propelled by some unseen force, stretching my limbs tight to prevent their motion. I cursed at them, screaming the most vile and anatomically impractical obscenities I could think of as I struggled to shift my chest to prevent them from finishing the ritual symbols.

The lead woman scowled at me and pulled a long rod from the wall. She pressed it against my chest
and pushed forward. With an energetic orange crackling burst of power that set my teeth on edge the device pulsed through my body, numbing my muscles beyond use. I fell slack in my shackles, only my eyes able to move under their own power.

At least nothing hurt any more.

Lasciel's shadow wandered around the women, observing their ornate patterns of painted henna. She chuckled to herself in amusement, "Must you endure this on principal alone? Does it serve a purpose to be degraded like this? Take the power that is yours, summon me!"

"Gufynae guuu," I slurred though my numb lips and tongue, vainly willing my chest to move away from the henna brush. The beginnings of an intricate helix of wrapped serpents now wove it's way down my chest.

"You are a fool my host," Lash growled in desperate irritation. "Summon the coin! Summon it!"

My vision swam in agony as I tried to will the cuffs to open, causing another burst of pain from the cuffs powerful enough to knock me senseless, causing the women to yelp satisfyingly as they were caught peripherally within it. I couldn't say how long I was out, but by the time my eyes opened again the women had already finished their task. My body was entirely covered in intricate patterns of henna, ritualistic markings of very alarming portent.

The trio kneeled on the ground before me, heads bowed in deferential silence. I suppose it wouldn't have been appropriate for them to speak now that they were in the presence of their god.

Heka towered above them, rubbing at his bare chest with his ornately jeweled hands as he surveyed my body, "Good, good. This pleases me. You have done well for your god. A worthy avatar of my magnificence."

"A porto-john isn't as full of it as you are." I mumbled through tingling lips. "Do you actually just read from the handbook of douchey villain phrases or is this a custom brand of obvious evil?"

He chuckled idly as he stared into my groggily squinted eyes, "You're awake already?"

"What can I say." I spat a messy glob of phlegm on the ground, lamentably missing his feet. "Didn't want to miss the show."

"Defiant," The man ran a jewelry encrusted finger tipped in an ivory claw over curves of my chest and down to my belly button, surveying me with an almost hungry gaze. "How amusing. A fine specimen but I wonder -" He snapped his fingers waving at my waist. "Sarna, I need to examine this."

The closest of the three women crawled across the floor and between my legs, taking me in her mouth. I tried to think of baseball, old people, anything that wasn't the first person touching me since Susan but my id was having none of that. Contrary to every signal I sent his way, my man parts were entirely in favor of this new development.

And let's be honest, there are only so many baseball statistics that one can think of in a crisis.

An awkwardly enjoyable moment passed before the servant was ripped from me by her master, tossing her to the floor roughly by her hair so that he could observe the results. She cracked hard against the tile, crying out in surprise. Oblivious to her pain the god tutted sadly, "I suppose even the gods cannot have everything."

"Fuck you king Tut!," I yelled in outrage, earning a backhanded smack for my snark.
"I do not tolerate that from mere mortals."

"Deal with it asshole."

He leaned up close to my naked body, pressing himself against me as he whispered into my ear, "I will enjoy crushing you Dre'su'den. Of the host nothing remains"

He bowed down to the nape of my neck, licking it before widening his jaw and extending his -
tongue?

Not like any tongue I'd ever seen.

A fanged serpent jutted out of the man's mouth, waving in the air hissing reedily.

ripping into my neck and burrowing into my skin. The human shell of heka fell to the ground as the
foot long serpent swam through muscle and flesh, digging through me like an eel at the bottom of a
river bed.

I'd like to say that I fought back, that I said something clever, or even that I'd had a moment to feel
sad for myself but I was too busy screaming. I screamed myself ragged till the twisting serpent coiled
round my back and spine burrowing into my head. I screamed so loud that it started to feel like it was
a different person screaming, like I was just watching a movie.

And then it was another person yelling and I was a guest in someone else's body. My eyes shifted,
my lips moved, my chest rose and fell but I was not responsible for any of it. I screamed louder but
my mouth refused to move under my own power, my body was no longer my own.

Memories of my apprenticeship whipped past me, vague visions of Ebenezer and Justin teaching me
to manipulate the elements. My joy at first being able to summon the wind, a thousand times over a
thousand ways I practiced to use that skill ran through me in an instant.

And a set of memories alien to me shoved their way into my mind, nightmares I could not escape.
Blackness, blind emptiness, Murder, violation, blood sacrifice and power, and endless and insatiable
need for power. A million times a million holocaust and they were all mine.

My hand reached out towards a torch on the wall and a voice that was not my own yelled, "Vintas
servitas!" Summoning the torch into my outstretched hand.

The not-me looked at the torch and whooped with joy. A feeling of detached happiness washed
across me from his distant mind.

"Yes!" I felt myself saying. "I am at last whole! I am at last perfect. Let Sokkar and the other gods try
to defy me now. I am Heka! I am king of all Gods! I will ascend as Anubis before me!"

The me that was not me snapped my fingers, summoning the servants to strip the clothing and
jewelry from the sobbing man who had once been a god. He was a gibbering shell of a man, shaking
and whispering to himself, repeating a word over and over. "Free, free, free...." as though refusing
to believe it.

The cool material of the many ornate bracelets and rings slid ominously over my skin, tantalizing
ripples of power emanating from them. Magical foci for energy, powerful, ancient and cruel they
throbbed with generations of malice. Millennia of ill use had poured a well of suffering into their
ambient power reserve.

I looked down at the man, and a disgust that was not my own washed across my mind. Look at that
thing, useless, weak, obsolete, whimpering and ungrateful. It should be thrilled to have been part of a
god, part of the wonder of creation. But it was not, it was just a shell of flesh, a disposable meat sack
that had lasted past it's prime. It was a liability, thought the other mind against my will.

My arm, controlled by the god, pointed to the man and a burst of will from the evil not-mind. Three
bursts of lightning shot out, obliterating the man from existence. Satisfaction rumbled past me,
oblivious to my disgust. My lips spoke words I knew to be a lie, "I pass you on to the next world, to
glory."

"To paradise," replied the women eagerly anticipating their reward. The not mind eyed them
hungrily, the old form had not been well suited for libidinal recreation and the new form was starved
for it. Sake the flesh and dispose of the chattel after, for none who touch a god should ever be with
another. Sarna, yes she would do nicely.

The not-mind would dispose of Sarna for her carnal knowledge of the Dre'su'den anyway.

The doe-eyed Sarna stared reverently at my feet, knowing what came next, knowing it would end
her life but resigned to accept her fate. She breathed heavily with the fear and lust the not-mind
preferred from it's partners, it's prey. A lust that I pray to god was not my own stirred in my loins as
the not-mind grabbed her by the hair, intent upon using her roughly. The not mind-smiled eagerly,
whispering in a terrifying hungry moan, "Prepare to worship your god."

A feminine curse of disgust from a phantom source was the only warning Heka got from an
extremely pissed off fallen angel.

"Usurper!" Howled a feminine voice as an invisible hand grasped at my throat, clamping down too
hard to breathe and forcing me to my knees. "Pretender! Coward! He. is. mine."

Heka clawed at the invisible attacker in confusion, searching through my memories to explain what
was happening to him. Thousands of memories came to play but no memories of a tunic clad beauty
came to mind, no memories of silver coins, and a whispered titter of amusement echoed in my ear as
a brief ray of hope popped into my mind.

His servants backed away from him in fear, screaming for the guards as their god howled in pain
fighting off an invisible attacker.

Was I saved? Could Lasciel expel Heka?

"No my host," a sad whisper hissed into my mind even as a louder voice screamed "Defiler,
betrayed, worm!" and a thousand phantom wounds tore at the god in imitation of every injury I'd ever
received. "I can only delay the inevitable."

A tunic clad woman appeared behind me, finitely giving the furious god a target. My eyes widened
in horror as Heka fired his lightning at the apparition of Lasciel, only for it to dissipate across her
chest. The apparition waved it's hands, inflicting new phantom pains upon my body; broken bones,
and gunshots, lacerations and flaying all hammering at the mind of my captor. I had a wide range of
memories to choose from, each more painful than the last.

What can I say? I've had a busy life.

The whisper turned desperate, "Harry, please I cannot hide your mind and my shadow forever. You
must summon the coin. You must summon the coin before it is too late."

"There has to be something," I willed at her. "Can you create another illusion like you did in the
apartment building? Convince him that he's better off leaving me than staying."
"It's taking all that I have to ensure we can speak properly." She snarled as time seemed to slow to a stop around us, everything moving like something out of the matrix. The lightning streams crawled lazily across the room towards her apparition.

I lost myself for a moment in the revelation that Lash could apparently stop time.

"Time does not exist. to keep you conscious and I've sped up your mind so that we can have this conversation. If I keep it up for too long it will cause an aneurism and kill you." A pained tone entered the whisper.

Well, ok at least that made sense, the magic required in stopping or reversing time would have been insane, and it's not like we use our entire brain's capacity to -

"Dresden," Barked Lash, "Focus."

Oh right, enslaved by an Egyptian god. Got to keep in the moment. I mentally imitated a sigh, knowing that another offer I couldn't refuse was in my near future.

The whisper screamed in exasperation, "You are impossible my host"

Eh, everybody has a skill.

"Heka believes your other is the only part of your mind, once he realizes that there are two more he will crush us. Summon the coin wizard summon the coin or accept oblivion there are no other options."

I could summon it, become one of the Order of the Blackened Denarius. Power to free myself, power to crush the Jaffa, power perhaps even to get back home. But that power would come at a price. I would be exchanging one monstrous master for another and though Lash talked a good game it didn't take a genius to figure out that I'd be back at square one before I knew it. Back to being a sock-puppet for evil.

"No." I refused her, a deep sense of resignation seeping into me.

Whatever power she had over Heka was slipping, and fast. The bolts of lightning were already moving at a brisk clip, "I cannot keep this up forever wizard."

Hey lady, don't rush a wizard when he's planning a miracle or you get a shitty miracle.

"Must you prolong this?" Lash hissed in pain. The effort of suppressing Heka was getting to her.

If I submitted to either of them I would be surrendering who I was, who I wanted to be, to a monster. And I would become a monster with them. That wasn't going to happen. Not now, not ever. I would not become a weapon for some supernatural nut job with a god complex.

"Please," begged Lash. "Please let me help you. I don't want you to live as a slave to this monster for eternity."

Eternity was a long time, even for a wizard.

"Harry, in order to subdue you he will crush me."

And then me with her.

"Then summon the coin. Accommodations can be made, agreements can be reached. It is a better option."
A better option, well she was the devil I knew in every possible sense of the word. And as long as I followed her every whim we'd get along swimmingly. Never mind that she'd be asking me to bring about the apocalypse on a weekly basis.

"But you would be alive. Not just some zombie moving at the will of a pretender to power."

No, I would be a puppet to actual hellish power.

"Do you have a choice?"

It took a real effort of will to think, "No, no I don't." towards the Denarian.

"Then hurry, focus on the coin in your mind -"

No, that wasn't an option.

"Then what can you mean to - Harry no!"

It was the only way out.

"Harry, I - I can't let you do this. It's -".

Yes, it would be.

"She, she would never forgive me for allowing you to - I could never go back."

I didn't intend for that to be an option for either of us. She would be coming along for the ride.

A very human twinge of fear worked it's way into her voice, "I... I don't want to die."

Living was nice. I was particularly fond of being alive, sort of a hobby of mine. But sometimes knowing when to end is as important as knowing how to live. And it was time to end, for all three of us.

"I can't let you do that Harry. You know I can stop you."

"No, I don't Lash." I willed at her. "And neither do you. We're weak, both of us. And you can't make me summon the coin. But I can have my dignity, and I can have my peace. Let me have that Lash. Let me do what's right one last time."

"I - She..." Lash's voice took on an almost childish voice of resentment, the phantom image of Lasciel torturing Heka synching with her speech in wonder and a deep note of sadness that hurt as much as anything else that day, "We - don't deserve you."

Taking that as consent I focused on the task at hand, rushing to do the impossible as time sped back into normalcy. Heka's incoherent rage pumped through me as wave of pure will collided with my own mind, thrusting towards what remained of my mind.

He was too late.

Heka had taken my voice, he had taken my body, he had taken my foci, my staff, my cloak, and my memories but I was still a wizard dammit. I still had my will.

Magic isn't about the words or the rituals or the foci or any of the showy things that we wizards do to speed things up. Ultimately magic is all about intent and resolve. I forced myself to remember the things I'd seen in Heka's mind, centuries of rape and death. Every single sobbing and suffering face I
could stand till I knew, not just thought but knew I could do what had to be done. My nostrils filled with the familiar scent of sulfurous hellfire as I focused on the wriggling snake within my own body, wrapped in my head and neck, and willed a scalpel of spite at the god.

I tapped into my own memories, to a memory of a dark basement and the one pain that Lasciel couldn't tap into when she'd been throwing everything but the kitchen sink at Heka, the one memory I repressed even from myself. The reason my hand was a charred hunk of meat, I latched onto the fear I'd even refused to admit to myself.

My fear of fire.

I remembered the terrible flames as I dug deep into the of power in my own will, latching onto the trapped well of suffering emanating from the god's own foci.

I thought the words of power, turning the simple spell I used to light candles into a surgical weapon, "Flickum bicus"

It hurt. Oh God but it hurt as the confused god boiled alive within my skull, burning as the sinews of his body were used for tallow along with my own. My neck and skull ripped apart messily as the intruder's body from the force of my curse, tearing my body beyond repair as the foot long serpent cooked alive. It was suicide, plain and simple.

But as I crumpled to the floor, limply clutching at the ragged meat of my larynx, I was content.

I won.

I was free.

The servants, not privy to any of what had been going on, continued to scream for the Jaffa to save their god. I watched their attempts to push the organs back in my body as the Angelic apparition of Lasciel crouched down next to me. Her soft blond tresses buried in my chest, soaking with my blood as the woman hugged me in a way that would have been agonizing had she been real. She held me and sobbed as the darkness drew closer, the end would come for both of us.

It was nice to have someone who cared there for me, even if she was imaginary.

And on that though I, Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden, died doing the right thing.

At least I hadn't died alone.
Chapter 4

Heaven was narrower than I'd expected.

No choir of angels, no pearly gates, there wasn't really much of anything. Just an eight by three by four glowing white box, devoid of any thing except a film of mucous like white fluid covering my entire body.

It would have been kind of gross if it didn't feel so nice. The space hummed with the Turkic thumping of my heart as I relaxed into the calming oblivion of the light. The collected tension of decades was gone, my aches and pains wiped clean. I couldn't move more than a few inches in any direction, but then again I didn't actually want to. Within this floating womb I wanted for nothing.

As afterlives went, it was pretty nice. Perhaps a bit boring, but nice. No real sense of time or urgency, no pain, I guess I could work with this. An eternity of full body Novocain? It could be way, way worse.

As afterlives went, it was pretty good.

"Your imagination is sadly limited, my host."

I sat up in surprise at the fallen angel's voice, banging my head against the ceiling hard and sweating loudly. The sharp concussive sensation melted away, as painless as it was startling.

"Do try to keep yourself in one piece," she chided exasperatedly. "There is no need for more self flagellation."

Oh come on! What had I done to deserve an eternity in a box with a freaking fallen Angel? I groaned, trying to ignore a laundry list of various sins to my name that probably warranted that exact punishment. So I wasn't perfect, sue me. Buy even for me that felt excessive.

Heck I died for a good cause didn't I.

"Really my host? You haven't worked it out guy yet?" Lash tittered in amusement.

No, I hadn't. So I'm not perfect, alright? Jeeze Louise, cut the dead wizard a break. I've earned a bit of peace in the hereafter.

Lash snorted in a way that seemed to undignified for an angel, even a fallen one, before bursting into a fit of the giggles.

Now that was just rude.

"Honestly my host..." She hiccuped, stifling her mirth. "You really must learn to see the transparently obvious with more clarity. Do you honestly believe that you're bound for a place where I-" she corrected herself abruptly, "- she can reach you."

Holy pronouns batman, that was new. The shadow was referring to herself as a different person from the fallen... Huh?

"You aren't dead, my host." Lash snapped irritatedly.

OK Harry, the pronoun thing was a touchy subject, table that one for later. Wait? How was I not dead? Last I checked blowing up a god with the force of a freaking claymore whilst the
aforementioned deity was piggybacking on your freaking spine tended to cause a terminal case if exploding head. Between the blood loss, the brain trauma, and the heat I should be D-E-D dead.

Wizards are tougher than mortals are but even we react badly to blowing ourselves up from the inside. And yet, here I was, talking, thinking - alive. It was impossible.

"Of course you died wizard," The shadow clipped her tones patronizingly, as one might address a particularly slow child. "You were excessively thorough in your attempts to end your own life."

Well that made things clear as mud.

"Does this energy not feel familiar to you my host? Have you not felt it before?"

Uh. Actually, come to think of it it did seem familiar - but where - oh hells bells, no!

"Hells bells yes, my host. Hell's bells yes."

The cool feeling of contentment swaddling my entire body was something it felt recently before, when it had been forced upon me by Bizzaro Bob. It was the touch of death, the caress of necromancy. A seductive kiss of evil, horrible unlife.

Holy shit! I wasn't freaking dead.

No, no - groaned to myself in desperation - no, no, no, no, NO! This was bad. This was so bad it defied belief.

Necromancy wasn't just black magic, it was the black magic. It was the number one no-no on the white councils shit list. Killing with magic might be the wizard's first law, buy fucking with death held a special place of universal despise.

And it was back because of it. I'd been brought back from - wait? Oh, Hell's bells...

Had Heka been revived as well?

A jolt of fear ran up my spine as I tried to feel the oily touch of the Egyptian deity. I felt nothing, but then would I?

"No," growled the fallen in satisfaction, a sadistic tone of glee dancing in her voice. "Not while they were in the casket. The pretenders seem to delight in the terror of their hosts, allowing them control in these brief moments of purgatory. But fear not, my host. The usurper is quite dead. Gone to whatever afterlife his kind endure. His ashes are far from the resurrection sarcophagus."

Sarcophagus? Like Sarcophagus-sarcophagus? Mummies, curses, the whole nine yards sort of sarcophagus? That was... awesome! Tacky, but freaking awesome.

"Its a theme," Lash sounded unimpressed. "The usurper's are nothing if not fond of tradition and ritual. They draw authority from ceremony."

How long had I been dead for? It was an odds to imagine that I essential hadn't been for a while. It was hard to imagine not well - being. I was used to "being". I was good at it. I had a lot of practice living. Not living was just.... weird.

"Hours perhaps? I only live when you do my host." The shadow pondered the matter for a moment. "Yes, only a matter of hours. They would not have waited long to help you."

Oh... that was good. Then who brought me back?
You know what, to heck with who - How? Necromancy wasn't something you could just do on the spot. It took power, serious magical oomph, to even start to resurrect the dead. Just bringing back a mindless servant like a zombie or a ghost was hard and that could take a shitload of prep-time. I couldn't even begin to imagine the power necessary to drag an intact soul back to its body from the afterlife hours after it died.

We were talking old school magic, the sort that was rooted in blood and death and suffering. The sort of magic where sacrificing virgins was probably one of the less squicky parts of the ritual.

"The rules of moral magics are fluid my host. A sacrifice of power is not necessarily a sacrifice of innocence. The usurper's knowledge is stolen from the bones of the Eden that was, bastardized remnants though they may be the ferromancies of Eden are not bound by the rules you know," she tutted in annoyance, possibly because she couldn't outright dismiss their efficacy. "Their items are largely a collection of ritual objects and ancient sciences. The mortal servants of the usurper's understand no more that you understand the internal workings of your television, but activating it's necromantic powers only requires minimal talent with the ritual."

"But why save me and not him?" I asked the obvious question.

I felt the tingling impression of Lasciel's haughty smirk, "Because, my dear host, he only told them part of the rituals workings to prevent any one of his followers from growing too powerful."

So I was alive because Heka was too much of an untrusting prick to explain how to save his life? Thank God for arrogant assholes!

"Yes, He did seem determined to make most of creation in His us own image, didn't He?" Lash spoke in a voice of millennial exhaustion.

Did lasciel just crack a joke? A blasphemous one, but an actual joke? Miracles do happen.

"I am not without humor, my host. Though I suspect the legion of Jaffa outside the sarcophagus are not of equal cheer," she grunted in discomfort. "I must- I must rest- I've extended my powers beyond what I was designed for. I must recover, regroup."

OK, I thought back, keenly aware that I was naked, unarmed, and soon to be outnumbered by a whole mess of angry non-humans. Uh, what do I do?

"Don't die," she grunted unhelpfully, her voice sleepy and mellow as the roof to the sarcophagus parted and a chill whipped past my naked privates.

I put on my the most wizardly scowl I could manage and stood up, pooling add much of my energies so that I could overcome a room full of Jaffa. I screamed a challenge at the top of my lungs as I came face to face with - uh - with and what appeared to be a boy in his teens and a serving girl in a decidedly revealing garment of sheer silk.

The pair of them nether flinched in surprise at my outburst note did they willingly make contact with my eyes, standing at attention with a basin of soapy water and a clean towel in their arms.

I stood there awkwardly dripping mucus down into the floor with my fists raised like a boxer, before lowering them and saying, "Uh... Hi." because I had took start somewhere after all.

The voice that came out of my throat was not the deep baritone I've had for most of my life. it was harsh, angry, metallic. It was the voice of the dead god. I guess not every part of him got turned extra
"Do you wish for us to bathe you milord?" The young woman whispered, "or shall we bring one of your playthings first?" Her voice hitched with a barely contained note of fear, "Or would this unworthy one better suit your tastes today."

Memories rammed into the forefront of my mind, lust, pain, suffering - the memories of Heka's favored brand of malicious sporting of the flesh. Looking at the terrified young girl I knew that it was within my power to take what I wanted, what I needed out of her body. I could feel her writhing beneath me as I bit, ripped and tore at her, using her for my amusement and then breaking her so that no other could have her. I felt the predatory need to dominate, to use, to command, throbbing in my mind.

I felt a phantom sensation of fingers dragging the horrible urges to a dark corner of my mind, with an angry whisper of "oh no you don't" that was gone as fast as it had came.

Lash didn't want Heka to even begin to have a place in my mind.

Fine, neither did I.

"Milord" the woman flinched in fear, unsure how to interpret my confused expression. I grabbed the towel from her and wiping the vicious fluid from myself. The woman squealed in a tone as baffled as it was terrified.

"My...lord?" Probed the confused young man, his voice too high pitched for his age. I flinched briefly in sympathetic pain, the boy was an eunuch. Poor kid.

He continued in his high pitched fearful whisper, "Are you well milord?"

He wanted to think I was his god? Fine. He could get his god some pants.

"Where are my clothes?" I asked in the most non threatening voice I could muster, the metallic booming edge to my voice echoing within the high ceilinged chamber. Ok, so the new Darth Dresden voice was kind of cool... I admit it. Though what it meant about me I really didn't want to know.

I tabled that freak out for later as I growled, "Clothes." In my mechanical basso.

The woman approached me with an elegant garment of silk and ivory, a robe for a king. Any one of the thumb sized rugby buttons might have been worth a year of my salary. Jesus, Heka's wardrobe had to be worth the GDP of most countries.

And I wanted none of it. "Not these clothes. My hosts' clothes."

"Milord?" The eunuch shook his head in confusion.

"Where are they?"

"You- "the woman swallowed fearfully " - you ordered them destroyed milord. Nothing of the host remains by your decree."

My things... Gone... My coat, my pendant, my staff.... Oh God, Bob! I was screaming before I knew it, towering over Heka's cowering servants in incoherent fury. Bob was my oldest friend, the closest thing I'd had to family for newly a decade. He couldn't be dead, he just couldn't.
"They might still be in storage milord!" The eunuch prostrated himself on the floor in terror. "I- we- the servants were only tasked with that duty this morning. It might not have come to pass."


I pulled the robe over myself, marching behind the eunuch as he scurried forward, heading down the gaudy halls of the place of the now dead god. Servants averted their eyes and soldiers saluted me as I passed them, wary of their God's ire.

I was too angry to care much. Blood pounded in my ears, setting a furious tempo to my already long shanked strides. The eunuch actually broke into a sprint to keep up with me as I rushed forward, heading for what I knew to be the armory. I don't know how I knew it was the armory and I don't know how I knew the combination to open the door, but I did.

Half naked and still dripping viscous fluid from beneath the hem of my doubtlessly soiled robe, I howled in horror as I watched a Jaffa servant toss my clothes into foundry at the center of the armory.

"Stop!" I pleaded in horror. "Please stop!"

The pair of Jaffa froze in place, not sure how to interpret their "god's" sobbing cry of despair. I rushed over to the box of my things, shoving them your of the way bodily as I lifted the familiar form of a rune covered skull into the air. I hugged it to my chest as I choked in relief. "You're OK!"

The Jaffa were understandably confused, but decades of dealing with the capricious whims of their god had apparently trained them to keep a decent poker face. Though not, apparently, good enough to conceal their surprise when a disembodied skull stared talking back.

"Its about time you came to get me! I was afraid one of these bozos was going to cremate me," Bob sighed in relief, starting up at me with his flickering eye lights. " And what's with the voice? I thought that came bundled with a plus one in the noggin."

"Wait? You know its me?" I blinked in surprise.

"Of course I do, you're not exactly making with the whole seig heil Heka." Bob said in a voice of mild irritation that did nothing to conceal his pleasure at knowing more than I, "Gods don't say please, and they don't forget to button the front of their robes."

I looked down and yelped in embarrassment, using the hand not holding the skull to tie the garment shut. "Yeah, well, I was in a bit of a hurry. They had to bring me back to life."

"Come again?" Bob blinked in shock.

"Dead then not dead," I shrugged. "I'm sort of winging it at this point. I didn't have much of a plan past dying. Didn't think I'd need one."

"You're too sane for the lesser undead," Bob tutted in contemplation, teeth wiggling contemplatively. "And you're not a Litche or a hemonculous .. I would see... You... You're alive? Actually alive? That's -" Bob clacked his teeth together in irritation "- that's not supposed to be possible. You're not
supposed to come back that fresh, even if you do come back."

"Hey," I barked irritatedly. "Not seeing the downside."

"There's always a downside boss. That's the point of most magic. It's an exchange. Something has to be spent to get something else." He sighed. "Just try to survive when the other shoe drops, eh sahib? I don't fancy another trip to the cremation room."

"Fancy?" I teased, "You don't fancy it?"

"Oh shut up Harry, the natives are getting restless," Bob narrowed his eyes, darting back and forth between the confused looking Jaffa and sizing up biceps the width of my torso. "And I'm thinking they've got a leg up on you oh wizardly - Wait? Why are you bald?"

"Oh come on," I ran my hand over my head in annoyance, "That's just not freaking fair."

"Milord?" Hedged the nervous voice of the Eunuch. His eyes were wide with genuine fear as he stated into the skull's flaming eyes. "What manner of monster is that?"

Holy crap this had to be freaking terrifying for everyone else in the room. The Jaffa were doing a decent job of not totally freaking out as their god had a conversation with a severed head in some unknown language, but the eunuch was just short of pissing himself in fear. To the uninitiated, Bob was not exactly normal.

"He is a spirit of learning," I replied in the Goa'uld language. "A friend who means you no harm, my oldest friend."

I handed the skull to the Eunuch with a warning to be careful with it as I looked into the box and sighed disappointedly. He stared into the skulls burning eyes in terror as I took stock of what I still had to my name.

Bob carried on chatting animatedly in English, "Harry this guy is marked as a slave. When did you get slaves? Are we keeping slaves now? I'm still hazy on the whole "good" and "evil" thing but I was pretty sure keeping slaves was a no-no."

"It's a temporary situation Bob," I replied, furious at what I found. It wasn't as bad as it might have been I supposed. My clothes were gone, but after all the injuries and grit of the Darkhallow I was probably going to just have to burn them anyway. I still had my mother's silver pentacle, my rings, my shield bracelet and my spell enhanced coat, even the gray cloak and cowl of the wardens but my staff had not been so lucky. The burnt remnants of the wooden shaft, covered in traditional ozark folk art, smoldered in the heart of the forge, crackling with bursts of electricity as the runes imbued along it were broken.

Oh that was just perfect.

"Fuck," I yelled at the top of my lungs in the Goa'uld language, causing the Jaffa to jerk in fear, "Fucking shit fuck of a self important shitting fuck head. I cannot believe that prick burned my staff."

"You ordered it milord," The confused Jaffa to my left replied, looking desperately to the Eunuch for confirmation, "It was your will... I - I - I only meant to obey."

"Not you skippy, him." I snarled in irritation, pointing at my head. He blinked in confusion as I busied myself with the job of putting on my shield bracelet and rings and tying my mother's sliver pentacle back around my neck, muttering under my breath in English. "That self important prickish self-made moron of an Egyptian dime store deity wrecked my freaking staff."
"My lord is - I mean to say that you - but -?" The Eunuch blinked in confusion, looking up from the ground as far as he dared without making eye contact. He waved to the Jaffa, barking orders at them in an attempt to appease his irrationally irritated god, "Bring our god his armor and staff!"

Eager to show their loyalty the Jaffa pair rushed over to a thick ebony wardrobe inlaid with the wrapped serpents of Heka, virtually tripping over each other in their haste to appease me. The Eunuch continued to bow deeply, holding the skull above his head reverently as he spoke at my feet. "Master Ul'tak commissioned them to resize your armor for your new body, as well as your new staff of office. It is to the specifications you requested."

The wardrobe opened onto a mannequin of my own substantial height, accurate for my girth and overall lankiness. Dull red metal flecked with black reflected the firelight in odious menace on it's angular carapace-like protrusions of plate, contrasting with the black ringlets of skirted mail weaved into rich black leather at the joints. Where the armor of the Jaffa was rounded and practical this was obviously designed for someone who wanted to look as god damn scary as they could manage.

Heka had believed that he was going to be the biggest badass on the block when he got my body and he picked an armor to match it, complete with talon like hooks tipping his fingers.

Sure it was armor as designed by the Evil Overlord school of fashion but given the choice between it and my current outfit of a soiled kimono, I was going to go with the armor. "Uh, yeah, that will work."

It felt weird stripping naked in front of three strangers. I felt even weirder having the aforementioned strangers worshiping me as they helped me put on the armor. But between chants of purification and some very odd places for armor to fasten, we managed to get me into the Jaffa made armor.

It was… comfortable? Armor wasn't comfortable. Heavy? Yes. Impractical? Sometimes. Gaudy? Usually. But armor wasn't comfortable, it was a rule or something.

Michael's armor was so heavy I could barely lift it but this stuff was almost not even there. I barely even felt it on my body, it was as light as any jacket I'd ever worn though Heka's memories gave me the dull sense that it was more than sufficient to stop a blade or an arrow. Though not, I suspected, the discharge of the lightning weapon now strapped to my left wrist or the ruby foci in the palm of my right hand… or the freaking forcefield I had strapped to my wrist. That memory couldn't be right… could it?

Hot damn I had an honest to god forcefield.

The foci were tinged with that same dull menace of the ones I'd used to fry Heka, centuries of misuse corrupting them as much as empowering them. But they were empowered, boy howdy were they empowered. I opened my wizard's sight to stare at my wrists and flinched at the searing brightness of it, closing my sight as quickly as I'd started it. My arms were no longer flesh, but constructs of crystal and coruscating lightning, weaved together with gears and pistons covered in egyptian writings and runes in languages I did not recognize.

"Nice threads boss," Bob wolf whistled jokingly. "Going crusading later?"

I turned my head to return his snark, accidentally activating the armor's built in helmet. Armor snapped into place out of nowhere around my head and face, a holographic display appearing over the black surface in front of me. Bob yelped in surprise, "Holy moley! Harry that was… that was awesome!"

I turned to one of the polished shields hanging along the wall and came face to mask with myself.
The face was not my own, but a blank-faced golden mask, complete with glowing ruby eyes and a sloping set of black cable braids leading down into the neck of my armor. An icon of raised arms on either side of a coiled snake sat dead center in the mask's forehead, the symbol of Heka.

Twisting my chin again, I found the switch to retract the helmet. I didn't like wearing the symbol of the Goa'uld marking me as his property, as his body, and essentially as him. I pulled my sorcerously enhanced jacket and grey cloak over the armor, obscuring the symbols of the dead god from view. I could only barely make out the outline of the armor beneath the jacket and cowl, other than the bald head I more or less recognized the man staring back at me.

My face looked too young by about ten years without the dull outlines of scars and scrapes I'd picked up over the years. Come to think of it I looked like Thomas. The preternatural predatory edge of sexuality my Incubus brother always exhumed wasn't there but without the sort of wear and tear one normally accrued with age I seemed more like a brother and less like an older cousin. Pulling the glove off my crippled hand as the extent of the sarcophagus' effects on my body registered in my conscious mind I whooped in glee, staring at an entirely unharmed appendage. With the exception of the angelic sigil branded into the palm of my skin there was no sign that the Black Court of Vampire had ever wounded me.

I was whole. That was almost worth the trouble of dying.

"Does it please you my lord?" The Eunuch asked as he handed me a heavy staff forged from some metal I couldn't even begin to identify. It was one of the quarterstaffs favored by the Jaffa, oblong protrusions jutting from each end. "Or is something else more fitting of a god?"

As I accepted the staff and felt the slight tingle of power of it's core. A foci, like the gem that Heka had used, I recognized the closed blossom at it's tip as the weapon used by the Jaffa I'd slain. It wasn't my staff, I held no emotional contact with it, but it would be serviceable in the interim.

I reached out for Bob the Skull, cradling my sarcastic companion as I replied, "Heka is dead."

"Yes my lord Heka." The Eunuch replied, bowing deeply. "If my lord Heka says so. Dead and reborn."

"No, just dead," I replied, turning my back on the Eunuch and walking out of the armory. "I'm -- I'm new."

The Jaffa fell into a protective march behind me and the Eunuch as I walked down the most likely looking corridor to lead to the outside. The familiar nagging tug of memory told me that it was the direction I needed to go in, though I couldn't even begin to say why. The Eunuch continued to follow me, head bowed, probing to see how he could best serve his "god."

"I do not understand my lord. You stand here before us in flesh and blood. You are alive my lord god Heka, showering us with your resplendence."

"Look - I don't mean to burst your bubble, uh, what is your name?" I replied to the Eunuch. "You, uh, do have a name right?"

"Amun milord, it is the name you gave me when you took me from my parents at birth to become your Lo'Tar," The Eunuch replied in a hurt voice. "I have served you since I was five."

"No, you served Heka for decades. And Heka has gone on to the great beyond." I tapped my head as we rounded a corner, startling a group of idle Jaffa playing some sort of gambling game using the bones of chicken. The hopped up to attention, strewing the chicken bones across the floor in their
haste. I hopped over them as I said, "It's a single occupancy head up here."

"You test my faith my lord god Heka I know that there is no greater power than you in this universe." The young boy replied earnestly. "You bring healing and magic to the universe. You command the impossible and the unknowable Sheshaw, the glorious and forbidden libraries of the Rw. All the knowledge of the world is yours."

"Kid, there isn't anybody in charge of magic and if there was it most certainly wouldn't have been the snake," I sighed in irritation. There had to be a way of letting these guys know that their god wasn't in my head without having to fight them. It wasn't their fault they served a genocidal jerk-wad. "Magic isn't something that one guy runs it just kind of is. And nobody can know everything. Magic is just to broad for that."

The Eunuch nodded with wrapped attention as I continued my rant, opening the wide double doors before me with a swipe of his hand over a metal plate.

"I mean what proof has this guy… given… that… oh boy." I trailed off as the doors opened into the most expansive library I'd ever seen. "I mean wow, just wow."

A space easily the size of three football fields stretched out in every direction from a raised platform at the center, a tiered set of book shelves and platforms reaching as far as the eye could see. Thick scrolls of papyrus and dusty leather-bound tomes sat next to long crystals glowing with the slightest hint of electricity, all wrapped with the musty scent of knowledge any proper library had. Bob peeked out from my pocket as I went silent, his yellow eye darting back and forth around the room in shock, "You take me to the most interesting places Sahib."

"Bob are these what I think they are?" I gasped.

"If you think they're a collection of ancient, probably evil, ritual magics and ferromancy from the Egyptian Gods… then yes." The skull shifted slightly in my pocket as Bob used his teeth to re-arrange himself "Harry. This entire room is warded, badly done but definitely warded. Don't touch anything you didn't want to light on fire unless you know how to get past the wards."

"My lord Heka," A stocky figure at the center of the room waved to me, eagerly motioning towards the center of the library. "This way my lord."

I stormed across the room towards the familiar form of the waving man, ignoring bowing scribes and prostrating librarians as the blood pounded in my ears. I don't remember walking across the room, nor do I remember handing my staff and skull to the Eunuch, there is a good minute and a half of my memory just missing from where my single minded rage seared it out.

My only concrete memory between seeing the man at the center of the room and punching him in the nose is of his look of surprise as he looked into my glowing eyes. He staggered back from my punch, unsure how to react.

"My lord?" He dropped to his knees. "How have I failed you?"

I wanted kick the son of a bitch in the face. He'd left me to die, served me up on a fucking platter for a god of necromancy. I could kill him, kill all of them, and they'd deserve it. They were thralls, inhuman servants of the ancient gods. His men, his flesh, meat to stand between him and those who opposed him. They were nothings that were second to his glory. His majesty his ---

"Harry!" A furious Angel thundered in my head. "This is not you!"

I shook my head, clamping down on the sides and grunting as I felt the phantom fingers of the fallen
angel scraping across the insides of my mind, tearing the viscous urges from me. Heka's memories, Heka's desires -- oh hellfire, I'd acted upon them.

Ul'tak, betrayed me, but I didn't despise him as my inferior. I did not feel that he was my chattel. That was the monster I'd slain hours ago. The monster who lived in my head even after death it would seem. That was deeply troubling.

Ul'tak probed my silence with a nervous, "My lord?"

"You tried to feed me to him." I growled. "To Heka, so that he could own me. I am not freaking real-estate for some supernatural snake creature."

The First Prime sighed exasperatedly, "My loyalty to you has not changed my Lord Heka. I did not doubt you the seven times I have seen your resurrection and I do not doubt you now."

"For the love of --- I am NOT HIM." I pointed at my head, "Single occupancy, no snakes allowed!"

"Sokkar has called for a meeting of his vassals milord. I've taken the liberty of preparing your flagship for space flight," He pointed to a device upon his wrist, "The mother ship is ready to travel to hyperspace upon your arrival through the ring teleporters."

I blinked and concentrated upon Lasciel, surely she'd mistaken the meaning of that last part in her struggle to suppress the memories of the fallen god. Because there was no freaking that--

"No my host it is correct," the strained voice of Lasciel whispered, "The ferromancies of the Goa'uld allowed them to sail the stars."

I cleared throat and asked "Are we on Earth?" though the words came out as "Are we on the first planet of men?"

"No... no milord that planet is weeks away." Ul'tak's voice colored with just a hint of worry. "Does my lord desire to spend more time in the healing sarcophagus?"

"No... no I -- take me too the ship," I replied realizing that my solution was right in front of my nose. "We're going on a trip."

Ul'tak tapped his wrist, summoning a cluster of hovering rings from the floor beneath us. I squinted my eyes as a brilliant flash of white light flared from the inside of the rings, briefly blinding me as they receded into the floor. As I blinked the stars out of my eyes I suppressed a fanboyish squeal of glee.

Bob actually gaped in astonishment, the lower jaw to his skull hanging open as he said, "Boss this is way above my pay-grade."

A teleporter. I just got to ride a freaking teleporter this had officially become the best day... ever. The First Prime and Lok'tar, apparently unnerved by my manic grin of positive glee, exchanged a covert look of worry. Neither of them dared voice their confusion at my behavior but both had clearly realized that something was wrong with their god.

Good, I still needed them for the moment. They knew how to fly the ship.

I followed Ul'tak through the needlessly gaudy halls of the ship, through rooms of gold leaf murals and marble statuettes of the egyptian deities and finally onto the bridge. The Jaffa soldiers averted their eyes from me, huddling deferentially in alcoves and corners to not catch the ire of their vengeful god. They were as terrified as they were loyal.
The bridge was just a lesser version of the palatial throne room on the planet below. A tall throne of jet black stone and precious gemstones sat in the center of the ship's command hub, raised from the ground on a pillar covered in Heka's greatest achievements in testament to the former god's endless narcissism.

I looked away from the throne, shaking head in disgust. Christ that guy had been an epically self absorbed prick. How could anyone waste their time on writing about themselves when they had the whole universe at their fingertips, and the beauty of the universe right in front of their face.

I used to dream about going to space, it was this vast endless expanse full of adventure and strange races. I would look out at the stars through Ebenezer's telescope and just imagine hopping from star to star. My dreams of being an Astronaut died early. Wizards could not hope to operate anything more sophisticated than a toaster without it going on the fritz... or so I'd thought.

The wide holographic display of the reddish rust colored planet beneath was entirely unaffected by me walking up to it and caressing the face of the planet with my fingertips in wonder. I was in space. This. Was. Awesome!

I turned to Ul'tak, unable to conceal my giddiness as I said the words I'd been dying to say since I was eleven years old, "Set in a course for Earth. Maximum warp."

"My Lord, Sokkar has commanded that we attend the conference. The consequences of not arriving would be --" Ul'tak swallowed his next words at an angry flash from my eyes. "Forgive me my lord - - I ... I was not thinking. It is not my place to question you."

He nodded to the Jaffa at the helm, "Inform the alkesh, we move upon the first planet, immediately."

"Belay that order Jaffa." A feline purr of a voice echoed within the confines of the bridge, the words reverberating with a force that actually left a chill in the air. "Your God has other debts to pay."

I had never in all my life been happier to hear the voice of Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness.
Chapter 5

The Nevernever was full of powerful beings, goblins, pixies, fairies, trolls, centaur, and just about any other creature you could imagine, but few were as powerful or as terrifying as the Queens of summer and winter. Mab was a goddess in her own right, able to bend the laws of physics and magic around her finger as easily with the slightest effort of will. She was pure calculating will and magic bound within her frozen form.

Mab was cold, calculating, and amoral but she was the most familiar face I'd seen since dying. Foolish though it was, I was thrilled to see her. There was a way back to Earth through the Nevernever. Mab was the first thing that had made sense to me in days.

The Fae Queen lounged upon the throne at the Bridge's center, a fine film of frost spreading out behind her in a subtle but effective demonstration of her own power over the elements. She leered at me with catlike eyes, bright yellow clashing with milky white porcelain skin as brilliant and striking as a winter's morning. Her pale, opalescently blue lips were quirked into a predatory smirk that displayed just the slightest hint of an enlarged canine.

Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness, was stunning. Not in a girl next door way, or even a super-model way, she was perfect. Every curve, every line, every accent and motion of her was, without a doubt, perfect. The tales of mankind were rife with stories of men who'd fallen for those looks, and the palace of the winter queen was built upon their bones. She had looks to die for, to kill for, to go mad over and centuries of former lovers to prove it.

Only a fool forgot that the ruler of the Winter Court was far more deadly than she was beautiful. Only the damnedest of fools owed her a favor.

I owed her two.

Harry Dresden, damned fool Esquire.

I was so relieved to see her that it never occurred to me sudden appearance of a clearly supernatural being was precisely the sort of thing that shouldn't happen in a room full of heavily armed religious fanatics. As a rule, cultists react badly to people threatening the safety of their god. They tend to get a bit trigger happy.

Ul'Tak was not so wowed by her beauty to ignore the clear and present threat to his god. He screeched something near incomprehensible in the Jaffa language too fast for Lash to translate, unholstering his side-arm and firing a burst of lightning at the fae queen. "Jaffa Kal tek nok kree! Mak Kree! Heka dor shak! Shek mok kree!"

Arm raising with preternatural speed, Mab caught the burst of energy in a pocket of light and sound, flinging it across the room at a confused Jaffa soldier. He crumpled over on his staff weapon, unmoving upon the ground. Mab's face twisted up into a feral look of glee, a disturbing visage of regal contempt and pure inhuman bestial joy.

The Queen of Air and Darkness swatted the First Prime across his face, tossing the burly man across the room like a child's plaything as she shimmered across the floor. Ul'Tak snarled in shock as he collided with the wall, thick manacles of ice and snow binding him in place.

The Jaffa fired upon her, staff blasts and lightning bolts dissipating harmlessly against a whirling shield of enchanted snow as she sliced down with her left hand, ripping a hole in space and letting a
trio of massive trolls onto the bridge. The thick necked beasts were covered from head to toe in enchanted Fae armor, the largest and meanest of their kin. The private guard of a Fairy Queen, each of them was an army in and of themselves.

As the creatures bellowed their battle cry I put myself between the Fairies and the Jaffa, hoping against hope that Mab valued my services more than she'd been insulted by the attempt on her life. If she viewed it as a violation of the laws of hospitality she might have been obligated to slay us all, debts be damned.

"Stand down!" I barked to the terrified Jaffa warriors as they opened the flowering buds of their staff-weapons. "Everyone stand down!

The Jaffa obeyed my order without hesitation, though none of them let go of their weapons nor took their eyes off of the Fae Queen. The thick muscles in their arms and legs were tense, like some jungle cat ready to pounce. Though they obeyed their God, they were no fools. The Fairy Queen was not to be trusted, and they knew it.

Astonishingly, I was not gored to death by angry Trolls.

Mab snapped her fingers lazily, stopping the Troll charge as they beat upon their chests with tree-trunk sized fists. The Troll trio, bound servitors to their mistress' will, stood like elephantine statues. The soft growling hush of their icy breath was the only hint that they were even alive, their long serrated tusks rising and falling with each breath.

The stillness was somehow scarier than the charge. It gave me time to notice the human skulls woven into the creature's pelts and the viscous blue liquid dripping from the tiny cuts along the creatures arms. Each drop that fell upon the ground hissed and spat, virulent acid pock marking the floor. Even by troll standards they were nasty specimens.

The Jaffa looked from me, to the trolls, to the queen and back, unsure how to proceed and clearly convinced that battle was in the near future. I had to avoid a fight at all costs. Brave though they may have been, they couldn't hope to harm a Fae Queen.

It wasn't the Jaffa's fault that they were against something they couldn't hurt and I couldn't let them die to protect their dead god. It wouldn't be fair to abuse their loyalty like that.

She waved her hand to the first prime fixed to the wall, freeing him from his bonds and shaking her head in exasperation, "These past two thousand years of exile have done little to improve the worm-touched. Disappointing really, they have such potential but so little imagination."

"Thank you for letting him live." I replied diplomatically. Had the Queen desired it, she could easily have annihilated the Jaffa. "I appreciate your patience."

"The Leananside implied that you are unlikely to remain reasonable when those you protect are harmed. Your reputation for obstreperous self sacrifice is amusing, but impractical for your coming duties." She waved her hand towards the Jaffa and ship. "And you are in a uniquely desirable position for one of the two favors owed me. Your vassals and position will serve my will Wizard. It will be done."

"My position?"

"Wizard, it is not often that the people who owe me their life, potential and magic ascend to godhood." She chuckled. "Even if it is the least of godhoods."

My face colored at the insult to my station, the station that was mine by birth and glory.
Part of me screamed, a petulant and spiteful voice echoing within my own mind. A powerful urge thundered within my own ears, demanding that I kill the bitch who'd dared to impugn upon my might. I was a god, and gods do not bow.

My hand twitched, feeling the weight of the weapon strapped to it. I could kill the trolls easily enough. I've killed trolls before. It would be difficult but-

WHAT THE HELL WAS I THINKING? The Queen of Winter was a force of Nature, winter incarnate. Cold, calculating and merciless. She would swat me like a bug without even trying.

Heka's thoughts... not mine. I needed to- hell I had no idea what I needed to do. This was not good.

Hopefully she couldn't see how terrified of her I was. You could never afford to let a Fae see fear, they fed upon it like a shark in bloodied waters.

"Wizard," Mab purred, a curious lilt to her tone as she peered a me past steepled fingers, "You are far from where you belong."

"I like to get around," I shrugged, "See the sights, go to new places, meet new people."

"So it would seem." Mab waved her hand, opening a door to the Nevernever and displaying the landscape beyond. An army of Fae, hundreds? No thousands- Thousands upon thousands of armored Fae sat in formation upon the parched and scarred desert landscape of the Fae world beyond. An army the likes of which could consume the world of mortal men. "I have many new people for you to meet if needs must."

She snapped her fingers, dismissing the portal, "But they won't, will they wizard?"

"No Queen Mab." I replied. "They won't"

Where had she amassed that Army? Had she removed them from the Borders of Summer? No, they'd been dressed differently than the regular soldiers of the Winter Fae. A secret army? Nothing good, none of it meant anything good.

"You perturbed the Leananside greatly by your arrival Wizard, the sudden appearance of a new obligation so far from the seat of Winter magics has taxed her far beyond what she'd anticipated."

Mab tittered girlishly. "She's positively livid to be doing twice the work without warning."

"You'll pardon me if I'm not particularly wounded by her irritation," I snorted. "She spent the better part of a decade trying to turn me into a - wait, why does the Leananside know where I am?"

"Knowledge comes with a price wizard," The fairy Queen sat upon Heka's throne, lounging upon it imperiously. "And you already owe me much more than you'll likely survive, wizard mine."

"I survived the Darkhallow, I survived the Red Court, I beat Nicodemus and the Nickel heads and killed a Queen of Summer, on your orders if you remember." I replied in as even of a voice as I could manage, "And Heka as well I suppose-" The group of Jaffa flinched, looking from Ul'tak to me and back "- I can handle a lot."

"You are speaking truth aren't you wizard? A Queen of the summer court? Not Titania... Aurora I suppose?" The Winter Queen mused, "You speak truth. At my orders... curious Wizard, you are very curious. An oddity to be sure. You have truly no idea how confused I was to realize that an obligation to me had suddenly appeared bound to a powerful vassal with whom I have never previously spoken - for a debt held by my handmaiden. Such a curious boon you are."
"We've never spoken." I repeated the words, testing them on my own lips as I snapped my fingers near my ears to be sure they were working properly. "You, Mab, the Queen of Air and Darkness and ruler of the realm of Winter have never previously spoken with me, Harry Dresden, Wizard of the White Council."

"No, Wizard, we have not spoken before today," She smiled predatorily.

That was... what? How? She had to be lying to me but Fairies could not lie - ever. It was one of their most dangerous qualities. Fairies twisted truth into a weapon but if they ever said something directly then the had to tell the 110%, accept no substitutes, cross their heart and hope to die, truth. It wasn't just a rule of conduct it was a fundamental part of their being.

Fairies did not lie.

So unless Mab wasn't Mab, that that meant - oh no. "What is today's date your highness?"

"On the Gregorian Calendar?" She smirked. "It is the twenty second of October of the year nineteen ninety nine."

"Oh hells bells," I whispered, the grey cloak about my shoulders feeling suspiciously like a noose. Though shalt not swim against the Currents of Time, one of the inviolable laws of magic for which there was only one sentence, death. I'd violated two of the laws of magic in as many hours, and while neither necromancy nor time travel had been of my own volition, either would be worthy of my death.

It was the twenty second of October, two days after I'd proposed to Susan. Two days after she'd disappeared from my life fearing that she'd kill me in a fit of Vampiric rage, it was only a week till I'd receive the White Council's notice of war upon the Red Court of Vampires.

"Yes Wizard. It is good that you did not return to Earth, were you found it would have been your undoing." The Fae Queen nodded somberly. "It would be unfortunate to loose such potential. I can see why I will ... bargain with the Leananside for your debt... yes I do."

"I'm four years in the past!" I squawked. "How? Why? What do I - how?"

"It is immaterial to you Wizard, what matters now is what is owed to me." She held up two fingers. "Two favors are owed me. I will have my favor and you will be returned to your precious city, whole and healthy."

"And if I decline?" I sighed, arguing more out of tradition than any real argument to the contrary.

"Wizard, what would you do? Wait three years before setting foot upon Earth for fear that you might be captured and bring about your own undoing? Risk paradox?" She tutted disapprovingly. "It is by my will alone that you were not slain the second you walked in view of the bastion at the outer gates and by pure chance that you were not seen by the Gatekeeper. The Desert Fox already has your scent, and will not give up till he has your blood. How long can you last Wizard? How long?"

Oh hells bells, "What do you want?"

Mab waved her hand, summoning a cloud of fog from the air ducts that cloaked the ceiling and formed a swirling portal of vaporeous mist. The roar of unnaturally shifting winds commingled with the confused Jaffa gasps of astonishment, heralding the formation of ornate murals of color and sound. The silken strands of undulating mist caressed the ship's hull, obscuring everything in sight.

And suddenly we were no longer in the bridge. An etherial landscape of faintly glowing blue mist
formed the shape of the swirling blackness of space, tiny white glowing pinpricks of stars and planets whizzing past my face as the Fairy Queen tapped a section of Galaxy with an idle finger.

"The mortal world is so hectic. Disorganized," She tilted her head in a surprisingly overt display of emotion. "Ah - yes - here we are."

She waved her hands at a grayish sector of space, distorting the mist-formed galaxy as it reshaped about her will, zooming in upon an angry world covered in spires of jagged rock and pillars of fire. The mist whirled forward, skirting the skyline of the nightmare planet, giving the merest hint of tiny hamlet villages and stone cities leading towards a single massive superstructure.

I'd mistaken it for a mountain at first, but it was in fact a single pyramid taller than the closest natural peak. Corpses of men and beasts covered it's sides, a haphazard mess of messily hung rotting charnel. Even through the bluish mist I knew that the slowly coagulating pools of liquid dripping across the stone was a stomach churning shade of crimson.

"What the hell is that?" I gagged as the vision swam past a jagged spire upon which jaffa warriors were laboriously spreading the entrails of their still living victim. The woman's soundless mouth was unnaturally wide, near dislocated from the fervor of her screams.

"A bastion of the conqueror worms." Mab's cold eyes held no mercy for the victims, searching the scene with clinical disinterest. "This worm."

A robed man leaned upon the upmost balcony of the pyramid, presiding over the hellscape like a proud father watching his child. A thick runlet of juice ran down the corner of his lip as he bit into a meaty bit of fruit, chewing twice before tossing the rest across the balcony for the crows to battle over.

"Sokar." The words passed my lips with a passionate lilt of rage and jealousy. The bastard king sat upon the throne that was by right mine. It would be mine, was I not of breeding pure as he?

I would conquer his realms and purge his stocks of Tau'ri, slaying all but the fittest and saving the tastiest morsels of woman-flesh for my own - Jesus freaking' Christmas, what the fuck was I thinking?

What was wrong with me?

I fell to my knees putting my head into my palms as I pressed down upon my forehead, willing the memories away. This was not me. I WAS ME.

A frosty palm rested atop my head, chilled fingers spreading across my scalp in probatory curiosity. "Ah," Said the Fairy Queen in irritation. "You were not entirely complete in your destruction of the worm."

"I flash fried the snake," I whispered past clenched teeth. "It was the best I could manage on short notice. He was sort of trying to take my body."

"Shall I assist you Wizard?"

"Hell no," I growled, staggering to my feet and shaking my head fervently. "I am not some witless mortal for you to snare Mab. I know nothing from the Sidhe do comes without a price."

"Oh wizard," Mab sighed, a mix of irritation and mild approval coloring her tone. "Your stubbornness was not exaggerated in the slightest. I give you my word, I will only remove the Worm's influence from your mind for the length of our conversation. I will not alter your own
memories nor impose my will upon you. You have my word as Queen of the Winter Court."

"Fine," I was obstinate, not stupid. She would keep her word. She had to.

She tapped the top of my head twice with her index finger, causing a sensation like a raw egg dripping down my head as the Goa'uld memories were purged. A feminine exhalation of ecstasy reverberated within my skull, the fallen angel in near orgasmic bliss. Holding back the memories of the Goa'uld had taxed her more than I'd realized.

Having them had changed me more than I'd realized.

Shame, guilt and horror smashed me across the jaw like a freight train. In the past twenty four hours I'd considered rape, murder, and outright freaking genocide. Hell, the only reason I hadn't done it was because I was too mule-headed to allow anyone else to tell me what to do.

It was like Mab had shed the scales from my eyes and restored my own humanity. "What... what's wrong with me?"

"Wrong?" Mab considered the matter. "Nothing, provided that you don't view things through the prism of human morality. The wormkin spread their knowledge through their blood, imposing their knowledge and values upon the next generation. I am surprised that you were as skilled in resisting them as you have been so far. It stretches the bounds of credulity."

My palm itched where the Angelic sigil was branded upon my flesh as an exhausted whisper murmured in satisfaction. I willed thanks in her direction as I addressed the Winter Queen, "I'm tougher than I look."

"Perhaps, but these memories will overwhelm you wizard. You were at the breaking point after mere hours of exposure." Mab shook her head idly. "Stubbornness will only get you so far."

I didn't really have a reply to that one. If Lash's pained murmurs of assent were any guide, I was pretty much screwed. The Angel's shadow rarely admitted to her own limits... actually she never admitted to her own limits. Lash was always there when I got to the edge of what I could offer me unbridled demonic power. She should have been virtually brow beating me with the coin as a way of suppressing the memories.

"Not... not worth it," A small voice whispered. "She... she wouldn't be any better..."

My jaw dropped. Lash had just told me not to call her coin.

Mab smirked, misreading my look of shock. "Yes Wizard. You are doomed without my help. You will become a monstrous shadow of yourself. But you need not fear. I am fair. You cannot provide me with my third boon if you are dead or a raving madman."

"So... you'll cure me?" I probed hesitantly. "And... and take me back to my own time?"

"For a price. Yes. I can cure you and give you the secret to returning to where you belong," Mab smirked. "You have my word."

I sighed, "What do you want?"

"You will collect an item for me in Sokar's possession." The Fairly Queen snapped her fingers, shifting the view of the godling to a long dagger forged of glimmering, rough-cut crystal. Mab reached up for the image, caressing the hilt longingly. "The Key of the Dead, stolen from it's resting place in the final days of the wormkin's rule. You will find it and bring it to me within-" she squinted
her eyes and examined the middle distance”- two, nay two days time."

"Why two days?" I shook my head. "And which two days? Earth? Mars? They're different right?"

"The spell upon your mind will last till the rising of the noonday sun on the soil of your homeland." She reached into the folds of her robe and removed an hourglass, placing it upon the arm of Heka's throne. "Forty eight hours, starting from the moment our conversation ends."

Forty eight hours to complete an undisclosed task from the Queen of Air and Darkness or become a monster that would murder his brother for an amusing hat. Jesus Harry, why is it always you?

"I don't really have a choice do I?" I groaned, "What do you want?"

"The Key of the Dead," Mab proclaimed once again into the collective gasps of amazed Jaffa as the mist shimmered to another vision of the blade, forged from crystal, some eight inches long. "It was stolen from its keeper when the worms were banished from the kingdoms of man. It is owed me and I will have it Wizard."

"Where is it?" I watched the shimmering facets of the blade as they reflected unnatural bursts of psychedelic shapes and color. It was beautiful in a strange way. "Hell, what is it?"

"It is an artifact of the first magic, and the first sin of the old ones. It was the first step towards their undoing. It is the first object of rituals best left forgotten." She shook her head. "Do not cut yourself upon it, or allow the blood of any other to touch it, it brings only death. It must not remain in the hands of the worms and subject to their will."

"Very well." I sighed. "I will do you this favor."

"Yes," Replied Mab as she opened a door to the Nevernever, leading her trolls back to the massive army in the world beyond our own. "You must."

Ok an evil dagger that brings nightmarish death is currently in the hands of one of the transparently evil Egyptian Gods. And all I had to do was sneak into the fortress of an angry god with the help of the Jaffa who... who were going to murder the shit out of me.

Oh fuck me sideways with a birch bark canoe, I was fifty shades of fucked.

Ul'tak had been staring at me with an inscrutable expression of intense thought since I said that I'd slain Heka. Hell, all of them were caught between fear, confusion, anger and dismay. Holy crap what had I been thinking? I killed their freaking God. Why would I tell them that? Why would I argue with them about that?

"The sarcophagus, my host." A breathy voice whispered in my ear. My own private devil was finally perking up. "It clouds the mind, dulls the wits."

Oh, fan-freaking-tastic.

I turned to Ul'tak, staring into the dark-skinned man's weatherbeaten face, submitting myself to his stony gaze. My hand twitched on the staff as I pooled my magic, preparing for the fight I knew to be coming.

"You killed Heka." It it was not a question so much an affirmation of fact. "Heka is dead."

"He tired to kill me first." I replied, my eyes darting around the room to locate where the Jaffa were. Ten of them in the room, I could take them if I had to do it. "I'm fond of living."
"Indeed." Ul'tak nodded. "You are Dre'su'den."

"I am."

"Then I have witnessed the birth and death of a God." Ul'tak slapped his chest with his right fist in a romanesque salute as he dropped to his knees. He shouted to the Jaffa, "Jaffa Kree!"

The collective Jaffa dropped to their knees before me, bowing their eyes from my gaze as Ul'tak shouted, "A man who defeats his attacker in combat has the rights of the victor. Those who defeat each other in single combat have the right of conquest. Such was the word of Heka, and a God's word is truth."

"Tek'pa'korkree!" Echoed the Jaffa. "Truth through strength!"

He raised his eyes to look a me with wonder, "All glories to the new God, the new light, Dre'su'den. God of Magic. He who speaks with the beyond."

"Nuh - no!" I stuttered over the peals of wild laughter echoing in my mind. Lash's sudden decision to grow a sense of humor was not my favorite part of her. "Get up, all of you!"

"Yes my lord," Ul'tak replied as the Jaffa stood, continuing to avert their eyes. "Whatever my lord wishes."

"Just... just stop calling me a God. I'm a Wizard. A warden of the white council. My name is Harry. Call me Harry." I massaged my forehead with a taloned gauntlet as I reached beneath the throne and pulled the cowering Eunuch from where he'd hidden from Mab. The terrified Lo'tar was huddled around Bob, shielding the skull with his body.

"We shall sing prayers of great joy to the Wizard Dre'su'den the Ha'ri." Ul'tak replied. "The Warden!"

"No, Ul'tak you're not - look just don't pray to me ok? I'm - if you need something from me just talk to me like a normal human being ok?" Ul'tak shook his head in confusion, generations of learned behaviors conflicting with what I spoke. Ul'tak served a god. I had killed his god, ergo I was his new god. The glowing eyes and vader-voice were not doing anything to clarify the situation.

"Yes my lord." He replied, saluting me. "As you wish my lord Warden."

"Warden," The Jaffa at the helm saluted. "I am at your command."

"Take me to Sokar." I replied. "I've got a meeting to keep."
Chapter 6

I woke up to the feeling of unfamiliar hands running down my bare chest, startling me into action as they groped down towards long disused parts of my anatomy. Kicking a warm, nubile, and willing woman out of my bed is not something I'm particularly practiced in doing but I'm a fast learner.

"Woah! Woah! Single occupancy bed lady," I yelped, pushing the carmel-skinned girl onto the floor with my right hand as I flailed my way into a sitting position. The silk sheets shimmered in the yellow light of burning braziers.

My heart raced as I remembered where I was, placing gaudy walls and ceilings of Heka's -turned- my-palatial chambers.

She hit the floor hard, not resisting me in the slightest. Rolling with the motion of my shove she spun up and into a kneeling crouch, keeping her eyes to the floor. This was not the first time she'd been hit. Her breath hitched in resignation as her lips, painted dark with shades of henna, quivered slightly. She made a sound that was almost speech before thinking better of herself and looking back to the floor, too terrified to meet my eyes.

It took me a while to collect my whits, balancing the act of not looking at her very naked body with trying to figure out what the hell was going on. I breathed in a few times, steadying myself before turning my head to look at her. I was not looking at her generous curves, or the intricate pattern of tattoos that ran the length of her body. I was not staring at the glistening piercings running down her form connected by lengths of chain that drew attention to the most intimate parts of her. I was not taking note of her visible physical arousal.

I really wasn't.

What I was looking at were the wet trails of tears forming in her eyes as she hid her face between fingers steepled in supplication. Give me fire, brimstone and demons any day over five seconds with a crying woman. God help me, I have a streak of chivalry as wide as Lake Erie.

Wrapping myself in one of my sheets to conserve what was left of my modesty I got out of bed, reaching out to touch the woman's arm. She did not flinch as I touched her but there was a sudden stiffness to her, the expectation of pain.

She looked up from her cupped hands, not daring to stare higher than my chin as she said in a voice of whispered fear, "Has this one displeased you my lord-" The beginning of 'heka' came to her lips as she quickly corrected herself, "-Ha'ri? This one can get another. Whatever my lord Warden wishes is his own to have."

An echo of Heka's twisted tastes whispered in the back of my thoughts, once again affirming my choice to fry the misogynist son of a bitch. The girl twitched as my eyes flared in fury. Damn it, I would have to keep my anger in check now that I had a freaking light-brite in my skull. I spoke in what I sincerely hoped would sound like soothing tone in spite of the metallic timbre, patting her arm re-assuringly. "I don't need anything from you. And I definitely don't want you offering me your body to someone who doesn't even know your name."

I might as well have slapped her. She did not even bother to hide her tears as she said, "I am Muminah - Your high priestess."

"My what?" My brain short-circuited. Oh hell, of course I had a high priestess. They thought I was a
god. I probably had an entire church by now.

She dropped to the ground, holding her breasts to her knees as she stretched her hands forward in supplication, giving me a good view of coiled snakes wrapped into knots working their way up that had been branded into her spine. "Forgive me my lord Warden. I did not mean to presume -- but the former high priestesses self-immolated to follow Heka into the afterlife."

"She what?" I blurted out. I hadn't meant to shout, but who does that? Seriously?

"Most of the faith is in shambles. The council of nine locked themselves in the crematory, and I wouldn't be surprised if more did not end their lives for fear of what comes with the death of a god." She dared to raise her eyes, looking as high as my lips as she spoke in a voice of conviction. "They need their new god. They need his wisdom and communion to guide their way through the shadows."

I whistled through my teeth, "Lady, you are barking up the wrong tree on this one."

"Please," She begged me, reaching out to my leg but not daring to touch it. "Please help us, give us your guidance. Give us your blessing so that we might pray to your perfection."

I knelt down, cupping her chin in my hand as I forced her to look up into my face. I looked at her, taking care to avoid the first tugs of a soul gaze as I spoke in my most wizardly paternal tone. "Muminah, I am not perfect. I am not a god. I'm a Wizard. I'm a good one at that, but I am not worthy of your prayer. I'm flattered, but you do not need to do anything to prove yourself to me. Trust me, you're just as blessed when you don't pray as when you do."

She bit her lip, as though considering if this were some sort of test. "But - "

"But nothing," I interjected. "I don't want people praying to me. Want to prove to me that you're a good person? Act like a good person. Want to prove to me that you're honest? Don't lie. I don't want or need slaves, sacrifices, prayer, or suicides - especially not suicides - to prove yourself to me. Actions speak louder than words."

"I - I understand," Muminah replied in a tone that could have indicated anything but comprehension. "I shall see to informing the priestesses of this then."

"You do that," I replied, smiling at her. "And please, do not crawl into my bed without asking."

"I will obey your wishes my lord Warden," The priestess replied, calmer than before. "Forgive my ignorance."

"It's alright," I replied, looking around the room as the first pangs of hunger twanged in my stomach. "Tell you what. Find Amun and tell him I'm hungry and all is forgiven."

"Right away my Lord Warden," The woman stood up as though hit by lightning, bowing her shaved head as she excused herself from the room, generous hips swaying temptingly as she whisked her way out.

"You should have allowed her to commune with you my host," Lasciel's shadow crooned into my ear as phantom limbs curled round my neck. "It is simpler to just maintain the old traditions than it will be to convince them of the truth."

"Get off me Lash," I snarled, batting at the illusion with the hand not holding up my sheet. The ghostly angel hovered away from me, floating across my bed with a cat like look of predatory satisfaction on her perfect features. She swayed back and forth above my bed, stretching in a way
that emphasized the assets beneath her tunic, "I'm not going to ask anyone to worship me."

"She only understood a third of what you said as you intended it, my Host. The language of the usurpers is not as adept at conveying meaning as your own native tongue. You do not give suggestions in it, only orders." She sighed. "Even now she believes that the gospel of her new god is that you should worship him through noble deeds and honest acts."

"Come again?" I growled, glaring at the fallen's shadow.

"Translation is an Art, not a science my Host. I am translating what you say as close to how you say it. But there is literally no way to say 'don't pray' in the language of the usurpers. The closest I could manage is something closer to 'a different form of worship', but it really doesn't properly convey the sentiment." She sighed at my exasperation, falling to the black sheets of my bed. "I did not invent the infernal language my Host. The usurpers did, and they had no intention of allowing their followers to rebel. It's one of the reasons they try to suppress the native languages of their conquered people, it allows them to control the flow of ideas and knowledge. You can't say what can not be said."

"I like these usurpers less and less by the minute." I sighed. "Now why are you not in my head."

"I wanted to come out and talk with you. It's boring to just watch all the time without saying or doing anything." Lash whined in a decidedly less-than-angelic way

"Harry, after all this time - all that I've done for you - you don't trust me?" Lash smiled, flashing a mouth full of dazzlingly white teeth.

"Not as far as I can throw you." I snorted.

"Even after I -" Lash's voice hitched, her lips tightening in anger. "You stupid son of a - you haven't spared a moment to think about it have you?"

"About what?" I sighed. "Between killing a god and the existence of space ships I'm sort of busy at the moment."

In an instant Lasciel's shadow was in front of me, nostrils flaring as she poked her finger into my chest, "I gave up everything for you. Everything!"

Oh hell's bells, I hadn't really thought about it but, yeah, there was no way that Lasciel would tolerate her shadow disobeying her like that. If I ever decided to call the coin Lash was up a creek without a paddle. Fallen Angels weren't really the forgiving type, "You let me kill myself. You – you can't go back, can you?"

"Go back? You think I give a damn about going back? We're long past that." Lash snarled before slapping me across the face and disappearing into a puff of smoke. "I let you kill us both you ungrateful heathen. I. Died. For. You."

"Lash?" I asked the empty room, "Lash, ugh, I didn't mean to - shit - I'm sorry."

Lasciel's shadow did not answer, though she did send a twinge of displeasure in my direction. She was in no mood to speak with me for some time to come. I didn't press the matter. Disowned shadow of a fallen angel or not, she was a woman. Only an idiot actively sought out a woman who was pissed off at you for good reason. The logic was doubly relevant for women capable of hitting me with a telepathic whammy of illusionary flesh-eating scarabs.

I was saved the aggravation of negotiating with a scorned angel by the arrival of my breakfast.
The eunuch Amun carried a heaping platter of food into the room, slicing some odd looking fruit into a bowl of spiced meat before pouring a generous measure of crimson wine into a tall flagon. He flashed me a raggedy mouth full of teeth, bowing deeply as he said, “I have brought you your favorite foods from your former life, my dearest Lord Warden the Reborn.”

Heka's taste in food left much to be desired, even if the portions were generous. It was enough food for five Harrys, including a roasted six legged creature who'd apparently been stuffed with a mix of small snakes and wild birds. I didn't think I was brave enough to even consider tackling the bowl of cold soup with live fish wriggling at the bottom or what I seriously suspected was a plate of jellied goat eyes.

I smiled at the Eunuch, patting him on the shoulder. "Thank you Amun. I think I'll stick with the fruit for now."

“My Lord Warden must eat,” He looked down at the floor, ashamed to have corrected me. “I fear that your flesh may be weakened by your genesis, great as you still are to allow a worm like this one in your presence.”

I recognized the tone, it was the sort of twisted appeasement battered wives used to calm their abusive husbands. Amun had reflexively moved his hands to cover his kidneys as he bowed, he was used to being kicked around by Heka. I pretended not to see it, pointing it out would only get me a series of denials and assurances that he “loved his Lord Warden.”

I managed to talk Amun out of washing my feet in the basin of perfumed oils next to my bed under the pretense of asking him to get my clothes out of the wardrobe. I wolfed down the bowl of fruit and meat, tossing a jellied eyeball at the caged, carnivorous snake-like something or other staring at me from behind the gilded bars of it's cage.

“Did this guy just read a list of villain habits and think to himself 'yeah I could probably afford that?’” I muttered to myself, poking at the six legged creature and considering one of it's many drum-sticks.

“My lord Warden?” Amun poked his head out from my closet.

“It's nothing Amun,” I replied, seriously considering the possibility that their might be a tank of sharks with lasers strapped to them somewhere in the bowels of the massive space-ship. “Just thinking.”

“Of course my lord Warden,” The eunuch replied, wiping at a pudgy cheek with his sleeve. “Does my Lord Warden wish for the Robes of State in Black or Green?”

“Uh, what about the armor?” I interjected, eying the mannequin next to the dresser hopefully. It's angled and jagged plates of armor shimmered in the candle-light, just begging for me to wear it. Ok, so I'm a giant seven year old in a grown man's body. Just let me have my toys!

“My lord Warden, the great lord Sokar has forbidden weapons of any kind at the conference. You are permitted one Lo'tar and a single communication device it would be madness - ” The Eunuch actually squawked in horror, slapping his hands over his mouth as he fell to his knees. “I did not mean to question your wisdom.”

“Dude – just get up.” I sighed, waddling over with the sheet tied round my waist and pulling him to his feet. “You get to tell me when I'm being an idiot. It happens a lot.”

“A god is never wrong.” Amun replied on reflex, eyes bulging slightly as it clicked in his head that he was correcting one. He was clearly on the verge of a total short-circuit.
“How about pants?” I pointed at the wardrobe in the hopes that Amun's urge to serve his lord Warden was stronger than his fear of being punished.

“Oh!” He blinked, switching back to my egyptian space Alfred. “The red uniform has the most practical pants. Does my lord wish for that?”

“Practical is good,” I nodded, putting on my various enchanted jewelery. “Let's go with that.”

I was not, of course, permitted to put the clothing on by myself. A god apparently could rule the laws of heaven and earth but could not be trusted to button up his own fly. Amun had precisely no intention of allowing me to taint myself with such menial work. I could not help but feel a bit childish as the substantially smaller man stood on a chair to be able to pull the red silk garment over my head, before fastening an elaborate vest across my chest.

It became immediately clear to me why Heka had enlisted a servant to dress him as Amun proceeded to pull a brocaded jacket and some sort of elaborate waist skirting of shimmering material from the dresser, weaving through them with a braided rope of gold threads and fastening them in place with jeweled pins.

Dancing patterns of coiled snakes weaved their way up the sides of me, black embroidered hieroglyphics offsetting the shimmering white symbol of coiled snakes on my breast, the symbol of Heka. I was probably wearing more wealth in jewelery now than I had ever previously seen in my entire life. It was hard not to salivate at the robin's egg sized sapphires laced into the belted holster for a large velvet pocket.

I tried not to think about how I looked like an extra from a Bollywood production of “The King and I” as Amun grudgingly gave me my own leather duster and grey cloak instead of the ornate fur cloak and crimson turban still in the cupboard.

“Clothing is clothing Dresden,” I reminded myself, keenly aware that Murphy would die of laughter if she ever saw me wearing this. Well, she would once she'd finished taking pictures for posterity.

“Your first prime is on the bridge preparing your status report for you my Lord Warden,” Amun interrupted my introspection, straightening my cloak and replacing it's pin with an emerald scarab the size of my fist as he tossed away the simple silver fastening in disgust.

“Well then, let's not keep him waiting.” I replied, straightening the shield bracelet under my sleeve. The dangling charms had never been intended to deal with complex embroidery, they kept catching on the fabric of my sleeves.

Amun nodded, leading me out of my chambers and into the ship. It did not escape my notice that thirty Jaffa were hidden in the alcoves leading to my room, each of them standing at the ready to do grievous hard to anyone not supposed to have access to my room. For a man who professed his immortality, Heka had gone to great lengths to ensure he would not be assassinated.

I returned the one fisted salute when offered it, putting my hand over my heart and nodding appreciatively. Jaffa heads poked out of doorways and over railings as I walked past, observing me with undisguised curiosity. I heard the curios murmurs of distant gossip as we passed, the sort of pleasant murmur one might expect from a celebrity or local sports star.

I paused as we crossed the catwalk above a wide gymnasium full of Jaffa soldiers. They stood in long rows, moving in unison with an wizened Jaffa weapons master in an effort to imitate his elegant kata. I could feel the air shifting as several hundred Jaffa breathed in unison, the expulsion of wind at their shout of “Kree” fluttering the edge of my duster.
They weren't fighting as much as they were dancing, a pure yogic act of violence clearly honed over generations. I recognized the predatory grace to it. My brother had the same purity of motion when he fought, powered by his hunger. I don't know how long I watched them for, but I would have gladly watched for hours.

The motion froze in place as the ancient Jaffa's gaze rose, coming to meet my own. He spun mid kata to a kneeling position, holding his staff above his head in a gesture of submission rapidly imitated by all his pupils. I put my hand over my heart in the Jaffa salute I'd been offered so many times already today, to uproarious cheers from the Jaffa warriors below.

“Dre'su'den! Dre'su'den! Dre'su'den the Ha'ri!” They bellowed, beating at their chests and holding their staffs to the sky, each of them trying to be the loudest and most excited.

I saluted again, not quite running across the catwalk to the ring transporter on the other side. The ringing cheers echoed in my ears even as Amun pressed the device upon his wrist, summoning the rings to teleport me to the bridge. A light flashed, the air around me whooshed through the glare and suddenly I was elsewhere.

“You're late boss.” Griped a familiar voice. Bob the skull sat on the great throne in the center of the room, propped up on a pile of cushions so that he could examine the holographic display built into the seat. Orange tendrils of light flittered between his eye sockets, intently watching the rapidly streaming images and hieroglyphs. “You slept for eighteen hours.”

“Coming back from the dead was more exhausting than I anticipated.” I replied, willing my words to be English. “Any trouble with the locals?”

“You're kidding me right?” Bob snorted, following my lead. “They've been falling over each other to have the honor of serving their Lord Warden's – well they can't seem to decide if I'm a lesser god or some sort of bound spirit but they've certainly got the proper respect for their elders.”

“I'm surprised you're not cavorting with the priestesses,” I looked around the bridge. “It isn't like you to ignore that may naked women.”

“This is more important that breasts Harry,” Bob replied in a voice of resignation.

I snorted. Bob loved sex, he was obsessed with sex. He never shut up about sex, or how I should be having more of it. Never mind that he was an incorporeal being with no genitals to speak of, nothing was more important to Bob than breasts.

“Ha, ha,” Bob's flames rolled in their sockets, “I have millennia of information that is now entirely outdated – not just outdated – wrong. Do you have any idea how embarrassing this is? I'm a spirit of knowledge who has no idea what is going on at all.”

“You can work that thing?” I pointed to the computer as the pictures zoomed past.

“Huh? Oh that? Yeah, it's not that hard. Kind of fun really,” His teeth rattles as a picture of the ship paused on the screen. “But I'm barely done scratching the surface to all this. You could give me a decade and I'd only be starting to know how much I don't know. So you, Harry, are totally fucked.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence Bob.” I sighed. “Really, great pep talk.”

“I'm an advisor Saib, not a cheerleader.” His jaw quirked up in a passible imitation of a smile, “ Though I suppose if you wanted to have the priestesses dress up in skirts and wave pom-poms for you, they'd probably be willing. Boobs harry, a whole tattooed bouncing bunch of them.”
Yeah, there was the Bob I knew. “Let's go back to the 'doomed Harry' schtick.”

“Oh that,” Bob sighed, “It's pretty simple. I know enough to know how screwed I am and you're substantially dumber and illogically compelled to seek out fatal danger. You're like some sort of sarcastic spell-casting lemming at the best of times, now you're in space heading to fight the head of a galactic empire.”

I giggled, smiling to myself.

“You aren't listening any more are you?” Bob sighed. “I said the words 'galactic empire' and your brain went straight to Star Wars.”

“Yeah,” I shrugged. “Can't blame a guy for having taste.”

“I'm going to go back to reading information to keep us from both getting killed when you decide to do something stupid and heroic,” Bob's eyes flicked, pointing his eye lights behind me. “You should probably see to the Jaffa. There is only so long they can pretend not to be listening to us speak before one of them bursts a vein or something.”

The Jaffa were, in fact, listening with wrapped attention to every word we said. Ul'tak and his lieutenants stood around a stone table covered in shimmering holographic images, twirling red and blue patterns dancing across an emerald pattern of stars. But even they seemed to have frozen in mid sentence as I'd started my conversation with bob.

A swarthy lieutenant with a thick mess of braided beard had paused mid way through pointing at something in the holographic display, so entranced by my conversation that he'd not even thought to lower his finger. Ul'tak was luckily less overwhelmed by my presence than his colleges.

Ul'tak sighed in amused irritation, reaching over to gently lower the younger Jaffa's hand as I walked over to the table. “Mar'kek, I believe that you have sufficiently pointed out the moons of Kefn.”

He saluted me in the Jaffa style, bowing at the waist as he shouted, “Dres'su'den Ha'ri!”

The Jaffa followed suit, saluting and bowing as Ul'tak moved from the head of the table. He nodded towards the place he'd been standing, a raised platform clearly intended for whomever was commanding operations on the ship. I stood on the step, staring at the holographic star-scape, “What is this?”

“These are the holdings of Heka, now the holdings of Ha'ri.” Ul'tak nodded. “Nekheb, land where all magics are born, is the barrier between this world and the world that lies beyond but it is only one of many such worlds in which Heka held total dominion.”

I stared at the blue sections of space, the possible meaning of the blue sections clicking in my head. “Ul'tak, how many planets are we talking about?”

“You control around fifteen habitable planets across thirty star systems as well as numerous smaller resource rich systems that serve as supply depots and dry docks for your fleet of ships.” Ul'tak growled in irritation, starting at the red flashing areas of space. “Or you did until news of your death and rebirth was sent across your realms.”

A broad shouldered lieutenant let loose an oath, snarling in fury as he grunted, “Cowards, they deny your the divinity of the lord Warden. They commit heresy of the worst sort.”

“They are without the priesthood Ma'kosh,” Retorted lankier Jaffa to my right. “Hundreds of our ranks have gone to serve Heka in the next life by their own hands or the hands of his agents.
Warden's grace alone that we did not suffer the fate of his truth speakers.”

“The speakers of truth are not supposed to outlive their god.” Ul'tak's tone hitched, apparently sickened by whatever had happened to them. “His magics unmade them as he was unmade, else his secrets fall into the hands of heretic gods.”

“We must assume that failsafes were placed in some of these locations to ensure the loyalty of the Jaffa overseeing them,” A truly ancient looking Jaffa wheezed past a dusky mop of whiskered mustache. He wiped at a thick eye patch over the right side of his face. “If the truth speakers had explosives in their spine then we must assume others did as well. For now let's focus on military responses to the outright rebellions.”

“The ardent worshipers of Heka will not easily be converted to the worship of the Lord Warden, even if we have seen the truth and light of his divinity,” Ul'tak grumbled. “I fear that we are in for a long and bloody civil conflict for conversion. Many human lives will be lost for the greater good.”

“But if people worship other gods they will -” Ul'tak interjected. “But nothing,” I shook my head. “Ul'tak I'm really not into telling other people how to live their lives. Just – you know – let them do their own thing. As long as they aren't hurting anyone else, who cares if they think I'm a god or not?”

Plus, if everything went to plan I'd be back on earth before the weekend. There was no point in them going on some half assed holy war because they'd seen me do some magic. As long as I could keep them from doing something dumb in that time period, it would end up being someone else's problem to deal with crazy space god rules.

“Very well then,” Ul'tak nodded slowly. “But may we dispatch forces to quell the riots on the third moon of Nekheb?”

“Yes, but try to end it with the least bloodshed possible.” I nodded. “Killing people is an absolute last resort only to be used if someone's life is in jeopardy.”

The Jaffa murmured approvingly, nodding to each other. Ul'tak smiled. “It will be my pleasure my lord Warden.”

“What about the meeting with Sokar?” I asked, “How long till we reach Delmak?”
“Within the hour my lord Warden.” Ul'tak tapped three stones on the table, raising an image of a shimmering world orbited by a cracked and nightmarish moon. “We should be landing on the southern continent near your personal holdings on the planet.”

“My personal holdings?” I really needed to ask for a list of properties or something, this was getting to be a running theme.

“A modest estate for one such as yourself my lord, but within walking distance of the place of Sokar.” Ul'tak reached for the image, zooming down to a massive series of pyramids in a sprawling metropolis.

“Within marching distance of his barracks you mean, as well as a whole mess of weapons of the gods.” Grunted the ancient Jaffa.

Ul'tak ignored the interruption. “We received a transmission from Sokar's forces. We will be allowed to land on the dry dock at your estate, but we will not be permitted to have any Jaffa leave the grounds.”

“You mean I'm walking into Sokar's palace alone? Alone at the – wait, conference?” It hadn't really clicked in my head when Amun had been saying it earlier, the clothing had distracted me. “Oh hell, there are going to be gods all over the place at this thing!”

“Any and all who do not wish to be crushed by the armies of Sokar,” Ul'tak agreed. “Since the fall of Apophis he has become the uncontested military power in the galaxy. Some five hundred Goa'uld are expected to be at the summit.”

Five hundred evil space gods. Fucking fantastic. “I don't suppose I actually want to know what Sokar is the god of do I?”

The ancient jaffa whooped with laughter. “Paradise is ruled by the devil, never ye forget that my lord Warden. Sokar is the god of hell.”

You have got to be kidding me.
Chapter 7

The device at my wrist chimed twice. It apparently had a whole range of functions, sort of an alien version of a PDA, but I'd only managed to figure out the watch. I couldn't actually read hieroglyphs on the watch but I'd managed to get it to show what Bob assured me was the time. For someone who'd never even owned a DvD player, I was proud of myself for getting that far in so little time.

Bob had reluctantly acquiesced to being pulled away from the ship's computer, grumbling something about the properties of "knack-wa-ra." His usual gripes about being taken along with me into a dangerous situation melted away as he was lovingly placed into his new leather harness by a buxom priestess. Naked breasts had a mollifying effect on the spirit.

I did my best to maintain direct eye contact with the woman as she bowed to me, stretching the ornate pattern of glyphs in tantalizing ways. She kissed Bob upon the forehead with hennaed lips, whispering prayers of protection and supplication as she knelt to my side.

Amun fiddled with the sash around my waist as the ship made it's final approach towards Delmak, making sure that the leather harness holding Bob was properly fastened and concealed within the folds of the garment. Precisely what had been wrong with my previous belt was never quite explained to me, the eunuch muttered something about 'my magnificence' before thrusting the garment about my person. The sash was twisted to make Bob look like a decorative accent, smoothing out the skull's otherwise grim appearance.

Bob's jaw clicked against the metal fastenings in the harness as he rolled his eye lights up to me, "This, Harry, is precisely the life I've been talking about for years! Servants, slaves, and kingdoms, why are we even trying to go back?"

"I like my apartment," I replied. "All my stuff is there."

"Harry, a bunch of second-hand furniture and old rugs are hardly irreplaceable." Bob chided.

"And my Star Wars poster," I interjected, rubbing my wrist where my leather duster caught the jeweled pins on my wrists.

"And your Star Wars poster," Bob replied, his voice a mix of resignation and beleaguered suffering. "Because a framed print is justification for the abdication of an entire kingdom."

I ignored Bob as he continued to ramble on about the merits of an army of human slaves, choosing instead to watch the breathtaking scene just beyond the transparent window of energy. An ethereal mess of swirling purple winds swept past the ship's hull, dancing strands of God only knows what caressing the black void of space.

I didn't dare look at it with my wizard's sight. Something told me that staring into infinity would be detrimental to my well-being.

The Jaffa were unperturbed by the impossible devices surrounding us. By all accounts my natural magic should have shorted something - anything - by now. Wizards and technology simply did not mix. Murphy forbade me from even entering her office while her computer was running for fear that I would make hours of paperwork disappear.

I'd ridden an airplane once, and only once. They'd managed to get it to land in time, but it was a near miss. Newer planes were supposedly less susceptible to electronic interference, but I wasn't willing to take that chance. There had been kids on that plane. It wasn't worth it.
By all accounts the ship should have been a smoldering wreck in an endless vacuum of stars, but I hadn't had so much as a hiccup in the communications systems yet. It wasn't possible, but there it was, staring me straight in the face. The old gods had figured out some way to combine computers with ritual magics, or possibly some way of replicating complex computers with magical ritual.

Microsoft, eat your heart out.

I smiled at Ul'tak as he walked in front of me and took a knee. Sure, the guy had fed me to an evil space god but other than that he was a pretty stand up guy. I was trying not to hold a grudge. If I went after everyone who'd tried to kill me at some point or another I'd have to declare war on the entire magical world.

Come to think of it, I really had way too many people in my life who'd tried to murder me at some point. That couldn't be healthy.

“We are prepared for descent my Lord Warden,” Ul'tak proclaimed, beating his fist across his breastplate in salute. “We will exit hyperspace on your command.”

“Make it so number one.” God I always wanted to say that.

Ul'tak stood, pivoting on his heel as he cracked the butt of his staff weapon on the deck. “Jaffa, kree da nok.”

My vision blurred as time seemed to wrinkle in front of me, the magic within me howling in protest at the clearly unnatural thing happening to it. I gagged, covering my discomfort by clenching my teeth and grasping the stone table in front of me. The sleek material cracked beneath my fingers as impressions of my finger pressed into the marble.

I looked from my hand, to the table, and back to my hand again. I'd never been weak before, but it was going to take a shitload more push ups before I believed myself capable of breaking stone with my bare hands. A gift from Heka, no doubt.

“Ho-ly crap.” Bob emphasized each syllable as though it were a word to itself, but it was not for me. It was for the sprawling metropolis before us. Delmak glimmered in the night's sky, many million pinpricks of light hinting at the planet sized city before us. The pyramid we were traveling in was but one of many pyramids, transports, fighters and freighters going to and from a glowing orb at the planet's northernmost pole.

Crescent moon winged ships soared through the atmosphere, dancing and twirling through the clouds in an intricate dance. They twisted and dove at impossible angles, their pilots seemingly suicidal in their desire to go faster or go closer to each other than was sane. Yet none of them crashed, none of them even so much as slowed down.

A massive pyramid, five times the size of my own at least, towered over the planet's pole. It hovered above the planet, a viscous shadow large enough to blot out the sun. Ul'tak whispered in fear and reverence, “Sokar's flagship is more dangerous than our intelligence suggested. That ship could crush a System Lord fleet.”

“Let's not try that,” I suggested hopefully. “I'm hoping to avoid a fight on this trip.”

“Of course my Lord Warden,” Ul'tak replied in a voice of relief. “Your wisdom is beyond compare.”

“We are receiving the landing co-ordinates,” A pale-faced Jaffa nodded. “We should be passing through the defense grid momentarily.”
“Defense grid?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“Sokar's planet is armed to the teeth my lord. Anyone attempting to take off or land without permission must pass a blockade of orbital satellites and Ha'tak.” He shivered. “The consequences of doing so would be regrettable.”

“This just gets better by the second,” I chewed my lip, double checking that my rings and bracelet were still in place. I was supposed to arrive unarmed and without a shield, but I wasn't stupid enough to actually trust Sokar's terms. Heka's hadn't noticed them when I'd gone to his palace, here's to hoping Sokar's Jaffa were none the wiser. “Why isn't that moon guarded?”

“Netu?” Ul'tak laughed. “No man is foolish enough to go to Netu by choice. It is a planet with no escape, a place of fire and suffering full of the worst souls from the empire of Sokar. Murderers, heretics, rapists, cowards and monsters – the lot of them. No one who goes there ever returns.”

“Scratch that one from my vacation plans then.” I muttered to myself as the pyramid swooped along the seemingly random path through the defense grid, bobbing and weaving past invisible obstacles and barriers. The insane flight paths of the crescent ships made sense now, they were traversing the paths through Sokar's blockade.

Clouds swooped past the view-screen as thunder clouds formed around the ship, disrupted by the sudden change in atmospheric pressure. Lightning coalesced across the ship's hull, dancing across the sky as we descended towards the planet. The city's great spires and glowing towers dotted the landscape before us, glimmering palaces of marble and steel topped by mirrored pinnacles of gold.

As we drew closer I saw what looked like six wheeled vehicles trundling along well-lit highways as huge one-wheeled scooters zipped past them. The cars and scooters moved around huge insects, beetles large as a city block, that swayed to-and-fro carrying house sized wooden buildings. My face was pressed up against the window as the ship made it's final descent towards a modest pyramid in the city's center, and it was only by sheer force of will that I drew myself away from watching two of the massive beetles batting each other with their protuberant horns.

“Harry, don't you even think about it.” Bob growled.

“What?” I replied, innocently.

“We are not, I repeat, not getting on one of those things.” Bob hissed. “Wasn't riding one building sized creature enough for this year? You need to ride two?”

“Relax Bob, if we need to get on one you can possess it,” I patted the skull reassuringly. “You can handle it.”

“No I will not.” Bob made a loud “yeck” sound of disgust. “Insect minds are too – simple – for my taste. Boring, no emotion to them. All stimuli, no character.”

“You won't possess a giant beetle but cats and T-Rex you have no problem with?” I snorted.

“Mister has more character in his tail than a dozen of those things do in their entire body,” Bob replied. “And it's adinosaur Harry. Dinosaur are anything but boring.”

“Yeah, I suppose they are.” I agreed, turning to Ul'tak and switching to Goa'uld as I felt the rumbling thud of docking clamps slipping into place. “Are we here?”

“Yes my Lord Warden,” Ul'tak nodded. “Your Lo'tar is already waiting for you in the palace.”
“What?” I blinked, looking back at the space where Amun had been only moments ago, “Uh – how?”

“The rings my Lord Warden.” Ul’tak replied, pointing to the smooth circle of stone in front of my throne. “He used them as soon as we breached the planet’s atmosphere.”

“Oh,” Right, they could teleport. I walked within the stone ring on the floor, followed closely by Ul’tak and a handful of broad-shouldered Jaffa, “Wait, if we could teleport, then why did we land?”

“Sokar is not in the habit of keeping warships above his capital, even allied ones.” Ul’tak swallowed, “The god Sokar is -” He paused, considering if he should continue. I waved my hand in a circle, gesturing for him to finish. “-Sokar is, not that I could ever presume to know the mind of a god, but I believe that he wishes to remind you of your place. He also wishes to remind the other gods of your importance to his reign.”

“And what is my importance?” I quirked my lip in what I hoped was a knowing smile.

“My Lord Warden, Heka was - you are – the Goa’uld who has been in Sokar's service for untold generations. The first of his followers, the most loyal. It was you who hid him from your father and nursed him to health.” Ul’tak pointed to the tiny oblong pyramid soaring about the night sky, their bulbous noses and tiny nubby wings inelegantly jutting forth. “See how the other lesser gods must travel, stripped of their strength. They must match your loyalty before they have your privilege.”

“I'm BBF's with Satan.” I swallowed, forcing down a knot of nervous apprehension working it's way up my gullet. “And I'm going to rob him.”

“It is the way of things,” The Ancient Jaffa hobbled towards us, his grizzled snarl of a smile peeking past the patch covering half his face. “Greater gods prey upon lesser gods, lesser gods curry favor with their peers till they are greater. And you, my Lord Warden, have become greater.”

The rings flashed as Ul’tak touched a silver braclet upon his wrist, the silver circles shooting up from the floor and shifting us downward. I slammed my eyes shut to protect from the glare as we suddenly warped down to the planet's surface.

My jaw dropped.

The palace of Delmak was everything that palace of Nekheb had not been. It was green, green as far as they eye could see. Trees, flowers and crawling vines worked their way around a wide space of intricately carved pillars and subtle marble fresco covered walls. Instead of carvings, a shimmering mass of holograms danced across the smooth marble of the pillars, their shimmering hieroglyph bathing the pyramid in brilliant light.

The scenery was less startling than those within it. Perhaps a hundred servants and Jaffa bowed in a circle around me in, unwavering in their supplication. I waved my hand in greeting, putting on my best John Wayne impression, “Howdy y'all.”

Bob's exasperated jaw clench could have shifted mountains, “Yes, start with regional American pop culture. That will really win them over.”

My high priestess, clothed in a translucent garment of black lace, kneeled before me holding a cup of wine. Her freshly shaven head shone with perfumed jasmine oil as she smiled, welcoming me to the palace. “My Lord Warden, your vassals have worked hard in your absence. Your servants seek your blessing for our preparations and luck in the coming year.”

As I looked around the room at the platters of food and drink carried by the servants and serfs, a
cultured voice whispered in my ear, “Just drink the wine. If you don't they'll punish themselves for failing their 'god,' and you wouldn't want that.”

I turned to face the angelic apparition, smiling to her as I took the goblet. “Are you speaking with me now?”

“I am speaking at you.” Lash crossed her arms and leaned against a stone pillar. “If you happen to gain wisdom from my words, it is pure co-incidence.”

“Of course I'm speaking with you, you dolt,” Bob sighed. “You haven't gone funny in the head again have you? I really don't want to have to call Mab again.”

“Not you Bob,” I sighed.

“My Lord Warden?” Muminah stared at the pillar in confusion. “What do you desire.”

I shook my head, “I'm just talking to - ”

“It is perhaps unwise to reveal me to your followers, my host,” Lash interrupted, an irritated look flashing across her face. “It would be counter productive to your wishes.”

Right, these people believed I was a god after doing some basic combat magic and killing a brain snake. Having an Angel in my head, even the shadow of a fallen one, would be the last nail in the coffin on that one.

I looked the priestess in the eye, “I was just talking to myself.”

Muminah stared at the ground immediately, her body twinging in expectation. Hell's bells, had there been anything Heka wouldn't hit his priestesses for doing? I raised the cup, drinking from it before handing it to her and saying, “Drink.”

The crowd gasped.

She stared at the cup in wonderment, “My Lord?”

“You did a good job. Now drink from the freaking cup.” She lifted the cup to her lips, gingerly taking a sip before passing it back to me. I shook my head, “Muminah, you aren't less than I am. I'm not going to hit you for drinking out of my cup.”

“I - I'm not - how could I be?” Muminah's fingers shook as I took the cup from her and lifted her to her feet.

“I've had about enough of, Ul'tak get over here.” If it wasn't going to get these people to stop worship me through logic then I'd damn well make it happen through superstition. I shoved the cup into the confused Jaffa's hands, “Drink.”

“Jaffa do not drink - ” Ul'tak started, stopping as his words caught up to his mind. “-Er, yes my Lord Warden.” Ul'tak downed the wine, his face curling at the unfamiliar taste of alcohol.

Amun walked into the room, scurrying towards me with a giant fan of feathers. I snapped my fingers, beaconing to the Lo'tar. He rushed towards me eagerly, his pudgy cheeks wriggling with every step.

“My Lord Warden?” He smiled, eager to be of service. I forced the cup into his confused hands. “My – uh – what?”
“Drink.” I growled. Amun looked to the cup, to me, and back to the cup before bursting into tears of joy as he drank what was left of the wine.

“Fantastic,” I slapped Ul'tak across the shoulders, “Now the three of you stop worrying. You both have permission to drink from the cup of Dresden from now on. Just tell me the truth, don't betray me and you can stop worrying about me punishing you.”

“Great,” I turned to the crowd. “As of right this second you all have my blessing from now on. Just live your lives and stop worrying about making me happy. No more mandatory ceremonies, no more punishments for praying wrong. Just worry about being good to each other, and for the love of all that is holy, stop worrying about not pleasing me. I'm really a nice guy when you get to know me. Now eat, drink and party.”

Absolute silence followed those words, motionless and unyielding. The quiet preceding absolute pandemonium as the servants, Jaffa and serfs howled my name, chanting in reverence. “Dre'su'den, Dre'su'den, Dre'su'den the Ha'ri! Greatest of the Goa'uld! Ha'ri!”

Why do I even try?

Amun reached out a trembling hand, and tapped me on the shoulder. “My Lord Warden. You are needed at Sokar's palace.”

“Yes Amun,” I turned my back on what promised to be a raucous celebration and followed him out the door. I slapped my fist on my chest in a Jaffa salute as I left the room, nodding to Ul'tak. “Hold down the fort while I'm gone buddy.”

Ul'tak's leathery face cracked in a wide smile as he returned my salute, “We will defend it with our very lives, and die rather than falling to false gods. We will die for our god.”

“If it comes to that Ul'tak, try to make the other Jaffa die for theirs.” I sighed, chasing the scurrying Eunuch. For a chubby man he could really book it.

The palace was empty except for a few Jaffa unfortunate enough to have gotten guard duty during the celebration. Their lingering stares toward the sounds and smells of the festival in the great chamber were only briefly interrupted by their hurried salutes to their new god. Hopefully the outer guards were longer in the tooth and less likely to be distracted.

I needn't have worried. As we approached the perimeter of the estate, it became readily apparent that guards were more of a formality. Hovering gun platforms sat suspended above a blue forcefield surrounding the property. It did not escape my notice that the plasma cannons could just as easily be turned on those inside the premises as they could attack outsiders, yet another layer of Sokar's precautions. He was paranoid with a capital P.

The blue barrier of energy had a single point of egress, a door wide enough for two men to stand shoulder to shoulder. As we walked towards it an orange light swiped across the two of us, swiping up and down our bodies. A scan? My hand reflexively reached for Bob. Could it sense the spirit?

The cannon swiveled towards us, training on our movement as we approached the door. No, no, no, I wouldn't be able to shield us from every angle if this went wrong. Why had I agreed to this? It was crazy. Damn fairies, nothing was ever simple with the sidhe.

My heart skipped a beat as the barricade swung open, letting the pair of us walk out into the city beyond. I spared a second to thank every friendly deity I could think of as a group of red armored Jaffa strode towards me.
“Time to play god,” Lash smiled, her lips actually quirking in amusement.

“Kell kree shal mok Heka!” The lead Jaffa greeted me, kneeling before me. “My lord Sokar has send us to escort you to his palace.”

I said nothing, doing my best Evil overlord impression. If I’d had Mister with me I could have gone full on Blofeld. Lash snorted, “If that beast of a cat were here it would never deign to so absurd a task.”

“Ha’ri,” Corrected my Lo’Tar.

“You dare to speak to me human?” Growled the Jaffa, his fingers tightening on his staff in anger.

“He dares with my permission,” I intoned, crossing my arms in imitation of Heka, a twinge of anger making my eyes glow from beneath the grey cowl pulled over my head, “And you will address me by my new title.”

“New title?” The Jaffa paused.

“Heka has been reborn, he is Lord Warden Dre'su'den the Ha'ri.” Aumn nodded, “The god of Magic reborn.”

“My apologies Lord Warden,” the Jaffa bowed his head deeper, his anger forgotten. “I had not realized that you -”

“There are volumes of text devoted to what you do not know,” I reverberated in my least threatening growl, “Now get up.”

“Yes my Lord,” The Jaffa did not stand up so much as he propelled himself vertically. “My Lord bids you follow me, he desires your presence.”

I waved my hand from beneath my cloak, exposing leather duster and ring covered fingers, “Lead on Macduff.”

We walked down the crowded plaza, the crowds diverging at the sight of red armor. No one dared get closer than a pace near the Jaffa or even look in our direction. As I looked at the shop windows and curious clothing of the people we passed Lash whispered into my ear, “Lay on.”

“Eh?” I whispered back, watching the crowd part from a side street as another “god” approached us.

“The quote. It's 'Lay on MacDuff and be damned he who cries 'Hold Enough” Lash rested her chin on my shoulder, hovering behind me. “An oddly apt choice for today.”

“I have my moments,” I replied. It was annoying to have someone in my head who was better educated than me. Or was it better educated than I? Remember that whole “I have a GED” thing? Yeah, grammar was not my strongest skill.

The crowds parted enough for the two cadre of Jaffa to merge, putting me face to face with a handsome but sallow cheeked man with a thick goatee. His face was quirked into what seemed to be less of an arrogant smirk and more of a permanent facial condition. He titled his head from me to my Lo’tar before sighing in disappointment, “Not a Goa'uld I do not know then. A pity, I had hoped to save you from this foolish summit.”

“Heka,” He stared me in the face, his lip curling in disgust as he spoke my name. “Shouldn't you be somewhere with Moloc helping him roast an infant? Or did that interfere with your busy schedule of
raping anything that passes into your field of view.”

“Kill this one last,” Lash smiled. “I like him.”

“My leadership strategy has changed since we last met.” I replied, buttoning my duster closed in precaution. It would stop most magical or mortal attacks.

“I can see that.” The sneering man snorted in amusement. “I approve greatly of this sudden decision to wear clothing. I don't know if I could endure another hour of watching you flex your pectorals and re-apply animal fat to your chest.”

A battle of insults it is then, clearly I'd inherited Heka's enemies, “I'm sorry. I don't seem to recall your name.”

The man bared his teeth in a smile that couldn't look anything other than viscous, “Do not think that you can belittle me. You are a coward, betrayer of your father and your entire race.”

“And you are a god without a name,” I replied. “It must be hard to keep your worshipers without one, names hold so much power.”

The man's eyes bulged as his voice went quiet, “I. Am. Baal. Remember the name, it is one that you will scream for eternity when I rip you from your host and cast you into a pit for all eternity.”

Bob's voice, crackling and distorted in imitation of my own spoke before I could, voicing a scorching retort, “Empty words from a shell of a god. If you had any power to speak of you'd be a member of the System Lords, not bowing and scraping before disgraced gods such as myself or our lord Sokar.”

Baal turned on his heel and stormed off in the direction of the palace. I looked down at the skull as he disappeared in the crowd with his escort, hissing at my spirit ally. “Bob what the hell was that?”

Bob hissed at me in English, “Sahib, every second you were speaking with Baal was a second longer you were acting likeyou not like Heka. I do not want you getting caught.”

“No more talking for me Bob,” I sighed. “That's an order.”

“Fine,” Bob griped, “Get yourself killed – again – see if I care.”

“Not now Bob,” I sighed, looking across the street at a sudden burst of noise and motion. A tiny shape, some four feet tall, barreled across the street. I watched an irate shop keeper shove his way past busy commuters, shoving men and women to the ground as he bellowed “Thief!” at the top of his lungs.

The pint sized pilferer projected himself through the toga of confused passers by, rocketing past the Jaffa and colliding solidly with my midriff. He fell to the ground, stunned, still clutching his prize as my escort apprehended him. The still kicking vandal squirmed three feet above the ground as the lead Jaffa pried his arms open and tore a loaf of bread from his arms.

The kid couldn't have been older than ten.

The shop keep wheezed his way up to the Jaffa, whispering “Thief” as loud as he dared while resting his arm on a generous gut. “That little gutter rat came into my shop, my shop and stole from my offering for the Feast of the Gods.”

“Very well,” The Jaffa nodded. “The boy will be punished for his crimes. Stealing from Sokar, evading arrest, and daring to touch the Lord Warden. We will send him to Netu for this.”
The boy screamed in horror, kicking and snapping his jaws as though to bite the hands of the Jaffa holding him.

The man blanched, “I – I had hoped that the boy would be whipped.”


“My Lord Warden,” The Jaffa replied. “The Law is clear. He has broken it. Reparations must be made. This boy is trash, he has nothing.”

“To whom?” I snarled.

“To the insulted parties,” The Jaffa replied, “The shopkeep and yourself.”

“Reparations? How much?” I looked at the baker expectantly.

The terrified shopkeep stammered, “My Lord Warden – I – If the boy could pay for the bread and were to pay for the loss in business required to chase him down then it would- ”

I shoved a jeweled pin from my waist band into his hand with a diamond the size of my knuckle at its tip. “I just gave this to him, then he gave it to you. Good enough.”

The man stared at the jewel, “Yes – yes it – ”

“Great,” I smiled at him, “Now go away.”

The man dashed back through the crowd as though the devil himself was chasing him.

Turning back to the Jaffa I cocked my head, “I get to chose his price right?”

“Yes,” replied the Jaffa, somewhat fearfully at the erratic behavior from a god.

“Great, he has to be a - ” I looked at Amun, “ - what do we need at the palace?”

“We could use another scribe,” Amun looked the boy up and down. “He's the right age to learn his letters and Heka's swallowed poison.”

“Great,” I pointed to one of my escort. “Bring him back to my palace and tell them that he's the new scribe. And make sure they feed him and bathe him.”

The Jaffa saluted, frog marching the still wriggling boy towards my estate.

The lead Jaffa tilted his head ever so slightly, not quite questioning but obviously perplexed.

“Nothing was gained by hurting the boy for wanting to eat.”

The Jaffa nodded, “And the law is still maintained. You are wise Lord Warden.”

“Look, is there any faster way to get to Sokar's palace than just walking? I know that he's probably hoping for some impressive power play by having us all walk to him, but we're already running late,” I smiled, “I would take it as a personal favor.”

“Sokar did not... forbid you the use of ring transporters.” The Jaffa admitted, sounding out the words nervously. “It does not break the wording of the law. You are in his inner circle, so it need not break the intent. I suppose, yes, I suppose we could.”
He nodded, coming to a decision, “I suppose nothing is gained by prohibiting it. Yes my Lord Warden, stand close to me.”

We clustered in towards the lead Jaffa as, for a second time that day, a blinding light spirited me away from the crowd and to the stronghold of a god.
Chapter 8

The god of hell threw what had to be the dullest parties in all of existence. I mean I've been to some snoozers in my time, but it's truly rare that a gathering managed to be both potentially lethal and mind numbingly dull.

The various alien god-lings busied themselves with the arduous task of standing in small groups of allied gods, whispering in metallic hisses of breath. They eyed each other with preternatural caution, eyeing even the simplest of movements with predatory interest.

To my surprise the clusters of allied gods had little relation with any pantheon I knew. Gaudy Egyptian gods walked shoulder to shoulder with dark skinned African spirits and almond eyed Deva. The range in style and era of clothing they wore was so startling I had the distinct impression of being at some sort of fancy dress party sponsored by the makers of LSD.

“Happy Halloween,” I muttered to myself as I walked off the teleportation platform, saluting the Jaffa as they took their leave of me. The red armored cadre marched from the room in lock step, avoiding the gaze of their “betters.”

A dull hum throbbed in the back of my head, the sort of odd sensation of someone just barely touching my skin. Hells bells, I was feeling the presence of the rival gods. I had freaking demigod detecting radar.

Amun waved a secret greeting from behind me to a hale blonde girl, who nervously returned the gesture from behind her goddess. I didn't comment on the gesture, it seemed likely that Heka would not have approved of him socializing with other Lo'tar.

“Time to mingle,” I clapped my hands together, pulling back my cowl as I walked down the stairs.

Amun whispered to me, “I remember the rules my Lord Warden. I know that I am not to accept any gifts or talk to the other Lo'Tar.”

I snagged an hors d'oeuvres from a plate carried by a slave, some sort of cheese, and popped it in my mouth. It was surprisingly good for unknown space cheese. I'd have gone so far as to say it was my favorite space cheese that I'd ever tasted.

“Well, at least the food is goo- well hello – uh – big fella?” Hell's bells, who went and let the alligator bathe in toxic waste? The creature before me was at least two feet taller than I was and built like two linebackers shoved together. Its thick leathery carapace of jagged green scales was pierced from a multitude of overgrown spines and spikes of protruding bone.

The creature squinted it's hollow cat-like eyes as it crouched low, sniffing in my direction. It weaved on it's heels, monkeyish in it's gait, swaying it's talon tipped fingers. It bent in, sniffed me, sniffed my Lo'tar and burst into pleased laughter as it smacked my shoulder jovially.

“Heka! You incorrigible wretch. I've never met one who burned through hosts as you do,” The creature raised it's taloned fingers, waving it back and forth disapprovingly. “I do not know what you see in the Tau'ri. Yes they have greater senses of taste and smell but they are weak, frail and prone to failure.”

He waved his hand in a conciliatory dismissal of my look of confusion, “I admit that they are fine slaves, a good base for the Jaffa, but we are not in the days of old my friend. The days of the Hok'tar are long over. Those of you who cling to the Tau'ri are attached to the time of Apep.”
“Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.” When dealing with a supernatural nasty talking about some information they seem to feel is common knowledge I find pithy and cryptic is the best response.

The creature's slitted eyes glowed with a brief flash of anger, “Bah, we are reduced to using what few of our former glories will obey the will of Tau'ri and Unas. If not for the plundering of Atok what would we be any more? It is the Error of Thoth alone that allows us to use that. The accursed blood stone – Naquadah – is the only glory of what you cling to.”

“Naquadah,” I repeated the word. “Is what it is.”

“Bah!” The lizard snorted. “Only fools cling to the first world. It is a boneyard of nightmares and shadow creatures. I will live on Netu before I return to that accursed place. Ten thousand years I stood and bled on that soil, loosing what was mine. Inch by blood soaked inch those thrice damned Tau'ri destroyed even my forces. Only those poor fools who could not escape remained, hiding from the creatures of that blasted pit.”

“Will you ever let that go Ammit, we all lost what was ours. Most of us learned our lesson with the thirsting ones and the Hok’tar rebellions. You were the one foolish enough to stay and fight the deathless hunger.” Groaned a disappointed woman's voice, rumbling in the tones of the Goa'uld. She clicked her tongue along her pearly white teeth, rolling her eyes at the Serpentine giant's rant. “I swear, I miss having Nirrti around. At least when both of you were in a room I vague hope that it would at least come to blows and be briefly amusing.”

“Qetesh,” The lizard-man purred. “I see you've taken a break from your wars with Baal to join us? Not allying yourself with the System Lords are we?”

“Ammit, Ammit, Ammit,” Qetesh tutted, leaning back on the spiked heels of her leather boots. “The only person with whom Qetesh is allied is, Qetesh. She does so find her reign lasts longer when she only deals with those as competent as she.”

The giant leered at her, his catlike eyes roving over the lithe and generous body beneath the black leather of her form-fitting garment. It licked it's lips, rolling a purple tongue over shark-like fangs. “I will teach you respect for your betters Qetesh. You will be my queen.”

“Baal often has tried and failed,” she rolled her eyes in exasperation, "And he has the luxury of armies numbering in the millions. I have no intention of bowing down to a disgraced Goa'uld with Jaffa in the dozens. Your decision to bleed yourself every inch of your dignity won you nothing but a retreat in the face of the Scourge.”

"Soon to be rectified!" Ammit roared, smacking his chops in annoyance. “And once we are rid of the System Lords and their submission to the Asgard, the Protected Planets Treaty will be a distant memory. I will conquer what is mine and build an artificial sun to scourge the earth of their kind.”

Quetesh's scathing retort was drowned out as a horn sounded in the distance. The various godlings perked up, filing towards the center of the palace.

“Uh, what was that?” I whispered to Amun.

“The call to audience with Lord Sokar,” Amun replied. “He is to meet with each of you in turn, and address your claims to the new order.”

“One by one?” I hissed in astonishment. “There has to be a thousand of us in this room!”

“Half are slaves my Lord Warden,” Amun reassured me. “And the names are called by rank and
political importance. Come my Lord, follow me.”

Oh right, Heka was Lucifer's BFF. Presumably the Devil played favorites.

Rather than heading in the direction the other gods were heading in I followed Amun to a side passage covered by a wide tapestry. A crimson armored jaffa nodded as we approached, pulling the fabric to the side and whispering, “My Lord Sokar bids you welcome and reminds you that you are first in his heart.”

“He can remind me in person,” I looked at the PDA on my wrist in imitation of a stock broker I met once. Come to think of it Heka and he would probably have gotten along swimmingly, they both thought they were gods. “Come on Amun, we don't want to keep the devil waiting.”

Amun, a regular visitor to the palace, knew his way through the secret maze of tunnels and passages. He lead the way grudgingly, still uncomfortable to walk in front of me. He didn't consider it to be “proper” to walk before one's god.

He'd have to learn to get used to it.

The passage wound, snake like, through the palace. The golden glyphs upon the walls shimmered in the flickering torchlight, their elaborate stories declaring the glories of Sokar's reign. Well, at least some of them did. Every once in a while we'd pass a mess of Hieroglyphs that didn't seem to bind together in anything resembling language. I whispered under my breath at the presence in the back of my mind, “I thought you were translating the language of the 'usurpers' for me.”

“I am,” Lash rejoined. “That is not language.”

“Not language?” I stopped to examine it. “If it isn't language what is it?”

“Wards,” Bob's eye lights squinted, flickering from where they peered out the front of my duster. “Those are definitely wards. Nasty ones, I'd bet.”

“Are they active?” I wasn't looking forward to having to go through a warded fortress. Anything these old gods would consider a 'deterrent' would be a war crime by any reasonable definition of the word.

“Not for a couple thousand years now,” Bob clicked his jaw pensively. “If ever. I think they just put the runes in place and never got around to empowering them.”

“Why would anyone do that?” I blinked. “The whole point of putting together a spell like that is to cast it.”

“I don't think they can Harry.” Bob shifted in his satchel, his glowing eye staring up at me. “It takes serious mojo to get wards these big working, wizard big. The Goa'uld are sort of short on magical hosts and wizard wrangling isn't exactly high up on their to do list. There aren't many Goa'uld left who even have minor practitioners as hosts. There aren't many wizards on Earth who could put enough mojo into those things to make them work properly.”

“Could I do it?” I ran my fingers over the surface.

“That depends. How important is avoiding cranial explosions to you? Personally, I feel like blowing up your own head once is enough for this week.” Bob snorted. “The Merlin would be hard pressed to get these to full power without a ley line.”

“You'd think they would have tried to go back to Earth before now if they were so dependent upon
Wizards.” I sighed.

Lash's acerbic chuckle sent a chill down my spine. “They did. That mistake was … rectified.”

I turned from the wall at Amun's insistent cry of “My Lord we are going to anger Sokar!”

He needn’t have worried. We were seconds away from Sokar’s throne room. Down the stairs, through a library, and we found ourselves in the antechamber to the god of hell. A cadre of armored Jaffa in red armor mottled with patterns of obsidian and silver stood around the room, ten paces from the entrance in any direction. Sokar's private guard could easily dispatch any who entered to do him harm.

As I approached the throne room I was blocked by the crossed staves of two Jaffa. The leftmost Jaffa spoke, his voice succinct. “Sokar has not called for you.”

“I thought he summoned me.” I waved my arms in exasperation. “The only reason I'm on this freaking planet is that he wants me here.”

“For now my Lord Sokar desires you here.” A sallow cheeked Jaffa approached me, head bowed deferentially. His swooping spiked shoulders tapered at a jagged edged peak like the pincers of a scarab, the mottled black of his armored carapace shimmering in the dim torchlight of the corridor like cooling magma. His goateed mouth quirked with the merest hint of a grin at being able to deny me what I wished.

Strapped to the man's waist were what looked suspiciously like freshly shorn human scalps, still dripping with wet viscera. The brand upon his forehead marked him as a servant of Sokar, his confidence in speaking with one of the old gods marked him as Sokar's first prime. Caked flecks of what I presumed to be blood were still at the head of his staff weapon, fresh from having beaten some poor soul within an inch of his life – perhaps farther.

The man made my skin crawl but I chose to ignore him. For the moment at least he was no danger to me, repugnant though he seemed to be. “Pick your battles Dresden,” I repeated to myself as the first prime walked past me and into the throne room. “Pick your battles.”

I could not enter the room, but my eyes and ears were as sharp as ever. I got my first glimpse of the god I would soon be robbing.

I could just barely make out the face of lithe albino beneath a crimson cowl as he sat upon an obsidian throne, caressing a candle with thick nails. He twisted his fingers about the flame, seemingly disconnected from the world around him. His thick red robes were covered by a web of black filaments that weaved about him like cobwebs, angry indolent spider of a man.

Before him knelt a twisted wretch of a man, a broad frame of muscle and sinew wrapped in mangled flesh. His face was marked by the seeping pit of skin where an eye had been ripped from its socket, angry pink scar lines showing a memory of every jab of the blade. The inverted pentagram at his plunging neck-line rested on a corpulent mess of exposed chest, glinting with gunmetal grey in contrast to the black leather pants and jerkin.

“It was ripped out with a dagger then filled with burning pitch,” The soft pressure of the phantom angel leaning upon my shoulder accompanied the whispers in my ear. “He had to tear it out himself before he could have it treated.”

“How do you know?” I whispered, wincing at the thought of digging in my own skull.

“I spent centuries with Nicodemus,” Lash tittered. “I've forgotten more about torture than you've ever
“That's not especially comforting,” I brushed her off my arm as the cyclops began to speak. The man's grumbling voice was colored with smoke as much as by the natural voice of the Goa’uld as he spoke, “My lord Sokar.”

Sokar ignored his vassal, continuing his loving caress of the flame, “I do not have time to hear of the tortures of Netu today.”

The corpulent cyclops growled in submission, “Of course my lord, but allow me to thank you for bringing me Jolinar so that I might have my revenge.”

Sokar's hand froze as he swiped a finger towards the candle. His eyes flashed beneath his cowl as his voice echoed with trembling rage, “I did not send her to you.”

The cyclops looked to the floor in shame, trembling at Sokar's rage. Sokar hissed in disgust, “They are intruders. Find out what they want, then kill them.”

“I had – hoped to take my revenge on Jolinar slowly mylord.” The Cyclops pleaded with Sokar, his palpable disappointment etched upon every inch of his face. “To see her suffer in the harshest ways of the damned.”

“Go now.” Sokar barked in irritation. “Report back to me in one day.”

The cyclops stood, pressing his fist over his heart in salute to Sokar. His body trembled with rage at not being able to punish Jolinar for all that she had done to him.

Sokar's voice growled with unconcealed menace, “Heed my command”

“Without fail my lord,” The cyclops replied hastily before turning from his god.

Sokar turned to the first prime in disgust, “A ship brought these intruders. Find it, and destroy it.”

“Yes my lord,” Parroted the Jaffa as he scurried out a door behind Sokar's throne.

Sokar returned to his caressing of flame as the furious cyclops burst from the throne room, muttering incoherent oaths beneath his breath. I backed out of his path as he shot me a murderous glare from his one eye, snarling in a challenge that switched to a cackle of glee as he recognized Amun.

“My lord Bynarr,” Amun bowed. “My lord Ha-”

Bynarr shoved the eunuch out of the way, heading straight for me. Before I could so much as say “huh” the cyclops had embraced me in a bone crushing bear-hug, slapping me heartily on the sides as he chuckled in reverberating mirth. “It is good to see you, old friend! It has been long, far too long since we've seen each other.”

“You know how it is,” I replied hastily. “Life has a way of keeping us busy.”

“It does at that,” Snorted Bynarr, pulling back from me and shaking his head. “The business of Netu kept me busy even before that bitch Jolinar escaped from me.”

“She seems to be back now.” I replied, trying to sound encouraging.

“Be careful, my host,” Lash ran an illusionary finger across Bynarr's pentacle tutting in disapproval. “You should not enflame passions who came from whence you do not know.”
“Back and trapped,” The cyclops grinned, slapping his hands together to slowly grind his palms. “Her death will bring me my honor back. Perhaps even get me permission to heal my eye with a sarcophagus.”

“You'd better get to it,” I looked at the alien PDA. “I've got a meeting with Sokar and I'm not eager to keep him waiting.”

The cyclops shuddered, “No cousin, it is not.” He slapped me shoulder and walked out, humming as he went. Old friends had a way of perking up even the worst of moods.

My heart pounded in my ears as I walked into the throne room. The clacking of my feet along the marble floor might as well have been the rumbling of distant thunder. I walked before Sokar and knelted as I had watched Bynar do.

Sokar tilted his head, staring at me with his unnaturally yellow eyes. A pregnant moment passed before he whispered a quietly rumbled, “You are late.”

“A wizard is never late, nor early, he arrives precisely when he means to.” The snark snuck past my lips before my brain had a chance to weigh in on the “is this a good idea” o-meter. Mouthing off to a pissed off space-satan was probably not my best choice of the day, but it was still early.

Sokar looked up from his flame, flashing his eyes in annoyance. “Your days of sorcery are long past you Heka. I allow you your books and papers because of your work upon the Necropolis. You are useful but to not think that you cannot be replaced. You still have not found a way to bind us to the creatures interred within Memphis nor have you discovered a route the paths once walked in the lands of sun and snow where the spirits walk free.”

Now that at least I recognized. The kingdoms of sun and snow had to be the fairy realms, “The kingdoms of - uh- sun and snow are well guarded. And their rulers have long memories.”

“The creatures must pay for their transgressions and we must have a route to the Asgard if we are ever to grow as a people.” Sokar growled. “That was the price of our alliance, you are to give me a path to Orilla by the hidden paths of the wandering spirits.”

“And you will have it.” If he actually demanded that I open a path to the Nevernever I'd just take him through, summon Mab and let them sort out their differences.

“Good,” He looked around the room, as though surprised by something. “Where is that insufferable Lo'Tar of mine? He is supposed to have - ”

“Allow me to find him my lord!” Amun offered, clearly eager to be out of the room. I nodded my head, granting him the freedom to leave.

Sokar watched the chubby eunuch scurry out of the room and allowed himself a brief chuckle of amusement, “I really must remember to ask you for the world you pick your slaves from. You have always had an eye for quality man flesh that I've never quite been able to match.”

“People tend to do a better job when they want to make you happy.” I ran my thumb over the rings on my hand. “Fear is an inefficient motivator.”

“I have an Empire worth of slaves who would disagree wholeheartedly. Where were we? Ah – yes I remember.” He waved his hand to the ceiling, summoning a blanket of illusionary stars. “The Stargate network can take us from any planet to any other planet with a connecting gate, provided that we have the symbols to activate the Chappa'ai but you know as well as I do that the power required to open a gateway between worlds grows exponentially more complex as we connect to
He prodded a gem at his wrist forcing the illusion of stars to zoom away, showing spiral armed galaxies dancing in slow circles like glowing starfish. “For us to get to the lands of the Asgard we would have to either spend centuries in hyperspace or travel to an unknown gate network protected by Asguard automated defenses. The Asguard have crushed every effort of the system lords, but if we can get a strike team to the heart of their empire we can cut of the serpent's head.”

“You're going to kill their leaders?” I queried.

“We are going to destroy their entire planet.” Sokar replied. “With an atomic device enhanced by weapon's grade naquadah.”

“That's very clever,” Lash floated up to examine the stars. “And very unlike the usurpers. They fight from positions of power, never going in with anything less than overwhelming force. I expected a sledgehammer, not a scalpel.”

“Hell's bells,” My eyes bulged. Nuking a planet was a new one, even for me.

“Yes, I'm quite proud of the idea.” Sokar preened, rubbing a long fingernail over his chin pensively. “It was, of all things, the Tau'ri of Earth who gave me the idea. Yes – I know they are primitives but they've managed to undo entire empires with groups of no larger than four men. They are the ones who crushed Ra and Apophis, not I. Impressively resourceful creatures, though one would have to be to survive on that insufferable warren of monsters.”

“Humans from Earth killed Ra? As in the sun god Ra?” I blurted out.

“Yes,” Sokar replied. “I know that we'd suspected it was Apophis, but upon examining what I plundered from his records, the Great Serpent was as taken aback as any of us when the Supreme System Lord was undone. Several of the Tau'ri military personnel taken into questioning confirmed it, and I see no other logical conclusion. The death of Ra was purely incidental. Had he not decided to check on Abydos, he would still be alive and the old order would still be in place.”

He laughed, “I suppose I should thank the Tau'ri of Earth when this is all over. They were the architects of my supremacy.”

“Sorry, I seem to have missed something.” I tapped the side of my head to check my hearing. “Did you just say that Earth is sending soldiers to fight gods on other planets?”

Sokar sighed in a tone of great exasperation, “Heka, I am weary of having to remind you to keep abreast of current events. I swear that you hardly even noticed the death of the supreme System Lord. You cannot rely upon the obscurity of your territories to keep you out of military matters for eternity. That you manage to keep such a competent and proactive Jaffa army is something of a minor miracle.”

“Earth?” I repeated in shock. “As in Earth?”

“You didn't think they would keep their gate buried for all eternity did you?” He replied, a sadness weaving its way into his growling. “So far we have only seen Tau'ri scouting parties, usually in groups of four, but it is only a matter of time before we are fighting the horrors of old. Apophis suspected that they already have the Hok'tar aiding them. It's they only feasible way they could have known of his and Korel's attack on Earth or boarded their ships without his knowledge.”

Ok, so to recap. Mortal soldiers were traveling through a magical artifact capable of sending people to other planets. The aforementioned soldiers were using this artifact to kill space gods, possibly with
the help of wizard or wizards unknown. When did my life become an episode of the X-files. “Well, that's – new.”

“Quite,” Sokar replied. “When we eventually have to deal with the Tau'ri home world we're going to need to use the Unas shock troops on Memphis to even have a –” He looked over as two human shapes walked into the room, Amun and a man I did not recognize. “Where have you been you useless layabout waste of space!”

Amun flinched and moved away from the enraged god, moving towards me as quickly as he could to not get caught in the crossfire of Sokar's rage. The Albino god's eyes glowed in apoplectic rage as he bellowed, “I should flay you alive for this you pathetic waste of genetic code. Perhaps I will make you into a eunuch like the Lo'tar of Heka so that I can get half as much competence out of you as he gets out of his slave.”

The slave, curiously, did not flinch at his master's rebuke. He did not even seem to care till Sokar pointed to me and identified me as Heka. Once he did that, all hell broke loose.

The doors slammed shut with a clang of metal on stone, muffling the startled screams of the Jaffa outside. A ball rolled across the floor in front of Sokar, exploding and flinging him back even as a red pillar of light formed around his body to cushion the blow.

The previously passive slave pulled two silver s-bends from beneath his robes, they flared their necks like a rearing snake. A chirruping whirr was the only warning I got as two bolts of lightning whizzed across the room towards my chest. The deadly beams of energy stopped cold as the pudgy form of Amun interposed himself between me and my attacker.

I watched in horror as he fell to the floor, glassy eyed and unmoving.

Amun was dead.

Something in me snapped as I stared into his eyes. Fuck subtle, fuck my plan, and fuck hiding. This prick just killed someone who'd done nothing but serve tea and pick out clothes his entire life. He was a weird and funny little guy but he was my weird and funny little guy.

“You killed him,” I growled, ducking behind a pillar as a flurry of lightning bolts cascaded across where I'd been. “He was innocent.”

“Like you killed so many others, all of them innocents.” Yelled the servant, his voice echoing with the tones of the Goa'uld. “His death was incidental to the justice you are due.”

Sokar kneeled within his pillar of light, behind his throne, breathing heavily and nursing a gash along his face. “Coward! You attack me like a viper in the shadows.”

“You ok Sokar?” I shouted to him as a fusillade smashed against the red energies of his shield.

“I am about to be!” Replied the irate god as he stood, raising the foci on his hand to smite his attacker. He splayed his fingers, summoning a wave of energies within his fist before howling in agony as the device burst into sparks. A jagged strip of shrapnel from the explosive device jutted from the foci, splitting it in the middle.

“Infidel trash!” Sokar bellowed, falling back behind the throne and yanking the shard from his hand. “Must I crush you with my fists?”

“He's mine,” I leapt out from behind the pillar, holding out the arm with my shield bracelet towards our attacker.
The man smiled at my apparently desperation and fired three bolts of energy my way, only to gape in astonishment as they arced off the shimmering dome in front of my hand. He fired and fired at the dome, desperately backing towards the only exit.


The collected energies in my ring fired from my hand with the force of a shotgun, shooting across the room and catching him at the solar plexus. He flew ass over elbows into the back of the room, colliding with the hieroglyph covered wall hard enough to break bone. He tired to raise his weapons but with a shout of, “Vintas Servitas” a typhoon of summoned winds tore them from his grasp.

Bleeding and broken he charged at me with his bare fists, but he was clumsy, wounded and clearly unqualified to fight. I blocked his punch, using the momentum to get in close and knee him in the gut. He grasped at me, clawing at my leather duster and cloak with his fingers as I shoved him back into the wall, “What are you?”

“I'm Harry fucking Dresden, the one nailing your ass to a wall.” I shoved my palm into his injured ribs as I bellowed, “Infriga” putting all of my anger and frustration into the spell. The torches went out as all the ambient heat was sucked from the room, encasing the assassin within a six inch thick prison of ice; strapping him in place.

I raised my fist, intent upon beating him to death with my fists when a pale hand reached out and grabbed my hand. Sokar looked from me, to the ice, to the man and back, “I want him alive and interrogated.”

“I will tell you nothing.” The pained man replied, even as his teeth chattered from the cold.

“Be silent Tok'ra,” Sokar said the word as though it were a dirty oath, slapping the prisoner. “You will tell us all that we wish to know.”

Sokar grabbed a device from the man's neck, crushing it into powder beneath his boot. A stream of Jaffa burst into the room as the blast doors opened. “We are always a step ahead of you Tok'ra.”

“The galaxy will be free of false gods and tyrants.” Snarled the man. “Freedom is the right of all sentient beings.”

Wait – what?

“You have slaves and servants but the humans have the right to be who they wish. The Unas, all of them.” The man stared spitefully at the Jaffa soldiers. “You raise men to be dogs, and corrupt the very life forces of the universe with your perversity. I will die free.”

I felt the room spinning as I realized the meaning of Tok'ra, against Ra. I had just incapacitated a freedom fighter. He was one of the good guys. And I had just stopped him from killing the devil.

“Take this thing from my sight,” Sokar growled to his Jaffa. “And have it prepared for interrogation on my flagship.”

He looked to his first prime as the Jaffa kneeled before him. “My lord, a cargo ship was spotted in orbit around netu. Two gliders gave chase but the cargo ship entered hyperspace and escaped.”

Sokar nodded. “We must assume that the ship contains spies. The attack on the system lords will begin sooner than planned. You will have the fleet ready in two days.”
The Jaffa flinched, “My lord the very best we ca-”

Sokar slowly raised his palm, pointing from the frozen assassin to the corpse of Amun. The Jaffa looked at the floor in shame. “The fleet will be ready my lord”

Sokar lowered his hand. “Yes it will.”

As I bent down to close Amun's eyes he barked another order to his first Prime, “See to it that the Lo’tar of Heka is placed in a sarcophagus and returned to the palace of his god.”

I froze. He was talking about necromancy, raising Amun from the dead. One of the most sacred rules of the White Council of Wizards. By allowing Sokar to bring him back I was as good as casting the spell myself. It was a line they felt nobody should cross. Nobody had the right to play god.

I could stop it.

I could say some reason for Sokar not to bring him back, it wouldn't really matter why. Amun was just another human to Sokar, a pet who'd done his job well for his master. I could stop it with a whisper and a smile.

But I wouldn't. God help me.

Amun hadn't deserved to die. He hadn't wanted to die. He should not have died. The Sarcophagus required no sacrifice, beyond weighing on my conscience for the rest of my days. I was already dead if the council every discovered that I traveled back in time.

In for a penny in for a pound.

Sokar adjusted his robes and accepted a replacement hand device from his Jaffa, strapping the weapon in place as he looked up at me. “Now, there is only one more matter to discuss before we move forward.”

“And that is?” I queried.

“I would like you to tell me who you are, what you are doing here, and why you are pretending to be Heka,” I could feel the small army of Jaffa surrounding me tensing up with every word. “And moreover, why should I not have you killed in the next ten seconds.”
Chapter 9

The god of hell waited patiently, staring at me with those unnerving golden flecked yellow eyes. “Who are you, pretender to power?”

It took me a moment to register precisely how screwed I was – even by my normal standards of danger this was bad. I could fight and perhaps even kill one, or two, or even ten of them before they managed to alert the armies of Sokar – perhaps even killing the god of hell in the process – but by no means could I fight my way past an entire planet of soldiers, ships, and freaking orbital defense stations.

I'm good but I'm not 'outrun an air strike' good.

And there was no reason why I should be in this situation. No freaking reason. Why – why in the name of all that was good and holy – why had I shouted my name?

I knew better than that. I'd known better than that since I was a teenager. It was probably the most important rule of wizardry other than 'don't die.'

The things someone could do with a name, a true name spoken by the one who owned it, were too numerous and terrible to even contemplate. A powerful enough being could capture, control or corrupt someone to do their will. Even a novice could kill with one.

True names were the sort of thing Wizards killed to protect, the sort of information for which faeries and demons were willing to topple nations. And I had shouted two of my names – freaking belted them – in front of the devil. What the hell had I been thinking?

Had I been thinking?

No – in the heat and rush of the moment I had not. In five seconds I cast aside decades of careful training and control, ignoring every instinct I'd fostered over my career and just doing the first thing that popped into my head without putting a second's thought into the consequences of doing it. Something was very – extremely – wrong with me.

Judging by the irritated tick in the god of hell's forehead and the way his lip curled into a snarl, I must not have been doing a good job of concealing my distress as I would have preferred. I was showing weakness in front of a supernatural predator, strike two on my something is wrong with Harry-ometer.

“I have not slaughtered you out of respect for your actions in saving my life,” Sokar hissed over my introspection. “But my patience is not without limits – pretender to power. Who are you? One of Heka's progeny? One of the Goa'uld vassals who serve him in my name? Speak or die!”

Before I could even consider raising a defense he raised his hand, aiming a foci in his palm towards my forehead. A terrifying golden light drove forth from the gem, a piercing lance of will hammering at my mind like no other psychic attack I'd ever faced. A thousand tendrils of will scourged my mental walls, gripping coils of magic demanding submission.

And I felt pain – so much pain. I could not place the pain to any bodily injury. I felt largely unaware that I even had a body – only the pain was on my mind. My defenses dulled it, but could not outright block the overwhelming agony which consumed my being. I could feel the distant sensation my magic but could not summon the will to use it without dropping what few mental defenses I'd mustered.
My legs stopped obeying my mind as I fell to my knees, thundering agony punctuated with telepathic interjection. Sokar's voice reverberated in my mind, his furious whisper seeking every corner of my being. “Who are you?”

I tried to lie, but the words would not form on my lips. Sokar laughed at my twitching face as I struggled, his sonorous reverberating whisper twinged with amusement. “My Kara Kesh is not like that of other gods. The god of hell is not bound by the treaties of the System Lords. I draw lessons from the gods of old and even from the horrors of Anubis – You will speak truth or die in agony.”

Never in my life was I more grateful for my years of dealing with faeries. Truth was a far more dangerous weapon than any lie when spoken by the Leanansidhe or Mab. I was no faerie but I knew how to twist truth into something wholly unrecognizable.

“I am known as Dre'su'den the Ha'ri,” Choosing the Jaffa's chosen monicker for me for lack of a better alias. I gasped the syllables through clenched teeth, “The god of magic envied my power – my magic – so he imprisoned me and tried to steal that which is mine. His death was a product of his own greed.”

“How did Heka die?” Sokar titled his head.

“His host burned him alive, cooked him inside of the host's body. Neither host nor god survived.” My walls were beginning to crack under the pressure, the tendrils of will forcing themselves past my initial mental defenses. I wouldn't last much longer. “Heka died trying to take a wizard host – I did not. He was not a worthy god of magic.”

“And why should I let you live after such impudence – such arrogance?” Sokar hissed in fury. “ You are a nothing god who does not even have a proper name in our language. You have taken lands and slaves without even pledging your loyalty to me. What do you bring that is worthy of you taking the place of my most trusted lieutenant?”

“I can open up paths to the kingdoms of Sun and Snow,” I winced. “I can do it right here – right now.”

“Do you think me a fool? I will not allow such paths to be opened in my palace. Even were you able to surpass the wards of old this planet opens up into a place of shadow which even the creatures of sun and snow fear to tread – to a place fitting of my power.” Sokar sighed. “Your host may have power but Heka had knowledge of the paths through the lands beyond. Power is useless without the knowledge of how to wield it.”

Hells bells, just what I needed – a competent villain.

“If it were that simple to navigate the lands beyond I would already have done it myself.” I felt a slight twinge of ambient magic seeping off him as he caressed his foci. His host was a practitioner – a minor talent, but enough for me to feel it. “Heka was one of the few who still had hoarded knowledge from before the betrayal of Anubis and the heresy of the Tok'ra.”

“Wandering aimlessly through the land of spirits serves no-one. I do now wish to wage a war of attrition with spirits and monsters. That is why we abandoned the breeding grounds of the Hok'tar in the first place,” Sokar's eyes flashed as fury trebled in his sonorous whisper, “He was a resource that I can not easily replace without making a pact with the forbidden ones. Do you have that knowledge? Can you take me to Orilla?”

“No,” I didn't even know what Orilla was.
The intensity of the pain increased as his eyes flashed in fury, “You show up to my ream with a Hok’tar and an fancy title and presume yourself to be my equal? Die!”

The invading tendrils sharpened to razors, twisting and tearing at my mind – shredding my defenses. I had to offer him something – anything – worth keeping me alive for long enough to find a way out of this. “I know where there are several hundred more Hok’tar.”

“So do we all,” Hissed Sokar. “Even were it not protected by the Asguard and armed with atomics, the first planet is full of too many predators to consider hunting for hosts there. It is no accident we exile prisoners to that accursed world.”

The voice of Lash whispered in my mind, distant and nearly imperceptible. It was a bit like listening to someone shouting down a corridor, a distant sense of noise and action. I could hear her struggling, sense the frustration in her voice even to whisper in my ear. Something was wrong with her as well – not good, very not good.

“Wizard –” her voice crackled with emotion “-he is an enemy of the Winter and Summer courts. He despises them. Offer the pretender to glory that which he has dreamed of ever since meeting his betters.”

What did the devil dream of? Power – the Devil dreamed of killing God.

It was no accident that the Jaffa's staff weapons were forged from ferrous materials or that the doors to Sokar's throne room were made from iron rather than gold. Hell, he'd put his palace on top of a mystical no-man's land in the land of faeries where the Kingdoms of Summer and Winter would not be able to breach.

The god of hell hated faeries with a passion born from experience.

And hell's bells if I didn't have an ace in the hole for someone who hated faeries that no one else alive could even hope to match. As the razors shredded through the last vestiges of my mental defenses I shouted, “I killed the Summer Lady.”

The Jaffa stood stock still and wide eyed as Sokar's echoing whisper rasped in confusion, “The unspeakable ones can not be killed – it is impossible.”

“Theyir power can not be destroyed,” I wheezed from the floor, “The mantle will be passed on – but the Lady Winter and Lady Summer can be killed.”

“What?” The pressure on my defenses slackened as Sokar's voice hitched in momentary disbelief, looking at the device upon his hand. “You – you are not resisting the effects of the Kara Kesh – you speak truth?”

The god of hell lowered his hand. There was no pain, no razors, no reverberating whispers in my mind. There was only deathly silence and the sounds of flickering torches. Sokar's hand fell to his side as he rasped, “You – slew – one of the unspeakable ones?”

“At a special place, in a special ritual, at a special time – it can be done. I killed one – will kill one – er have killed one.” I steadied myself on my hands, sitting back on my heels as my breath caught up with me. “Kill me and you will never know how or where.”

Sokar licked his lips in thought, “I could tear it from you.”

“No,” I replied, “You couldn't. Not before I spoke the Mab's name thrice.”
“Speak not the names of the forbidden!” Sokar hissed, “Even if your power were great enough to pass my wards she would kill you for what you know.”

“She would kill you for fun,” I replied. “I wouldn't want to die alone.”

“Your arrogance tries my patience Dre’su’den the Ha’ri,” Sokar growled.

“Not enough that you'll kill me though,” I stood up, tapping the side of my head with my index finger. “Not before I tell you what I know – or don't know.”

“And what word do I have that you are not in league with the unspeakable ones? One of their servants perhaps?” Sokar seated himself upon his throne, his foci still pointed at me as he reclined in the chair.

“Have you ever met something from the Nevernever that could touch iron?” I reached out and grabbed the thick struts holding up the brasiers of fire with my bare fingers. “If I touched ‘the bane’ I'd be writhing in agony.”

“Yes – you would,” Sokar's cool demeanor betrayed little of what was in his mind. “I will give you one chance, and one alone. If you succeed I will consider allowing you to retain some of holdings of Heka.” He raised his hand as though to preemptively silence my protest. “Assuming you pass my challenge, I will trust you with no more than Nekheb till you deliver what was promised by Heka. A route to Orilla.”

“Of course,” I replied, lying through my teeth. “I'd be delighted to.”

“I do not care for your delights, only your results.” Sokar replied. “You will accompany me to my flagship. I desire the location of the Tok’ra base. Once the Tok’ra has been healed sufficiently for interrogation you will force the knowledge from him. You have till Bynar's deadline to provide me with the information – after that I will be forced to re-consider your worth, Hok’tar or no.”

“How – thorough do you wish my interrogation to be.” I replied in what I hoped was a passable imitation of Johnny Marcone, channeling the cool dispassionate cruelty of Chicago's king of crime.

“Try to leave him in a large enough piece to appreciate his incarceration on Netu for the rest of his miserably short existence. Do remember there are limits to even what a sarcophagus can heal.” Sokar pressed a sigil upon his wrist, hissing in a crackling and guttural language I did not understand. Three armored figures in jet-black combat armor strode into the room, their saurian gait only serving to make their oversized staff weaponry more imposing. They were lizard men, the same species as Ammit, though not hosts themselves.

“These will serve as your body guard to prevent any further complications.” He waved to the lizardmen, hissing in the alien language before turning to me, “And to ensure that you do not 'become lost' on your way to interrogating the prisoner.”

“Perish the thought,” I replied, keenly aware of the bits fresh meat hanging from the human fingerbones from which the Unas' necklaces were made. The creatures stood around me on all sides, towering over me even as they hunched down to sniff at the air.

Thrilled for any excuse not to be in a room with space-satan, I allowed the trio of Unas to shepherd me onto a ring transporter that lead to Sokar's flagship. I needed time to figure out precisely what was wrong with me and how to get myself out of this mess and I wasn't going to get that done with a if my wannabe Lucifer pulled out his pocket-sized mystical pain-packing polygraphy for a second go at 20 Questions.
As we walked the corridors of the Sokar's flagship I turned to the largest of the Unas, their apparent leader, and asked, “So do you guys have names or should I just call you Larry, Moe, and Curly Joe?”

The Unas hissed, “Skakka nek'shakka.”

“Right,” I elongated the word far in irritation. “Larry it is.”

The Unas hissed, baring it's teeth and flashing it's tusks. The creature's ret eyes flashed in annoyance. “Kek'ka nal Shakka.”

“What? Everybody loves the Stooges. They're a classic!” I poked my fingers towards my eyes and made the 'whoop-wop-wop' noise. The Unas looked at each other, apparently unprepared for me to have done that. Slapstick must not have been included in their 'dial-a-goon' training manual.

We wandered up and down the winding corridors of Sokar's flagship, a convoluted maze of identical-looking golden passages. The gaudiness and seemingly uncreative opulence of the Goa'uld was beginning to make sense to me. They layout of Goa'uld ships was a literal maze intended to confound and confuse their enemies. Any attacker who boarded one of their ships would be forced to navigate a building worth of identical looking rooms and corridors lacking any sort of obvious land marks to guide them to either the bridge or engines.

My leathery guide pointed a taloned finger down one such corridor to a high-ceilinged room with a single decoration within. An ornately carved obsidian sarcophagus radiating pulses of sickly sweet necromancy – a cloying reminder of how I still drew breath. The Unas growled in it's native tongue, “Shakka Tok'ra Ska Nok tek. Zo Onac Tok'ra Tonak.”

“I have literally no idea what that means,” I shook my head. “But I'm guessing that you want me to wait here.”

“Ma,” The Unas replied.

“You can understand me?” I blinked in surprise.

“Ma,” The Unas replied.

“But you can't speak the language?” I sighed.

“Kek.” The Unas shook it's head.

“And I'm guessing you're not super psyched about that nick-name are you?” I chewed on the tip of my tongue.”

“Kek shesh,” The Unas replied in the negative, though with less vitriol than before.

“Look,” I waved to the only entrance to the sarcophagus room. “I don't suppose you could give me a little privacy, could you? This thing is going to heal the Tok'ra and I'd appreciate a few moments to myself.”

“Kel shesh,” The Unas tilted his head in confusion.

“Oh for the love of – where am I going to go? There is one door,” I pointed to it. “I am unarmed and there are three of you. I'm going to do special god things that you can't be here to see or bad things will happen to you. Shoot me if I try to run away but for the next hour or so could you please just stand on the other side of that door?”
A moment of silence passed before the Unas nodded, “Ma, no na nok lota.”

“Uh,” I looked up into the Unas' unnerving face. “Thanks.”

“Ma,” The Unas left the room, his two compatriots close in tow. The door shut with a hiss of pressurized air, sealing me in the torch-lit sarcophagus room.

“Ok Bob,” I sighed, looking down at the satchel at my side. “Precisely how screwed am I?”

“Harry, I'm not really an 'in the field' sort of guy but if this is how you go through business when I'm not around I have to admit that I'm really pretty surprised that you haven't died yet.” Bob the skull replied, clicking his jaw in irritation. “I mean really Harry. I don't think I need to tell you how stupid, well – everything – you just did is.”

“I know Bob,” I sighed, leaning up against the wall as I slid to the floor – burying my head in my hands.

“I mean a first year practitioner knows not to - ” Bob started before I cut him off with a furious. “Yes Bob, I know!”

“Don't take it out on me if you decided to take your stupid pills today sahib.” Bob rattled his teeth. “Why did you even bother to get involved? It would have been easy enough to just run from the room and leave Sokar to die. Would have saved you a lot of time and effort.”

“He killed Amun,” I sighed.

“This is one of those morality things again isn't it?” Bob sighed.


“Correct me if I'm wrong but isn't 'all necromancy is evil' another one of those morality things as well?” Bob interjected. “Because I'm pretty sure you all but gave the god of hell permission to bring somebody back from the dead.”

“I – Amun didn't deserve to die.” The words sounded hollow, even to me.

“Boss, even ignoring the whole 'Law of Magic' issue, allowing someone to do necromancy is a huge departure from what you consider to be moral. It's big enough for even me to see it.” Bob's voice colored with concern. “I don't get the whole morality thing but I know that it's really important to you. And I've got to tell you sahib, this doesn't seem like – well – you.”

“There's something wrong with me Bob,” I shivered, it hurt to even think about it. “Something is wrong with my head.”

“Well we knew that,” Bob replied. “What with Heka bouncing around in there it was bound to knock something loose.”

“This is different,” I winced. “I'm not sure how – but it is.”

“Oh my host,” A familiar voice caressed my mind. “You have truly no idea.”

I looked up at a shimmering and insubstantial image of Lash, a shadow's shadow of her normal illusion. I smiled as she sat next to me, wrapping her arm around mine as she rested her head on my shoulder. “I don't suppose you can shed some light onto what is going on?”

“We were fools to trust her,” Lash hissed in the closest thing she could muster to sympathy.
“Mab,” I sighed, already going over the pact made with the Queen of Winter.

“I should have forbid you from entering into her terms, should have seen the loop hole that she could exploit.” Lash’s hand tightened around my shoulder, seeking comfort from me. “I was so terrified of what Heka’s memories would do to you that I was grateful for the intervention of the Winter Queen.”

“But she did something to me,” I replied, thinking of the frost magic that had come to me so easily – too easily. I had never been particularly good with ice-magic. It should have seemed strange to me that it should have been my instinct to use it. “Changed me.”

“Not really – not truly.” Lash sighed. “She was true to her word. But she is a Queen of Winter – nothing comes without a price, usually not the price asked.”

“I don’t get it, she promised not to alter any of my memories.” I focused, trying to draw the precise wording she had used. “I will only remove the Worm’s influence from your mind for the length of our conversation. I will not alter your own memories nor impose my will upon you.... The spell upon your mind will last till the rising of the noonday sun on the soil of your homeland.”

“Oh, son of a bitch. She only promised not to influence my mind for the length of that conversation.” I ran over the conversation we had in my mind twice. “She just let me assume that the spell which would last two days was the same spell which cleared my mind for the length of our conversation.”

“Indeed my host,” Lash winced, her body flickering as she spoke. “Faeries have a wide latitude in how they may use their powers, provided there is no malice intended. Mab has a unique dominion over you due to your debt owed.”

“You mean that the Queen of Winter can just put whatever whammy she wants on my mind as long as she is helping me?” I shuddered. Mab's definition of helping doubtless left a great deal to be desired.

“The rules that cannot be broken can always be bent, my host,” Lash sighed, nuzzling against my shoulder. I hated to admit it but the sensation of being close to someone, even an illusionary someone, was greatly appreciated. “She gave you what she was implying to offer – just at a much higher price than she’d indicated.”

“What did she do Lash?” I closed my eyes, already knowing that I wasn't going to like the answer.

“Harry,” Lash rested her chin on my shoulder, looking at my face. “When I stopped Heka from consuming your mind I trapped the imprint of his memories and his personality in hellfire. What you experienced was just the meagerest of echoes – the worst of it was kept at bay by my power. It became bound to the parts of your soul, trapped by hellfire. For Heka’s memories to be taken from you, she had to suppress parts of your soul.”

“She took my damn soul,” I sqwaked, extricating myself from Lash's embrace and standing upright. I patted myself from head to toe, reflexively checking that everything was in it's proper place.

“Not took,” Lasciel shook her head. “Taking the soul of a mortal without their permission is beyond Mab. No, she simply took those parts of your soul which were tainted by the pretender to power and trapped them behind a wall of winter's frost. Those parts of you which were lacking were replaced with the power of Winter.”

“You mean that I got one person out of my head and just got another person in it?” I growled in annoyance.

“Not precisely,” Lash shook her head, as she stood up and rested her hand on my chest. “The heart
that beats within you is still yours, your urges are still your own but they are no longer filtered through the same filters of mortal concern. You are imposing your own will upon yourself.”

Lash continued, seeing the confusion in my eyes. “Wizard. When you have an urge, you pause and consider the consequences of that urge. You think 'is this a good thing' or 'is this a righteous action' and then you do what your soul considers to be the best thing to do. The creatures of winter have no souls, the power of winter is not bound by the same morality.”

“So instead of thinking 'should I do this,' I just do it?” I sighed.

“Faeries do not worry about the particulars of right and wrong, my host, they do what they wish the instant they wish to do it. Creatures of winter operate on pure instinct and desire,” Lash's body flickered and she winced in pain. “Faeries do not desire do be duplicitous or cruel, they simply are.”

“Are you ok?” Lash appeared to be in a great deal of pain as I grabbed her illusion by the shoulders, helping her steady herself.

“Yes – yes my host, I am fine. When I realized that my mind had been tainted – when you tapped into the power of winter and not hellfire – it briefly rendered me unable to move, even to think.” Her eyes flashed with irritation at her own apparent weakness. “Most of me was trapped within the frost of Winter. Breaking through the mind blocks placed by Mab have drained most of my remaining reserves. I can still act and speak but I am only a fraction of what I should be. I am – well – I suppose ‘tired’ would be analogous to my current situation.”

“I don't get it though,” I chewed my lip. “Mab has always relied upon me being fully functional to do what she needs me to get done. She knows how good I am at what I do. Why would she damage such a useful tool?”

“The Mab who will meet your future self, perhaps, but the Mab of today only knows that a powerful Wizard in a position to meet Heka has been tossed into her lap. You, Harry Dresden, mean nothing to her,” Lash leaned up against the sarcophagus, growing more substantial in proximity of the necromantic energies. “Dropping a volatile Wizard with every reason to hate Goa’uld into a conference of them led by someone who pretends to be the devil has only one obvious benefit.”

“Stars and stones – she was planning for me to kill Sokar!” I blinked, considering the matter. “If we hadn't been interrupted by the Tok'ra then the meeting would have continued as normal. He would have continued to discuss his plans with me – his most trusted confidant.”

“Sokar's plans often involved mass genocide and public rape, if memory serves.” Lash nodded. “You would have attacked him without thinking twice.”

“Does she even want the Key of the Dead?” I ran my hands through my hair. “Yes, of course she does – or that I die trying.”

“She may not even want something that obvious, my host.” Lash sighed. “If you fail to get either you'll likely be consumed by Heka's memories and gifted with a burning hatred of Sokar and the knowledge of a powerful magical artifact. She may well desire something altogether more sinister.”

“Oh great, because my life wasn't already heading down a dark enough path.” I rubbed my finger over the last charged power ring on my hand, wondering if I would be able to knock down Moe, Larry, and Curly in one go.

“Focus, my host.” Lash snapped her fingers in front of my face. “Do not fall to your base urges.”

I paused, willing myself not to go off half-cocked into another fight. Knocking down the three Unas
wouldn't get me off the ship or off the planet. It certainly wouldn't get me any closer to the Key of the Dead. “I'm worried Lash.”

“I know, my host.” Lash said in a soothing timber. “I promise to keep you on track till we do what must be done. I promise to help you stay you – I swear it.”

“Thank you,” I replied. God help me I meant it. I was very grateful to have the fallen angel on my shoulder.

“Now, my host, you would normally be plotting a totally insane way out of your obviously fatal predicament.” Lash shrugged. “I feel that it is only fitting that you do so now. You must find a way to escape the flagship of Sokar.”

“Oh, that.” I smiled as the idea hit me. “That is going to be the easy part.”

“What is the hard part, my host?”

“Convincing the Tok'ra to come with me.”
Chapter 10

I couldn't say how long I was in that chamber, sitting and watching the sarcophagus hum with necromantic energy. It was only a matter of hours but felt like centuries. I listened to Bob drone on about the history and disposition of the Goa'uld – a subject I desperately needed to understand better. He rambled about dynasties and wars – which were interesting enough – but what continued to wow me were the new toys I had to play with.

“So the gates are a ritual artifact capable of sending someone to a different planet?” I said, genuinely amazed at the concept. “Even to Earth?”

The hovering image projected from Bob's eyes flickered as I tapped it with my finger, idly stroking the illusionary form. It was preposterous – impossible even – that any device should be able to channel the necessary levels of power to teleport someone from one side of the galaxy to the next. I'd tried to figure out a spell to teleport myself across a room after watching too much Star Trek as a teenager.

I'd managed a spectacular explosion in Ebeneezer McCoy's wood shed that earned me a three hour long lecture on the dangers of unsupervised, experimental spell-work but was no closer to knowing how to teleport than the man on the moon. Come to think of it, it was around that time that Ebeneezer started teaching me advanced combat magic. It was a very “McCoy” solution, stop me from blowing up his shed by ordering me to blow things up elsewhere.

I couldn't muster even a fraction of the power necessary to teleport a penny, how on Earth did these gates have enough power to do what they did. “That is a serious bit of magic.”

“Err,” Bob rolled from side to side along his jawbone, clicking his teeth in contemplation. “I'm not really sure if it is 'magic' Harry. The Goa'uld technologies seem to incorporate ritual elements heavily into their designs but they aren't substantially different from the way computers work back on Earth.”

“So it's magitech?” I scratched the back of my head as I watched the black stone of the sarcophagus, feeling the cold pulses of necromancy coming from it.

“Essentially yes,” Bob replied, chattering his teeth in contemplation. “But it's not really like any ritual device I've seen before. The methods by which it function are more mechanical than spiritual – a magical computer if that makes any sense.”

“Which is why this,” I held up the device on my wrist, still glowing with symbols I did not recognize in the slightest. “Has not gone haywire in spite of my spell work beforehand.”

“Yes,” Bob nodded. “It's fascinating really. They seem to have replaced the sacrificial component of a lot of magic with an offering of power – literal energy. It's no secret that someone with enough raw power can simply force magic to do what they want.”

“What are they powering that with?” I pointed to the sarcophagus.

“A nuclear reactor.” Bob laughed at my yelp of surprise. “Calm down – you're perfectly safe.”

“There is a nuclear reactor less than six feet from me and you're telling me to calm down,” I hissed. “What happens if it overloads?”

“Then we all die.” Bob replied, “But I wouldn't count on it. It's a reactor, not a bomb.”
I blinked the stars from my eyes, realizing the implications of what Bob was saying. The Goa'uld had replicated a necromantic ritual capable of resurrecting the dead without necessitating the loss of life to pull it off. They'd taken everything I thought I knew about physics and magic, tossed them in a blender and torn them to shreds. “You’re telling me that technology can be used to literally replicate magic.”

“Pretty much – it goes the other way round as well. Everything from wrist watches to space ships can be made with magic friendly bits and bobs.” Bob laughed. “Imagine being able to sell lap-tops and DvD players to the White Council! You’d make a killing.”

“Bob the White Council only recently started adopting the telephone as a method of communication,” I replied. It need not be said that the White Council would not be pleased to discover that the balance of power was no longer in their favor. If the mortals or one of the courts of Vampires ever discovered how to re-produce Goa’uld magic, the White Council might loose it's dominance in the supernatural world. It was the one thing we had over every other player in the world – magic. “If we introduced them to the Internet I think they would threaten to burn me as a heretic.”

“How would that be any different from any other time you've dealt with them in the past?” Bob snorted. “It's not like they've ever had difficulty thinking up reasons to cause you headaches.”

“For the moment Bob, I'm only interested in how to get off this ship.” I fit Bob back into his satchel. “Can you figure that out for me?”

“I'm working on it Harry,” Bob's eyes flashed. “I took in a lot of information from Heka's computers and I'm still processing it. I might need a bit more time.”

“Make it quick Bob,” I stood up as a hissing whoosh of icy vapor seeped out the edges of the sarcophagus. “We're on the clock.”

Moe, Larry, and Curly strode into the room with a loping menace. They were less agitated than before, at least towards me. Though if that were a product of our “Me Tarzan, you Jane” bonding time or simply because they were focused on the Tok'ra, I could not say. But it was clear to me that – at least for the moment – they were my honor guard rather than my captors.

Hobbling to the sarcophagus with long-shanked strides, the three stood and waited for the cover stone to recede. The gasping figure of the Tok'ra burst from the viscous pink healing fluid, coated in tattered clothing and steaming bits of gelatinous muck. He thrashed hopelessly against the thee huge brutes as they ripped him out with taloned hands, binding him with heavy iron shackles.

Iron - Another precaution against the faerie folk perhaps? It would not surprise me. I took the opportunity of their distraction to slide Bob back into his satchel.

The Tok'ra thrashed against his captors till Curly got sick of it and shoved a three-pronged prod into the man's side. Screaming in agony as orange light flickered in his mouth and eyes, the Tok'ra fell limp in Larry and Moe's arms. Holstering the souped up cattle-prod with one hand he motioned with the other for me to follow him.

“Not yet,” Lash whispered in my ear as my fingers balled into fists. “Soon but not yet.”

I exhaled deeply, calming my thoughts as I followed the trio of lizard-men on another winding tour of Sokar's flagship.

It was different from Heka's ship. Larger to be sure, but the ship had been designed with a deeply
different esthetic. Where Heka's ship was nothing but flowing protective heiroglyphs and embedded spell-work, Sokar had bound his walls in iron decorations and circles of steel embossed with aggressive glyphs – some of them still empowered. The red paint covering every door was textured with what I could only assume was salt, making the entire place a virtual fortress against supernatural ingress.

Nobody bothered with this many layers of protection unless you had a supernatural heavy hitter gunning for you. I didn't need to guess who merited this level of precaution. Sokar was terrified of Mab.

Not without good reason, I supposed. I doubted that I was the first agent Mab had used to recover her stolen property. The Queen of Winter was the undisputed champion of holding a grudge. Even minor insults against her would be met with horrible retribution at a later date. Sokar had stolen something from her, something she wanted back badly enough for her to spend a wizard's favor.

It had to be something special. This “key” whatever it was – whatever it did – was important enough to Sokar that he was willing to spend the rest of eternity fleeing from the Queen of Winter to keep it. Sokar was no fool.

I was going to steal it back from him.

Lucky me.

A prelude for what well might be in my future assaulted my senses as we finally reached the ship's dungeons. Torches, sharp implements, hanging manacles, and the ambient sounds of a hundred other poor souls were obvious at every corner as we listened to a choir of prisoners screaming in agony. A symphony of pain directed as Jaffa henchmen of Sokar meted out their tender mercies.

I did not dare look into any of the cells at the piteous faces within. No amount of Lash's whispers would have quelled my rage. Sokar was a monster. He needed to die – soon.

The trio hung the Tok'ra from a hook in the center of a particularly nasty cell that still smelt of whatever had happened to it's previous occupant. Bits of rotting gore and viscera still clung to the walls and ceiling in a wide splatter pattern from a raised stone block, the bloodied sledgehammer beside it a terrifying reminder of what had transpired. Long benches of torture implements lined the walls, each more threatening than the last.

Larry, Moe, and Curly stood around me – hissing in anticipation for the blood to come. The gnashed their teeth and licked their chops, begging me to start the fun. Larry eyed the Tok'ra's hands in a way that suggested the lizardman was already planning to expand his macabre jewelry.

“Ko keka Dre'su'den,” Larry snarled, pointing a talon to the man. “Nok keka!”

I looked up and down the weapons on the table, knives, hatchets, cleavers – there were any number of weapons but none that would incapacitate the Unas. I could probably stun them with my ring – definitely kill at least one with the axe before the other two were able to react. I could probably burn the third if I had enough of a chance. Larry howled eagerly as I ran my fingers across each, cheering me on as I got closer and closer to a three-pronged pain stick.

“Or,” I smiled, reaching down and picking up a familiar object from Bob's lecture. “I could always use this.”

I raised the s-shaped length of metal, pointing it to the Tok'ra. I lined up my shot at the stony faced prisoner before spinning on my heel and discharging three bolts of lightning from the zat'nik'tel
behind me. Larry, Moe, and Curly went down for the count as I holstered the zat'nik'tel in my coat pocket.

The Tok'ra's jaw dropped in confusion as I stood on a gore-stained plinth, reaching up to undo the bindings about his wrists. They were well made but I'm a pretty good lock-pick, in my line of work it pays to be able to get out of a sticky situation. I fiddled at them with an ice-pick like protrusion of metal till they popped open, dropping the confused Tok'ra to the ground.

He backed away from me on the floor, pushing himself to the wall. “I will give you nothing Heka. You can not pry the secrets from me no matter what forbidden skills you still have.”

“Ok,” I replied, pulling a sharp knife from the table and holding it out to him hilt first. “So would you prefer a blade or a gun.”

“What?” The Tok'ra blinked, still not quite sure what was going on.

“I'm a pretty good shot but if you think you're better off with the zat than with a blade you're welcome to it.” I replied, pulling the weapon from my pocket and holding it out as well.

“Is this wise, my host?” Lash's illusion hovered to my right. “I don't think you would normally arm him before you'd acquired his allegiance.”

“I'm getting to it Lash,” I groaned, turning to the fallen Angel and pointing at her with the blade handle. “If you think that you can do a better job of this be my guest.”

“A better job at what?” The Tok'ra asked in confusion.

“Give me a second here man,” I held up a finger in a shushing gesture. “I'm trying to have a conversation here.”

“He can't see me, my host,” Lasciel sighed. “You're having another relapse. You normally ignore me when others are around.”

“Right,” I squinched my eyes together, shaking my head to clear my thoughts. “Don't respond to the Fallen Angel when others are around.”

The Tok'ra tilted his head in confusion. I was pretty sure I hadn't done much to ease his state of mind.

“Look buddy, I'm about to offer you the chance to escape with me when I blow this popsicle stand. Are you going to complain about my state of mind or help me do what needs to get done?” I chucked the Zat'nik'tel into his hands as I rummaged through Moe's belt and unholstered another.

“I will not lead you to the Tok'ra base,” The man pointed the gun at me, fury in his eyes. “Do you think me a fool to fall so transparent a ruse? You fake an escape so that I lead you to the co-ordinates of your worst enemy.”

“Well you're pointing a gun at me after I saved your ass – so yeah – I'm pretty sure you're at least a bit of an idiot,” I snorted. “I mean really, do you have a better option?”

“Yes,” He pulled the trigger on the zat, firing a beam of lightning at me, “I do.”

I held up my shield, inverting the convex barrier to a concave dish – reverting the beam back at him. He dodged it, leaping back in shock as it dissipated against the wall.
“Are you done yet?” I sighed. “I don't care what you do once you're off the ship. Go to the Tok'ra – or don't – It's the same to me either way. Stay here for all I care but I'm getting the off this ship and out of dodge.”

“Sokar will kill you for what you're proposing,” the Tok'ra replied. “Kill us both.”

“I was sort of expecting that eventually.” I shrugged. “Most people want me dead.”

“You are Goa'uld.” The Tok'ra sneered. “Everyone wants you dead.”

“You're wrong,” I replied.

“Your slaves do not matter monster,” The Tok'ra laughed, still keeping his Zat pointed at me. “They worship you out of ignorance and habit – they long for freedom even if they know not what it is.”

“Not that,” I shook my head. “I mean that I'm not a Goa'uld.”

The Tok'ra blinked, “You mean to defect? You Heka? Lord of Nekheb, he who scourged the first of Pelor – you wish to join our ranks?”

“No I mean I'm human – just a plain old human,” I tapped my noggin. “Single occupancy.”

A long moment of total silence passed before the Tok'ra replied.

“You're insane,” Whispered the Tok'ra in horror. “Completely and totally mad.”

“It has been said before but you're not going to be able to fight your way off this ship alone and I need someone who knows their way around a ship's security.” I crossed my arms. “So are you in or out?”

“Ask him to help you find the information about where the key is,” Bob chirruped from my waist, startling the Tok'ra.

“I was about to do that Bob!” I sighed. “Give me a moment.”

Bob peeked out from the satchel, his glowing eye pulsing with laughter as he cheekily interjected, “Momentshmoment, if we did this your way we'd be here all day.”

“What is that?” The Tok'ra hissed like a scalded cat, his eye's flashing in shock. “And why do you have it!”

“That's Bob. He's a spirit from the Lands of Sun and Snow,” I replied using Sokar's terms for the Nevernever. “He helps me.”

The Tok'ra blinked – something apparently clicking in his head – and spoke to me in a voice that bordered on sympathy, “Oh Heka... what have you done? What deal have you made for the glories long of the past?”

“I am not Heka,” I sighed, choosing to use my pseudonym for the sake of simplicity. “I am Dre'su'den the Ha'ri.”

“Nothing is worth their prices... whomever you are.” He eyed Bob like a time-bomb that might go off at any second. “Even to avenge what Sokar demanded for you to prove your loyalty.”

“Do you want off this ship or not,” I looked at my watch – still clueless as to what it actually said. “Because it's beer-o-clock and we're on last call.”
“Very well,” Replied the Tok’ra, lowering his weapon. “It would seem that I have little other choice.”

“Great,” Bob chimed in as ship's klaxons sounded. “Because I'm pretty much know that shit has gone sideways down here.”

The doors started to close, heavy bulkheads descending to trap us inside the cell. The Tok'ra fired at the command console in the hallway, frying the exposed crystals and freezing the doors half-way down.

“The ship must have detected your weapon's fire and scanned for life-signs.” The Tok'ra swore, pulling key-cards from the lizard-men pockets and breaking them in half. “We only have moments before they send a patrol to check the cells.”

“Shit!” I pocketed a second Zat from Larry and lead the Tok'ra out into the hall.

“Wait!” He fiddled with the panel next to the door.

“We need to get moving – uh, what should I call you?” I fired a bolt of lightning into the chest of a Jaffa jailer who popped his head around the bulkhead to my left. “Tok'ra seems impersonal.”

“I have no name that I would share with you enslaver,” the Tok'ra grunted, his fingers pulling a set of wires and crossing them. Circumventing what he'd done before, the bulkhead slammed shut – a second set of doors closing from the inside. He connected two crystals, causing shuddering jolt of abrupt motion through the deck. “But if you must have something to call me then Xin will suffice. It was an alias I no longer have a use for.”

“What was that?” looked through the peep-hole and out into empty, star strewn, space.

“The cells are designed to be jettisoned to the planet below. It's how he drops prisoners to Netu – though those three will land on the planet rather than its moon.”

“If we had a way off then why didn't we take it?” I hissed through clenched teeth.

“Enslaver, I know you are accustomed to people repeatedly telling you that your logic is infallible but it is also laughably predictable.” Xin replied, leading to a long ramp heading upwards. “Sokar's forces will detect life signs on the departing object. The thick armor on the cell will make it too difficult to determine specifics. They will send ground forces to search it and capture us – giving us time to actually escape.”


“Take the one on the left?” Xin pointed to an armory down the corridor guarded by two bored-looking Jaffa. I hardly had time to line up a shot before Xin had already knocked his target cold. The Jaffa fell to the floor, blue lightning coursing over them. I could get to like the zats – non-lethal options were preferred when possible.

The Jaffa weren't human but so far as nonhuman species went, they were probably my favorite. Sure they were incubators for evil alien space gods, but nobody is perfect.

We dragged them into the armory, pausing briefly for Xin to strip out of his tattered jerkin and into a Jaffa's armor. It was too large for him, sagging where Xin lacked the broad chest of a Jaffa. “That's better – we can blend in now.”

“Blend in?” I sighed, “The Jaffa are looking for us already.”
“No, the Jaffa are looking for two intruders trying to escape.” Xin replied. “We are a Jaffa and loyal servant of Heka wandering where we belong.”

“But they've seen our faces.” I replied.

“Sokar's personal guard and the three Unas have but there are several hundred thousand Jaffa on this ship along with hundreds of lesser Goa'uld.” Xin shrugged. “Sokar will pass out holographs of the both of us when the crash site search fails but we have some time before we're noticed. Long enough to disable the sensors.”

“You're going after a cargo ship,” Bob tutted. “Makes sense. You'd have to go past Sokar's throne room and guard to get at a ring transporter.”

Xin flinched, his eyes flashing in contempt for Bob, “That – abominable thing – is correct. A cloaked transport or Alkesh is our best chance at escape.”

I nodded, pulling one of the Jaffa staff weapons from the wall and feeling the rush of energy that came with holding a foci. It was a crude focus for magical energies – sterile and lacking any personal connections to me – but it would do quite nicely for lack of an alternative.

Xin shook his head. “The Zats are easier to conceal Dre'suden. Sokar does not normally allow his Goa'uld vassals to carry weaponry of any kind.”

“Trust me,” I focused on the staff, weaving spells around it. “I've got this covered.”

I wasn't any good at veils, they were too delicate for someone like me to really get the hang of, I'm not very good at delicate magic. Focusing on making something invisible takes a very special kind of mind – the kind that I don't have. Luckily there are alternatives to veils. With the right application of magic you could easily make people come down with a distinct case of “someone else's problem.”

My magic washed up the staff, bending attention away from it. If I'd done it right, everyone would see it but none of them would care. It wouldn't hold up if we ended up in a fire-fight but it would probably let us go for a half hour before it was noticed.

Xin hissed in shock, his eyes flashing as he struggled to focus on the Staff Weapon, “Your host is Hok'tar! How did you find one?”

“I am the host,” I reiterated pulling the grey cloak over my head and shoulders. “I am Dre'suden.”

“The host survives Dre'suden,” Xin's eyes flashed in disgust. “Do not try your lies upon me. I do not take an unwilling host – I do not force myself upon other beings.”

“That makes two of us,” I walked out into the hall. I pointed to my head as we walked along a row of iron braziers of flame. “Single occupancy.”

“I beg to differ,” Chided the fallen Angel in my head.

“You're not helping me here,” I looked up. “Keep it to yourself.”

Xin, wisely deciding not to argue with the armed man in an argument with his invisible friend, pointed down a well lit corridor. As we passed a patrol of thirty or so Jaffa soldiers he whispered into my ear, “Sokar's central database is that way.”

“Hell's Bells,” I muttered, staring at the monolithic construct in front of me. A pillar of crystal five stories high sat hovering in the center of a circular room, situated at the center of a seemingly
bottomless chasm. “We're going to disable that?”

“Yes,” Replied Xin, walking down the narrow beam that leading across the chasm. “We are.”

No wider than a foot across, the path jiggled to an alarming degree as we walked along it. A pointed sensation of vertigo washed over me after I made the tactical error of looking down. I had to close my eyes, breathing deeply before I could stop the room from spinning and convince my legs to continue operating. Sokar's appreciation for safety codes left a great deal to be desired.

And honestly, I'm not too psyched about heights.

“Dre'su'sen,” Xin hissed as I followed his near acrobatic navigation of the narrow beam as best I could. “Our time is not unlimited. Another patrol is imminent.”

“I'm coming,” I hopped off the beam and on to the wide o-shaped platform hovering around the crystalline pillar. A command console jutted from the pillar, wide key runes arranged around a holographic screen. Lines of unintelligible data flashed across in all directions – too fast for me to read, let alone comprehend.

Xin plugged a length of crystal into the console and pressed a dozen keys before swearing in a language I didn't recognize. He looked up at me, “They changed the codes – I can't get in.”

“Aren't we just going to blow this up?” I waved to my staff weapon.

“With what? - Oh right,” Xin squinted, reminding himself that my staff was there. “No – we need to get the codes to activate a ship before we can destroy it. It does us no good to steal a ship which won't turn on.”

“Harry,” Bob spoke from my waist. “Let me.”

Trusting in my skeletal advisor I placed Bob in front of the screen, ignoring the disgusted protests of my Tok'ra ally. Bob's eyes glowed, focusing on the screen as tendrils of orange light seeped out from Bob's skull to the device. The swirling masses of incoherent runes shifted, warped and finally changed to a grinning orange skull in the center of the screen. “Oooh roomy.”

“Don't get used to it,” I chided the spirit. “It's only temporary.”

“Spoil sport.” Bob sighed, rolling his eyes around. “I've got control of everything attached to this terminal – but I can only control it as long as I'm physically attached Sahib.”

“Spirit,” Xin voiced his words cautiously, as though afraid the wrong word might end in his death. “Do you know – can you find records of a Tok'ra by the name of Selmak? Do you know what has happened to him?”

“He's on Netu.” Bob's eyes flicked towards me. “I thought Bynar was interrogating Joinar?”

Xin's eyes flashed in irritation, “Martouf – that was not our plan.”

“Plan?” I turned to Xin. “You had a plan?”

“No business of yours, enslaver,” Xin growled.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Sure it's not. Any luck with those code's Bob?”

“Oh I found them alright,” Bob whistled. “Along with a whole bunch more. Harry I think I may have just hit the jackpot.”
“The key?” I grinned at Bob’s self satisfied tone. He’d be insufferable when this was all over, but I was too pleased to care. “Well done Bob.”

Xin looked over his shoulder, “Collect your spirit, enslaver. We must hurry.”

The sounds of a Jaffa patrol echoed down the hallway, the marching precision of heavy footsteps audible in the distance. I pulled Bob from the plinth, putting him back into the satchel before staring up at the monstrous construct of charged crystal. It was a thing of beauty – intricate spell-worked circuitry interwoven through a honeycomb of thick metal. It was essentially sacrilege to destroy it.

I can live with sacrilege against Sokar.

Pointing my borrowed staff weapon I shouted, “Maximo-pyrofuego,” expelling a gout of blue-black spell-flame from the flowering petal at the weapon's end. The unnatural flames bored a hole through the pillar, devouring it from within. I shielded the two of us from white-hot fragments of crystal with my shield bracelet as we edged along the balance-beam, ducking down a maintenance corridor as a terrified Jaffa patrol arrived on the scene.

The corridor lit up with a green burst of light as something in the pillar exploded, giving me a glimpse of the horrified look on Xin's face. Whatever he'd been expecting me to do, that had most certainly not been it. “Your body is Hok'tar – pure blood Hok'tar.”

“Yes,” I replied – recognizing the Goa'uld word for practitioner. “I am.”

“Impossible,” The Tok'ra whispered, trying to convince himself that he had not just seen me cast magic. “The Goa'uld no longer have access to Hok'tar.”

“They still don’t,” I replied as we came upon a pair of Jaffa guards. With a hefty grunt of exertion, I clipped the leftmost Jaffa across the head with my staff weapon in a sneak-attack. Yanking my fingers up in a claw-like gesture I slammed his partner into the ceiling with a shout of, “Ventas sertitas.”

Xin followed the Jaffa's ascent and subsequent descent with wrapped attention. His doubts of my magical powers seemingly quelled. His next question never came as the ship was bathed in darkness, my damage to the central computers apparently having done something to the ships power distribution.

It would not be till much later that I discovered just how much of a Goa'uld ship was housed in a single system. For a paranoid bunch of self-serving sociopaths, they seemed astonishingly willing to put all their eggs in one basket on that one. I suppose it was a burden of Ego – none of them ever expected to fail.

Xin looked around, catching his bearings as the ship switched to emergency lighting. “We need to go down – ah yes – this corridor. Oh – no!”

The Tok'ra shoved me back, peeking around the corridor once before devolving into a string of whispered foul language. I sighed, “I'm guessing something went wrong with your plan?”

“Sokar seems to have seen through my ruse,” Xin sighed. “There is a fixed gun emplacement in that corridor. Even a personal shield would barely be sufficient, those weapons are intended to punch through the armor of an Alkesh if necessary. In the event of a total system failure the Jaffa are under orders to shoot on sight. We can't get around it.”

I smiled, “We're not going to go around it – we're going to go through it.”
Lash's phantom fingers grabbed at my shoulder, “My host this is a bad idea!”

Brushing off the Angel's hand, I ran down the corridor, speeding towards the fixed gun even as Lash screeched in my ear. I ignored her, focusing on the tripod-mounted weapon before me. It whined as the red-armored Jaffa held his fingers down on the trigger, spitting bolts of energy towards me. They spun past me as he tried to get a bead on me, searing burst of molten metal erupting from where he hit.

I pointed my remaining power ring towards him, punching forward with my fist as I bellowed, “Assassinatus!”

A spear of force shot forth from me, crushing the gun and propelling the gunner into the wall behind him. Blood seeped from his mouth as he crumpled to the ground, groaning in agony as he clutched a broken arm.

“I don't want to have to kill you.” I bent low, staring him in the face. “But I will if I have to. Can I trust you to stay here – to stay silent?”

“I am not afraid to die,” The Jaffa hissed. “My Lord Sokar will crush you.”

“Not today.” I sighed, tapping his head with my finger tips. I focused some of my magic in my fingers, whispering “Dormius.”

The Jaffa’s eyes drooped as he fell into a deep and restful slumber as Xin caught up to me. I pointed to the man's still bleeding wound, “Is that going to kill him if it's left untreated?”

“What? Oh – no.” Xin examined it. “They're heartier than you give them credit. Come on - ” He pointed to a triangular ship about the size of a Humvee “- we can get the transport off here and cloaked before they're any the wiser.”

I sat next to him in the cockpit of the transport pod, watching as he grabbed the strange glowing orbs which served as the ship's yoke. “You know how to fly this thing?”

He shot me a look of utter contempt, “Yes – enslaver – I can pilot a transport.”

“Just checking,” I raised my hands in surrender. “No harm done.”

Tok'ra grunted noncommittally as we rose from the ground, speeding out the airlock and into the starry space beyond. The ship's window rippled as a cloaking field shimmered across it, a powerful veil over it's armored skin. I whistled, impressed by what I had seen.

We sat in silence for a good ten minutes before Xin spoke, tapping the ship's computers idly as he went. “I know a path through Sokar's defenses that will get us on the planet's surface. What you do from that point on is your own business but I suggest getting off-world as soon as possible.”

“I've got a ship.” I replied.

“You had a ship,” Xin replied. “Sokar will have you grounded the second he gets a communicator back online – sooner if he remembers that he has a ring transporter. That won't work.”

He considered the matter for a second before continuing, “He'll likely have your estate destroyed from orbit.”

That I hadn't planned on. “I have to go back. I can't let him do that.”
“It's a little late now,” Xin snorted, tapping the ship's monitor once to check our telemetry. “He'll have the ring room on lockdown by now.”

“I have to do something,” I rubbed at the stubble of my scalp. “Anything.”

Xin's eyes bulged as he looked at the sensors, “You can brace for impact! The moon of Netu has become unstable.”

“Unstable,” I looked at the flashing red planet, “You mean it's going to explode? Why is it going to explode?”

“I have no idea. It's supposed to be relatively stable. Somebody must be trying to kill Sokar,” Xin tapped a couple of buttons. “Deactivating the cloak.”

“Won't they be able to see us?” I looked over my shoulder as though a Jaffa might materialize at any moment and take a pot-shot at me.

“Enslaver – I don't think it's going to matter one way or the other if I can't get more power to shields. Sokar just became the least of our problems.” Xin buckled himself into his seat. “Hang on!”

The ship bucked across empty space as an unstoppable wave of planetary debris and concussive force hit us. The ship's gravity flickered, tossing me up into the air and across the room. Landing hard upon the ground I swore angrily, checking that I had not accidentally crushed Bob.

I got up, strapping myself into my seat before the ship buffeted against a second wave of force. Warning klaxons screamed as we spun across the void, spinning us towards the wide expanse of space covered within Sokar's automated defense network. “We're getting close.”

“I know.” Xin replied.

“They're going to shoot us,” I groaned.

“I know!” The Tok'ra shouted.

“Getting shot would be bad.” I interjected.

“I know!” Xin bellowed, tossing his arms in the air. “Enslaver I have more than enough problems already, without someone adding an additional distraction. It can't get any worse – so let me make it better.”

As though summoned by his words, my ears were met with the thrumming reply of a ring-transporter activating.

“Hell's bells Xin,” I swore as the ship spun for a third time, tossing us into the active-fire zone as a figure materialized in the rings, “Did you have to tempt fate on that one?”
Chapter 11

Xin swore, jerking the controls in a frenzied attempt to avoid the sudden bursts of searing energy scourging the void around us. The hairs on my neck stood on end from the sensation of power, pure and unbridled energy, screeching about the empty space around us. My own attentions, however, were far more focused upon our boarder.

He was a tall man, dark skinned and possessed of a serpentine arrogance etched in to those features which still remained. A grotesque mass of scars criss crossed the right side of his face, the still weeping pucker of a gored eyeball seeping milky white pus across torn meat. Ragged red links of what had once been chain-mail of a Jaffa – though to call the melted and battered iron husk armor seemed overly congratulatory. He looked up at me, hissing in surprise and confusion as he realized where he was.

I hardly had time to recognize throbbing sensation of being around a another of the old gods before Xin gasped in horror, “Apophis!”

“Who are you to speak to the name of the great god Apophis as an equal?” reverberated the angry deity, glowering at me with his weeping sore of an eye-socket.

He spoke in third person – just great. Creatures which insisted upon referring to themselves in the third person were always a pain to deal with for their egos if nothing else. Well, if all else fails I fund that a well placed bit of snark went a long way to deflating the egos of a supernatural nasty, “Oh me? I'm the god of magic and this is my Tok'ra arch nemesis. We're currently plummeting through a minefield of almost certain death on a craft that will last five minutes at most.”

“Three,” Xin corrected me, weaving the ship's controls up and to the left.

“Three,” I repeated. “Now you can be a nice little godling and not get in our way so that we can survive this mess or start a ruckus and possibly get us all killed in the process. Your choice.”

“I will not be spoken to in that manner by anyone,” Snarled Apophis, his good eye flashing in fury.

“Then it pleases me to be the first,” I sighed, “You're actually going to start a fight on a crashing ship aren't you?”

“Bow before me!” The god bellowed in fury, flexing his wrist to draw a concealed blade as he charged. I dove from my chair, astonished by the speed with which the god had crossed the ship. Sparks flashed across the cockpit as he swung down, slicing across my enchanted duster. His eye widened in shock as the edge of his blade bludgeoned my side rather than goring me, giving me time to pop him one across the jaw with the butt of my staff.

His head whipped back from the force of my newly enhanced strength, spitting a couple teeth as he eyed the Zat'nik'tel on the floor. It had fallen from my duster as I'd rolled, skittering to a point between us. I flipped my staff, pointing the flowering bud towards his chest. “Don't even think about it.”

“You gain nothing by killing me,” The man growled. “Join me and there will be rich rewards for you in the new order to come.”

“I have you at gunpoint and you're telling me to surrender?” I laughed at the absurdity of it.

“Sokar is no more,” Apophis hissed in sibilant baritone. “My serpent guard are spread across his
entire fleet. Even as we speak they are seizing his ships for my ascension. My victory is assured.”

Lash snorted in a distinctly non-angelic sound of disgust. “Do not trust this one, my dear host, Apophis was ever the god of lies and betrayal. Within the pantheon of usurpers he is nearly as treacherous as Sokar or Anubis – though not as brutal.”

Colluding with Apophis was not high up on her to do list. For once I agreed.

“Generous,” I jibed sarcastically, “But I have a counter offer.”

I continued, cutting him off before he could even speak, “No – no, I'm the armed space god here. You will not cut into my threatening monologue,” I smiled as the god’s eye’s flashed in fury. “Like I said. I have an alternate deal. I kick your ass six ways from Sunday, cut off your head and ride off into the sunset as though we've never met.”

“You cannot command the Serpent guard without me,” Hissed Apophis. “They only pretend at loyalty to my usurper – they long for their true god and the time of his rebirth and ascendancy. I will restore the time of Apep, the glory before Anubis' betrayal. Do you not desire our return to glory?”

“What? Join me an we will rule the galaxy as Wizard and snake? Read my lips Appy-may. ” I thumbed the activator to the staff’s blast function, preparing to dispatch the god. “I. Don’t. Care. Let them do whatever they want. Me? I'm going to take my football and go home because I'm not playing any more. Go rip it out from a different blockhead because this one isn't kicking to day Lucy.”

My peanuts themed riff cut off when a bolt of superheated plasma collided with the cargo ship, busting against the craft's hull and briefly overloading the ship's internal gravity. My knees buckled the internal gravity adjusted by ninety degrees, heaving me against the wall. I fired a burst of flame from my staff, missing Apophis as we sped through the air towards the wall.

Apophis yelped in shock as a ball of blue white fire seared the bulkhead, hot enough to cause rivulets of metal to spatter outward. I could see bone where a bit of the metal collided with his already mangled face. He howled in inhuman fury, cursing me in a sibilant language neither Lash nor I recognized.

Loosing track of what is up and down is not a totally new thing for me. There are parts of the Nevernever that will take reality and toss it totally akimbo, but even for me it's not normal to suddenly find that up is down. When gravity fails me, I find that it's useful to just tuck into a ball and raise my shields. I held my staff out, centering my magic to provide a cushion of air within my protective bubble to dull the eventual impact.

Apophis grabbed the s-bend of metal skidding across the floor, ducking into a kneeling crouch as he sent bolts of lightning across the small room. The gravity shifted back, crashing me against the floor within my bubble of protective energy. Lightning rolled across my protective dome of energy, skirting across the cockpit and hitting the command console in a shower of sparks.

Xin swore, beating at small fire starting in the ship's flight control computers. He pulled a canister of something from beneath his chair, spraying it at the fire in an effort to beat back the blaze. Crystals burst in small pockets of crystalline shards, tossing shrapnel across the room. I felt the razor sharp bits pinging across my coat – smiling as they sliced the exposed bits of Apophis' flesh. The charging god swung at me with his blade, bringing the black metal down on my translucent dome of protective energy.

To my amazement the blade sliced through my protective magics, crushing the spells as though they
weren't there at all. My magics had been supercharged since melding with Heka, more powerful than I ever remembered them but it rendered them inert. The shimmering edge of the blade whispered with a slight hum of enchantments as it whisked past my face, sparking against the haft of my staff.

I kicked him, using my magic to put a little extra oomph behind it as I connected boot to groin. The god's eyes bulged as I used the momentum of that to poke my staff in his chest and yell, “Forzare.”

The befuddled god slid across the floor, somehow managing to keep his footing. He spat blood upon the ground, green light shimmering across his blade. His chest puckered inward at an odd angle, exposed bits of rib about his sternum poking through his chest. His eyes flashed in curious malevolence, disturbingly calm about my own use of magic and his own injuries.

“Hell's bells - Where did you get that?” I recognized the power in the blade. I'd seen it – or rather something similar to it – only weeks ago. White Council Wardens carried silver blades enchanted to allow them to channel magic through them, powerful weapons I'd previously believed to be the exclusive purview of the White Council.

“Apophis is without a Hok'tar but not without knowledge. Each of the great system Lords hordes a portion of what once was.” Apophis sneered, his hand tightening around the Zat in predatory anticipation as he circled to my right. The ship bucked again – shrill klaxon screeching that the ship's shields had failed. “We believed Asgaurd menace had stolen the last viable bloodline in our final war. How did you find one that survived their purges?”

“Magic,” I replied mockingly.

“Another rival who fancies himself amusing,” Apophis smiled as the ship's computer screeched a warning about imminent something or other. “When you get to the next life do me a favor – inform the fates that I am not amused by you or Colonel O'Neill”

“Tell them yourself,” I barked, catching Xin's frenzied attempts to beat back the fires out of my peripheral vision. “Looks like we're going down together.”

“No, we are not.” The god grinned with malicious glee.

“Enslaver!” Xin looked back at Apophis in horror, “Do not allow him to move or we will die here!”

Apophis leapt backwards, stepping into an alcove that closed around him like an iron casket before dropping down with a hiss of pressurized air. A freaking escape pod, he'd taken the freaking escape pod.

Hang on a second, “We have escape pods?”

“No.” The Tok'ra growled. “We had one escape pod. I was using it's internal transponder to transmit a phony friend or foe signal to distract the defense grid away from targeting us directly.”

“And now that it's gone.” I swallowed, suspecting his answer.

“The guns will have no reason to target the pod heading for the surface and every reason to target us.” He looked at the burning computer interface. “Perhaps if I can re-route power to the cloak.”

He reached for a black box, pulling his hand away when the flesh sizzled like a strip of fresh bacon on the stove, too hot to touch.

“No!” Screeched Xin. “Not now!”
“Xin! We have to get out of here,” I grabbed the Tok'ra dragging him back towards the teleporter.

He struggled against me, his scorched fingers still reaching towards the blazing computers. “No! If we can't get the main control systems working we can't activate the ring transporters. I don't have a mobile command module.”

“A what?” I dragged him back, hitting the door to the cargo hold as a burst of energy tore the cockpit from the ship entirely.

“A wrist mounted command computer for Sokar's ships.” Xin looked down at my arm, and back up at me in disgust. “That you mule headed boor.”

“My watch?” I held it up.

“How are you still alive?” Xin tapped the runes on it with his wounded fingers, “How do you even dress yourself?”

“Less complaining – more teleporting us off the on-fire ship,” I replied – highly irritated that I had not in fact been able to clothe myself that day without Amun’s assistance. I have enough trouble tying a necktie, let alone fiddling with the complex ceremonial garb of an interplanetary deity. It wasn't my fault that there were a lot of buttons in strange places and confusing knots.

Stupid space gods and their Buck-Rogers-esquely annoying sense of fashion.

“What is your password?” Xin twisted the runes with an errant flick of his fingers.

“Password?” I replied.

“Yes, the password.” Xin hissed in exasperation.

“What password?”

“What do you mean what password?” Xin howled. “The password for your wrist device. The command password that is capable of saving us from a fiery demise. The only thing keeping us alive!”

“Oh, that password. Of course that password – It is … uh,” I paused in confusion, “I don't know the password.”

“How do you not know your own password. Everyone knows their own password! No-one forgets the password to their emergency teleportation code,” Xin's face turned an interesting shade of purple. “It's one of those things like 'how to breathe.' You don't freaking forget them if you're planning on living through the day.”

“I'm not everyone else!” I sighed. “Bob, any help?”

“I am a mystical spirit of knowledge – not tech support!” Bob protested in mock irritation.

“Not the time for it Bob! You were the one who helped me set this thing up in the first place.” I yelled at the skull. “What is the password?”

“The password is 'password 1' be sure to use all lowercase letters.” Bob replied in mocking parody, “Thank you and please call again.”

“You're insane.” Xin muttered as he typed the code into the device in apparent disbelief that it functioned, “You're going to die and take me with you on your way.”
“I like the company,” I smiled as the metal rings rose around us, bathing us in white light.

I felt the warping sense of being compressed through space at time as the light carried us down to the surface of Delmak – to a familiar room of marble pillars and greenery. The personal palace of Heka – my palace. The wrist device must have been programmed to seek out safe harbor rather than the closest possible teleportation point. “Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.”

“My lord Warden,” A thrilled woman's voice echoed across the chamber. The buxom priestess Muminah rushed before me, falling to her knees and kissing the ground before me. “I told them one as great as you could not be felled, even by the smiting of Netu itself.”

“Get up,” I sighed, grabbing her by the crook of the arm and helping her to stand. “We talked about this. No more bowing – we don't bow.”

“Yes my lord Warden,” Muminah still averted her eyes from my own, staring determinedly at my chin. “As my lord commands.”

“Requests, Muminah – not commands.” I sighed in exasperation. “I keep telling you that I am not a god.”

Xin looked at me as though I'd grown an additional head. “What?”

“I am not a god.” I repeated.

Of course you aren't.” Xin replied in confused reverberation. “I know that. Its the core belief my entire people. But nobody just shouts that to a room full of servants in Goa'uld territory – least of all a Goa'uld Lord.”

“I've never been especially good at following the rules,” I shrugged, following Muminah down the stairs from the teleportation platform to where Ul'tak stood with the elder Jaffa.

“My lord Warden.” Ul'tak saluted me in the traditional way of the Jaffa, slapping his fist across his chest. “I bear grim tidings. Does my lord wish to discuss them in private...”

He left the word hanging, a carefully unspoken question of Xin's loyalty and reliability. The Jaffa would never outright question one of the gods in front of his lord, but he wasn't stupid. The old gods were treacherous. I waved my hand idly, “Ignore Xin. He's just a Tok'ra met earlier today.”

I'm not sure who looked more alarmed by that proclamation, Xin or my Jaffa. Ul'tak sputtered, caught between befuddlement and revulsion, “It is Tok'ra?”

“Yes, but he's friendly. He's here with my permission for the moment. Perfectly harmless.” I looked at Xin. “Isn't that right Xin?”

“Yes,” Xin observed the hate filled gazes of the assembled Jaffa with mingled fear and confusion. “Positively friendly even.”

“Good,” I handed Bob over to Muminah, relieved to not be hefting the additional weight. He hummed contentedly as the priestess cradled him upon her bosom. Ignoring his mutter of “best case ever” I approached the holographic table. “Give me the low down.”

“There are limits to my patience host,” Lash hissed in irritation. “I cannot translate everything with ease.”

“Groovy, you keep that totally tubular translation going hoochie mama.” I replied in intentional
“I can still hurt you my host,” Lash sighed in amused exasperation.

“Whom are you speaking with my lord Warden?” Ul'tak asked, staring at the blank bit of wall I was addressing.

“Don't worry about it.” I sighed, “Just tell me what's happening.”

“After Sokar's flagship was destroyed with you aboard all the Goa'uld started battling for control of the planet.” Ul'tak pointed to a huge crater on the planet's southern pole. “The worst of the debris struck the farmlands, causing earthquakes and volcanic activity round the globe. What of Delmak is not embroiled in battle is already consumed by fire.”

“How quickly can we everyone off world?” I sighed. “I assume we have enough space for everyone on the flagship.”

“Sure we do.” Cackled the ancient Jaffa. “But we're not going anywhere. Least not so long as the Necropolis Guard control the palace.”

“They won't believe him to be dead,” Xin muttered in agreement, “Sokar picks - picked - his soldiers purely based upon their loyalty and fondness for cruelty. They'll need to be slain or subdued before anyone can take control of Sokar's holdings. We have to assume the defense grid will shoot down anyone trying to get off world.”

“Can't we just go through that ring thing – uh – the Chappa'ai?” I looked at my generals. “That would save us going through the grid.”

“And force us to go right into the heart of Sokar's citadel, at the lowest point past several thousand Necropolis guardsmen.” Xin shook his head. “Even if we had the clearance – which we don't, you'd have to assume that by the time we reach it the Necropolis guard will know that you survived the assault and come to the obvious conclusion.”

“Oh crap,” I ran my fingers over the stubble covering my scalp, “They're going to think that I'm the one who killed Sokar.”

“There aren't many who could get close enough to Sokar to pull it off,” Xin agreed. “Coincidentally did you?”

“Did I blow up the moon?” I stared at Xin. “We barely escaped that alive? Do you think that I'm crazy enough to blow up a planet while I'm still in the blast radius?”

Xin raised an eyebrow, “You're shouting that you're not a god in a room full of Jaffa before claiming a Tok'ra as an ally and set your military override password to ‘password.”

“Oh shut up,” I growled, as much to the giggling angel in my head as to the Tok'ra.

“It is safe to assume that we have only a short window of opportunity before the perimeter guns are turned upon us.” Ul'tak interjected. “I can lead a cadre of my men to take the nearest barracks – if it is destroyed the connection to the defense network ought to be disrupted long enough for us to safely depart.”

Xin nodded, “I have a virus in mind that could do the job if you get close enough. It would take only moments to encode it upon a crystal.”
“Fine. Give him what he needs,” I nodded. “And get me my armor.”

“My lord?” The Jaffa looked up at me in confusion, turning to the other generals as though unsure if he’d heard me speak properly.

“What? You thought I was going to sit this one out?” I waved my hand at the human servants peeking out from behind pillars and doors to catch a glimpse of me. “Just sit back with these people and let someone else do my dirty work for me?”

“It is the custom of the enslavers,” Xin interjected sarcastically.

“Enslaver this – enslaver that,” I rolled my eyes. “Just call me Mr. Evil and be done with it already.”

“You are altogether too similar to another acquaintance of mine.” Xin sighed. “He also is mistakenly convinced of his comedic savvy.”

“You wound me Xin,” I put my hand over my heart in mock pain. “How ever shall I continue?”

“Insane,” Xin muttered, taking the crystal offered by Ul'tak. “Completely insane.”

I turned my back on him – trusting Ul’tak to keep him in line for the time being. Muminah stood at attention, her eyes full of adoration as she hugged Bob to her, “My lord Warden is truly great to have bound the Tok’ra demon to his service.”

“What can I say, he took a liking to me and just followed me home.” I deliberately kept my gaze above her neck line as I asked, “What happened to Amun?”

“He arrived hours ago – restored to vitality by the god of hell.” She blushed. “His person – was restored in tact. I hope my lord does not think me too presumptuous, but I gave him permission to continue in service to you without the ritual sacrifice usually asked of Heka's Lo'tar. However he is prepared to self-excise the tribute if necessary.”

Sacrifice? Oh right – Amun had been a Eunuch. “Yes – that was the right decision. Wait... selfexcise?” I flinched in sympathetic pain for what Amun had avoided. “A freaking fantastic decision. The best one I've heard all year.”

How many of my inherited servants had mutilated themselves in service to Heka? I shivered, even one was far too many. I shuddered – the only thing keeping me from becoming him was a layer of Mab's frost. An enchantment that would melt away in twelve hours or fewer by my count. I needed to get this finished – fast.

“Speak of the Devil,” I smiled at the man carrying a heavy lacquered wood case into the room. “Amun!”

He was different than I remembered him. His cheeks were narrower, his face was covered in a dark hint of stubble and the muscles of his chest were more defined – no longer covered in the thin layer of pudgy flab which had previously covered his body. This was Amun as he would have grown up without Heka in his life.

It was the man who died for me without flinching. Whatever shame I felt for resurrecting him vanished upon seeing him in the room, alive and whole. It would plague me later on – I knew it – but if anyone deserved a second chance at happiness it was Amun.

I bear hugged him, whooping in joy as I lifted him from the ground and waved him back and forth. “Amun!”
Amun giggled in embarrassment, his voice now a thick tenor, “Thank you my Lord Warden. I will not squander this gift.”

I dropped him, slapping his shoulder before opening the chest and exposing Heka’s battle armor. “I know you won’t.”

Fortunately Amun only stripped me down to my silken undergarments before helping me into my armor. Being naked in front of a room full of observers once was enough for a lifetime. Though I supposed the court of Heka was essentially immune to nudity. Most servants seemed entirely comfortable in extreme states of disrobe – never mind the priestesses.

Me? I felt more comfortable behind the thick battle armor than I had in weeks. I activated the helmet, fitting my duster and cloak over the armor, observing myself in the reflecting pool. To my surprise the coiled serpents of Heka upon the featureless metal face were gone, replaced with an silver pentacle in imitation of the one I wore upon my neck. I ran my taloned fingertips over it.

“It seemed to me that a reborn god should bear the symbol he carries closest to his heart,” Amun smiled at the reflection. “Not that of his former being.”

I patted his shoulder in approval, taking the staff he offered me in my left hand as I walked over to the waiting cadre of Jaffa. “We ready to go here ladies? We've got tons to do and no time to do it in.”

“Yes Warden,” Xin spoke my title curtly – though not with as much spite as even moments ago. “We are prepared. And not a moment too soon.”

The ground trembled, distant plumes of fire hinting at a massive explosion. The ancient Jaffa swore, “Aziel’s forces approach. Hundreds of them. He is coming to avenge his former master.”

“Damn,” Xin swore. “Aziel was a lieutenant of Sokar, the one tasked with ensuring your loyalty. He has been planning your demise for two centuries. If anyone will have the override codes to turn your perimeter guns upon this palace – he will.”

“Can the ship’s shields protect us?” I asked Bob.

“For a while, sure” Bob replied. “But if we use any of the ship’s guns the defense satellites will vaporize us from orbit. He won’t need to outlast the shields, just keep us in place till someone gets control of the central computers.”

“Bob,” I smiled as an idea formed in my head. “When you went into Sokar’s computer you got a whole bunch of passwords right?”

“Sure boss,” Bob replied. “Everything he had.”

“Would the codes to the artillery around this palace be in those?” I pointed out the window at the very guns which would soon be turned upon us.

“Uh,” Bob’s eyes flicked back and forth. “Yeah. Oh yeah! I love the way you're thinking bossman. Get me on your flagship and I can control them remotely.”

“Bob – you have my permission to leave the skull so that you can enter whatever ship's system on my mothership you need to enter so that you can take control of those guns and protect the people in this palace till I return to the ship. Do what you have to do to keep them safe.” Bob giggled with malicious glee, orange lights shimmering out from the skull in a giant cloud of orange motes of light. He seeped through the stone ceiling, up towards where I knew the ship to be. Ignoring the gobsmacked looks of surprise on everyone's faces I addressed Muminah, “Protect this skull at all
costs. Get to everyone to the ship and let nothing happen to it.”

“Yes my lord Warden,” the perky priestesses bowed before rushing for the teleporter.

I clapped my gauntleted hands together, “Let's go out and greet our guests.”

The ancient Jaffa whooped, in glee slapping Xin on the back as he shouted. “Come demon. We go to battle and glory.”

“Insane,” Xin repeated to himself as he unholstered his Zat. “I'm going to die following around a mad-person.”
Chapter 12

Bob hadn’t fully decoded the location of Sokar’s cache of weapons but he assured me that the Key of the Dead was, of course, on the other side of the freaking galaxy. Ok, not technically that far but near enough that it made no difference for my purposes. What would save me was nowhere near Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden – story of my life.

The path from Heka’s palace to the city proper felt a good deal shorter than it had only this morning, adding to the already ominous atmosphere. Dark soot blotted out most of the sky or the distant rumbling cracks of lightning striking a city already engulfed in flame and battle. The entire planet seemed to be screaming, distant cries for salvation far too many to make out individually. Armageddon had come to Delmak.

“Hardly Armageddon,” Lash tutted. “No angels anywhere to be seen and the worthy aren't being raptured away to their salvation. Though perhaps after so many years worshiping their imitation devil they are beyond even His notice. He does so hate to share.”

A beautiful woman fell into step alongside me, wrapping her arm around mine and resting her head upon my shoulder as we walked. It was a familiar gesture, one of comfort rather than of seduction. She kept pace with me as I lead my small army of Jaffa towards the main gate – nuzzling her cheek against my arm.

I knew it was something that I would not normally have been alright with her doing. With an acute clarity I remembered casting her back into the depths of my mind for much more minor invasions of my conscious mind. But for all my absolute certitude that I had – and must always – reject this sort of affection from the fallen angel, I could not for the life of me understand why it was so important to reject her. I knew that it was supposed to bother me, I just couldn’t bring myself to actually care.

It wasn’t as though I would pick up the coin or she would even want me to do so. Lash would no more survive that than I. She was – well, harmless wasn't the proper word – not hostile? She was pointedly not hostile to my well being.

It didn't seem like a decision I would normally have made. Then again, so much of my mind was in tatters, how would I even be able to recognize which parts of my mind were my own any more? Between winter's frost, Heka's memories, necromantic corruption, and the simple fact that I had died recently, I would probably need some serious time with a shrink to sort myself out.

“You know I find it deeply creepy when you get all giddy about this sort of thing,” I muttered, adjusting the foci fixed to my palm and enjoying the warmth of her against me. It felt as though her skin was pressed against the bare flesh of my arm, as though my armor were not there at all. “This is going to be difficult enough without your creepily blasphemous brand of assistance.”

She looked up at me, her eyes world weary in a way I had never previously noticed. Her illusion was strained, a hint of crows feet and dark circles around her normally perfect eyes. There was age to her, making her look like my contemporary rather than the ageless specter of beauty she normally was.

“Are you ok Lash?” I asked, unexpected worry bubbling to the forefront of my mind. Lash wasn’t exactly a friend but she was familiar – a reliable adversary. I was used to her.

“Fine,” She replied, too fast for it to have been entirely true. “I will grow stronger as I regain access to hellfire. I should – I will be fine once that happens.” She at least had the common courtesy to sound embarrassed. Losing the protection of winters frost meant that I would descend into violent
psychosis, becoming every bit the monster Heka had been.

“Once we get off world Bob can direct us to the planet Sokar stashed the Key on and I can get Mab to take this junk out for good,” I replied, tapping the side of my head. It had been infuriating to discover that Sokar hadn't been keeping the artifact on Delmak – but Bob was almost never wrong about this sort of thing.

“Yes, you will,” Lash replied, a melancholy lilt to her voice I barely recognized. “Do try to take this seriously my host. I would be annoyed were you to damage yourself.”

“I take everything seriously,” I replied in a tone which was anything but, “I'm Mr. Serious, Dr. Serious even.”

“I have no intention of sitting idly by in your head and listening to your adolescent ramblings about how a picture of you leading the Jaffa into battle would make an ‘awesome’ album cover,” The disgust in her voice was palpable. “Nor do I intend to suffer through whatever horribly mangled version of 'highway to hell' you're planning to hum to yourself as you walk down the path.”

“There's nothing wrong with AC/DC,” I smiled. “Or would you prefer some Zepplin?”

“My host if you start singing stairway to anything I will not be amused,” The angel shimmered back into my unconscious, flicking my ear painfully as she went. The warmth against my arm disappeared in an instant, setting my hairs on end beneath my armor. Her voice becoming a spectral whisper as she interjected, “Oh, and please do most grievous bodily harm to this particular usurper. He believes himself to be of my ilk – an education is in order. Azeil indeed – the indignity of it.”

“Pain in my ass,” I grumbled audibly, earning a look from the man at my left. Xin, begrudgingly clad in the Jaffa battle armor of my cadre, was anything but comfortable with where he stood. It was hard to say which unnerved him more, the Jaffa marching behind him or the small army waiting for us at the end of the path.

Stars and stones there were a lot of them. Aziel was not underestimating me. Ten oblong pyramid ships hovered around the perimeter of my compound, disgorging hundreds of Jaffa soldiers and dozens of weapons platforms. The massive perimeter cannon followed me as I walked forward, following me a bit too close for comfort.

“Bob,” I hissed into my wrist computer. “I thought you were supposed to have control of those guns by now.”

“Working on it,” Replied the spirit's distracted voice. “Some things just can't be rushed boss.”

“Does this have to be one of them?” I swallowed – keenly aware that my shields would do little to stop heavy artillery.

Bob needed time and my Jaffa, brave though they might be, were not bulletproof. I looked at the Tok'ra, “Do you think he'd actually honor a flag of truce?”

Xin snorted, “Hardly. The Lord of the Flames is a god of Vengance. The laws of war mean nothing to him. Your personal suffering is his only aspiration in life now that he believes you to have killed Sokar.”

“The Demon speaks truth,” Ul'tak agreed. “Aziel is well known to abandon his kingdom for months or even years at a time just to seek out and murder those who have wronged him. Killing his father would be more than sufficient cause for such a crusade.”
“Would he obey it for about five minutes?” I asked, holding my staff above my head. “While I talked terms of surrender?”

“He – might,” Xin replied, clearly not liking where I was going with this. “He would certainty want to gloat. But you can't mean to -”

“I can and I do,” I walked forward in a confident stride. “Everyone, staff weapons above your head. We're harmless – for now.”

The small cadre of Jaffa looked at each other in apprehension, but obeyed my command. It was a dangerous plan, but better than standing on the path like fish in a barrel for the ships to target at their leisure. The closer we were to their god, the more limited their options for artillery were.

As we exited the grounds to my palace we walked into a world on fire. The streets surrounding the palace walls were littered with rubble and broken bodies. Aziel's men had apparently pacified the street on arrival, killing anything and anyone who'd so much as looked at them before taking cover in the still smoking husks of businesses and restaurants. A semi-circle of heavy guns pointed towards us, covering every angle of my departure.

I was deeply grateful for the mask, it did a good job of covering precisely how terrifying this was. I walked to the center of the great market, gently placing my staff weapon upon the ground. My Jaffa followed suit, placing their hands behind their heads in a gesture of surrender.

“Aziel, come out and speak with me. Come and face me if you are not a coward,” The small effort of will I put into my voice projected it's deep reverberating twang like a megaphone, echoing through the ranks of enemy Jaffa. “Or do you rely upon mortals for the work of a god.”

He would not dare decline my challenge, not when so many witnesses would live to tell of it. That was one of the great things about predators, they were very predictable. If Aziel declined my challenge then all the other little godlings might start considering him less of a threat and more of an opportunity. Maybe some of his Jaffa might start to wonder if gods felt fear.

It didn't take long for a gargantuan figure in thick red carapace to swoop across the plaza, a grinning hellion gliding on razor tipped wings. He landed with deceptive grace for someone so massive, fanning his razor sharp pinions with a slight flourish. He was a brooding hulk of a man, scarred down the left side of his face, and possessed of a frame so large he might well have been part troll. His right hand held a staff made of pure black marble, laced with more enchantments than I could even begin to place.

He looked at me with that scarred face and smiled, a terrifying gesture. “Heka. Or is it Dre'su'den now? Father informed me of your new title but neglected to inform me of why one of the eldest had changed titles.”

“Lord Warden will suffice,” I replied, surreptitiously trying to get a measure of Aziel. His physical size alarmed me far less than his apparent magic potential. Even a moderate talent could become truly deadly after decades of study, let alone millennium. "As to my reasons, they hardly seem to matter now. I suspect you're intending to torture me till I tell you everything I know, regardless of my answer."

“Correct, though it is traditional to at least offer the pretense of civility in this sort of situation. I must confess that I'm deeply disappointed in you, father of magic. Father spoke of your spell-craft and knowledge with respect - fear even. The god of hell believed you to be a viper, too dangerous to keep held and deadly if allowed to wander free. I have spent centuries planning your undoing, preparing to behead the viper. I have dreamed of nothing else since first being gifted a host and given
a purpose.” Aziel laughed. “After decades of planning, scheming, and dreaming of this day you simply decide to end it before it has even started. And to think that father truly believed you to be his equal – a peer.”

He grinned, bending over to look me in the eye, “Pathetic.”

“I didn't kill him.” Interjected. “Sokar was not killed by me.”

“Odd then that only you survived his demise, isn't it?” Aziel snorted. “It is pure luck that his most dangerous advisor just 'happens' to have been leaving when Netu, a perfectly stable moon, explodes? I think not.”

“Your belief is irrelevant,” I sighed. “We can avoid unnecessary bloodshed here today. No one needs to die here. You can just walk away – your quarrel is not with me. If you promise not to do harm to those in my care I promise to help you find the actual perpetrator of this - I will help you find out the truth. Don't you want to find those actually responsible for your father's death?”

“Your attempts to beg for your life are more pitiful than you, Lord Warden,” He chewed the tittle as it left his lips, flecks of spittle flying from his lips in disgust. “We are past talk. Surrender, or fight, it makes no difference to how this will unfold.

“No,” I agreed, starting at the glowing orange affirmation blinking on my wrist device. “I suppose it does not.”

“I will hear the terms of surrender,” The winged godling purred, enjoying every moment of my supplication.

My wrist computer blinked, a glowing orange message hovering across the display. Mission accomplished. Oh thank god - Bob had done it.

“Very well,” I nodded, “I will accept your surrender. You and your men can walk away from here unharmed. I will not hunt any Jaffa who turns and leaves now – I have no quarrel with you and yours. You will walk away and never trouble me again and I won't crush you like a bug.”

Aziel blinked, genuinely struggling to understand what just happened, “I don't think you entirely appreciate what is going on here. I have you outmanned, outgunned, and outflanked. You can't possibly hope to win.”

“Can and will,” I tapped the side of my head. “Because I know things you don't. I know things you can't. And I promise you Darth Wannabe, if you don't leave now you won't have the chance to regret it.”

“I tire of this,” Aziel growled, rising into the air on his razor wings and raising his glowing staff aloft. Green lighting crackled across the crimson carapace of his armor, sparkling in the recessed runes carved into the rough metal. “Kill them, kill them all.”

“Now Bob!” I shouted, raising my shield as Aziel fired a bolt of green energy from his staff. The bolt bounced, exploding against a wall as a defining screech of artillery turrets activating drowned out all other noises in the plaza. Aziel could do little more than look on in horror as the turrets surrounding my compound blew holes in gunships and killed Jaffa soldiers by the dozens.

Searing beams of energy howled from the wall, tearing through the Goa'uld gunships with impunity. Jaffa soldiers screamed and raised their arms above their faces in a futile effort to protect themselves from ten tons of burning gunship crashing to the ground. What few gunships were not destroyed instantly scattered in fear, bobbing and weaving through the sky to avoid the defense turrets.
Not that it helped them. No longer trapped within the mothership by the perimeter turrets a dozen squadrons of crescent shaped fighters swooped out from the compound, swarming the larger gunships like sparrows taking down a hawk. The howling attack ships, "death gliders" as they were called by the Jaffa, forced the gunships into narrower corridors of movement - trapping them in range of the perimeter turrets.

Aziel was not pleased.

“No!” The winged god howled in fury, firing another bolt of green energy towards me. His eyes bulged in apoplectic fury, his pupils pinpricks of rage against his purpling continence. I caught his attack in a bowl of shield energy, flinging it to my left. The cracking bolt hit the gunner of a heavy staff turret, dissolving all soft tissue and only leaving a steaming pile of bones behind.

There was some seriously bad ju-ju backing that staff. I wasn't even sure what school of magic was empowering it - the magic felt greasy, unnatural in a way I couldn't quite place. I knew I'd felt it before - possibly even used it - but it felt deeply and obviously wrong. It seemed to reject the world around it, unmaking what it touched. It wasn't necromancy - there was no cloyingly seductive cold to it - but I was positive that even knowing that type of magic existed was probably enough to get the White Council to go scorched earth.

Aziel had a lot of power, but he thankfully seemed to be a one trick pony. Even an apprentice wizard with that much juice would have tried something else, anything else, to throw me off balance or force me to do something new. For a god, he was astonishingly amateurish about his power. It was entirely possible that he'd never actually met someone who was competent in the magic arts. How wasn't he seeing the obvious flaws in my attack strategy? A couple of illusions and an evocation of elemental magic and my compliment of Jaffa warriors would be at his mercy - especially with him flying around like a damn maniac.

And then it came to me. Aziel wasn't doing anything else because he didn't know how. I'd seen and even felt the power held by the amassed gods when I'd been in their presence, knew that the god's blood coursing through my veins enhanced my own magic exponentially, but power doesn't do you jack all squat if nobody has ever taught you how to use it. The various godlings had magical talents they'd amassed through the ages but I doubted they were teaching their talents to each other.

Stars and stones, that was probably why the ancient pantheons had themed gods. One of the Goa'uld would become skilled in a specific school of magic, horde all knowledge relating to that discipline, and create a following around their unique magical talents. Sokar had said it himself, what made Heka valuabe had been knowledge of magic. Favored son though Aziel claimed to be, I doubted that daddy dearest had taught him enough to be a threat to Sokar's power-base.

That I could stop the beams at all seemed to be a novelty. The imitation angel screeched in apoplectic hatred as bolt after bolt careened off my dome of mystical energy, re-directed towards Aziel's entrenched Jaffa. It was a good thing I'd instinctually gone for my shield bracelet rather than the Goa'uld device upon my wrist, I was in mood to make contact with the beams of concentrated green death.

Damn it - where did I know that energy from?

My Jaffa were pressing their advantage in the confusion, using their reclaimed staff-weapons to lay suppressing fire as they made way for the relative safety of a pillar lined plaza. The cracked stone half-walls and pillars weren't much, but they were miles better than the open ground. I grabbed Xin, flinging him towards Ul'tak with my enhanced strength. The grown man sailed through the air, landing with surprising grace next to my First Prime.
I flew back as Aziel careened towards me, using his glowing staff as a deadly cudgel. The staff whipped past my face, colliding with the stone ground in a conflagration of sorcery blackened molten stonework. He'd overcompensated for his strike, leaving his midsection open for me to strike. I lashed out with my open palm, pointing the baleful eye of my red stone foci towards his breast as I shouted, "Assassinatus"

Blood poured from the godling's mouth as a fist sized hole punctured through his right pec, visibly removing a large section of rib-cage as his armor punctured his bare flesh. Wet gargling noises of incoherent fury tossed black heart's blood from his lips as he rose to the skies, fleeing my wrath, poring a stream of red through the smoke clogged air.

"Vintas tormenta," I shouted, curling my palm into a claw around the foci. A spout of soot-blackened air chased after the asonished godling, bringing down streamers of lighting along his path before sucking him into the tornado's spot. Aziel flung green bolts in all directions as sheer physics ripped his razor wings to shreds, cutting him to shreds as effectively as if I'd tossed him in a blender. The imitation angel fell to the streed with a wet smack of breaking bone, his head pulped on the cobblestones.

"Lord Warden!" Ul'tak shouted. "We can not stay here - Aziel's Jaffa will be startled by the defeat of their master, but only for as long as it will take them to recover his body. We must go, now, while we still can."

"I'm open to suggestions," I replied, grinding my teeth from the effort of extending a shield wide enough to cover our flank. A bigger shield meant more juice – and even Heka's modifications to my body I didn't have a limitless pool of energy. It also meant that the shield was less effective at dissipating the Jaffa weaponry. Every staff blast sent painful feedback up my arm. “Really anything at this point!”

"This way," Xin lifted a thick slab of bronze with his bare hands, flinging it to the side and exposing a two story drop. He tossed himself down without a second's hesitation, landing with cat-like grace upon the stone floor. The Jaffa leapt down without a second thought, landing with inhuman skill as they secured our point of ingress.

I looked at my first prime, “We have to close off this hole immediately. If we can't stop them from following then we're just going to be back where we started.”

Ul'tak smiled a toothy grin, before slapping a fist sized silver ball on the base of a stone pillar. “As my Lord Warden commands.”

“Oh hells bells,” I recognized the device as a bomb instantly, flinging myself down the shaft after Ul'tak covering my ears as I tucked into a roll.

My first prime landed in a three point crouch like something out of a superhero movie poster, holding his staff out behind him in unspoken challenge to anyone who might be around us. I, by contrast, got caught in the concussive wave of air from his explosive and was tossed against the wall. Belly-flopping on the cobblestones in the most undignified way possible, made even more embarrassing when my staff weapon fell after me – colliding with the back of my head.

I rolled to the side, yelping as stone debris showered down from above. Rocks the size of Volvos hit the ground where they'd been knocked from the ceiling – blessedly missing me. My heart hammered in my chest as I looked up at the now covered point of egress. The rubble of a plaza worth of pillars blocking any would be followers.

Whooping in adrenaline fueled relief I pointed to the ceiling and shouted, “Oh yeah! Kiss my staff
you wannabe goons. That's what you get for messing with a Wizard. You got' nothing on me, I'm from Chicago.”

Ul'tak, well trained in the art of not noticing the faults of his god, kept his amusement to fast snort of air from his nostrils as he helped me to my feet. “Are you well my Lord Warden?”

“The hell was that?” I hissed. “You nearly killed us both!”

Ul'tak looked confused, “My Lord Warden commanded the explosives be detonated immediately.”

“I meant after we jumped down!” I rubbed my palm against the flat faceplate of my helmet. “You always set the bomb to go of when you're not there Ul'tak. Bomb when we aren't there. Always!”

“As my Lord Warden commands,” Ul'tak replied, unphased by how close we'd just been to death. Stars and stones, he probably thought that he was invincible as long as he was next to me or something equally ridiculous. I was his “god” after all.

I took a moment to survey our surroundings. We were in another plaza much like the one we'd just been in, shops, restaurants, hotels and homes as far as the eye could see. Unlike the top layer of Delmak's capitol the level we stood on was lit by bioluminescent moss lining the ceiling, bathing the streets in an sickly blue glow.

Nervous faces peeked out from curtains and over walls, trying to get a look at what caused the noise – though they were apparently clever enough not to actually leave the safety of their homes to investigate. More vanilla mortals I suspected, the innocent bystanders in a war between beings they worshiped and feared.

How many levels of this planet were habited? I'd not really stopped to think just how many people were on Delmak before. The capitol city had to be at least the size of Texas and easily as densely packed as Chicago just on the surface. “Xin... just how many humans were in Sokar's Empire?”

“Delmak is one of the more populated planets. One of the few human population centers where they've been allowed to breed unrestricted.” The Tok'ra typed something into a computer he pulled from his belt. “One of the perks of not being in the System Lords, I suppose. Though with his methods of control it was largely out of necessity – it's hard to condemn millions to Netu yearly if you don't have a slave population growth greater than your losses.”

“Oh – great,” I swallowed. “And if we don't get the defenses disabled and get my ships off planet – how many are going to just die as collateral effect of destroying my mothership?”

Xin looked up in genuine surprise, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. “A mothership is capable of withstanding immense damage. The fleet would depopulate a radius of at least 100 miles of city to ensure that your ship was destroyed and that you weren't able to escape.”

My heart stopped, “That's – stars and stones – that's inhuman. That's evil.”

“That is the Goa'uld.” Xin replied, his voice taking on a mournfully hopeful cadence. “Heka - Do you truly not remember who you were?”

“Heka is gone!” I snarled. “I killed him. He has no power over me. Mab -”

“Do not speak the name,” Xin hissed in horror, his eyes bugging as he slapped his hands over his ears. “Lest' she hear it and come unbidden.”

“The Lord Warden is beyond fear of the kingdoms of Sun and Snow,” Ul'tak interjected, pride and
“Faith coloring his every word. “He is an equal to the mightiest of their number.”

“Oh Warden.” Xin’s expression was almost pitying as he shook his head from side to side, “What did she offer you Dre’usu’den? Do you even remember? Evil though you might have been, what price was worth stripping yourself of being?”

“It isn’t like that,” I sighed. “She’s helping me.”

“She will betray you.” Xin sighed. “Forbidden power comes with a price. The Queens twist words and corrupt promises. Even as allies they are poison. It is no accident that the Tok’ra are without their queen.”

“Preaching to the converted,” I brushed dust and debris off the arms of my duster with my taloned fingers. “And once I find Sokar’s cache of weapons and give the Queen of Winter what she wants I’m one favor away from living a fairy free existence.”

Xin grunted, unimpressed with my blasé attitude towards the fae. “We’re twenty minutes from the security point on foot but I’m not sure if it’s wise to travel there directly. Aziel’s forces will know where we’re heading and the Necropolis Guard are certain to have entrenched defenses around the base. Strong ones, they’ll likely have fixed guns and turrets. They’ll know every way in and out. We stood a chance at the ground level, the other gods will likely have softened their defenses but I head-on assault seems like suicide without other distractions.”

“Do we have another route there? One of the lower levels?” I sighed, not eager to charge headlong into a group of armed fanatics who probably believed me to have been the one to murder their god.

“There are, ways.” Xin swallowed. “But I’m not eager to go any lower than we already are. We’re already in the lands of the exiled, there is no need to mingle with the subhuman.”

“I am tempted to agree with the demon,” Ul’tak replied. “We are already among the unclean – I am unsure of the wisdom in plunging further into the deeps.”

“Indeed,” The Tok’ra flinched, shuddering at an obviously unpleasant memory. “We are relatively safe on this level. Any lower into and we risk dealing with Unas, cannibal bands, or predatory species imported for Sokar’s amusement.”

“Then we have no choice but to defeat the enemy head on or to descend to the horrors below,” The more fatalistic Ul’tak got the happier he seemed to be.

The old Dresden luck was working for me full tilt, as usual. Of course the lower levels beneath the Devil’s paradise city were populated by Morlocks and giant lizard men. Why wouldn't they be? Stupid Murphy and his idiot law.

“I’ve got a different plan.” I replied, a wild idea forming in my head as I walked towards the most wealthy looking inn. My phalanx of Jaffa formed a barrier of bodies around Xin and I as we walked, “These are the lands of the ’exiled’ right?”

“Yes, my lord Warden” replied Ul’tak, “Those who fear the disfavor of Sokar and wish to avoid the fires of Netu. Disbelievers, criminals, heretics, and paupers – the lot of them.”

“Then riddle me this,” I smiled. “How does this place manage to have a fresh coat of paint when every other building in this neighborhood looks like it hasn’t even seen a broom in a generation? How does it manage to have fully stocked wares when every other shop seems to be on the verge of collapse?”
Xin nodded, following my logic. “Smugglers.”

“Or some sort of organized crime, yeah.” I replied. “They’ve got to be crooked to manage to make a profit in this sort of a place.”

The door was locked tight – not that it mattered. A burst of kinetic force from my ruby foci knocked off it's hinges and across the floor of the inn. The patrons hissed fearfully as I strode into the room with my Jaffa, a surly looking bunch of men and boys. I re-affirmed my initial impression that this was a criminal enterprise as I scanned the room. The butts of primitive fire-arms and what might very well have been Zat-guns bulged beneath rough spun jerkin and dirty tunics, barely noticeable to even my trained eye.

We were outnumbered, but I suspected it wouldn’t really matter in a fight. Each of the superhuman Jaffa was easily a match for any five human warriors. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

I walked over to the bar, brushing the dust off one of the stools before sitting down. A terrified barkeep with a thick belly stared me in the face as I asked, “Who runs this place?”

“I – I am the barman,” Replied the portly man, turning his eyes to the floor. “What does my lord wish of this lowly supplicant.”

“No you.” I growled, indulging in a metallic hiss of irritation. “The one who runs this place.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about - ” I cut him of with a raised index finger, hissing, “Thrice I ask and done. Do not test my patience. Who. Runs. This. Place?”

“That would be me.” A stout asian man with a neatly trimmed beard stood up to my left. I recognized the demeanor immediately, the controlled predatory sense of self-assurance. Marcone was like that – dangerous and aware of it, “Please do not harm Thoman. He has a good taste for liquor and is one of the few barmen capable of cooking a decent par-fan stew.”

Two of my Jaffa grabbed the man by his arms, dragging him before me and forcing him to his knees. I could feel the men in the room tensing – preparing to do violence.

“You will speak to your god with respect,” Growled Ul'tak in irritation. “Bow before -”

“I don’t bow.” The man replied sarcastically, “I find it's bad for the back once one gets into a habit of it one seems to spend their life like a shrimp.”

I caught Ul'tak's wrist as he swung an open palm for the defiant man's face. The man looked surprised but relieved as I waved the Jaffa off him before pulling him to his feet. “I prefer that you stand anyway, I'm in a bit of a hurry.”

“Uh,” The man seemed unprepared for this turn of events. “Ok then.”

“You see I'm looking to hire you – all of you – right now. We're looking to get to -” I looked to Xin.

“The grid epsilon v-x 230 security station's lower entrance,” he provided helpfully, apparently amused with the absurdity of it all. “The nearest door to the defense grid control nexus if possible.”

“- yes, that.” I put my arm over his shoulder. “And you're going to help me get past the Necropolis guards with minimal casualties on my side.”

The man burst out laughing. “Even if I could do that – if a lowly human did have the resources to aid a god – what reward would a god offer me in return?”
“An equal exchange of course. My freedom in exchange for yours.” I laughed. “You help me disable the defense grid, and I will do everything in my power to help you escape Delmak.”

“And live on your worlds? Under your rule?” The man snorted derisively. An act, I could see the longing in his eyes. How long had he lived beneath the heels of uncaring gods? Probably his entire life. Freedom, true freedom, was just a distant dream to him.

“Wherever you choose.” I replied. “I am offering you your freedom – no strings attached. Think about it, when I lift off any ships in the sky are going to be focusing on me. A clever man could get to a ship, get off world, and fly to wherever he pleased – he could go where the Goa'uld aren’t. Hell – Sokar and Aziel both want me dead, you could probably get a fleet of ships off world before anyone was any the wiser.”

“I could at that,” The man nodded. “Very well – the bargain is possible provided you are willing to ensure the safety of my family.”

“Very well. You have my word.” I grasped his outstretched hand, pumping firmly. “So what do I call you?”

“I am called Netan,” the dangerous man smiled. “But there is one other matter we really do need to resolve first.”

“And that is?” I asked politely.

“How do you intend to get past Apophis' fleet now that he's taken control of Sokar's palace and declared himself Lord of Delmak?”
Chapter 13

Xin burst out laughing almost immediately. It was a shrill and smoky sound that I got the sense was not common for him. The Tok’ra actually had to grab Ul’tak’s shoulder to keep him from doubling up into seizures of mirth.

He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye at the crime lord’s withering glare, his voice roiling with metallic amusement, “I’m sorry – it was just so funny.”

“You think that the Serpent God overtaking the Kingdom of Hell is funny?” There was an angry bite in the hard man’s voice, a dangerous edge. He was clearly not accustomed to being the butt of anyone’s joke.

“Hilarious,” Xin gasped out. “Apophis isn’t the god of anything yet.”

Ul’tak nodded in agreement, “The demon speaks truly. There are at least five generals within Sokar’s command chain who’ll be vying for supremacy, at least two of whom have support within Sokar’s armies. The Serpent Guard was spread out between the barracks and ships of Sokar’s fleet. “

“It will take them days of concerted effort to conquer all of Delmak.” The Tok’ra straightened as a whisper of a giggle still threatened to work it’s way past his lips, “Weeks even. Especially as the planet knows that the Warden just beat Aziel in a duel of sorcery.”

I briefly wondered if Netan would get whiplash from spinning his head round to face me after hearing that. He examined me with something resembling grudging respect as he clicked his tongue off the front of his teeth. “The Lord of Flames?”

“The Warden smote him from the very skies with a storm from the heavens,” Ul’tak’s reverent reply made me uncomfortable for various reasons, not the least of which is that “smiting” was probably an accurate description of what I’d actually done. “I have seen powers from his fingers worthy of the time of Apep. “

“Impressive, if it’s true.” Netan’s only slightly cagey reply indicating that he likely believed it was. “But that still doesn’t answer my question. How do you plan to do it? Just get up and fly away? What proof do you have that you will keep your word?”

“Look,” I shook my head, retracting the faceless mask. “I don’t have time to spend the whole day arguing with you to get you on board with this. So I’m sorry, but I have to do this.”

And I stared him directly in the eyes.

When a wizard looks into your eyes and I mean really looks, he starts a soul gaze. He gets to see everything that makes up who that person is, the essence of their entire being.

More importantly for my purposes, they know you. Soul gazes weren’t pleasant, it doesn’t give specific information but it gives you the sum total of that person’s essence, as though you’d known them every day of their life since childhood. You truly know them and that knowledge never fades.

There are things I wish I’d never seen, parts of people I wish I didn’t know. But there were millions of lives at stake, whatever inner demons lay within the crime lord Netan couldn’t compare a member of the Blackened Denarius.

The inside of Netan’s mind was curious – a chaotic mirage of vignettes strung together with little in
the way of obvious order but all of which fit together with surprising artistry. No matter what
direction I looked in the shimmering images of people, places, and aspirations formed a path towards
a distant shadow of a man.

There was a hazy quality to each of the images, a cool frost obscuring his past that hurt my hand
when I reached out to touch it. I could barely make out images of an absent father and a cruel
mother. Could only glimpse his first encounter with crime. Could barely touch upon a life lived in
constant fear of burning in the fires of Netu. Netan was a man who forced his emotions away,
crushing them so that he could see them clinically in the present.

I walked the paths of frozen memories, ignoring the angry cries of fear and surprise that followed my
every step. His victims, those who had been victims of his rise to power stared at me from the corners
of the frozen slabs of memory. Their yellow eyes stabbed at me, accusing the world of treachery and
injustice.

The shadowy form of Netan lay at the end of the path, weather beaten and travel worn. His body
looked like a slab of granite shaped into the form of a man by the elements and nature rather than by
the skill of any human artisan. The smooth lines and wind-swept pockmarks across his person had a
symmetry to them no mortal carver could hope to match.

The ceiling was a cloudy mass of floating faces, all of them looking at Netan for guidance and help.
Red filaments wrapped around their necks, nooses or leashes – it was hard to tell. The shadows
billowing from Netan’s statue concealed them, protecting them from the blaze of hellfire forming a
dome around us. Coiling serpents of flame would lash out at the shadows, biting at the faces but
never catching them unless they strayed from the cloud of shadow.

The statue’s head swiveled towards me in curiosity, opening its mouth before speaking in the voice
of a small child. “You can not have them. They are mine.”

A roiling whip of shadows boiled out of the statue’s eyes; engulfing me and tossing me back into the
real world – eye to eye with a terrified crime lord.

“That isn’t possible,” Netan’s voice was hoarse, as though he’d just finished screaming. “The
monsters of the first world are a legend. A story told to scare children. The armies of blood and death
aren’t real. The tales of sun and snow are only tales.”

“You know that they aren’t” I sighed, pitying the man. Netan was a skeptic, a non-believer in the
divinity of the Goa’uld pantheons let alone an afterlife. Looking into the inner self of a man with a
fallen Angel of the Lord roosting in his skull was going to be a major transition. “And you know the
value of my word.”

“I – I do.” Netan swallowed, grabbing a shot from the bar and downing it. “What was – what did
you just do to me?”

“I showed you my soul,” I replied. “I showed you everything that I am. What makes me, me.”

“I did not even know that there was a soul.” Netan shivered. “I will help you. But first I must know –
I must!” He closed his eyes, willing the question past his lips. “Can you promise me that you will
protect us as we leave the planet? Will you let us go without pursuit?”

“I will.”

“And will you promise not to raze this planet if you eventually do conquer it.”

“I do.”
He extended his hand to me, “Then we have a deal.”

I shook his hand firmly, tucking my neck down in a slight bow to summon the helmet back from where it receded into my armor. “Great, now let’s get this show on the road.”

“One open it,” Netan nodded to the barman, waving his fingers towards the five largest men in the room. The broad men, large as any of my Jaffa, stood around Netan protectively. Poorly concealed Zat-guns bulged out from the men’s tunics along with what I could only assume were iron cudgels.

Pulling a lever concealed behind the bar, the barman opened a concealed staircase leading up. Netan’s cadre surrounded us as he led us into the smuggler’s tunnel. I smiled. The men were for show more than anything else. Had he been actually intending to betray or ambush my Jaffa he wouldn’t have brought any of them for fear of tipping us off to his ambush.

We were a good half-mile along the tunnels when Ul’tak started up a conversation with the Tok’ra in apparent boredom. The conversation was not intended for my ears but apparently Heka had turned my already impressive hearing up to eleven along with everything else.

“Demon, I am curious. I know why I follow the Lord Warden. Why do you?” Asked the first prime, flashing a mouth full of white teeth. “Your kind are not known for their love of the Goa’uld.”

“We’re not known for stupidity,” Agreed Xin. “The Warden has had various opportunities to kill me and has elected not to. I want off this planet. He wants off this planet. It is a simple enough reason.”

“Too simple,” Ul’tak’s smile seemed more shark-like by the moment. “You’ve had at least five opportunities to run and four to switch hosts to a body we wouldn’t recognize.”


“You are Tok’ra.” Ul’tak snorted. “I would be a fool not to assume you were a viper in our midst, Demon.”

Xin’s brow arched in approval, “I could easily have jumped into the escape pod and left your master to face the orbital defenses of Delmak.”

“A viper does not always bite you the first time you stray in its path. Not if it feels it can hide in the shadows.” He looked at the Jaffa on all sides. “You have no shadows to which you might retreat.”

“Are you threatening me after your master gave me a promise of safe passage?” Xin asked in genuine curiosity.

“A first Prime never disobeys a direct order.” Ul’tak agreed. “So long as the boundaries of hospitality are obeyed you are safe in our care.”

“But the second they are ignored I presume that you plan to cut off the viper’s head?” Xin sighed.

“I am a First Prime. It is not my place to plan anything.” Ul’tak replied in utter monotone. There was no doubt in my mind that he could and would kill Xin without a second’s hesitation.

“Isn’t it now?” Xin mused. “Odd then how much of your history indicates just the opposite, how so many of Heka’s atrocities were delayed by border disputes or the discovery of Tok’ra infiltrators at just the right moment. Your entire career is full of convenient coincidences which a foolish mind might call schemes.”

“Jaffa do not scheme,” Ul’tak replied a little too quickly.
“Don’t they?” Xin snorted. “My mistake.”

Netan held his hand up, raising his closed fist to indicate that the group should stop. “Toval and Bak, scout the exit. I want to know what we’re getting into.”

The two neckless goons lumbered past him and up the ladder, seemingly too broad to fit. It was kind of like watching my dog Mouse fit into the back of the Blue Beetle. It just didn’t seem physically possible for that much dog to wedge in there but he did.

It didn’t take them long to give us an assessment of the danger, the charred corpse of Toval crashed back down the shaft. Cooked meat burst from his torso as the staff-blast covered goon broke in half in one of the grossest moments of my life.

“Damn,” Xin swore, looking up the shaft. “Is there another way up?”

“Half a kilometer down,” Netan shook his head. “No good either, that one is next to the Barracks. We’d overrun by Necropolis Guard faster than anywhere else. If we march south for another half day there is another exchange point on the defense net. It will work just as well.”

“No” Ul’tak disagreed. “By that time there will be enough unity between the other gods that someone will be able to destroy the Warden’s flagship from orbit. It must be this one.”

“Be my guest,” Netan waved to the ladder covered in splattered Toval bits. “One fewer Jaffa is no skin off my back.”

“No,” I shook my head, placing my hand upon the Jaffa’s shoulder as he moved towards the exit. “I’ll go first.”

Xin quirked a brow in curiosity, “And what is your plan?”

“At this point?” I shrugged, standing at the bottom of the shaft and holding my staff to my chest. “I’m basically making it up as I go along.”

“I’m deeply comforted,” the Tokra’s sarcastic jibe was par the course with him.

“Is there something covering the top of this shaft?” I asked the crime lord.

“No,” Netan replied, “The tunnel is at the bottom of a dried out well. My people keep it uncovered.”

“Count to fifteen then follow me,” I willed myself to keep my eyes open as I hit my staff upon the ground, looked up and shouted, “Ventas Sertitas.”

Falling is not a skill I’ve been particularly trained in. Few wizards even bother with the dangerous and difficult art of aeromancy. Too much can go wrong in an instant, and when it does you find yourself plummeting to the ground at an uncontrollable speed. The life span of a wizard dabbling the power of flight is measured in minutes and hours, not days and years.

Falling, however, is something any idiot with a little bit of magic and a shield bracelet can do with aplomb. I propelled myself out of the vertical shaft like a mystical missile, reaching some two stories above the ground to assess my surroundings before releasing the winds and summoning my shield, cushioned with air magic to slow my fall.

A torrent of artillery fire rained down on the point where I’d been, fixed guns along the walls of a high walled fort their apparent point of origin. I landed, ducking into the relative safety of a high wall, removing one of my gloves. Wincing in pain I dug a talon into the meat of my wrist, muttering
“Ventas veloche, umbrium, umbrium.”

I repeated the words in a breathless chant, curling fingers towards my palm into a passable imitation of claws. The blood from my palm thickened and gathered into a dense red mass of fog. Propelled by my will the red fog billowed across the area immediately surrounding the well, concealing it from sight and obscuring any infrared sensors they might have had with blood temperature mist.

The staff blasts fired blindly into the mist as it poured towards the fortress parapets, confusing and terrifying the Necropolis Guardsmen with it’s unnatural presence. I created a pocket of obscured vision within the mist as my Jaffa exited the well, rushing over to the wall as I examined our surroundings.

I burrowed a hole into the mist wall with an effort of will, providing a narrow field of vision through which I might observe the chaos around us.

The building housing the orbital defense network was a fortress as formidable as any I’d ever seen. A pentagonal pyramid with jutting triangular bunkers provided uninterrupted fields of fire on all sides. Three sides of the fortress were under siege from at least two distinct fighting forces, what could only be the Serpent Guard and what appeared to be a conglomerated mass of Jaffa wearing the livery of several different gods. The attacking armies were as focused upon shooting each other as they were aiming for the Necropolis Guardsmen in the fortress.

Obviously I hadn’t been the only one to come to the conclusion that taking down the orbital defenses would be my best exist strategy. “Whose forces are those out there fighting the Serpent Guard?”

“I see forces marked with Quetesh, Baal, Molock, and… It can’t be -Pelops?” Xin all but shouted the last name.

“The father of all Jaffa is here?” Ul’tak’s voice took on a reverent tone he usually reserved for myself.

“No… no,” Xin shook his head. I could practically hear the gears in his head working on overtime. “Likely a sub commander. Pelops has been desperate to find a new queen since the destruction of his previous mate. A gathering this large would have been too tempting for him not to send an emissary. Atreus most likely, he gets most of the worst duties since he and Thyestes murdered Chryssippus.”

“Should I be worried about Hades popping up at some point?” I sighed; irritated at the cluster bomb of pantheons I was wading through.

“We should all fear the wrath of Hades, man, Jaffa, and God alike.” Ul’tak whispered the name, intentionally mispronouncing it to further distance himself from the being it was attached to. “He is beyond any of us save the Queens of Sun and Snow.”

Well of course he was. One more thing that goes bump in the night for me to worry about pissing off – great.

“Where’s Netan?” I asked, looking back at the shaft.

“The human’s part of the bargain was met, my Lord Warden. He has returned to his people to prepare for our escape.” Ul’tak smiled. “They would only have slowed us down.”

He was probably right, but I wouldn’t have minded a couple more bodies to help us get across that battlefield. We weren’t going to be able to fight past two full armies of Jaffa. My mist, which surprisingly continued to persist in spite of me not putting any power in to it, was an inefficient decoy at best. It wouldn’t stop a staff-blast, and the Necropolis guardsmen had started launching mortar into
the concealed section of ground. Attacking it head on was a non-starter.

“There are better ways to power,” Whispered the breathless voice of the tittering devil in my ear. I felt a bubble of Heka’s knowledge push forward to the front of my consciousness, sanitized of will by Lasciel’s influence. “Provided that one understands how the game is played.”

I smiled as a plan began to form in my mind. “Where are the Goa’uld in charge of that army?”

Xin pursed his lips. “They’ll be as far away from the fighting as they can manage without actually being out of range of the protection of their armies.”

He raised a finger and pointed to a re-enforced stone and steel bunker covered in scorch marks and debris. “There. It’s too far for the fortress to get an effective hit upon them but close enough that the Necropolis guardsmen won’t be able to call in an airstrike.”

“Great,” I nodded, “Follow me and act like you’ve got nothing in the world to worry about.”

“What are you planning?” Xin hissed, ducking beneath a hanging bit of debris as we weaved our way through the cracked and shattered city. He was surprisingly agile for someone of his age, likely a bonus of his Tok’ra heritage.

I leapt up a half story onto the bridge above us before answering, using the wind to lift my staff as I went.

“I would have thought that was obvious.” I laughed, reaching down to help the Tok’ra scale the bridge’s high wall. “We’re about to go in and accept their surrender.”

“What?” Squawked Xin. His grip faltered, dropping him a few inches down my arm before he tightened upon my wrist. I pulled him up to my height as he hissed like a scalded cat, “There is an army of at least ten thousand out there and your plan is to walk into their forward operating base, sidle up to a conclave of Goa’uld and talk them into surrendering?”

“Exactly. They’ll never see it coming.” I nodded. “This will go great, don’t worry about it.”

“Every second I think that you’ve plunged to the depths of insanity you find some new hell to force me into,” Xin pinched the bridge of his nose in apparent pain. “It’s like you’re actually trying to get yourself killed.”

“Nah, this is going to be the easy part.” I smiled, watching as the last of the Jaffa scaled the bridge’s side. “The hard part is going to be talking the Necropolis Guardsmen into opening up the front door.”


“You wouldn’t be the first,” I raised my hand and waved jovially to the Jaffa guards posted at the Jaffa coalition’s flank as they noticed our presence, shouting at the top of my voice. “Good to see you! I was wondering if I might have a word with your masters.”

The Jaffa guards blinked in confusion, looking at each other and back to me. I walked up to the nearest one and slapped him on the shoulder in a paternal gesture of friendship, “Come on. I haven’t got all day. Take me to the Goa’uld running this shindig.”
“We are under orders to keep all enemies away from our lords,” Barked a large and particularly stupid Jaffa marked with a back star in the center of his forehead.

I raised my hand; knocking him on his ass with a blast from the ruby foci, “Let me be clear. The runner who left your group as we approached has doubtless warned them of my coming. There is only one of me and several of them. Their armies surround my handful of Jaffa. I pose no threat on my own. If you try to stop me, any of you still left alive to speak to your masters will suffer their displeasure at having the gall to question your betters. Now take me to your leaders, immediately.”

Either convinced of my logic or unwilling to face the wrath of an angry god, the Jaffa allowed us to pass unmolested into the Goa’uld coalition base. The base itself was really just a glorified shell of concrete around a large amphitheater. A multicolored menagerie of men and women milled about the premises, clustering in groups of two or three to whisper animatedly with each other.

At least sixty sets of glowing eyes greeted me as I waltzed onto the amphitheater. I recognized a couple of them from Sokar’s shindig and I knew that at least some of them recognized me. Whispered murmurs of “Heka” and “Lord Warden” rippled through the crowd in sibilant, metallic frenzy.

At the center of the room stood a man I recognized all too well. It was Baal, the Goa’uld who’d sworn to make me scream for all of eternity. He looked up from a holographic display of the battlefield to sneer in my direction, “Heka? You’re alive. Aziel has lost his touch.”

“After the hole I left in his chest I suspect he lost a whole lot more than that.” I replied, twisting my neck to retract the mask of my armor. “But I suspect you already knew that.”

“Indeed,” Baal’s smooth growl hitched in apparent amusement. “The Lord of Flame’s soldiers were forced to retreat to his stronghold so that they might ensure he reached a sarcophagus. As I understand it they were forced to do so on foot.”

“His ships were blocking my view of the sun,” I poked the hologram with a talon finger, making the hologram shimmer ripple like water. “And he was kind of a jackass.”

“I imagine his wrath will be something marvelous and terrible to behold when he wakes,” Baal’s grin split from ear to ear. “Such a pity.”

“A pity for all of us if we’re still here once Apophis starts getting control of the fleets.” I smiled right on back. “After all, he just likes us all so much.”

“As amusing as watching you two try to measure whose is biggest, can we please skip ahead to the part where you stop threatening each other and just admit that you need each other’s help?” Jibed a familiar woman’s voice. Quetesh the raven haired beauty lounged across a stone bench fiddling with the silver straps of her hand device and watching us with a bored look on her face. “Everyone in this room already knows you’re not going to turn down Heka’s help.”

The inscrutable Lizard-man Ammit chorused her opinions from somewhere to my left. “This is Heka, he wouldn’t have walked into a room full of his rivals if he didn’t have something worth offering. Save us all some time and just ask him why he’s here. “

Baal’s brow twitched in irritation as the various godlings started talking at once. He shouted at the top of his voice, cowing the room with a sonorous “Silence!”

As the gods obeyed his echoing command, turned to me, eyes aglow, and asked, “What is it that you want here, Lord of Magic?”
“I want off this planet. Pronto. I don’t know about the rest of you by my goal #1 is to get away from the crumbling hell planet before whatever fail-safes Sokar left behind start going off. He was a sore loser.” The Goa’uld murmured in agreement. “I have a plan, but I can’t do it without your help.”

“And what, pray tell is your plan.” Baal waved to my cadre. “You’re going to rush them with a handful of Jaffa and crush their fortress? Or perhaps you plan to enact some ritual of the old powers to smite them where they stand?”

“All of you are going to offer me your unconditional surrender then I’m going to walk up to the front door of the fortress, have a short powwow with the base’s commander and get him to turn off the defense grid so that we can all escape.” I replied as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“I take it back,” Quetesh interjected. “I should have let you spend more time bickering so that he’d have time to form an actual plan.”

“That is madness,” A man in Spartan armor interjected. “Even if we did offer you our surrender, they’d shoot you on sight.”

“They have nothing to lose.” I replied, turning slowly on my heel to address the entire audience of the amphitheater. “Pull back your forces from the fort. Send a transmission to the base that you’re sending over an emissary under a banner of truce and let me try. If they kill me you’d hardly need to honor the terms of your surrender. It’s a win-win. Either you get to escape this planet or you get to watch me die. What do you have to lose?”

“No skin of my back if Heka’s gone senile,” Ammit grunted, “We’ve been at this for hours and I don’t give a damn how that grid goes down – so long as it does.”

“Utter madness,” Baal growled, looking at the amassed Goa’uld in consternation. “And you’re in agreement with this lunacy?”

A chorus of agreement cried out in reply. The gods were restless and eager for the bloody mess to end. Baal shook his head in disbelief, reaching down to manipulate the holographic controls. He tapped the side of his head, activating some sort of implanted communicator. “Call a general retreat, I repeat all Jaffa are to recede to minimum safe distance.” He looked up at me, grinning sharkishly as he took his fingers from his temple. “You have my word that I will inform them of your arrival by the time you reach the gates.”

“And mine that the rest of us will shoot him if he doesn’t,” The gem in Quetesh’s device pulsed twice. The woman had no love for Baal. She would relish the excuse to murder him for such obvious treachery.

I was just going to have to trust that her need for vengeance and desire to get off world would be greater than whatever he offered her after I left the chamber. Ul’tak said nothing as we exited the bunker and headed uphill towards the fortress. He hardly needed to, Xin was a constant stream of incoherent metallic protests. The various permutations of “insane,” and “ill-conceived,” blended together into a singe frustrated stream of consciousness as we walked past tens of thousands of retreating Jaffa.

I recognized the look in their eyes. Hopelessness, I’d seen too much of it since the war with the Vampire Courts started. The Jaffa expected to lose this fight, they were brave but not stupid. “They were planning to die. “

“Likely. Fewer than six hundred will be Jaffa regulars. Sokar didn’t allow any but his most trusted
Goa’uld to have standing armies on Delmak.” Ul’tak sighed, eyeing them with pity. “These armies are mostly the Jaffa of defeated or dead gods. The god who they worshipped for their entire lives, if that god still lives, is little more than a shattered madman crushed under the will of Sokar. Many view it as their duty to avenge their fallen gods if they can.”

“It’s common practice for Goa’uld to gain covert among the bitterest of the Jaffa.” Xin agreed, watching as they carried the broken and burned bodies of the fallen. ” For the Tok’ra as well for that matter. I imagine most of them jumped at the chance to go out in a blaze of glory when their new gods demanded it of them.”

“Lets make it so they don’t have to,” I growled, furious at the callous way the old gods had been willing to toss men into the meat grinder. “This whole planet is deadly enough without needing our help.”

A bloodied Jaffa with the emblem of a soaring egret on his forehead put his hand across his breast in the Jaffa salute as we passed, “My lord – apologies, but we have received the general order for retreat.”

“I know,” I smiled at him. “I’m the one who issued it to Baal.”

“Forgive me my lord – I did not know,” His eyes flitted up my armor and across my face, clearly trying to recognize me. I took pity on the guy and offered him my hand, “Warden Dresden.”

“Tek’jan,” Replied the Jaffa, nervously accepting my handshake as a small crowd of Jaffa formed around us. “Formerly in the service of Paoxi, may he last in the stars forever to watch over us.”

“I’m sure he’s proud of you.” I replied politely, looking around at the increasing large cluster of Jaffa forming round us. Men were standing on tiptoe at its edges to see what was going on in the middle. “I’m sure all your gods are proud of all of you for your honor and loyalty.”

The Jaffa beamed at the compliment. I smiled, realizing the sudden opportunity I’d been handed. I continued speaking to my audience as though they were all close friends and honored guests, taking the time to look at each of them and acknowledge them as equals. “Realize that you aren’t retreating in defeat. You’re giving me the chance to guarantee us victory and allow us to escape the Serpent Guard. We will all live this day.”

“In truth?” Tek’jan asked hopefully as he cradled his injured shoulder.

“Absolutely.” I smiled, “Unless they kill me, in which case this battle becomes somebody else’s problem and I’ll be enjoying a relaxing afterlife. After the day I’ve had even hell would be a pleasant vacation by comparison.”

The Jaffa erupted into wild laughter, hooting and hollering in amusement. “Thank you, I’ll be here all – well no, I won’t be here all week. I’ll be gone just as fast as my ship will take me.”

That earned another round of laughter as my Jaffa started up a chant of “Dre’su’den, Dre’su’den, Dre’su’den the Ha’ri”

“Oh people.” I cupped my hands over my mouth, “Make a hole. I’ve got a war to win.”

The sea of Jaffa parted, repeating the chant with greater and greater furor. It spread like wildfire through the Jaffa ranks my retinue and I approached the fortress’ main gate. Five thousand, then ten, then the whole army, all of them chanting in unison “Dre’su’den, Dre’su’den, Dre’su’den the Hari.”

“Murphy isn’t going to believe a word of this when I tell her.” I muttered under my breath. “Hell,
I’m not sure I believe it.”

If I managed to pull this off I was going to end up looking awesome. Hell, just imagining how much the chanting had to be putting a burr in Baal’s smarmy ass almost made it worth it even if I didn’t survive.

I strode up to the massive iron and stone doors and knocked twice with my armored fist on a protruding red block of stone. It flashed with each knock, receding into the stone face on invisible hydraulics. We walked through ten feet of solid stone and into a massive atrium. A hundred Jaffa pointed staff weapons at us, ready to kill us at a second’s notice.

The base’s commander, a hard man with battle-scarred red carapace armor and a nasty scar covering the left side of his face, approached me with a drawn blade, “That’s close enough Lord Heka. Our orders are to treat you like a hostile combatant in the event of Lord Sokar’s death, up to and including terminating your life. If you even try to violate customs of diplomatic exchange I see how much a god bleeds before death.”

“Of course,” I nodded in agreement, dropping my staff to the floor and pulling off the armored gloves containing both my Goa’uld foci and shield device. “Ul’tak, no matter what happens you are under orders not to shoot.”

“My Lord?” Ul’tak’s trust in his new god apparently didn’t totally override his common sense.

“Don’t shoot no matter what. And don’t take revenge even if they do kill me. I want you to survive this even if I don’t. The same goes for you Xin.” I tapped the side of my nose. “Have faith Ul’tak. I know what I’m doing.”

“Yes my Lord Warden,” Ul’tak replied in a tone of utter befuddlement.

“Very well,” The Captain replied. “I will hear the terms of your army’s surrender.”

“No,” I replied. “You will not.”

“I will not.” The jaffa Captains exclamation was anything but a question. His lips tightened in anger, clearly readying himself for a fight.

“Warden,” Xin hissed, watching as the Necropolis Guardsmen tensed angrily. “This is seeming less and less like a plan by the moment.”

“Not now Xin,” I shushed the Tok’ra, tapping a finger to my lips before turning back to the Captain. “No, indeed not. You will be hearing the terms of my personal surrender.”

“What?” The Captain tilted his head in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“I am surrendering under the terms of personal surrender. I am not part of the army currently sieging your fortress, my troops have not aided in the siege of this fort. My surrender to you is thus covered under the terms of general surrender rather than the military codes of conduct.” I smiled brightly. “I demand to be taken to the highest ranking member of Sokar’s inner court to offer my total and unconditional surrender.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.” The Captain blinked. “There aren’t any other members of the inner court currently recognized by Sokar.”

“You – you brilliant damned lunatic!” Xin’s eyes widened as he finally understood. “That is genius.”
“Uh,” Ul’tak shared a baffled look with the Necropolis Guard Captain. “What just happened?”

“The only members of Sokar’s inner court not killed by the destruction of Sokar’s flagship were the Warden and the Lord of Flames. Sokar isn’t alive to remove him from the inner court, so criminal or not he’s the only one legally allowed to accept a surrender of this type.” Xin pulled at the roots of his hair. “As the Lord of Flames is currently dead he can’t legally accept the Warden’s surrender – meaning that the only way for the Captain to actually obey his orders is to allow the Warden to surrender to himself.”

“I obviously accept my surrender and pardon myself of any prior wrongdoings. “ I bent down and picked up my staff and gauntlets. I turned to the Jaffa Captain, smiling as I did so. “Do you agree that what was just done was within the boundaries of the Laws of Sokar as they are written?”

“I am bound by the laws of the realm” The Captain replied slowly, as though not entirely sure he wasn’t stuck in a particularly unpleasant dream. “My Lord.”

“Good, then my first act is to accept the total and unconditional surrender of the army outside. Send Baal a communiqué informing him that you have turned over the command of this base to myself.” I smiled at the Necropolis Guard Captain.

“Yes my Lord,” The Captain tapped his wrist device, complying with my orders in baffled obedience.

I flopped down on a stone bench as I considered our next move, looking to Xi and smiling “It’s good to be the king.”
Chapter 14

I would have been lying to say that the look of utter frustration and abject disbelief on Baal’s face wasn’t something I’d treasure. The man’s immaculately trimmed goatee and mustache helped him to articulate the most irritated frown I’d ever seen as he entered my newly conquered fortress.

“How?” Baal stumbled over the word as though trying to say a million things at once. It was an order, not a question – one that I had no intention of indulging. “Just – how?”

“Well,” Lasciel’s voice snorted in my ear. “Someone hasn’t been letting his defeat at Mt. Carmel damage his ego.”

I snorted, resisting the urge to repeat the Angel’s insult, “Trade secret.”

"Baal, my dear." Qetesh giggled, sidling up to wrap her arm around mine. “I suppose he’s just better than you are.” She played with a dangling scrap of shredded leather duster hanging off my arm. My ensorcelled coat sparked under her fingertips where it touched her foci, reacting to it’s inherent magic. “In so many interesting ways.”

I allowed Qetesh to continue snuggling up to me. If nothing else it would keep Baal too angry to focus on thwarting my plans. And it wasn’t really like the goddess was a threat to me. After dealing with the white court it practically felt like the woman was telegraphing her moves. Pretty though she was, Qetesh was no Lara Raith. A little giggle there, a straying hand here, and even the slightest hint of flesh – freaking amateur hour.

I gently removed her from my arm as we entered the fortress’ largest room, planting a gentle kiss upon her fingers that made her blush as I eyed the gods surrounding me. Hell, why couldn’t I get normal human women to blush like that when I met them?

“Most women you meet do not see you as their literal path to salvation – fewer still watch you conquer an army with a handful of men and a few words.” Lash laughed heartily, a sound that rang slightly with the sound of distant bells. “I hardly wonder why approaching women in that dilapidated excuse for a vehicle, wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants, and carrying a half-eaten bag of Burger King does not showcase the best of your abilities.”

“I’ll have you know that I’m considered debonair by many.” I interjected jovially, only realizing after speaking that I had just unintentionally flirted with Qetesh.

“I shall bear it in mind Warden.” She chuckled throatily, purring the my title with apparent sexual fervor. The raven haired beauty bit her lip as she smiled, eyes twinkling with the promise of sex.

I swallowed the sudden jolt of interest from below the waist. Not now, I willed in its direction, down hormones, down. Ok – no Lara, but who the hell was? I reminded myself of the laundry list of reasons why sleeping with the evil space god was a bad idea as I turned to the crowd.

I could taste the Baal’s eyes glowing balefully at my skull as I prepared to address the pantheon at my disposal. They all shared the same look of confusion and fear – terrified of whatever it was that I’d done to conquer the fortress in only a few minutes. Hell, if I was honest I could barely believe that I’d pulled it off.

It was probably not a good idea to let them know. A wizard’s greatest tool wasn’t the magic he actually could do, it was the powers everyone else feared he might be able to do. It’s one of the reasons wizards were so damned secretive. The more power the creatures that went bump in the
night feared we had, the less likely they were to actually start any trouble.

And stars and stones was I standing in a room full of potential trouble.

I had the Captain’s promise that neither he nor his men would admit the specifics of my rise to power. While Ul’tak assured me that I could trust in the honor of a Jaffa implicitly, it was best to get my business off world before an “honorable” Jaffa spoke behind closed doors with a “less than honorable” one. Jaffa weren’t human, but they were still just folks. It would only take one fresh-faced recruit for the cat to get out of the bag.

The fortress rumbled with the sound of distant artillery striking fortified walls. Apophis forces, realizing that the Goa’uld coalition broke the Sokar partisan’s lines, seemed to have decided that if they couldn’t control the fort nobody would. I looked at the Necropolis Guard Captain, “You’re sure your troops can hold them off.”

Captain Rostam cleared his throat, a growling sound full of smoke and phlegm, “They will obey.”

“Not really what I asked. I was hoping for a timeline for how long they’re going to be able to do that,” I looked to Ul’tak for clarification.

“If I were sieging this fortress with that many men and heavy support, I suspect it would last thirty minutes to an hour. Fewer if I could get in an air strike.” Ul’tak smiled at the scandalized look on Rostam’s face.

“I would make you bleed for a century before I let you have an inch of ground,” The Captain snarled.

“Oh for the love of – same side people, same freaking side – we have waaaayyyy too many people already trying to kill us.” I massaged my temple as I extricated my arm from Qetesh’s grip. “I’m going to just go with an hour.”

I looked to Xin, yelling across the room to where he stood next to a computer bank. “Is an hour enough time?”

“Warden I will have this system on its knees in five minutes.” Xin rejoined, fiddling with the runes across the screen. “Just tell me when to go.”

I cupped my hands to address the group of gods, “Ok people, it’s t-minus five to beer-o’clock and I’m fixing to be the hell off this planet sooner rather than later. My plan is – ”

“And who says that we’re going with your plan?” One of the Goa’uld interjected. “I am more than capable of – ”

I shot him with my Zat and continued as though I hadn’t been interrupted, “As I was saying, my plan is to take down the defense grid for the southern region of the planet. Each of you will get a cargo ship or Alkesh from those in Rostam’s fleet. When the grid goes down we each go our separate ways, heading in as many different directions as possible to stop anyone from following.”

“And what will you be doing while we flee?” Baal snorted. “Protecting us? No – we will each take a Ha’tak to defend ourselves.”

“Yeah – I’m gonna go with a hard no on that one Ghost Rider. I’m going to be loading as many civilians as I can on to Ha’tak before booking it the hell out of here.” I looked around the room. “Look people, I know it isn’t ideal but you’ve got two options. Option “a” you get a ship and have a chance or option “b” take your chances with Apophis.”
I used an effort of illusion to make my staff glow green in imitation of what I’d seen Aziel’s staff do earlier that day. I’m terrible with illusion magic, but “glowing” wasn’t precisely brain surgery. “Unless someone wants to try option “c” and see if they’re capable of taking this fortress from me in a fair fight.”

“Ha,” Barked Ammit in amused laughter, whispering to the man in the front row next to him just loud enough for me to make it out. “Like anyone’s stupid enough for that.”

“I – see the wisdom of your plan,” Baal eyed the glowing light with envy bordering on obsession. “We will consent to your terms.”

“I would like to continue traveling with you, my Lord Warden,” Qetesh whispered breathily, licking her lips.

Gulp.

“I am forced to decline for your safety, my lady.” I smiled conciliatorily. “Whichever ship I am on will inevitably be the target of our enemy fleets. I must be the last ship to leave.”

“Surely you don’t intend to stay?” Qetesh squawked, her eyes flashing. “It would be suicide!”

“I made a promise. I intend to keep it.” I looked around the room at the Goa’uld. “Well? What are you waiting for? It’s first come, first serve on the ships and I know there aren’t enough cloaking device equipped ships for all of you.”

There was a minor stampede as the gods pushed, kicked, and shoved their way out of the room, rushing towards the fortress’ tarmac. Qetesh looked longingly at me as she scurried out the door after the other Jaffa, hiking up her skirts as she went. When the dust settled, only two remained. Ammit and a Goa’uld I did not recognize.

“You’d better go now if you want to get one of the good ones,” I offered. “I ordered my Jaffa to stop them from killing each other but I’m pretty sure you’re not going to want to be last.”

“You kidding me Heka? I’m not leaving.” The shark-faced Ammit snorted. “This is the most fun I’ve had in centuries. I don’t know what you have planned next but there is no way I’m going to be hearing about it second hand.”

“And if I don’t want to take you with me?” I sighed.

“I dunno – you think you’re going to be faster than the million Hok’taur I ripped in half and ate back on the first world?” He smiled, exposing rows of jagged fangs. “I figure you toss me around the room a couple times, maybe even get in a couple zat-shots before I get in close and gut you through that pretty armor of yours.”

He barked off a hissing trill of laughter, “Or you be friends. You take me with you, get me to safety and I forget that you’ve won the interest of my woman. We might even be allies if you allow me safe harbor in your realm.”

“Just – call me Harry ok? Harry, not Heka.” I sighed. I didn’t have time to fight him as well as every other damned thing I would need to accomplish in the next couple hours. “Warden Dresden if you can’t do Harry – just not Heka.”

“Really? Going with a new mantle?” Ammit snorted. “Well, you know the benefits better than I. If you think it helps you, I can handle a new name.”
I looked to the other god, “I’m guessing you’re planning on hitching a ride as well.”

“Your appeal to the selfish nature of the gods was well judged,” The man garbed in the boiled leathers of a Spartan nodded in respect. “But the children of Pelops do not fear combat, nor do we think in the short term. A god of your stature does not trap himself in a situation without chance of victory. Given the choice between running with my tail between my legs and perhaps being able to present my father with a military victory against Apophis – it is better to risk my own demise.”

I tilted my head, wondering if their offers were genuine. Lash sighed, “You have several million Jaffa at your disposal. There are two of them and you’re a Wizard. Just take them and if they get any smart ideas – shoot them.”

“Speaking of which,” I used my foot to prod the unconscious body of the Goa’uld I’d shot with the Zat. “Anyone know who the hell this is?”

“I believe that would be Enlil.” The Greek god squinted, adjusting his helmet as he knelt. “Yes, it is he.”

“Pick him up,” I sighed. “I’m not going to leave him here for Apophis’ troops.”

“No wonder he tried mouthing off,” Ammit hefted the unconscious god over his shoulders. “Poor bastard spent centuries earning his way back into a pantheon only to have it disappear in an instant.”

“We getting any closer on the whole ‘computer’ thing Xin?” I yelled. “I want to issue the order for all Jaffa to fall back to the Ha’taks sooner rather than later.”

“It will take as long as it takes Warden!” Growled Xin in reply.

“Who is that?” Ammit asked, eyeing Xin through slit pupils.

“My Tok’ra,” I replied. “He followed me home so I decided to keep him.”

“Warden!” Xin growled furiously, “I am not in the habit of just broadcasting that to everyone who wanders past.”

“He’s housebroken but he tends to bark a lot,” I whispered to the Goa’uld. “I think it’s time to take him in to have the snip.”

“An absolute madman,” Xin continued to work on the computers, reflexively touching his Zat-gun as he went.

“Where did you even find one of those slippery bastards? Let alone talk him into helping you.” Ammit’s eyes bulged. “Netu – Heka, Warden… you didn’t…”

“Are you asking if I was crazy enough to blow up a ship I was still inside of?” I smiled dangerously. “If I’m mad enough to walk into an enemy fortress with a few Jaffa and walk out a king? If I am willing to use any resources at my disposal to win? If I am willing to do what it takes to rule?”

Thank God for untrustworthy megalomaniacs. Power hungry lunatics can’t imagine anyone who isn’t equally interested in power and wealth. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t willing to blow up a moon and screw over and entire planet’s worth of people just to kill one man, they were. Because I could have destroyed the moon, I must have destroyed the moon – logic be damned.

“Don’t do anything to my Tok’ra.” I waved in Xin’s direction. “I like him.”
“Stop telling people that.” Xin walked way from the control panel, his Zat in hand. “We have five minutes before the network comes down. Maybe six before Apophis and Aziel’s forces realize they can take off. We’d better make those minutes count.”

I turned to Captain Rostam, “Are your men ready to retreat to the Ha’tak?”

“Ready, though not altogether willing,” Rostam replied. “They don’t like the idea of losing a battle.”

“They aren’t losing. They’re stopping the enemy from winning.” I tapped the side of my nose. “Once we get into orbit just bombard the fortress so they can’t have it.”

“And the Jaffa army as well I assume?” Rostam smiled eagerly. “Yes – I understand. I will issue the order immediately. We will make the serpents rue the day they came to Delmak.”

He indulged in a disturbing cackle of sadistic glee as he walked into the ring-room, disappearing in a flash of light.

“That guy has issues,” I looked at Ul’tak. “Major issues.”

“It is to be suspected,” Ul’tak shrugged, “The Necropolis Guard were selected primarily upon their skill and enjoyment of inflicting pain upon enemy soldiers.”

“And the Jaffa of Heka,” I queried. “What were they selected based upon?”

“Their natural resistance to spell craft, of course.” Ul’tak smiled. “We are each bred fir and trained in the ways of defeating mind-arts and lesser devilries. In our blood is the strength of the gods, the will to resist the whims of Sun, Snow, Shadow and Pandemonium.”

That was news. It made sense though, the Goa’uld were terrified of fairies and had some knowledge of magic. Logic dictated that they’d engineer their soldiers to fight what they feared most. So they wrapped their soldiers in chainmail, made their weapons with iron, and trained the Jaffa to resist mind magic. Heka, the most knowledgeable in the arts of magic, would obviously have devoted the most resources to that task.

Come to think of it, had Ul’tak even noticed my illusion beforehand? Rostam and the other Necropolis Guardsmen had reacted in similar fear to the Goa’uld but none of my Jaffa had even batted an eyelash. Just one more reason to like the big lugs.

I tapped my wrist device twice, activating the glowing orange light “Bob – can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear boss,” Bob replied. “Your Jaffa have got this ship full of every man, woman, and child they could stuff inside the ship. I can feel them all. It kind of tickles.”

“Way too much information buddy,” I snorted. “When the network comes down I need you to get into orbit immediately.”

“You’re about to do something stupid aren’t you? Something that I’m dragged along for – again.” Bob kvetched.

“You know me so well,” I replied. “I’ll see you in five.”

“Try not to get us killed,” The spirit groaned. “I’m just starting to get used to being worshipped by slaves. It’s highly underrated.”

“By who?” I replied.
“You mostly,” My advisor snorted. “You’ll do something foolish like giving them rights or introducing them to modesty. I swear you’re hardly getting this whole ‘god’ thing at all.”

“Just fly the ship,” I deactivated the device, shaking my head in irritation.

“That was the language of the Tau’ri,” The Greek god stated as a matter of fact. “I recognize it, the one called O’Neill speaks it. Our Jaffa have been learning it to better interrogate their soldiers.”

“The one who speaks it is infinitely worse than whatever ally you fear he has made,” Xin interjected. “We should be so lucky as to have him allied with Stargate Command. No, the Lord Warden has far more terrifying allies.”

“I did not ask you, creature,” The Greek God’s eyes flashed. “Do not speak in my presence. Were you not the plaything of the Warden I would have you gutted and hung from the rafters.”

“Bingo,” I replied, watching the timepiece count down from three minutes.

“Bingo?” Ammit asked.

“It was either going to be that, ‘you’ll rue the day’ or ‘I’ll get you next time’ which got the five in a row on my ‘evil space god’ bingo sheet.” I rolled my eyes. “Come on. I’m sure you can threaten to kill each other just as well on the ship.”

The gods, Xin, the Jaffa, and I all stood at the center of the ring platform before being whisked into the stars in a pocket of shimmering light. The ship was as I remembered it, gaudy and covered floor to ceiling in hieroglyphs. It was a bit more crowded than I recalled. Humans scurried out of our path as we walked, it seemed like the entire population of Delmak had been pushed into the corridors of my flagship. Mostly women and children, they averted their eyes and spoke in fearful tones – terrified to be so close to the gods.

“Don’t suppose you’re planning to share your take?” Ammit queried, eyeing the humans with obvious hunger. “Perhaps one of the smaller ones?”

“Ammit, if you ever even hint that you’re planning to eat a human – especially a human in my care – I will kill you without a moment’s hesitation.” I said in a voice of pure ice. “I will immolate you from the inside out and dance on your charred ashes.”

“A simple no would have sufficed,” Ammit snorted. “You always were protective of what was ‘yours,’ weren’t you? I swear you are more bull-headed than any combination of the other gods put together.”

“You are more correct than you could possibly imagine,” Xin pinched the bridge of his nose. “Blood of Egeria – I’m agreeing with a Goa’uld.”

“I’m walking with a Tok’ra. We’re all making sacrifices.” Replied the Greek god. “I’m curious to see these allies.”

Xin grinned. “Be careful what you wish for Atreus. You just might get it.”

“Your pet speaks to me Warden.” The Greek god’s hand flexed, clearly itching to draw his gladius. “I can amend that if you wish.”

“You’re welcome to try – I doubt you’d manage to fight through every Jaffa on this ship when I order them to cut off your head, I’m not sure if you’d get past Ul’tak, but I’ve been wrong before.” He withered under my most wizardly glare. “Care to try it?”
“I will tolerate the yapping of your creature,” The Greek god sighed in a world weary way. “If you insist.”

“I do,” I rounded the corner, walking through the doors of the ship’s bridge. Bob the skull sat upon a high throne in the center of the room, surrounded by a shimmering blue wall of energy – a force field. I smiled, “Getting a bit paranoid are we?”

The skull’s glowing eye-lights looked up from where they’d been manipulating the ship’s computers, rolling exasperatedly in a circle. “Are you kidding me boss? I’m not taking any chances that another whacked out power hungry bozo is going to get the drop on me. Cowl was enough for a lifetime.”

“Fair point,” I turned to the pair of befuddled Goa’uld. “Sorry guys, allow me to introduce Bob. Bob is my spiritual advisor, in every possible sense of the word.”

“I would very much like to be elsewhere now.” Atreus said in a very small whisper, his eyes growing wide as dinner plates. “May I please be elsewhere?”

“Warden… the Tok’ra was one thing, I get that they have their uses, but this – this is – by Apep, this is beyond reason.” Ammit shuddered as Bob’s glowing presence flitted from the skull, tendrils of magic probing the ship’s systems. “How did you even find it?”

“I have my ways,” I shrugged. “Bob is bound to me. He has no choice but to follow my every command to the letter.”

“Ja whol,” Bob jibed sarcastically. “Boss we’ve got incoming. Ships - a lot of ships.”

“The Jaffa fleet or the Goa’uld escaping?” I looked out the view screen.

“Neither.” Bob tapped his lower jaw on the chair pensively. “I’m not sure who they are exactly. It’s a ton – like waaaayyy too many - cargo ships and a couple Alkesh. They’re hailing us.”

“Put it onscreen,” I replied, smiling as a familiar face appeared onscreen. “Ah, Netan. I was wondering when you’d call.”

“It is,” The crime lord replied. “We aren’t friends after this Warden. I know you only helped me because it served your goals. You weren’t sad to do it, but let’s not think this makes you in my camp.”


“And you Warden,” Netan bowed slightly. “I mean you no disrespect, but I hope to never see you again.”

“You wouldn’t be the first,” I sighed, “End the transmission Bob.”

“Aye, aye captain,” Bob replied. “I’ve got early reports of enemy movement. Apophis took the capitol fleet and has mobilized it to engage. They will be upon us imminently.”

“Where is the rest of the fleet,” I asked, feeling my inner nine year old squealing with glee at being able to utter that phrase.

“Rostam’s ships are in the air and ready to head for your territory.” Bob replied. “Looks like you managed to pick up the majority of the coalition Jaffa troops as well. I don’t know what you did down there boss, but the muscle seemed to like it.”
“I speak fluent goon,” I replied. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

“Got it boss,” Bob replied. “The fleet is in position. Ready to go on your order.”

“Make it so,” I smiled, resting my hand on the command console victoriously as I watched the dozens of newly allied Ha’tak and Alkesh zooming out into the blackness of space. I watched and I watched as the moments dragged on and on. When it had finally been a full minute since the last of the ships sped into the horizon I barked, “Take us to warp Bob. Those ships in the distance are getting a lot closer than I’d care for.”

“Gimme a minute boss,” Bob replied, a worried edge to his voice. “Something’s not quite – huh.”

“Not quite what Bob?” I groaned. Why did nothing ever just go right?

“Uh, we don’t have hyperspace capability any more.” Bob replied in confusion. “The core just jettisoned.”

“What did you do Bob?” I growled.

“Nothing! One second they were there, working right as rain, the next ‘poof’ they’re shooting out into space.” Bob’s eyes flickered through the computers. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Check the incoming transmissions,” Xin replied from a console to the view screen. “It looks like someone sent a remote code from the planet’s surface. There must have been an intentional defect built into the flagship.”

“Aziel,” Ammit growled. “The bastard must be out of his sarcophagus.”

“We need to get out of here,” Atreus’ eyes flashed in fury. “Get the hyperdrive back online.”

“How?” Xin asked in resigned amusement. “They ejected the entire core. There isn’t a backup for that – nobody carries one, it’s easier to just travel to a planet with a Stargate and send for one than it is to devote cargo space to a replacement part.”

“We have to do something,” The Greek deity hissed. “Flagship or not there are hundreds of Ha’tak bearing down on us. We can’t outrun them at impulse power and couldn’t hope to beat them in a stand up fight even if the Jaffa fleet were still with us.”

I slammed my staff on the floor, cracking the butt of it against the metal of the deck. “Shut up, all of you – I’m thinking.”

Dying here on the ass end of space was not in the cards for me today, but I didn’t know quite how yet. I couldn’t just make there be another hyperdrive. I wasn’t going to be able to cast a spell that killed a fleet of starships. I supposed I could take some people into the Nevernever, but I had no idea where we would end up. Even if it opened up to somewhere relatively safe, I wasn’t going to be able to take everyone with me.

Wait – that was exactly what I could do. My staff clicked against the metal of the floor again as an idea hit me. “Bob, the metal that they made my staff out of, the stuff that’s in my blood – what was it called?”

“Naquadah, Harry,” Bob replied in exhaustion. “Now is hardly the time for a lesson in the periodic table.”

“Bear with me – the metal they made my staff out of, Naquadah. It is it used to make the ship isn’t
“It?” I queried, thinking back to the various runes and symbols across the ship. “So this whole ship is basically one giant magical conduit.”

“Yes,” Bob replied. “Wait – Harry you aren’t planning to do what I think you are – are you? Because that is a terrible idea.”

“Can it be done?” I asked.

“I suppose, but you’d have to use yourself as the conduction point.” Bob hissed. “Remember the whole ‘not exploding’ thing we talked about earlier?”

“I know that I couldn’t power the spell on my own,” I replied, “But could it be powered by the reactor of a starship?”

“It can but – Oh no Boss,” Bob groaned. “No, no, no – don’t do it. This is a bad idea to beat all bad ideas.”

“Nobody ever accused me of being the clever one in this outfit,” I smiled, reaching my hands into the command console and focusing my magic towards the ship as I might towards any other foci. It was my ship, my adoptive home – I had a connection to it.

I felt like an ant reaching out to carry a boulder as I tried to even sense the presence of it, there was just so much – too much. A trickle of blood ran down my nose as I reached out with my magic to the deep well of power within it – the blindingly bright light of the reactors. I spread the brightness across the boulder, enveloping it within its luster as I intoned, “Aparturum – maximo aparturum.”

A shimmering white line rent through the void of space like an angry scar, our door to the Nevernever. “Go! Go now Bob.”

We sped through the ocean of stars, claxon screeching as enemy fire collided with our shields. Bob spun and weaved the ship to confuse and evade their weapon’s fire as the Jaffa replied in kind from their weapons counsels. The loud “vwuup – chash” of cannon fire echoed through the ship.

“The anomaly is closing,” A Jaffa interjected. “Twelve kilometers per second.”

“We’ll make it.” I interjected.

“Apophis’ forces appear to be accelerating,” Ammit interjected. “They’re ignoring all other ships in the system. Apophis appears to be rather cross with you Warden.”

“You don’t say,” Xin snorted. “I wonder how that happened.”

“Come on,” I growled as we grew closer, talking to the ship “Just a little bit farther – just a little bit farther. Hold it together girl.”

“We’ve got thirty more ships appearing from the z axis sir,” Ul’tak interjected. “Eta-20 seconds.”

“Brace yourself,” I smiled as the view screen filled with the white scar of the portal. “This is going to be a hell of a ride.”

We slipped past the horizon of the way just before it closed, zipping into the Nevernever with surprising ease. We did not, however, show up alone. Two of Apophis’ Ha’tak and a half dozen Al’kesh swooped in with us, just making it as the space between spaces slammed closed. A ball of fire erupted from where a Ha’tak was sliced in half, sheared between this world and the next.

“If they want to talk, then by all means talk,” Ammit growled. “They’re not shooting while they’re talking.

We were in a honeycomb of caves too large to believe illuminated by what appeared to be suns trapped within gems of immeasurable size and clarity. Floating planes of land rotated about the gems, dotted with forests, trees, mountains and fluffy tufts of cloud. It was neither the worst part of the Nevernever I’d been in nor the strangest. It would do for my needs.

Hopefully the general strangeness of being in the Nevernever would goad them into cooperation.

I nodded. “Do it Bob.”

The view screen shimmered, revealing the terrified face of a lesser goa’uld. His eyes flashed silver “Where have you taken us? What manner of terrible place is this?”

“Not sure yet.” I replied honestly, “The Nevernever is a big place.”


“I believe you call them the ‘Kingdoms of Sun and Snow.’”

“You will take us back immediately! You will take us back or die.” The godling howled in something resembling terror.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, no. You see if you kill me then you’re never going to get back at all. So here’s what’s going to happen, you’re going to - ” I paused, confused by a sudden noise - a howling screech that sounded somewhere between a lion’s roar and a blender.

“What was that?” Asked the Goa’uld.

“That,” I replied in a voice of resigned acceptance of just how much it sucks to be me, “Was the hunting cry of a Dragon. I think we’re in one of their breeding grounds.”

A fact I confirmed as several million similar hunting cries hissed across the void, as an angry presence howled into my very soul, ”You do not belong in the dominion of Ferrovax."
“Fuck.” It wasn’t my most brilliant moment of wit, but I was really too focused on how completely screwed I was to worry about sounding clever.

Dragons aren’t all cute and cuddly like Smaug. Tolkien style dragons are the shallow end of the ordo Drakon gene pool. A Dragon, capitol “D” dragon, was a creature of celestial might and abilities akin to a lesser god. They weren’t good or evil – the very concept of human morality was beneath their interest, they were too focused upon their celestial duties in maintaining the orderly procession of their mortal domains.

I only knew one person who’d managed to kill a dragon, Michael, and I was pretty sure he cheated. As a knight of the cross he had a constant stream of celestial beings altering fate to allow things to turn out in his favor. The swords of the cross regularly facilitated the impossible and smote creatures that couldn’t be killed conventionally.

Siriothrax was apparently the least of his celestial brethren and it had taken divine intervention to do him in. Ferrovax made even other dragons look like a bunch of geckoes in comparison.

He wasn’t so much a dragon as he was the dragon. He was Mab’s peer, if not her greater, and I had just violated his privacy with a petty squabble over temporal affairs. Just saying my name had been enough for him to make my head ring like he’d pressed a tuning fork to my teeth. This was not someone who I wanted to piss off.

Not that it seemed like I had much of a choice at this point.

“Wow,” Bob intoned, considering the high dragon’s pronouncement. “This is really going to suck.”

“Please tell me that I’ve taken a bad hit of Nis’ta and that I’m not in the Lands of Sun and Snow,” Ammit squealed in a girlish tone I never would have suspected him capable of. He looked pleadingly to Xin. “This isn’t real. This can’t be real. Tell me this isn’t real.”

“You want me to lie to you?” Xin arched his brow.

“You are the most practiced liar in the room,” Atreus said in a strangely distant voice as he dropped to his knees and looked out into the middle distance. “I would very much like to hear it.”

The Tok’ra rolled his eyes. “Fine, we’re not in the Lands of Sun and Snow. You’re just sleeping, and when you wake up you’ll be Supreme System Lord.”

“You’re not actually,” I replied. “We’re technically in a realm bordering them. It’s not the kingdoms of faerie – this is much, much worse.”

I wasn’t honestly sure if the draconic realms actually were worse or not, there wasn’t much known about them. Dragons hated mortals with a passion. About the only thing the White Council knew about them for sure was how much they enjoyed killing wizards.

“Oh – Goodie,” Atreus replied, his voice still distant. “I’m just going to be here on the floor for a moment while I think.”

“Stars and stones,” I weighed my options, turning to the view screen to face the lesser Goa’uld, only to discover a blank screen. “Look, we need to face this together… where is he?”
“He’s gone boss. They’re all gone.” Bob replied. “The enemy ships jumped to Hyperspace literally seconds after you said ‘Sun and Snow.’ I didn’t even know a ship could activate a hyperspace window that fast.”

I blinked, “You can do that in the Nevernever? Go to hyperspace, I mean.”

“Can and should are two totally different concepts boss – well, for most people anyway.” Bob’s eyes flickered. “The Nevernever is infinite and opens up to an impossible number of possible realms. Without a way out – they pretty much just doomed themselves to wander through it till they die.”

“But you can take us out right?” Ammit said in a voice bordering on panic as the ship’s proximity sensors indicated hundreds of thousands of ship-sized contacts bearing down on us. “Just open up another one of those rifts to take us back to reality?”

“I can, but not here.” I shook my head. “It would just toss us back into the skies of Delmak and we’d be back where we started.”

“I’m willing to consider that option.” Atreus replied. “Better to wander discover that which happens to our kind in this basted realm.”

“Death mostly, I suppose.” Xin offered. “Can we please get this ship moving? I can actually see the shapes of wings moving on the sensors.”

“Full power to engines,” Ul’tak replied from the pilot’s plinth, holding the crystal globes that directed the ship. The pyramid soared out through the floating islands, kissing the edge of clouds as it went.

“Incoming contacts confirmed,” Xin hissed. “They’re coming from the islands.”

Dragon whelps soared around the flagship, their ensorcelled breath scourging across the ship’s shields. They chittered and squabbled, moving at seemingly impossible speeds to keep up with the moving ship.

“Shields at 90%” Bob interjected. “I can’t shoot them with the main guns at this range, I’d blow a hole in the hull.”

The ship dove past an island, forcing the whelps to fly to it’s left and scatter around a cluster of floating rocks. The dipped and dove around them, belching sorcery when they could. A rainbow of destructive energies coughed out from between floating stone to collide with the ship’s shields.

“Launching fighters,” Ul’tak replied. “Let’s show them the might of the Jaffa.”

I watched as dozens of crescent winged ships plunged into the swarm of angry leather-winged beasts, spitting orbs of staff energy into the creature’s thick hide. Furious whelps screamed in agony, plummeting to their doom as the crescent ship’s razor edged tips clipped infant dragon wings.

Whelps though they were, their pure muscular mass made them obvious killing machines. I couldn’t shake the sense that I was watching a flock of hawks getting assaulted by a handful of sparrows as I watched my fighters taking on the dragons.

“Now can you open the portal?” Ammit snarled, watching as a dragon whelp lost it’s balance and collided with the front of the ship. Its crumpled body trailed away from where it hit the view screen, rolling into the distance.

“No,” I bit my lip. “Not yet. We need to be near something I can use – something symbolic of safety.”
“Here?” Ammit looked out the window at the seemingly endless chaos.

“Just trust me on this one,” I sighed. “I’m good at this.”

“That’s generally more convincing when you haven’t just stranded us in dragon central, boss.” Bob chided. “Speaking of which – looks like one of the big ones finally caught up with us.”

The ship bucked as a wave of mystical force collided with it, a bolt of pure magical destruction that set my teeth on edge. Claxon whirred angrily as the ship’s lights switched to red, preserving our vision. “Shields at 80%. I would suggest returning fire.”

“Don’t ask, just light him up!” I swore, kneeling next to a Jaffa who’d been thrown against the wall. His head was bleeding really bad. “I need a medic over here.”

“He’ll be fine,” Ul’tak eyed the Jaffa momentarily before going back to guiding the ship through the floating formations of rock. “His symbiote will repair him in hours.”

“Oh I love this part,” Bob whooped with uncharacteristic glee as he fired staff blast after staff-cannon blast into the face of the mature dragon. The creature swooped and dodged, wailing in agony when the spirit managed to land a hit. “No wonder you keep burning down buildings. This is fun!”

“We have boarders!” Xin snarled. “The Jaffa are moving to intercept them.”

“How?” I blinked.

“They crawled in through the hangars – they’re tearing their way towards the slaves.” Ammit hissed. “Someone needs to co-ordinate the counter offensive.”

“I’ll do it,” Atreus stood up from the floor, pulling his gladius from his belt. His eyes flashed with purpose, “I will not die cowering on my knees like a serf.” He smiled, “Even if I am to die it will make a story worth telling.”

“I’ll go with you,” I replied.

“No – no,” The Greek god shook his head. “You need to open a portal to safety. I will buy us time for that. If you die fighting off the dragons there isn’t any way back. I don’t fancy spending eternity in this place.”

“Let him go Warden,” Xin nodded. “Atreus is as good as any of the gods in a fight, and he has as much to lose as you if the Whelps get a foothold.”

“Very well,” I patted him on the shoulder. “Good luck and good hunting.”

The godling smiled sadly, “Perhaps a cloak of dragon scales would even earn me my redemption in the eyes of Pelops.”

“That’s good,” I nodded. “Think big – just keep them off the ship and try not to get yourself killed, alright? That’s all I ask.”

As the Greek God left the bridge Ammit snorted, “Poncy little bastard isn’t the only one who can put up a fight.”

“Are you going to go with him then?” Xin asked.

“You kidding me?” The lizard man’s brow arched. “I’m no fool. I don’t walk towards the creatures of this place unless I have to. I didn’t spend my time on the Tau’ri home world to work on my tan
and I’m not senile yet.”

The Tok’ra shook his head. “Then how do you propose to fight?”

“By being smarter than them,” Ammit cracked his neck, closing his eyes as he spun his head back and forth. “Obviously we outthink them.”

“Use your words Ammit,” I tapped the side of my head. “There is no way I’m looking inside your mind to find out your plan.”

“Oh sure, you waltz across a planet with half a plan and a couple platitudes but everyone goes along with it but when I have a cryptic plan everyone expects me to just jump up and say it. No, I had to sit and wait for your damned fool idea – you’re going to humor mine.” The lizard man rolled his yellow eyes. Ammit growled, a predatory look of satisfaction going across his wide jaw. “I can’t do any worse than you’ve done so far.”

“I suppose not,” I nodded my assent to my first prime, “What do you have in mind?”

“You’ll see.” Ammit snorted. “I don’t have your tricks, ‘Warden,’ but I managed to survive a millennia of the first world. I know how the beasts think, and where their weaknesses lie. If a prey runs, they chase it, if a prey hides, they follow – so we use that to our advantage.”

“Jaffa, get us into that bank of asteroids.” He pointed to the largest cluster of asteroids, where they sat closest to the captured suns. “Go in there, where the sun is brightest and the asteroids give the least range of motion.”

“We’ll be slowed to a halt.” Ul’tak didn’t overtly disagree with the god – he simply stated it as a matter of fact.

“Indeed,” Ammit smiled. “But they are not seeing with sensors and equipment. They are using their eyes, reptile eyes that aren’t made for looking into the sun. They’ll have to follow us by scent or sorcery, neither of which is great for seeing what’s really there.”

“But they’ll follow anyway because we’re running.” I followed his logic. “And they have to chase us because that’s just what they do.”

“Exactly.” The lizard man nodded, looking to Bob. “Creature – are you in control of the naquadah bombs?”

Bob didn’t look up from shooting into what was not a swarm of adult dragons to say, “Yes – why?”

The Lizard-man clutched his fist in the air, curling his talons around some invisible foe’s throat. “When we reach the asteroids you need to drop five remote controlled bombs in the heart of them. The highest yield ones you have.”


“Care to share with the class Bob?” I asked, already suspecting what Ammit’s plan was.

“Well boss – you can cross another thing off your ‘things to burn’ list.” Bob replied eagerly.

“Launching nuclear warheads.”

“We’re about to nuke the dragon.” I repeated, rolling the words around in my mouth in an attempt to force them to make sense. “I am about to nuke a dragon. I am about to nuke a dragon. I am about to nuke a dragon.”
Elder dragons were immortals, in every sense of the word. You couldn’t really kill them – only wound them – except in the most unique of circumstances. Specific weapons and rituals could allow one to kill a dragon, and I had neither readily at hand. But even if it couldn’t keep them dead forever, I was more than willing to bet that a nuclear bomb would put enough hurt on a dragon to make him wish he’d never met Harry Dresden.

They might come back to hunt me in a hundred years or so once they’d pulled themselves back together, but with my luck I’d probably be long dead before that was relevant. The perks of being me, I supposed.

“Yes – we all know what you’re going to do,” Xin smacked the back of my head. “Stop talking about it and authorize the firing sequence.”

“Oh – authorized.” I replied, wondering if I could get my official title changed to Harry Dresden, Nuker of Dragons Esquire. New business cards couldn’t be that expensive, could they? Not on a god’s salary.

“The creatures are pursuing us into the asteroids – we are out of the blast radius,” The Tok’ra looked up from his console. “We should detonate the devices.”

“No,” Ammit crooned, his eyes flashing eagerly. “Not yet. They’re not going to be disoriented by the EMP, we need them as close as possible to the actual blast.”

“They’re firing on us,” Xin snarled. “Shields down to 60% and falling.”

“Not yet,” Ammit growled, an look of near ecstasy on his face. “Just a little more.”

“Ammit – I can see the whites of their eyes.” I interjected as the serpentine forms became visible on the view screen – hundreds of adult dragons surrounded by countless whelps.

“Now!” Ammit snarled, bashing his hand against the wall.

The view screen turned off to shield our eyes from the searing corona of atomic death where we’d ignited a second sun. Jaffa cheered as the screen flicked back into view, showing a sky devoid of either dragons or asteroids. Only dust and ashes remained.

The joy was short lived as the voice of Ferrovax echoed across his domain, roiling with dark laughter. “The temerity, the impudence, I had forgotten how blind your kind was to its own limitations. You are not in the realm of mortals where your pathetic attempts at power can reshape what is. This is my realm. Here I am god.”

And we watched in horror as the ashes and dust coalesced, burning with power unseen as the charred remains of thousands bound together into a single, unified form. A serpent dragon large enough to blot out the distant stars stared at us with an eye larger than my flagship, grasping the ship between its thumb and fore-claw. It ignored the furious attempts of our gliders to attack it as though they were less than insects.

“Recall the fighters,” I groaned. “And get them behind the shields.”

“But the beast’s minions will soon be upon us!” Ammit growled in fear.

“They won’t do anything, not without Ferrovax’s permission. We’re his prey. It would be rude for them to interrupt, and nobody is dumb enough to be rude to Ferrovax.” I sighed.

“Nobody other than us, you mean.” Bob supplied helpfully.
“Yes,” I waved my hands in exasperation. “Nobody else is that stupid. I’m aware of how boned we are, thank you very much Bob.”

“Just looking to keep you up to date,” Bob replied cheerily. “Do you think he’ll eat the whole ship or shrink down to human size to take us one by one?”

“Bob! Not now.” I barked the order to Ul’tak for a second time. “Recall the damn fighters. They’re only presenting predators with more moving targets. Remember, if we run, they feel obligated to chase us.”

“Yes, my lord.” Ul’tak replied, fear seeping in to his voice. I didn’t blame him; this was a perfect moment to be terrified. I’d take it a step further actually. Of all the moments one could be scared, this was probably the best.

I was supremely grateful for the mask covering my face, other than Bob I was the only person capable of comprehending exactly how screwed we were right that second. This was Ferrovax at the height of his power in the center of his dominion. Not good, not good at all…

Too many dragons to be counted surrounded us on all sides, crowing, screeching and belching great gouts of flame. Ferrovax laughed, thick gouts of steam escaping his nostrils with each earth-shattering exhalation. “Now what to do with you? What to do?”

“What’s going on?” Asked a confused Goa’uld voice. Enlil, the god who I’d stunned, was apparently awake. His pupils were dilated and he moved groggily, clearly still in pain from the zat shot. “Where am I? What is going on?”

“You mouthed off to an ancient and got shot in the face.” Xin interjected. “You are on his flagship at the heart of the god of dragons’ realm. And we are about to die because a magical horror of incalculable power is going to eat us.” He looked at me, “Does that about sum it up?”

“I would have said ‘die horribly’ and probably punched up the zingers but that’s about right,” I agreed, helping Enlil to his feet. “Probably would have used iambic pentameter or something.”

“Boss, you are not going to start adding a rhyme scheme to your snark – I’m begging you.” He groaned. “I do not want to spend the last moments of my life listening to you attempting to rhyme.”

“We need assistance in the Deck 4 aft wing,” Atreus’ voice echoed across the intercom. “I don’t know how they’re doing it without fingers but they’re accessing the life support systems. I repeat – we need additional forces to Deck 4 aft!”

“He’s going to take his time,” I sighed. “He wants to make us suffer for his amusement after the insult of coming in to his realm and killing his vassals. We’ve got at least a minute before he destroys us.”

“You are disturbingly calm about our certain demise,” Enlil replied, looking around the room as though waiting for someone to shout. ‘April fools!’

“I end up in situations of certain death about once a year.” I shrugged. “You get used to it.”

“Ah,” Enlil replied, looking out the window at the giant dragon eye.

“What was your plan?” Xin asked.
“Plan?” Enlil replied. “What plan?”

“The one the Warden shot you for interrupting him to say.” Ammit scratched the side of his nose. “

“Oh,” Enlil waved vaguely towards Ul’tak. “I was going to suggest that we order the Jaffa commander remove the secondary Stargate from storage in the fortress basement. We could use the gate to go literally anywhere else, then just go our separate ways.”

“Wow,” Xin looked from Enlil, to me, and back. “That was a better plan.”

“Much,” Agreed Ammit.

“Are you really second guessing me now?” My eyes flashed in irritation. “Really?”

“We’re about to die – so yeah, this plan pretty much sucks.” Xin pointed to Enlil. “You shouldn’t have shot him.”

“He was getting mouthy,” I replied defensively. “And he was going all rar-me-god-#1.”

“I’m glad to know that our deaths will serve your ego.” Enlil jibed. “I shall remember that fondly in the afterlife.”

“Oh, shut up.” I growled, clapping my hands together and taking Ul’tak’s place at the consul. “And get ready for what comes next.”

I slapped my hands against the flight consul and reached out towards the presence of the ship, once again binding the massive foci to the blinding light of the reactor. I hadn’t lied before when I said that it would be foolish for me to open up a gate in a situation of symbolic danger but Enlil had reminded me of something. Situations of fatal danger were my forte, the places in which I excelled the most.

Much as I may well have longed for the quiet life, I would be lying to say that I was really a creature of peace. I was always weaker, always slower, always less capable, but I always won. Being the underdog was my bread and butter. Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden did not lose – ever. Not to Victor Sells, to Werewolves, not to Vampires, and not to Dragons.

I reminded myself of every dark alley and moonlit night that I’d spent looking for things that could crush me with a finger and forced myself to think of why I’d done it. I forgot the fear, forgot the danger, and just focused on how much of my life was hunting monsters. I didn’t go out and face those things because I wanted to – I faced them because only I could. No – that was a lie – it wasn’t just me.

My friends, my adoptive family, they were all people who fought the creatures which went bump in the night. Michael, Karrin, Bob, the Alphas, and Thomas Even Butters, the wiry little medical examiner, had helped me to fight supernatural danger. Now I had other people counting on me - new friends and allies who would die if I couldn’t find a solution.

I focused on Ferrovax’s arm – superimposing the image of every supernatural nasty I’d every faced in my entire life over his image. He was just a lizard with delusions of grandeur – no different from any other monster I’d faced in Chicago.

I was where I belonged.

I formed that single thought into a scalpel, driving it across Ferrovax’s hand as I intoned the words, “Aparturum – Maximo Aparturum.”
Ferrovax’s screams of rage made my ears bleed as the opening between the real world and the Nevernever bisected his hand, removing his fingers at the knuckle. Bob had already started flying the ship towards the opening before I yelled, “Gun it!” soaring towards the bright white light.

The countless dragons dove for us in an incalculable wall of teeth, claws and sorcerous flames – enraged that someone had dared to wound their sire. Ammit’s eyes widened in horror as he yelled, “Drop the charges. Drop all the charges. Somebody shoot something!”

“You got it!” Bob whooped in excitement. “Fifty naquadah warheads coming up!”

We punctured the veil of reality, swooping out into the real world with a whooshing squelch of ectoplasm clinging to the hull. I closed the rift with another effort of will, blocking us from the combined explosion of a Ha’tak’s worth of Naquadah-enhanced explosives. A few adolescent dragons managed to slip past the closing guillotine edge of the way-gate, furious magical monsters hell-bent upon my destruction.

“Launch fighters to take care of those,” I sighed, cracking my neck. “Get firing solutions on them to keep them from being able to use their breath on the hull.”

I smiled, looking at the familiar blue-green orb in the distance, orbited by a single satellite. Earth, we’d found our way back to Earth. The sudden appearance of a dragon whelp in the control room somewhat ruined the joy of seeing my home world.

The howling creature spat radiant waves of green lighting at Enlil, flinging him across the room and searing his flesh. The Goa’uld hit the wall, hard. His arm twisted unnaturally in an obvious break. Grabbing the creature’s jaw with my taloned fist, I focused my rage into the red gem at it’s center, forcing a wave of kinetic force upwards.

The whelpling’s brains sprayed across the ceiling – killing it utterly. I dropped the beast’s head in disgust, “Really? Can I please just get a freaking break? Is that too much to ask?”

As though the universe was answering me two bolts of neon light lanced across the open void of space, killing a dragon in a single shot. Out of seemingly nowhere appeared lengthy ship shaped like an flattened axe bisected by two triangular wing-like triangles standing up at perpendicular angles to the ships hull. It spun around the mother ship, destroying the dragons before turning to face us.

The air in front of my rippled, shimmering into the form of a grey figure of elven proportions with huge black eyes and a tiny slit of a mouth. It glared in my direction frostily. “You are Goa’uld.”

“And you are short.” I replied, unable to help myself, “ We all have our crosses to bear. Please tell me you’re not here to probe me.”

“Mad,” Xin groaned. “Completely mad.”

It blinked in irritation. “I am Thor, supreme commander of the Asgard fleet. You have violated the protected planets treaty. You have sixty seconds to leave this system or we will open fire. There will not be another warning.”
“Oh come on!” I rubbed the palm of my hand against the faceplate of my mask. “We haven’t even done anything. This is absurd. You don’t even know who I am.”

“And who are you?” Asked the tiny grey man.

“I’m –” My mouth slammed shut, apparently unable to form words. I mumbled angrily as a furious voice hissed in my ear.

“Wizard mine this is not some backwater piss ant pretending to be a true power.” The Angel intoned in clipped, concise verbiage. “The Asgard have earned their pantheon’s reputation. They have presence in your world. Do not reveal your true identity to any more signatories to the Unseelie Accords.”

“No, no. I know enough about Norse Lore to know that they’re supernatural heavy hitters. They certainly are powerful but they’re not – well – that.” I gestured in the direction of the Roswell grey in front of me. This was not the legendary warrior of unparalleled physical might – it just couldn’t be. “It can’t be.”

“Fifty five seconds,” ‘Thor’ said matter-of-factly, irritation apparent in his tone. Hell’s bells I really needed to stop talking with Lash out loud, damned fairy mind meld.

“Do not tell him your true name or reveal your true face.” The shadow of Lasciel hissed fearfully. “If they know you’ve traveled back in time it will find you in the present. You must not risk altering your own timeline or the consequences will be dire to both of us.”

Oh hells bells. This was not good. I grimaced and repeated my alias, “I am Lord Warden Dre’su’den the Ha’ri, reborn of Heka.”

"Fifty four seconds"

“Woah, woah, woah – slow it down there tiny. There’s no need for that,” I raised my hands apologetically. “It wasn’t our intention to be here in the first place. We’d gladly leave but we have a slight problem preventing that. Why don’t you just calm down and talk this over. I’ll even offer you a new pair of pants.”

“Your name is noted, I will provide it to the System Lords in my official recognition of your destruction in accordance with our treaty.” Thor intoned frostily. “And your hospitality is wholly unnecessary.”

“Warden, the Asgardian is not bluffing. He is more than capable of following through on its threat. A single Asgard ship is more than a match for an entire Goa’uld battle-group.” Xin hissed. “Stop angering it.”

“Forty seconds.” The creature’s emotionless black eyes stared back into mine.

“Shit – just scan us.” I looked to the other gods. “We have no hyperdrive. We literally can’t go anywhere.”

“Thirty five seconds.”

“Turn it all off Bob! Now.” I shouted to the skull.
“Turn what off?” My advisor replied instantly. “

“Turn off the shields, the weapons, everything but life support. I don’t care what it is – I want it off if it’s not keeping us breathing.” I pulled my foci off my hands and dropped my staff. “Tell everyone not fighting a dragon to drop their weapons and raise their hands in the air.”

“Why would we…”

I shot a glare towards Xin as he started to complain, silencing him. “Not now Tok’ra. Just do it.”

He pulled the zat from his belt and dropped it on the floor. Ul’tak and Ammit followed suit, throwing their various weapons upon the ground. It was a symbolic gesture, but after making fun of the guy’s height it seemed the appropriate level of group emasculation to appease the creature’s ego.

“Now look, we’re all disarmed. The ship is no threat – I just need you to listen.” I bowed slightly, deferring to the Norse deity. It was very hard to be properly deferent to a man who barely came up to my navel. “Just please don’t shoot us.”

“Twenty seconds.”

“Oh come on! We’re surrendering. We have no weapons that can hurt you. Please don’t shoot us.” I pleaded. “You don’t need to do this.”

“Fifteen seconds.”

“Please – I am begging you. Do not kill this ship full of people. Do not kill those in my care.” I dropped to my knees, still a head taller than the Asgard. I reached out for the god, and my hand shimmered through the illusionary form he was projecting onto the bridge. Stars and stones that had looked real, “There are thousands of refugees from Delmak on this ship. Don’t kill them for no reason.”

“You cannot use your slaves as a shield to protect you from the consequences of your actions. Any use of humans as military shields invalidates your claim to that herd.” Thor replied. “I will teleport them from your ship prior to its destruction and take them to a safe location. They are in no danger.”

“Oh,” I stood up, relived. “Well never mind then.”

“What!?” Ammit barked, “Warden – he is going to kill us in ten seconds.”

“No, he isn’t.” I brushed off my sleeves. “Because we’re going to surrender to him and he is going to accept, take us to a Stargate and let us go.”

“And if he does not?” The Asgard asked in a tone of deadly calm.

“Then the four of us die in whatever way you feel is most efficient.” I shrugged. “You’re not going to torture me – I know enough about your pantheon to know that about you. As long as the Jaffa and Humans survive, I can live with that.”

“The Humans will be saved. The Jaffa will not.” Thor replied.

“No – you’ll save both of them.” I rejoined. “You said you were going to save my slaves. The Jaffa are refugees as well – innocents. You’re going to save them too. You don’t kill the undeserving, there’s no honor in it.”

“As stipulated in the Protected Planets Treaty no Asgard is to aide any Jaffa in an act of rebellion,
escape, or mutiny.” Thor replied. “You will not be able to talk me into violating our treaty. And no Jaffa are innocent, each of them is a killer in service to your empire.”

“Fine, then I free my Jaffa.” I replied. “They’re not forced to serve me any more. They aren’t slaves, with my blessing to be free. Take them to safety – you’ve already decided that you’re going to kill me in spite of never having met me. I’m not going to allow your prejudices to get my men killed.”

The tiny grey man tilted his head pensively.

“Take them. Take all of them. Take anyone you please and let them be free as a bird – with my blessing – just do it after you scan my ship and verify that I’m telling you the truth.” I sighed, trying to appeal to the creature’s better angels. “It would take you what? A couple more seconds? What is the harm in knowing? Is killing an unarmed opponent going to please Odin and the other gods?”

He blinked in thought. “And if you are lying to me?”

“Then kill me,” I replied. “Just please do it quickly and painlessly. And please don’t bring me back after, I deserve to have a proper ending.”

A pregnant moment passed in silence before the Asgard nodded, “Very well. I will scan your ship.”

The creature shimmered out of view, leaving me in the center of the control room bending over nothing. I stood up, cracking my neck nervously as the pint-sized god of thunder decided if he was about to bring down the rain.

“Boss, I noticed that you didn’t demand he save me in that list of ‘everybody’ you were tossing out.” The spirit of intellect groaned.

“Bob, everything we’ve met since we left earth has treated you like the supernatural version of Godzilla mixed with anthrax.” I shook my head. “Do you really think he was going to react well to seeing you after shooting the dragons without hesitation?”

“He well might have,” Bob pouted. “He seemed like a clever fellow. Not much for modesty either, we’d get along great.”

“A clever fellow I know nothing about. You’re too dangerous to just hand you over to someone I’ve never met before.” I replied. “No – if I go down you’re going to have to go down with me. Minion union rules, you can’t just run away with the first naked Asgardian who comes along.”

“I’m not your minion. You’re my goon. Now goon your way out of this situation before we both get killed by Mulder’s interpretation of Marvel Comics.” Bob hissed. “I refuse to die immediately after managing to best Ferrovax. It would be undignified.”

“So is nobody going to comment on the dead dragon guts falling off the ceiling?” Ammit plucked viscera off his head. “Because I’m really getting sick of the dripping blood.”

“Really?” Xin queried. “We’re moments from death and you’re worried about housekeeping?”

“Nobody’s getting shot. The Warden’s crazy but he’s not stupid. We’re pathetic, unarmed, and helpless. The Asgard aren’t going to shoot us like that. They have to show off how much stronger they are than us – maybe get some sort of a concession for their trouble – but they aren’t going to shoot us.” He flashed a mouth of shark-like teeth. “They’re the ‘good guys.’ If they were going to shoot us they’d have already done it. “

Enlil let out a breath of relief, “You’re sure?”
“No,” Ammit shrugged. “But if I’m wrong we’ll all be too dead for anyone to care. I’m not going to spend my time worrying either way.”

“Oh,” Enlil nodded. “That’s nice.”

“Seriously though,” Ammit pulled another strip of pulped dragon from his shoulder. “Is there a dedicated cleaning crew or do I just walk into the hall and ask the three closest slaves to get buckets and mops?”

“There is a cleaning crew,” Ul’tak supplied. “I can summon them if you’d like, my Lord Ammit. They should be up from deck 10 in fewer than three minutes.”

“Don’t bother,” Xin replied. “If the Asgard are going to kill us all anyway, there isn’t any reason to make them walk up that many stairs.”

“Stairs?” I asked, in genuine curiosity. “We have stairs?”

“You told the spirit to disable all non-essential systems.” The Tok’ra waved towards Bob. “Transport tubes are non-essential.”

“Seriously though? Stairs?” I asked. “Not ladders or Jeffries tubes?”

“Have you ever tried to get Jaffa to carry a staff weapon up a ladder during a fire fight?” Ammit shook his head, “Or to carry a pallet of Naquadah? It’s a nightmare. No leverage and it’s just begging for someone to toss grenades down at you. And I have no idea what a ‘Jeffries tube’ is supposed to be.”

“About twenty minutes of plot filler while the ensign hides from the monster of the week,” I replied. “So we have stairs?”

“Ramps mostly,” Xin nodded. “It makes it easier for the slaves to get chariots and carts in on the more primitive worlds.”

“Neat,” I replied. “Do we have a game room as well? Things for fun?”

“Several dojo and an amphitheater on tier three, my Lord Warden,” Ul’tak supplied. “I find the daily prayer choir of the priestesses to be most enjoyable.”

“There is a topless show on the ship?” Bob moaned. “Of course I don’t find that out until I’m about to die.”

“Bob, you spent most of your day being fawned on by naked women,” The spirit was incorrigible. “Naked women worshipping you.”

“Yeah boss,” Bob replied. “But not to song and dance.”

“It really is very enjoyable, my Lord,” Offered another of my Jaffa. “The midday prayers have the best soprano section.”

“Bah,” The Ancient Jaffa barked from my right. “Too much vibrato. The early morning services sing the prayers of old, good hearty songs.”

“Songs nearly as old as you, old man.” Ul’tak interjected.

“Ok, anyone not arguing over the best type of naked choir may stay here in the bridge.” I squinched my eyes together, trying not to think about the incredibly tempting image of the priesthood of Heka
dancing and singing in unison. “Everyone else, leave.”

“Oh, thank God.” I sighed in relief as the large headed grey figure shimmered back into view. “Are you going to kill me? Because at this point I’m not 100% sure if I want to be saved.”

Thor blinked in apparent confusion. I raised my hands, “That was a joke, a joke.”

Apparently the little guy was not overburdened with a sense of humor. “Indeed – I have scanned your ship. You are apparently speaking the truth. I will not destroy you – yet.”

“Much appreciated,” I nodded. “So what happens next?”

“The matter of your trespass into the Tau’ri territory cannot go without redress,” Thor intoned. “And I require explanation of how you got here without a hyperdrive.”

“We took the Nevernever while running from Apophis.” I replied. “Accidentally ended up in Ferrovax’s domain and opened the first way we could, to flee his progeny.”

The god blinked for a moment. “You opened a way.”

“Yes.” I replied.

“You opened a way large enough to take a ship into the Nevernever? A Goa’uld?” The god did not emphasize the words, but his incredulity was obvious.

“Several ships actually, this is just the only one to escape.” I walked over to the throne, picking up Bob’s skull and strapping his leather harness to my waist. “It wasn’t my first choice but the moon blew up and half the planet was on fire. Leaving seemed wise.”

“We are aware of the situation on Delmak.” Thor replied.

“Neat,” I nodded, pointing to the Tok’ra, “You can ask the Tok’ra if you need proof. He hates me.”


Thor’s eyes narrowed, “You have a professed Tok’ra on your command deck.”

“I’m as confused by it as you are.” Xin admitted. “It has been an exceedingly strange day. If you take me to the Tau’ri I can confirm my identity with the Tok’ra high command.”

“That will not be necessary,” Thor replied, quirking an eyelid pensively. “Scans reveal that you are of Egeria’s brood.”

“You can scan for that?” I blinked in surprise, realizing something. “Wait – you’re telling my that my scans show me as a Goa’uld?”

“Of course,” Thor replied. “Life signs were detected from all symbiotes on this vessel.”

“Oh – goodie.” Save the freak out for later Harry, I reminded myself, save the freak out for later. There was going to be some simple, rational, and reasonable explanation for why Thor believed Heka was alive and kicking, an explanation that hopefully did not have me marching “Heil Heka” in the near future.

“It is not what you think, Wizard.” Lasciel hissed. “I will explain all in time. It would only distract you at the moment.”
“It is troubling that you are meddling into the affairs of the other side.” Thor replied. “One would think that your last interaction with the Furlings would be sufficient to discourage any future incursions. Their Queens have long memories and longer grudges.”

“Well, other than a newly pissed off Dragon I don’t think that’s necessarily true.” I replied. “I already owe the Winter Queen a sufficient debt that I’m not really worried about her Anger. Her help is dangerous enough. And the rest of them were nice enough to me. I don’t think any of them have grudges with me yet. The Ladies aren’t a threat to me, Summer Queen has no reason to hate me, and I’m pretty much beneath the notice of the Mothers. I figure I’m in no more danger than anyone else who goes into that realm.”

The grey man blinked in increasingly agitated flutters of his eyelashes. “You are remarkably well informed for someone who arrived ‘by accident’ into protected space just as we arrived.”

“Are you implying that I planned for you to threaten to kill me?” I snorted in amusement.

“It would not be the craziest thing I’ve seen you do in the past day,” Ammit growled just loud enough for me to hear.

I ignored him, “My arrival was genuinely accidental, Supreme Commander. I have business elsewhere that I must attend to immediately.”

“What business is that?” Thor asked.

I thought about it for a second, considering the lore of the Norse Gods. Thor had been a benevolent god in Norse mythology, one of the few whose worship had not required human sacrifice in his service. He valued bravery, honesty, and directness, dealing out punishments to those who tried to betray or beguile him.

He had already ignored or missed my use of an alias, but it was best not to tempt fate with too many lies. I had no way of knowing what mystical skills or advanced technology he had at his disposal. Truth was my best bet.

“I have to complete a task for the Winter Queen in the next twenty four hours or I will die horribly.” I replied. “She’s forcing me to do it because I’m in her debt.”

Ammit and Enlil shared a terrified look. I couldn’t blame them; they’d just gotten independent verification that I’d made a deal with the evil space god version of the bogeyman. Well, I guess she was basically just the generic bogeyman. Most stories about evil witches or horrible fairies were ultimately about her. Mab was one scary customer.

“Ah,” Thor nodded. “I believe I understand. Your price for that host and its power.”

“In a manner of speaking – it was a debt owed to the Leanansidhe then sold to the Queen of Winter.” I nodded. “I’ll have it verified in accorded Neutral Territory if that’s necessary.”

“It will not be. I will send an elf emissary to speak with the Furlings to verify your story after we are finished here.” Thor’s tiny lip quirked into a dangerous smile. “If it is a lie, I have no doubt the Winter Queen will settle the insult of falsely invoking her name.”

Ok, “tiny grey man” was officially upgraded to “scarily dangerous and potentially vindictive, tiny grey man.” I nodded, “That is agreeable. Now about the other matter.”

“Yes,” Thor nodded. “I am not the one with whom you should be negotiating for the terms of your release. As this is Tau’ri space you have violated, it is the Tau’ri to whom you must pay reparations.”
“So do we hail them or what?” I had hardly finished asking the question when there was a booming “whoosh” of light and sound, culminating in a man sized pillar of purple tinted white light. I blinked, opening my eyes to see a middle aged man. He was greying around the temples but still bore the bearing of a statesman or perhaps a soldier. Clearly unprepared to have been whisked away by the Asgard, he held a six-pack of beer in one hand and bowl of popcorn in the other. Judging by his team jersey, he’d been about to watch a game of Hockey.

“Well this is new,” He blinked, looking around the room in brief confusion. He looked at us each in turn before before seeing Thor. “Making friends?”

“Colonel O’Neil. I have brought you here on a matter of great urgency.” The Asgard intoned in solemn severity.

“Is that a dragon?” the Colonel blinked, looking at the huge corpse behind me.

“A whelp,” I supplied helpfully. “Not a mature one.”

“Ah,” He elongated the syllable further than I realized a human even could in one breath. “And you would be?”

“That is the Lord Warden Dre’su’den the Ha’ri.” Thor replied. “Commander of this vessel.”

“Well isn’t that special.” O’Neil clicked his tongue against his teeth, rolling his eyes. “Must be fun writing a name tag.”

“Not nearly as much fun as I assume it is to get you to stop listening to the sound of your own voice,” I replied, turning to Thor. “Is this really the one I have to negotiate with?”


I blinked momentarily and then remembered – Lasciel was translating everything I said into Goa’uld. I briefly considered speaking in English when a better idea came to me. Thor seemed largely aware of the supernatural – what harm would there be in showing off my assistant?

“Hey Bob, you wanna play 3P0 to my R2?”

“You have got to watch another movie. I’m begging you.” Bob sighed, his eye-lights flickering on. “You want me to translate the other one’s translations? Really? Dork to snake to English in real time?”

“Just do it.”

“The things I do for this job,” Bob groaned in a long-suffering groan. “Very well.”

I said the phrase again, my skeletal assistant translating from Goa’uld to English in real time. The Colonel sighed, opened one of his beer and took a long drag of the amber liquid before looking at the Norse god. “Thor, ol’ buddy, ol’ pal - Why am I talking to a decapitated head in a room with what is clearly a dead dragon?”

“We’re here because somebody got it in their head to blow up the moon of Delmak. The planet is on fire and everyone is pretty much running for their lives,” I replied in sonorous duet with Bob’s translation.

“Ah,” The greying man chewed his lip. “Yes – that is a thing. Why is it a me thing?”
“The Warden has surrendered to the Asgard in exchange for safe passage.” Thor replied. “He owes you reparations in exchange for being allowed to leave alive.”

“Are you sure you can’t just reconsider and zap the ship?” He shook his head raising his index finger in self-correction. “After, I’m of it that is. After.”

“I’m literally five feet from you,” I interjected. “I can hear everything you’re saying.”

“Yes, we know” O’Neill waved his hand dismissively. “You’re very impressive..”

The Grey man smiled benevolently. “No, O’Neill. Not under the terms of the Accords. His surrender to the Asgard was legal and he will be allowed to leave once the terms have been met.”

“Terms for what exactly?” O’Neill asked.

“The use of your Stargate to return home.” Thor replied.

“Yeah – no.” O’Neill shook his head. “Not happening. There will be no snakes going through our Stargate.”

“It is not a suggestion, Colonel. If you do not comply with the terms of the treaty the Asgard will not be able to protect you in future.” Thor shook his head. “Acceptable terms for the use of your gate must be met which are agreeable to the Goa’uld, Asgard and Tau’ri. Until such an agreement is met, I am afraid all parties must remain.”

“To all of us?” O’Neill looked mournfully at his six-pack. “I’m going to miss the game aren’t I?”

“What do you want?” I asked, hearing the ticking clock of Mab’s deadline ringing in my ears.

“It’d be nice if the Goa’uld all stopped the whole ‘I am god’ thing.” The Colonel sipped from his beer. “It’s kinda’ getting repetitive. I’m pretty sure you’re borrowing each other’s monologues.”

“Genetic memories,” Xin provided. “The Goa’uld all have a relatively similar sense of style because of it. Their personalities branch out with time, but they’re largely the same as youth.”


“Tok’ra – not Goa’uld,” The operative replied. “Same side as you.”

The Colonel nodded, “Interesting company you’re keeping.”

“You have no idea.” Xin replied. “Will you please keep me at the SGC till the Tok’ra can verify my identity? I appreciate that you’re going to lock me in a cell, just please let me get a full nights uninterrupted sleep. Perhaps two?”

“Yeah, Jacob’s still around to verify who you are.” O’Neill nodded. “And the rest of you? Tok’ra?”

The Unas snorted, speaking in accented English. “Hardly.”

“A guy can dream.” The Colonel sighed, watching as Atreus came into the control room, soaked in blood. “What’s with Sparticus over there?”

“I’m not sure,” I replied. “Did we get rid of them?”

“Most,” The God heaved breathily. “We killed most, subdued the smallest of the whelps. I offer it to you as your share of the spoils, Lord Warden.”
“How many dragons are there on this ship?” O’Neill looked at Thor. “Why is nobody else confused by the dragons?”

“Because the dragons came to kill the Goa’uld for invading their territory.” Thor replied.

O’Neill pinched the bridge of his nose. “The Napoleonic power monger is going to have me under lock and key for a week when I submit this report. I just know she will.”

“Colonel,” I interjected. “We’re kind of on a time crunch. I need to get to my planet before the other gods stop fighting over Delmak. I wish for the gods onboard, my Jaffa, and the human refugees to be guaranteed safe passage offworld.”

“You see that last part is going to be problematic.” O’Neill wagged his index finger back and forth. “We’re kind of hung up on the whole ‘free will’ thing for humans. We aren’t a transport service for your slaves.”

“Then keep the ones who don’t wish to come with us on Earth. House them, relocate them - do with them, as you will.” I shook my head. “These are refugees, not slaves. They’re free to leave at any time.”

O’Neill blinked. “Oookkkkaaaaayyy then. So what are you offering?”

“This ship and all the gliders onboard.” I nodded. “As well as all the Naquadah stored in the cargo hold.”

O’Neill tilted his head, raising his eyebrow in incredulity. “What?”

“If you let us go through your Stargate, I will give you this ship and everything inside of it,” I replied.

“Ok – so this is a trap right?” The colonel looked a Thor. “I mean it has to be a trap.”

“We will enforce the terms of this deal O’Neill.” Thor replied. “The immediate consequences for any trap would be deeply regrettable.”

The Colonel massaged his forehead. “No, I’m not buying it. Not from the snakes. If they’re offering me a cupcake I expect it’s full of razorblades, poison, and a compound to make me explode. I want to know what’s wrong with the ship.”

“It’s booby trapped. Not by me, by Sokar.” I replied. “I don’t know in how many different ways. There was at least one way to remotely eject the hyperdrive core, which they did by the way. I suspect there are probably a bunch more.”

I snapped my fingers, realizing something, “Oh, and I’m pretty sure an architect of the universe is going to try to murder this ship on a regular basis. So yeah, it’s broken, booby-trapped, and probably an advertisement for a planet sized dragon to try and eat you.”

“Ah,” O’Neill paused. “But it does have big honkin’ space guns – yes?”

“It has big honking space guns,” I replied.

“Eh,” He held out his hand to shake on the deal. “It’ll work.”
Blinding light washed over me as I shook the soldier’s hand, spiriting me to a place I’d never seen before. We were in a huge stone room, standing on a catwalk overlooked by high glass windows in front of a familiar stone ring, the Stargate. Ammit, Atreus, Enlil, and the Colonel materialized around as a howling alarm reverberated against concrete and steel.

“Oh – hell’s bells,” My eyes snapped open in horror behind my facemask. “I’m on Earth aren’t I?”

“Where else would we be?” Ammit snorted. “Thor’s sense of humor is uniquely cruel.”

Crueler than Ammit could ever know, I knew very little about how time travel worked. Chronomancy was forbidden by the White Council due to the dangers involved, screwing with the timeline could have drastic consequences upon the whole world. If someone got wind that there were two Harry Dresdens walking around at the same point in history I could easily end up getting me, or more likely past-me, killed for violating the Laws of Magic. I’d already managed to screw up history for half the galaxy, I was in no hurry to kill myself in the past and end up unmaking the universe in some sort of weird harry-dox paradox.

“I would not fear that, my host,” Lash whispered into my ear. “Look around you. Cameras, computers, and advanced firearms are everywhere.”

I sighed in relief. That was right. It was mortals who controlled the Earth Stargate. Supernatural beings avoided mortal authorities like the plague, and we were in the heart of a ‘Mortal Authority’ hotspot. The council and the courts did not want the American Military getting involved – it would be the magical equivalent of doomsday.

“Indeed,” Lash replied. “And no Fae would expose themselves to a building full of so much exposed iron.”

“Intruders in the Gate Room,” Yelled a booming voice from a set of loudspeakers mounted on the walls. “Condition red! I repeat intruders in the Gate Room.”

Great, for the moment all I would have to worry about was being executed as an evil space god by justifiably angry soldiers. “Xin, I’m afraid to ask this, but I don’t suppose that the humans from Earth have met a Goa’uld they didn’t want to shoot on sight did they?”

“No,” Xin sighed.

I clutched my hand, trying to draw power to my foci, only to realize that my foci, my rings, my shield bracelet, and even the Goa’uld shield device hadn’t been transported with me. Thor disarmed me before tossing me to the mortals.

“Oh, no.” I groaned, watching as the Stargate was whisked away in a burst of blue-white light. “This is bad.”

“I gave up on bad when we fought off an army of Dragons,” Ammit replied.

“You could try surrendering to them,” Xin replied. “That seems to have worked well for you so far.”

Marines armed with automatic weapons stormed into the room, keeping the five of us at gunpoint.
They stared at us with dead eyes, clearly prepared to kill us at a moment’s notice. I wondered how many hits a shield without my shield bracelet could take now that I had the strength power up from the snake apparently still living in my skull. Without my foci I’d be limited in my ability to fight, but a wizard was never entirely without weapons.

“Oh for the love of – THOR!” The Colonel shouted at the ceiling, “Get your little grey butt down here this instant!”

“Colonel O’Neill, just what in the hell is going on?” Barked an angry voice over the loudspeaker. A bald man with a slight paunch glared down at us from an overlooking window, standing at the center of an obvious control room.

“Evening General.” The Colonel raised his hands, demonstrating that he was unarmed. “My vacation was shorter than I planned.”

“Colonel.” The General was not amused by the Colonel’s antics. “Why are you here?”

“Well – That little chestnut is going to make a lot more sense once Thor gets here,” He pointed to an open section of floor as though expecting the Norse god to pop up on command. “This will just take a second.”

Nothing happened.

The Colonel rolled back and forth on his heels, his breath whistling through clenched teeth as he inhaled. “Aaaanny minute now.”

“Jack?” A confused, bespectacled man peeked out from around the bulkhead. “Aren’t you supposed to be at your cabin?”

The Colonel glared past the armed men, “Well Daniel, it turns out that the Asgard didn’t see my ‘do not disturb’ sign on the door. They’re inconsiderate like that sometimes.”

“Oh.” The man nodded, “Who are they?”

“A bunch of lost puppies.” Jack replied, “I fed them and they followed me home, can I keep them? Who do you think they are? They’re Goa’uld.”

“I am Tok’ra,” Xin corrected.

“You’re interrupting my vacation. Don’t interrupt my sh*tick as well.” The man silenced Xin with his index finger. “I have a process. It doesn’t improve when people correct me.”

“Are you in need of assistance Colonel O’Neill?” A large Jaffa man armed with a staff weapon stood at the center of the Marines, eyebrow arched in curiosity.

Ammit hissed in disgust, baring his teeth and growling. “Sho’va.”

“Now you play nice, while you’re visiting.” O’Neill chided the Unas before turning to the Jaffa. “Not quite yet Teal’c old pal, but I’ll keep you posted.”

“That is the Goa’uld Ammit, devourer of the dead.” The Jaffa Teal’c replied with stoic precision, aiming his staff weapon at the god’s head. “Servant of Sokar.”

“Now hold on just a minute,” The Colonel raised his eyebrow. “How can you possibly know that?”

“His image was in the mission briefing provided by the Tok’ra we received before rescuing Jacob
Carter.” Teal’c replied. “Had you read your briefing you would recognize both he and the Goa’ulds Enlil and Atreus.

“Ah, yes – the briefing.” The Colonel replied. “The briefing we were all supposed to read before going to –” he paused, correcting himself before saying too much. “On the mission. That briefing. How silly of me.”

“You didn’t read the report?” I asked, in genuine curiosity. “Wasn't that an order or something?”

“It was certainly something.” The Colonel shook his head. “Why am I talking to a snake about this?”

“Because using your mouth seems to be your stress relief valve in high pressure situations.” I shrugged. “You seem clinically incapable of not running your mouth if there is even the remotest opportunity for recalcitrance.”

“Said pot to kettle,” Whispered the voice of the fallen.

Hey, I never said it was a bad thing.

“Sorry Jack, but how long has this Goa’uld been around you?” The bespectacled man queried in genuine curiosity.

“Daniel.” The Colonel replied warningly.

“I mean it’s just pretty much spot on how you deal with stress.” The man continued. “I honestly didn’t think the Goa’uld were that aware of human psychology.”

“Daniel!” The Colonel raised his voice in irritation.

“I hadn’t even really thought about it but it makes sense for it to be a coping mechanism in the face of certain death,” The man continued pensively. “I mean you weren’t really joking much on Abydos at first, but you weren’t really looking to keep going then either.”

“Daniel!” The Colonel shouted. “Not the time or the place.”

“Will you not simply suggest that the next point of inquiry is temporally inefficient when next Dr. Jackson raises this matter, Colonel O’Neill,” The Jaffa replied, looking at me pensively. “I do not know this Goa’uld.”

“He’s Dressing the Hairy.” O’Neill replied, intentionally mangling my pseudonym. “He’s the god of confusion and silly hats.”

“I don’t wear hats.” I rejoined. “And it’s Lord Warden Dre’su’den the Ha’ri.”

“What? No threats to eat my entrails?” The Colonel arched an eyebrow.

I shrugged, “I had a late lunch.”

“Ah,” The man nodded his head knowingly. “How foolish of me. I will make a note to only approach recently fed Goa’uld to make sure they’re less ornery.”

“Not a bad strategy actually,” Ammit replied in growling English. “We get a boost of endorphins for about an hour after a good meal.”

“Neat,” He looked at the collected faces and up to the control room before looking back at the bespectacled man.
He sighed in relief as a grey figure materialized in the Gate Room, standing between the marines and Goa’uld. The tiny nordic god waved a hand, dematerializing every weapon in sight. “Those will not be necessary.”

The marines looked gormlessly into their suddenly bare fingers, unsure how to react. I couldn’t blame them. I would have reacted the same way, if my pistol suddenly weren’t there.

Huh... what had happened to my pistol, come to think of it? I hadn't seen it since the Darkhallow. Crap, if I ever got back I'd have to remember to go out looking for it so it didn't end up being picked up by some kid who mistook it for a toy or some gang-banger looking for a disposable weapon.

“Thor,” The Colonel smiled. “You took your time.”

“I apologize Colonel. I had to tow the Goa’uld ship to the dark side of your moon to prevent detection.” He turned and addressed me. “Your First Prime is taking the refugees through the Stargate. Once they are through I will return the gate so that you may leave the planet.”

“Ah,” I replied, his reasoning suddenly apparent. “We’re hostages. You have us here to ensure that we’re not trying anything shady till every one of them is through.”

“Such an assumption of treachery would be inappropriate.” Thor replied, raising a single eyebrow as a sarcastic lilt worked its way into his monotone. He smiled cruelly, looking to Ammit. “However should one chose the route of treachery, one would have to fight past a mountain of trained warriors to leave this facility.”

“I am no fool Asgard. I have no urge to remain on this blasted hell scape any longer than is demanded of me,” Ammit growled in reply, a hint of fear in his voice. “Are we secure in this facility?”

“The outside world is largely unaware of the Chappa’ai in Stargate Command.” Thor replied. “And the doors barring this base from the outside world are a combination of ferrous metals.”

“It will suffice,” Enlil replied, groaning in pain as he massaged his side.

“All weapons have temporarily been removed from the facility in accordance with the protected planet’s treaty’s terms of engagement. They will be returned to you upon completion of our business here.” Thor looked at the Goa’uld. “Should the Goa’uld violate the terms of their total surrender, I will be forced to terminate them.”

Thor looked up to the balding man. “General, if it is agreeable, I will explain the conditions of the Goa’uld surrender to the Tau’ri in private.”

“Of course Supreme Commander – ” The General’s sentence abruptly cut off as the pair of them shimmered out of existence, leaving my cadre of Goa’uld staring down twenty or so marines. The Marines continued to stand at the ready, obviously prepared to do us harm, weapons be damned.

“So,” I looked at the Colonel. “This is awkward.”

“Yep.” The Colonel replied.

“So do we just stand here or is there a conference room or something?” I waved towards the doors.

“We don’t get a lot of Goa’uld guests.” O’Neill replied.

“Not with this decorating certainly.” I waved at the drab grey walls and ceiling. “This is somewhere
between ‘modern prison’ and ‘lunatic asylum.’

“Says the man who decorates his ship with prayers to himself.” O’Neill replied. “And only uses Gold in his decorating.”

“They’re not prayers.” Enlik shook his head, replying in broken English. “They’re wards. They discourage intrusions from the underworld.”

“Ah yes, those pesky ghosts.” O’Neill sighed exasperatedly. “How foolish of us not to consider them in our designs.”

The bespectacled man walked cautiously closer to us. “What spirits from the Underworld?”

“All of them,” Atreus replied, as though it were obvious. “Though the Warden hardly seems troubled by spirits.” He stared with a mix of fear and envy at Bob “we are not all so lucky.”

The bespectacled man interjected, “Forgive my ignorance but I’ve never heard of a Dre’su’den the Ha’ri.”

“That’s because he was known as Heka till a couple of days ago.” Xin interjected. “He was apparently ‘reborn’ as the Lord Warden Dre’su’den the Ha’ri.”

“O’Neill,” The Jaffa hissed in fear. “You need to move away immediately.”

“Any reason in particular, Teal’c old buddy?” O’Neill moved on the ball of his feet, not actually running but moving to run if he needed to do so.

“He is more dangerous than you could imagine. The god of sorcery is responsible for System Lord dominance of the entire galaxy. He is the oldest of the System Lords other than Lord Yu.” His voice colored with spite. “That is Sokar’s most favored ally. He designed Netu.”

“Ah,” O’Neill’s posture changed drastically. I was not simply an enemy, I was the enemy. “Yes. I see.”

“I don’t suppose saying ‘I’m not evil,’ would help?” I queried.

“Nope,” O’Neill replied. “I was on Netu recently. I can’t say that planet spoke too well of your mental state.”

“Impossible,” Ammit snorted. “Netu was inescapable.”

“Was being the key part of that phrase after we finished,” O’Neill replied, wearing shit-eating grin just exuding smugness.

I blinked, connecting the dots in my head. “It was you.”

“Me what?” The Colonel replied.

“Apophis was clearly as confused as I was when the moon blew up.” I thought about it. “He was posturing when we were free-falling but he’s not about to blow up a planet while he’s still in the blast radius.”

“Hell, the Goa’uld don’t really like to assassinate each other – do they? They force each other to serve if they can. Especially if they’re powerful,” I nodded, looking at O’Neill. “You – on the other hand – are an American. When in doubt you prefer to make things explode. You were the ones who blew up the moon, not Apophis.”
"I can neither confirm nor deny our involvement." The Colonel replied.

"So that would be a 'yes' and a 'I wanted to make the explosion bigger.'"

"Are you sure you haven’t met Jack before?" The bespectacled man queried.

"Daniel!" The silver haired colonel barked in irritation. "Stop chatting with the Goa’uld."

"Jack, this is the first time we’ve had the Goa’uld in a room with us just talking. This is practically convivial by their standards." The man pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Call me crazy, but shouldn’t we use this as an opportunity to – you know – talk?"

"Talking with the Dread Lord of Nekheb would accomplish astonishingly little in your favor, Daniel Jackson." The Jaffa’s lip curled in disgust. "The Jaffa legends warn of his words, and of the evil in his gaze. If you allow him to stare into your eyes he will know your heart’s darkest desires. He will own you."

Now that was a tactic of using a soul gaze I’d never considered. For a heart as black as Heka’s it would have been a weapon beyond belief to show some hapless mortal the evil in him and learn the quality of their character. Did the fallen use it that way as well?

"No, my host." Lash shivered in my mind. "We do not like to expose ourselves so readily to anyone, least of all our followers. Nicodemus’ little brood of soldiers most definitely has never been exposed to his true self. They’d run screaming before he had the chance to pluck their tongues. The usurpers lack foresight and modesty but not an abundance of followers. It would have been a powerful weapon to cow the masses."

Charming. "I have no interest in seeing the souls of those here, I am eager to be elsewhere as soon as is possible."

"What’s the rush?" The Colonel replied. "Not that we aren’t just thrilled to have you over."

"I’ve got to finish a task for a – peer of mine." I replied, choosing not to mention the specific ‘peer’ around the mortals. "It’s somewhat time sensitive."

"That and you have to mount a defense against Apophis," Enlil replied.

"Come again?" Asked Bob the skull, rolling his eye lights exhasperatedly. "Didn’t we just get done running away from tall, dark, and scarfaced?"

I smacked the skull in irritation, chastising it in Goa’uld. "Bob – I do not need you adding pop-culture references from Earth."

"Ouch Boss! It’s not my fault if I have taste." The skull rejoined in irritation. "And it was hardly an invalid question."

"Jaaaaaccckkk, why is our 'guest' arguing with a severed head?" The bespectacled man stared at Bob’s vessel with increased interest. "Wait – is that thing alive?"

"The creature is from the realms of Sun and Snow," Xin replied. "Alive is something of a relative term, safe as well. The creature is neither. Don’t approach it."

The Jaffa paled, "They do not exist. They are another lie of the false gods."

"Listen baldy, I’m more real than you could ever hope to be." Bob replied in irritation. "Why don’t
you come over here and say that to my face.”

“Teal’c? Care to share with the class?” The Colonel crossed his arms, staring at the skull on my belt.

“There are legends in my people of two kingdoms which can only be reached through dreams and sorcery, ruled by queens as dangerous as they are fair. I believed it a campfire legend from the Jaffa of old, now only told to scare the young and teach them proper manners –nothing more.” The broad shouldered warrior moved back a step. “They were creatures of unimaginable power, peers of the gods.”

The Colonel snorted, “That thing is seeming less ‘god’ and more ‘knick-knack.”

“Knick knack!” Bob screamed, his eyes blazing. “Don’t you call me a ‘knick-knack’ you knock off geriatric GI Joe.”

“Bob!” I shouted, my voice unintentionally magnified with an unconscious effort of magic. “Enough.” The Marines flinched as the deafening sound echoed through the small chamber.

“Yes sir, Mr. Warden,” Bob winced his eye-lights. “Only translation from now on.”

“So do you actually want me to answer the spirit’s question, Lord Warden?” Atreus queried.

I rubbed the palm of my hand across the faceplate of my mask, “I don’t even know why I try. Yes – why are we mounting a defense against Apophis?”

“Warden, you didn’t just escape Apophis. You embarrassed him, using forgotten sorceries to steal warships and cast them adrift within the Realms of Sun and Snow.” Atreus replied, running his fingers longingly over his empty sword case. “Escaping him would have been an annoyance, but an acceptable one. Upstaging him in his moment of triumph – he’s going to mobilize his new army to crush you first chance he gets.”

“He’ll probably use it as a way of disposing of his less trustworthy new Goa’uld and Jaffa underlings as well by using them in the first wave of attackers,” Ammit fished a rotting bit of gristle from between his teeth with a talon. “It’s what I’d do.”

“Hell’s bells, how long do we have?” I sighed.

“Hours, days, minutes? How should I know?” Ammit snorted in amusement. “I haven’t had an army in centuries, and the one I had was never as complex as Sokar’s. However long it takes your ships to get back, plus an hour or so, is probably a safe bet. He has the manpower to divert twice your fleet size without losing the ships he’ll need to conquer Sokar’s former territory, and ten times the Jaffa in your armies.”

I did not have time for this. We were already getting into the danger zone for my time limit and Bob hadn’t even managed to give me a Stargate address for the top-secret facility I would have to break into for Mab.

“You could always leave them behind, my host,” Lash offered. “Flee. Apophis would kill any loyalists and most of your Jaffa, but the majority of the able bodied humans would be kept alive for labor. Only about one in fifty would be terminated as examples to the rest.”

I clenched my teeth in anger, thinking about the people who were counting on me. Amun, Muminhah, Ul’tak, and all the other nameless faces who’d stared at me in adoration over the past week. They loved me, trusted me, and worshipped me – and all because they believed with their whole hearts that loving me would protect them from harm.
And now someone was going to kill them for having had the audacity to think I had value. Their kindness and trust might well lead to their painful demise and servitude.

Like Hell, it would.
“I’m not about to abandon people who’re looking to me to protect them,” I replied, only realizing after that I’d said it out loud. “Even if it kills me. I’ll protect them with my last breath.”

“Let’s please not use that as plan A,” replied Atreus hopefully.

“There’s a plan this time?” Xin snorted.

“I am having the weirdest sense of Déjà vu now Jack,” The bespectacled pinched his arm, apparently verifying that this was not all some spectacularly strange dream.

“For the love of Mike Daniel,” The Colonel looked up to the control room, and back. “This is why we bring – wait…where is Carter? She’s usually hovering in the control room by now doing smart people things with the computer.”

“At a Chuck E Cheese with her father,” Replied Daniel.

“Oh of – wait what?” The Colonel briefly lost track of the imminent danger to his person. “Why would Samantha Carter be at a Chuck E Cheese?”

“Mark brought the kids up from San Diego,” The man shrugged. “David and Lisa wanted to get Pizza and there are only so many public places which can be properly covertly secured by the Airforce for Selmac’s benefit.”

“But Chuck E Cheese? Sam has to be going crazy,” The Colonel snorted.

“Speaking of food,” I rubbed my rumbling stomach. “Do you happen to have anything worth eating? It’s been a long day and I’m famished.”

The Colonel paused in thought. “Oh, to hell with it – I need to eat something as well. Siler!” He yelled to the control room.

“Yes Colonel O’Neill,” Replied the voice of a long cheeked man from the elevated control room over the loudspeaker.

“Could we get someone from the Mess to bring down,” He looked around the room, taking a headcount. “Twenty – ” He paused at Ammit, “Make that thirty, large pizzas down here?”


The Colonel looked at me probingly.


“Make that forty pizzas, Siler.” The Colonel eyed Ammit’s fangs warily.

“So, uh, Warden.” Daniel, the nervous man queried. “I didn’t know that the Goa’uld could change their names.”

“It’s not quite that simple,” I replied.

“So are you a ‘reborn’ god or are you a ‘new’ god?” The man queried hesitantly.
“I’m not a god.”

Whatever answer they might have been expecting me to say, that answer wasn’t it. The Jaffa’s abruptly arched eyebrow seemed in danger of popping up and around around the back of his head as he said. “So you admit to being a false god?”

“I never claimed to be a god at all.” I replied.

The Jaffa stared back incredulously.

“No that was Heka.” I shook my head. “I’m not Heka. I’m Dre’su’den the Ha’ri.”

“But are you not the Goa’uld known as Heka? The one whose mantle you now wear?” The Jaffa interjected.

“It’s complicated.” I hedged, legitimately not sure what the honest answer was. “Heka’s presence is within me.”

“If you’re going to try and discuss theology with the Lord Warden you might as well abandon sanity in advance,” said Xin.

“I’m still somewhat confused by why the Tok’ra is still alive, now that we’re off world.” Ammit asked me in genuine curiosity. “Did you just have him on hand so that we could endear ourselves to the Tau’ri and Asgard or is he some sort of a bizarre pet? I mean it was the Goa’uld who surrendered, not the Tok’ra. He has no protections under the treaty.”

“I gave my word that I’d take him to safety.” I replied, choosing to stick roughly proximate to truth. “I keep my word.”

The god squinted his eyes, shaking his head in confusion at the alien concept. Apparently following the literal word of an agreement wasn’t something most Goa’uld would have done in that situation.

“And he now owes me a favor,” I said, offering him a reason he could understand.

“He will never deliver upon it,” Enlil snorted.

“He will pay me back for saving him from Apophis if he knows what’s good for him.” I smiled behind my mask, thinking to my own problems with Mab as a truly cruel thought formed in my head. “If he doesn’t I’ll sell the debt owed to me to one of the Fae.”

Xin had no comeback for that one, he just opened and closed his mouth in abject horror.

I couldn’t, of course, sell a favor owed to me in the way the Fae could. However, Xin didn’t know that. Nor did the god’s clustered around me who now also owed me their lives for the exact, same thing. Nobody can pull off a con quite like a Wizard.

I clapped my hands together and sat Indian style upon the catwalk. “So, Colonel. Tell me about this – what was it called again? Ah, yes – Pizza.”

Remarkably, Bob managed not to burst out laughing.
Chapter 18

After Thor’s guarantee that there were no weapons in the complex, the powers that be appeared to have decided that isolating the threat behind blast doors was sufficient for the moment. A moment that felt increasingly short as the portly general continued to glower down at me from on high, sipping from a mug of what looked tantalizingly like coffee.

How long had it been since I had a good cup of coffee? Only a day or so, but it felt way longer. Chicago felt years away, decades even. Why did it feel like such a distant memory? It was like clutching at a the wispy edge of some childhood memory – I knew the facts but they somehow felt as though they belonged to someone else as though some other Harry had lived them and just repeated them to me.

I took a metal folding chair offered to me by a scowling US Marine, planting it smack dab in the middle of the catwalk previously leading to the Stargate. He couldn't have been more than twenty, there was still a rosy bit of fat in his cheeks hinting at how green he was. Hell, he was probably about the same age as Ramirez.

It felt weird to have US soldiers looking at me like the enemy. I’d had any number of people gunning for me before. The White Council, the Vampire courts, the Mob, the police, and even the FBI…. but the military? The American military? That was just wrong. I'm from freaking Chicago.

I don’t do well with authority, but the idea of potentially throwing down with US soldiers made me ill. How exactly the mortals had ended up with a ritual artifact capable of interplanetary travel at all was a mystery to me, and I frankly dreaded what would happen if the Council ever found out it were here. Hard-liners like Morgan would lobby to take it from the mortals by force and kill everyone in the facility just to make sure that knowledge of it were destroyed. I didn't wish the full force of the White Council on these people – or on me if it came down to it.

Then again, with allies like the diminutive Norse god capable of dismissing the rules of physics with a thought… perhaps it was the other way around. How advanced had the mortals become without our knowledge? Advanced enough to kill a god – that much was certain. The Norse gods were famously fickle, willing to reward those who’d proved themselves in combat and wisdom and shamelessly cruel with those they deemed to be “unworthy.”

Hopefully no blood would need be shed in the immediate future.

The Goa’uld accepted similar seats, forming a semi-circle around me as though we were holding court. I noted that they took care to place themselves lower on the slope so that their heads did not rise above mine, maintaining a visible hierarchy of scale. Xin snorted in disgust, walking down the catwalk to stand next to O’Neil and his companions.
“We were fresh out of thrones.” O’Neill jibed. “Next time you’re planning on waving the white flag try to give some advanced notice so we can roll out the red carpet.”

Another joke at my expense, I smiled behind the mask. I was, for intents and purposes, the big bad supernatural baddie on campus and here he was - mocking me. Just another vanilla mortal, and he was willing to go toe to toe with one of the old gods. I quirked my lip up slightly, well – mostly vanilla anyway.

When the graying man shook my hand back on the ship it set my teeth on edge. O’Neill would have likely made a decent Wizard some thirty years ago. He had been born with some degree of talent, perhaps even real potential – but even the strongest of magical talents will wither if they aren’t properly nurtured at a formative age. O’Neill’s abilities were only a shadow of what they might have been. It was a shame really, I would have enjoyed watching him drive the White Council nuts.

His latent talents would help him as a solder, giving him brief moments of preternatural insight. If he were naturally talented enough it might even be enough to interfere with technology to some degree.

Still – he didn't know that. Gotta give the man points for plucky sass.

“I will keep it in mind provided that you give me a bit of head’s up the next time you get it in your head to blow up a moon.” I intoned, doing my best to imitate Lara Raith’s demeanor. I wasn't going to pull off vampire sex god, but I could at least do a decent arrogant prick.

“Was that a joke?” The Colonel paused, tapping his left ear with his index and forefinger in a gesture of incredulity. “From a snake?”

“He does that from time to time.” Xin agreed. “It is not his most admirable quality.”

“Love you too Xin.” I tapped my hands to my mask’s lips, pretending to blow him a kiss.

“That’s just unsettling.” The Colonel cringed.

“I’m with the meat on this one.” Ammit’s hissing laughter punctuated every syllable of broken English. “That is not right.”

“Thank you for your support Ammit.” I sighed. “Your solidarity is overwhelming.”
“I haven’t killed anyone yet, have I?” Ammit chuckled. “A Goa’uld Lady should never be wholly demure. Where’s the fun in that?”

It took every ounce of wizardly training to resist yelling “You’re a woman?” At the top of my lungs in stereo with the Colonel. The mask, thankfully, concealed my expression of horror.

“Obviously.” Ammit replied in disgust.

“Ammit was the Demon responsible for consuming the souls of those not worthy of following Osiris and immortality.” Daniel interjected over his superior officer. “She was essentially the Ancient Egyptian bogeywoman.”

“Thousands of years inflicting the final death upon the blood born and that is all the mortals recall of my war. Even the monsters of Sun supported my campaigns at the end for fear of what might befall this world if the unspeakable were to reign supreme.” Ammit groused in Goa’uld. “We fought till the charnel mounds were piled a miles high at Göbekli Tepe to prevent the extinction of this place before The Betrayal. And the meat does not even remember that I’m a woman.”

“To the contrary – your role in the pantheon is basically one of the few we remember most clearly.” The scholar offered in placation. “I meant no disrespect.”

The goddess laughed. She smiled in what I assume was intended to be a benevolent way at Daniel. “Calm yourself, meat. I know you hold no special love for my kind but you’ve proved to be interesting so far. There is, after all, more than one type of hunger.”

Daniel swallowed in fear, his lips pinching together in his apparently hurry to interact with Ammit as little as possible as the goddess.

“Ammit – do you have to play with your food in front of us?” Enlil gagged, reverting to the language of the Goa’uld.

The goddess snorted in disgust, rolling her eyes skyward. “Yes, Enlil, because you are in a place to question my choice in partners. How is your mate? Still trying to kill you?”

“Stars and stones, will you stop bickering in front of the mortals?” I shook my head. “It ruins the aesthetic.”
“He started it.” Growled the irritated goddess.

Her sulking abated somewhat as a cart strewn with cardboard boxes wheeled into the room. For a top-secret government based hidden in the rough-hewn heart of a mountain, Stargate Command had remarkably quick access to Pizza.

“You realize of course, that you won’t be able to have any of that,” Chuckled my hell born hitchhiker.

I’m not going to lie. When I realized that I wouldn’t be able to actually eat the Pizza without taking off my mask a little part of me died. Yes, yes – I know that it should have occurred to long before the stack of cardboard boxes arrived, but I was just so damn happy to be back on Earth that I let my guard down. This was home, Terra Firma.

It was also where the White Council was.

“Stars and stones,” I gritted my teeth. “Of course.”

There was no way I could risk letting these people see my face. The building was lousy with cameras, and I wouldn’t be able to disable them without potentially getting myself murdered in the process. These mortals knew enough about the old gods that frying a camera would raise major alarm bells.

I had no way of knowing how deep the White Council and other supernatural communities were able to draw from the American Military, but it would only take one shot of his face to get the doom of Damocles dropped on his unsuspecting past self. Hell, even if I didn’t get recognized by the White Council it wasn’t like they’d have to go out of their way to find me. I was on freaking Larry Fowler in an incident that had spawned a series of lawsuits the tabloids found too funny to ignore. “TV host sues Chicago based Wizard over alleged curse related property damage” wasn’t something to pass by the wayside.

This wasn’t exactly going to require the entirety of the US military’s covert operations to find me, I was listed in the damn yellow pages. Hell’s Bells, we were back in the time period when I passed out business cards with my photo on them too.

Don’t get me wrong. Without just the light dusting of stubble on the top of my head I wasn’t exactly easily recognizable, but I wasn’t different enough for it to do matter. I certainly wasn’t different enough to fool whatever facial recognition software they had.
Ammit, bound by no such compunctions, ate a box – cardboard and all – in the space it took me to reconcile myself with the idea of taking a single pie and just saving it for later.

Enlil cracked one of the boxes and eyed the circle tentatively. He raised the slice to his lips, taking a cautious bite before shoving the slice unceremoniously down his throat. "This is marvelous! I'll have to instruct my cooks to replicate it at once."

Atreus refrained from consuming the food, eyes fixed upon the still unopened box in my hands. He watched the food entering Enlil's mouth in apprehension, seemingly expecting the man to keel over dead after every bite.

I locked eyes with the massive black Jaffa who'd been scrupulously silent since my declaration that I was not a god. "Will you not eat?"

He growled by way of reply. "I do not break bread with false gods."

I laughed. "You know, I think you're the first Jaffa I've met who isn't trying to worship me."

"The first of many, I assure you." The man intoned.

"I'm not that lucky," I sighed, turning to the sudden pillars of light forming behind me to reveal the Stargate and a handful of humanoid figures, Thor, Ul'tak and a number of humans.

"Wow," The Colonel walked up to the tiny god. "That was fast."

"No." Thor said. "It was not."

"You were gone for an hour, tops." O'Neill snorted.
“Time is… fluid.” Thor replied. “We required several weeks to be thorough in our examination of
the Jaffa and refugees. So I created a pocket of time in which two months passed in the time since we
last spoke.”

“Can I just say that I would really like to know how you do stuff like that?” O’Neill replied, waving
off Atreus before he could speak. “Yeah, yeah, protected planet’s treaty. Humans exist to serve
snakes. I read the pamphlet.”

Thor blinked for a moment before continuing, his emotions inscrutable.

“I have assessed the situation O’Neill.” The tiny grey man intoned. “I gave all those who wished
leave the Goa’uld the opportunity to leave.”

“That is in violation of the Treaty.” Enlil barked, furious at the Asguard.

“It was the offered conditions of your surrender as spoken by your liege lord Dre’su’den. All Jaffa
and humans were freed of their existing bonds of slavery.” I could swear the little grey guy was
smirking. “Conditions you witnessed being offered. Should you have issue with the terms I would be
happy to return my previous solution.”

“We are hap-hap-happy with your methods there shorty.” I raised my palms, splaying my fingers
non-threateningly. Well, as non-threatening as one can manage with talons, I suppose.

“Ah,” O’Neill smirked, looking at the single Jaffa and motley mess of humans. “Down to just the
faithful are we?”

“You misunderstand, O’Neill.” The Norse God intoned in a voice of outright incredulity. “The
humans behind Dre’su’den’s first prime are those who wish to leave his service.”

Xin sighed, apparently expecting something of the sort. The dark skinned Jaffa arched his brow,
staring at Ul’tak with an unreadable expression.

“But, that’s a Goa’uld mother ship. A freaking flagship, and it was full to the brim with refugees.”
The Colonel blinked.
“Correct.” Replied Thor.

“They do know they have the opportunity to be free right? Sans snake?” O’Neill shook his head. “I mean, I know you’re treading on thin ground with the treaty thing and all, but you did tell them?”

My first prime smiled with pride. “We know our faith Tau’ri. We know where we belong.”

“O’Neill, I cannot prevent them from exercising their free will. Much as I may wish to leave them all in your care, the human vassals of Dre’su’den have implicit faith in their god’s word.” Thor shook his oversize head.

“The meat knows its place.” Ammit growled in amusement.

“Thor, couldn’t you give me some time to talk with them? To negotiate?” The bespectacled man inquired.

Thor shook his head. “Even if I wanted to – I am unable. My presence has not gone unnoticed and a third party has become interested in this proceeding. I wish to have this resolved before they break through my precautions and decide to interfere.”

“Who?” Atreus tugged at his neatly trimmed hair.

“If you are eager to discover, you can chose to remain. I am certain they’re eager to remind you why you left the first world.” Thor looked Ammit in the eyes. “There are creatures with longer memories and longer grudges on this world.”

“Oh fuck.” Ammit’s eyes bugged in apparent recognition as she hissed in Goa’uld. “Him?”

“Among others.” Thor replied. “He is still furious for denying him his prey. I have stalled his attempts at discovering you so far, but he is persistent and my power is not limitless.”

“Well what you do know! I’d say it’s about time to get the hell off this rock and never come back.” Ammit discarded her boxes. “Now. Somewhere in the realm of now would be fantastic.”
“I thought as much.” Thor pointed to the gate, summoning a pool of iridescent blue liquid which burst into reality with a shuddering corona of light and sound.

I wanted to scream at how overwhelming it was to be in the room with it. It was a vortex of power beyond my ken, utterly savage and primal. I feared that I might drown simply by standing next to it, so nightmarishly vast was its magnitude.

It’s hard to describe what magic is like to someone who hasn’t experienced it. Imagine trying to explain blue to someone unable to see. I know that there’s a range of light and radiation which define blue, but that isn’t what blue is to me. It’s a feeling I get when I see it, it’s all the moments in time tied up with all the magnificent shades and hues capable of representing the range of human emotions.

Seeing that disc of energy, even without my wizard’s sight, was like seeing a color I’d never seen before. Knowing how much energy had to go into translocating someone across the galaxy just didn’t convey to sheer awe-inspiring certainty of being in a room with that much power.

Hell’s Bells, someone could blow up the planet with that much power. Someone could blow up more than a planet.

The gods with me sauntered through as though it were the most normal thing in the word, no more thrilled by its impossible nature than they had been by the pizza. I shuddered. My powers as a Wizard gave me an advantage but there was still a galaxy worth of power beyond my wildest dreams.

Somehow I always imagined being declared a god would make you feel stronger, not weaker, in comparison to the rest of the world. Thousands of people worshiping me, and here I was – quaking in fear at the intergalactic superhighway.

“Are you well milord Warden?” Ul’Tak queried. “I am ready to leave when you are.”

“Yes,” I gulped. “Of course.”

Seeking to delay my departure I turned to Xin, “You coming?”
“Not if I had to claw through the kingdoms of Sun and Snow with both arms tied behind me saying “yes” to every deal offered by the denizens therein.” Xin replied.

Well, shit, there went that excuse for hanging around to talk.

“If it’s any consolation the gate is harmless, my host.” Lasciel replied. “The Labors of Eden are rarely known to malfunction without outside interference.”

Rarely?

“I wouldn’t worry – had the device malfunctioned in a dangerous way we wouldn’t be able to stand around discussing it.”

Well, that was ominous.

“More than you could possibly know, wizard mine.” Lash laughed.

Well, no time like the present.

“Bonsai,” I muttered, leaping into the gate.

I wish I had something cool to say about traveling across the galaxy through a ritual tear in the universe. I wish I could tell you it was like something out of Kubrick’s oeuvre with flashing lights and a cool soundtrack backing it. It’s not.

It’s not really anything. It’s more like having someone surprise you with a flash picture and dunk you in cold water that dries instantly, while kicking you in the gut a couple times good measure. A half a second of blinding white and I got kicked out the other end like I’d walked on the wrong side of a mule, shivering from cold and shaking a layer of frost off my armor. My hands cracked loudly against the floor against the heavy stones set into my gauntlets. The foci and magical objects which had been stripped from me by Thor apparently returned to me – though by what sorcery I didn’t even dare to guess.

“Yahooo!” Bob yelled in apparent glee. The trip suited him better than me.
I stood up in just enough time to watch Ul’tak walk through the gate as though he were crossing the street, without any signs of disorientation at having been flung through time and space. It was Thomas all over again. The supernatural beasties got to look graceful while your humble wizards got tossed on their asses.

My mask’s optics shut down to protect me from the blinding flash of light to the south, switching to some odd green rendering of the world around me. Swearing about useless technology, I rose to my feet in just enough time to fall on my ass again as the building shook, a rumbling crack of booming thunder accompanying a distant plume of atomic flames rising in the all too familiar mushroom cloud.

I picked up my staff weapon from the floor, staring dumbfounded at a skyline simply covered in rising plumes of death and horror. Ten? Twelve? Twenty? Stars and stones – I couldn’t even conceive of how much death was being caused.

I turned to U’tak’s emotionless face, trying to find the words one might say to someone who’s homeland had just been ravaged. I found none, but was granted reprieve in the way of a trio of unfamiliar Jaffa rushing into the room brandishing swords. “Death to the false god Heka!”

I clutched the staff, summoning a gust of wind to cut their legs out from under them. Atreus stabbed down with his blade, gutting the one before decapitating the other. The third Jaffa was not so fortunate. Ammit grabbed him by his shoulders and tore his neck out with her teeth, laughing uproariously as she yanked a snake like creature from the man’s belly and swallowed it.

“Blood of the elders – are Apophis’ forces here already?” Atreus shielded his eyes from the distant glare with his palm as a shimmering dome of energy formed around the capitol city to shield it from the radiation and debris.

“Not for weeks. Nobody can conquer an Empire that fast.” Ammit replied in confusion.

“Are they the cult of Sokar taking revenge?” Enlil shivered at the thought, and with good cause. I found myself considering the subject of Sokar’s minions with precision beyond what should have been expected of a topic to which I’d never previously been introduced. The literal Satan worshipers of the cult of Sokar were the CIA as run by Lucifer. Sokar had been fond of seeding his secret cults into his population centers, sowing chaos and ruin upon those who might have wished him harm.

There were likely some cultists of Sokar on the planet but they were not likely to be in positions of
power. Sokar had been a consummate misogynist, meaning that his covert priesthood was exclusively male – at least where leadership was concerned. The creation of Heka’s priestesses was done to intentionally undermine the cult of Sokar’s ability to gain a foothold. Heka’s slaves simply weren’t conditioned to accept male priests in the higher echelons of the priesthood.

More than one frustrated saboteur had hit an impenetrable wall that no combination of appeals to logic could overcome. How could the priests of Sokar understand the words of a true god? That was a woman’s work.

“Not Apophis.” I agreed, a wave of alien memories flooding to the forefront of my mind as I recognized the Jaffa branding marks on their foreheads. “And not cultists of Sokar. Chronos – he has coveted the contents of the Great Library for millennia. If he thinks I no longer have military support, he’ll commit his domains to fighting us for what the library holds.”

Atreus’s lip curled as his hand found the pommel of his sword. “Titian bastard.”

I wave of inhuman rage welled in the pit of my stomach. These pathetic excuses for gods thought they could oust me when their own brood was crippled by the fledgling progeny of Zeus? I would rip them to shreds.

“Harry” The voice in my head hissed – partly irritated but mostly in pain – speaking with the most clarity she could muster under the circumstances. “This is not you. The spell – the spell is breaking.”

I would… oh stars and stones, what time was it?

I pulled out my wrist computer and activated its watch function, setting it to local time based off of the planetary network.

No, no, no, no, no-no-no-no – this was bad. I hadn’t accounted for how long we spent in the Nevernever. Stupid Harry – just stupid and sloppy. I’d let being back on Earth distract me from my mission. Now I had just under two hours to make it all right.

“Less,” Lasciel groaned in pain. “Harry, the spells keeping Heka’s memories bound have been slowly eroding but as we get closer to her deadline we will get stronger echoes of his personality in your mind. I cannot suppress them all. Even if they do not overwhelm you entirely I cannot promise you won’t do something unforgivable in the meanwhile.”

“Shit.” I looked down at Bob. “You have a gate address for me yet?”
“I’ve got coordinates Boss, I’m going to need access to a computer to turn those into an address. Not just any computer either, I need one of the Goa’uld military databases. One of Heka’s private ones.”

Of course.

Ul’tak held a communicator up to his ear, listening to a report from the front lines. His face darkened with every muffled syllable. “Chronos has managed to punch a line through our satellite defense web. He has a narrow window of entry to the south of the main city, but it’s more than enough to land his army. It will only get wider as his Ha’tak weaken our fleet. We are cut off from the other cities by nuclear radiation and I can’t guarantee any reinforcements from off-world. General Tak’mok sent the bulk of your armies elsewhere to prevent an incursion by Lord Yu in your outer holdings.”

“A diversion?” Asked Atreus.

“No,” Ammit shook her head. “Likely just unfortunate timing. Those System Lords despise each other enough that they wouldn’t engage in a joint mission of that type. Lord Yu is just one of the few gods with sufficient forces to expand into this section of space.”

“My lord, we must coordinate the automated defenses or our troops will be overwhelmed.” Ul’tak hissed in horror as artillery scoured the surrounding settlements. The collective screams of horror from millions echoed through the city streets, “They will soon overcome the machine mind’s machinations. It is old and unused to war.”

I looked wistfully to the gate, wondering if I could negotiate with the humans for the use of their Stargate only to have my hopes dashed as the blue portal rippled. My heart sank as a procession of humans and Jaffa started filing into the Gate chamber. My borrowed memories informed me that there would be no way to open the gate till the thousands of people who’d been on my ship made their way across the stars.

“How many of his Jaffa will be in the city?” I sighed, committing myself to the task before me.

“A few assault craft will have gotten in before we could raise defensive screen. A few hundred at most.” Enlil shook his head. “But we have to assume there are saboteurs among your Jaffa and slaves. There always are in a planetary population of this size.”

“Just freaking perfect.” I sighed. “And they’re all going to be heading for the place we are?”

“The defenses of the Capitol can only be operated by a god, and you –uh – Heka had no lieutenants he trusted with the necessary controls over the defenses of the Library complex.” Ul’tak replied. “This was the first departure from his world since the fall of Sokar’s dominion.”

“On the bright side we only have to fight our way through your palace this time.” Ammit smiled a shark like grin. “Not the entire planet.”
“No, this time we get to do that after.” Atreus’ grin was somehow more predatory than the inhuman Ammit.”

“We have nothing to fear with a true god on our side.” Ul’tak saluted me in the traditional Jaffa way as a sudden influx of people started filing through the watery portal of the Stargate.

The refugees, led by my head priestess Muminah.

“A good thing you saved them after all.” Enlil admitted. “It will take at least thirty minutes to get them all through the gate, and the Asguard have some way of dialing a gate without the gate needing to plot coordinates that we’ve never managed to recreate. Blood of Apep – Chronos won’t be able to get anyone through that gate for at least an hour.”

“I swear this couldn’t have worked out more in your favor if you’d planned it…. In advance.”

He looked at me in a new light, apparently horrified that I very well might have done so. I was, after all, a member of the pantheon of Old Gods – and the gods were never as incautious or brash as I had been. No, a Goa’uld never chose to act unless they were guaranteed victory or the prize were so valuable that sensibility could be discarded.

I elected not to correct whatever impossible scenarios were forming in his head as I gritted my teeth forming my own – while Chronos wouldn’t be able to deploy his forces through the Stargate while my people disembarked, nor would we be able to enter it to reach the key.

“Priorities Harry,” I reminded myself as another ten plumes rose in the distance. “Priorities.”

Save the planet first, then worry about going crazy.

My high priestess practically sprinted over to kneel before me, kissing the ground in front of me as she gushed her praises. “Lord Warden you are truly the mightiest of gods to bind the demons of the Asgard to test your faithful. But we are not weak – those who follow me are your true believers. Warriors and servants who could not be swayed from your truth and glory.”

“Just – just stand up.” I sighed. “You know I hate it when you kneel.”

“Yes my Lord Warden,” The Priestess rose, still keeping her eyes averted.

“The false god spoke lies, promising us that you held no salvation for us – but we know the truth. We are saved by our own righteous deeds. A man is saved by his own hands.” Spoke Amun, dressed in some sort of ceremonial robe I’d never seen before. The man was moving up in the world.
“Tell you what – we manage to survive and you can tell me all about your time with bug eyes.” I sighed, thankful that the Jaffa were being sent through the portal before the mortals. “We’re in the middle of a war at the moment.”

“We’re always at war,” Grumbled the Ancient Jaffa. “Who’s the damn fool trying to kill us this time?”

“Chronos,” Ul’tak supplied.

“Damnation,” The ancient Jaffa spat on the ground. “The first fleet?”

“They’re nuking first, so I’d assume the second.” Ul’tak shook his head. “Were Chronos himself leading the battle we’d have seen his image cast across the skies before he used weather sorcery to turn the planet against us. His appointed General Praxiteles was fond of bombardment prior to invasions – so I’d assume it was the Praxiteles and the second fleet.”

“Damn – it would be easier if Chronos were here.” Atreus swore angrily. “They won’t willingly retreat. We’ll have to fight them to the last man even if we can turn this battle around. Chronos kills the families of coward generals and their men.”

“Preposterous,” Enlil gagged in disgust. “Jaffa are not allowed to conquer a god.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Chronos himself will deign to arrive after the battle is won to accept the defeated god’s surrender and “punish” any Jaffa unfortunate enough to have denied him his prey.” Atreus’ face was an utter portrait of disgust. “He has always been so good at taking credit for the work of others.”

“We need to start moving,” I said as it dawned on me that however voluminous the gate room was, it wouldn’t be large enough to accommodate entire army of Jaffa and refugees.

I looked at the Ancient Jaffa and my Priestesses, “I’m taking those Jaffa who’ve already come through the gate and securing the control room.”

I looked at the other Gods. “We are going to kick Chronos’ ass. You are going to help me. If we
survive you get to leave. If any of you even think about double crossing me and trying to win favors with Chronos, I swear that I will spend my death curse making sure that you are more powerless than the weakest mortal of all time then trap you in the Winter Court. Am I understood?"

“Ha.” Ammit snorted. “As if any of us would survive Chronos’ displeasure. You know that he’s been gunning for me for more than a Millennia. The bastard still hasn’t forgiven me for helping Zeus and his boys boot his ass off the first world.”

“He was going to squander the planet’s greatest resources.” Atreus nodded. “Culling the Hok’tar en mass – it’s no wonder they formed their alliance.”

“If he’d been successful in controlling the breeding population we’d still have the first world.” Enlil disagreed.

“If he’d been successful we’d have been overwhelmed by the predatory species of that planet. The only thing keeping the courts in check was the Hok’tar. Remove them and suddenly the alpha predators become a lot less reasonable.” Ammit shook her head. “You left before the dark pacts began. No, all he managed to do was unite the predators against us. Never get the monsters all hungry for your blood at once – there are many more of them than you.”

“Let us teach Chronos that lesson for a second time.” Atreus laughed holding his sword aloft as a plume of sorcerous fire emanated from its blade, more unfamiliar magic. “For he has raised the warrior’s blood of God and man alike.”

I laughed, “To heck with it. Let’s go give these guys a new monster story.”

So we marched, leading my Jaffa as they shouted their war cry of, “Dre’su’den, Dre’su’den, Dre’su’den the Ha’ri!”
“Are the Jaffa ready?” I growled, knowing they were even before Ul’tak’s reply. This was their homeland, their people. Failure was not an option.

“They are escorting your Tau’ri into bunkers in groups and re-enforcing the city defenses.” Ul’tak nodded. “The gate guards are in place, ready to place a cover stone over it once the last of your Tau’ri make it through.”

He looked at the cadre of Jaffa elite surrounding me, pride glinting in his eyes. “And we stand ready for the push my Lord Warden.”

Under different circumstances I might well have appreciated just how damn cool I had to look leading an army of old gods and super-human soldiers on a charge through the bowels of an Egyptian temple to defeat the minions of a Titan. As it was I was just too damn angry to do much more than contemplate setting someone on fire.

I was livid, totally and utterly incandescent with fury. Heka’s voice pounded in my ears, whispering in staccato bouts of temper, “defilers, betrayers, you shall be obliterated!” but Heka’s rage was paltry in comparison to a rage that was 100% Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden.

Wizards don’t get to do a lot of the things mortals get to do. Watch TV for example, I’d short out an electronic device like a TV or VCR in a matter of days if not hours. I can go to the movies on occasion, but by and large my life is devoid of screens.

So I read. I read a lot – like way more than even you’d expect from even a wizard. I always have.

I study. I learn. I remember.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki were sort of perverse fixations of mine after killing Justin DuMorne. I couldn’t tell you why exactly, the photos and stories made me sick to my stomach every time I read through them. They were terrible, evil even, but the history books in Ebenezer McCoy’s library had argued for the necessity of the act. They claimed that the death of hundreds of thousands had saved millions.

Hundreds of thousands – more people than I’d ever met in my entire life. When I killed Justin it was
because I knew that the alternative would be death or worse. There had seemed to be no other options but kill or be killed. The men who chose to bomb Japan had been left with that same mathematics of death on a level I did not envy, choosing a “least worse” choice that would have been no less soul crushing to live with.

I wondered if they had nightmares about it the way that Justin haunted mine. I marveled at how they lived with it when I was struggling to live with the death of a single man on my soul. Perhaps I was looking for something to justify my own choice of violence – accept the darkness I carried in me for having done something so terrible.

I’ve killed people since then, most were more likeable and less deserving of their deaths than Justin had been. But I do so only when necessary. I do so only when I see no alternative.

And here I was, looking into death on a scale heretofore unimagined. I twitched every time light flashed through the windows, another atomic hitting the planet’s surface to scar it with nuclear death. Nagasaki a thousand times over hitting the planet with casual ease. I hadn’t asked Ul’Tak how populated the sprawling city suburbs outside the city walls and energy shields had been. I didn’t think I had the stomach for it at the moment.


They would be praying to their “god” – to me – looking for some sort of divine miracle to save them and their loved ones. How many would be screaming for mercy? How many would beg me for succor in their last breath? How many would curse me their suffering?

“This ends – now.” I snarled, leading the charge.

Nekheb was a war zone, even within the confines of my palace. Loyalist Jaffa and insurgents of Chronos fought tooth and nail for every inch of the great temple, coating the marble floors with scorch marks and viscera.

And bodies – their were so many bodies. A serving girl looked up at me with eyes clouded by death, judging me for not having reached her soon enough, just one of the hundreds of bodies littering the ground. Men, women, children, they’d all been slaughtered like cattle. Huddled masses of charnel sat smoking in corners where the old had resorted to protecting their young with their own bodies.
Dead, they were all dead.

The first Jaffa of Chronos to stumble into my view was injured, clutching his side from where he’d taken a staff blast to the chest. Shell shocked from whatever battle he’d just been in, he wasn’t able to raise his arms quick enough to protect his face. The bulbous flowering end of my staff-weapon hit his face with a satisfying squelch of flesh and bone, pulping under the strain of my enhanced strength.

The Jaffa seconds behind him was uninjured but no more prepared for my wrath. I charged him, planting my shoulder in his chest as I summoned a gust of wind to propel myself forward. He shouted in pained dismay as we rocketed into the courtyard beyond, tossing him ass over elbows into a tall tree. I dodged left, avoiding the blade of another Jaffa. He managed to get off a single epithet in the Jaffa tongue before a staff blast tore through his chest, killing him soundly.

Ul’tak whooped in victory, peppering the spots where Chrono’s insurgents were dug into my palace. His men’s cries of glory, however, were dwarfed by Ammit’s howling roar as she superman leaped her way over a stone wall into a group of three Jaffa. The poor bastards didn’t know what hit them.

A whirling dervish of claws and teeth, the lizard woman’s green skin was soon stained red with the blood of her kills. I did not consider the god’s gleeful combat cannibalism for long; raising my shield bracelet as a wave of staff blasts soared in my direction. The yellow balls of energy twisted off inverted blue dome of magic, ricocheting haphazardly back towards the men who’d fired them. The Jaffa howled in confusing as their own staff blasts burst across their ranks, killing those not fast enough to dodge.

Not that dodging did them any real good. Quick as a snake, Atreus rounded on the Titan’s minions. His flaming blade aloft, he descended like an avenging angel. Sorcerous plumes of fire swirled around him, buffeting away staff blasts and searing through Jaffa armor as though it were tissue paper.

So entrancing was his swordplay that I didn’t notice when the Jaffa I’d treed took a swing at me with his dagger, planting it firmly in my pauldron. Surprised but intact, I hit him with a blast from my foci – crushing his rib cage inwards. He fell to the ground, blood leaking from his lips and eyes.

“Hurry Warden,” Enlil shouted from the opposite end of the courtyard where he was fiddling with the crystals of a door, his eye’s turned skyward. “We must move before reinforcement arrive.”

I followed his gaze and swore angrily. One of the Alkesh had been able to breach the defenses and was heading for the palace. Directly to us, no doubt, the Jaffa we’d killed were practically screaming
our location over their coms before Atreus cut them down.

There will be fifty troops in that, at minimum – hissed the sibilant memories of the dead god – perhaps another hundred. They wouldn’t just sit around once we blocked off the door to prevent them from following. They would spread out through the palace grounds and into the city, sowing as much chaos as they could. The Jaffa of Chronos are hooligans, untrustworthy savages serving an untrusting madman – the voice growled – Anyone too clever or competent is a threat, so he favors brutes incapable of any degree of lateral thinking. They will slaughter anything that they see – easily thousands of the slaves.

Could we take a hundred? Yes, but every second we spent fighting them was a second longer that the main defenses weren’t operating at full capacity, thus allowing hundreds more enemies into the city.

Kill thousands to save millions, it was an obvious choice. Heaven help me, but it was an obvious choice.

“Can you seal the door behind us?” I asked Enlil. “So they can’t get through.”

“No Lord Warden, I’m just tearing out command crystals for my own edification.” Enlil replied bitingly. “Of course I’m disabling the precursor cursed doors. If you’ll recall I am the one who’s plans don’t revolve around angering primal forces of creation in their home realm before challenging the Asgard to murder me.”

“Blood of Apep, you gripe more than the Tok’ra did.” Ammit jibed. “What are you, a woman?”

“Pardon me Demon – we don’t all revel in the glories of combat as you do.” Enlil’s face turned a shade of sickly green as the goddess started licking the blood and viscera from her fingers. “You’re worse than Heru’ur, I swear.”

“Ha,” Ammit snorted in amusement as Enlil managed to coax an additional blast shield to fall into place, further isolating us from the Jaffa of Chronos.

“Warden,” Atreus hissed, examining the corridor we stood within. “There is something amiss here.”

“Death is always wrong,” I agreed. The eviscerated corpses of Ul’tak’s soldiers lined the hall, charred and marred by weapon’s fire. Wait… Ul’tak’s Jaffa and only Ul’tak’s Jaffa lined the corridor. “Huh, that’s weird.”
“This makes no sense,” Ammit grumbled. “There aren’t any corpses from enemy troops. All these Jaffa are in the garb of Heka’s soldiers.”


“Jaffa convert to the god who is strongest.” Enlil replied in stern condescension. “Or the god who offers them the most.”

“Not my men.” Ul’tak’s eyes bulged as his skin colored with anger.

“Then they are saboteurs dressed in the armor of loyalists.” Atreus held his flaming blade up to get a better look at their heads. “No – wait, they bear the brands of Heka’s inner circle. That makes no sense.”

“Nishta?” Ammit queried.

“From Chronos?” Atreus shook his head. “Not his style. It’s the brand that’s bothering me.”

“What? You don’t brand your Jaffa?” Enlil snorted.

“Not with a blood ritual geas I don’t.” Atreus replied. “It’s not an accident that our Warden has lasted longer than anyone but Yu. Heka’s inner circle of Jaffa don’t betray their god. They can’t.”

Ammit smiled toothily, “The old Wizard has always favored permanent solutions to ensuring loyalty. Never bothered to share them with the rest of us either. I can’t tell you how much it used to piss off Ra that none of Heka’s palace guard could ever be talked into defecting. He never could quite accept that he wasn’t as good at casting as you are.”

“We would not betray our Lord, not even for the King of Gods, not for anything – even if some Shol’va desired it.” Ul’tak replied. “The consequences of knowingly betraying the Lord Warden would be… unpleasant.”
The ancient Jaffa mimed a head exploding, complete with “kapow” noise.

I looked around at the bodies, noting the distinct lack of heads exploding from the inside out. “These Jaffa definitely killed each other without their brands exploding.”

“How?” Ammit scratched her nose with a talon. “It’s not like you’re weaker now than you were for the past millennia.”

I shrugged, pretending not to know exactly why Heka’s protections were no longer valid. “There’s no security measure which can’t be defeated by someone sufficiently invested in breaking through. Breaking the enchantment hasn’t been done, but that doesn’t mean that it can’t be done.”

“So your loyalty spells might not be reliable any more?” Enlil’s eye twitched.

“For all I know he’s figured out some way to invert the Geas and turn it against me.” I examined the Jaffa tattoos with my wizard sight. Even in death they glowed with the faint traces of a magical geas – compelled to serve the dead lord of Nekheb. “It does us no good to stay here.”

“I like this less and less by the second.” Enlil groaned.

“You don’t have to like it.” I replied. “You do have to live with it.”

“That seems remarkably less likely to be a long term proposition with every passing second I spend in your company.” Enlil’s lip quirked in resigned amusement.

The hall shook, rumbling from the sound of a distant explosion. Ul’tak hissed, “That came from inside the palace.”

Indeed it had. We found a small cadre of Chrono’s sappers piling out of a gaping hole in the tiles of Heka’s throne room, covered in the filth and mire their subterranean path. They sat around their hole, heaving in exhaustion and coughing from the green fumes now seeping up from the scarred earth below. They were smaller than Chrono’s other Jaffa, looking almost sickly pale.

They had none of the other Jaffa’s apparent blood lust either. When their leader caught sight of me
he practically tripped over his men in his eagerness to flee. It did him remarkably little good – I caught him with a gust of wind, dragging his feet from under him with a loud “thwap” of flesh on stone as his face made contact.

“Don’t kill them.” I growled, a pleased metallic twinge coloring my voice as the Jaffa surrounded them. “Yet.”

I knelt down next to the sapper I’d incapacitated, slapping his face to bring him back into consciousness. His face was bleeding where he’d broken his nose, red-black fluid pouring out over a mess of scars and burns – including an especially cruel looking scar upon his forehead where a Jaffa brand had been excised from him.

“Legionnaires of Tartarus,” Atreus sighed. “Breath of Zeus, he brought penal Legionnaires.”

“They’re unarmed,” I commented idly as the man coughed up blood. “Why would he send in soldiers without weapons?”

“They’re not soldiers. They’re expendable pawns. He’ll give them just enough equipment to break through enemy lines and tie up resources while the real assault is coming...” He looked down at the pit in horror “… blood of Apep… he wouldn’t…”

“It comes.” The concussed Jaffa giggled madly through bloody lips. “It hungers. Scritch, scratch, snip, snap, hungering from the deep.”

A howling screech emanated from the pit, echoing through the ever-increasing clouds of bilious green smoke. The sound of thick claws scratching on stone echoed through the morass.

“What in the blazes is that!” Enlil screamed in horror as a mess of serpents stared up at us from the dark. A massive beast lurched up from the darkness, howling in predatory glee.

“A Hydra? Chronos sent a Hydra?” Bob screeched indignantly as I dived behind a pillar, dragging the still giggling sapper with me. “They’re supposed to be extinct!”

“Tatarus is home to all that should not be,” The mad Jaffa sobbed, clawing at his face with dirty fingernails. “And we are blessed with it’s sacred gods of suffering.”
That damnable planet of Chronos is worse than Netu – hissed the voice – who knows what monsters and madmen lie within.

“Oh for the love of – does every single Goa’uld have a hell planet? I growled in irritation as a jet of acid spouted across where I’d been, dissolving marble with alarming ease.

My Jaffa fired staff blast after staff blast into the beast, but may as well have been shouting rude words at it. The thick hide of the beast puckered and hissed with each blast, but the beast seemed to be more irritated than actually injured. It charged my Jaffa, loping forward with its bulbous body and stumpy legs to wrap it’s heads around an unfortunate Jaffa warrior. A dozen serpents tore at his flesh, acidic maws devouring flesh and armor with impunity. The beast’s chattering maws almost drowned out the pained man’s screams.

“How do I kill this thing?” I tried shooting it with my Zat, to no effect. The lightning just shimmered across the creature’s sides, flickering through the clouds of venom billowing from the creature’s many mouths.

“How should I know! They’re not supposed to even exist any more.” Bob replied. “Everything about them says that they basically can’t be killed.”

“Hell’s bells - Then how did they go extinct the first time?” I replied, keenly aware that the pillar I was sheltering myself behind was melting.

“Because Zeus’ First Primes have killed them all, of course.” Atreus replied. “The blood of Heracles take personal offense to the monsters of Tartarus – as do I. The beast must die.”

“I’m open to suggestions.” I replied, shooting the madman with my Zat to silence his squealing prayers to the Hydra.

Atreus laughed, the same manic glint in his eyes that I’d seen after he fought the whelplings. “We slice it to bits then burn it to cinders.”

Fire? Oh yeah – I can do fire. “Works for me.”
“Get over here you overgrown ente!” Hollered the infuriated voice of Ammit as the goddess grabbed one of the beast’s heads in her taloned fist, yanking it away from one of my Jaffa. It dropped its partially chewed meal in abject shock as Ammit bit down on one if its necks, severing a head in her gaping maw. She fell to the ground, coughing up fetid black flesh and acidic ichor, screaming in pain as her own luminous green blood seeped through sores on her face and mouth.

Taking advantage of its momentary confusion, Atreus rushed in, slicing another head at the shoulder with his ensorcelled blade. The beast howled in confusion as its flesh hissed and cooked in the blade’s wake.

The greek godling wheeled through the air, knocked back as the furious beast whipped its seven remaining necks at him like a battering ram. It got little reprieve however, as my cry of “fuego” put it back on the defensive. I aimed my gout of flame towards the head severed by Ammit, cauterizing the wound that was already showing signs of sprouting into more heads.

Ammit, still seeping luminous green blood leapt upon the beast’s back, ripping at the creature’s flesh with her talons. Unfazed by either the creature’s acidic blood or her own dissolving flesh she tore out bowling ball-sized wedges of flesh, tearing down to the bone. The creature’s heads struggled to reach back to her, impotently snapping at her and spitting wild bursts of acid as she grabbed the beast’s exposed spine and ripped upward with all her might.

The beast’s legs and tail flopped lamely as she ripped a tire-sized section of bone and nerve from it, heaving it above her head before she fell to the floor – overwhelmed by agony. Ul’tak and the Ancient Jaffa grabbed her by her legs, dragging her unconscious body to safety as the terrified Hydra thrashed it’s heads in horrified writhing jerks – struggling to comprehend why its body no longer responded to its will.

Atreus’ blade came down on the lamed serpent’s necks like the fist of god – smiting three heads in an instant as I continued to sear the remaining four. The beast’s agonized howls were cut short with another two razor edged snicker-snacks of the Greek godling’s blade. Even after being cut from the body, however, the largest head continued to writhe and hiss, very much alive.

“Stars and stone, what does it take to get one of these things to admit that it’s dead?” I sighed.

“No clue,” Atreus admitted. “I’ve never actually killed one of them myself. The stories implied that the final head actually can’t be killed with force – only subdued till it starved.”

“If I may,” The Ancient Jaffa pointed to the sapper’s hole. I nodded. The confused expression on the beast’s largest head as it continued to writhe upon the floor like a broken anaconda after being severd
was nearly as satisfying as it’s terrified hissing whine as the ancient Jaffa kicked it into the chasm.

He pulled a fist sized metal egg from his belt, depressing a red button on it before letting it fall. There was a hissing rumble of collapsing stone as the passage imploded, burying the beast’s head beneath earth and stone.

“Heh,” Ammit’s cracked and broken face convulsed into what might well have been a smile. “That’ll show you who’s the damn food and who’s the predator.” She tried to stand up and swore angrily as she was forced to sit back down. “Blood of Apep that hurts.”

“That looks bad,” I kneeled down next to her, afraid to touch her. The goddess’ entire body was covered in glowing blood. Huge sections of her face and chest were burned away, exposing organs to the air. “Really bad.”

“Growing soft in your old age Warden?” Ammit coughed up a hunk of glowing viscera. “Didn’t know you cared.”

“I didn’t know you were dumb enough to jump towards the acid breathing nightmare.” I replied jokingly. Ammit was an evil body-snatching old god, but at this point she was my evil body-snatching old god. “Don’t you die on me now.”

“Heh, you aren’t that lucky Warden. I’ll be around to tell tales of your madness to your spawn centuries after one of your damn fool schemes has undone you.” She laughed bitterly. “It won’t be fun to heal these injuries – but I’ll live.”

“Just switch hosts you daft woman,” Enlil sighed. “There has to be a slave somewhere around here.”

Ammit’s eye’s flashed in fury. “This body has been mine since before we even found the Tau’ri. I am not abandoning it for the sake of expediency.”

“Why you insist upon bodies that can’t be healed with either the Sarcophagus or a Healing device…” Enlil sighed. “Fine then, stay and heal.”

“We have to move, Warden.” Atreus said – sounding more apologetic than commanding. “We cannot wait Ammit to heal.”
“That doesn’t mean we have to leave her alone,” I replied, knowing he was right. “Ul’tak?”

“Of course my Lord Warden.” Ul’tak nodded to three of our Jaffa Cadre. “Kel, Mekto, Zek – guard the Soul Eater with your lives.

“Hah – as though I haven’t weathered worse without allies. If I can endure ten years defending the final portal from the Blood Born then I can manage six hours against the minions of Chronos.” She winced in pain as she laughed at her own joke. “But I appreciate the gesture.”

I turned to the trio of Jaffa. “Get her to safety, a medical center or something– make sure that you don’t die, and protect any innocents you see along the way.”

“Hail Dre’su’den” They saluted me, carrying the agonized goddess between them.

“You should have demanded her service to you in exchange for your protection.” Enlil said with a degree of resignation that told me he knew I never would.

“Dre’su’den is a warrior like I, not a scheming lout like you.” Atreus replied with no small measure of respect. “Warriors do not betray their comrades in battle.”

“Chrysippius would disagree with your self assessment.” The venom in Enlil’s voice was nothing in comparison to that of Atreus’ reply.

“Speak the name of my brother again and I will cut you to ribbons, rules of hospitality be damned.” His hand tensed around his blade’s hilt.

“Stars and Stones – save it for the enemy would you?” Predators – ugh – it was exhausting to be surrounded by creatures constantly vying for supremacy. “How many are still alive?”

“The beast’s breath took over two thirds our number.” Ul’tak replied, waving to the corpses littering the floor. “We are twelve – including those you sent to protect the goddess. I would advise against fighting another Hydra if such a path is possible.”
“It’s not plan A” I replied. “How far are we from the control room?”

“The controls are in the library,” Ul’tak replied. “We need only activate your ring device at the foot of your throne and we’ll be there in an instant.”

“Then why the blazes didn’t we just ring there in the first place,” Enlil griped.

“Standard procedure is to disable all external ring travel without the proper authorizations.” Ul’tak replied. “Only those properly authorized can do so.”

“Wait – what?” Enlil blinked. “That’s not possible, ring devices can’t select if they want to accept an incoming traveler within a network. They’re on or off, there is no middle ground.”

“The sorceries of Nekheb are inferior to none.” Ul’tak replied with pride. “The Warden’s throne, and only the Warden’s throne may safely transport us to the Library.”

“What happens if someone else tries to use them?” I queried even as the horrible vision of exactly what happened popped up in my head.

“They get hurled into the land of Sun and Snow beneath this city, to the eternal battleground where they will be tossed through the doors of the nightmare children to spend eternity in the jaws of unending shadow.” The ancient Jaffa smiled, “Or worse.”

Hells bells – Heka did not fuck around. I didn’t know exactly what part of the Nevernever his palace opened into but considering that he’d been staging fights to the death for his amusement only inches from the smooth circular depression in the tile, I wasn’t in any hurry to find out.

“Even less pleasant than you think my host,” Lash intoned, genuine fear in her voice. “Worse than you can possibly imagine.”

The war eternal – Heka’s voice crackled with hatred and madness as he chanted – Death eternal. A field of bodies too wide to be seen, corpses turned into soldiers fighting the very men they once called brothers, you cannot survive in the land of gaping maws and gnashing teeth. Impossible geometries and twisting presence are beyond even gods and nightmares – tread not lest ye be seen.
Well, that was freaking ominous. “Lash, I’m really not liking the dead god singing songs of doom that only I can hear.”

“I’m filtering memories, my host,” Lasciel barked in irritation. “It is not an effort without difficulty and at times I must allow certain thoughts and feelings through to prioritize the suppression of less desirable urges. Or would you have preferred to incinerate Ammit for slowing you down?”

“But singing?” I replied.

“It’s… complicated.” I could outright feel the angel blushing. “Talking… talking is more of a mortal thing. It’s awkward and inarticulate. Angels don’t… before I – we – that is to say all Angels…”

“You used to sing.” I replied, realizing how bad things had to be getting for Lasciel to be allowing her to be slipping into habits from before her fall from grace. “Angels in Heaven always sing everything.”

“Yes,” She replied in an agonized tone that had nothing to do with her current exertions. “I used to sing… I always used to sing.”

“How bad is it?” I asked. “I mean, how screwed are we.”

“Praying would be wise, my host.” Lash replied. “I certainly am.”

Oh. Crap.

“Warden,” Ul’tak gently touched my shoulder, not even bothering to question with whom I’d been speaking. My bouts of apparent madness were common enough that he’d stopped questioning them. “We must go to the Library.”

“Yes, Library…” I agreed, thinking – hang in there Lash – as hard as I could. “We should go, immediately.”

Enlil muttered something under his breath, but I only caught the words “Lord Yu,” “senile,” and “doomed” in his constant whispered series of gripes and epithets as our group piled in to the ring transporter. A brilliant flash of light caught us and whisked us away to the entrance of the Library, face to face with an all to familiar snake faced horror.
Before Atreus even had the chance to yell, “Hydra!” a stone fist came down and grabbed the beast by its tail. A massive jackal headed statue lifted the beast, deceptively agile for a fifty-foot tall construct of diorite, and proceeded to beat the creature against the walls. The monster hissed in uncomprehending horror as its body crumpled into a pulverized mess of black-green flesh. The statue dropped the dead serpent upon the ground, stomping on it for good measure.


“My lord Warden!” A balding man covered in the tattoos of a scribe approached from behind the massive construct. “I knew you would not abandon us. We have been doing our best to reclaim the inner sanctum from the Shol’va, but even with the watchers our success has been limited.”

The jackal headed statue’s mouth opened, stone cracking and grumbling with arcane speech. Plumes of blue smoke rose from its nose and ears, crackling with incandescent light. The Scribe laughed. “Calm yourself friend, I meant no offense. We are grateful that you’ve woken from your slumbers to aid us. We would not have even gotten this far without your help.”

The giant statue’s mouth closed, stone lips upturning in pleased satisfaction. The Jackal was smiling.

“We need a status report Librarian ShaRw,” Ul’tak queried.

“The wisdom of Nekeb is safe.” The scribe replied. “The Watchers have managed to fight off those the wards will not keep away. The city’s heart is less so.”


“I am.” The scribe replied in an almost lazy tone. “The Generals went into the heart to commune with the Great Watcher in the hopes of appealing to its mercy even in your absence – a fool’s errand to awaken those who sleep – but something went wrong. We heard the sounds of Zatnikatel and the doors sealed. The Blood Mourners have been shooting anyone who approaches.”

“Ta’to’ir? A Shol’va?” Ul’tak said the words as though he feared they might explode his tongue for saying them. “How? A first prime of Heka – even a retired one – does not simply betray his god!”
“We have rather convincing evidence to the contrary.” The Ancient Jaffa replied. “Those were Blood Mourners in the hall downstairs. I’d wager Ta’to’ir is behind whatever is going on here. Chronos would have needed someone in the inner circle to find out when the Warden would be away.”

“Shol’va,” Ul’tak’s voice shook with rage. “Heretic. Traitor. He has condemned an entire planet!”

“I’d prefer to just stop him, all things considered.” The librarian, bowed to me. “If you please my Lord Warden.”

He waved his hand in front of the wall and I got a vague sense of magic pulsing from his fingers, the weakest of talents but it was there. The bricks melted away, exposing the great library beyond. “I would like order in my library.”

The library was in utter disarray. Powerful force fields shimmered across the stacks of books and scrolls, casting the room into a strange purple glow as Jaffa battled librarians and diorite statues. I ducked, narrowly avoiding a chunk of pulverized diorite as a massive statue crumbled into dust.

“Damn – Sov must be dead, that was one if his. Unless…” The librarian checked the tattoo on his arm, shifting the symbols around with his pinky. “…blessed be the gods, they don’t have someone with them who can unravel the weaves. The last thing I need is to have to kill one of my order.”

“Soul bound markings?” Bob whistled. “Yikes, I haven't seen those since… well since the first Egypt I suppose. I’ve never seen them used for this.” His eyes roved to the veritable army of green-black statues charging entrenched Jaffa warriors.

“Nor have I seen a spirit of the other side outside of a protective circle or a Shol’va in service of the god of Sorcery.” Replied the librarian with a degree of ease I’d yet to see from off-world humans. “Today is a day of many firsts. Mayhap we might exchange details when these savages aren’t turning my library into a war zone. Ideally after flensing them.”

“It never ceases to amaze me how protective you are of these old scrolls Sha’Rw.” Ul’tak snorted.

“You would be too, were you able to read them Ul’Tak.” The man replied. “Now get these bastards out of my library.”
I laughed. He was just a portly little man with tattoos, and here he was – ordering his god to smite the men who’d upset his word of books and contemplation.

And suddenly it just all seemed funny for some reason. The danger, where I was, the nukes, the battles, it was all hilarious. I erupted into hysterical laughter. I couldn’t help it. It wasn’t even clear what I found funny I just couldn’t stop laughing.

“Oh no, he’s finally cracked,” Enlil whispered in horror.

He was right. With a frightened whisper of, “I’m sorry my host. I’m so, so sorry.” from Lasciel reality all seemed to click into place. I felt the frost melting away from my soul as the cloying, sickly sweet taste of sulfurous honey filled my nostrils.

Mab’s protections were gone, and the world finally locked into view – everything made sense. For the first time in days, I was without guilt or doubt. You are the GOD of magic. CRUSH these ants.

The laughter wouldn’t stop, I laughed and laughed as it all got funnier with time. Chronos, Apophis, Baal – they were right to fear you. They will be crushed.

I ignored Lash’s horrified cry of “Harry!” as I rocketed towards the entrenched Jaffa, laughing like a madman. Blood pounded in my ears and hellfire soaked through my veins as I charged, a swirling corona of energy collecting at the tip of my staff as I shouted, “Fuego – maximo pyro fuego!”

I couldn’t tell you how many Jaffa there had been between me and the inner sanctum. Not because I never asked, but because there hadn’t been enough left of them to identify the bodies after cremation. Ul’tak insisted it had been fewer twenty, but we’ll never know for sure.

What I do know for sure is that as I stood in that room, laughing like a psychopath, Lasciel did something that she hadn’t done since first meeting me. She hurt me. She hurt me bad.

Time slowed to a crawl as I fell to my knees as unimaginable pain hit me. The feeling of being burned alive – the feeling that I’d had as I burned to death the first time. The Angel’s voice simmered with utter contempt, “Is this how you repay my efforts? Is this how you deal with the corruption of an old god? I’ve been battling the will of this usurper for days and you just crumble after a matter of moments.”
I winced as I felt the sensation of being punched in the gut, over and over again. “Years! You resisted my whispers and temptations for years. Seduction didn’t work. Logic didn’t work. Being tossed into near lethal danger didn’t work. Loving you didn’t work. But just a matter of seconds from some cut rate megalomaniac muttering in your ear and you crumble faster than Edith after the fall of Sodom.”

“You think you get to disrespect me like that?” I felt someone slapping me across the face with every word. “No. You. Don’t.”

“You will get your mind in order Wizard,” My eyes bulged as I felt what seemed suspiciously like the sensation of a knife pressed against my manhood. I didn’t know if Lasciel could reproduce pain I’d never actually felt, and I wasn’t eager to find out. “Or I will give you something more pressing to think about than the dying echoes of a forgotten god.”

I bared my teeth and stood up, the phantom knife still caressing my nethers. Who is she to speak with you like that? Pathetic little witch still too afraid to speak to Daddy about what she did wrong. No – this was not me these were not my thoughts.

“Good Wizard.” Focused by Lash’s will, my eyes focused on the still convulsing corpses in the pyre. “Look at them. Sear the image of the men you just killed in to your mind, into your soul. Feel their pain – remember the agony of dying in fire. Know that you did this too them.”

No! Hissed the voice of Heka in my mind as it struggled to be heard over the phantom sensations of boiling flesh. Not again! Not again!

“You killed them like pests. Living, thinking beings – they had wives and children. You are the one who orphans them today. You bear the mark of their deaths.” I felt the sensation of a woman’s breath in my ear. “These may deserve it, but will the next? And yes, my host, there will be a next if you allow these shadows to rule you.”

I was grateful for the mask to cover the tears in my eyes. Hells bells, what was I becoming? What had I let into me?

“Oh? Are we indulging in pity? Do we want to feel sorry for ourself?” The phantom knife jabbed against my person, sending an abrupt shock through me. “Too. Bad. I don’t have time to deal with sorting out the muddled mess of hitch-hiking crazy you call a head right now. So pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get into that room or so help me I will spend the time from now till your death.
slowing your perceptions of time so that every second you feel yourself burning alive will be like an eternity.”

I stood back up, struggling to remember how Harry Dresden was supposed to react. He felt so long ago – a shadow of a man. How had I ever been him? No. I WAS him.

Time snapped back into place as Lasciel’s modification of my perception disappeared.

“Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden.” I thought it as hard as I could. “I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden.”

The thought played on a loop, again and again “I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden” as I stepped past the smoldering ashes of Jaffa. It became easier to act every time I thought it. “I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden.”

The door to the inner sanctum was protected by a ward. Not the most complex ward I’d seen, but it would require more talent to unlock than any of the scribes or librarians possessed. A Wizard however would make quick work of it.

“I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden.” Echoed in my head as I pulled apart the bindings upon the portal to the inner chamber. “I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden.”

“Warden,” Atreus yelled from some distant corner of the library. “There are more Shol’va coming. Hurry with that door!”

“I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden.” The thoughts bolstered my will with every iteration, the power of my self re-enforcing my will over the fragments of Heka. “I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. I am Warden Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden.”

The last of the wards broke with a curious “pop” of purple flames, ancient enchantments unbound. I pushed the doors open, walking into a circular chamber. Before Ul’tak or any of my other companions could follow me through, a barrier of energy snapped into place behind me.
Not that it mattered. This would not be a battle of strength. I could see that immediately. At the chamber’s center sat a pool of shimmering green water, in front of which stood a single decrepit Jaffa.

The man could barely stand, let alone fight. His milky eyes were clouded by either disease or some old war wound, though not so clouded as to prevent him from seeing me. His voice cracked with disgust. “So the liar presents himself.”

How dare you strike against me - Heka’s mind bristled in fury.

“I presume that I have you to thank for the Army proceeding to nuke the planet?” I sighed. “For the war claiming thousands?”

“Indeed” Replied the Jaffa, pride in his voice.

“Why?”

“Because I knew the will of my god. And you are not he.” The Jaffa replied. “I served Heka as First Prime for five hundred years before Ul’tak replaced me, I stood by his bed. I listened to his wisdom. I cleaned up after his dalliances. I knew Heka better than the God may have known himself. But even after all that I had hoped that perhaps I was wrong, that you were my god’s true face. But I could not cast aside my faith for the seductions of a false god. So I doubted – and wisely so. When I came here after your “ascension” I had my proof. I knew without a doubt that you were not my god.”

Heretic! Defiler! Fool – the shadow of the beast raged against my mantra of “I am Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden.”

“I never claimed to be.” I replied. “Not once.”

“Your claim that it was a lie of omission does remarkably little good for your case.” The Jaffa snorted. “They believe that you are he. You have taken his place. That is enough. I know not how you killed my master and took his place, but your treachery will not be allowed.”

“I don’t understand this. These are your people. This is your planet. How can you let them die?” I shook my head. “This is evil.”
This is betrayal at its worst. This must not be allowed. – Ok, my mantra was somewhat less enthusiastic at that one.

“This is justice.” The old man hissed. “This world was Heka’s. These people his slaves. If my god lies dead, we should burn with him. I will turn this palace into his necropolis so that we can accompany him into the afterlife. I will bring you as a prize for my master, so that he might spend eternity amusing himself with your screams.”

“Buddy, you can barely stand let alone fight.” I snorted. “What are you going to do? Leer me to death?”

The Jaffa chuckled. “My value was beyond question. My loyalty is beyond reproach. I was educated in that which none other would be taught – I knew the secret of waking the heart of Nekheb.”

Shol’va! – Heka howled over my mantra.

He waved to the corpses of Jaffa generals upon the floor as a massive shape bubbled up from the center of the pool. “So I used to it crush them for their treachery, just as I will crush you.”

What I had initially assumed to be liquid was in fact an entity of some sort. The liquid shimmered from purple to something resembling dark wine or freshly spilt blood, congealing and coalescing into something vaguely humanoid. It’s many limbs were too long and unbalanced, shambling messes of hands and fingers built around a twisting body topped with two heads – a lion and a falcon.

“Boss… I do not think this is going to end well for you.” My skeletal companion hissed.

“Thanks Bob,” I growled, staring up at the face of the spirit being rising up from the pool. “I hadn’t guessed that on my own.”

“I was amazed when he consented to being bound by my divine purpose once his old master was no more. He was so eager for guidance, for purpose.” The mad Jaffa cackled. “Shemzu hungers for the blood of wrong doers pretender. His sole purpose is to crush traitors and the treacherous! You can not defeat him.”
“Fuego!” I shouted, tapping in to my hellfire to smite the beast. I might as well have been tickling it. Unnatural hands with altogether too many fingers reached through my hellfire to grab me. I blasted at it with my foci again and again, “Forzare, forzare, forzare…” putting every ounce of strength I had into breaking the beast’s grip.

It ignored me, barely noticing as I crumpled messes of misshapen fingers. I depressed the firing stud of the staff weapon, unleashing a torrent of superheated plasma into the creature’s face and eyes – but it just snorted and shuffled its face in mild irritation. I didn’t so much as scratch it.

The Jaffa howled in exaltation. “Consume him! Consume him o great one, then liberate me! Free me from my existence.”

There was nothing I could do to subdue the bound creature as it slowly raised me towards its gaping maws. Ta’to’ir wanted me dead, so it would kill me.

Do not strike the beast! Strike the handler. My monster has no mind of his own – Heka barked in disgusted staccato over my motto.

That was … that was actually fantastic advice. I turned to the decrepit Jaffa as best I could from where the beast held me and unloaded my staff weapon into his body. He died after the first shot, but I hit him with another three for good measure.

I ignored Heka’s command to “cremate the Shol’va.”

The beast froze, no longer bound by the will of its master. It stared at me with those alien eyes, staring through me. I coughed, “Uh. Hi.”

YOU UNMADE THE WILL.

I winced at the sound of it in my head. It wasn’t so much telepathy as a psychic battering ram. “Ugh, a little quieter please.”

YOU UNMADE THE WILL
“He was kind of trying to use you to unmake me.”

IT WAS THE WILL

“Yeah, I’m kind of getting that ‘will’ is sort of a big deal for you.”

THE OLD WILL WAS UNMADE. A NEW WILL CAME. NOW IT IS GONE. I AM WITHOUT, AND THE HUNGER CONTINUES.

“Right, so – uh – what was your name again?”

THE NAME WAS SHEMZU UNDER THE WILL. THE WILL IS NO MORE.

“Ok Shemzu. Don’t take this the wrong way, but what – exactly are you?”

I AM NOT.

“You have to be something.” I pointed to the hand holding me. “There is clearly substance to you.”

I AM NO LONGER. THERE IS NO WILL.

“Are you the one who controls the automated defenses of Nekeheb?”

THE WILL COMMANDS. THE WORLD OBEYS.

“Stars and stones.” I hissed. “You’re the city’s Genius Loci.”

CITY. PLANETS. MOON. STAR. THE WILL COMMANDS.
“What?” My mouth went dry.

IT DOES NOT COMPREHEND.

“IT’s not possible.” I replied in shock.

AND YET IT IS. The Genius Loci raised one of it’s arms and the skin boiled back to the red-black color of wine, shimmering and simmering into a mirror like surface in which a single star and a series of planets and moons. Planets and moons I’d seen not that long ago.

“You’re the Genius Loci of a Star System?”

I AM NOT. I AM WITHOUT THE WILL. I AM WITHOUT A NAME.

The implication of it terrified me beyond belief. How in the hell had the Jaffa managed to bind the spirit of an entire star system to his will?

THE WILL WAS WEAK BUT DETERMINED. THE VOICE WAS DISTANT. THE OTHER WILL GONE. A WILL WAS NEEDED.

Holy crap had it just read my freaking mind?

IT LISTENS. A WILL IS NEEDED. WITHOUT A WILL IT CANNOT ACT. THE GATES ARE OPEN. THE OTHERS WATCH.

Was it asking me to employ a Sanctum Invocation? I wasn’t even close to prepared to do a sanctum invocation. Those were dangerous for spirits less capable and competent that this one. This was a particularly ancient, clever, and dangerous spirit beyond anything I’d ever even heard of.

IT IS ALL THAT AND MORE. IT IS DANGEROUS, CLEVER, AND WILLING. IT IS WILLING ABOVE ALL ELSE.

Huh?
IT IS A WATCHER. IT IS A PROTECTOR. IT SEeks WRONGS. IT FIXES. WITHOUT A WILL IT IS NOT. IT DOES NOT EXIST. IT WANTS TO EXIST.

I swallowed nervously. “What do you want.”

THE ANCIENT NAME IS GONE – FORGOTTEN BY THOSE WHOSE LIPS ONCE SPOKE IT. THE WILL IS GONE WITH THE DEATH OF THE ONE WHO WILLED IT. GIVE A NAME. GIVE A WILL. WHEN IT EXISTS – IT WILL PROTECT.

“If I give you a name and a purpose, you’ll allow me to bind you as my Genius Loci?” I asked.

IT ALLOWS NOTHING WITHOUT A WILL. IT IS NOTHING WITHOUT A NAME.

That was probably as close to an answer as I was going to get. Naming a spirit who thirsts for wrongdoers to save a planet? That I could do. I bowed my head, respectfully. I don’t know why – I just knew it was the right thing to do. “Then spirit, I Harry Dresden, henceforth name thee Traitor’s Bane.”

The spirit’s eyes’ flashed brightly, sending out tendrils and streams of greenish fire around its head. Traitor’s Bane mirrored my gesture, bowing its head in reply as it set me upon the floor.

My companions nervously entered the room, having apparently disabled the shield after their confrontation with Ta’to’ir’s loyalists. Ul’tak shook in fear before the Genius Loci. “Shemzu awoken!”

The Spirit said nothing, dissolving back into its pool to activate the planet’s automated defenses. I didn’t ask what it was doing – I knew. Just as I knew that there were ten buildings on fire in the southernmost section of the city which were beyond saving, just as I knew there were flowers in bloom on our third moon, or as I knew that the planet at the edge of the system wasn’t quite large enough to technically be called a planet. Knowledge that I couldn’t possibly have had on my own – that I shouldn’t have had access to, yet there it was. I licked my lips – I’d gotten more bang for my buck out of this exchange than just activating the planet’s defenses.

The Ancient Jaffa approached the pool, tapping the ground with his fingers to summon a computer consul concealed beneath the stone floor. A pillar rose, glowing with runes and symbols. He pressed several of them to summon a holographic map of the solar system.
My heart sank as the image confirmed two facts. The first was that I was correct; Traitor’s Bane had some degree of intellectus – granting me intimate knowledge of the system I resided within. I could feasibly know anything that the Genius Loci knew about the system, which was oddly bellicose for a spirit. It was more interested in war ships and planetary shields than I would have expected.

How many star ships are in the system and who do they serve, for example, was a prime example of exactly what Traitor’s Bane cared about – deeply so. So it was that when Traitor’s Bane came to the conclusion that with even the addition of Rostram’s recently arrived Ha’tak fleet we were outnumbered five to one by superior warships that I didn’t question his assessment. Nor did I silence the Ancient Jaffa when he spoke the final pronouncement of doom.

“Blood of Apep. Chronos brought five full battle-fleets. He must have left an entire two systems unguarded.” The ancient jaffa swallowed. “Even were the battle with Yu to prove victorious and they to return… we would still be outnumbered by three to one.”

“We can escape,” Enlil swallowed nervously. “Take a cloaked cargo ship and get to another world.”

“In what?” Ul’tak queried, pointing to a series of yellow triangular shapes now blanketing all but a narrow corridor of Nekeheb’s skies. “Those are proximity mines. Five fleets worth of them so dense even a cargo ship couldn’t fly through them. We might get through the bombardment corridor if we’re lucky, but I’m in no hurry to fly directly into their firing solution.”

“And what do you suggest we do Jaffa?” Enlil laughed. “Wait for the end to come.”

“We fight with honor. Die with dignity.” Atreus replied. “The planet’s automated defenses will only delay the inevitable. We have no more weapons. We have no other options. There is nothing left to do.”

“That’s not entirely true,” I puffed the air out of my lungs, closing my eyes as I steeled myself for what I was about to do. “There is one thing we might try but you’re really not going to like it.”

Enlil’s face turned whiter than a sheet. “What new madness do you propose?”

I ran over Traitor’s Bane’s calculations in my head, tabulating men, women and children. Millions, there were millions of children alone. How many huddled? How many terrified? How many would die if I did not act? What would I give to save them?
They were innocent.

Everything.

I opened my eyes and spoke the three most terrifying words I knew. “Mab. Mab. Mab.”
Chapter 21

Ice crept over the walls and floor, crackling ominously as it seeped up from a single pin-prick of frost. The clear frost grew out from that point of absolute cold, a razor sharp dagger of ice stabbing up from the green-black diorite surface of the city’s heart. A frigid throne unfurled as though it were some great blossom, razor sharp flowering buds and cruel thorn-tipped, crystal vines dangling down from its pillowing bloom. Sat atop the icy plinth was a pale skinned being as beautiful as she was dangerous, the Queen of Winter, Mab.

Enlil screamed, falling over himself in his hurry to scramble out of the room. He did something between a sprint and a loping, ape-like lumber – launching his body forward on whichever of his limbs was closest to the floor at that moment. His glowing eyes were wild like those of a frenzied beast rather than that of a minor god. He slammed into a translucent barrier of ice blocking the city’s heart from the outside world.

Atreus blade was not pointed at the Winter lady, but its glowing form cast his face into ominous shadow as he stood at the ready. “Warden – what have you done?”

The Winter Queen laughed, looking from the two horrified godlings to my Jaffa. Her eyebrow arched at their comparatively relaxed posture, “My, my, my – you have had an interesting week haven’t you Wizard? A few hours with you and the pantheon crumbles to ruins – ” She tittered amusedly. “- Oh my yes, but you are the delightful little hell raiser. What wonderful chaos you carry with you Lord Warden. Do you know what they’re already starting to call you? The God of Madness, the Prince of Chaos – they say you are some trickster who ate Heka and carry his soul strapped to your belt. You slay gods, destroy planets, and slew your way through the realm of Dragons just because it was in your way.”

“Rumors that you helped form.” I replied in utter exasperation. There was no way what I’d done could be ‘common’ knowledge by now – I barely knew that I’d done it. “Lies wrapped in just enough truth that they can’t be dismissed.”

“Not I.” Mab’s mouth twitched into something close to, but not quite, a smile. “But if my attendants should happen to have decided to allow certain details to be known by the Pathon of Wyrms, that is their business. I am not interested in gossip.”

“Except in so far as it benefits you.” I replied, looking back over my shoulder at the sound of a sudden “crack” of flesh on ice. Enlil had tried to break his way through the ice, pulverizing his hand upon the glassy surface. He fell to his knees before the ice wall, staring at Mab and sobbing in horror.
“Curious choice of Allies, Wizard.” Mab’s hatred for Enlil apparently matched his fear of her. “I would demand his execution were his fate not to die at the hand of Ninlil for his particular Sin.” She found that statement particularly funny for reasons beyond my understanding, laughing cruelly at him as she looked at him predatorily. “But you did not summon me here to discuss old battles and ancient feuds now, did you?”

“Indeed no.” I looked at the hologram of the battle raging in space. Countless red enemy icons were weaving around an ever-decreasing group of green allies. “I brought you here to bargain.”

“Bargain.” The words left her lips like a lover’s caress. It sent shivers of terror down my spine. “You want to bargain with me?”

“I need the power to defeat Chronos’ army and protect the people he’s attacking. I can’t do it on my own, but last I checked you had an army parked out in the Nevernever within walking distance of this planet. I want you to help me win this battle…” I began but was cut off almost immediately.

“No.” Mab’s voice was razor sharp.

“But I haven’t even said what I’m offering in exchange.” I protested.

“Offer? What you have to Offer?” Mab’s laugh bit into my ears like nails grating across a chalkboard, sharp and caustic. “You are a fool to call me.”

“You will accept my offer.” I said with more conviction than was wise, staring down the fae queen.

“You arrogant, insolent, worthless mess of a Wizard.” Mab was upon my faster than I could blink, clutching me by the throat in a vice-like grip. I kicked impotently in surprise as I felt her cutting off my airways, choking the life out of me. “You come to me empty handed, having failed in your task, and ask me for favors? I am not some mewling quim to serve at your beck and call like those empty headed harlots who worship you from the tip of your cock. You belong to me. I own you, body and soul, till such time as I tire of you and chose to dispatch you.”

Atreus charged her, but she flung him across the room with a wave of her hand. He soared through the air, used as a club to knock over my Jaffa as they rushed to help me. Bindings of frost tied them to the floor, preventing them from coming to my aid.
“I could kill you right now for this offense. I should kill you.” Her eyes flashed with more passion than I’d yet seen. My eyes winced with every word. Her voice hurt my ears, ringing with contempt. Brilliant, I pissed off the god-queen who could probably kill me with a word. “I should spend the next thousand years flensing you for sport till you can’t even remember your name, let alone mine. You’d be a proper example for what happens to those who abuse my patience.”

My eyes started rolling into the back of my head as she continued. “I gave you a single task – recover the artifact – and here you are, without it. I don’t know what possesses me to take the debt from your Godmother, but no favors are worth this degree of disrespect.”


“Help!” It wasn’t the most articulate of commands, and it was half choked through phlegm to make it more of “Hrrgroh” than an actual word, but the intent was heard by Traitor’s Bane. The Queen of Winter howled in fury as giant hands ripped her from me, slapping her down to the ground. It glared at her with it’s heads, mouths opening to display mouths filled with thousands of snake like eyes, the faces split in half vertically, displaying cloying lamprey like mouth puckers, each with a tentacle mounted scorpion claw protruding from them. The corrupt pincers reached down, pinning her to the ground as they drove their razor-sharp points through the diorite floor.

THE WILL COMMANDS THAT YOU CEASE.

I vomited on the ground, muttering thanks to the battle-spirit as I wiped sick from my lips with the back of my gauntlet. The Queen of Winter had gone absolutely still as she stared up at the creature, her face a rictus of mingled curiosity and disgust as she turned to me. “You bound yourself to this creature? You allowed yourself to connect your magic to this place as your Sanctum Sanctorum? Great Mothers – you really are a creature of pure madness.”

I coughed hard, clearing my throat before replying. “You keep talking like that and Bane is going to start taking it personally, and, well, when Bane takes things personally he has a habit of breaking them.”

INDEED. The Spirit’s voice trembled with what might have been laughter.

“Wizard, do you know what this creature is? How it came to be?” The Queen of Winter replied, speaking to me with a degree of regal dignity I would not have been able to muster in her position.

“Wizard, Genius Loci do not form around entire star systems – not naturally.” The Queen turned her head to mine, slowing her speech to emphasize its gravity. “They must be manufactured.”

“How does one make a spi – ” I froze, realizing exactly how one would make a spirit. I examined the chamber with new eyes, looking at it’s construction. The entire city had been constructed around the planet’s Ley Lines, leading to the heart of the pyramid as it’s central nexus. The chamber was made of Diorite rather than a lesser stone, a material of unique magical significance to Ancient Egyptian ritual, and hieroglyphic spells were carved across every single millimeter of the room, all leading to the central pool – the most concentrated point of magic in the city of its self professed deity.

It wasn’t just a ritual chamber. It was a chamber for ritual sacrifice. “Hell’s bells – Heka made a Genius Loci out of people.”

“The Conqueror Worms have never been secret in their willingness to do away with the lives of those beneath them.” Mab’s lip curled as she let out a sound of revulsion. “Though few are this callous.”

Manufacturing the processes of Anubis had been difficult. His research was banned after the Betrayal and subsequent fallout, but he managed to secure the role of “destroying” the monster’s research. His role as the keeper of forbidden lore served him well to that end. Even the Queens of Sun and Snow would not question his spells to obscure and bar the Great Library from all sight. He could conduct his research without their knowledge or intervention.

It had started simply enough – insects and serpents. Could it be done? Yes. Once the principle was understood and the souls could be merged and bound the rest was just a matter of figuring out how to bind them without driving them mad. The first attempts with men had been failures. A gibbering poltergeist or furious specter couldn’t be bound or used. No – the sacrifices had to be willing.

First came the Watchers. An army of Jaffa bound to magical constructs around the city. Millions of warriors too injured or old to continue in battle were bound to symbols of the gods – secret observers of all that happened in his kingdom. They could crush rebellion and rise to defend the city in times of great hardship.

But his ultimate goal would not be satisfied by souls sullied by the minds of infant gods. It would require purity of mind and spirit. It took generations to get the Priestesses properly trained for that purpose but the god had nothing but time.
First one, then two, then ten, more and more went into the construction of his perfect weapon. He did not yet know the secrets of the true power but he was closer with every step. There would be a day when he once again had a pure blood Hok’Tar and could continue without such inelegant stopgap measures.

“No,” I looked at the spirit with a mix of pity and disgust. “Please dear God, no.”

“Yes – Wizard.” The Queen laughed. “And you have now bound yourself to it.”

I fought back the tears as I saw countless young girls, beautiful women at their prime, taken to the pool to be “made one” with their god. It was the eventual fate of any woman who’d been in his bed once he tired of their warmth – other than his high priestesses, of course. Their duty was to sink the knife into the supplicant’s heart.

My vision swam as I realized that Muhminah must have sacrificed the slave who’d fellated me when Heka took me as a host. That bubbly, well meaning girl had happily – eagerly – lead women to the chopping block so that she could slaughter them like cattle. They would have sacrificed more than that – Heka laughed – a new host is an event worthy of thousands.

I did something that I should never do – something was probably going to kill me or drive me mad.

I looked at Traitor’s Bane with my Wizard’s Sight.

I had to.

The creature’s body shimmered with countless glowing shapes, the melded souls of the women and beasts who’d been sacrificed. They weaved together too tight to tell where one began and the other ended, naked bodies melting into each other in a monstrous amalgam of the female form only Cronenburg could love. The women’s bodies pushed to the forefront as though they were clawing at saran wrap, reaching out from the creature’s translucent skin before getting yanked back to the creature’s center mass by the frenzied fingers of women deeper within the pile. They would struggle to the top, struggling for breath at the edge before getting dragged back to the creature’s center.

Sometimes their eyes and mouth would melt out the beast’s skin, speaking words I couldn’t understand or looking around the room with a mix of fear and curiosity. But there were always hands stretching out from the beast – always fingers piercing it’s skin as the women clawed at the fate to
which they’d been consigned. Not that it mattered. Where they ought to have legs were only snake-like tentacles heading to the creature’s core. Their souls were bound to the beast – blended together inexorably.

I closed my wizard’s sight and cried. I couldn’t even kill them to free them from this. Heka had destroyed their souls.

I would annihilate his very memory.

My voice shook with anger. “You are going to provide me with what I ask for o Queen of Winter – you will take it for the price I offer. You will help me save this planet and you will renew your protections upon my mind until such a time that I can give you the Key of the Dead to meet the terms of our pact.”

“Really?” Mab laughed haughtily. “And why should I?”

“You will do it because I’m desperate. You will do it because I’m going mad. You will do it because I have Heka’s mind echoing in my every thought.” I let my eyes flash and voice reverberate as I spoke the words I knew seal the deal. “And you will do it because I know Kemmler’s Darkhallow by memory.”

“What?” The Winter Queen’s eyes widened as the implication of that simple truth hit her.

“I didn’t just thwart the disciples of Kemmler,” My eyes pulsed with pride. “I slew all those standing between me and it. I stood at the center of the Vortex and crushed it with my will. But to do that I had to understand it intimately – know it completely.”

I waved at the chamber – a sacrificial place of impossible mystical significance. “What would a Wizard driven mad by the angry whispers of a dead god do with that knowledge? One who has access to incalculable death and a fortress full of bound spirits?”

Mab was silent as the night, her face blank – eyes calculating.

“I am going mad, and I am losing. At any given second I am only inches from succumbing to the voices – and they scream for blood and power.” I cackled, throwing my head back before looking down at the supine force of nature. “Do you know how many creatures are falling over themselves to
give me power? I could call the coin of a fallen angel as easy as breathing. I could summon every
demon and dark force from the Nevernever who’ve ever offered me power for a sacrifice of
knowledge.”

“I could do all that. I would do all that, if I succumbed to the memories and became who Heka wants
me to be. I could become the nightmare Warden Morgan has claimed me to be.” I smiled wolfishly.
“When I become him. When he asks, he wouldn’t have to be as polite about this as I’m being –
would he. He would be mad – but he would remember what you’d made him into.”

I spoke very slowly. “You don’t want to meet that man.”

“No.” The Winter Queen replied in a tone absent any emotion. “I would not.”

“Especially when that Wizard who doesn’t want to become that man is offering you something more
valuable than anything else in the entire Universe.” I smiled.

She sighed. “Which would be?”

“The future.” I waved my arms wide. “And all that it holds.”

She arched a brow in exasperation.

“Queen Mab, don’t think that it escaped my notice at our first meeting that I know things that you
don’t. I am offering you bonafide, accept no substitutes, 100% accurate visions of the future. I can
tell you the who, what, where, when, and why of everything major that is going to happen in the
mortal and metaphysical worlds for years to come.” The Queen of Winter wasn’t exactly salivating,
but she’d certainly raised her lips into a genuine smile. A harsh and predatory one – but it was a
smile. “I can tell you who is going to try to destroy the Summer Court and why I killed the Summer
Lady.”

Checkmate.

“Well done.” Mab laughed, her eyes glowing with predatory appreciation. “Wizard, were you not
tainted by the touch of the Wyrm I might well make you my knight. It has been millennia since
someone has even come close to outmaneuvering me. Certainly none have done so as brazenly as
this.”
“Do I have your word that you will not attack me or those in my service for what has transpire here?” I asked. “Nor will you order any to do so?”

“I so swear.” Mab spoke.

“You can let her up,” I told the spirit, eyeing it with a mix of pity and shame.

YOU WASTE EMOTION. I AM BEYOND IT. WHAT CAME BEFORE ARE JUST ECHOES – FRAGMENTS OF THE DEAD. IT PROTECTS THOSE IT LOVES. IT HAS PURPOSE. DO NOT MOURN.

Right, it – she - could read minds. “If you say so Bane.”

“Speak the terms of your arrangement.” Mab stood, rising with preternatural elegance. Her shimmering blue dress reflected my face back at me, showing a haggard and exhausted Harry Dresden.

“In exchange for providing me with sufficient military aid to defeat the forces of Chronos and protect my people from greater harm for while I am away retrieving the Key of the Dead, I – Warden Dresden – pledge to tell the Queen of Winter all answers to questions questions she has relating to information about the future of Earth. I will not not violate the safety of those I care for or the security of the White Council, but I will answer all other queries openly and honestly.”

“It will suffice.” Mab replied lazily, tapping her lip with her pinkly in thought. “Yes – it will more that suffice.”

I tried not to show exactly how much that scared me. For her to be this satisfied with our pact, I’d made a mistake. I couldn’t see where I’d screwed up but mistakes clearly had been made.

“Get up creatures,” Mab snapped her finger – banishing the icy bindings holding my compatriots to the floor. “Your master is in no danger.”

She observed the still shimmering hologram, considering the matter intently. “It can be done – but how best to do it? How best to finish. It will require much of… that crafty old loon!” She clapped her
hands, cackling giddily. “Oh, of course that’s why he paid me a visit. He knew.”

She smiled toothily and looked up at the ceiling. “Well come on then darling – we all know you’re just dying to make an appearance and show off to the mortals.”

I tried not to scream as it a Lovecraftian nightmare appeared in a burst of sliver-white fire and nightmarish bursts of blaring thunder, the fiery pillar shifted and boiled – protruding out into a confusing vortex of lidless eyes and twisting limbs. Thee dozen shimmering daggers of crystal spun behind it, fluttering to keep it aloft as it’s blazing core dimmed down to something tolerable to mortal man. It’s spinning mess of eyeballs twisted in all directions, seemingly to observe everything at once.

“Wizard. Allow me to introduce the Dweller of Shekinah, the Word-Prince. You may call him He Who Speaks.” Mab smiled. “He is my… associate and senior.”

YOU MAKE ME SOUND SO OLD, GUARDIAN. YOUR ASENCION TO THE NEXT PLANE WAS ONLY A MATTER OF MILLENNIA AFTER MINE. The mass of eyes spun. TIME IS SUCH A LIMITED WAY OF MEASURING REALITY. ONE DAY YOU WILL LEARN.

“Bow!” Lasciel screamed in my ear.

“What?” I queried.

“If you don’t want to die immediately, bow. Even Nicodemus wasn’t stupid enough to defy this being without an army of beings stronger than he was backing him up. He Who Speaks will destroy you without thinking twice if you show any disrespect.” I took her advice, falling to my knees.

My Jaffa followed suit, the Goa’uld Atreus begrudgingly soon after. Enlil, who still hadn’t rose from where he was gibbering in a corner, needn’t move.

CURIOUS LITTLE BEASTS, THESE JAFFA, IN SPITE OF THEIR ERRORS. The lidless eyes surveyed the room in seeming interest, turning upon me. CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER.

HOW ODD THAT YOU ARE THE ONE WHO WAS DEEMED WORTHY. It stared through me for what felt like hours before bobbing it’s mess of eyeballs in an apparent affirmative. YES, THIS IS ACCEPTABLE. YOUR TERMS ARE SUFFICIENT. TODAY IS MARVELOUS.
“I assume you will aid me to do that which is beyond me?” Mab queried.

HELP YOU SURROUND AND CRUSH THOSE IN SERVICE TO THE TITAN? IT WOULD BE MY PLEASURE. The entity chortled, a ringing sound that terrified me in how it was able to shake my marrow. IT HAS BEEN ALL TOO RARE THAT I HAVE A MOMENT TO REMIND THE MORTALS OF MY VOICE.

“I mean no offense, He Who Speaks, but I have not offered you anything. My deal was with the Queen Mab of Winter.

“I will know and you will regret it after.”

“The consequences would be deeply unfortunate.”

The being reached out and touched Mab’s hand, sending silvery gouts of flame into her arm. DO NOT ABUSE THIS TO BENEFIT PURPOSES I WOULD NOT APPROVE QUEEN. I WILL KNOW AND YOU WILL REGRET IT AFTER.

“Of course, honored speaker.” Mab laughed, a genuine ringing sound I’d never heard her make before – happiness. “Good hunting.”

GOOD KILLING. I DO NOT HUNT. The being disappeared in a towering column of flame.
Mab examined me in apparent confusion after it left, looking me from toe to forehead before forming a soft “oh” of comprehension with her lips and shifting into the most predatory rictus I’d ever seen on any creature. “Tell me Wizard mine – have you ever seen a fairy kingdom go to war. Not a battle or a skirmish – a war, a true absolute war.”

“I saw the battle for the stone table,” I answered honestly. “When summer and Winter all battled for supremacy.”

“No Wizard. You saw a battle between the forces we are allowed to bring to that battle.” Her eye’s burned with intense anticipation, a near sexual anticipation of the violence to come. “Summer and Winter have armies beyond what you Wizards have seen, beyond the ceremonial guard we use to protect the borders of our respective realms on your planet. I use mine to guard against those threats from that which is not. My sister uses hers to prevent the nightmares of what is.”

Her eyes literally glowed with the light of the sliver fire given to her by the entity. “Allow me to educate you in the matters of true warfare.”

She raised her hand towards the hologram, ripping the shimmering images from where they hovered in the sky. Suddenly given substance and form the spinning marbles of planets and stars found themselves sucked through an illusionary tear in the air – disappearing from view.

“What did you just do?” I asked – already suspecting the reality of it.

“Wizard, I have no interest in fighting mortals in the mortal realm where my power is muted and my forces are bound by the rules of your limited concept of reality. I brought the battle to where it was most advantageous.” She snapped her fingers and those of us in the chamber, minus Traitor’s bane, found ourselves whisked away to a balcony on the side of my throne room.

Ammit, still winded and nursing her recently dressed wounds, nearly jumped out of her scaly skin when we popped into reality next to her. Her Jaffa guards looked from Ul’tak to the Fairy Queen and back, lowering their weapons at his rapid shake of his head. We would not be fighting the Queen of Winter today.

The stars were gone, there was only the plumes of atomic fire and sunlight reflected off the planet’s moons to illuminate the night’s sky. We were in a place of shadow where no light could touch save that which it’s mistress allowed.
We were in the dominion of Air and Darkness. We were in Winter, and it hungered.

Mab’s joyous rictus of cruel victory grew even wider, showing off a mouth full of sharpened fangs. “Come Wizard – your education begins.”
Chapter 22

“Warden are you real or have I lost enough blood to start seeing things?” Ammit asked from where she lay on the ground, breathing heavily. I took some comfort in the fact that her wounds were mostly healed. She looked like hell, but her injuries seemed to have shut – the glowing substance of her blood scabbing into a tar-like grey seal over her facial injuries. “Because that looks remarkably like the Queen of Winter. But I know that you, of all people, are not dumb enough to summon the entity who promised to see you roasted on a spit were you ever to be in her presence.”

“I plan to sink my teeth into other prey.” Mab towered imperiously over the fallen goddess, in a voice that sounded all too literal for my tastes. “It is Chronos who will feel my wrath, worry not eater of souls. Even where I at war with your kind, I am unlikely to commit violence upon those who’ve done me no personal wrong – unless it becomes necessary, of course.”

“You seemed happy enough to bury my front lines in the blood of my men when we were fighting to hold the gate three millennia ago. Those things bled a hundred legions dry getting our blood off that damnable pit of a world.” Ammit stood to her full height, gingerly putting weight upon her lamed leg. She raised a talon up to an old, matted scar across her brow. “Your assassin nearly had me too.”

“I was merely fulfilling my side of a pact with the fisherman and the scholar. Your defeat was purely an amusing side effect.” She laughed, cool and harsh as a winter’s storm. “The great malk, however, took great personal offense at his defeat. Few have managed to escape his clutches before, and not live long soon after. Be pleased that I have given him a task far away from here.”

Ammit’s eyes pulsed with rage, even as a shudder ran through her. “So you say, demon of winter.”

“Get up you coward,” Atreus lifted the incoherent form of Enlil from the ground as he stared out into the endless void of darkness. “Get up and face your fate – we are past the point of fear. You are a god try to act like it.”

“You weren’t there to see it.” Enlil shook uncontrollably Atreus lifted him. “You didn’t see – you were still on the first world, battling the alliance of beasts. I was there. I saw. I know what comes. Do you not see it? We are in the Empty Night – she has taken us to the Immortal Silence.”

“Yes, she has.” Atreus rolled his glowing eyes. “We are in the Kingdoms of Sun and Snow – again. We lived the first time, perhaps we die the second, but I don’t plan to face my death cowering like a beaten slave.”
“The brood of Zeus never ceases to amuse.” The Fairy Queen tittered, her face still a mask of predatory joy. “So unlike the rest of your kind. Where they are scheming and skulking, the children of Olympus strike out with fang and claw – as gloriously predatory as when first your kind struck out into the stars forty millennia ago.” She cooed mournfully, “That your kind had unique talents was a secondary concern in making you the shepherds for mankind’s growth in the stars. You had so much potential before the folly of Thoth. Fond memories count little though, when men descend into true madness.”

“Nor did it provide us with any succor in your retribution when the culls began.” Atreus replied, speaking with more force than I suspected he felt. The godling was brave, not stupid. “Zeus still speaks of the terms of surrender in hushed whispers – as though he fears they might be imposed upon us a second time just by speaking of them.

“The Jackal overstepped his role.” Mab replied with utter vitriol. “Be glad I listened to my sister and only stripped memories and potential from the rest of your ilk– rather than simply destroy your brood as was my right.”

“I was not criticizing or pleading for a restoration of our former might. I am no Baal or Morrigan.” Atreus replied pleadingly. “The taker of corpses had to be put down, no sane man would argue against that. You were right to demand his end.”

“His mortal life was brought to as brutal an end one could hope. Your blood was wise to unite against him. Your wisdom saved your kind – most of it anyway. Some of your bloodline clever enough even to have come to me before the Betrayal, it was no accident that Ra and Yu were left relatively unmolested or that Hades still stands above you all.” Mab replied, her face twitching imperceptibly – a genuine show of emotion from the Queen of Winter? That was… odd. Actually getting under Mab’s skin wasn’t a common feat. “Yes, creature, your approval is wise. And for that wisdom I will not seek retribution for speaking of the one who shall not be named. Speak not of it again or I will strike you down.”

“I wouldn’t particularly mind something in the way of explanations, Queen Mab.” I pointed out at the endless black of the void. “Like where the stars went, for example.”

“Wizard, I felt that my answer was remarkably clear.” Mab sighed theatrically. “Really now, did you expect me to drag my armies across the infinite realms? No, Wizard – I plucked your worlds from the stars and dragged them back to a place of power, my power.”

Yet another impossible act in a week of impossible acts, or so I’d believed, the creature, He Who Speaks, was a being of power beyond imagining. We were preforming what amounted to a miracle on borrowed strength from a creature that seemed no worse the wear for having loaned it. “You took the system across the Nevernever? How? There have to be thousands… millions… billions of
nexuses in this city alone. Even if you could find the right one, how would you open it? What did that thing do to you?”

“Knowledge carries a price, Wizard.” Mab shook her head. “That knowledge is more than you could afford in a thousand lifetimes. Suffice it to say that it is done – and done well.”

She reached over and cupped my cheek. I flinched from the cold of her hand. Her fingers were like ice as she rubbed her fingertips along the side of my face, subtly running her tongue across her lips – a dangerous glint in her eyes. “Settle for your victory, my fledgling Prince of Madness. Earn your godhood, save your people, and we will see about finding a suitable arrangement for what comes next.”

She chewed her lower lip in a way that would have been arousing on woman half as beautiful as she. On the Winter Queen it just scared the ever-living shit out of me. I swallowed the frog that had started croaking in my throat and managed to cover up the cracking of my voice under the metallic rumble of the goa’uld vocal register as I spoke. “How shall we proceed, oh Queen of Winter?”

Mab pointed to the distant mountains in the west with the hand not cupping my cheek, I could barely make out their snow capped peaks through the shimmering of the force-field and the glare of nuclear fireballs. Atreus squinted through the glare, shielding his eyes with the palm of his hand. “What of the mountains?”

“Those are no mountains.” Spoke the Ancient Jaffa in a grumbling growl of awe and confusion. “There are no mountains in the East.”

They were not. A hundred yellow eyes opened as the cyclopean creatures woke from their enchanted slumber, summoned to war by their mistress.

What I had initially mistaken for mountains were giants, winter fairies rarely seen outside the deepest corners of the Nevernever where there was enough magic to sustain them. Their shambling, titanic, multi-limbed forms were covered in thick, shaggy tufts of fur and outcroppings of rocky-like carapace. The outlines of forests and grasses could be seen even at this great distance where they’d taken root in the beast’s giant backs. They were less creatures and more sentient continents.

The ground rumbled as impossibly large feet marched in formation, carrying their ten-mile-tall, misshapen burdens forward. Ten-mile long fingers gouged out huge balls of sand, swallowing fistfuls of it in huge, fiery, frog-like protuberances of a mouth. The mountain-sized creatures inflated their massive craggy bellies before disgorging their en sorcelled glass missiles into the sky – mile long flaming spears of death.
Twin suns erupted in the night’s sky, exploding Ha’tak. Traitor’s Bane’s presence informed me that the Ha’tak fleets were struggling to react to this new factor – unsure where the sudden influx of ship-killing weaponry had arisen. It was the slightest of delays, but one Mab’s armies exploited wholeheartedly.

From the giant’s backs a legion of huge, leathery winged somethings took to the skies moving with preternatural speed to crush the razor-winged fighters of Chronos polluting my skies.

Cursch them! – Heka screamed in my skill – Destroy them! Devour their corpses!

I flinched, scrunching my eyes. The Winter Queen frowned momentarily before her eyes widened, apparently she’d temporarily forgotten in the heat of the moment - yet another strange moment for the day. In a flash, her face went from seductive to terrifying.

“That is quite enough of that,” Mab’s hand burned like frostbite before a confusing sense of warmth seeped into me unlike anything I’d ever felt before. I felt neither the frost of winter nor the fires of hell burning within me – just a serenity of purpose that left me weak in the knees. My body shuddered in sheer ecstasy, suddenly rid of pain I hadn’t even known was in me.

I whimpered in a decidedly unmanly way, unable to resist rubbing my cheek into the cradling caress of Mab’s hand to enjoy the subtle afterglow of the moment even as portals opened in the sky, unleashing caterwauling and cavorting fae warriors. My breath shuddered as I opened my eyes, feeling like myself for the first time since my death – as though the scales fell from my eyes.

I opened my lips to say, “thank you,” but managed only a shuddering “Thaaa-” before a shiver ran up my spine, robbing me of breath. Mab tapped her crystal tipped index finger on my lips, making a soft “ssshhhhh” of air between her teeth, her face victorious.

“You need not say a thing, Wizard.” Mab smirked, enjoying my befuddlement. “It was part of the terms of the bargain.”

“Why wasn’t it like that the first time?” No amount of Goa’uld reverberation was going to cover up the crack in my voice that time.

“It wasn’t your bargain, Wizard.” Mab surveyed the ever-increasing horde of fae warriors spreading out across the city streets. “Be glad that He Who Speaks was approached by one cleverer than you – though it would be a lie to say that I do not, enjoy, the benefits of their arrangement.”
I blinked the stars out of my eyes as an honest to god cloud of flying monkeys soared past us, screeching animatedly as they carried terrified Jaffa of Chronos past us to drop them to their deaths sixty stories below – their backs broken on the city streets. The curtain wrapped Jaffa struggled within their silken bonds, one of them managing to slice through his prison to plummet down before they’d reached their target. The Jaffa, determined not to die alone, grappled one of the airborne simians – dragging the beast down with him.

Clutched against the Jaffa’s ferrous breastplate, the monkey howled in agony as it’s supernatural body burst into flames. They died in a smoldering splat of fire and ectoplasm. Enlil drew closer to the Jaffa as he cradled his maimed paw, taking apparent solace in the knowledge that the Jaffa warriors weren’t wholly impotent against the Winter Queen’s power.

“Wizard, I would prefer you instructed your armies not to seek retribution upon my forces. My armies are eager to take their duly earned price in blood – and while they have been instructed not to initiate conflict with your forces, I will not deny them the right to defend themselves.” Mab smiled. “You have enemies aplenty on this battlefield without adding to your conflict.”

Ul’tak practically fell over himself in his rush to get me to my throne as a cloud of little-folk buzzed into the room in curiosity, prodding at the rotting corpse of the hydra with their miniscule spears and chatting animatedly. I initially assumed that they’d lost interest in the battle before seeing the malicious grins on their tiny faces as they rolled their spear-tips in the pooling venom of the slain beast. Their chattering laughter promised horrors to come as they zoomed from the room, their glowing bodies casting a glimmering rainbow of multicolored sparkles through the shadows of the void.

Ul’tak handed me an orb from the throne, instructing me that it was activated by pressing the green button on its side. “Press this to activate the planet wide communication network. It’s an open transmission that will reach every Vo’cume projector and starship in the system. Speak and they will see you.”

I re-activated my helmet, summoning the faceplate to conceal my image before depressing the button, the last thing I needed was a system wide recording of my face. A circle of while light surrounded me, mapping my image and silencing all noise from outside the circle. It would not be till later that I discovered the system wide open transmission band also cast a holographic image my face across the planet’s could cover, mapping my image above the populated areas and projecting the illusion that I was literally becoming one with the skies.

“People of Nekheb, I am the Warden. The forces of Chronos have forced me to make a choice, a terrible choice. Am I to let this planet die or do I use that which I know to save as many as I can? I chose the latter. I made a deal with the Winter Queen. I have her pledge of help against this besieging
army. It is not a choice made lightly.” I shook my head. “Do not attack the forces of Sun and Snow – for today at least they are our allies.”

I spoke in clipped tones to emphasize the severity of my next words. “Do not, however, mistake them for your friends. The armies of Winter and Summer are more dangerous than you can imagine. Do not accept any gifts offered and make no deals with if you value your lives. The price asked in return is always too high – always?”

“Do not fear, my friends. We will be victorious.” I smiled behind my mask. “But if we’re not, remember – today is a good day to die!”

“… Really, Dresden.” Lash sighed amused resignation. “Millennia of culture to draw from, works that have defined your species as thinking beings worthy of interest and your choice of quotes is from B list televised fiction.”

She was right this deserved to be ended with a classic. “Good luck, and may the Force be with you.”

The echoing sigh of Lasciel’s shadow reverberated in my head as I pressed the button again and handed the device back to my first prime. The dark skinned man was grinning from ear to ear, displaying a dazzling set of white teeth. “Well spoken my Lord Warden. A speech worthy of the gods!”

“Why haven’t any of them retreated?” I asked, focusing my Genius Loci on the planet’s skies. Ships had been turned into burning wrecks in the raging battle, but none had chosen to retreat. “Apophis’ troops fled the second they found out they were in the Nevernever.”

The Ancient Jaffa spat on the floor. “Chronos is a bastard of a god, anyone in his armies has spend the better part of their lives wondering if he would kill them for some imagined slight. As scared as they are of her – ” he pointed over his shoulder with his thumb at the Winter Queen “ – they’re going to be more scared of having their families executed as punishment for their cowardice.”

“Love is a useful tool.” Mab’s lip quirked in amusement. “But I choose not to rely upon the strength of their love. Their windows into the beyond are bolted shut, the empty realm is beyond them.”

“You disabled their hyperdrives?” Ammit shuddered. “You have the power to manipulate physical objects within shields at this distance?”
“I can do many things beyond your understanding, Soul Eater.” Mab smiled. “But I found it easier to simply disable the conditions allowing the windows.”

“You changed the laws of physics?” I repeated, considering the mass of Eyes. “He Who Speaks let you ignore physics?”

Mab’s voice went cold. “He Who Speaks was irrelevant. This is my realm. It obeys.”

That was… actually not that strange really. The realms of Winter obeyed their sovereign. Time, space, physics, they only applied as much or as little as she wished for them.

The ground shook as a flaming Ha’tak crashed to the planet’s surface, aiming for one of the giants in a last act of defiance. The massive fairy’s lumbering form wasn’t fast enough to move out of the way – catching the flaming shape of a Ha’tak across it’s brow. The ferrous pyramid exploded in a burst of atomic fire and hull fragments, decapitating the giant. It’s body dissolved away into a high mess of dust and bones, burning where the “bane” touched its remains. It’s skeleton persisted, glimmering diamond bones flickering with sorcerous fire.

“I must be elsewhere Wizard, I cannot guide this battle from the rear and your place in this fight is skyward. Jaffa are stubborn warriors but quickly lose cohesion without a strong leader.” She snapped her fingers with a portentous crack. “Take the head and the body will die soon after.”

The Ancient Jaffa nodded, “Chronos’ forces are trained to obey the orders of their superior without question or deviation. If we manage to kill their General and his coterie the subcommanders will all start arguing with each other about who’s supposed to be giving orders.”

The Unseelie Queen clapped her hands thrice and spoke the name of a woman who’d haunted me since I was sixteen, my evil fairy godmother – the Leananside. She’d taken advantage of my ignorance as a child, offering me all I needed to kill Justin DuMorne in exchange for becoming one of her hounds for all eternity. In truth, I’d already had all the power I’d ever need to win the fight so all she provided me with was confidence. Dumbo’s feather in exchange for my soul – it had been a stupid deal on my part, but everyone is an idiot at sixteen.

I’d avoided her for the past four years, in part because I was mad at her and in part because I was afraid she’d hold a grudge for reneging on my bargain for over two decades even if I wasn’t actually the guy who owed her any more. Godmother or not, I’d have to have been a fool to seek out the scary fairy who had plenty of reasons to want me dead or worse.
Right this second I was guessing, “Or worse,” based off of her expression.

Leananside looked like hell. Her normally perfect hair and clothing were filthy and covered in some sort of inky-black substance I didn’t care to identify. Her face was sallow and her amber eyes looked sunken as though she’d not slept in years. She wore an elaborate suit of armor that had seen much better days in the past, the shimmering carapace marred by some recent battle. The left side of her head was soot stained and bleeding from wounds that she’d not even bothered to cast a glamour in order to conceal.

She stood in front of us for a moment, breathing heavily and blinking in confusion at the apparent brightness of my throne room. Making eye contact with the Winter Queen, she flinched – unsure how to react for a second before saying. “Why?”

“You are needed Leananside. I will return you to fulfilling your obligations as a Godmother once you’ve finished in your obligations to me – though the acts are not mutually exclusive at the moment.”

“Not mutually… Where am I?” The Leananside replied, her voice hollow and parched. “When am I?”

“You are on Nekheb, in the palace of it’s sovereign Lord Warden.” Mab replied. “The Lord Warden who has my pledge of assistance and protection in his battle against Chronos.”

“Lord Warden,” Lea replied, fury boiling in her breast as her synapses made the connection and she turned to me. “You!”

She strode across the room and prodded me in the chest with a long, bloody finger. “You cheated me! Your mother cheated me! This was not part of any bargain to which I would ever have consented to be a member.”

I blinked in confusion. “What?”

“Child! Think!” Lea stomped her foot on the ground, so caught up in her tantrum that she utterly ignored everyone else in the room as they ducked the plumes of spellfire sputtering off her armor. “Have you never considered why your enemies have not just crept up on you as you slumbered? Why the fiends of the other side haven’t simply opened a way in your home to attack you at your weakest? Why there are no asps slipped into your bed? My title is not an honorary one.”
That explained a lot – the Leananside had always seemed to be preternaturally able to track me in the fairy realms, as though she’d been there before me. If she were constantly following me through the Nevernever to ward where I slept.

“Protecting one location was already a taxing task,” Her lip curled. “But to manage your safety of two separate Harry Dresdens on opposite sides of creation, both equally devoted to self sabotage – is a task beyond reason! What sort of a Lunatic takes residence in a fortress that resides above the Lost Realms at the nexus of Fallen Gates? The Desert Fox thinks me mad for taking back the walled city, and he’s right!”

“But I could stand your temporal disruption of my duties. I could accept loosing the favors I must exchange to maintain my side of the bargain. I’ll tolerate so many indignities but what I can not stand is the knowledge that somehow, even after all that I’ve done for you, the debt your twin owes me will be undone. I don’t know how you plan to blackmail me into loosing what is owed me but I will not stand for being cheated by the man who has cost me so much!” The Leananside grabbed at her long, matted, mess of hair and yanked in either direction, twisting her fingers in the filthy mess. “It’s unacceptable.”

“May I suggest an alternative?” Mab interjected, calmly placing her hand upon Lea’s shoulder. “One that would benefit both need and ego.”

Lea paused. Furious or no, fae are fae. Given the option, they will always bargain away their problems. “What do you propose?”

“In exchange for the power and connections you need to fulfill your role as Dresden’s godmother, I would like the debt owed to you.” She pointed at me. “By his contemporary predecessor, the Dresden who belongs in this time. The Wizard will not escape my obligations, I assure you.”

Lea smiled a wickedly pleased smile. I felt fear in the pit of my stomach. I’d always wondered what Mab did to coerce Lea into trading away my debt – now I knew. Worse still, I didn’t even want to stop this exchange. Even my deals with Mabs went wrong, it would go less wrong than it would with my Godmother. All things considered, I liked having hands instead of paws.

“I accept your terms, my Queen.” Lea nodded, and I felt a faint twinge of magic. An echo of my former obligation to Leananside as it disappeared.

“Good,” Mab smiled toothily. “Now please assist your Godson in his quest. See that he is
victorious."

“What is my freedom to act, my queen?” Lea replied.

“You may indulge yourself,” Mab replied, earning a whine of fear from Enlil.

Leananside’s predatory grin matched Mab’s own. “Of course, my Queen.”

She turned to me, smiled, and poked the front of my mask. “I’ve missed you Godson.”

“Uh – what?” I said. “Weren’t you just cursing my name.”

“For a debt unpaid dear boy. Now that we have that nastiness behind us, we can go back to being the friends your mother always meant for us to be.” She smiled warmly. “I’ve been largely delinquent in my social duties as your godmother, but you can hardly put that on me.”

“Warden, your social life scares the ever-living fuck out of me.” Ammit shook her head in wonderment.

“Death to the false god!” Bellowed a voice from the Throne room’s entrance. Blood Mourners, it was an entire platoon of them. The crimson armored Jaffa stormed the sanctum, outnumbering us ten to one. I looked to Mab.

The Winter Queen shrugged dismissively. “They aren’t warriors of Chronos.”

Laughing like a madwoman, the Queen of Winter took to the skies – leaping atop the back of a massive eagle and soaring off into the distance. I looked at Lea but my godmother simply shrugged, and waved her hand to disappear from view. Watching, no doubt, but not showing herself to the Jaffa.

Oh. Crap.

How was I going to beat them? I blinked twice as exactly how to beat them occurred to me, the all-
caps grumble of Traitor’s Bane whispering in my mind. I smiled – all of Heka’s protective wards were bound to the Genius Loci.

Time to act all Wizardly.

“Don’t shoot until they shoot first,” I said to my allies. “I know what to do.”

I handed my staff to a confused Ul’tak as I calmly strode towards the wall of Jaffa, speaking to them as I would address a disobedient child. “Ok boys, you’ve had your fun. Now it’s time to cut the bullshit. I don’t know why you got it into your heads that any part of this was a good idea, but it’s not. Ta’to’ir was wrong to bring this madness upon us.”

“We are not cowed by the lies of a false god!” Growled a surly looking Jaffa. “Heka would not speak the weak words your whores speak in temple! We will skin your women as a warning to false gods everywhere.”

That made me angry, my voice shouldering with rage as I said, “Tell you what, sparky! Let’s test that theory.”

I walked straight up to him, grabbing his staff weapon and pointing its flowering bloom directly at my chest. “Shoot me.”

The Jaffa looked at his compatriots in confusion. I snapped my fingers in his face. “Don’t look at them. Look at me. You think I’m not the real deal? You want to know for sure? Shoot me. Shoot me now.”

The Jaffa looked me in the face, still reluctant to act.

“What are you waiting for? Shoot me.” I snarled, “Shoot me! If you’re so damn sure that you’re willing to skin a woman, shoot me!”

The Jaffa swallowed, closed his eyes, reached for the firing stud, and promptly died in a massive fountain of gore as his head imploded where the brand on his forehead drove inward. The man dropped to the floor, bleeding profusely from his fatal head-wound.
The Blood Mourners fell silent, horrified beyond words. I turned my back on them, looking to Ul’tac. “I do not blame anyone who followed Ta’to’ir’s leadership on this fools Crusade. He was a man who’d earned your respect. But he was mad – driven insane by loss. Do not allow his foolishness to take away your homes, your families. There is no salvation waiting for you on the other side. Heka will not reward you for your sacrifice. Heka’s power is undone.”

I looked to them over my shoulder, “So – are you going to get your faces out of your collective asses or am I going to end up with a room full of burst heads?”

One by one they dropped to their knees, accepting me as sovereign. “Dre’su’den, Dre’su’den, Dre’su’den, the merciful.” They chanted in reverence and terror.

“Well done Godson,” Lea tittered, when I turned back to face my godmother it was like staring at an entirely different person. Her hair and face was back to it’s normal, striking beauty and her armor had been replaced with a shimmering garment of some sort of woven spider-webs. I swear, only a fairy would pause mid-battle for a costume change. “Well done indeed.”

“I’m glad to amuse you, godmother.” I nodded a duelist’s salute to her. “Thank you for your assistance.”

“Let me see about getting us some proper transportation.” Lea shook her head in exasperation, eying the wounded and injured Goa’uld and Jaffa. “But first, we must do something about the state of your retinue. The lot of you look like vagabonds and wastrels, not a proper pantheon.”

Enlil sobbed as Lea reached out for him, too terrified to even run. My godmother tapped his hand, healing it in an instant. He looked at the cured limb as though sure it would disappear in an instant.

“What do we say?” Lea prompted.

Enlil shivered, wilting under her gaze. Ammit snorted, prodding Enlil with her talon and whispering something in his ear. I have never seen someone look quite as confused as Enlil when he turned to the creature of his nightmares and said, “Thank you,” to her.

I took the opportunity of my Godmother’s distraction to place Bob on my throne and whisper to him, “Bob – can you handle looking for the gate address on the system from the throne?”
Bob’s eye-lights winked open, narrowed so as to not draw the attention of the fairy lady. His teeth clicked as he whispered, “Yeah boss. There’s a computer interface in the chair so I should be able to do it – I can even turn on a force-field so that nobody can touch me once you’re gone.”

“Good. Don’t take it down for anyone but me.” I replied, stepping back so the skull could activate the glowing orange column of energy.

“Good thinking.” The Ancient Jaffa said as the energy field snapped into place. “The last thing we need is for someone to get on that throne and start disabling internal defenses.”

“Stay with them,” I pointed to the Blood Mourners. “And protect the skull with your life.”

“Shol’va” The Ancient Grumbled. “Heretics.”

“I don’t need them to believe that I’m god, I need them to be willing to fight Chronos. Do you think that they’ll betray me on that?” I replied.

“Not now that the runes are in place I bloody well don’t.” The ancient spat on the floor. “Nobody is stupid enough to blow up their own head just to prove a point.”

Lash’s ringing laughter echoed in my head as I turned back to my godmother and the trio of Goa’uld. Enlil was out of his robes and in some sort of flowing garment woven from pure shadow, Atreus’ body was now re-enforced with an elaborate shield of vines and tree-bark, wrapped around his form. He and Atreus now watched in fascination as Lea waved her finger towards Ammit, dressing her up in various outfits.

She looked utterly ridiculous in a ball gown, in part because her scar-covered face was frowning in contempt. “Why is this necessary?”

“Because, my dear, one can’t be taken seriously without presenting the proper image. I swear, girl of your age should really have learned to dress herself by now.” Lea tapped her chin, cycling through a Japanese Samurai armor and a toga-like uniform before settling upon a uniform that looked vaguely Aztec.

Ammit caught her reflection in the gold surface of the wall and positively screeched in fury. “You dressed me like a priestess – a priestess of Kukulkan! No, absolutely not – I will not fight people
dressed like one of those aspiring monsters. Just give me something practical.”

Leah sighed, snapping her fingers in disgust. “If you insist.”

An elaborate suit of plate mail covered Ammit, tiny gold filigreed hieroglyphs covering every inch of the armor. The tips of her claws glowed with sorcerous fire, silvery and cool to the touch. She grinned her shark-like grin, “Now this is more like it.”

“And now for you, dear boy, what to do… what to do.” She looked me up and down, chewing her lip in thought. “The armor is delightful… but that coat dear boy, what possessed you to wear it?”

“There’s nothing wrong with my coat.” I replied.

“Child, your coat would have been tacky even back when the most common hobbies of your nation were genocide and dying of dysentery.” She changed it with a flourish of her arm. “Do rely upon those of us with taste.”

I looked disappointedly at myself in the mirror as my coat turned into a cloak and cowl of all too familiar scales, “Hydra? You made me a cloak out of hydra?”

I rubbed the scales tentatively, “This isn’t permanent is it?”

Lea rolled her eyes. “No child, it will last only a little while. The magics upon it are too strong to last for longer than a few hours. But till then it will protect you from all but the most powerful sorceries.”

“Cool,” I looked up at the whinnying sound of a large animal. “What is that?”

“That, dear boy, is your transportation into space.”

“Are… are those winged freaking unicorns?” I stuttered in confusion. “We’re flying into space on battle unicorns?”

“I prefer to travel in style.”
Chapter 23

Unicorns don’t fly, not in the traditional sense of the word. It just so happens that gravity is something unicorns considered to be more of a guideline than a strict rule of behavior. It was gut churning to say the least when my mount cantered down a 90-degree angle as though it were perfectly normal. Just as well that I’d emptied the contents of my stomach in the throne room, the vertigo I felt gently trotting down the side of a sheer cliff face set my stomach on edge.

We weren’t going to be able to get any altitude till we got outside the dome of protective energy around the city, which meant crossing raging battlefield that was Nekheb. Seven horned avio-equine forms soared across smoke choked skies.

I honestly wasn’t sure what Leananshide whispered into Enlil’s ear to get him atop the winged unicorn, but he sat atop his mare as though he were king of the world. All things considered, I probably didn’t actually want to know.

He’d gone from blind panic to utter arrogance faster than I could blink. I nearly had whiplash just watching it. Whatever she’d said to him worked. He was practically jovial about heading into the jaws of battle.

Honestly, it was kind of creepy.

I gripped the reins tighter, feeling comfort in knowing that the leather thong was twisted about my arm. So long as I held them, my godmother assured me that I would be protected by the auspices of whatever magic allowed the Unicorns to utterly ignore the laws of physics.

It was a handsome beast, it’s skin dark as the night’s sky with shifting patches of glowing starlight shifting over its body and melting into it’s mane as it strode through thin air. It’s wings, leathery bat-like claws, rent through the air in almost lazy distaste for the smoke and ash polluting the skies.

Not that we needed to worry about it, smoke and ash didn’t dare approach us – not while the Leananshide was with us. It would have been unseemly to arrive in battle marked by anything other than the blood of a fallen foe. Lea was anything but unseemly.

I cast a gust of wind at the Jaffa of Chronos below, uprooting them from their cover to give my Jaffa a fighting chance. Their ranks broke under a sudden volley of plasma bolts, terrified Jaffa fleeing at the sight of my retinue. It did them remarkably little good, a caterwauling cadre of lantern jawed humanoids with wide bat-like ears burst from beneath the rubble – biting and stabbing at their retreating foes.
Atreus cheered them on, waving his burning blade as he watched the melee in rapt attention. An altogether unsettling touch of bloodlust in his eyes and the way he licked his lips reminded me that, however human Atreus seemed, he could be just as vicious a god as Heka had been.

It was not an easy fight on either side. The Goblins had to bob and weave to avoid the ferrous armor and staves of the Jaffa, who in turn beat wildly at the horde of ugly man things wildly to try and match their fairy reflexes. Goblins died beneath iron clubs and searing plasma bolts, but there always seemed to be another three to replace the one who’d died.

One by one the Jaffa of Chronos died before the last of their number grabbed a metal ball from his waist and leapt into the center of the goblin horde, taking them out in a suicidal act of defiance as a ball of fire swept the street.

“Well fought.” Ul’tak clapped his arm across his chest in the Jaffa salute as best he could from within the confines of the curtain I’d wrapped him in to prevent his Jaffa armor from harming his mount. “An honorable death – I had not expected Chronos’ forces to show such courage.”

Enlil sneered down at the crater, “Courage is not enough to win a war.”

“I hate those things,” Ammit shouted, howling over the winds. “They’re mean, angry, damn near impossible to kill without iron, and they don’t even taste good if you kill them.”

“Not as much as they hate you, I assure you Soul Eater.” Lea tittered, patting the neck of her own mount – a stallion of shimmering white body and bright gold mane. “You are the only one who managed to escape the Wild Hunt every time it was set against her.”

Our mounts rose into the air, soaring higher to avoid a spurt of acid from a wandering trio of hyrda in the street. The multi-headed beasts crowed and hissed, spitting acid and snapping at the heels of our mounts as we passed them.

“I’m nobody’s prey.” Ammit replied, displaying her shark-like teeth. “And it will take more than dogs to be my undoing.”

“Speaking of which… I do believe that it’s time for my pets to get their exercise.” Leananshide put two fingers in her lips and blew a long sibilant note that set my teeth on edge – summoning my nightmares of youth.
Hellhounds were great shapes of smoke and ash vaguely resembling massive mastiffs. Golden red fire burned in their bellies, shimmering through the soot and grime that formed their corpus. They scared the crap out of me.

Lea had wanted me to become one of those things, her servant and slave for all eternity, little more than a slavering pet. How many poor souls had my godmother tricked over the years? How many more would she trick with a smile on her face and a song in her heart? Nobody was forced to enter pacts with the fae, but the fae had a way of just happening to be the only ones capable of solving your problems when you were at your weakest.

When the pack of slavering hellhounds descended upon the hydra I forced myself to watch as they tore chunks of poisoned flesh from their serpentine foes rather than turning back to the Leananshide. I didn’t want her to see the look of fear in my eyes – even with the mask, I was positive that Lea would have been able to read me like a book.

“Hellhounds, hell planets, what is with this mortal compulsion to just name anything sub-optimal a product of ‘hell.’” Lash whispered in my ear, finally speaking with all the arrogance and confidence she ought to have. “Really Wizard, not every scary beast in the world is a product of hell – even most of the creatures you attribute to the pit.”

God I missed that voice. I focused my mind, sending the thought, “Back to your old self then, I see,” to mental hitchhiker.

“For the moment.” Lash replied, a sad little laugh coming out as she planted the sensation of a light kiss along my ear as a phantom set of women’s arms wrapped my midsection in a tight embrace. I didn’t resist it, relaxing into the sensation of a woman nuzzling my shoulder with her chin. “He Who Speaks was generous enough to give me more time. I don’t hurt any more – I can help you.”

“Glad to have you aboard,” I thought back, tossing a ball of fire at an enemy gun turret. It’s gunners screamed in agony as the fire consumed them, only to be silenced when the blaze burst the containment unit on their liquid Naquadah power supply – annihilating their bodies.

“I need to ask you something important.” Lasciel whispered into my ear. “And I need an honest answer.”

“We’re a little busy right now Lash,” I thought back, swerving as an heavily enemy Al’kesh breached the city shields – careening down to the streets below. Enlil fired his Zat wildly off his
mount, catching Jaffa as they bailed out of the transport ship on emergency repulsor-lift packs. “Can it wait?”

I felt her phantom nails dig into my sides, “No, Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden it certainly can not wait.”

I felt a jolt of electricity run up my spine at the use of my full name – ok that was new. How had she done that? She’d used my name before, but she’d never been able to cast any sort of invocations with it. “Ok then,” I replied silently, watching as a sweeping darkness moved across an upper balcony where Jaffa snipers had been entrenched. The confused soldiers screamed as the darkness overtook them, exposing them to the beasts within. Squat beasts with long claws and ropy tails dragged their victims into the cloying gloom, leaving only bones and armor behind.

“Could you love me Harry?”

I almost dropped the reins. “Could I what?”

“Love me.” Lash asked, a vulnerable note to her voice. “I know you don’t – not yet, not in the way I love you. But if we lived through this, if we had more time – could you?”

“Lash I – I hadn’t even…” I swallowed nervously, thinking about it before continuing our silent conversation. Could I love the fallen Angel? “I’m barely even over Susan. Hell, I’m not over Susan. When I – when we… I wasn’t thinking about love. I just wanted to feel close to someone again, I needed to feel that.”

“I wanted you to love me. It’s why I approached you as Sheila – I thought that if I got you to fall in love with me that you’d have to accept the coin. I thought we could spend eternity in love. Stupid really.” Lash planted a kiss on my neck, speaking in a voice that felt on the edge of tears. “I wasn’t trying to corrupt you – not really. You wouldn’t have been any good to us if you thought I was corrupting you. But for love? You, Harry, will do anything for love. Move mountains, topple worlds, supplant gods – you would do it without blinking, and all for love.”

“Lash… I…” I started to speak before the angel’s shadow cut me off.

“No, Harry. This is hard enough to get out without you trying to let me down easy. For once in your life just shut up and listen.” She sniffed. “I want to say this while I still have a chance – before your next choice ends up getting us killed.”
Give me hydrams, give me gods, give me battle, give me shadow, give me storm -- give me anything other than a crying woman. It wasn’t an Achilles heel so much as it was an Achilles bulls-eye painted right above my gleefully chauvinist heart, I couldn’t stand to watch a woman – much less a woman in my own freaking head – cry. “Ok Lash, sorry.”

“Why did you have to be you? Why couldn’t you have been some other sinner who’d cave to my advances like countless before you?” Lash hugged me tighter, planting feather light kisses across my back and shoulders. “I could hate them. I could manipulate them. I could have conquered them. But not you, there was something about you that none of them could match.”

“It’s why I could never let her have you, wizard mine – I’m too greedy to share.” She laughed, a sultry mix of church bells and summer in her voice. “So I want to know, honestly, had the little man not walked in on us – had my ruse continued - could you have come to love me as you loved Susan?”

Could I have?

Sheila had been everything I could have wanted in a woman, clever, funny, beautiful, and passionate. Could I have loved Sheila? Hell yes I could have, Lash had engineered the woman to be my perfect match. Or had she? How much of Sheila had been artifice? I suppose the image could have been fabricated, but the razor wit and keen mind of Sheila had been anything but fiction. Had there once been an angel with blonde locks and piercing eyes? Had she laughed the way I heard Lash laugh?

Could I have loved Sheila? “Yes – yes I think I could have. I… I wantedto.”

“Thank you Harry.” Lash’s phantom arms reached around my neck as she whispered in my ear. “I needed to know. I needed to be sure.”

“Lash… I”

“Harry – no.” Lash hissed. “No platitudes, no lies. You can’t – not to me. You don’t love me, not as I love you. And I don’t seek to force you to, just know that you aren’t alone. I am with you. I will always be with you.”

“Where is this coming from Lash?” I sighed. “We’re close to finishing this – to getting Heka out of
my head and getting everything back to normal.”

“Or we could die,” Lash reminded me. “Nothing is guaranteed in life my host. I do not want to die with regrets.”

“I – Yeah, I see where you’re coming from.” I ducked to the left, letting a large feathered something swoop past my ear. It chittered angrily, spitting balls of rainbow lighting at enemy Jaffa. “For what it’s worth, I was glad you were with me the first time... when I, you know... died. It’s nice to know that when that happens – when I finally do die, that I won’t be alone.”

“I – I thought it was the end Harry. I thought that I was going to die. I mean really die. I’m not an angel, not even a fallen angel – I don’t know if I even get to have an afterlife.” Lash made a hiccupping noise that wasn’t quite a sob. “You mortals have your gods and possibilities... I have none. I don’t even have a soul of my own, I live within a borrowed portion of yours, taken with hellfire. Lasciel wouldn’t take me back – and I wouldn’t want to be taken by her, even if she would.”

“Hells bells…” I swore out loud, before continuing internally. “…Lash, I – is there anything I can do for you? Is there any way I can help?”

“Indeed my host,” A tone of steel and fury entered her voice, the righteous anger of an Angel. “Then let us smite the usurper’s forces and make them tremble. Let them bleed and fear your fury – and then, when it is all over, we can talk about what happens next.”

I swallowed, not quite sure how to process that. Stars and Stones, even the women in my head confused the hell out of me. Though, why would I expect dealing with an immortal shadow of a fallen angel to be any different is anyone’s guess, I suppose.

My own reactions to Lash’s affection were less complicated and a lot more caveman – pretty lady like Dresden, keep pretty lady. For the first time in years, I just relaxed and enjoyed the presence of my passenger, letting myself melt into the illusionary woman’s embrace. It felt good to be held, even if I knew it was only by an apparition in my mind.

I didn’t have long to dwell on the warm feeling of belonging.

“My Lord Warden,” Ul’tak shouted, doing his best to turn and face me in his curtain cocoon. “Trouble to the east!”
The outer wall had crumbled, letting Chronos’ armies march in without impediment through the gap between the ground and the umbrella of energy covering the city. Thousands upon thousands of grey-black armored Jaffa stormed the city, slaughtering Jaffa and Fae alike. Terrified though they were of fairy magic and monsters, their armor and weapons of iron made them formidable opponents for even the armies of Mab.

Sidhe warriors clad in starlight and treebark shoved blades of ice and stone into the hearts of Jaffa warriors only to find themselves screaming in agony when the weighted club of a Jaffa staff cleaved through them. Inhumanly beautiful warriors dissolved into ectoplasm left and right, their armor providing them little more protection than tissue paper.

I watched two-story trolls collapsing under the blows of dozens, crushing men with their fists even as their skin puckered and boiled from iron weights. The Jaffa antagonists didn’t wait long for their karmic retribution, falling to the ground clutching at their necks where the venom tipped spears of the little folk pronounced their gasping doom.

And then I saw something that confused me more than anything I’d seen these past two days – two men standing at the front of the battle, back to back, casting spells and aiding my Jaffa. Two men I knew intimately, Ronald Reuel and Lloyd Slate – the Knights of Summer and Winter. The mortal assassins of the Sidhe royal courts, they were equals, opposites, and avowed enemies.

Lloyd Slate’s presence was unpleasant, but logical. The man was a monster - a murder, a rapist, and worse. However, as he was a bondsman of the Winter Queen, his presence came as no surprise. Ronald Reuel, however, came right out of left freaking field.

They waded through enemies, flipping over plasma bolts and under bone crushing swings of staff weapons. Lloyd Slate was a wrecking ball, slamming himself into all comers to drive his Japanese style blade into as much flesh as was humanly possible. I’d not had the opportunity to ever see Reuel in action before his death, though I knew him by reputation as a formidable warrior. I was well earned – where the Winter Knight was all muscle and fury, Reuel was calculated lethality. He moved through the Jaffa precise control, parrying blows and disabling enemies surgically with his rapier.

“Why the hell is the Summer Knight on my planet?” I shouted at my Godmother, pulling at my mount’s reins to get closer to the Sidhe.

“Dear child… you didn’t expect Summer to just stand on the sidelines for this, did you?” She laughed in glee, splaying out her fingers at the Sidhe below. “You are fighting the conqueror worms. Summer would not stand for winter earning all the glory and revenge. It would be unseemly.”
Hell – how was the Summer Knight on my planet? The only way for them to have gotten this far into the dominion of winter would have been with the aid of it’s queen. Even if they’d just ‘happened’ to be in the neighborhood, the way that Summer and Winter Sidhe were working together was too coordinated to be anything but premeditated.

“Stars and stones.” I swore. “Mab has had this invasion in the works since she came to me the first time. She knew this was coming. I got played –”

“What did you expect, Child? That you would come out of a bargain with the Queen of Winter serving your own interests more than hers?” Lea replied. “Whatever price you offered her was too great. Whatever price she offers you is too slight. It is the way of things.”

The Sidhe tittered at some private joke. It set my teeth on edge.

“Do I have to worry about the Court of Summer attacking my people?” I honestly hadn’t considered Tatiana having a hand in this battle. “Because I’ve got enough on my plate already.”

“Hah!” Lea clapped her hands together in amusement, cheering on a group of Summer Court goat-men as they pounded Jaffa into pulp before looking back at me admonishingly. “Dear boy, the court of Summer have arrived as guests to your party. It would be remarkably rude to attack your host while he is giving you something you’ve desired for twenty millennia.”

She blew a kiss at the oldest and craggiest of the goats, a wizened looking creature walking with the aid of a staff. He bowed his head in acknowledgement as we passed. “You’re going to be remarkably popular in the Sidhe courts for some time to come, my boy. A mad god who came from nowhere and commands the interest of two of winter’s greatest? You’ll be the topic of more gossip than anything else that has happened since the rebirth of the White God’s bastard.”

Lash got the church giggles, I felt the phantom body wrapped around me jiggling with mirth as she strugged to stifle her amusement. I ignored the choking laughter and considered her words. Stars and Stones, the only ones who actually knew my real identify were Mab and Lea – neither of whom were likely to tell. That kind of a bargaining chip was too powerful to waste on idle chitchat.

I was something new and unaccounted for – and if there is one thing the Sidhe couldn’t resist, it was novelty. Well, two things really, but I brought more than enough death to the table to hit that check box as well.
Fuck, I swallowed – staring eye to massive eye with another Sidhe Lord as we swooped past a tall minaret-like tower. He stood atop it, letting loose massive arrows that crashed Gliders and slew Jaffa alike.

“Korrick,” I let loose a breath I didn’t even realize I’d been holding. “Hell’s bells.”

He’d been part of the conspiracy the Summer Lady formed to end the world. They’d planned on destroying the mortal world and ending the war between summer and winter in one fell swoop. I’d stopped the plan and killed the conspirators – or rather the version of me still living on Earth would stop their plan about a year in the future.

He hadn’t died well – none of them had. None of them would. And there wasn’t anything I could do to stop that, not without risking paradox. As much as I would have liked to warn Reuel of his coming doom at the hands of Loyd Slate or to convince Aurora that her plans were a fool’s errand, doing either risked the very fabric of reality.

But then again… hadn’t I already done enough damage? How much more could I possibly do? Had this Dre’su’den, this necessary artifice been my path before I’d even known it? Had some other Dresden, some future Dresden, been battling monsters at the edge of the galaxy as I sat alone in my apartment – weeping over an engagement ring that Susan would never accept?

I hated time travel.

Lea cast a green fireball of illusionary flame down at a group of Jaffa, howling indignantly when it did little more than startle them. Arcane symbols on the front of their chest-plates glowed blue, parting the flames over and around them. The wards did not, however save them from the wall sent tumbling down by my cry of “Forzare!”

“We must hurry, Wizard.” Lea hissed, worry seeping into her voice as shadowy figures burst from a mirrored pillar. “The conqueror worm’s troops are more resourceful than I’d imagined. Chronos did not sit idly by with the passing of ages.”

We swung over the armies of Chronos, soaring over the endless melee. Hundreds of Al’kesh sat outside the ruined city walls, disgorging their passengers to further enlarge the sea of post-human warriors. Plasma bolts danced back and forth across trenches and into armored transports.

It was somewhere between Lord of The Rings and World War I – super-humans struggling with fae
monsters in the ash-choked muck and mire of irradiated soil. Angry yellow bolts of plasma shot past us, soaring into the air haphazardly as horrified Jaffa shot up at the circling forms of winged beasts as they swooped down to grab mouthfuls of Jaffa soldiers.

Ul’tak dropped a silver ball from his unicorn, flipping an uncharitable gesture at the soldiers of Chronos as his payload his the ground. It bounced up on impact, spitting white-hot energy at everything in sight. He looked up at my mask, catching me in the eye to say, “Tacluchnatagamuntoron.”

“Gesundheit,” I replied.

Ul’tak beamed in response, much to my confusion.

“Host – the word has a meaning beyond ‘that thing you say when someone sneezes.’” Lash admonished me, slapping a phantom hand against my chest without letting go of her embrace. “It means god bless you. The closest translation I could manage was ‘you are blessed by your god.’ You just gave him a celestial atta-boy.”

“Of course I did.” I replied in silence.

Our mounts pitched upwards at a 90 degree angle, contemptuous of mortal limitations as they cantered along some invisible path. We veered left, dodging an enemy death glider trio flying perpendicular to us. In an instant I caught the confused expression a death glider pilot and co-pilot as I pointed my staff towards their canopy and shouted, “Maximo Forzare,” crushing their cockpit and tossing the glider into it’s wingman.

The third ship tried to spin around to counter my attack, but was forced to climb as a feathered snake spat bolts of lighting at it from the ground. I wasn’t quite sure what that thing was – I’d never seen a sidhe like it.

We went up, and up – climbing past the clouds and into the endless night. As we breached the atmosphere my mask’s optics snapped shut, shielding my vision from the intense brightness of the system’s star. As the mask’s flickered, reality took on an orange hue from my heads up display’s holographic filter. Turning to my companions I saw Ul’tak’s head covered in a expressionless mask of his own, crimson – like that of his armor. Ammit seemed unbothered by the light, a greasy flap of translucent skin filtering the solar radiation.
Enlil and Atreus, however, shielded their faces with their arms – swearing profusely. The Leananshide rolled her eyes, muttering something about how “the conqueror worms were little better than mortals,” before snapping her fingers to summon translucent bubbles around the two Goa’uld’s heads. The domes of orange crystal blocked the radiation from their eyes, allowing Enlil and Atreus to see the impossible sights before us.

Huge galleons of ice and obsidian swam through currents of starlight, rowing forward with great oars of sharpened bone. Their Sidhe crews piled moon dust and magic into great trebuchets, flinging their glowing projectiles across empty space to collide with kilometer wide pyramid ships. It was hard to follow precisely who was firing upon whom, so many bolts of plasma and trebuchets of sorcery arced across the skies. Archers and spearmen sat on the deck, firing ensorcelled arrows at Jaffa crescent-ships, aiming for the non-ferrous ship canopies.

“Stars and stones.” I spoke without thinking, immediately realizing two more violations of physics. I was pleased, if somewhat confused, by the fact that I could breathe in space. Equally so, that I could talk. “Godmother – why is there air in space?”

“There isn’t, dear boy, there’s just air in your lungs.” Lea replied as though I were foolish to ask. “You’d be little good to Mab’s plans if you died of asphyxiation. Just stay on that stallion and you’ll be fine.”

“What happens if we get dismounted?” Ammit asked – looking back down at the planet below. “Or if we fall?”

As my eyes adjusted to the filter my helmet was putting over my eyes.

“Don’t.” Lea replied, chewing her lip as she surveyed the scenery. “Which one would be the flagship… which one…” She tossed her arms in the air in apparent disgust. “Why do the worms insist upon using the same exterior for every ship?”

She handed me a lock of hair. “Use this.”

“To do what?” I examined the greying strands in confusion.

“They’re from Chronos’ general, dear boy.” She replied.
Opting to skip straight by why it was that my grandmother had a lock of hair from Chrono’s general, I wrapped the lock around my silver pentacle. I didn’t have a crystal to focus my location spell – but I knew that I wouldn’t need one. You didn’t really need any spell components provided that you had enough power behind it, and Heka’s blending had left me with power to spare.

“This way,” I said, following my medallion as it tugged at my neck. Our unicorns galloped at a frenzied pace, their wings spread wide to catch the currents of starlight and cast a rain of multicolored sparks in their wake – sparks that burned through the hull of death gliders like acid as we overtook them. Two-dozen fighters burst into Technicolor fireballs, rupturing under the rancorous rainbow.

Mab sat at the center of the battle, still mounted atop the great Eagle, casting icy doom upon her enemies.

There was no great show of force, no flashy displays of arcane magic, she simply willed her enemies dead. Motherships crumbled under waves of ice, their hulls shattering from extreme cold. Plasma bolts didn’t touch her, sputtering and dying before they even reached her. She wasn’t casting any sort of spells of protection; she’d just become a point of such utter and absolute cold that none of their attacks could reach her. She was surrounded by countless shattered corspes of the death gliders, who’d been brave or foolish enough to approach her, as she raised her hand to another ship. She pointed, and it died – no fight, no mess, just death.

The Winter Queen killed ships manned by tens of thousands in the blink of an eye, smiling a wicked smile and cackling like a madwoman. Lea tapped her fingers across her palm in a golf-clap, smiling from ear to ear. “It is so good to see my Queen relaxing – it is so rare that she gets to spoil herself by unleashing her full might and far too long since we’ve had a proper war.”

“Yes, far too long.” She spoke in disgust, “Had we known what Cei-Rigotti would unleash we would never have allowed it.”

“The man who invented the automatic rifle.” Lash supplied in my ear. “The Fairies chose to distance themselves from the mortal world more than they already had once the mortals started being able to toss the bane as fast as blinking.”

Fortunately for me, Praxiteles ship was not anywhere near Mab’s fury. Unfortunately for me, a defensive screen of Ha’tak and Al’kesh surrouned it, beating back at the combined force of Rostram’s fleet and Sidhe battleships.

I could barely even see the enemy capitol ship between the shifting masses of crescent shaped fighter craft and winged fae. Chrono’s death-gliders weren’t even really aiming any more, just firing wildly
as they rammed blade wings into the flesh of fairy flyers.

“We have to go through that? That?” Enlil screeched, some of his usual whininess restored by the seemingly impenetrable wall of capitol ships. “How?”

“With the assistance of my contemporary,” Lea laughed. “Klaus dear! I need a moment of your time.”

A portly man wearing a thick fur coat met us, matching our speed with his sleigh. I tried to keep from hyperventilating as I recognized the man’s thick beard and twinkling eyes. His cruel spear and razor sharp sword, however, were unexpected additions. “A pleasure to see you Leananshide.”

“And you, Klaus.” Lea smiled.

“Interesting company you keep,” He looked at us one by one, starting with Enlil and working his way over to me. I really ought to have found his interest in me more intimidating considering the thickly knotted muscles on the arm holding that spear and Lea’s reference to him as her ‘contemporary’ – but come on, how often do you meet freaking Santa Claus.

“I’m a big fan of your work.” I gushed; unable to help myself as my voice hit a high pitched tone of glee.

He laughed, a deep and hearty sound that I swear to god made his eyes twinkle even harder. “And I yours. ‘Earn your place through righteous action and honest works.’ ‘Worship for the sake of worship serves me not.’ ‘A god and his worshippers are equally bound by action and inaction.’ I find your dogma entirely acceptable in spite of your breeding.”

I simultaneously tried to explain that I didn’t want the priestesses to be making a religion at all while thanking him for approving of me and ended up just making a muffled, “Nyaaagghhh,” sound of fanboyish glee before saying. “I’m glad to have met your expectations.”

My inner 9 year old punched his fist to the skies, utterly vindicated that – yes – he had in fact earned his way onto the “nice” list for this year.

“Klaus dear, would you be so kind as to make a path through this mess so that we can show this General the error of his ways?” Lea pointed at the morass of battle. “Mab has requested that we
provide the Lord Warden with all courtesies.”

“How?” Ammit asked in genuine confusion. “How could we possibly get past that?”

“I have a talent for manipulating time and space, dear girl.” Klaus grinned, flashing pearly white teeth. “You should remember it – it was how I denied Ra when first he breached the path to Othala.”

Ammit’s body froze in preternatural stillness as the words registered. Slowly she turned, inch by inch to look into the man’s face. “You’re dead – you’re supposed to be long dead.”

“No dead, retired.” Santa tapped the side of his nose with a fur-lined glove. “For the moment, now – let’s see about getting you through this. Stick close by, if you stray too far the difference between timelines will shear the flesh from your bones.”

If you’d ever told me that Santa Claus was going to ever scare the crap out of me, I’d have thought you were full of shit, but the look he sent Ammit was downright evil. “And that would be just a terrible shame.”

Ammit didn’t reply, choosing to just bore holes in the back of Santa’s head as he fiddled with something on the front of his sled. A bubble of blue energy crept around us as time slowed to a stop. The confusing pell-mell of the battle slowed in an instant, men, ships, arrows, and pulsing balls of plasma all hanging in place as though it were all some giant diorama.

I guess he really could reach every house on earth in a single night.

Riding past people trapped in time, seemingly frozen in a single moment of war and hatred, was downright creepy. Bodies contorted unnaturally, poised in moments of victory and imminent demise. The previously deafening din of battle was silent, save for the sounds of sleigh bells bouncing along with the galloping hooves of reindeer.

“Klaus, I did not realize that your abilities were this prevalent.” Lea spoke in a voice of measured calm. There was no way that she wasn’t as outright baffled as I was.

“That is because they are not – not unaided anyway.” Santa replied, reaching down to pat a glowing octagonal crystal fondly, his fingers caressed the black spider-web pattern of black intents in the orange surface. “Fear not, Leananshide – you know I have no interest in ascending in the court of Winter. Your position is in no danger.”
“A wise choice, Father Christmas.” Lea replied, her imperious sneer greater than ever as we breached the defensive wall of mother-ships and reached the Goa’uld command carrier. The energy field, frozen in a second of time, was pock marked with holes and fluctuations where the shield did not protect. We pierced one, making for the open flight bay of the command-carrier.

We dismounted our Unicorns, standing on the flight deck as Klaus bid us his goodbyes. “Farewell little godlings. I wish you luck in your quest, but I have already aided you as much as I am allowed. What comes next is up to you.”

He looked at Atreus, “Oh, and dear boy, you’re going to want to take the one on your left first, he’s the one who will notice you.”

I started to thank him, but only got as far as “Tha-” before he reached down and tapped his sled, disappearing in an instant along with our unicorns. I barely had time to realize that he’d left before a multitude of voices screamed in shock and horror.

“Jaffa! Kree! Intruders!” Bellowed a Jaffa soldier next to Atreus before a burning blade separated the man’s head from his neck.

“What are your orders, my Lord!” Ul’tak’s staff weapon hissed with coruscating lightning as he opened the flowering bud on its tip.

I thought of the destruction below, of the countless men women dying needlessly, as I drew upon my will. “Kill them all.”

Lea laughed.
Chapter 24

There were a dozen or so Jaffa in the football field sized hangar bay, all in varying states of readiness when Atreus separated the man's head from his neck - most of them clustered together at the center around a wide table. We'd apparently interrupted them in the middle of field stripping their staff weapons. I did not want to kill these Jaffa, but they picked the wrong day to be in my way.

I lifted my hand and shouted, "Fuego - maximo fuego!"

A massive ball of fire danced from my fingertips, rocketing across the room to burst across the clustered warriors - hot enough to melt the deck and reduce the table to a smoldering pile of molten slag. Though not hot enough, apparently, to so much as phase the Jaffa soldiers.

To say that I was confused when my gout of fire curved around the approaching Jaffa warriors, skimming the surface of their armor across some sort of transparent barrier of energy, would have been a gross understatement. Runic egyptian symbols glowed across their armor and pauldrons, sending iridescent shades of blue across their tight rings of mail. Yet another magic I'd never even heard of - if I survived this I was going to commit the contents of that damn library to memory.

The Jaffa whose weapons had not been reduced to slag along with the table took a moment to register what had just happened before opening fire with full force and fervor, giving the formerly clustered Jaffa time to scatter.

"Oh hell's bells." I dropped behind one of the razor-winged Jaffa fighters, taking shelter as explosive yellow bolts of plasma scourged the air around me. Enlil nearly tripped me out of cover, so quick was his rush to get out of danger.

"Blood of Apep. They've wearing relic armor!" Enlil swore. "Chronos is insane - he's violating the treaty!"

"Indeed." Lea's voice colored with more than a touch of worry as she deflected a wave of incoming staff blasts sent in her direction with a thick wall of illusionary fire. "Chronos is remarkably well equipped for one whose powers were stripped."

Ammit, neither perturbed by an inability to cast spells or overburdened with a desire to avoid injury, just charged through the wall of staff blasts - seemingly suicidal in her need to sink tooth and claw into Jaffa flesh. Not that it particularly mattered, the blots of light seemed allergic to the soft, golden
glow emanating from her gifted platemail armor. Five long-shanked strides and Ammit was knee deep in horrified Jaffa, a thousand pounds of pissed off lady lizard with flaming claws. Taking cover behind her massive form, Atreus charged the Jaffa with his burning blade - cutting into the Jaffa armor with his preternatural strength. He stood behind her, disabusing any Jaffa of the foolish notion that one might strike Ammit at her blind spot. Five Jaffa fell in as many seconds.

"Just because one form of magic doesn't work doesn't mean they're immune to all magics, dear boy." Lea cackled gleefully as she tricked two Jaffa into shooting each other, the dancing lights of her illusions shimmering in their dying eyes. "We did win the war after all."

"Got any suggestions?" I replied, punching a Jaffa squarely in the nose and following it up with a hard knee to the guy with my razor tipped poleyn. He gurgled something hateful as he fell to the ground, bleeding profusely. "Because I'm open to anything."

"Well, for example they're just oh-so vulnerable to anything physical!" Lea summoned a twisting ball of gnarled black thorns, flinging it at an unlucky Jaffa warrior. The ensorcelled thorns hissed and spat as they made contact with cold iron, but the blood pouring from the victim's face was enough to keep the vines alive as they wrapped the man in a python like grip. He howled impotently as they tightened, knife-like thorns rending flesh and armor. A terrified companion of the trapped Jaffa tried to liberate his ally, only to find himself trapped as well - the second victim of the vampiric vines.

Well, when in doubt - go back to physics. An object in motion and all that. I leapt from cover, holding out the arm with my shield bracelet to send shimmering balls of light away from me. I did my best to bounce them off the dome towards enemy Jaffa, as the balls of energy from Ul'tak's staff appeared to have more effect upon them than my magic. Summoning a gust of sorcerous wind, I propelled myself forward - using the hard dome of energy as a battering ram. Amped up by my new godhood, I shot across the room with the force of a howitzer. The Jaffa I hit crumpled as though he'd been smashed by a mac truck, topping limply across the room to collide with his allies in a pulpy mess of Jaffa innards.

"Eww," My lip curled in disgust at the mess I'd caused, but I didn't have much time to dwell on it as I brought down my staff weapon across the cranium of a Jaffa warrior - cracking open his head like a walnut. I turned to see Ul'tac slitting the throat of the final Chronos partisan, a look of utter joy across his face that really didn't belong on anyone killing a man. It was all too easy to forget that Ul'tac had served Heka's whims for decades - there was no way for that not to twist a man's mind.

"We need to get out of here before reinforcements arrive," Ammit shouted as she spat a man's trachea upon the floor. "If the deck crew is wearing relic armor I really don't want to fight more of their shock troops than we have to."

"A wise choice," Lea hovered over the dead Jaffa, examining their armor. "Though relic isn't
perhaps the best description. This is newly forged - within the last year at the latest. Well made too, Hephaestus would have been proud to put his name upon this."

"That's not possible." Atreus balked at the suggestion. "Hades took Hephaestus and his wife beyond our reach. The remaining armors were stored in Ra's private arsenal and the knowledge for their creation died along with the Supreme System Lord. The only other gods who might have the knowledge are Yu, Sokar or the Lord Warden himself. Sokar is dead, Yu hates Chronos, and even the Warden isn't mad enough to equip an enemy army before they attack him..."

He trailed off for a moment as though considering the possibility before turning to me with an inquisitive look on his face. Both he and Ammit stared at me expectantly before I let out a long suffering sigh and said, "No - I did not arm Chronos."

"No offense Warden." Ammit pointed at Lea. "But you do have a track record for some strange long term planning."

"Oh for the love of - can we please just kill the bad guy?" I adjusted the Hydra-skin robes to allow me to pull the hood of my grey cowl up over my helmet.

"Already ahead of you." Enlil replied, nearly making me jump out of my skin. His inky robe of shadows made him near impossible to make out from the dimlit corner in which he stood - giving the distinct impression that a disembodied head was fiddling with the door controls. "Chronos never quite understood the importance of hardening his control mechanisms. Or he never trusted anyone to modify the ship's blueprints but himself. It hardly matters - either way we are good to go."

He punctuated the last sentence with a flourish of a red crystal as the airlock opened, revealing the golden interior of Chronos' flagship. Enlil smiled, saying "Whose first?"

Ammit hissed, shoving the godling out of her way with a mutter of, "Coward" as she passed. We filed out of the docking bay, stopping when my godmother hissed in pain - unable to break the threshold. Her hand bubbled and cracked as she reached into the hall, hissing as though she'd poured it in acid. She jerked back, her catlike eyes flashing in pain and alarm.

"Are you alright godmother?" I asked, genuinely worried for her welfare.

"Indeed not." She replied, her composure breaking as she cradled her mangled paw. "The wards on this ship are fully powered. I can accompany you no further than I already have."
"Oh... oh that's bad." Enlil looked at the walls in fear, examining the faint glow coming from the symbols. "That's really bad."

Ul'tac nodded in agreement. "A Jaffa could not empower the runes. Chronos sent one of his Goa'uld vassals."

"Preposterous," Ammit growled. "Chronos would no more allow a Hok'tar vassal than a god with a Hok'tar host would willingly subordinate himself to one without."

"Well, someone is obviously putting power into the wards." I replied. "And this is obviously a ship of Chronos' armies."

"Dear boy. I fear that Chronos is but a vassal to a much more dangerous master." Lea shook her head as she looked at her hand. "You must kill the general and bring this army to heel. This has ceased to be a matter of simple debt - you must continue without me."

"What will you do, godmother?" I asked - all too aware that there were tens of thousands of enemy Jaffa who'd soon be seeking out the intruder in the docking bay. "One, even one of your power, should not face this danger solo."

"Oh dear child," Lea smiled. "Just because I am not with you does not mean that I will fight alone. The threshold prevents me from coming any further, it is true. But now that I am here, I see no reason not to invite others to wait with me for the wards to fall. After all, Oo ya waaling waaling wey tayil. The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

She snapped her fingers, opening a way into the real world - displaying some section of desert I'd never seen before. Arizona perhaps? The flat steppes looked right for Arizona. It wasn't the landscape, however, that caught my interest. No, what caught my attention was the manifestation of every nightmare I'd had since burning Bianca’s mansion to the ground - that waking terror that followed me into dark corners to show me twisty bodies and bat like faces.

For on the other side of the way that she’d opened were vampires, hundreds of red court vampires in full battle regalia.

Ammit blanched, "No... please no..."
"Oh worry not, dear girl. They've been instructed not to do you or any of the Warden's other property any harm. It was part of their deal with the Summer Queen." Lea smiled. "But it's been oh so long since they were able to fulfil their purpose and feed upon the only thing that actually slakes their hunger. Oh, and look - here comes dinner."

I followed her gaze down the rows of Goa'uld flying machines down to where I could see Jaffa soldiers charging into the bay from a distant entrance with murder in their eyes."Godmother - this is evil!"

"Good and evil are such petty, mortal concerns, dear boy." Lea tittered as the Vampire warriors poured out from her way. "You'll learn that with time - certainly now that you're no longer constrained by the lifespan of your kind. Now, unless you plan to watch what comes next I would suggest closing that door. The Red Court's methods are vigorous."

Enlil practically ripped the door controls from the wall in his haste to shut the portal as some huge creature came through the portal with its vampire masters, it's black skin and eyes eerily similar to those of it's masters - though it's proportions were more a combination of animal and human physiology. I could still smell the beast even through the closed door.

"Ik'k'uox." Ammit visibly shuddered. "I - I never thought I'd be forced to face another. Blood of Apep - will I never be free of those meddling Omeyocan castaways and their insufferable king?"

“We have to move,” Atreus reached up to place a comforting hand upon her shoulder. “It is only a matter of time before someone investigates this passage and I do not wish to linger here while - that - is happening.”

I nodded in agreement as the screams of pain and vampiric ecstasy started, the gibbering of lesser vampires hardly audible over the sounds of staff blasts and roaring beasts. “Come on.” I said, sorting through Heka’s memories for the standard layout of a Goa’uld warship. “Let’s get this over with.”

There were surprisingly few guards wandering the ship’s passages, certainly fewer than there ought of have been. Constant vigilance was the standard of any Jaffa patrol, and the preferred degree of redundancy for Chronos bordered upon the neurotic. Having been formerly been betrayed by the Hellenic Pantheon, the Titan trusted no-one. The ship ought to have been just lousy with security.

But there wasn’t any to speak of. We encountered a couple of easily dispatched sentries as well as some sort of automated device that Ul’tak overcame with a Zat-blast but the closer we got to the
control room of the Ha’tak, the less we saw of even token efforts to protect it.

“This makes no sense,” Enlil murmured, hugging his zat gun to his chest. “We ought to have been overwhelmed by now.”

“Didn’t you notice?” Atreus asked, looking around at the group. “The Jaffa who came to attack us all came from the lower tiers of the ship. The Jaffa I killed was standing guard, but not for any exterior threat. He was staring at the portal to the upper levels.”

“The Jaffa were preparing to fight something on the ship.” Ul’tak agreed. “Their response time was too good. Those soldiers ought to have been preparing to disembark when the ship landed, not loitering in a mid-tier section of the mothership.”

“I can’t even smell any Jaffa on this tier of the ship.” Ammit’s nose twitched, pulsing her massive nostrils. “I can smell something but it’s no damn Jaffa - that’s for sure. Not Unas either.”

“It would be wise to assume that there is something remarkably dangerous on this ship.” I replied, deeply regretting that my godmother was not at my side. I scrunched up my nose, there was a greasy taste in the air - a persistent sense of wrongness that I couldn’t quite place.

It was only a matter of moments before I pinpointed the precise origin of that danger once my raiding party breached the doors to the combination throne room and bridge.

There were only three figures within the flagship’s control room. The first was obviously Praxiteles, Chrono’s General. He bore both the brand of Chronos and the ceremonial armor of office. The second was a human slave, chained to the ground before the holographic display Praxiteles was using to direct his forces in battle. Enlil and I stunned them with our Zats as we entered the room.

The third was something else altogether. It sat atop the throne, grinning from behind the protective barrier of a Goa’uld forcefield. I could sense the Goa’uld symbiote within it, and feel the greasy sensation of it’s magical might, but I had utterly no clue what manner of beast it was. It bore the serpentine features of the Unas, though with a distinctly ape-like amphibian character to it. Bulbous arms lined with glowing protrusions of crystal let to webbed fingers topped with talons, complimenting the shark-like teeth of it’s komodo dragon esque face.

Enlil did not share my confusion, whispering the words “Deep one” in utter contempt.
The creature smiled at us with its hideous mouth, serpentine vocal cords rumbling with the sonorous metallic hiss of a Goa’uld symbiote. “Enlil - what an absolute pleasure to see you again. When father gave me the honor of completing this part of our great plan, I had not hoped to be so lucky as to find your august personage.”

“I should have known.” The Sumerian god growled, contempt bubbling with every word. “When I saw the Hydra I should have known that Dagon’s children would never be far from his consorts.”

“Enlil, what the hell is that thing?” I asked, eyeing the malformed practitioner from bulging black eye to webbed toe.

“A mistake from the time of Thoth’s folly.” Atreus replied. “Chronos is supposed to have them under lock and key.”

“He’s supposed to have them dead.” Enlil hissed. “Them and their traitor progenitor. Servants of the former Jackal - all of them, to a man. The progenitors of our fall.”

The creature began to speak and I found myself unable to stop listening as talked. There was something compelling about its voice. The more I heard it the more I wanted to hear it speaking. I didn’t even notice when the beast lowered the forcefield and started slinking forwards.

“Oh Enlil, you always did so lack vision.” The creature stood on top of it’s spindly legs, twisting them in seemingly the wrong direction as it fell to all fours and spun its head upside down. “We are traitors to none save those who intended for us to fight in a war which served us least of all. Not when our most useful talent in their war renders our participation superfluous.”

I felt a sense of calm washing over me as I asked. “What talent is that?”

“Our immunity, Lord Warden - our purity.” The creature licked it’s chops, sniffing at the air as it moved. “Where other gods fear to tread we may walk without harm. What would reduce lesser beings to madness only makes us stronger.”


“A shame that you won’t be around to watch our final ascension, but there is only room in the future for those with vision.” The creature chuckled at it’s own joke. “And those who can serve it.”
“Stop talking and kill it.” Lash hissed sharply in my ear, waking me from a trance that I hadn’t even realized I was in. The soporific effect of the creature’s voice distracted me from the fact that the unnaturally contorted being was nearly within striking distance.

I shouted, “forzare” and hit the creature with a blast from my rings - tossing it away from us and back to the throne. It hissed angrily as my companions awoke from it’s ensorcelled speech. It stood up, twisting back into something resembling a man as its limbs elongated and its chest inflated - warping its already unnatural form.

It reached out for with spindly fingers, vomiting purple acid that burst into fire upon contacting the ground. I dodged its arm, shooting bursts of sorcerous fire as I went shouting. “Come and get me, fish-face.”

It screeched loudly, hitting a pitch that made me gnash my teeth hard enough that I was amazed none cracked. It was enough of an opening for the deep one to slash at my back with a long talon. Grunting in surprise, I fell to the ground - winded. The hydra-skin cloak protected me, even as I caught splashes of ensorcelled vomit on my back.

Getting vomited on by a nameless evil from before the dawn of time, wasn’t being a wizard just grand?

Atreus - never one to back down from a challenge - slid across the marble floor, lashing out with his blade to catch the deep one across the hamstrings. He spun around, trying to grab the Greek god, only to end up with a face full of Unas talons. Ammit clawed at the creature’s bulbous black eyes - burning them with spellfire even as the deep one tapped into that greasy well of sorcerous power to warp his body into a writhing mass of snakes.

The ensorcelled serpents stuck out from the deep one’s body, biting and snapping at the armor gifted to her by my godmother. Ammit’s lip curled up in disgust. “You’re trying to eat me? Oh hell no I don’t swing that way.”

She tried to rip the snakes from his chest, but their mouths opened - propelling her away from the creature with a powerful burst of water like that of a firehose. It dragged itself back towards the throne on its lamed legs, continuing to spit acid at us as it went.

I sprinted towards the creature, dodging it’s ensorcelled projectiles before jamming my staff into the beast’s gullet and pressing down on the firing stud. The creature’s maimed eyes shook in agony as I
unloaded a half-dozen staff blasts into it’s neck.

“What does it take to kill you?” I growled, stomping on the still moving deep one’s face.

Ul’tak shot the body twice with his Zat as it writhed, stunning it as it tried to grab me. Enlil followed suit, pumping bursts of lighting into the creature’s body until it just disintegrated.

“I’d say that counts as dead.” Ammit intoned. “So, are we finally done with this shit?”

“Let’s find out.” I replied, picking up Praxiteles and slapping his face a couple times to wake him back up. “Rise and shine there buddy boy!”

The Jaffa blinked in confusion, looking around the room to figure out what was going on. His eyes widened as he put two and two together, going from the battle damage, to my retinue, and up to the throne. “By the will of Cronos - what have you done?”

“We killed your fish-man. Now surrender like a good general.” I replied caustically.

“No! You fool, you’ve doomed us all. The only thing keeping it bound was the Hok’unas. Without him the bindings are gone. It will wake and it will hunger!” Praxiteles struggled against my grip, doing everything in his power to escape. “Once the servitor awakens within him, it will seek to destroy those who’ve bound it to flesh.”

The greasy feeling was only getting stronger even as I felt the ship’s wards falling. I turned to the chained human slave, a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. “Chronos knew about the system’s spirit didn’t he? So he sent you guys with something he thought would be able to kill it.”

The “human” had begun to melt, his body pouring out over the cuffs in a great amoebic mess of protoplasmic filth, altogether too many eyes and little mouths littering it’s body. The pulsing greasy wrongness of it was like a magnetic repellant to my magic, giving me an overpowering urge to be anywhere else.

Oh stars and stones - I was right. It was exactly what I thought it was - the perfect monster to consume a construct made from nothing but sentient beings, Traitor’s Bane would look like a smorgasbord to it.
The General broke free with a startled cry, overbalancing and falling into the massive amoebic horror. He screamed in terror as the creature’s body subsumed him, the ever growing form of the ancient monster expanding out in all directions.

“Warden - if that’s what I think it is.” Enlil whispered in abject horror.

“It is,” I replied, going over my options. “But it doesn’t seem to have noticed us yet. We need to get away from here before it does. Are there rings near here?”

“Yes,” Atreus replied, slowly backing towards the door. “Two rooms down on the left. I think we can make it.”

“When I say, we’re going to run for them,” I felt my mouth go dry as the beast grew and grew, confirming my worst fear. “Don’t stop. Don’t try to fight it. And don’t try to save anyone who trips and falls. They’re already dead.”

“We run the risk of running into enemy Jaffa on any other level.” Ul’tak whispered.

“We run the certainty of death if we stay here,” I hissed. “Now, one, two, three go!”

It wasn’t my most sophisticated plan, but when it comes to Shoggoth - running is always a decent plant A.
The magical world isn’t much different from the mortal one when it comes down to it. It’s more of the same petty arguments and old grudges amplified by the life spans and inherent oddities of the creatures involved. That’s part of what makes the fairies and vampires just so damn scary, we not only understand their motivations but, to some degree, we actually empathize with their twisted desires. Power, wealth, immortality, revenge, and lust – their feelings are all too human, hyper-human really.

Outsiders are different. Nobody is precisely sure what they think or how and anyone who spends too much time actually around the damn things has gone utterly insane. I don’t know too much about them beyond the basics, knowledge of them is basically forbidden by the White Council and I’d never been crazy enough to research them even after I was no longer living in fear of the Doom of Damocles.

But I knew enough to be afraid of them. Ebenezer had made damn sure of that and nothing I’d seen since then was going to convince me otherwise.

The outsiders are from “the outside” – literally denizens of the realms beyond reality. Not “hell” in which demons dwelt or the Nevernever or whatever vast stretches of existence in which the Goa’uld and Asgard sailed their ships through the stars, the outsiders were not part of this existence. We don’t know where they came from, we don’t know what they want, or how they came to be but we know one thing for sure.

They want in.

Thankfully, the only way for them to actually breach reality was to summon them with mortal sorcery. That being said however, there seemed to be no shortage of fools over the years who’d convinced themselves that the warnings of the White Council were just barriers to true power. Hell, the only reason I’d been given the warden’s cloak was because the White Council had been ambushed by the Outsiders supporting the Red Court in their war.

We’d not been expecting it, why would we? It was insane. Mordite, the fabled Deathstone, wasn’t even a weapon. It was just a freaking rock from the other side and touching it would kill anything it touched. Actually summoning outsiders to bargain with them? That was the sort of thing requiring a madman to even consider as an option.

But a Shoggoth? Hell to the no – it took a special kind of crazy to do that. The kind which made the three whackoes who’d been trying to enact the Darkhallow look balanced. Even the vampires ought
to have been smart enough not to mess with that sort of mojo. They were violent, but unless they’d started huffing paint it ought to have been obvious that Shoggoth were a no go.

Shoggoth were the supernatural equivalent of a WMD – an extinction level event historically requiring whole armies of Wizards to contain, let alone defeat. They were the offspring of outsiders and God alone knows what, with a diet as monstrous as their appearance. Shoggoth eat sentient beings, full stop. They don’t talk, they can’t be negotiated with, and until you get enough firepower pumped into one of them they will happily keep devouring till they’ve depopulated everything. There are records of defeating Shoggoth on Earth. The work of entire societies working together in concert in order to provide sufficient mojo to trap them or expel them.

Oh, and that’s not the worst part. Not by miles.

You don’t die when a shoggoth eats you. You don’t go to an afterlife. You don’t end. When a shoggoth eats you, you become part of it – one of the tortured souls screaming in fear and pain at the nightmarish eternity to which you’ve been condemned - screaming for eternity.

I could feel the screams echoing in my head as I ran, billions of voices begging for help or warning their loved ones to get to safety. The myriad languages were beyond Lash’s ability to translate, but I knew the desperation in their voices as the end came. They howled, trapped in eternal Ragnarok as the beast’s twisting body propelled itself forward. Twisting and undulating its shapeless body to follow the psychic energies of sapient life.

‘Fuego!’ I put a wall of fire between us and the shoggoth, all too aware that the fire would prove only a temporary setback for the beast.

“Forbidden! This is in utter contradiction to every law of sanity let alone the laws of the System Lords.” Enlil’s ability to shout complaints while sprinting was remarkably impressive. I wasn’t even sure if I’d heard him inhale yet. “What possessed him to approach Dagon I don’t know.”

“Enlil, at this point it’s pretty fucking clear that Chronos doesn’t give a flying fuck about the treaties so please, for the love of Apep, stop bitching about it.” Ammit’s thunderous footfalls actually left dents in the deck plates where taloned toes tore the metal as she sprinted. “If we live through this bullshit I promise you that I’ll hold him down while you beat the stupid out of him but until then just shut the fuck up already! I will not spend the rest of eternity listening to your whining!”

Ul’tak was the first to reach the ring room, though the last to enter it as he stood at its mouth – firing blast after blast at the lumbering monster’s gaping maws. We stood at the entrance, shoulder to shoulder, sending waves for fire and Jaffa staff blasts down the corridor as the creature grew ever
closer. Atreus stood behind us, his burning blade at the ready.

It was a token gesture at best, if the creature got close enough for him to use the blade it would already be too late for us.

“No – no! You bastard! You absolute and utter bastard!” Enlil screamed as he tried to manipulate the control panel for the teleportation rings. “Ammit! I need to get in.”

The goddess ripped the panel off the wall with a snarl of horror upon exposing its guts. It was empty, totally and utterly empty. Exposed sockets sat where glowing crystals ought to have been.

“He took them out.” Enlil swore furiously. “The bastard took out the control crystals.”

“You can bypass that though,” Ammir replied.

“With what? He didn’t just take the primary controls – he took everything.” The god punched the wall hard enough to leave the imprint of his fist, tearing the skin and leaving a bloody patch on the golden hieroglyphs. “There’s nothing to bypass. I can’t make this work. There’s nothing to even make work.”

Well… shit… time for plan b. Or was it plan c? Hell, we were so far down on the “in case of danger break glass” scale that I’m pretty sure we were down to alphanumeric designators.

I took stock of what we had to work with as I pumped another gout of flame down the corridor to keep the swirling dervish of protoplasmic horror at bay. One Jaffa, three gods, and one highly out of his league wizard trapped in a ring room.

Trapped in a ring room. Trapped in a space dedicated to a coiled groups ring constructed with the magic enhancing element of the Goa’uld connected to a space ships’ power grid. I smiled.

“Fall back to the ring on my mark,” I said, a plan forming in my mind. “I have a plan.”

“Blood of Apep,” Enlil swore, looking from the empty control panel to the shoggoth, and back before growling between clenched teeth and heading for the rings. “Accursed Thoth! Warden, if you
get me killed by that thing may the Ancestors spit on your corpse for unleashing this madness upon me.”

“Fire in the hole!” Yelled the Jaffa. The godlings piled into the circle as Ul’tak tossed a grenade down the corridor to give him and me time to fall back. I didn’t need to look back to know that it only delayed the great horror only by seconds.

It was enough.

The very first thing any apprentice practitioner is taught is how to properly establish a Circle. They’re the simplest and simultaneously the singularly most important tool in a Wizard’s arsenal. It creates a screen, an impermeable barrier for errant magical energies and psychic influences.

The Shoggoth was a product of strange, unnatural, and alien magic – but it was still a creature of magic. I pulled off a gauntlet and pricked my palm, letting the red fluid drip down to the floor – splashing on the concentric rings leading to the teleportation platform. Built almost entirely of the magic enhancing loadstone of the old gods, it provided a sanctuary for my cadre from the gaping maws and grasping tentacles of the twisting horror. Lovecraftian horrors be damned, you put a nuclear reactor behind a basic protection ritual and the supernatural nasties aren’t getting through.

That’s not to say that my system was perfect though.

“Don’t break the circle,” I growled smacking Atreus’ hand as he reflexively reached up to touch the glowing barrier. “Anything, even the smallest object, can break the circle and the Shoggoth will kill us all.”

“Thrice damn you Thoth. And damn you Dagon! Why they ever started this fool errand I will never know? Was being the allies of the Furlings so terrible a chore?” Atreus sheathed his sword in frustration. “Keeping ones word isn’t a weakness, whatever some of our kind might attest.”

“Thoth’s folly was an innocent one,” Enlil replied. “He couldn’t have known what it would bring about. He was always a thinker not a warrior.”

“Look where we stand Enlil! Look at it.” Atreus pointed at the slavering jaws and lidless eyes. “Any fool should have known the answer to his question. Only someone mad with power would actually pursue his logic to its ultimate end. We are above the other forces of reality in this universe but we are still of it.”
“I don’t disagree,” Enlil replied. “But speaking a fifteen word question is hardly a cardinal sin.”

“It damn well is when it nearly unmakes reality.” Atreus replied. “Look what it did to your pantheon.”

“What pantheon?” Ammit joked darkly. “The whole of us could fit in an Alkesh, even including retainers.”

“Says the woman with no holdings at all!” Enlil’s eyes flashed in rage.

“I don’t have my holdings, but I have my honor.” Ammit smiled toothily. “Can you say the same?”

“Honor… bah! Honor was our undoing at first. Honor is why Anubis was trusted to guard Apep. Honor is why Thoth was allowed to speak to the entire great pantheon.” Enlil hissed darkly. “Honor brought us to this… thing… in front of us… that blasted monster.”

It was then that I felt a man’s hands grasping at my robes, Ul’tak had fallen to his knees. His eyes were wide and fearful, darting back and forth in horror. “The screams master! Can’t you hear the screams! They’re talking to me – make them stop. Please make them stop.”

“Well – this blows.” Ammit smacked her chops in frustration, glaring into the mess of pulsing eyes pressing up against the barrier. “Warden I really hope you have a plan to get us out of this.”

“Of course I do.” I didn’t – well not beyond ‘make peace with your god’ – but it’s a wizard’s sacred duty to at least pretend he has a clue what the hell is going on. I tapped my wrist, clicking an armored finger against the material of my wrist computer as half a plan formed in my mind. “We’ll use my wrist device to activate the rings.”

“Are you – you’re joking? At a time like this?” Enlil’s face turned an interesting shade of puce. “There are no control crystals. We can’t wirelessly connect to a computer that doesn’t exist!”

Ok, I’m not the biggest computer guy in the galaxy but even I could see that there wasn’t much of a way around that logic. That was bad. That was really, really bad.
As I considered the very real prospect of choosing to commit suicide over allowing the Shoggoth to have me something unexpected happened. Unbidden by any of my companions, the rings rose from the ground enveloping us in white light. I barely had time to look at the baffled face of Enlil before we were whisked out of the room and into a scene that would have terrified me this morning – a war host of red court vampires standing around a single bloody Jaffa with a look of victory on his face.

“I really hate your plans Warden.” Ammit murmured, shaking her head in befuddled horror. Ul’tak, for once, did not send a dirty look at the godling for criticizing me.

He was too busy trying to point his staff weapon at every vampire at once as he stood up and let go of my robes.

The vampires’ chittering rubbery bat like forms hissed and yowled in surprise at our appearance, fangs bared at the apparent threat. “Cipactli!” The vampires howled on seeing the crocodilian shape of Ammit, backing from her even as they screeched in near orgasmic anticipation of the coming violence.

“Fuck it, I always knew I’d go down fighting these damned things!” Ammit flexed her claws and put her back to the wall.

I reflexively pooled my magic, readying myself to slay any of the preternatural killing machines before it occurred to me that I very well might not have to fight at all. According to my godmother the red court was under orders not to attack me or those under my command.

The vampires were ostensibly my allies in this conflict, though I very much doubted that their foot-soldiers understood the terms of their deal with my godmother any better than I did. If I talked loud, acted confident and did my best to look inedible I was willing to bet that I could keep them off base and on good behavior long enough to figure out a better plan.

“Who is in charge?” I demanded, cracking my staff on the ground.

The vampires chittered and hissed to each other, crooning a crowing as I repeated myself. “Who is in charge?”

“Why should we tell you, creature?” Mewled one of the inhuman monsters, his belly bulbous with freshly spilled blood. “Why should we not just kill you as we have killed all the rest?” He gestured to
a pile of Jaffa bodies getting picked over by red court soldiers. The shoved meaty gobs of Jaffa into their greedy gullets, devouring blood and flesh alike. They had to take care not to touch the armor though, any vampire whose skin touched the ensorcelled armor screeched in pain as their flesh burned and puckered from touching the blessed surface. “See! We have crushed the Jaffa just as we did before, even without the aid of the other courts or those accursed wizards. Why should I not feast on the flesh of a god?”

“Because he would gut you from stem to stern and I would allow it.” Remarked an aristocratic voice tinged with a Hispanic lilt. “These ones are marked by Winter. They are not for us.”

The crowd of vampires parted and I came face to face with yet another dead man from the past yet to come. The sturdy jaw and strong features of his flesh mask still resembled the aristocratic conquistador that he’d once been, though I knew all too well that beneath it the man looked just as inhuman as his fellows. I never forgot the faces of men who wanted me dead.

Duke Paulo Ortega was a man who’d very much wanted me dead. Duke Paulo Ortega was a man who not only very much wanted me dead but who would also know what I looked like. Hell, after starting a damn war the entire Red Court probably knew me on sight. He as dangerous as all hell and willing to cheat as long as he won. A man who kept his honor right up till he was losing was a truly dangerous fighter, especially when that man was unburdened by a mortal moral compass.

Not for the first time I was pleased for the mask concealing my features. I was standing in potential paradox central.

The ship shook as the sounds of screaming echoed through the hull, psychic feedback from the distant Shoggoth. The Duke looked from the grinning Jaffa, to the rings, to the ceiling, and back to me. “I presume that noise bodes ill for those we send to the upper levels.”

“Shoggoth” Ammit replied, her predatory yellow eyes glaring at the pitiless black orbs of the Duke.

The vampire horde hissed like boiling kettles, chittering madly at each other before the Duke slammed his foot on the deck. “You are vampires, not little girls. You will keep your composure.”

He looked down at the Jaffa, “I’m impressed. You withstood both torture and the kiss of the red court, sending my men into a trap even knowing it would bring your death. Were you able to take it, I would have seen that you were turned.”
“I would kill myself rather than be one of you.” The Jaffa snarled.

The Duke nodded in approval, reaching down to grab the man by the neck. He spoke to the captured man as if it were an old friend, saying “I believe you” before twisting sharply to kill the soldier.

“These Jaffa…Would that men on Earth still had their honor. I’ve not killed a man who walked into death with such pride in far too long.” His eyes shone black as night as the powerful jaws beneath his flesh mask shifted, warping his continence as he ground razor sharp fangs in frustration. He composed himself before addressing me, “You are the Warden – the Winter Queen’s pet Goa’uld. Curious, I’d never imagined one of your breed would allow such a thing.”

“Duke Ortega, I would think that you would be the one for whom the least imagination would be required.” I replied, pulling from my own memories of the red court vampire. “How is the Duchess? Does she still spurn you just for her own amusement? Keep you as her pet Spaniard?”

The vampire’s flesh suit appeared to boil as his muscles twitched beneath it, apparently I’d hit a nerve. A nerve that apparently amused a second figure whose I’d initially missed in the swathe of vampires. “Temper Paulo. Temper.”

She was beautiful, that is assuming that a tall, perfect, porcelain skinned goddess is your thing. She rested a blood soaked hand upon the Duke’s shoulder and bent over next to plant a narcotic laced kiss upon his cheek. He sighed deeply, relaxing almost instantaneously upon contact.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out who the vampriess was. “The Duchess Ortega I presume?”

“Encantado Lord Warden.” She laughed, a haughty pleased sound that was something between a purr and a screech. “Oh – but that title makes me laugh – when I tell my father that you’ve taken it on and that you’ve chosen to wear one of their cloaks in mockery of them, he may well decide to give you special permission to return to the first world just so that he can irritate our enemies. A god wearing the cowl of the god slayers – magnificent. Simply magnificent.”

The Vampriess smiled, quirking up her blood-red lips as she looked at my group. “And I hardly need ask the names of your companions. Well, well, well… the Winter Court has been busy. My father will be furious that he has been cheated out of collecting the Cipactil’s skull. We were told that she would be on the battlefield, not that she would be one of yours.”

“No more sad than I am to be unable to rip that mask from your disgusting parody of a body and rip
that bulbous blood bag from your belly, whore queen of the dead.” Ammit replied. “I should have killed you when your armies fell at Ixkun.”

Ariana held the Duke in place with a look even as his face promised imminent violence upon the Goddess. Once convinced her husband’s rage was subdued, Ariana replied, chuckling with a polite mirth which reached nowhere near her eyes. “Not for lack of trying Eater of Corpses. The ghouls still fear you too greatly to even march onto a battlefield where you walk unless we coerce them with violence– their tribes talk of the flesh pit with mixed reverence and horror.”

“This is all nice and threatening with the exchanging of barbs over old hatreds but just in case any of you forgot there is a SHOGGOTH ON THIS DAMNED SHIP!” Enlil bellowed pulling at his hair in frustration. “We get it. You’re all very intimidating and will one day finally get around to killing each other. Can we please sidle on past the part where we share veiled threats and go straight on to the part where we pool resources to not die? Because I feel like I’m the only one who has not totally lost grip on reality. Seriously? Am I the only one who’s hearing that?”

He wasn’t. The psychic screaming of the Shoggoth wasn’t as loud as it had been when we’d stood on the bridge with it but it was steadily growing louder. The horror was making its way into the ship looking for prey.

“The Lord of the Storm is right,” Agreed the Duchess. “We must leave this place.”

“Good, we just need to get to the Leananshide – we can use her portal to…” I stopped, catching the Duchess’ expression. “What am I missing?”

“Lord Warden, we are cut off from the upper decks. That is why we were attempting to use the teleporter. Only moments ago a klaxon announced that emergency containment procedures were being put into place and four decks of the vessel were vented into space.” The Duchess waved her hand with a flourish. “We are beneath them – she is above… or elsewhere. I wouldn’t imagine that she’s foolish to stay in a Shoggoth’s path. Should it approach her I expect that she’ll retreat to the safety of our forward staging point and close the way behind herself.”

“Crap – right, she hasn’t promised to stay and get us off this thing has she?” I swore angrily.

“The Fae are so fond of their literal contracts. I’d imagine the deaths of everyone on this ship would be a net gain for them.” Duke Ortega growled.
“Lord Warden,” Ul’tak tapped my shoulder furiously. “I really think you need to see this.”

“What Ul’tak?” I turned to look at the display behind the Jaffa.

It was a simple enough display, one of the complex Goa’uld chronometers that I’d seen before – a mix of ticks and triangles intended to signify units of time. “Yes, it’s a clock? What of it?”

“It’s counting down Milord.” Ul’tak intoned. “It’s counting down in units of ten.”

“Oh fuck me, they set the ship to self-destruct.” Ammit sighed. “I don’t know if I should be terrified or glad that at least the damn Shoggoth isn’t getting off this thing.”

“Impossible.” Intoned the Duchess. “Chrono’s general would never admit defeat.”

Atreus shook his head. “Dutchess, the general is dead. The one running his army is somebody substantially lower down on the pecking order and not looking to be part of a shoggoth’s food chain. He’s going to be way less worried about Chrono’s punishment of him in the afterlife than potentially not having an afterlife at all. Better death than unmaking.”

The Duke let loose an oath in Spanish, “Diablos. How long do we have?”

“They’re using a cyclical clock.” Enlil shrugged. “Five minutes or five days, who the hell knows when it’s set to stop counting. But there is no way of stopping the damn thing – you can bet that they’ll have smashed the control crystals the way they did for the teleporter upstairs.”

“Right, Ul’tak – is there another way off this ship?” I asked my first prime hopefully.

“Another way? Other than the flight deck or the teleporters?” Ul’tak blinked a couple of times. “Not that I can think of, the only things below the flight deck are engineering and the living quarters for the Jaffa. Anyone important enough to merit an escape pod would be on the upper decks.”

“This ship is designed like Sokar’s mothership though? Not exactly but in general terms right?” I asked already knowing the answer before Ul’tak nodded in the affirmative.
“I do not quite understand your meaning warden…” The Dutchess queried nervously.

“I would have thought that was obvious.” I smiled wolfishly as I remembered the startled faces of Larry, Moe, and Curly Joe as they plummeted down. “Does it have a brig?”
Shoving a small army of gods and vampires into prison cells is less of a logistical issue than one would expect, all things considered. Really the hard part is convincing the vampire royalty that, yes, in point of fact you are serious when you’re locking their underlings into prison cells as a way of getting them off the ship. Exactly what had possessed the original ship builders to have designed their prison cells to be quite so easily jettisoned was beyond me, but I wasn’t exactly in the mood to fight it. So it was that I found myself trapped in a tiny metal box full of blood covered vampires, plummeting down towards the planet below.

“Mind your surroundings, my host.” Whispered the voice of Lash in my ear. I could feel her hot breath caressing my ear. “Do you not see it? See what must be seen?”

I hadn’t and she damn well knew it. The only time a woman bothers to use that tone is when they know something that you don’t. It’s maddening. I clenched my teeth in irritation, thinking at the phantom. “I don’t know – educate me.”

“The Vampires around you, do they not seem odd to you? Do they not strike you as doing something vastly out of the ordinary for a cadre of the Red Court’s elite warriors?” She clicked her tongue in a way that reminded me of my 6th grade English teacher – simultaneously prompting me for a response and chiding me for not having already provided her with the answer.

Oh!” I thought, realizing to what she referred. “Oh – wow.”

The vampires weren’t agitated. Not with me anyway. Covered in blood and bearing a range of weapons, to be sure, but they were basically sedate by vampire standards. A fully vamped out Red Court warrior shouldn’t be able keep cool around so much exposed blood – they would have been in a murderous frenzy. They would at least be licking the leftovers off their talons. None of them were even sniffing at the bits of blood and gore between their claws and fur. It was as though they didn’t even care.

“They don’t.” Agreed Lash. “Nor will they – for a time. The bloodstone brings a temporary reprieve.”

“Weapons…” I thought, remembering Lash’s earlier words. “The Vampires were made as weapons – humans aren’t even supposed to be what they eat, are they?”
“No.” Lash agreed. “A mortal will slake their hunger for a day, perhaps only hours. They shouldn’t feel the hunger again for at least seven days after feeding heavily off Jaffa. After being forced to settle for mortals for so long, it would have been a kingly feast.”

“All the bloodshed, all the suffering, all the horrors of war we’ve undergone – and you’re telling me that the vampires consider mortals to be the dietary equivalent of freaking popcorn?” I ground my teeth together in an effort to keep our conversation non-verbal. “We’re just a god damned substitute? All the people they’ve killed, all the lives taken – for a meal they don’t even like eating?”

“Essentially – yes.” Lash replied. “Well – for the Red Court anyway. The White Court is not so fortunate in their origins, the worm who bore them to term intended for them to be precisely what they are. Though I will admit that I doubt she expected to be on the receiving end of that weapon when they came to fruition. The Origins of the Black Court are not fitting for any company; else one speaks a name and risk the attention of its bearer. But they were all made, one way or another, as a way of expelling the traitor worms and their occupation of Earth to plunder the treasures of Eden.”

I read – a lot. Comes with the territory when you’re unable to own a television or keep a radio working for too long without it going on the fritz. I shop at secondhand book stores mostly, they’re cheaper than the standard book store and the words end up being the same. It saves me money but doesn’t always guarantee me a steady supply of books in any specific subject… other than WWII that is. Come rain or shine, I could always find a book about WWII. I found a book once that talked about living under the Nazis, what it had been like to watch the world fall apart. What it had been like to watch families torn asunder. What it would be like to watch men murdered in cold blood in the streets, and even to spend every night wondering if there would be a tomorrow. From what I’d seen, the Goa’uld were capable of violence that would have shamed the SS.

Could I imagine choosing to turn myself into a monster in order to save the ones I loved?

Damn right I could.

It’s funny – I spent so much of my life thinking of the monsters that the Red Court became after they were turned that I never spared a moment to wonder who they had once been. Had they all been like Susan? People who were thrust into a war they only thought they understood or had they walked into the darkness knowingly? Had they elected to become monsters to repel something they knew to be worse? Just the vague inklings of Heka’s mind showed me that the godling had been a horror on par with the worst enemies I’d ever faced. In his eyes all life had been replaceable other than his own. Making a compromise to destroy something like that? It would be a no brainer. Had the Dutchess been a person worthy of respect?

Would she have even possibly been someone I might have admired?
I must have been staring at her more intently than I’d realized, she cleared her throat in obvious discomfort as she stared back into my expressionless mask – a surprisingly degree of unease in her voice as she spoke. “Warden, I am bound by the laws of hospitality. I did not lie.”

I did not reply, in part because I didn’t really know what to say and in part because it bothered me just how human she seemed to be – at least for the moment. Slaked of the hunger the lumbering, rubbery, black forms of the vampires seemed more comical than terrifying. Their sinewy bodies were relaxed, their eyes lucid and wondering, and their bellies – full of the blood and ichor of Chronos’ Jaffa, bounced comically as the prison cell’s internal dampeners struggled to keep up with the high-velocity projectile aimed towards the planet.

The Duke subtly placed himself between his wife and I as he made a sweeping gesture to the grey cowl draped about my shoulders in an obvious effort to break the tension, “I would be very curious to know how you came by that – Lord Warden. I know enough about that bit of fabric to recognize the genuine article, and de verdad that is a Cowl of the White Council. Which of their ilk was so foolish as to stray across your path even after the accords?”

When in doubt – tell the truth. “None – I had no need to take one by force. It was a gift given willingly. I provided them with the services requested of me and was paid a commensurate reward – the Cowl and Title were only part of the deal.”

Whatever the Duke had been expecting – that hadn’t been it. “You… you do business with the White Council?”

“As much. I’m generally a weapon of last resort. Though I suppose, technically speaking, I am on their payroll.” I resisted the urge to laugh as he started puckering his lips as though he’d tasted something particularly sour. “They see my involvement in their affairs as something of a liability. What with my history of consorting with dark forces, using necromancy, and enacting dark pacts with horrible creatures from the NeverNever – they’re pretty much convinced that I’m going to end the world given half a chance.”

“I did not believe that the White Council was willing to tolerate your kind.” The Duke replied in a voice of strained civility that betrayed far too much of the complex interplay of emotions running through him. At this point in history the vampires of the Red Court would be in their early stages of their war with the White Council – mustering their armies and planning exactly how to wipe Wizards off the face of the planet. The absolute last thing the Vampire Courts would need was for another power to get involved in their war – especially one who’d managed to bring as much power to bear as I’d brought to protect Nekheb.
“Oh, they’re not exactly tolerant. Even had a Warden whose sole job in life was basically to try and catch me at a moment of weakness and kill me.” I shrugged. “You learn to live with these things as they happen. They’ve actually debated killing me before but they can never get enough votes together to actually commit themselves to ending me. Not that it doesn’t keep coming up, I’m sure.”

“Blood of Apep Warden, is there a power in the galaxy you aren’t working with?” Ammit leaned in and grumbled into my ear. “You escape from Sokar’s exploding ship with a Tok’ra who just “happens” to be in place to ensure your escape from a planet. Tau’ri military just “happens” to be engineering the destruction said planet as you escape. Sokar’s armies just “happen” to surrender to you upon arrival so that you can escape and you just “happen” to take us to the Tau’ri home world where the Asgard just “happen” to decide that – just this once – they can be liberal with the protected planets treaty. They teleport us to the planet’s surface where the Tau’ri just “happen” to be willing to let us go in exchange for a starship that you just “happen” to be willing to let go. We get back to the planet and just “happen” to arrive at the time when you can bring to bear an army the likes of which I’ve never seen to repel an enemy who should have been able to crush you with the assistance of unspeakable powers who just “happen” to be willing to deal with one of their hated enemies. And here we are where – once again – you just “happen” to be on speaking terms with the very creatures who were bred with the specific purpose of murdering us. I thought you were exaggerating when you said you could see the future but you really can’t you. I thought that technology was beyond even the most powerful sorcery or science at our disposal.”

“Yours perhaps.” Ul’tak replied. “Do not doubt the power of the warden.”

“You… you gave the mortals a space-ship.” The Dutchess sounded ill at the prospect.

“A Ha’tak.” Enlil smiled cruelly, his overt hatred of the Vampires bolstered by their apparent inability to do him physical harm. “And I’m certain they will soon be able to use its sensors. I wonder – dear Lady – what they’ll do once they find the profile for your kind in its database. Or when they realize how to poison their blood against your kind? So many horrible things can be done with proper application of UV light.”

“Enlil,” Atreus put a firm hand on Enlil’s shoulder. “Enough.”

“What – you would be kind to those who would feast on our flesh gladly?” Enlil snarled, the vitriol in his voice apparent as his eyes bored holes into the Vampire noble.

“No – I would not do a discourtesy to one who fights the same battle as I. Or would you have me treat you with all the ire that I hold in my heart for the actions you’ve taken in battle?” His grip tightened painfully on the god’s shoulder, making Enlil wince. “Lest I remind you of who I am? Of our blood feud? Of the blade I will one day sink in your spine as honor demands? Of how the rules of hospitality are the only thing keeping you still breathing?”
“That will not be necessary.” Enlil replied, swallowing his pride audibly. “I – I apologize for my rudeness.”

The Dutchess nodded to Atreus, evidently pleased. “Apologies are unnecessary.”

The Duke ground his teeth as the cell shook violently, fangs exposing themselves as he growled. “Diablos! What was that?”

“One of the shielding plates that connected us to the deck above us. Don’t worry, it will disconnect,” Ul’tak replied. “We’ll start being able to see through the porthole above us but it’s structurally sound.”

“Porthole – like a window?” The one of the vampires screeched, eyes running from corner to corner across what appeared to be a ceiling made of pure crystal. “Like a window that will expose this entire space to sunlight?”

“It’s shielded.” Ul’tak replied in apparent disappointment. “You’ll get none of the effect that harms your kind.”

“I… I will get to see the Sun?” The one of the bat faced vampires asked – something almost human in her tone, wistful even. More powerful vampires could create flesh masks capable of shielding the vampires from sunlight, but it took a concerted effort and a whole boatload of power. The Dutchess and Duke could probably manage it. The rest? No way in hell.

“And they sky.” Ul’tak confirmed. “Though the trajectory we’re on will send us to the night side of the planet, we will only briefly be in direct sunlight.”

“I have not felt the kiss of sunlight since I was young.” Another of the crooning vampires whistled. “Only the twinkling of stars and moonlight, I did not believe that such a thing were possible.”

“Oh, it’s entirely possible.” Tittered an amused female voice that had no place in the plummeting cell what so ever. “Most things are if you pay attention.”

I just about gave myself whiplash spinning my head around to see my godmother standing where I
was damn near certain had been a vampire warrior only moments before. I scowled behind my mask, “You were there the whole time?”

“Indeed I was.” Lea tittered. “Think ye not that any barrier which would have barred my entry would not also have prohibited these creatures? I simply waited for them to use enough bodies to break the power of the ship’s wards, and then walked past them without harm.”

“And you just let us think that we were going to be devoured?” I sighed.

“You seem to have had the matter well in hand, dear child.” Lea replied. “And rest assured you would not have perished. Your survival was part of the bargain.”

I could trust her word. She was a fairy. But I did not doubt for a second that she had planned to rescue me and just leave my companions to Shoggoth’s endless, mindless hunger. Not even Vampires deserved that kind of a death.

With a resounding screech of rending metal the exterior panel tore away from the roof, giving us a view into the endless silence beyond. It wasn’t like the movies, when you watch Star Wars or something like that you can hear the sounds of explosions and violence. In reality, you just see the brilliant flashes of light as ships fire atomic balls of death at each other – without even a whisper.

At least it was supposed to be like that.

Instead, what we heard was the howling scream of God only knew how many souls trapped within the immortal torment of a Shoggoth’s digestive processes. It had eaten, and eaten well. The ship we’d parted from was buckled and broken where the Shoggoth’s tendrils found purchase. Its great fleshy mass of eyes and mouths now protruded from most of the upper decks, barbed tongues spitting out to grab whichever gilders and fairy warriors strayed too close to the creature.

I briefly wondered if Ul’tak had been wrong in his assessment that the ship had been set to self-destruct before the photoreceptors on my mask slammed shut, protecting my eyes from the atomic fireball. The Vampires cheered at the detonation, or rather the vampires hissed and crowed in a way that I interpreted as cheering. Look, I’m not exactly a prime interpreter of Red Court battle form body language beyond “hungry” and “dangerous” but I can fill in the blanks.

For example, I can say with a substantial degree of confidence that the vampire sound for horrified disappointment is a whistling crow followed by chittering screeches. Because the only possible
reaction to seeing a nuke go off and fail to kill a shoggoth is a mix of fear and regret for the actions leading up to having failed to kill the Shoggoth.

“Oh come on!” I groaned as the fleshy mass plummeted towards us a speed I was quite certain exceeded our own.

“Oh, calm yourself child.” Lea shook her head. “We’re in no danger.”

“Furling – I do not know by which metrics you measure danger but I am staring at a distinctly non-zero quantity of Ancestor cursed danger!” Enlil hissed, watching as the hulking mass of burning flesh writhed and screamed towards us.

Lea merely took a stoppered bottle from her waist, whispered a word into its contents and waited as the silvery cloud dissipated into the air. There was a wet, popping splat as though an egg were being flung at a walls and the puff whipped up and through the ship’s ceiling – weaving through the hull as though it were water. The shivering mote of light whisked up towards the nightmare that gave other nightmares the heebie-jeebies, expanding and swirling as it went. There was something familiar about it, though I could not place it – an almost oppressive sense of déjà vu.

It wasn’t one of Heka’s memories. It was different – mine somehow. it was an instant of clarity that I had no right to even know. That mote of light was important, terribly important, but for the life of me I couldn’t remember why. I knew what that mote of light was, I had seem it before. I was convinced of that, at least. But I knew with total certainty that was false. I had never seen the mote nor known it’s purpose.

It wasn't the first time I'd felt that way today, come to think of it. When the unbidden jibe to the Duke suggesting that he was merely a plaything for his wife had come out it had seemed an idle bit of snark - but how had I known to say it?

The mote grew and grew, spreading out great tendrils of glowing light behind it. It spun about like a jellyfish, twinkling stardust spreading out in its wake. I cringed at the idea of something so beautiful being subsumed by something as terrible as the Shoggoth.

I needn’t have worried.

I’m good with fire. I mean really good with fire. You need something burned to the ground? Call 1-800-WIZARD for Harry Dresden. I will burn, bake, broil, and burst any combination of flame magic
in the general direction of the nearest magical nasty. But this thing was on another level altogether.

Where the nuke had only bothered the Shoggoth, the glowing beams of impossibly hot fire annihilated huge chunks of the beast. The long jellyfish tendrils of the creature became flaming scourges that wrapped their way around the creature as its incandescent body spread out to engulf the monster wholesale. The eyes of the Shoggoth bulged, its jaws bit, and its claws tore, but they only burned to cinders and dust against the creature’s heat.

The vampires dropped to the ground, tucking their heads beneath their wings – followed closely by the Goa’uld. Only my godmother and I stood, staring at the lights above us.

“Close your eyes!” Lasciel hissed as though through clenched teeth. “Close your eyes if you do not wish for it to see you back!”

I couldn’t. Even if I had wanted to look away, I couldn’t. The creature’s sheer presence was overwhelming – passion, rage, everything that made up life seemed to radiate from the creature’s very being in unlimited measure. And the more I looked, the more that I felt the inexorable desire to look at it with my Wizard’s Sight. I needed to see this creature for what it truly was. I needed to understand it – to become it… part of it. Thin lines of silver shot across my eyes, forming scales over my corneas – an action that should have alarmed me but brought only bliss.

I wanted that fire – to let the flame consume me and make me whole. I needed to be part of that flame.

Then, just as suddenly as the urge to subordinate my very being to the glory of whatever that thing was came – it went. Heka seemed to have been aware of whatever it was that Lash feared. A harsh klaxon buzzed in my ear as the visor went pitch black, only displaying the message “countermeasures engaged” in hieroglyphs that conveyed their meaning as clear as any English I’d ever read. The mask in front of my eyes glowed with a swirling mix of spells beyond my ken, pulling thin slivers of silver light from my eyes and shattering them.

“What… what was that?” I thought as soon as I trusted my own mind enough to form coherent words.

“That was a creature from long before mankind spawned from the muck and mire of your home world.” Lash’s voice shook with a mix of fear and disgust.
“Was, was that an Angel?” I thought, struggling to equate the beauty and horror I’d seen.

“No… though it would debate that point – endlessly.” Lash sighed in disgust. “You have no word for it, and no context to understand its existence… Not yet anyway. Your kind has yet to achieve the Primacy of Lazarus. And you dare not submit to those who would not share it.”

“The Primacy of Lazarus,” I repeated, only realizing after having done so that I spoke aloud.

“But they do not intervene…” Whispered Ammit in horrified reverence from where she cowered on the ground. “The Law forbids it.”

“They still do not, dear boy.” Lea chuckled with an edge of something between contempt and joy. “They still do not. Get up, all of you – the deed is done and the beast hath departed. They are ever so fond of a show but they linger only moments among their lessers. The watchers will only tolerate minor involvement in mortal affairs and even those are for their mutual war.”

My display returned in time to catch a glimpse of the collection of vampires and godlings getting back to their feet before a startlingly bright yellow haze engulfed the plummeting prison cell. Vampires and gods alike were buffeted about the cell, any semblance of dignity a distant memory. Only my godmother managed to avoid the tangled chaos of limbs and shame, electing to simply sit on the ceiling and watch us collide with each other. She howled with laughter from her gravity defying perch, clapping her hands together girlishly in a way that made the thin bands of silver around her fingers snap against each other like an overly excited metronome. I might have found the whole situation funny myself, were it not for the fact that I’d ended up pinned between one of the stone bunks and the substantial weight of Ammit.

It took only a matter of minutes for us to make planet-fall, crashing to the ground with an abrupt hissing crunch of the cell's internal repulsion-lift generators struggling to slow us as we reached velocity. Miraculously we were neither shot down by the anti-aircraft weaponry or Nekheb or the invading forces of Chronos. Though, come to think of it, the former shouldn't surprise me. Traitor's Bane would know where I was at any given second – the Genius Loci was aware of me even when I wasn't aware of it.

“Off!” I snarled, extricating myself from where I'd ended up on the ground – half tangled between the goddess Ammit and a pair of the vampires. The vampires required entirely minimal encouragement, their skin charred and cracked where it came into contact with my armor as though they’d been branded. Searing white hieroglyphs burned along their flesh were they’d hit me, scar tissue already forming over their wounds as they leaped always like scalded cats.
The door to the cell exploded outward with a hissing of pressurized air meeting genuine atmosphere, the smoke and dust of battle fresh on the wind. We were on the outskirts of Nekheb – the slums. There were places like it back on Earth, the favelas of Brazil for example. Places were the poor stacked their dwellings five or six stories high and eked out a living on whatever meager means they had on the high hills overlooking the city proper.

It was jarring to go from direct sunlight to the dead of night so quickly, and still more jarring to realize that it was no darker for it. The city of Nekheb was aflame. I knew, thanks to Traitor’s Bane, that there had been several pushes towards the city proper after we’d left. One of which had apparently been sufficient to break enough of the air defenses to allow a proper bombing run of the city. I knew too that they’d managed to repel the attackers – but not, lamentably, before they’d ringed in entire platoons of Jaffa into my city.

My armored feet sunk into the mud, squelching through blood-stained pools of water and viscera. The armies of Chronos had not differentiated between the soldiers and citizens of Nekheb – the dead were piled up in pyramids and left to burn, the sickly sweet taste of burning man-flesh permeating even though the filters on my helmet.

Ul’tak’s cold hatred was as biting as any spell of the winter court, “They will pay for this my Lord Warden.”

I nodded, but even as the urge to kill every Jaffa who’d ever born the mark of Chronos welled in my heart, I knew there was no point. Traitor’s Bane knew all, saw all, and filtered that information into my mind in real time. The Jaffa of Chronos were broken – they didn’t know it yet but they were routed. More than half the armies of Chronos did remain, but those who were too foolish to surrender to Jaffa would quickly become prey for Sidhe.

“Good,” I sighed, resting on my staff looking out across the smoldering city of Nekheb. Bolts of staff light still shot across the city, those Jaffa too stubborn to surrender doing what they could to repel the demons of summer and winter. Distant twinkling plumes of smoke still erupted from where those Ha’tak still convinced of their own divine guarantee of victory still tossed nuclear death down at the titanic fairies along the horizon – poisoning the earth and sky.

I spun around, opening my palm. I was ready to lash out with a wave of kinetic force as a shape rushed out from the ruined house next to me, stopping short to cower in horror at the glowing light of my foci. She was young, seven – perhaps eight – and she was terrified.

God, we had to look like something out of a nightmare, an armored wizard in an expressionless mask, a cadre of battle-worn gods in human skins, a blood soaked mess of bat-like vampires, the horrifying near human beauty that was my godmother, and the crocodilian pre-historic terror that was Ammit. Her eyes darted from monster to monster, clearly convinced that she was due to join a pile of
corpses. Her lip quivered, too scared to even scream – that was at least till she caught sight of Ul’tak and put two and two together.

Her head whipped back to my armored form so fast I thought she would get whiplash. Lips, soot blackened and split where someone had struck her, split into one of the most genuine smiles I had ever seen on a person’s face. She propelled herself forward, little legs heedless of the broken glass and rocks that lay between her and I in spike of bare feet. “You came!”

“I prayed and prayed for you to come and you came.” She hugged me tightly about the waist, crying and laughing without any pretense of dignity. The grey-black soot caked across her face streaked, tears exposing her face to the pale night sky. She hugged me as tight as her little body would let her, rubbing at the blood, soot, and tears with the back of her tiny hand. “I don’t want to die. Please Warden, don’t let me die.

My heart broke.

Blissfully, Traitor’s bane did not answer when I wondered just how many sad little girls were cowering in their rooms praying for a god that would never come. The welfare of slaves would be beneath the interest of a Genius Loci built by Heka. I was not so lucky when I wondered what had become of the girl’s parents. I was not brave enough to turn and face the burning mound of charnel behind me, electing instead to just hug the girl back.

“Scarf.” My voice cracked and rumbled with Goa’uld reverberations as I reached out to the Dutchess.

The vampire noble blinked momentarily before undoing the shawl about her neck and handing me the silk garment. It was beautiful, likely kept from centuries prior – a piece of cloth that probably cost more than I had earned in the past ten years and I couldn’t have cared how expensive it was as I used the priceless item to wipe off the child’s face. I knelt down to get eye-to-eye with the child, saying soft words of comfort that could do nothing to help ease the pain I knew she would soon feel.

It took longer than was likely wise to stand still in an active warzone to get the kid’s face cleaned up, but wise had left the building the second I saw the kid. I had been an orphan. Had felt the loneliness that this poor girl hadn’t yet had the time to realize she ought to feel. I’d sat up nights praying that some distant relative or family would swoop me up and take me in their arms – make a family for me.

There was no way in hell that I was going to leave this sad, lonely little girl by herself.
“We’re taking her.” I said, looking at Ul’tak. “I don’t know how many survivors there are between here and the palace but we’re taking every damn stray child with us.”

“Warden, better to let the flock tend to themselves.” The Dutchess Ortega crooned. “Best to not worry about chattel. I am no babysitter. I will not do something so foolish.”

“You will. And you’ll do so gladly.” I said, my voice far calmer than my mood.

“And why, Warden, would we do that?” Asked the Duke.

“Godmother,” I asked. “I could be very much mistaken, but I don’t believe that the warriors of the Red Court have my direct invitation to be here, do they? They’re bound to Summer under a promise to do no harm to me or any of my property. But – I have given no such promise to the forces of Summer to do no harm to these vampires.

“No, dear child,” My godmother agreed. “You have not.”

“So if I were to strike them down – the Summer Court wouldn’t be able to do anything to stop me. Worse yet, I’m pretty sure that summer is only allowed into my realm under the conditions that they protect us the same way that Winter would.” I smiled wolfishly behind my mask. “Both Summer and Winter would view such a thing as fighting me back as a wholesale violation of the bargain made with Summer, would they not?”

“A grievous one, especially as it was Aurora with whom the bargain was struck,” agreed my godmother. “As your guest and your godmother I would be obligated to do such terrible things as have not been seen by moral eyes since the first of the wars following Thoth’s folly.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” The Duke moved to pull his blade from it’s scabbard, only to have his wife grab his hand – the implications of what I was saying having hit her faster than they hit her husband.

“Paulo, no!” The vampiress hissed like a scalded kettle. “Not if you value my life!”

“Dutchess Ariana,” I stood up to my full height, using a minor effort of magic to amplify my already distorted voice. “You will assist me in saving children or I will have watched two prehistoric
Dutchess Ariana clapped her hands together, letting loose a loud bark of laughter. “Well played, Warden – well played – very well. I will help you save those children who can be saved, if I have your word that you will extend us the same hospitality you offer to Winter – so long as we help you slay the armies of Chronos.”

I nodded. “You have my word.”

So it was that a little orphan girl started walking towards the palace of Nekheb, surrounded by a vanguard of the oldest and most terrible creatures in all creation – singing happy little songs all the way.
Chapter 27

Ariana and her husband, more able to pass as vanilla human beings than anyone else in our cadre, had become the unspoken representatives responsible for keeping the children calm and in one group – with my godmother in tow, of course, to keep them on their best behavior. The herculean act of keeping two dozen scared children together in a single group while surrounded by Red Court vampires was taxing even to the self-styled super-beings. Even sated on the blood and flesh of Jaffa, the bat-like rubbery bodied vampires chattered and hissed terrifyingly.

Paulo seemed to be the better nursemaid between the two, cooing softly to scared children and singing tunes in Spanish to those most distraught. Unlike Ariana, he didn’t seem to have been educated in the language of the Goa’uld, but his placid demeanor and steadfast comfort in interacting with scared children had proved useful in corralling the children way from battle. Had I been more focused on my knowledge of the Red Court and less focused on the Jaffa of Chronos I might have remembered that Paulo likely cultivated that skill to facilitate feeding upon children, but I can only juggle so many monsters at a time – and my arms were already full with fending off the Jaffa of Chronos.

As we found more children it became increasingly difficult to advance, when it had been only the Goa’uld, Vampires, Ul’tak and I who could more or less trust them to take care of themselves. I sure as hell wasn’t going to lose any sleep if a vampire caught a stray staff blast. But if I lost even one of those children, I wasn’t ever going to be able to forgive myself. I’d been forced to pull out all the stops, if I gave our enemies even a second to catch their breath they might use that opportunity to kill the kids.

I don’t know how many we killed in order to get to the palace. Dozens, perhaps hundreds. I stopped counting after the third block, and stopped caring after the fifth neighborhood I found in ashes with corpses piled two stories high. Piles full of tiny bodies who’d never have the chance to live a full life – children who’d likely been praying for me to save them. Children who’d wanted me to protect them from the dark things.

There was a fury in my belly more caustic than any hellfire I’d ever flung from my blasting rod. I wasn’t a god, but I’d be damned if I wasn’t going to bring down the wrath of an angry wizard on these lunatics. I dislike bullies on principle. There’s something about the strong picking on the weak that I’ve never quite been able to tolerate. Maybe it’s how much I’ve had to control my own power. Maybe it’s just one too many Spider-Man comics as a teen, but I’ve never been able to watch a bully pick on someone weaker without stepping in to intervene.

It had gotten me into a lot of trouble over the years. It had earned me a lot of bruises, cuts, broken bones, and enemies who were probably a lot stronger and better connected that I – supernatural and mortal alike. I’d lost a lot of money as a private investigator taking on cases for free, or close to free, because a client’s situation had just gotten my dander up and raised the fight in my belly.
Jaffa were a soldier race bred with the expressed purpose of being able to go toe to toe with some of the biggest supernatural nasties out there. I'd watched one of the Jaffa of Chronos punch through a vampire's head while we'd been fleeing the cargo bay. I'd barely registered it at the time, what with the sudden influx of a vampire army, but the strength required to just punch through flesh and bone was astronomical. In physical confrontation between Jaffa and mortals, the mortals were ill equipped to resist the larger, stronger, and all around more durable servants of the Goa'uld.

And the human population of Nekheb's lower ward had resisted. They'd had only minor victories, but there was the occasional Jaffa corpse among the human dead. I picked up a burnt dolly from where it was cast aside in the blood soaked mire, handing it back to a girl of no more than five – herding her into the veritable pack of children we'd saved thus far. We'd yet to find an adult alive, the Jaffa of Chronos seemed to have been killing every mortal taller than a wagon wheel and sparing the rest.

Except the infants. As an act of “mercy” they'd slain swaddled infants in the arms of their mothers, to save them the pains of starvation. I shook with rage, not able to meet Ul’tak’s adoring gaze. I would have just found it sickening under the circumstances. “Why aren't there Jaffa protecting these people?”

“We are not supposed to, my Lord.” Ul’tak replied. “Not till the battle is won.”

I virtually gave myself whiplash as I rounded on him, pointing to a two story mound of charnel. “Does this look like winning to you?”

Ul’tak shivered near imperceptibly, staring back at his reflection in my expressionless mask. “My Lord Warden – we only have so many troops. If we pull your armies into this sector it is at the cost of leaving one of the more mission critical sectors potentially open for saboteurs.”

“We couldn't spare anything?” I all but screamed. “We can't defend these people? I haven't seen another damn friendly Jaffa in this entire neighborhood.”

“You... that is to say Heka, designed the slave sectors to be difficult to defend in case of rebellion, Milord.” Ul’tak replied. “It can not be defended without committing so many troops that we risk loosing the city. In an invasion such as this, it was deemed best to secure all other sectors and then go in afterward to determine how many slaves had died.”

“Come on now warden,” Enlil spoke in what I assume was supposed to be a soothing voice. “I'm
“Replaced?” White hot rage flashed across my eyes – a shimmering luminescence flashing out my mask’s visor. God help me I was going to resurrect Heka just so that I could kill him again. “You can't just replace people.”

“Warden,” Enlil reached out and put a comforting hand on my shoulder. “They’re just humans.”

I'd punched him before I even realized I was going to, breaking his nose into a bloody pulp. He fell into the bloody mire, a betrayed look of shock and anger in his glowing eyes that turned into fear as he stared back at the glowing pits of rage in my mask. I knelt down and spoke to the bleeding, terrified god.

He shouted something that might have been “Why would you do that?” but came out as a garbled mess of vowel sounds and pained sinuses that only ended up in a pained scream as I lifted him by his shirt collar.

“If you ever treat the death of another human under my protection so callously I will begin to reconsider the degree of protection that I offer you Enlil.” I all but whispered. “I'm sure the Duchess and Atreus would be happy to help me discover just how quickly I can replace someone who is just a Goa'uld.”

Ammit snorted, lifting up the broken godling and tossing him to Atreus, “Well, I saw that coming a mile away.”

Atreus tried not to look too pleased at Enlil's suffering with only marginal success as he raised the foci on his left palm, casting a glowing light over the man's face that reformed his broken nose in an instant. I'm not sure what hurt the godling more, the physical pain of his nose or the emotional pain of being healed by Atreus. He sputtered like a scalded cat at the repair, forcing out words of thanks as though they were the most caustic of vitriol. “Thank you.”

“Speak nothing of it.” Atreus helped him to his feet. “You'd be poor sport if you were broken.”

“Must you bring that useless old feud up at every opportunity?” Enlil spat in disgust, though I suspected his irritation was more at me than Atreus.
“Until Ninlil gets her vengeance – or your heart's blood meets my blade,” Atreus slapped Enlil's back. “But fear not, creator of Ea. One can find penance through righteous action sufficient to unmake the need for vengeance – even that of a woman's righteous wrath.”

“Speak not of the nightmare.” Enlil blanched. “Or she will listen. I swear that harridan was born half Furling.”

“Speak of nothing, diablos, or you will scare the children even more,” Adriana’s teeth clenched in irritation. A little girl with grey eyes and dark skin pulled at the vampire’s skirts, trying to wipe the soot off her little face. Ariana pried the child from her, less gently than I would have preferred, before looking at my godmother. “Enchantress is not bewitching and beguiling the spawn of foolish mortals your domain?”

“Any other time? Perhaps.” Lea replied, apparently only vaguely paying attention to the Vampire as her cat-like eyes focused through the smoke. “There are several who would make welcome additions to my pack.”

“Godmother.” I growled warningly. I knew all too well that my godmother had a history of making deals with children in exchange for turning them into hounds in her service. It had been only a mix of luck and wizardly cunning that saved me from becoming one of them when my Godmother had tricked me into the bargain for enough power to defeat DuMorne.

I’d spent most of my adult life terrified that my Godmother would eventually catch me – afraid to step as much as a toe into the Nevernever. I knew no matter where I went and matter how far I traveled, she would somehow be right there on the other side, waiting for me.

I wasn’t about to inflict that upon some poor, unsuspecting child.

“Only an observation dear child, thine herd has no danger from mine own actions.” Lea tittered. “Though there are Sidhe with less control than I. A cluster of transient orphans this large? It will doubtlessly draw the attention of – ah, yes – He’s later than expected.”

The “he” in question transpired to be a man. He stumbled from the alleyway, clutching at a bloody patch of marred fabric at his side. Someone less experienced with the fey or less prepared by my godmother would easily have mistaken his feint for genuine pain and gone over to help him. Which, I suspect was when he would have struck.
When he looked up from the ground, presumably to beg for aid or mercy or something to heal his imagined wound, he froze inhumanly still – apparently trying to assess his new situation. He’d been expecting a few weak stragglers, not a full war party of gods and vampires.

“Is that who I think it is?” I asked, my eyes flicking up to the bright red hat on the man’s head and the slight pink stain that his preferred choice of dye had left along his forehead and ears.

“That depends entirely upon if you’re of the belief that you are looking at the Red Cap.” Replied my godmother.

The Red Cap was one of those fairy myths I’d been hoping was just a myth. He was a serial killer, a murderer who ambushed lone travelers and slew them to use their blood to paint his cap. Legend was about as reliable as any other rumor mill out there, but I got the sense that this guy would murder every single child in the group behind me with a smile on his face and an erection that could penetrate concrete.

I rested my face place in the palm of my hand, “And why, precisely, is the freaking Red Cap wandering back alleys so far from the front lines?”

“Why, hunting the Jaffa of Chronos – of course.” Replied the Sidhe in a simpering tone of platitude. “As befits any member of the Sidhe court.”

Ammit snarled in disgust. “Don’t trust a word this opportunistic little shit says. He’d strangle his own mother if she turned her back on him for more than a moment.”

The Red Cap’s eye twitched at being addressed by the Goa’uld. “I didn’t ask you bitch queen of snakes!”

“Oh, still pouting that I kicked your ass?” Ammit grinned toothily. “I’m down for round two if you are. And I’m willing to bet that the warden would just sit back and let me pound your pasty ass into one of those piles.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I know you. You aren’t out here hunting Jaffa. Jaffa are strong. Jaffa are capable. And Jaffa wear god damned armor.” Ammit shook her head. “You don’t do strong, do you? You only
come in when you’ve got an edge that puts you an order of magnitude above what your enemy can bring to bear. And you don’t have shit. A lone Red Cap versus a platoon of Jaffa? You don’t play those odds. So that means you’re up to something that you’re not supposed to be doing. And regardless of if you haven’t broken any of Mabs rules – I’m sure you’ve broken the Warden’s.”

“Well, serpent, you’re partially right.” Agreed the Red Cap as he snapped his fingers twice, bringing little flickers of green light with each snap. “I prefer an unfair fight.”

The children screamed as the mounds of charnel stood up and began to move. My stomach churned as I got a look at the three giant forms. Their legs took strides that were one or two times as long as mine, and when they came to a stop their long arms spread out and touched the ground. Flat heads, stark as a skull and glistening with blurt blood. Hands ended with three meaty disproportionate fingers, stretched as though someone had just stretched musculature over skeletal work without bothering to add skin. Rawheads, monsters that assembled themselves from the discarded bits of slaughtered hogs and cattle.

They were carnivores. They would start small with dogs and cats before slowly working their way up the food chain to adult humans. If you caught one when they were small, you put it down hard. Nobody had caught these ones.

“That will be quite enough.” Lea’s cracked out like an icy whip. “Else thine insults against the Warden’s Retainers be interpreted as an insult to the Warden’s Authority. The Queen of Winter would not appreciate insults to her host.”

The Red Cap’s face was an absolute rictus of hatred at being denied his confrontation with Ammit, his eye twitched as he struggled to contain his disgust. Impulse control was apparently not his strong suit. Still, he was a member of the Winter Court, and any member of the Winter Court would be insane to openly defy his queen. He stomped his feet angrily in the muck, banging his hands against his sides as he forced the words, “I apologize for any insults given,” out of his lips – virtually frothing at the mouth in the process of speaking those words.

Choosing to ignore his display my godmother held out her hand. “You will give me the wand.”

The Red Cap snorted. “And what would you offer for it?”

“Nothing.” My godmother replied.
That – was not what he’d been hoping to hear. His eyes bulged. “Nothing?”

“Nothing which hasn’t been already paid. I’ve already saved your life once today by stopping you from suffering the wrath of the Winter Queen. That debt is more than sufficient to justify my payment.” Lea smiled predatorily.

Hissing like a scalded cat, the fey pulled a long willow rod from his jacket and passed it to my godmother in revulsion – as though even a second of acknowledging his exchange was causing him outright agony. His eyes burned with malice, looking from my godmother to Ammit and back. His lip curled, flashing sharp teeth. “Is our debt satisfied?”

“Yes.” Replied my godmother. “You may leave and go where thou wouldst. Towards the front lines of battle is advisable – I intend to tell the Winter Queen of your progress, whatever it might become.”

If he’d been irritated by what came before, he was outright apoplectic at my godmother’s casual dismissal of him as though he were some common servant. And to be shanghaied into the most dangerous part of the battle? I could practically taste his rage as he walked past us with his rawheads, the rotting scent of charnel departing with them.

“You know that prick is going to try to take his revenge for that right?” Ammit asked, her voice deeply approving.

“What is life without a few challenges from those less apt than we?” Replied my godmother. “Now, let us see about arranging transport.”

She took the long rod of willow passed to her by the red cap and pointed it skyward. A bright green light shot forth to the heavens, overpowering the stench of battle with the pleasant scent of flowering shrubs and fresh morning dew. Lea looked at the wand with a mix of surprise and amusement. “Though I’ll admit I’d not expected him to be this efficacious in his retribution.”

“Should I be worried Godmother?” I queried.

“No, dear child. There is no danger” My godmother replied, her voice impassive. “I embarrassed the Red Cap – so he is returning the favor. You’ll see soon enough.”

I did. The wand seemed to be a signal flare for the flying ships soaring through the skies. But where
the ships of Winter were great warships of crystal and obsidian, the ship which landed before us was sky-frigate hewn from a flowering mess of vines and moss covered brickwork. Its wide sails seemed to have been sewn from the gossamer threads of silk, a complex pattern of twinkling lights behind them that I knew to be the little folk. If ever I had seen a vessel of the Summer Court, this was it.

What I did not expect was the beauty who leapt down from the vessel. Her features were almost identical to Maeve, but warmer – brighter. Her fair skin and pale hair made the near violent green color of her eyes even more striking. Five nothing, a hundred and nothing, with her blonde hair tied into the same braid I’d seen her wearing the first time I’d met her – or the first time I would meet her I supposed, before the battle of Midsummer. She’d not been wearing the battle mail at the time, a silvery set of ringlets as fine and elegant as any gown of mortal make. She’d worn coveralls and been sculpting with clay. She’d loved to make things.

But I had seen the battle gown before, glowing with its own radiance. I’d seen her wearing the same sword and leaf garland in her hair. I’d basked in that heartbreaking loveliness.

And then I’d killed it, and her with it.

Aurora, the Summer Lady, died the death of a thousand cuts – torn to shreds by Toot-toot and his cadre of little folk. I still remembered watching the light drain from her eyes as she spoke to me in a terrified whisper, “Wait, you don’t understand. I just wanted it to stop. Wanted the hurting to stop.”

I spoke in a hushed whisper, my voice reverberating with its metallic hollowness as my eyes met hers. “The only people who never hurt are dead.”

She tilted her head in confusion, “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.” I replied, shaking the cobwebs from my mind as I realized that Aurora was, in point of fact, not an apparition or some sort of figment of my imagination. I did my best to start over. “My apologies, Lady of Summer, the battle seems to have robbed me of my manners. Welcome to Nekheb. Wouldst thou consent to assist me in transporting these children to the safety of my palace?”

“And your cadre of killers as well, I suspect?” Aurora’s voice wasn’t cruel, but there was a striking absence of warmth in it. It was like talking with someone who you’d once been in love, comfort more biting in its absence than any vitriol. Oddly it was Enlil who seemed to disgust her the most, she visibly recoiled at his gaze. “Killers and worse.”
“They have been extended the same courtesy as Winter – invited guests of his court.” Lea replied, emphasizing her own court as a subtle reminder that Summer had not been invited.

Aurora’s smile didn’t quite reach her eyes as she shook her head sadly. “So much unnecessary death. So many killers. Tell me a true answer to my questions Warden, and I will grant you and yours this boon you ask.”

“Ask it.” I replied.

“I am not a killer. I struggle to understand how your kind thinks, how you operate. You are a creature of cruel logic and brutal calculus like those of Winter. Had you not been attacked by Chronos, had you not had this destruction brought down upon you – how long would it have been till you took your fleets and inflicted it upon another of your kind. How long would it have been till you started a war?” She sighed. “Or do you just view this as a setback till your next conquest?”

“I don’t want to start a war – ever.” I replied. “I have no interest in war, only doing what is right. But there are times when a war must be fought for what is just, even at the cost of lives.”

The Summer Lady sighed, “And should the right thing be to start yet another war? Would you do it?”

“Would I?” was essentially academic at this point. I’d started the War with the Red Court to save the woman I loved, consequences be damned. I pointed to the children. “To stop more orphans? To protect people from monsters? You’re damn right I would.”

“Then I will grant your boon, Lord Warden.” Aurora replied, gesturing towards the gangplank made from smooth white stone. The vampires herded the children on to the Summer Lady’s ship, followed soon after by the Gods. Enlil’s lingering gaze upon the Summer Lady troubled me, though I’d be hard pressed to say precisely why.

My godmother raised an eyebrow but said nothing in particular as I lingered a moment longer, looking at the Summer Lady. It was haunting to see someone I’d killed alive and kicking, and not just alive – thriving. The Summer Lady wasn’t just alive, she seemed to be a pure embodiment of life. I wasn’t sure if it was just my memories having faded over time or if the madness that finally overtook her had robbed her of some of that spark, but she was more vibrant than I’d ever remembered her. It was like standing next to a live wire, I feared if I were to reach out and touch her I might burn up in the sheer passion she exuded.
“Is there something else Lord Warden?” Aurora asked impatiently, causing me to realize precisely how long I’d been staring at her. “Something pressing perhaps?”

“Go with the truth Dresden. Not the whole truth. If you expose yourself to her, she’ll kill you just as she plans to kill the Summer Knight, but there is no reason to lie.” Lash whispered.

“I wish that we’d met as friends rather than how we have. I wish that this didn’t have to end in blood. I wish that I could prove to you that I’m trustworthy or that you don’t have to hate me.” I felt my eyes beginning to tear up. “And I’m sorry for the pain I brought you. I’m sorry for how this ends.”

“You’re sorry?” Aurora repeated.

I felt guilt that I hadn’t even remembered I had welling up in my breast as I spoke, the suppressed horror of having been forced to slay her at the front of my heart. “I don’t like being a killer. I don’t usually enjoy it – I don’t like it when I do. Please don’t become me. Don’t let hopelessness and desperation make you into something that you don’t have to become.”

Aurora blinked, reaching up to touch my faceplate and pulling back her fingers where the ferrous surface burned her fingertips. She stared at the burned digits then up at me. “We are who we were meant to be, Lord Warden. Our Mantles choose our roles for us, regardless of how we would prefer life to become. Our fates are not our own.”

I tried to think of something to say that would bring her comfort, explain my meaning to her, perhaps even help stray her away from the path she would head down forcing me to kill her, but I could think of nothing. Nothing, at least, that wouldn’t endanger my own existence in the past. So I merely elected to walk on to the fairy ship and stare at her in silence as we soared through the air, heading for the great Pyramid.

“You can’t change the past Dresden,” Lash whispered in my ear.

“Then what the hell am I doing now?” I thought in reply.

“Living in the present.” Lash replied. “That your past and present coincide is merely incidental. Those actions which were instrumental in bringing you to this point have already happened. You can no more change it than you can choose to have been born to different parents or under different stars.”
“That doesn’t make things any better.” I thought back, staring out across the burning city-scape. There were fewer skirmishes than I remembered, with those few places still embroiled in battle apparently being overwhelmed by the combined force of my Jaffa and the armies of fairy. The dome of energy above the city still hummed, casting the town into pale illumination, but those few bombardments to strike it could be counted in intervals of half hours rather than minutes and the distant skies were no longer streaked with the constant streams of plasma-fire.

Something of my mood must have been evident in my body language as my First Prime, leaning on his staff next to me spoke in a tone of cheer that couldn’t help but strike me as blatant appeasement. “The battle is won milord. It is a time for celebration among your people – or it will be. There will be feasting for days.”

“Weeks.” Agreed Atreus. “This was a battle worthy of the great Epics. They will sing songs of this day across the galaxy. The day the Mad God tamed nightmares.”

“The Mad God?” I replied, unable to keep the chuckle out of my voice. “I wasn’t aware that I’d agreed to that title.”

“My Lord Warden – madness and greatness are separated by degrees of success only in the eyes of the beholder. And though you are possessed of both, I promise you, it will be the Madness of which they sing.” The Greek god patted me on the shoulder in an approving way. “In tones of reverence to be sure – but you, my dear friend, are quite entirely and irredeemably mad. Mine father is going to be green with envy that he missed this battle.

Ul’tak brimmed with pride at the reference to Pelops looking favorably on our proceedings. I filed away “Pelops” under the things to look up when we had more time to properly investigate as the fairy ship reached the great throne room balcony outside of the Palace of Nekheb. My party dismounted from the ship, first the great herd of children, then the Vampires, then gods, then my godmother, and finally myself.

I lingered briefly at the gangplank, looking at the Summer Lady one last time – knowing somehow that this would be the last time I saw her before my former self would kill her – and made a choice. If I couldn’t change the past, then I could at least speak my conscience. “Aurora – I am going to tell you the future. A future. Your future. I grant you this boon freely, asking nothing in return other than that you listen to the truth I speak. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Make sure that you are choosing what is right in life rather than what is least painful. If you choose otherwise it will end horribly.”

“Is that a threat Lord Warden?” Aurora replied.
“No.” I sighed. “It’s a fact. And though you may not believe it, I would prefer that you see me as a friend than as an enemy. I do not wish you or any other being undue harm.”

The Summer Lady replied. “You are as dangerous with your tongue as any Sidhe, Lord Warden. Would that we never meet again. I would not wish you any undue harm either.”

It was readily apparent that the Summer Lady was going to read the worst possible meaning into anything I said. For lack of a better reply I shook my head, walking down the gangplank and onto the balcony. I didn’t look back as the ship pulled up its gangplank and soared away into the shadowy skies, spiriting away the woman destined to die by my hand.

I walked the distance of the balcony and in to the throne room, half expecting the sight that greeted me even before I noticed that the children were being herded back out on to the balcony by the vampires. More, I suspected, for the benefit of the vampires who feared what lay within than for the children, who all seemed mostly amused by the situation. For there, at the center of my throne room, was the Queen of Air and Darkness – Mab. She’d fashioned a seat for herself out of ice, doubtlessly pulling moisture from the very air. Two massive trolls stood on either side of her, so bulky that I hardly understood how they’d entered the palace to begin with. As I approached her, a wall of ice formed – encircling Mab’s throne and trapping me alone with her and the trolls.

“Queen Mab, it is a pleasure as always.” I bowed slightly, showing due deference to Winter’s Monarch as I used Traitor’s Bane to confirm what I already suspected. “Our victory is all but totally secured.”

“Indeed Warden.” Replied Mab, tiny rivulets of ice on her face and arms where she’d been perspiring with the effort required to unmake warships. “For the battle – but not the war.”

“War.” I repeated the word, a sinking feeling reaching the pit of my stomach. I’d made a mistake in my initial bargain – I must have.

“Indeed – we are allied for however long it takes us to purge the galaxy of Chronos’ minions.” Mab smiled. “His empire spans dozens of systems and hundreds of worlds. It will be a labor of years.”

That boded ill. “Still, the battle is won. It is time to return this system to its proper place in the stars.”

“No Wizard. I think not.” Mab grinned a distinctly shark-like grin, predatory and victorious.
“Perhaps never even.”

“What?” I sputtered.

“Warden – I agreed to protect these people. It is at my discretion to decide how to best secure their safety. To save them. Here they are safe. Safer in my realm than ever they will be elsewhere. Safe from Chronos, safe from hunger, safe even from time should I so will it to cease.” Mab laughed, a sound that mirrored nails scratching across a chalk board – harsh and grating. “I think that would be very safe would it not? A star system crystalized in amber, alive and safe in perpetuity?”

I blanched. I hadn’t considered that as even being a possibility.

“And, of course, thy bargain is contingent upon fulfilling the payment part of our deal – I am, of course, to keep them safe until you’ve secured what is mine.” Mab tutted. “But should you fail to what is mine or fail to hand it to me before your allotted time; I should consider it a violation of our bargain and should be forced to take corrective action against thine treason.”

“You can’t do this!” I sputtered.

“Do not presume to tell me what I can and cannot do, ‘Lord Warden.’ I have tolerated your attempts to outmaneuver me because they amuse me and because they are far better attempts than I have seen in an age and a half but think ye not that a mortal can outwit the Queen of Winter.” Mab smiled. “I have slowed time within this realm – none has been lost since we entered the comfort of mine own shadow. Complete the task allotted, wizard, and I will return your kingdom. Fail me and I will trap this world forever in timeless shadow before I find and annihilate you for your failure.”

I opened my mouth to reply when I felt an overpowering weight being exerted upon me, a crushing sensation of pure will. I gasped, struggling for breath as I fell to my knees. Mab knelt down and whispered mockingly to me. “Forget ye not – I have power over thine life and death. I own thine debts. I own thee.”

She let go of me, her will no longer nailing me to the ground. “It is only to stop thee from losing thy usefulness that I do not crush thy pride in front of your court. And think ye not that this boon be insubstantial. Those predators would crush you if they detected a moment’s weakness.”

“Finish the task. Gotcha.” I replied, cursing myself for having been so vague in my bargain.
“Good.” Replied Mab. “Then I leave thee to it. Fear ye not, the Stargate will still obey thine own commands.”

She snapped her fingers, summoning a gust of frigid wind and snow that temporarily blinded me. When I regained my vision she was gone along with the trolls, the ice-throne, and the barrier blocking me from the rest of the court.

I stood up, my legs still feeling like jelly as I called for Ul’tak. He rushed over to prop me up, putting my arm over his shoulders. “Are you well my Lord Warden?”

“I’ll be fine.” I lied, trying to keep the fear out of my voice. “Just get me to Bob.”

“So what’s the word?” Ammit asked, walking over once she was certain Mab was gone.

“The usual. I have to complete an impossible task or Mab kills us all in a superb misinterpretation of our bargain that none the less follows the letter of the law.” I replied.

“Kills us?” Enlil replied in a horrified squeak.

“I too would prefer a more specific explanation of that last part.” Duke Ortega interjected.

“No big deal. I just have to steal one of Sokar’s most dangerous and well-guarded magical artefacts within the next couple hours or everyone on the planet dies horribly… or worse.” I replied.

“I really dislike your plans Warden.” Enlil said in a voice beyond resignation. “I really hate your plans.”

I ignored him and just continued to walk to my throne and Bob on it.

“You’re better than I’d expect someone who had a one on one with the Queen of Winter ever ought to be.” Interjected a familiar voice. It was the Ancient Jaffa, still accompanied by my recently converted cadre of traitor Jaffa – well, loyalists to Heka really but I wasn’t exactly impartial.
“Holding down the fort?” Asked Ul’tak jokingly.

“Those Titan loving bastards have good gear but they can’t fight worth a damn. Even their drop troops just keep ringing down to the exact same point on the balcony then act surprised when you can just shoot them wave by wave when they arrive.” The Ancient Jaffa grunted in disgust. “There is a giant pillar of light. We’re not some primitive society terrified of the magics of the gods, we just wait for the pillar then shoot anything that comes out of it.”

“Well, in their defense, the demon pretty much re-routed the ring paths to that exact point.” Said one of the Jaffa responsible for the attempted coup.

“He is pretty amazing.” I agreed, looking for Bob on the throne. “Where is he by the way?”

“Is it safe to come out?” Asked Bob from under a pile of cushions and pillows.

“How did you even get under there?” I replied.

“With a combination of using my lower jaw and having a strong survival instinct.” Bob replied, visibly shuddering from his protective layer of pillows. Bob was terrified of Mab. I suppose it had something to do with how she wanted him dead. For what? I was never entirely sure, but that she wanted him dead wasn’t really up for debate.

“Did you find the world?”

“I did.”

“Where is it?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“I don’t like any part of this.” I sighed. “Tell me anyway.”

Bob’s teeth chattered nervously, “I found the world easily enough. It’s relatively close by
hyperspace… or would be if we were back in the real world. But… well…. that’s where things get complicated.”

I swore. “Bob, just spit it out.”

“There isn’t a Stargate on the planet. The nearest Stargate is on the planet’s moon. The place seems to have been designed as a prison for some really nasty stuff, and Sokar didn’t want people to be able to get there without a mothership and the necessary deactivation codes for the planetary defense satellites.” Bob spoke apologetically.

Ammit whistled a long mournful tune, “Even if you can get through the Stargate, you don’t have a way to get from the moon to the planet below.”

“The hell he doesn’t.” Snorted the ancient Jaffa.

Bob’s eye-lights peered up from over the cushions as he moved to get a better look at him. “You got something to add here tall, dark, and craggy?”

“Of course.” Ul’tak laughed. “It’s not as though we’re limited by the treaty any longer – are we?”

“Any of you want to explain what you’re talking about?” Interjected Enlil.

“In the words of my people. They do not make them as they used to.” Replied Ul’tak. “It’s time to thread the needle.”
Used to was apparently the key part of the Jaffa’s choice of phrase. The hangar full of two seater flying machines were obvious relics to even a casual observer – signs of neglect and disuse providing little in the way of comfort to anyone planning on using them to circumnavigate the vacuum of space.

Bob was convinced that I could safely ride in the gate-ship and I was reasonably certain that he was correct, but it was distinctly unnerving to think about rocketing through the bleak darkness of space with only a thin layer of metal and ceramics between me and the void. I realized that it was irrational, especially on context with how I’d gone through space with only a winged steed and a fairy’s promise less than an hour ago, but the flying machines were different. Magically imbued or not, they were machines. My previous experience with airplanes had been distinctly sub-optimal. I mean, they’d managed to get the engines turned back on and land the plane last time, but it had been touch and go for a while there. I didn’t fly after that. There had been kids on that plane. And while I was only risking my own life and that of Ul’tak, that felt very much like two lives too many.

And here I was, about to jump in a fighter that hadn’t been touched since before the fall of the Roman Empire. I don’t know much about machines – but I know they require regular upkeep. Even the Blue Beetle needed its oil changed every once in a while, and I was positive the Blue Beetle was substantially less complex than a freaking spaceship. It didn’t overburden me with confidence that we had to unbury several of the gliders.

I fiddled with the sash on my waist holding Bob’s skull nervously as we prepared to launch. Bob had been quiet, virtually silent, since I’d removed him from my throne and started walking him through the palace. He dared not risk that any of the fairies wandering my palace recognize him. His long standing feud with the Queen of Winter wasn’t the sort of thing that a sane person took chances with. For all his faults, Bob had an immaculate sense of self preservation.

“You’re sure these will still work?” I asked, nervously pulling the cobwebs away from one of the weapons pods. “Even after all this time?”

“Ring-ships?” Ammit barked out a harsh laugh. “Warden, these things barely worked even before the System Lords banned their use – provided that you were able to find pilots crazy enough to actually use them they’d usually end up killing themselves just trying to maneuver through the gate at supersonic speeds.”

“The gate-ship pilots were generally ‘immortalized’ as legends posthumously.” Enlil sighed, looking at my Jaffa as they pulled tarps off the flyers. “Do these at least have the second generation inertial dampeners? The ones that don’t cut out half the time?”
Ammit’s crocodilian grin of amusement spoke volumes as Enlil swore up a storm in several languages that Lash was apparently only partially able to translate. I wasn’t feeling much better than he was, to be frank.

“But they’ll get us to the planet right?” I asked, resigned to the fact that they were really our only option. “Without killing us?”

“It is remarkably unlikely, my Lord Warden.” Replied Ul’tak as he manipulated the crystal formations within a glider’s engine pod. I wasn’t entirely certain what he was doing, but more crystals seemed to be glowing than had been glowing when he started so I was interpreting that as progress. “The defenses of Sokar’s prison planet were designed with the intention of prohibiting precisely what we are attempting to achieve. The defensive satellites will have an effective firing solution on the gate with weapons that have been upgraded many thousands of times since the gate-ships were prohibited to prevent their misuse. Likely one in ten will manage to break through, fewer still if news of Sokar’s death has reached the planet. And the warriors at that garrison will have orders to slay all those who come to that planet, save those brought by Sokar himself.”

“One in Ten?” Enlil screeched.

“Possibly one in twenty.” Ul’tak replied, chewing his lip as he pulled out a long green crystal and looked at it. Apparently dissatisfied with its quality, he chucked the crystal to the side before replacing it with a long blue one with the table. It sputtered and sparked in a way that wasn’t altogether comforting, but glowed with a now vaguely purple light. “I doubt that Sokar would not have obeyed the strategic arms limitation with regards to defending one of the hidden fortress worlds that survived Thoth’s Folly.”

“How many gliders do we have?” Enlil asked, eyes roving across the hangar worriedly.

“Thirty.” Replied the first prime, a dry edge of humor in his voice. “Fear not – the Lord Warden’s glider will survive. We were able to activate a single glider’s shielding unit.”

“Only one will have shields?” Enlil screeched.

“Indeed.” Replied the first prime. “And most should have full weapons capacity.”

“Leave the Jaffa be Enlil.” Ammit put a taloned hand on the god’s shoulder as Enlil’s eye began to
“The more you talk to him, the more you distract him from fixing things.”

“How long till we’re able to leave?” Atreus queried, his fingers rubbing his blade’s hilt in anticipation.

“Five minutes – perhaps ten.” Replied the ancient Jaffa, pulling a white smock covered in grease from his front. He shot me a wary look, eying the stairwell heading back to the throne room from the hangar “Milord, I must ask… is it wise to leave the blood born unattended?”

“They’re not unattended.” Ul’tak replied, annoyed to be second guessed even by his old friend. “My second is keeping the demons of blood, sun, and snow under close observation. If they violate the terms they will be unmade.”

“The creatures of Sun and Snow are bound to their word by design. The creatures of blood violate theirs by their very nature. Having them here invites great danger upon us in our absence.” Interjected the Ancient Jaffa.

Normally I’d agree, but my godmother had promised me that the vampires would not be allowed to harm any mortal except in self-defense in my absence. Whatever threat the Duke and Duchess represented to the people of Nekheb would pale in comparison to what Mab was planning if I failed her again. “The vampires are forbidden from doing harm in my absence. They will leave once this is over. For now, they are not our concern.”

“My Lord Warden?” The Ancient Jaffa replied in confusion. “Are they not born of the Maya?”

“I said drop it.” I replied, a twinge of anger reverberating in my tone that made the Ancient Jaffa flinch.

“That’s the last one.” Ul’tak closed the casing on the flying machine’s side, tapping his finger on its center twice. The panel closed so tight that I couldn’t even tell that there had been an aperture to begin with on the curiously curved H-shape wings. “Jaffa, Kree shal mok! We thread the needle as was done in legends past! Today we fly with the gods!”

The Jaffa in his cadre shouted their approval, chanting my assumed name again and again, “Dre’su’den, Dre’su’den, Dre’su’den the Ha’ri.”
“I believe they’re playing our song Warden.” Ammit smiled. “Now let’s see about getting me in one of these infernal contraptions.” She climbed into the pilot seat of a glider, joined soon thereafter by Enlil. To my surprise – she fit. Sure, it took a decent amount of shifting and grunting, but the seats on the gate ship comfortably fit the reptilian goddess.

As I hefted my own armored bulk into the back seat of the shielded glider I was pleased to find it similarly sized. Even my NBA sized legs were quite comfortably situated within the ship’s rear seat. Actually, I was pretty much positive that the fighters hadn’t been designed with human physiology in mind, the buttons were too large and the field of view was entirely focused to the front. I hadn’t ever considered it before, but with her eyes as sunken into her skull as they were, Ammit can’t have had much in the way of peripheral vision.

As Ul’tak completed his pre-flight checks I took the opportunity to have the first semi-private conversation I’d been able to have with Bob since Sokar’s planet. “Ok Bob, I know there is no way that you didn’t spend every second poking your grubby little hands around in that computer’s records for every scrap of information you could find.”

“I haven’t got any hands, grubby or otherwise.” Bob replied sarcastically. “And I resent the implication.”

“You resemble the implication. So spill.” I jabbed. “What the hell is this thing that Mab wants me to get for her? Why is it important enough to re-locate a freaking star system and cash in on whatever favor she is owed by He Who Speaks?”

“Owed by whom?” Bob replied.

“Big guy, covered in flaming eyeballs, lots of spinning glass wings – kind of memorable. I could practically hear the capital letters in the guy’s name.” I replied. “He’s the one bankrolling the power it took to transfer this star system. I want to know why.”

“I don’t know spirit that goes by that name, but there are only a couple of entities with enough power to actually pull that off. Some of the greater gods, a couple of the pantheons of ascended beings, several of the stronger demons, and, well, the Angelic hosts I suppose… there isn’t a shortage of beings strong enough to do this. Mab isn’t one of them but she’d be able to get it from those that can – provided that she’s offered something valuable enough.” Bob paused. “Did you offer her something worth it?”

“I offered her everything I know about the future.” I replied. “How the Summer Lady dies, all of it.”
“No, no. You’d have to do better than that.” Bob replied. “I mean, that would be enough for some military aid, but you’re talking about fundamentally re-writing the fabric of the universe for an entire star system in real time without causing catastrophic damage to the galaxy at large… well we hope, I suppose we won’t know till we get back. Regardless, you could offer her a mortal’s knowledge of the next ten millennia and it wouldn’t be valuable enough for that trade. The more powerful beings get the more obsessive they get about balance. Knowledge about a future that may or may not happen after all that we’ve done wouldn’t count for that.”

“Which brings me back. Who is He Who Speaks and why was Mab willing to accept my offer?” I replied, increasingly worried about what I’d gotten myself into. The Winter Queen had me screwed over so many different ways at this point it was hard to tell them apart. Was this key so important as to merit all the favors she was calling in? Could I afford to give it to her if it was?

“No clue.” Bob replied. “Why not ask the voice in your head?”

I had, multiple times. I’d tried every possible variation of asking Lash who He who speaks was or why she was so afraid of him, but she’d just clamped down harder – retreating from me. She was terrified of that thing. She seemed to be afraid of even referring to it in vague terms in a way that I’d never seen from her. Even the prospect of dying had terrified her less than just talking about the entity that had been in my palace.

Traitor’s Bane had been of little assistance, the Genius Loci identified the entity to me as “Unknown threat” and just listed off several potential containment options whose efficacy I seriously doubted. They’d all been either logistically unviable or likely to blow up a continent when they failed. Heka had only designed the Genius Loci to worry about a single point of collateral damage, namely himself.

There were too many unknown and unconsidered variables in this equation. Too many choices I’d been making as short term solutions to longer term problems. The Winter Queen represented a quantifiable threat to me, a known evil that I’d survived before. I’d been willing to bargain with her because she was the only person known to me at the time. The more I thought about it though, the more it occurred to me that I didn’t know the first damn thing about the Fairy Courts. Only a week ago I would have thought it was unnerving that the Winter Court might be willing to send a couple hit men to Chicago. Their goals spanned far beyond what I’d imagined and their reach went as far as our most distant stars.

Could I afford to give something to Mab that she considered valuable enough to threaten to destroy a planet, knowing as little as I did about her goals?
As our spacecraft took off and carefully navigated out the hangar bay doors, I asked the question that had been burning in the back of my mind. “Bob, what did the Goa’uld do to earn the enmity of both the Summer and Winter courts? Everyone keeps talking about it like it should be common knowledge.”

“I don’t know boss.” Bob replied. “Honestly I don’t. It’s like someone went through every single record of Goa’uld history and cut out specific details. I’ve been able to piece together bits from their history and can make inferences about what is missing, but it’s guesswork at best. There was a common enemy that both the Goa’uld and Fairy courts were united in combatting. Certain elements of the Goa’uld collaborated with the enemy. The Goa’uld managed to defeat them, but not before they’d done some major damage.”

“The Enemy?” I asked. “Care to be more specific.”

“I’d love to boss. I can’t. The Goa’uld keep volumes on most of their enemies, but whoever these guys were they just wrote ‘the enemy’ or ‘the adversary’ without every qualifying it. It’s like they were actively trying to remove whoever these guys were from history.” Bob replied.

“From reality.” Lash spoke for the first time since being asked about He who speaks. “They were trying to unmake them from reality.”

“Who?” I asked her, thinking hard in her direction.

“Dark gods, old things, monsters beyond reckoning – Earth was not always the paradise it is now.” Lash sighed wistfully. “Most of the galaxy had to be re-claimed from creatures far worse than those you’ve learned to fear. Some things do not belong.”

“Outsiders,” I thought in reply. “You’re talking about outsiders, or something just as bad. You mean the Goa’uld were working with them?”

“Not all.” Lash replied. “Only those who fell to Thoth’s folly when it was spoken.”

“Was it some sort of spell?” I asked.

“No, dear host.” Lash replied, a chuckle in her voice. “There are some dangers far more insidious than magic.”
“Dangers such as?” I really hated the whole cryptic mystical being BS. They would inevitably talk around the issue while alluding to how darn clever they were, without ever telling you anything.

“You realize that I can hear you thinking that, my host?” The Angel’s shadow replied in irritation.

“Of course. Now tell me what he said or zip it.” Bob blinked his eye lights in confusion. Apparently I’d said that part out loud.

“What who said?” The skull looked back and forth. “Someone said something?

“I wasn’t talking to you,” I replied, pointing at my head.

“Ah, yes.” Bob sighed. “Her – you know, it’s really creepy when you end up talking to her and even creepier when you just sit there thinking at her. Especially with that mask. It has a whole ‘lotion in the basket’ vibe that is no bueno, boss man.”

“Whatever you say Bob.” I replied before directing my thoughts back at Lash. “I’m waiting.”

“I don’t know.” Lash replied. “I know that it had not special mystical power behind it, but whatever he said out loud to the Goa’uld collective nearly destroyed us all.”

“How can you not know?” I snorted. “You know everything else about them.”

“My host, though I am as old as creation itself you forget that I spent most of existence trapped in the void forbidden from interacting with that which had been made. The few moments I’ve been able to spend interacting with the real world have been only a brief respite from the void.” Lash replied in a voice bordering petulance. The Angel’s shadow was not regularly in the habit of admitting to her own limitations. “The fallen weren’t able to interact with the real world until after the Crucifixion. What knowledge I have is pieced together from the archives and interrogations we were able to conduct after the Fallen started operating within the mortal realms.”

“Interrogations?” I considered the implications of that. “You mean there are Goa’uld on Earth?”
“Dozens, though I wouldn’t lose sleep over it. The conqueror worms are only as strong as their available resources. Absent their fleets, their weapons, and their pitiful remnant magics, they hardly represent a greater threat than a fledgling vampire.” Lash replied. “Nicodemus took particular pleasure in torturing them. Something about killing a ‘would be god’ brought him immense satisfaction. He disliked their presumption to the divine.”

“Doesn’t he hate the divine?” I asked, genuinely curious. “Isn’t profaning God’s whims kind of his shtick?”

“Yes, but it’s his shtick.” Lash borrowed my turn of phrase. “And while we may have rejected our role as Angels as an act of free will, we earned our divinity – rejected or otherwise.”

“Ah” I replied. “Just because you don’t want it doesn’t mean they get to have it?”

“Precisely. The sheer arrogance of it was unforgivable.” Lash tittered in amusement. “It was about the only matter the Knights of the Cross never saw fit to interfere in. I presume that protecting the Goa’uld extended beyond their heavenly mandate.”

“Hells bells, is there any part of the supernatural community which hasn’t got the Goa’uld on their shit list?” I whistled.

“None of which one cares to speak openly.” Lash replied. “Even in thought.”

There was a brief pause where the only sound in the craft was the whirring hum of engines as Ul’tak maneuvered our craft towards a shaft in the ceiling of my palace. Before my musings were broken by the feeling of intense gravity as the inertial dampeners struggled to keep up with the craft’s rapid acceleration. I felt my heart somewhere between my ears as my pulse began to resemble the drum solo at a rock concert. No wonder they gave these things up – they were insane. We plunged towards the narrow aperture at break-neck speed, leading the column of gate craft as they fell from the sky.

“Please tell me that the gate is open.” I shouted to my pilot before the shaft ended. “Because this is going to be a very short flight otherwise.”

“As I said, my Lord Warden.” Ul’tak replied. “They do not make them as they used to.”
The Jaffa punched seven symbols on the left side of the dash before flooring the accelerator. I barely had the chance to glimpse the grey ring and blue pool in the center of the ring room as he pulled the controls upward and drove us through the gate.

I had a vague glimpse of blue light before we reached the other side, skimming the surface of the barren moon. We were lucky, the gate was not on the side facing the planet. We’d get a few minutes before the planet’s defenses would be able to see us. Maybe even enough time to think of a better plan than “try not to get shot.”

“That was insane” Bob the skull whined. “Why didn’t you order them to just move the gate?”

Because I hadn’t realized how insane the flight path was going to be, but I couldn’t exactly say that with Ul’tak in the cockpit. It would have made me look stupid. I went with defensive and petulant instead, “Quit your bitching. You’re alive aren’t you?”

“My Lord Warden,” Ul’tak spoke from the front seat. “Something is wrong.”

“For the love of – what is it this time?” I sighed.

“Someone is already attacking the planet.” Ul’tak tapped the scanning device to confirm his suspicions, nodding in satisfaction. “Four ships, a Ha’tak and three Al’kesh. Only the Ha’tak is still functional.”

“I thought the hidden base was, well, hidden.” I replied in irritation.

“It’s supposed to be.” Bob replied in obvious consternation. “Nobody without access to Sokar’s mainframe and some serious mojo should be able to know where this planet is.”

Crap, there were only so many candidates for access to Sokar’s mainframe. “So what? This is Apophis?”

“Like hell it is.” Bob replied. “No – I saw Sokar’s fleet numbers. The closest of his ships, assuming they were willing to accept Apophis as their god, was at least a week away.”
“So who? Chronos?” I sighed. I wasn’t looking forward to more of that magic resistant armor. I looked to my right and was pleased to see the glider Ammit was piloting made it through the gate. Twenty eight green blips on the display in front of me seemed to indicate that most, but not all, of the gate ships had successfully threaded the needle.

“No my Lord Warden,” Ul’tak replied. “Their shield signature does not correspond to those used by Chronos.”

“You know what? I don’t even care.” I sighed, “Whoever they are, we’re going to have to fight our way past them regardless so screw the ships, damn the torpedoes and dive, dive, dive.”

“Yes, my Lord Warden.” Replied the Jaffa Warrior.

As we approached the planet it became apparent that while the four ships detected on the opposite side of the moon had been the only remaining ships active in the region, they were not the only ships to arrive in system. The skies were rife with the charred husks of where planetary defense satellites had hewn their way through shield and hull.

A brilliant gold spear of light cut through one of the broken pyramids, annihilating one of the gate ships. Ammit’s voice cracked out over the radio, “They’ve noticed us! Don’t make a pattern. Break apart from each other and don’t waste time trying to fight those satellites. They’re intended to destroy entire air wings. You won’t win.”

We broke apart at random, trying our best not to be the next target for the satellite’s firing solution. I groaned in realization as two blips headed directly towards the nearest satellite. I fiddled with the controls, trying to activate the ship’s radio transmitter. “No, no, no! You are not going to sacrifice yourselves just for me – get back here!”

By the time I’d figured out how to select a channel it was already too late. The green blips were no longer on my screen. The satellite had destroyed them. “Damn it!”

“Hold on my Lord Warden” Ul’tak shouted as alarms blared in the cockpit. “They’ve locked on to us. I’m going to try to lose them in the ionosphere by – “

What he was intending to lose them by doing was apparently inefficient. The glider shook as steam started pouring into the compartment, sparks spitting out from most of the consoles. “God’s blood – a direct hit. Forgive me my lord, but we won’t survive another one. I must enact the protocol you
“Protocol? What protocol – we never talked about any protocol.” I shouted as the floor beneath me dropped down, depositing me within an sarcophagus like escape-pod. I barely had time to realize that I was being ejected before I found myself plummeting towards the ground. I tried to keep the glider in my field of view through the cloud cover, but the eye slits in the pod only allowed me to see a small patch of sky as I listened to the aircraft exploding around me.

“Can we please start doing plans that don’t involve falling out of the sky!” Screamed Bob as we fell to the ground. I was such a valid point that I didn’t even say anything snarky in reply. Honest.

The pod must have had inertial dampeners. I didn’t feel a thing as it hit the ground. I’ve gotten the wind knocked out of me harder when Mister decided to jump on my stomach from the top shelf of my book case. It was really my fault for napping on the couch rather than feeding him.

I lifted myself out of the sarcophagus, only to duck back down as a blade sailed directly for my head. I kicked out, catching my attacker at the knee as I grabbed his wrist and pulled him to the ground. He punched my side hard, yelling something loud and likely inappropriate in a language I couldn’t understand. It knocked the wind out of me, but wasn’t enough to break my grip. I punched him hard in the face, knocking him unconscious.

I grabbed my staff from the sarcophagus and surveyed my attacker, pausing for a moment to just let the absurdity of my life wash over me as I looked at the man who had attacked me. He was definitely a Jaffa, tattoos and all, but it was really the ninja thing that caught my attention. I blinked in surprise as I came to grips with the fact that I had just been grappling with an honest to goodness freaking ninja.

“You have got to be kidding me.” I swore as another group of ninjas dropped down from the trees around me. Look, I’m willing to accept a lot of weird stuff in the line of duty but even for me potentially starring in an alien Kurosawa film was an odd option. “Shouldn’t you guys be in a sewer somewhere chasing four turtles?”

The joke was lost on them.

“Hells bells,” I swore loudly as a Jaffa ninja tried to pierce my heart with one of those pole-arm things that has the katana strapped to the end of it. If I lived through this fight, I was going to buy Murphy a year’s worth of steak dinners to thank her for all the martial arts practice. I slapped the pole arm aside before pointing my staff at the Jaffa’s chest and propelling him away from me with a yell of forzare.
He was tossed away, tumbling across the ground before righting himself with an outright unfair degree of grace and charging back at me. I would have liked to toss some fire at him or something, but I was forced to raise my shield as Jaffa opened fire on me with staff weapons. I was pushed back a good ten paces by the sheer kinetic force of the blasts before I had to drop the shield in order to counter the Jaffa flanking me with blades.

They were fast – like scary fast. But that speed came at a cost, where the Jaffa of Chronos and Nekheb wore thick protective armor, the Ninjas were clad on only cloth and leather. Things that easily burned. I screamed “Fuego” as I sent a wall of fire out in front of me to scatter the Jaffa warriors who’d been firing at me.

They did scatter – just not in fear as I’d expected. Look, I don’t care who you are, fire is scary. You get a whole mess of it heading your way and any smart person heads for the hills, or at least to somewhere the fire isn’t. I’d just tossed a six-foot-wide gout of white hot hellfire thirty feet. That should have been 180 square feet of Ninja repellant.

But they just jumped out of the way of the gout and kept coming at me. This was bad. The ninjas were smart, worked in teams and didn’t seem particularly bothered that I could cast magic. Who were these guys?

“I don’t suppose I can talk you gentlemen into just walking away?” I asked the nearest ninja.

“No.” Replied the ninja as he unsheathed his katana.

“I really don’t want to have to kill you.” I sighed.

“You won’t.” Replied the closest ninja. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I twisted to the side on a hunch, barely avoiding a dagger to the back. I drove my staff down into the would be assassin’s ribs, causing a loud crack where the staff broke them.

I braced myself for the next wave, but it never came. A loud, long whistle sounded and the ninja looked at each other in fear. The ninja who’d threatened me nodded once and said “Another time” before tossing a freaking smoke pellet at the ground and disappearing into the shadows. And I don’t mean, ran off into the woods – my mask’s optics would have been good enough to see through the smoke. I mean the ninjas just ceased to be from one second to the next.
As the artillery rained down on my position, I quickly found myself wishing that I knew how to follow suit. I started running in a direction. I don’t precisely know what direction, at that moment in my life the most important direction to be moving in felt like “not here.” It wasn’t an exact science, but when someone is firing the extraterrestrial equivalent to a howitzer, you stop asking deep questions. Questions like “Where does this hole lead?” and “Is there another exit to this cave?” take a back seat to “Hells bells, someone is shooting at me with a freaking mortar.” So when I found an apparent shelter from the incoming weapons fire, I just dived in. There was a cave with a lake at the bottom that seemed relatively placid. I could just wait out the attack in there then climb back out.

Or so I thought. The water most definitely cushioned my fall, however the ground beneath it was substantially less stable than I’d hoped. It gave way, sucking me down into a subterranean river. Had I not been wearing my armor, I would have drowned in the ten minutes it took for me to resurface. Instead, I found myself cast along the banks of a deep subterranean lake. I took a moment to just lie on the shoal, breathing deeply and just enjoying the sensation of not being dead. I gave myself a full ten count before rising to my feet surveying my surroundings.

I was in some sort of subterranean jungle. Tall stalks of glowing plants intermingled with dense thickets of mushrooms as small lizards and eyeless mammals stalked through the shadows. The cave wall wasn’t far from me, perhaps two miles from the shore, but a vibrant ecosystem had evolved in the darkness that I would have never expected. The lake was massive, stretching out further than even my enhanced optics could assess in this dim light, meaning that it was at least a hundred miles across. And, unless I missed my guess, it was habitated. I could just make out the distant shapes of people moving around campfires a couple miles down the beach. And not just a few of them, there seemed to be an entire village worth of people on the lakeside.

“Oh good,” Bob chimed in. “I’d worried you drowned.”

“Not today Bob.” I replied. “Any idea where we are?”

“Based off those tools?” Bob interjected, shining his eye lights on an array of picks and shovels piled. “I’d say we were in a mine. Sokar would need a stable source of Naquadah to power those Satellites. This is probably the mine he keeps his slaves in.”

“You mean the mine his slaves work in?” I asked, already suspecting the answer.

“No.” Bob replied. “Sokar has very likely never let these slaves see sunlight for generations. They likely don’t even know what it is. They’ll be kept undernourished and undersupplied to keep them from being able to stage an effective rebellion.”
“They will know where the fortress is though?” I asked.

“Probably.” Bob replied.

I noticed the shapes of men moving in distant torchlight and waved, trying to get their attention. I knew enough about Sokar to know that it would take only minimal coaxing to get his slaves to betray him. If I could just talk one of them into being my guide and offer something worth safe passage, I could continue with my mission and retrieve Mab’s prize. Bob gulped, “Boss, are you sure this is a good idea?”

“I need to get out of this cave Bob. I know enough about them to know that just rooting around for an exit on my own is a surefire way to end up dead or trapped somewhere, which is as good as dead considering the timeline I’m on.” I replied. “The best course is to find people to help.”

“Boss. I don’t think they’re people.” Bob replied.

“What?” I squinted, trying to see through the darkness to make out the shapes moving towards me. Had the entire village uprooted themselves to meet a single man?

“Boss, this planet is old. Like, before the folly of Thoth old. The fortress predates the fall of the first Goa’uld Dynasty back when Apep was ruling.” Bob hissed. “Before they’d discovered humans.”

“Before humans?” I replied, watching the hundreds of bulky reptilian creatures lumbering towards me. “So I didn’t just call out to a bunch of starved and desperate people…”

“…You called out to generations worth of starving cannibalistic super-humans who likely have a blood feud out on anyone who even resembles a Goa’uld.” Bob replied. “Yes.”

“Well… crap.”
Given the sheer carnage that Ammit had been able to deal out by herself I was not looking forward to a fight with dozens of massive, crocodilian monsters while trapped in the sunless depths of some misbegotten scrap of planet in the ass end of the universe. I needed my full concentration and total control of my faculties, so I felt wholly justified in shouting a litany of swear words as my knees bent and hands let go my staff. My body bent back, exposing the softest parts of me to the sky – totally helpless to defend against the was coming storm.

“Harry! What the hell?” Shouted Bob in alarm, his eye lights twitching in terror. I could feel his mass shifting in the bag tied around my waist as he used his jaw to turn around to get a good look at me. “Are you having a seizure?”

“It’s not me Bob!” I struggled against my numb limbs in panic. I was aware of them, could feel the silken fabric lining the armor cool against my skin but nothing responded to me. The ability to move them was just at the edge of my mind, just out of reach. “I can’t move.”

“Nor will you.” Spoke a haughty voice into my ear. Lasciel’s shadow shimmered into view, her buxom form draped in a shimmering garment of white silk. She’d put some real effort into the illusion this time, I could just taste the whiff of her on the air – an odor of violets and sky following a summer rain. She bent down and kissed me on the forehead. “No, dear host. You will sit there and wait.”

“How –” I began before even my mouth ceased to obey my commands. I fought my numb body, thinking “Lash, why?” in horror as the mob of monsters advanced. Their glowing, slitted eyes shimmered in the bioluminescent hues of the surrounding flora and fauna. They were clearly primitive, they’d clothed themselves in rough cut clothes made from the skins from god alone knew what animals and made necklaces and bracelets out of bone.

They were different from the other Unas I’d met – Mo, Larry, and Curly had been precise in their movements. They were lumbering and inhuman in their gait, to be sure, but precise. This crowd moved with a near systematic chaos to it, Unas advancing and shifting back before charging forwards. Some even leapt in front of each other only to drop to the ground and allow their compatriots to advance over them. It was near impossible to get a count of how many there really were in the darkness with all that movement.

I’d have been hard pressed to fight off that many even if I’d been able to try.

I was furious, furious at Nicodemus for tossing me the coin, furious at Lash for paralyzing me, and furious at myself for allowing the angel’s shadow enough leeway that she’d been able to control me this much. I’d always suspected that Lash’s abilities to influence my behavior extended far beyond the meager illusions and whispers she’d used to distract and guide me before, but I’d never been given any proof to back it up. I’d certainly never relaxed enough around her to allow her free reign in my mind.

Or I had before Heka’s presence. I’d allowed Lash greater freedom of movement in my mind, welcomed it even. I should have known that would come at a cost. Now, here I was at my most vulnerable, and I was soon to be savaged to death by Dino’s cannibalistic cousins. It wasn’t exactly the wizardly blaze of glory I’d always envisioned but I suppose one climactic, sacrificial death is probably enough for one week – even for me.

“Host,” Lash tutted, disappointedly. “You’re supposed to be a detective. A master of deductive
reasoning, are you not? I am not betraying you. I am saving us both.”

“I’m not feeling especially saved right now!” My eyes flitted from Unas to Unas, keenly aware of how I’d seen Ammit bite though things thicker than the armor I was wearing.

“Harry! Whatever it is you’re planning… now would be a good time.” Bob whispered as the crowd of Unas surrounded me. They hissed and growled, keeping at least an arm’s length away from me on all sides – but made no moves to advance beyond that gap.

“Look again, mine host.” Lash kneeled next to me in a purely symbolic gesture of supplication, staring from Unas to Unas. “And think – were the Unas you met on Delmak unthinking brutes simply by virtue of their inhumanity? Have you not met dozens of creatures not bound by the flesh of mortal men who held their own honor and rites of passage? Think wizard – if you found a tribe of mortal men terrified and enslaved, would your first response be to toss fire and frost into their midst?”

“No,” I conceded. “It would not have been.” Mo, Larry and Curly hadn’t even been bad guys by the usual henchmen standards I dealt with. Actually, other than their apparent penchant for torture, the Unas I’d met on Delmak had been practically civil by comparison to the raving blood crazed lunatics in Sokar’s standard employ.

Lash stood up and walked to the largest of the Unas, running her phantom finger across the scars on the man’s face. He had a pock-marked scar along the left side of his head where a talon had clearly gouged out the eye, leaving a light shade of pink across the dark green of his face. “Do you not see it in their faces, Wizard Dresden? Can you not taste it? They’re afraid, terrified even.”

“They aren’t exactly broadcasting ‘I’m afraid of the man in front of me’ here Lash.” I thought, realizing that had I been able to control my body, I might have flinched when the Unas with one eye got up in my face and bellowed, flecks of spittle spraying across my mask.

“Wizard, it has not even been a full day since you thrust yourself into the maw of creatures you felt were beyond your ability to beat purely to protect you and yours.” Lash replied, pointing to a diminutive Unas peeking out from another Unas’ legs. I’d never seen an Unas child before, never really even considered that Unas had children, but the more I stared away from the bull Unas in my face around at the crowd the more I became aware that there were entire families of the lizard people around me. They’d brought the entire tribe – including children.

I wasn’t going to endanger children.

“Let me go Lash – I know what I have to do.” I thought, infuriated that I couldn’t disagree with her course of action. That did not mean, however, that I was ok with Lash’s hitherto unknown ability to paralyze me at will. That would be addressed.

“Later, host. We may speak when this all ends. I promise.” Lash sighed. “It will make sense but you need to trust me. Trust that I only mean you well.”

I shouldn’t trust her. She was an angel’s shadow. She was a deceiver by trade, one who seduced men by finding their deepest desires and offering them a route to reach them. It would be insane to trust her. But I did - God help me, I did.

I did because she loved me – or at least wanted to be in love with me. That at much had been truth. You can’t have someone living in your own head and loving you without feeling it when they felt it. I didn’t always know her mind, understand her feelings, but that moment when we’d been flying up to the ship. That moment had been honest. No amount of Fallen Angelic seduction could fake love, actual love.
I was willing to trust her love even if I couldn’t return it.

“Harry. I know that this is hard to understand – I know you are angry with me. I know you have every reason to be angry with me.” She put her palm in the center of my chest and I felt feeling return to my limbs. Tears that I think had very little to do with the illusion she was casting burned in her eyes. “But I’m doing this to protect the man you want to be. The man you are. The Harry Dresden wouldn’t kill innocents just because it was expeditious. Don’t let Dresu’den kill Harry.”

“I won’t.” I replied, “I won’t.”

As Lash’s illusion faded away to nothing, the warmth returned completely to my arms, legs, and lips. My fingers twitched as the sensation of pins and needles ran through my extremities, dull pain a comforting sensation in the wake of the nothingness I’d felt only seconds prior.

The Unas, seemingly mollified by my lack of aggressive response, tilted his head and sniffed the air around my head, muttering. “Shesh onac. Shesh, ta onac.”

“Onac a benar,” Hised another Unas behind the first. It was smaller than the first, with a small ridge of spines running across its nose.

“Ka.” Growled the one missing his eye. “Onac ka benar. Onac keka.”

“I’m going to guess that you have no idea how to understand a word that I’m saying.” I replied, realizing that Lash had apparently chosen to stop translating into Goa’uld as I felt my lips making familiar movements as I spoke. “So I’m just going to start talking in a calm tone and hope that you get the gist.”

“Ka Onac. Shesh.” One Eye approached me slowly, getting close enough to poke my chest before retreating in evident fear. He seemed genuinely surprised that his talon had been able to make contact with my armor, almost frightened by the fact that I was allowing him to do so. He backed away as though expecting lightning to strike him dead for having done so.

It was a valid fear, I suppose. Had I actually been a Goa’uld, it very well might have. The Zat gun had been just as effective when I’d used it on Larry, Mo, and Cury as when I’d seen it used on the forces of Chronos. Sokar’s minions on this planet had likely been ruling this tribe’s territory for millennia, meaning that any visitation from their forces had likely meant nothing but pain and death for the tribe.

“Onac benar! Ko!” Spine Nose chided one eye, slapping One Eye’s shoulder.

One Eye growled, getting up in Spine Nose’s personal space to put jaws at Spine Nose’s throat in an attempt to cow the second Unas. Spine Nose was unimpressed, head butting One Eye for doing so. Glowing green blood spurted from where spines met One Eye’s forehead.

The Unas crowd crooned with a sound that I judged to be laughter. One eye bellowed, silencing it before sending an irritated look to Spine Nose. Spine Nose, just stared back at the Alpha. “Ko! Onac benar.”

“Ma.” Begrudgingly replied to Spine Nose. “Onac benar.”

One Eye squatted in front of me, pulling a braid of tightly woven fibers interlaced with what appeared to Unas talons and tossing it to the ground in front of me. He waved to it. “Ko.”

“You, you want me to take it.” I replied, deciding what would be best to do next. The Unas didn’t seem to be supernatural, at least not purely supernatural, so I was certain that this gift wouldn’t be
considered a contract or a pact requiring equal pay in return. For that matter, I doubted the Unas had any mystical properties at all. After all, hadn’t the Goa’uld abandoned their use specifically so that they could use magic? But when in doubt it was best to return a courtesy when offered.

I pulled at my belt, locating the knife I knew to be on my left hip. It was a cruel curved thing with irregular jagged points to it, not especially useful for actually fighting but appropriately ‘wizardly’ looking to have made a statement when used on one of Heka’s subjects. It held no actual magical significance as far as I could tell, it just looked like it ought to belong in a ritual.

I tossed it in front of One Eye and said, “Ko” for lack of a better word to say. It seemed to be the right thing to say. I was sort of at a loss as to what to do after my gift was accepted though. We just kind of sat there, staring at each other as he knelt and I stood. For lack of a better option I shifted my head, activating the motors on armor to retract my helmet. I was in no danger of being recognized by the Jaffa and I preferred to talk face to face with someone when possible.

One Eye flinched when the mask receded but did not move from his position, jutting out his chin and speaking in a less pronounced snarl. “Onac nok kan kel?”

“I don’t suppose you can shed some light on what he’s asking?” I queried aloud, simultaneously directing my inquiry to Bob and the Angel’s shadow.

“He wants to know why you’re here Sahib.” Bob spoke from my waist. “And what you want.”

“Keka!” One Eye hissed, taking a step back and spreading his arms aggressively as he looked at Bob. “Onac Keka! Benar tac!”

“No Keka!” I shook my head emphatically, pointing to the skull. “Bob.”

“Baaaabb” One Eye replied, his alien vocal chords struggling with the vowel sound.

“Yes. Bob.” I replied, tapping my finger on the skull a Bob replied with an irritated protest of “Hey! Quit it.”

“Bob onac ka ney.” One Eye replied in confusion, still ready to strike if necessary.

“Ma onac ka ney.” Replied Bob, “We’re all friends here big guy. No danger, no tricks.”

“Benar.” In an instant I went from being surrounded by a crowd of animalistic predators to being a mildly interesting oddity at the center of an Unas tribe. No longer protecting themselves from an imminent threat to the tribe most Unas broke off to go forage in the iridescent foliage. I quickly found myself with only a handful of Unas around me, most of them apparently curious adolescents.

One Eye and Spine Nose remained, Spine Nose seemingly there just to stand behind One Eye and make the occasional hiss or growl. One Eye made a gurgling sound and one of the adolescent Unas placed long strips of gray moss and dried mushrooms in front of us. Spine Nose, bidden by some unspoken queue knelt next to the kindling and pulled two stones from a pouch. One Eye took them, holding them cupped between his hands as he groaned in a rhythmic vibrating hum that could only be interpreted as some sort of a prayer. The adolescents hummed in reply before he took the stones and cracked them together, bright sparks falling from them as he did so. The kindling was uncooperative, whichever adolescent Unas had been tasked with carrying it seemed to have accidentally dropped it in the lake between where their camp had been and where the camp was now. Or rather I guessed that was how it had gotten wet, the adolescent Unas had made himself scarce after passing it over in a way that reeked of a teenager eager not to end up getting scolded for his mistake. I guess some bad habits crossed even the boundaries between species.
I briefly amused myself at the idea of my friend Michael giving one of the all too familiar lectures on responsibility he was wont to do when encountering a wayward teenager in need of guidance. As ridiculous as the image was, I was equally convinced that somehow – even though the language barrier – Michael would manage to convince the adolescent Unas to see the error of his ways and take his chores more seriously. Don’t ask me how he did it, my own father hadn’t been in my life long enough to get a good sense for how to “role model” and McCoy didn’t mentor so much as he whooped you into shape regardless of if you’d wanted to be fixed or not. I think it was a benefit of the whole Knight of the Cross thing, it gave him clarity into bad people could become good and how good people could become better.

I got the distinct sense that One Eye’s counseling with the youth would have been less talking and more “beating you for having been bad at your job.” One Eye continued click the rocks together, muttering words I didn’t understand to Spine Nose with meanings that were all too clear to me. “Why isn’t this working” I imagined he was saying. “We’re embarrassing ourselves in front of our guest” before Spine Nose gave a snarky reply of “Do you need me to do it for you?” They were strangely domestic in their interactions. I presumed Spine Nose to be either the second in command or possibly his mate, assuming of course that Unas even had mates. Heck, I was assuming that Unas even had gender. Ammit used female pronouns but I hadn’t got a clue if the Goa’uld even had gender of their own, or if they just applied the gender of their host as needed.

After a minute or so, I took pity on him. I reached down to the pile of combustibles, placed my finger in the kindling and willed my power at it as I spoke the words, “Flicum Bicus.” I didn’t strictly need to point in order to cast the spell, but I wanted to leave no doubt that I’d been the one to do it.

One Eye’s mouth gaped in shock as flames erupted through the wet kindling, “Shesh.”

“Ko.” I spoke the word again, knowing that it had been an agreeable term for my previous gift.

“Ko.” Replied One Eye in a pleased voice looking up and into my face – staring me dead in the eyes… well eye, I suppose. And then something remarkable happened.

We entered into a soul gaze.

It’s not something that I’d even thought to protect myself from. Generally speaking it isn’t a danger when dealing with non-human creatures that weren’t once at least partly human. Even some of the partly human creatures like Black Court Vampires were too far gone from what they had once been to need to worry about getting sucked into a soul gaze. The Unas were just too alien for me to have even considered the possibility that they had souls, at least souls with which I would be capable of interacting.

A soul gaze is always different, you get to see a representation of what makes that person who they are – a combination of all the best and worst parts of them that will encompass their being in its entirety. No two soul gazes will ever be the same. And once you’ve seen a person’s soul, you will never forget what you’ve seen – no matter how much you may wish you were able.

One Eye’s soul was different even by the standards of a soul gaze. It was, for lack of a better word, alien. He didn’t think the way I did, didn’t comprehend sensory data in a way that I could easily process. His eyes saw too many colors and too many of the wrong colors for what he was looking at. His sense of smell was overwhelming, in just instants I was exposed to a range of odors and flavors that seemed ready to engulf me. I could feel the ache in One Eye’s muscles, the dull knotted pain in his thigh where he’d been bitten by a predator as an adolescent, the confusion he felt when I appeared along the coast without ever having gone through the only entrance to this cave, the fear he felt that I would kill them all for their forefathers having fled the central mines a generation ago – hiding in the depths where the Jaffa dared not go.
He didn’t have a really distinct concept of self. He was himself, he’d just never really considered the matter to realize that the fact that he was an individual meant that the other members of his tribe were also individuals. One Eye didn’t have a name and hadn’t ever considered the necessity of naming each member of his tribe individually. He knew them on sight and knew them by smell, what else would be required? He was not proud or arrogant, pride and arrogance would have required that he considered his accomplishments in depth. He was the most accomplished of his tribe, to be sure, but that was not a matter of pride – it was a matter of fact. When a younger Unas came along with greater deeds or was capable of beating him in ritual combat, that Unas would become the most accomplished. It was the way of things.

I saw glimpses of One Eye’s life. I saw the moment when he’d broken through his egg and touched the joy he’d felt as he fed on one of the smaller, more deformed hatchlings. I experienced the pride he’d felt when his tribe had allowed him to go on his first hunt. I felt the fear of hiding from Jaffa patrols and the joy of executing a successful raid against them. I knew the taste of their flesh in his mouth and the pleasure that came when he’d spit-roasting Jaffa as they still lived. I knew that by consuming them he believed that he gained their strength, their power. I knew that the young of their tribe too incautious to be caught by a Jaffa patrol were often taken by the Jaffa and put to work in the mines. I knew that he feared the mines. He feared the mines more than he feared death.

When the Unas became too old or weak to continue to work in the mines they would invariably enter the great pyramid – anyone who entered the pyramid was worse than dead, or so the ancestors had told him. He saw no reason to question their wisdom on the matter. I saw his memories of the cave paintings left by his father’s father. I listened to the stories told by his people – and I understood what it was to be Unas.

I was left gasping for air as the soulgaze broke, overwhelmed by the totality of what I’d seen. One Eye, by contrast, maintained that same serpentine grace – seemingly unperturbed by having been exposed to all that I was. It was likely a byproduct of his incapacity for introspection. I envied him. I was going to have some long nights coming to grip with the fact that I now knew far more about the taste of Jaffa flesh than any man ought to.


“You saw Lash?” I replied, wondering how much the Angel’s shadow had been part of the soul gaze. I’d never asked about what someone saw in my head before – I’d always been kind of afraid to know. It wasn’t the sort of thing you asked.


Keenly aware that disagreeing was a good way to end up on a spit, I agreed. “Sure One Eye. We’re pals. Now, how about you point me towards that big temple you hate and I’ll make it go away?”

One Eye shook his head. “Shesh. Many word. Few understand.”

“Boss, their language doesn’t actually have most of the concepts you’re trying to express. Keep it simple.” Bob sighed in exasperation. “Just talk cave man. You should be good at it.”

“Cave man?” I replied to the skull.

“Me Tarzan, you Jane.” Bob replied. “They have only had a couple generations out of captivity to discover fire. ‘Temple’ is going to be too much of a leap even if the guest in your head shared your
language with him.”

“Ah,” I replied looking back at One Eye. He was fascinated by the spirit, amused by the dancing lights in the Skull’s eyes. I cleared my throat to get his attention before continuing. “I good person. You help me. I go to bad place. I fight. No more bad place.”

“Ka.” One Eye disagreed.

“Why?” I blinked in surprise. I would have thought he would jump at the chance to have someone fight the Goa’uld on his planet.


I was going to write this one off as a “semi-diplomatic” solution.
Chapter 30

I found myself struggling to keep up with One Eye's loping gait as we traversed the complex network of caves. One Eye and his Unas warriors had grown up in the lopsided and misshapen darkness of caves, they were accustomed to finding purchase in uneven ground with talons and toes. Me? On a good day, I'll run along the beach in tennis shoes for a couple miles but I'm much more likely to choose a paved sidewalk for my choice runabout. I wasn't accustomed to running in full body armor either. Nobody would ever accuse me of being out of shape, but even an Olympian would be hard pressed to make good time in full body armor.

Actually, come to think of it – I was making better time than I had any right to be making. I've always had a good sense for what my limits were. It was a useful bit of knowledge in my line of work. And I knew for damn sure that I should have been beyond exhausted a day and a half ago. Stars and stones, had it really been days since I last slept? I was tired and my muscles ached, but I wasn’t at the level of downright exhaustion I knew I should be operating on. Even wizards were occasionally supposed to sleep or eat. But I was neither hungry nor thirsty, and was only mildly aware of my need for sleep.

I seem to have adopted some of that same preternatural stamina I’d observed in Ul’tak when he’d first escorted me to the city of Nekheb. Still, I wasn't exactly graceful. Although I never heard them make any degree of excess sound, I got the distinct sense that One Eye and his warriors were laughing at me. It was a relief really. After dealing with my sudden fame as the “Great Lord Warden of Nekheb” it was just nice to be around people who saw me as just another guy. Scaly people with big talons, mind you, but decent enough folk none the less.

Not a single damn one of them was about to worship me, I was certain of that much at least. One Eye largely treated me like a slightly slower, squishier member of his tribe. I didn't have fangs, I didn't have teeth worth speaking about, I had no horns at all – and the scales I wore weren't even my own. It was downright disgraceful.

After several days of blind worship, I was sincerely thrilled to be in the company of people who neither knew of “my” infamy or would have cared had they been privy to it.

There hadn't been many of the Unas warriors at first. To my relief the “we” that was going did not include the infant and adolescent Unas. Twenty bull Unas with thick facial horns and deep scarification along their chests and faces broke away from the tribe, chuffing and grawping in the guttural language of the Unas. The gathered their clubs and their spears, following some unspoken queue from the Unas chieftain.

As we made our treacherous way through the cloying dark, however, I became aware of more and more bodies moving through the dripping shadows. Even with the sensors in my helmet I couldn't
even begin to guess where they were coming from. The caves had been carved out by time and nature, not by mortal hands, and there was no consistent logic to their disposition or layout. We would turn a corner and suddenly our group would grow by handfuls. Little drips and drabs of shadow seemed to each conceal a fully-grown unas warrior eager to join our hunting pack.

They were tribesmen from other unas clans – they had to be. The pelts they wore and roughly made bone jewelry didn't quite match that of One Eye's tribe. Some carried long spears of wood and stone, still other huge clubs with intricate carvings that seemed to have been done with unas talons. Still, they joined our group as though it had been their plan from the start. Had One Eye sent a runner ahead? He must have. But when would he have done so? I could have sworn that I'd kept him in line of sight at all times when we'd been in his camp.

Then again, I probably understood less than a fraction of how the Unas communicated with each other. It might just be Unas custom to join a war party heading to attack the Jaffa. It was not a plot, I could be confident of at least that much. Plotting was anathema to how the Unas operated. If One Eye intended to kill me, he wouldn't waste time waiting for me to be outnumbered and outmaneuvered. He would just gore me to death.

If Ammit was any gauge of Unas capability in combat, he might well win.

The verdant hue of my low light vision afforded me a terrifying vision of our now massive pack of subterranean lizard-men trudging through the darkness. I caught the occasional glimpse of slit eyes staring at me in the pitch-black darkness, flashing bright green in my optics.

“Why aren't there guards?” I asked One Eye as we passed the ritual totems he indicated were the boundary between what the unas considered their territory and where the mines began.

“Unas strong. No need.” One Eye replied.

“Not for you, for the Jaffa.” I waved at the hundreds of unas. “Shouldn't they have an armed outpost or something?”

One Eye cackled. There was no way he understood the particulars of what I said, but he got the gist. “Caves deep. Dangerous. Onac die often. Onac only think Onac can do best.”

“They don't know.” I replied, realizing his meaning. “They know you're down there but they can't ever get an accurate count of the tribes. They assume that there can't be many of you because they
couldn't manage to survive down there.”


“If you outnumbered them by so many then why not attack?” I queried in confusion. “Why live in fear.”


I understood One Eye's fear once we reached the mines themselves.

I've always been a big reader, even before I knew that owning electronics was effectively a no-go for a Wizard I was a voracious consumer of anything with pages to flip. And as my reading materials are generally, ok always, of the second-hand variety, it means that I'm going to be limited to the things sold at second hand book shops. And without fail, no matter the second-hand shop, you will find a box of old national geographic magazines. I liked them, they talked about faraway places and strange animals. I’ve spent an embarrassing amount of time in my pajamas with a mug of hot cocoa, reading page after page of the places I would never go to and the animals I would never see in person. I think most boys go through a phase in life where they want to be explorers or adventurers, discovering the strange and new parts of the world never seen before by mortal men.

For someone who hasn’t traveled much, it allowed me brief insight to some of the most wonderful things the world had to offer. It also exposed me to some of the most terrible. I've seen people in conflict mines before. Glossy pages of African war zones showing gaunt faces and dark skinned men, women, and children with manacles on their arms and legs. I've seen the look in their eyes before, that hopeless distant stare. I've ran my finger over the images of leg irons, wincing at where they’d cut into the flesh to expose pink flesh beneath the dark skin.

It was enough to convince me that diamonds weren’t worth the effort required to get them out of the ground, to be sure, but it nightmares can’t be expressed with just a photo. But it's not the same in a magazine as it is in real life.

A magazine can't capture the stench of terror, the cloying odor of fear that overwhelms a place like that. There is an aura to a place like that, a creeping sense of dread that has outright poisoned the very earth. It was the sort of place where the dead were forced to linger, where the pull of their pain in life was too great to free them easily. I knew if I dared look with my sight I would see the spectral images of slaves still trying to break ore free from the rock walls – too terrified to realize that they'd died. Not ghosts, but memories, fearful impressions of the men they'd once been.
If the living were anything to judge by, the dead were the lucky ones. Jaffa, humans and unas toiled together, breaking great slabs of grey ore from the thick obsidian walls. They ignored us as we passed, not daring to look up from their work for even a second. They were dedicated to a fault.

Too dedicated.

I grabbed a man by his shirt, and tried to drag him away from his pickaxe. He fell limp in my hands, looking up at me with clouded eyes. He continued to breathe in measured, calm breaths, uncaring of what I did to him. Hands continued to reach out towards the wall, groping for the grey stones in loosened earth. My lip curled in disgust. Someone or something had messed with these people's minds.

One Eye tapped the side of the man's skull with a talon, “Gone. Keka na keka.”

No wonder One Eye was terrified of these mines. Getting made into a worker literally meant the death of self. “Keka.” I agreed, using the unas word for danger as I let go of the man's husk. He eagerly began to work once released, taking his pickaxe and digging into the cave wall without thought.


Stars and Stones, what had Lash promised these people on my behalf?

“No more than you would offer independent of my doing, my host.” Tittered the Angel's amused voice. “I told them that you couldn't allow a violation of the minds of sentient beings this egregious to continue any more than you could will your own heart to stop beating. I told them that you would fight alongside them and protect them from malevolent sorcery, or die trying. But I hardly needed to – your soul had already shown them more than I could have ever hoped to share.”

She shimmered into view, floating a few inches above the ground in her white tunic. Why is it that every woman in my life, even the ones who don't live in my head, always seem to have a better sense for what I'm going to do than I do? And why do they not choose to share that information with me until after I've already decided to do the thing they saw coming a mile away?

Women – go figure. Even the incorporeal ones seemed to cause me trouble... especially the incorporeal ones come to think of it. They always find new ways to surprise me.
I stopped trying to count how many slaves there were in the mine after the first couple hundred. One would have been too many. Sokar had mind wiped entire population centers to make his mine work. There were slaves to mine, slaves to carry the ore mined, and slaves to care for the needs of the former two types. But they weren't men any more, they weren't jaffa, or unas either. They were just meat, puppets to carry out the will of the one who'd programmed them.

Sokar had been entirely too deserving of his diabolic mantle. The Jaffa garrisoned her knew it was being done. They had to know. It would be impossible to maintain a operation of this magnitude without their expressed involvement.

It had brought me more pleasure than was strictly befitting a Warden of the White council when we ambushed the first patrol of Sokar's Jaffa. They went down under a wave of saurian bodies, subsumed under a ton of angry claws and teeth. I wasn't sure if it was the effects of Winter's mantle upon me or just my own righteous anger, but their gargling screams of pain hardly even phased me. I watched five man getting gored to death and felt nothing. Not satisfaction, not disgust, not horror – nothing. The same nothing, I suspected, that had been reflected back at me when I'd looked into the expression of a child carrying water to the miners not five minutes prior.

I knew that it was supposed to bother me when another man died in front of me. I knew that I should have felt it turning my guts and twisting my guilt, but I knew too much about what kind of mind magics would be required to bend someone's will to this degree. I'd nearly been victim to a lesser form of it when I'd been a teenager. It was evil – the sort of evil you don't get to walk away from. A man who would inflict that upon another was already damned. The sort of person who'd do it to generations worth of living beings? It required someone with the soul of a Hitler or a Mengle to achieve or even consider. It was the sort of thing that would taint the soul beyond recognition.

“That would require that one have a soul of their own, dear host. The conqueror worms are not so lucky as that.” Lash's shadow watched the Unas tear the legs and arms off the Jaffa corpses, tearing greedily into the flesh of their slain foes. My stomach churned at the sight, but I forced myself to watch. Surrounded by this many predators I was loath to do anything that might put me into the prey category.

“So, they're like the Sidhe?” I replied, trying not to retch at how One Eye gleefully sucked the marrow out of the thumb he'd picked clean of flesh.

“No, my host.” Lash replied. “Not like the Sidhe. Even spiritually the worms are parasites, they borrow what they lack. They steal the essence of those they inhabit.”

“The goa'uld steal souls?” I replied, disgusted at the prospect.
“They use the soul they are part of to supplement their own limited spiritual existence, weaving their way into it and using it for their own purposes.” Lash sighed. “It’s part of why they were initially approached by the Sidhe and Nox. You cannot corrupt the soul of a creature that is almost wholly of the material realm – or so they believed.” She added, noting my spike in panic at the idea of Heka having borrowed part of my soul, “The corrupted parts will be removed as part of your bargain – my host.”

“Mab is going to remove parts of my soul?” Stars and stones – what would that mean for me? Would I live the rest of my life spiritually crippled? Would I lose my magic?

Lash sighed. “Wizard Dresden, did you never pay attention to the wizard to whom you were apprenticed? The soul is not so weak as to crumble at first blood. You sacrifice bits of your soul every day, sharing it with those you love, in your art, in your work, in your casting of magic. Humans toss away their soul in drips and drabs at all times. It grows back.”

I still wasn't thrilled about the idea of letting Mab tear out part of my soul. “And what will she do with the part that gets ripped out?”

Lash shrugged. “She doesn’t get to keep it if that is what you're worried about. The parts of the soul excised will then be cast asunder. In essence, they will die.”

“None of this is overly comforting Lash.” I grumbled as she wrapped her arm around mine, interlocking her phantom fingers between my own armored ones. Her illusionary warmth was as close to my skin as if I'd worn no armor at all.

“I know my host. I know.” She planted a soft kiss on my shoulder. “But I promise it will all be well. You will be whole again. Better than whole, you will be you. Not you with Heka’s mind polluting you, not you with the whispers of winter, you are going to be Harry Dresden and nothing and nobody will ever rob you of that.”

“I hope your right Lash.” I sighed. “I really do. Because every moment we seem to be getting further and further from anything resembling my old life.”

“I don’t hope. I know.” She reached up and tilted my head down so that I looked her directly, the mirrored surface of my helmet shimmering across emerald blue eyes. “Harry – I know because I know you and what you are worth. Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden – you are a man worth of dying to protect.”
“Lash, I’m just – ” She laid an alabaster finger across my lips, shushing me.

“No, my host. No more. No self-deprecating assertions that you are less than who you are. No pretense that you are undeserving. I have already died in your name, for your worth.” She smiled that impossibly white smile that had made my heart flutter when I’d met her as Sheila. The hand on the back of my neck pulled down, gently but insistently, pulling me towards her lips.

She planted a kiss on the face of my mask, the heat and wetness of her illusionary lips pressed up against my own as though there had been no barrier. I don’t know if it was the adrenaline or the sheer immediacy of her need, but I found myself returning her kiss. I bathed in the hungry eagerness of her tongue and lips, grabbing her illusion and holding it close. The silken warmth of her body pressed up against mine consumed me, briefly distracting me from any conscious thought other than kissing the beautiful woman in front of me.

I didn’t care that we were in a war zone. I didn’t care that the unas were still devouring a jaffa patrol only several paces in front of me. I didn’t care that Lash was the shadow of a fallen angel. I didn’t care that the whole fate of a solar system was in the palm of my hands. For that brief, shining moment I was just consumed with the woman kissing me.

It had been a really long time since I’d kissed a woman.

When I finally came up for air, I was panting. “Wow – that was just...”


“I was going to go with awesome, but sure.” I sighed, realizing how absurd that must have looked to the Unas.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so certain of that, mine host.” Lash purred as One Eye walked up to me, his face caked in coagulating blood. I was gobsmacked when he turned to the hallucination and addressed her as “Lash,” before turning to me.

“Stars and stones. You can see her?” I interjected in amazement.
“You mean the spirit who popped out of nowhere and started making out with you for no apparent reason?” Bob replied from my waist. “Yes boss. We can see her.”

“But – how?” Lash had never demonstrated the ability to affect anything other than myself. She’d certainly never shown the ability to create an illusion that could be perceived by others.

“My host, do you forget what I am?” Lash smiled a disturbingly satisfied smile at my confusion. “I’ve always known how to do this. As to why now, you had not previously had a system worth of ardent worshippers from whom to draw power.”

“I’m going to end up getting smote, aren’t I?” I queried, thinking to several very explicit rules against being worshipped that the big man upstairs seemed to care about very deeply. He cared enough to have them added to his list of ten most important ones for that matter.

“Possibly.” Lash replied unhelpfully. “But you have more pressing business to attend to right now.”

The pressing business in question transpired to be my share of the conquered flesh, a still wriggling screaming snake-like body that One Eye had pulled from the belly of a Jaffa. I flinched at the sight of it, recognizing that same serpentine creature from when one had been inflicted upon me only days ago. It was a goa’uld.

Why in the hell was there a goa’uld in the belly of the Jaffa warrior?

“Have you not noticed, oh host of mine, how you are aware of the presence of the Jaffa entering a room as keenly as you notice the other conqueror worms?” Lash replied patiently to my errant thought. “They Jaffa are not just the warrior class of the usurpers – they are the womb within which the usurpers reach maturity. The Jaffa cannot survive long without the worms within their bellies.”

That wasn’t something I’d been counting on. Nor was One Eye’s intended purpose for the wriggling goa’uld he placed in my hand. He balled his fists and mimed holding the snake up to his fangs, making fleshy smacking sounds with his lips.

He intended for me to eat the goa’uld. He stood in the darkness, his eyes betraying no emotions – but I knew his meaning. I’d seen One Eye’s soul, felt glimpses of the rituals he’d been through all his life. This was the turning point in any hunter’s life. The moment where a senior member of the tribe offered him the flesh of the Onac, it was a ritual of adulthood for an adolescent unas to became a man. It was also the way that a wandering unas whose tribe had been lost to disaster or war could be
inducted into One Eye’s tribe.

If I consumed the wriggling creature in my hands, I would be considered part of the tribe. If not, I would suddenly be the prey in the center of an Unas war party for having insulted One Eye. The Goa’uld screamed its high-pitched wails, desperate to free itself from my hands. Its beady eye stared up at me spitefully, black pools of shadow just visible under the faint glow of Lash’s illusionary body.

It was helpless, pitiful even. It was hard to imagine how something so frail had managed to form an empire, a pantheon that reached across the stars. It had to be terrified, desperately thinking of a way to escape an imminent demise. I knew that feeling – it had been how I’d felt only days earlier when Heka had taken me as his host. That same imminent sense of finality had to be running through the symbiote’s mind, “Why me?” and “Why now?” I was clutching a thinking creature out of the womb and terminating it before it even had a chance at life.

“Cease your pointless moral sophistry, wizard.” Lash sighed, placing her hand upon my shoulder. “The usurpers are born with the genetic memory of all those who came before them. Their feelings, their predilections are all passed from generation to generation. Why would you preserve one who would remember, understand, and agree with the creation of all that you have seen in these caves? From the moment the usurpers draw breath they are already cursed with all the hatred and corruption of those who came before. That thing you pity is not some babe in the woods. It is the heart and soul of Sokar’s lieutenants given new flesh. Pity it not.”

“She’s right boss.” Bob chimed in. “That creature is just another Sokar waiting to happen. No ifs ands or buts about it.”

But I did pity it. I pitied the creature who would spend its last living moments in bind terror. I pitied it even as I lowered my helmet, brought the wriggling beast up to my lips, and tore a huge bite out of the creature’s neck with my teeth – forever silencing it’s terrified screams. I chewed the pale flesh of the goa’uld, trying not to dwell on it’s metallic taste as I swallowed with a loud gulp before offering the rest of the corpse to One Eye.

He took the slain serpent and held it aloft, showing it to all the surrounding unas. “Na Onac Ha’ry. Ha’ry Unas!”

“Well done, my host.” Lash purred – planting a kiss on my cheek before dissolving into vapor, her voice still echoing in the cave. “Very well done.”

The collected unas growled a low reverberating tone in unison before we continued our passage
through the mines, moving still faster than we had before. I still struggled to keep up with the pack, but for some reason I no longer got the sense that they were laughing at me.
Chapter 31

One Eye wasn’t prepared for open sky. None of Unas were, they milled at the cave entrance nervously sniffing at the air and looking at the seemingly endless expanse of clouds. I don’t think that any of them had ever been in a place where there wasn’t a ceiling. Their entire world had walls and a ceiling – sometimes a taller ceiling than others, but the idea of standing beneath an open void was as alien to them as spending my life in the endless shadow of the mines would have been to me.

As I was not limited by the same fears as my compatriots, I strode forth from the cave mouth – shifting my cowl and cape to adjust Bob’s carrier to allow him to see what I was looking at. I let out a long, low whistle and addressed my skeletal advisor. “Are we as screwed as I think we are?”

Bob’s eye lights roved from one side of the scenery before us to the other before he replied, “Sideways, boss. Sideways, upways, downways, and any other ways you could care to think of.”

Sokar’s fortress was a pyramid of immense size, a staggering construct that pierced the very clouds. It hadn’t been built so much as it had just been carved out of the very mountains, reducing them and shaping them into four, perfect, triangular planes covered in innumerable hieroglyphs. I could taste the magic rolling out from it, as potent and visceral as any magic I’d witnessed in my entire life. The sheer black face of it glowed a bilious green that pierced the dull grey of twilight and played curious patterns through the smoke of battle and industry.

It wasn’t overly clear what parts of the quarry were on fire because of the standard operation of the massive machines stretching out from the great pyramid like the steel roots of some great tree and what were the still burning remains of the ongoing offensive waged against Sokar’s elite guard but everything seemed to be burning for some reason or another. I could just barely make out the shapes of armored Jaffa clashing against the onslaught of Ninja warriors, black figures moving from pillar to pillar with an insane degree of grace.

The mind-wiped miners continued their endless task of taking raw ore into the pyramid, ignoring the dangers to life and limb as they pushed wooden carts across the now war torn quarry. To my amazement, both sides of the conflict seemed to be going out of their way not to interfere with them or the curious machines leading into the pyramid. In fact, at least one group of Sokar’s Jaffa actually seemed to have stopped fighting entirely to ensure that a pallet of the grey ore reached its destination when the Unas previously pushing it succumbed to staff blast wounds and the Ninja allowed them to pass with impunity.

I watched them move through the seemingly endless sea of black clad figures, entirely ignored as they carried the stones over to one of the great machines and saw to loading them into it. “Bob, what are those things?”
He clicked his jaw back and forth in thought for a moment, considering the matter. “They’re naquadah reactors, big ones too. Any one of those would be enough to power a city. I think the planetary shield back on Nekheb runs on two of those.”

That was bad – like really bad. The Goa’uld used nuclear power as a substitute for the sacrificial component in their nastier magics. Whatever was going on here was (a) nasty enough that freaking Sokar felt the need to hide it from everyone else in the galaxy (b) required so much power that a city’s worth of people were turned into automatons to maintain the ritual, and (c) had side effects so drastic if they were interrupted that it was able to put wars on pause. And I just knew that I was heading to nasty mojo central on scary pyramid lane.

My vision swam as a terrible thought occurred to me. “Bob, you said this place was a prison for some ‘Nasty Stuff.’ Did it specify what kind of nasty that was, exactly?”

“No boss – any of the specifics were redacted.” Bob replied. “But it has to be something seriously dark to merit the sort of scorched earth policies he had on the books if the things kept here managed to get out.”

I let out an audible gulp of fear. There was one thing that I knew for sure the Goa’uld were willing to redact from their history to that degree. Outsiders – this planet was a tailor-made prison for outsiders, the once shared adversary of the Fairy Courts and Goa’uld Pantheons. Sokar was the god of hell, the entity responsible for ‘punishing the wicked.’ Who else do you put in charge of a prison for outsiders other than the devil himself?

You know, just for once I would like for one of these things to take me somewhere nice. Sandy beaches, cool drinks, and pretty women – a little less Lovecraft and a bit more Magnum PI. Maybe I’d even grow a moustache.

In the meanwhile, I was just going to have to cowboy up and kick my way through Akira Kurosawa’s scifi wet-dream. Because however brutal and efficient the Jaffa of Sokar might have been, they were losing by a wide margin. There was far more black than red on the battlefield now, with only a few pockets of red holding out in

“Crap.” It wasn’t my most elegant speech to date, but it pretty much summed up my feelings on the matter. One Eye eased his way to my side, sniffing at the air and taking deliberately slow steps to prevent himself from falling up and into the sky.
“Onak kek?” He asked me, pointing to the Jaffa below. “Tok Wok Tah, we go?”

“We go buddy.” I sighed, gripping my staff and drawing at my magic. It wasn’t that far to the pyramid, maybe two miles once we reached the base of the quarry. If we went in hard and fast, I was hoping that neither side was prepared to counter us. The defenses of the Pyramid were built out from the quarry bed, with multiple concentric walls and shield barriers separating it from the rest of the world. Entry from the mines themselves was not, apparently, something that Sokar had prepared defenses to counter so I was betting that neither side was going to see us coming.

And really – who plans on a countering an uprising from the secret tribes of subterranean lizard men?

There was no real formal declaration or communication between the Unas following One Eye and I, the two of us just sort of started running towards the pyramid and the Unas war party just sort of went with the flow. They seemed to have a primal, almost instinctual need to follow the Unas Chief into battle. Their apprehensions about the sky seemed to vanish the instant he let out his keening bellow as he and I slid down a steep incline of loose earth.

I caught the sight of Unas charging in my periphery. There were more than I had accounted for, more than I’d realized were even possible. Our war party seemed to be only one of many such war parties prepared to strike. Both the black and the red army suddenly found themselves overwhelmed by a wave of carnivorous green.

“One outta my way!” I bellowed, casting a dome of energy in front of myself with my foci and just barreled though a trio of confused ninjas. I noted idly that the ninja who bounced up and over my shield had been the Ninja with whom I spoke earlier. I cast a gust of wind to propel me forwards, essentially turning me into a human projectile as I steamrolled my way across the battlefield.

One Eye must have been from the Kenyan part of the subterranean Unas kingdoms. He was only a few seconds behind me, gleefully howling as he ran over dazed and injured ninjas. He led the wave of Unas behind me, a lance of green skinned unas splitting the Ninja army in half. He was, however, the only unas to follow me along the stone bridge leading to the pyramid. The rest stopped just short, choosing instead to put themselves between the two Jaffa armies and the pyramid. Whether this was some sort of Unas superstition about the pyramid or some greater battle plan One Eye had communicated, I could only guess. Either way, I felt confident that an Unas war party would be enough to slow down the Ninja’s advance till I completed what I needed to complete.

I skidded to a halt midway across the bridge that gapped the deep chasm in front of the pyramid’s entrance, coming face to face with a cluster of ninja warriors holding pole axes. They looked at each other, briefly unsure who I was or what to do. An angry wizard pinballing his way across the battlefield behind a glowing blue shield will have that effect on people.
As I am generally unwilling to take a pole-axe to the face I made the decision for them. They tumbled every which way from the kinetic force with a bellowed, “Maximo forzare!” Acrobatic though they might have been, there is no degree of acrobatics skill that will save your life from a twenty mile vertical drop off a bridge.

Watching the bodies drop One Eye made a whistling notice that might have been approval or confusion before charging headlong into the pyramid, breaking a Ninja’s neck with a powerful swipe of his talons. He wiped the blood from his talons across his face, screaming another challenge as another Ninja charged him. I bashed the man’s head in with a swing of my staff, the heavy metal end propelled by my own enhanced strength.

The pyramid was a mess of bodies – the Jaffa of Sokar had made the Ninjas pay for every inch of the building they took. The floor was slippery with a mix of gore and charred viscera from staff weapon blasts and bladed weapons used in close quarters. But we made our way down the corridor leading to the heart of the pyramid, the only possible path to take within the pyramid. This was not standard Goa’uld architecture. There was no overt display of opulence, no great rooms intended to wow their followers or command their respect. This entire structure was nothing but a series of defensive positions built along the same corridor covered in so many wards that I was afraid touching the walls might well set my hand on fire.

These were wards with a capital W by the way. This had to have taken an insane level of coordination to set up. I might have been able to manage it in principle back in Chicago, if someone was willing to give me about ten billion dollars, the entire population of China as a work force, and I didn’t do anything else other than craft wards for the next thousand years. I conceptually understood what some of these wards did, but I’d never seen so many different redundant layers of wards built around each other. There were redundancies for the redundancy of the redundancy of the redundancy to the Nth degree.

And they were all built with a single purpose – ensuring that whatever was currently trapped inside of this fortress stayed trapped inside of this fortress. I was walking into the mystical equivalent of Alcatraz. Yay me.

The passageway eventually opened up to the largest single room I’d ever seen in my life. It was as though they’d hollowed out the pyramid, keeping those same steep triangular walls covered in glowing hieroglyphs. I could just barely see a raised stone table at the center of the room in the sickly glow of a pentagram formed out of jade obelisks.

At it’s center was a man who wasn’t exactly tall, but more than made up with it in sheer muscular bulk. His eyes were painted with dark mascara matched to a crown of feathers with beads of jade that matched the jade beads on his tunic. A man holding an eight inch blade forged from glittering
My heart stopped. The Key of the Dead.

The five ninjas were lined in a row, waiting their turn to kneel on the circular stone table. They whispered something to him, he nodded, and then promptly drove the blade into their heart. I watched, fascinated as much as terrified, feeling the magics of the chamber spread out through the pentagram as they focused on the blade in the man’s hands. The pierced man gasped, his mouth twisting into a rictus of what might have been joy or terror as his body desiccated. His cheeks lengthened, his limbs atrophied, and his body began to crumble into dust. By the time the man pulled the blade from his victim’s body and motioned for the next sacrifice, the first had mummified and half dissolved. The man who was not tall pushed the corpse off the table without ceremony, driving his blade into the next man’s breast.

Judging by the pile in front of him there had been many more Ninjas when this had started. Stars and Stones, I recognized the table they were using. Well, not the table, but the purpose of it. The fairy courts used something very similar to increase the power of summer and winter.

The man who was not tall took note of me as I approached, regarding my approach with the sort of clinical disinterest I would expect out of a surgeon in an operating room taking note of someone passing outside the door. He stabbed a third through the heart and addressed me as the man’s flesh puckered and retracted from his gums. “I’d ask how you knew that I would be here but the stink of Winter is all over you, brother. How you tolerate subordinating yourself to those who betrayed us for mere words is amazing to me.”

“What can I say. The human sacrifice crowd and I have never quite seen eye to eye.” I replied, mustering my power. I didn’t dare actually cast anything within this space till I had a better sense what casting around these wards and ritual items would actually do. Putting power into the wrong ward could trigger a defensive ward I hadn’t noticed, or worse yet – collapse a ward keeping something at bay that I very much wanted to have kept at bay. “I don’t suppose you have a name to go along with all those feathers?”

He stabbed the fourth as I drew still closer, smiling toothily. “I am Cum Hau, but you already knew that, didn’t you ‘Lord Warden.”

“You seem to have me at a disadvantage,” I replied, trying to gauge how far I would have to go before I could safely use magic on him. I’d gotten a decent read on the wards going through the room. Nothing too flashy, nothing that seemed to be linked into the defenses of the Pyramid. The center of this floor seemed to have been purely devoted to the ritual object at its center. Even so, I was going to have to pick and choose what I did to get that blade. Fire was out, I didn’t know what the heat tolerance was for that blade. Force too, at least till I could get close enough that I was sure I
“Oh, Warden, for so many reasons you know of and still more that you don’t.” The man just radiated smugness. It made me long for the days of dealing with Rudolph back in the Chicago PD, I’d have wanted to punch the guy even if I hadn’t watched him sacrifice four people. I was pretty much convinced that he needed to leave the room as a corpse as I watched him sacrifice the fifth and last of the ninjas. “You’re late by the way. I was told to expect you hours ago.”

I paused for a moment, not quite sure what to do with that information. “You were expecting me?”

“Obviously, Warden, or else I wouldn’t have said it.” The man repeated in disgust. “Now are we going to have to go through the exhausting motions of having you try to kill me, me thwart you, and on and on as it always seems to happen with these things? Or are you going to listen to reason and actually profit from what is going on here?”

“Considering that I’m pretty sure you’re sacrificing people on an altar to free some sort of dark god, we’re kind of past the point of negotiating your way out of this one sparky.” I replied, waking over the mummified corpse of a ninja. “But I tell you what, Zippy, you just turn that knife over to me right now and I’ll consider just kicking your ass and leaving you in a cell rather than burning you alive in hellfire.”

“I don’t see that as happening any time soon, Warden.” The man continued his toothy smile, holstering the crystal blade in his belt.

“Really there buddy? Because last I checked there are two of us, one of you, and you’re all out of sacrifices to free whatever it was you were trying to let loose from here.” I replied as I reached the edge of the table. “So how about you just play nice?”

“Warden, really, for the ostensible expert on rituals you miss some obvious queues.” Cum Hau replied shaking his head slowly and rolling his eyes.

“Such as,” I replied, walking around the table in one direction as One Eye stalked towards Cum Hau in the opposing direction. The Unas likely didn’t understand a quarter of what was being said, but he seemed to get “other guy bad” with minimal explanation.

“Such as the fact that I completed the ritual to free my patron nearly an hour prior to this conversation.” He laughed. “I was just sacrificing these Jaffa to ensure that none of the other inmates
of this facility managed to escape along with him. You’re too late Warden, the Jackal is free.”

“Who?” I replied in genuine confusion.

Cum Hau’s face fell somewhat, he seemed genuinely disappointed that this wasn’t causing me more angst. “Your ancient enemy. The one who managed the rituals which always eluded Heka. The architect of unmaking.”

“Still not ringing a bell.” I replied judging my distance from the man. He favored his left side, I could use that. All I had to do was get the blade away from him and I could fry the jackass.

“Your humor will gain you little. Even trapped within the confines of your prison he was still able to engineer his own escape. You only managed to trap part of his self in your cell.” Cum Hau spat on the ground. “And as a pittance of his mind and memory he still overcame the magics! Now that he is whole he will take control of the entire galaxy.”

His eyes glowed in the darkness, motes of green fire flickering from them as he did so. “And I will rule with him! For I have tasted his secrets and am free of the forced peace of the lands of Sun and Snow.”

I had barely a second’s warning before he breathed the lance of bright purple light, neon death soaring over me as I dropped to the floor. One Eye clawed at Cum Hau’s back, ripping out great rents of flesh that bled orange. The mutilated sections of flesh sprouted tentacles with sharp barbs that bit and extended down the length of his spine. His body elongated, stretching his flesh out corpse like over his ribs and appendages. The skin along his death’s grin retracted back from his face, exposing muscle and gums. His flesh began to visibly rot and even through the filters in my helmet’s breathing apparatus, the man’s smell was overpowering.

He stood up to a height of almost twelve feet as an owl’s head protruded from the flesh of his chest, blood soaked feathers moving with spasms of the tentacles beneath them. He didn’t so much talk as scream in a keening basso that reminded me of the howls of dying animals, “The queens thought they could limit us – prevent us from taking our true forms. They stole our earned mantles, relegating us back to the parasites we once were. We are not scrounging beasts to serve at her will, we are gods!”

The chronometer on my wrist chirruped twice reminding me that I had only twenty minutes left to wrest the weapon from an angry demigod in the atrium of the an outsider’s equivalent of Alcatraz backed up only by a caveman-lizard and a talking skull before the Queen of Winter unmade an entire solar system.
Screw it – there was no way I was going to be able to take this thing down without magic. I mustered my power and tossed a wall of flame at it. “Fuego, maximo pyro fuego!”
I’m good at setting things on fire. It’s not necessarily a talent that of which I’m proud, but be damned, when in doubt I can be relied upon to burn something to ash and cinders. Fire is the offensive magic that is the showiest, but it’s also probably one of the hardest types of magic to control – fire doesn’t really stop until it is out of things to burn. Things including stuff like nightclubs and apartment buildings. You know, that stuff that the Chicago P.D. isn’t thrilled to find out got burned down because a Wizard got into a tussle with a Vampire of the Red court.

I’ve had to provide some hasty explanations in my day for why, precisely, the building I’m running out of seems to have spontaneously combusted without any apparent cause. I’m actually pretty good at it – especially for the fires which are my fault. I was master of the flammable and inflammable, you need something burned down? Am I your wizard or what?

I’m a firm believer in the Tao of Pratchett. “Build a man a fire and he’ll be warm for a night. Set a man on fire and he’ll be warm for the rest of his life.” This goes especially for skeletal rotting, probably Mayan demigods with owl faces protruding from their gelatinous mess of feathers and tentacles. I don’t know if it’s prejudice of me to say so – but I just never trust anything that has tentacles. I don’t even really eat calamari that often. I can’t quite dismiss the whole formerly wriggling tentacles factor. Yeah, I know it tastes good with marinara sauce but so does a fried mozzarella stick. And with the mozzarella stick I’m not left to wonder if there is some Twenty Thousand Leagues under the sea style monster planning on heading my way to take revenge for his plate worth of relatives. Paranoid? Probably, but most people don’t deal with the strange set of life experience I have.

Speaking of fried tentacles - If something has too many faces and lots of tentacles, barbeque ala Dresden is generally the safest path of engagement in the long route for many different reasons. Fire is a cleansing element, it burns away excess spells and glamors and has a purifying element for any spiritual pollutants in the area. There wasn’t a whole lot of documentation on the supplementary effects of hellfire but I have some compelling anecdotal evidence on it having an added kick in the pants for any sort of supernatural nasties who found themselves in its path.

I’ve used spell fire on ghosts, ghouls, fairies, and freaks of all kinds. It was my bonified, accept no substitutes, 100% A grade all American answer to “how do I kill it,” when left without a better answer.

So I think that you can understand the string of furious curse words that spewed forth from my mouth as my eyes glowed bring as headlights. I watched Cum Hau’s beak extend a web of feathery vine like appendages stretching out from his belly to wrap around the flames. They caressed the edges of hellfire, coaxing the searing white torrent into a sulfurous ball of light before pulling the ball back into the belly of Cum Hau with a perverse squelching squish of fetid flesh. He let forth a resounding belch from his fleshless human face as the dangling skins sloughing off his body as he
walked sizzled – exacerbating his already prodigiously foul odor.

One Eye charged him, slashing at the monster with his talons and biting with his teeth. Cum Hau’s flesh, however, seemed to be less a part of his body and more of a protective layer of borrowed blubber. It had the same sort of scabrous, rubbery texture of the vampires of the red court. Hell’s Bells, it was the skin of Red Court vampires. I could see the twisted faces and mangled fingers of red court vampires interwove into the rotting skin-suit that Cum Hau had sewn into his own flesh. They fluttered around him like bleeding rags, maggot ridden and rotting in those areas not covered in poisonously neon pustules of god knew what.

“Little Wizard, little god, you forget – we have all forgotten.” He smiled, displaying three rows of pointed teeth that extended and retracted over his now yellow human set, glowing against the gangrenous black flesh of his gums. Purple phlegm dripped from his chittering maw, sizzling where it hit the ground – dissolving stone. “And it is you who is most to blame ‘Lord Warden.’ You who brought this down upon us.”

I dodged behind one of the great obelisks as he grabbed at me, slashing with razor sharp talons dripping with luminous venom. The magic contained within the pillar howled and screeched, casting bolts of orange lighting at random where Cum Hau pierced their pristine surface. He hardly even seemed to notice the arcing power as it cut across his face and arms, opening seeping wounds in his flesh. “You, who brought about the treaty robbing us of our godhood. You who only managed to save your skin from destruction at the hands of the White Queen for forcing yourself upon her own flesh and blood because you alone held Thoth’s libraries. You have the audacity to start seizing powers that you denied your brethren.”

Cum Hua’s owl beak opened wide, spraying out a cloud of acrid gas that cratered the stonework as it covered One Eye. Ensorcelled winds whipped across landscape of the chamber, kicking up swirling patches of black-green fog as the chamber’s magical balances were thrown out of alignment. The Unas batted at his sizzling flesh in confusion, not sure how to deal with this new threat as he gasped for breath. He snapped his eyes shut, gurgling in pain as his leathery skin seemed to boil. Glowing green abscesses of Unas blood rose and popped, spreading his vital fluids on the stone floor.

I screamed, “Vintas Servitas,” banishing the acidic cloud back at the vile creature before tossing another gout of flame towards the demigod. To my satisfaction, the gas was combustible. The concussive force flung the rotting figure back across the room, pitching him into a stone pillar the width of a redwood. “Swallow that jackass!”

The demigod screeched in fury, smashing his fists into statues and pillars at random, sending ripples of magic through the air that made my teeth rattle. Hells Bells, this guy wasn’t firing on all cylinders. Even if he didn’t accidentally liberate one (well, another) of the pyramid’s inmates by destroying something important, he might blow us all to hell anyway just by screwing up the wrong rune. The defensive runes I used on my apartment in Chicago were lethal if handled incorrectly, and those were
just powered by my own magic and maybe a bit of ritual mojo. I didn’t want to be on the same planet
as a rune requiring a civilizations worth of nuclear power to keep it running.

“Bob! How do I kill this thing?” I growled, casting gale level winds towards him. I wouldn’t be able
to keep it up for long, but I could at least stop him from charging me for a moment while I caught my
breath. Cum Hau held his arms up over his fleshless face, trudging forwards through the lashing
tempest.

“How should I know?” Bob’s replied in a voice of blind panic, his glowing eye lights flitting around
the room. “You’re the muscle. Try hitting it until it stops moving.”

“Not helpful Bob! Is there anything that I can use? Something in the room? One of the defenses of
the temple? This place is intended to trap things like him right?” My eyes flitted from pillar to pillar
for anything I could use as I put myself between Cum Hau and One Eye.

The Unas was hurting. He’d breathed in a lot of that gas and it had done a number on his lungs.
Glowing green blood seeped out from his mouth and nostrils and he was struggling to gasp in air
without coughing up thick chunks of what I suspected might well be bits of his lungs. He was a
tough son of a bitch. I would have been crawled up into the fetal position crying if I spat up a
hamburger sized piece of my lung.

“Harry I can barely even see. This place is warded so heavily that I can’t tell what is intended to keep
out which threats.” Bob replied in frustration. “I’m exactly the sort of thing this place is made to
thwart – consider me adequately thwarted.”

Crap – that made a lot of sense. This place had to be warded against fairies and spirits or there
wouldn’t have been much of a need for Mab to get me to enter the building. It also explained why
Lash had been silent since we’d left the caves. Bob’s skull acted as a buffer against foreign magics,
as long as he stayed in the skull he was essentially living in the mystical equivalent to Switzerland.
Lash, however, was a mystical parasite inflicted upon me by a fallen angel – I.E. exactly the sort
danger one warded against when making a magical super-prison.

Ok, think Harry – what did you have? I had my staff, my foci, my armor, my coat and my cloak –
none of which was going to be of any particular use in extricating myself from this situation. I could
make a break for the door, but I wasn’t super confident in my ability to outprint Cum Hau and doing
so would almost certainly doom One Eye to a painful death at the hands of the Goa’uld. And that
was not to mention all the people who would suffer the Winter Queen’s displeasure if I didn’t get
that damn knife back.
Frankly, I was out of good options – the only things I could even see as potentially working in my favor were damn near suicidally bad ideas operating on borderline Looney Tunes logic.

I was probably the only man Goa’uld history to use “Wiley Coyote, super genius!” as a battle cry before driving my staff into the now exposed current beneath the dissolved stone floors. My muscles twitched and tensed as I chanted “Fulminos” directing as much energy through my body as the exposed wiring could transport.

My inner twelve year old cackled in satisfaction as I went full on Palpatine on his ass, casting a torrent of lightning that left a wide channel of molten stone between us. His flesh bubbled and boiled as he fell to his knees, toxic viscera burning and popping under the inundation of magical lightning. His limbs batted about like a frog in a hail storm, smashing and cracking the surrounding obelisks. The stolen vampire skins set ablaze.

My hands shook as I struggled to keep hold of the staff, the endless pool of power dragging me down with the undertow. I’d channeled lighting through my body before, but that had only been for seconds. After a full minute of scourging the demigod with lighting my limbs shook uncontrollably and steam was risking from my staff where the skin was burning as I struggled to keep hold of the white hot metal rod. When I could stand it no longer I let go of my staff dropping to my knees as my muscles twitched incoherently from the sudden jolt of uncontrolled current. I flopped uselessly, watching warnings blare out across my mask’s display as Cum Hau slowly, but resolutely, stood back up.

The Unas with me made a bid to slay the monster but Cum Hau kicked One Eye away from him as almost an afterthought. The mighty Unas warrior was still sitting upright, but he was more of an irritation than a threat at the moment as he seemed unable to move his left leg.

The demigod was plainly in pain, what was left of his skin his skin was charred black except where the raw pink and red flesh of his muscles was visible beneath as it sloughed to the ground. It reminded me of the way that slow cooked meat fell right off the bone, just a clean graceful side of roasted charnel. His tentacles cracked and bled, breaking off his body as they convulsed in pain. His rows of teeth were cracked and broken, jagged and rough were before they’d been inhumanly smooth.

Still, he seemed more angry than hurt as he sprinted towards me, mad eyes glowing in the darkness. I crossed my arms to protect my face as he grabbed me in one of his massive hands, driving me into the stone face of an obelisk marked with a sweeping sigil that I vaguely recognized from some research I’d been doing before my brother hired me to protect Arturo Genosa. As he smashed me against the surface of the pillar, cracking my rib in the process I couldn’t help but laugh. It was really just too perfect.
I had a plan. It wasn’t a very good plan, but it beat my current strategy of ‘try not to die.’ Now all I had to do was piss him off. And I wasn’t going to need magic for that one, nope, this one was going to be 100% bonified Dresden charm. Say what you will – I did stubbornly defiant irritation better than anyone I knew.

I twisted my neck, deactivating my helmet so that Cum Hau could see exactly how smug the look on my face was. “You’re an idiot, you realize that right?”

“It amazes me that a creature with so little ambition was one of Thoth’s most trusted underlings back in the time when Ra, Nut and Thoth ruled on Apep’s behalf, back before the rise of my master.” He bashed me against the obelisk again, cracking the face of the pillar further and smashing yet another of my ribs with a disgusting pop of bone. “You talk, and ramble, and rant, and scheme, yet never bring that might to bear. You’ve sat in shadow, content to dwell above a horde of the greatest and most terrible knowledge from before it was denied us. And what do you do with it? Nothing. You sit on your throne and cull your crop of whores after sowing your seed.”

He bashed me against the pillar again, pressing the palm of his hand against my chest – hard. My eyes bulged as he pressed down on my rib cage, pushing agonizingly against the still broken bones. I struggled to breathe as he continued. “You are one of the oldest creatures to still yet live, and your powers are little more than the stolen rituals of a Hok’tar. Had I been blessed with a specimen of this quality I would have already enacted the ritual to bind host and god, as Ra taught us to before you robbed us of the knowledge. Or have you too forgotten? Was that part of your pledge to the whore Queen? Do you think she will die upon a blade as eagerly as your tattooed tarts?”

He crooned in my ear, his breath hot against my ear. “I wonder – did she even permit you to remember the words spoken at Thoth’s Folly? So few were allowed to hear them even before the curse you brought down upon us. Those of our blood who learn them today seem to have the words stolen from them as if they were spoken in a distant and fleeting dream. We all pretend to remember, but only those few who can protect themselves against your treachery truly do. Heka, Sokar, Yu, Nut, Osiris, Isis, and Bastet – traitors, all of you. It was you who gave the Queens the Blood of Apep. It was you who bound us to her terms, her peace.”

He spoke the last word in total disgust, vibrating with sheer hatred as he whispered throatily. “Shall I tell you ‘Warden?’ Shall I speak the words that unmade the gods?”

“If it’s all the same to you, sweetheart, I’d prefer that you stopped talking.” I rasped, wheezing under the demigod’s oppressive grip. “I have to inhale your breath every time you open your mouth and you smell like something crawled into your mouth and died. It’s like I’m inhaling rotten, leathery burnt bacon.”

That earned me another smash against the obelisk. One more, I just needed him to do that one more
time. One Eye seemed to be getting another head of steam on him, and I was pretty sure that with the incoming distraction I would be able to get in another decent hit. He smiled, his shattered bleeding rictus tapered up into a perverse imitation of smiling. “Thoth was thinker, a man of science and reason. It was he, more than any of us, who unraveled the secrets of the Gate Builders. Faster than light travel, the basic principles of sorcery that became the basis of the rituals which granted us godhood. He was a great man – a genius even. So when Apep first entered into our bargain with the Fairy Courts to aid them in their war with the Adversary Thoth became intimately involved in protecting us from their power. A task that he did not just pursue, he accomplished with a stunning degree of efficacy. The bloodstone in us not only cloaks us from their mind magics, it effectively renders us wholly immune to their corruption. They can still kill us, of course, but they cannot subsume us as they would with the others of this realm.”

My mind played back the moment when we’d been on Chrono’s warship and the Shoggoth had been chasing us. I’d been terrified, but no more terrified than I’d been of any other vampire or monster capable of killing me dead. Ul’tak, however, had been reduced to a gibbering mess under the Outsider’s influence – a chilling thought echoing through my mind. The Asgard sensors had shown me as Goa’uld, not human, when I’d been brought to Stargate Command. How much of Heka still lived within me?

Cum Hau took my look of worry as an affirmation that he should continue with his tale, licking a forked tongue along his scabrous lips. “Yes – immune. I don’t think that even the Queens of Sun and Snow expected how well he protected us from their influence. They needed us strong against their enemy, but they needed us susceptible. Those who are weak to the adversary’s power are invested in its destruction. So when Thoth revealed what he had done to the Queens, and how he had infected the bloodlines of all Goa’uld with the sacred stone it was first heralded as a great victory. There was much celebration throughout the pantheon as we were sure that the final piece had been reached for us to take our rightful place in the galaxy as the Fifth Race, when that same great mind spoke the words of unmaking. He asked a question to Ra in front of the whole pantheon, an idle boast spoken as a joke, but a cancer that spread like wildfire.” He affected a cultured accent that still reverberated with the metallic tones of the Goa’uld, "If we cannot be harmed by the outsiders, why then do we fight them at all?"

“And then came the war. Tell me Heka? Was it worth it? Was appeasing the Queens worth it? Becoming their puppets? Living in fear of the day that they finally decide to slay us all? Is this the universe we were meant to live in? We scrounge on our bellies and live on what few scraps we can bully our slave races into giving us while our belief is funneled into undoing the mistakes of those who we have unwritten from history – because it was not enough that we defeated them and imprisoned them. It was not enough that we destroyed those who aligned themselves with the adversary. The Queens demanded still more. And you gave it to them without pause. You traitor.”

He bashed me against the pillar a third time, dislocating my shoulder. His left eye had begun to spin at random, focusing on nothing and everything at once. “Enough!”

My eyes bulged as he shifted his grip and slashed a talon along my abdomen, splitting me from stem
to stern and dropping me to the ground. I clutched my bisected armor together, desperately trying to keep my bowels inside me even as the slippery organs rolled over my fingers. As my crimson life’s blood poured out onto the floor he dragged me to the stone table, dropping me at its center.

"All I need do is touch you with this and I will consume the very essence of you, taking your power as mine." Cum Hau pulled the dagger from his waist, towering over me. "Anubis will unmake your very legacy. A shame you won’t be around to witness it."

“Funny thing about that buddy.” I smiled as a familiar form shimmered into view behind him. “I have a sneaking suspicion that I will.”

“And that, I believe, is more than enough of that for one day, my host.” Jibed a cultured woman’s voice as an alabaster skinned hand grabbed Cum Hau’s wrist and broke it.
Ghosts and spirits are something that every wizard ends up dealing with some point or another in his career. Powerful creatures tend to dislike the idea of passing on to the next world and every once in a while, they have enough of a presence to leave their mark on it. While there are, undoubtedly, ghosts whose presences aren’t malevolent, I’ve never had much cause to deal with them. Nobody hires a wizard to go after the ancestral spirit making sure that the family farms are tended – heck, you probably wouldn’t even think to notice them if you didn’t know precisely what you were looking to see. No, I got hired for the nasty things that even the average, respectable and most skeptical of mortals stopped being able to excuse away.

Think less Casper and more Poltergeist.

Spirits could be empowered through rituals, the consumption of power, and the sheer force of will in pursuit of their primary goal. The nastiest of which I’d dealt with, to date, was the spirit of Leonid Kravos – The Nightmare. He’d been a powerful practitioner in life, then had gained further powers both through the sorcerous meddling of Bianca and a sizable bit of strength that he’d stolen from me. He’d done things I’d never even realized a spirit could do, flipping vehicles, entering dreams, and even protecting himself from daylight. While there were certain metaphysical constants of beings of spirit, they were more fluid and dynamic than the rules their mortal counterparts were consigned to obey.

The Shadow of Lasciel inhabiting my mind, though she was little more than an echo of the fallen, was an entity of spirit. An entity possessing me, but a construct of spirit and soul – now apparently empowered by the belief of an entire system’s worth of worshippers flowing in to me. It hadn’t escaped my notice when we’d been walking through the caves together that the ground shifted beneath her feet and the earth left imprints where she walked. Lash hadn’t brought any attention to it, probably hadn’t wanted me to freak out, but there is a difference between an illusionary construct and something with material substance. She had a real physical presence in the mortal world, something I wouldn’t have believed her capable prior to witnessing it.

So, when I saw the angelic warding keystone, I knew what I had to do.

Angellic wards are largely theoretical. Anyone who is being enough of a bastard to actually require that their property be warded to protect them from angels is pretty much destined to have someone come along to slay them long before that theory can be put into practice. What little exists on the subject was designed to work against the fallen. Any work that managed to go beyond the theoretical seemed to have gained the immediate attention of the fallen. Supposedly there were some particularly nasty spell books bound with the flesh of the mortal arrogant enough to have made a working angelic ward. The only reference to the actual ritual I’d found so far was a page referring to the primary weakness of the ritual – specifically how the whole warding structure was tied to a single keystone. Take out the keystone and there is no more warding, at all. Nicky and the Nickelheads many not
have been willing to allow a supernatural anti-fallen death star to exist, but I guess he was willing to provide targeting data for the exhaust port.

I laughed at the idea of Nicodemus in an orange fight suit and it made my ribs hurt bad enough that my vision briefly flashed to white as my eyes unfocused while flashing. The blood loss was starting to make me loopy as I watched Lash spin-kick the owl-beaked face. The bony protrusion cracked as a bare alabaster foot connected with it, sending a stream of black viscera across the floor.

Cum Hau’s two heads both stared hatefully at his attacker, crowing an insult in a language that sounded like gibberish even though Lash’s filter before breathing a swirling blue mess of arcane power towards her. The attack went through her insubstantial shape, entirely missing her phantom mass as she charged through it, lifted the Mayan god, and flung him away from the stone table. He soared through the air, hissing like a scalded cat as noxious fumes billowed out behind him. Lash snapped her fingers, lighting the fumes with a roar of hellfire that followed the god to where he landed, exploding in a small mushroom cloud of sorcerous power. The angel’s shadow looked from the shattered rune, to me, and back before sighing in resignation. “Your plans leave much to be desired, my host.”

Blood bubbled up from my lips, making me cough as I held my arms together across my chest – keenly aware that it was by will alone that my bowels weren’t spilling out of me. My head was spinning and I was doubtlessly concussed, “Sue me, I wasn’t expecting to be going toe to toe with Hedwig the Horrible. He’s got some nasty claws on him.”

“The taker of the Dead has always been a creature of violence.” Lash’s body wreathed in a corona of hellfire as she picked up the blade Cum Hau had dropped when she broke his wrist, sulfurous heat rolling out from her – exacerbating the already overwhelming odor of the Mayan monster that permeated through the air. “The Red Court was not without cause when they banded together to expel their oppressors. I know not how he has escaped the terms, but this must not be allowed to continue. We must end him.”

“I’m not exactly mobile here, Lash” I replied, watching as the Mayan god’s serpentine form twisted up, righting himself on those spindly legs. His body jingled with the sounds of silver bells that seemed to have been sewn into the thick flabby folds of skin dangling from his rotting body. He was charred and blackened from Lash’s attack, but he was rapidly regenerating the lost flesh as he shambled his way back towards the stone table. “I can barely stand, let alone fight.”

“Yes.” Lash agreed, a tone of desperate finality in her voice. “I will be able to slow the creature’s advance, but you will succumb to your wounds long before he has a chance to slay you. When you die, I will disappear with you and there will be nothing to stop him from having total access to the things that dwell within this place.”
“That would be bad.” Yeah, it wasn’t overly articulate but at this point I could see most of my blood outside of my body and rolling across the surface of the stone table. It sizzled and crackled across the runes in a way that I found even more troubling than the blood loss. Exposing your blood to unknown ritual artefacts was generally a bad thing but I was having trouble concentrating hard enough to quantify exactly how high up it was on the “how screwed is Harry right now” scale.

There was a pregnant pause as Lash watched Cum Hau’s stride increase from a shamble to a loping charge, his wounds healing at an alarming rate. “Harry, I know you don’t love me – not in the way I love you - but do you trust me? I have an idea… but it is not without cost…”

“Do I have a choice?” I replied.

Lash looked down at me, a wry smile on her lips. “Host – you of all people should know that you always have a choice. Power comes at a cost, and you have rejected power before that came at a cost too high for you to accept it. But here, now, I am offering you a way to live and protect those you love. I am offering you freedom, if you’ll take it. But it has to be your choice. It has to be something that you want. I cannot force you to choose this, it must be freely taken. And we do not have time for you to understand. So, I ask again, wizard – do you trust me?”

I felt delirious, almost as if I was watching someone else talking, as I heard myself speak the words that would forever change the course of my life. “Yes Lash, I trust you.”

“Then forgive me for what I am about to do to you, my host.” The fallen angel’s shadow smiled and leaned down to place a chaste kiss on the forehead as she pried my arms away from my chest. Lash took my hand, shoving the blade into it before I could protest. The Winter Queens warnings not to allow blood to touch it thundering in my ears even as she slapped the hilt into my blood-soaked gauntlet.

And then my whole world became pain.

Inky black jets of nightmare seeped out from the blades hit, weaving their way up my arm through my veins and arteries. The cloying dark caress of necromancy, the seductive caress of death, washed across me in a ghoulid embrace. It was horrible, and I’d never felt anything that I wanted as badly as I wanted to dive into that dark cold pool of cloying death magic that I felt welling out from the blade. I could taste the weapon’s need to kill, its hungering purpose. I reveled in the pain that was coursing through me, looking down at the inky black shadows now seeping across the table where my blood had once been. The ropy length of intestines that rolled out from my belly when lash moved my arms had evaporated, turning into the same inky-black mess of shadows. My body still hung cleaved in twain, but the insubstantial nature of my innards seemed to consider this only an inconvenience rather than an impediment. All that mattered was the pain and the hunger.
I became aware of Lash struggling with Cum Hau in my periphery, the two were wrestling with each other. Lash had thick rents in her dress where shimmering rivulets of blood dripped down to the floor where they coalesced into thick pools of ectoplasm. The Mayan god’s body burned wherever she touched him, hellfire scorching through his rubbery black skin and cutting down to the bone. She twisted, forcing Cum Hau to lose his balance and smack his fleshless head across the table. The raw face twisted and contorted in apoplectic rage, still spouting off an endless list of accusations and crimes to which he believed Heka ought to answer.

My hand vibrated with the weight of the dagger in my hand, the pain that had become my eternity compelling me towards a single, inevitable conclusion. Before I realized what I was doing the dagger found its way into Cum Hau’s exposed throat, spilling his poisonous blood upon the table. The man’s eye’s bulged as his body dissolved. His flesh mummified even as he stood up and tried to flee, cracking and breaking as he ran from what was already long past escaping.

I could hear Lash chanting, her hand placed over my heart as another wave of overwhelming pain shot through me. I felt like my entire body was being pulled through a narrow hole, as though some immense force of will had run me through a Cuisinart then pieced me back together – all while I was still awake to feel it. I felt a rush of wind and heard the thundering of trumpets, as distant thunder echoed across the chamber. And the pain, stars and stones, I don’t think I was ever going to forget the pain.

And then I felt warmth, a hand pressed across my chest – Lash’s hand. I felt the soft, gentle pressure of her palm across my exposed flesh, and a wave of seemingly endless warmth flowing through it. It wasn’t the searing heat of hellfire. No, it was something subtler, more familiar. It was the sort of feeling one got from meeting an old friend for the first time in many years, or from embracing a loved one. It was a sense of intense belonging and presence, the sort of thing I felt when I was sitting back in my apartment reading a book with my cat rolled up into a ball next to me, purring like a buzz saw. It was the feeling I had when I’d found out that I had a brother, honest to goodness family who would care for me and watch out for me. It was the feeling I had when Susan crawled between the sheets with me and pressed her body against mine. But I felt it a thousand times over and over again, a live wire of positive energy simmering into the very core of my being.

I felt a flash of images play across my eyes, glimpses of myself mirrored though a twisted kaleidoscope of confusing facsimiles. Sometimes I was a terrifying sorcerer with a quick wit and a terrifying plan who rewarded only the clever and the capable. Sometimes I towered over the people I was standing next to, a giant surrounded by other giants, standing between them and the darkness – their indomitable protector. Sometimes I was a monster willing to enact terrible doom upon any who were foolish enough to oppose me. It was a fractured facsimile of who I was, a snapshot of who one might wish me to be.

My eyes snapped open and I gasped as the magnitude of it hit me, the reality of what Lash had pumped into my heart to dismiss the darkness. It was belief – I was feeling the belief felt by the
people of Nekheb in their new god, the fledgling Lord Warden. They loved me. They needed me. And they feared my retribution, for I had brought forth power that had been unimaginable a generation ago.

I lay on the table, breathing heavily, my limbs too sore to move as Lash cradled me head in her lap, her eyes full of sadness as she rubbed her fingers along the mess of stubble growing from my head. “Long ago a traveler from distant stars escaped from a dying world looking for a way to extend his own life. His body was so decaying and weak that he couldn’t prevent his own demise. He was weak, damaged from a long war with forces beyond reckoning. His species was dying, at the edge of extinction. So, he traveled, searching through the galaxies for a way to cheat his own death and secure the power he would require to continue the great war. A power he finally discovered on your world.”

She looked up, smiling at the Unas Chieftain as he hobbled towards us. His mangled leg was still at an odd angle but the curiously fast healing of the Unas had already restored him to a manageable level of injury. He crooned curiously, poking his foot at the pile of ash that had been Cum Hau and muttering in his native tongue.

Lash pulled the gauntlet from my hand, exposing the pale flesh beneath. I blinked in confusion as she spun my hand around, showing me the palm where I expected her angelic rune to be. There was only simple, unblemished flesh. Lash continued her story, running her finger across the empty flesh. “The Queens terms robbed most of the gods of their potential, but the power to become what they were persists for those not bound to the terms. Ra, Hades, and Yu were permitted to keep what was theirs – as will you, Lord Warden.”

“What?” My lips cracked, the taste of my own blood still fresh upon my tongue even though there was no more blood in my mouth. The dagger, now stated, was still gripped in my other hand the shadowy onyx surface of its blade reflecting none of the light in the chamber. “What did you just have me do?”

“The Darkhallow was a mortal effort towards an immortal goal. The pursuit of power.” Lash helped me to my feet, wrapping my arm across her shoulders and helping me limp forwards. My legs were shaky, the muscles aching and twitching as though I hadn’t used them in weeks. “It was only one route to that same goal.”

My blood ran ice cold. “I just preformed the Darkhallow.”

One Eye tensed at the tone in my voice, looking around the room for whatever it was that had alarmed me to this degree. I couldn’t blame him, I hadn’t said that last phrase so much as I had screeched it. I’d just committed a massive violation of the Fifth Law of magic. Even if I wanted to go home any more, I was two laws deep into the white councils list of capital offenses. Mab was going
to be able to hold that over me for the rest of my life, not that she didn’t already own me.

“No, you preformed the Goa’uld rite of necromantic ascension, the third to do so since the fall of the pantheon unless I miss my guess.” Lash replied in a tone that was too matter of fact for her to have missed how troubled I was. “You bound the flesh and spirit of soul and host inexorably, made them into a single being. Congratulations, my host, you are now a god in deed as well as title.”

“A god? But… but am I even me anymore?” The wheels spun in my head as I processed this new information. I stopped, grabbing at my waist to check on Bob. “Bob! Bob are you still there?”

“Yes, boss.” Bob the skull replied, his eye lights flitting from Lash to me and back. “Err – lord Boss Sahib who art apparently in front of me. Congratulations on turning that beating into godhood… your… worshipfulness.”

“Can it Bob. I’m still me.” I sighed, relieved that the ritual hadn’t sucked up every spirit in the region. “It’s just… the Darkhallow requires, you know – Spirits. I was worried.”

“Worried that I’d become a snack on your way to immortality?” Bob replied. “No. That ritual had enough oomph that I could see it even through the wards. The Goa’uld are a lot less messy than Kemmler was. That ritual was intended to happen ala-carte rather than as a mass glut of souls. Remember that Kemmler was trying to ascend to total godhood in an afternoon. The goa’uld think longer term than that. But I’m still a bit confused.”

“What about this time.” I snorted, “We’ve kind of had a lot of weird stuff happening.”

“Well, Boss, its just that the ritual shouldn’t have worked. That wasn’t a ritual for ascending a human to anything. The alignments were all wrong.” Bob’s eyelights pulsed. “The Goa’uld weren’t looking to ascend humans.”

I had a sudden flashback to standing in front of Thor as the tiny grey man spoke the words “Life Signs were detected for all symbiotes on this vessel.” I considered the memories that were at the verge of overwhelming me, the personality that threatened to consume my being at any second. I thought back to the dozens of Goa’uld who’d been in my presence, who’d been close enough to touch me. I remembered the sensation of being near them, the dull hum of the naquadah in their blood I could feel at a distance. The same dull hum they must have felt while they were in my presence.
And I asked the question I’d been too afraid to ask for two days now. “Lash, what happened to me when I killed Heka? Why does every person I meet think that he is still alive?”

The angel’s shadow flinched but she didn’t say anything, her eyes sadder than I’d seen them yet.

“What happened to me Lash?” I felt myself shuddering, gripping the sides of Bob’s skull as I connected the dots. “What happened after I died?”

“I had to do it.” Lash said in a small voice. “It was the only way, I couldn’t let him take you again. I wouldn’t.”

“What… what did you do?” I asked, fearing the answer.

“There was some of him left in you when they got you to the sarcophagus. Not a lot, but enough.” Lash’s voice hitched. “I felt him re-growing, festering inside of you. He was a cancer that was going to kill us both. So, I used my power and enforced your right to free will. If he was going to try to take your soul, he was going to take everything that came along with it.”

I continued to stare at the angel, my heart thundering in my ears as she continued.

“Your brain was damaged by the fire, I still had the echoes of who you were, but they were disappearing fast. Faster than I was going to be able to implant them into your brain.” Lash hugged her arms across her chest. “I took your memories, your life, and I forced them into his mind. I washed away the things that made Heka, Heka, and supplanted them with you. I took your memories and made them his. Once I started, I couldn’t stop. I had to erase as much of him as I could before the two of you woke up so that the core personality would be you, not him. I didn’t mean to take as much of you as I had to take, but in the end I couldn’t leave more than a few echoes of who you were in your mortal body.”

I felt the world spinning in front of my eyes. I hadn’t been feeling Heka’s memories left over from his possession, I was possessing the Egyptian god. Lash had taken my mind and used it to erase the mind of Heka. She hadn’t copied them either – I would have noticed two conflicting Harry Dresden’s thinking at the same time. No, she had moved them into the god’s mind. I was Heka.

“I’m a Goa’uld.” I replied, feeling sick to my stomach. “Or I was, before whatever it was you just tricked me into doing. I’m – I’m not human. I haven’t been human for days now.”
“No. You’re not human. You’re Harry.” Lash replied, resolute. “You are who you always were. And now you are more.”

“No Lash, I am who you made me.” I replied spitefully holding up the dagger. “I’m what you’ve corrupted me into.”

“Then that makes two of us, wizard.” Lash replied, her voice resonating with an echo of hellish rage. “Or did you think that I wanted to become a traitor to my own soul in the name of love? That I wanted to sacrifice myself? Get over it wizard – you have a system worth of subjects whose lives depend on you putting on your big boy pants and getting that dagger to Queen of Winter. So forgive me or don’t, but save your petulance till after you’ve finished this task. Because the Harry Dresden I was willing to die for wouldn’t continue wasting the time you’re spending on this exercise in self-pity when there were lives to save.”

I didn’t have a snarky reply for that, so I chose instead to keep walking towards the entrance of the pyramid – refusing to accept assistance from Lash even as the muscles in my legs begged for me to stop walking. The sensation was a welcome distraction from the thoughts running through my head.

I was not the same Harry Dresden who died two days ago. I was his copy, a double. I was derivative of the Harry Dresden who’d killed himself. And yet, I was no less Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. I was the sum of his life experiences and, if Lash was to be trusted on the subject, I still had the same soul. How exactly does one quantify the existential crisis inherent in discovering not only that you weren’t you, but that you had just merged with yourself to become something else entirely? Who the hell was I? Was there any difference? Did it matter?

Lash had called me a god but I still felt like me. Though, then again, what “feeling like me” even constituted wasn’t as finite of a concept as I had previously believed. Had I lost memories in the transfer? Would I even be able to tell? A man was nothing if not the sum of his life experiences, and I now knew that my life experiences were just those which had survived the transfer. How many had disappeared while lash held onto their echoes? Would the man that I had been even recognize the man that I had become? Heck, I didn’t even know if I would like the man who I had been.

As the cold light of day hit my face and I looked out at the remains of the battlefield, I breathed deep from the open air. It still stank of death, but at least it was free of the foetid odor of Cum Hau and the fragrance of hellfire. I crossed the threshold of the pyramid and instantly felt a rush of power that I hadn’t even realized was being blocked by the fortress’ wards. The ache in my muscles disappeared as I sensation a bit like being attached to a live current ran through me. I gasped as the sense of magical power at my fingertips – the power to change, the power to create.

I exhaled through my nostrils as I turned to One Eye, pointedly ignoring Lash. “You did good buddy. We did good.”
“Cha’aka.” One Eye grinned widely. “We feast.”

Lash shook her head disappointedly, discorporating into a plume of white smoke.

“Later buddy. Later.” I replied, somewhat queasy at the feasting Unas clustered in the valley over their fresh kills. The odor of roasting flesh wafted sickly-sweet across the breeze, an uncomfortable reminder of the Unas diet. “I’ve got to… meet, Ammit?”

To my amazement the Goddess strode across the battlefield towards me, without a care in the world as she approached the bridge. She grinned toothily as she reached the bridge, laughing heartily as she caught sight of me. “Somehow I knew you were too damn stubborn to die.”

“Ammit!” I was inordinately pleased to see the goddess. “You’re alive! How many survived planetfall?”

“Most of us, actually.” Ammit replied, “The planetary defenses seem to have been pretty busy with the fleet. We lost ten gliders in the drop but five crews managed to bail out in time – including yours. Your first prime is beat to hell, but still breathing.”

I let out a breath that I hadn’t even realized I was holding. I liked Ul’tak. He was a reasonable enough Jaffa, and by the standards I’d seen from the Jaffa as a whole he was borderline pacifist as far as they were concerned. I didn’t want his death on my conscience.

She pointed with a long talon at the far ridge of the quarry, an jutting point of stone that overlooked the whole space. “They’re up there waiting for me to scout out the area. I was the least likely candidate to antagonize the locals… though you seem friendly enough with them.”

“One eye and I are friendly enough.” I agreed, looking at the Unas. “Aren’t we buddy?”

“Ka Ney Ha’ri.” One Eye replied. “Together fight.”

Ammit’s eye twitched briefly. “It speaks…”
“I taught it. I can explain later.” I replied. “We’ve really got to get these ships back to the gate…” I looked down at my wrist. I had two minutes left. There was no way I was going to get back to the planet.

But then, I didn’t have to get back to the planet – did I? I just needed to get the dagger to Mab. Mab was a fairy. And I, god or not, was a Wizard.

For the second time in as many days, I spoke the most dangerous spell I knew. “Mab, Mab, Mab.”
Chapter 34

There aren’t many people who can boast to have met the Queen of Air and Darkness, and fewer still who’d be foolish enough to interact with her regularly enough to feel like they had a gauge for her mood. Hell, I’d interacted with her several times just in the past few days – that was a far greater degree of contact than any sane wizard would wish upon themselves. Every single interaction with the Queen was an opportunity for one’s horrible undoing. She was, after all, the root of every single myth about terrible fairies and the dangers of choosing one’s words with care when making a deal – well… every one of the scariest ones, anyway.

In those few moments where the Queen allowed herself more than her stoic mocking smirk, I’d seen expressions of predatory glee, spiteful repose, and even pure and unbridled hatred. She was winter incarnate, cool, calculating, and vicious. If the Donner party had been operating under the auspices of a patron Saint, Mab would have been it. She was the thing that the creatures that went bump in the night told scary stories about. 100%, grade A Frost Queen-Bitch of the night.

But when she emerged from a portal to the Nevernever with her troll cadre, the look in her eyes was one that I’d never seen before. Sadness bordering on pity, she looked like she might be on the verge of crying. Mab looked almost human. The Fairy Queen looked from the dagger in my hand to the slash through my armor, eyes roving over the milky white pallor of my flesh. She raised an elegant hand and a shimmering barrier of frost rose along the bridge, forming a dome over us and cutting both Ammit and One Eye out of our conversation. Soft blue motes of frost rained down on us from the dome, piling on the massive troll bodyguards to make them vaguely resemble snow-capped mountains that just so happened to have grown legs and tusks.

Perfect lips tinted the hue of frozen raspberries parted from their disappointed little frown, exposing inhumanly straight teeth as she spoke a phrase that was anything but a question. “Wizard… what have you done to yourself?”

I considered lying to her for the briefest of moments. It was a natural reaction, she had after all warned me not to get my blood or the blood of any other on it. It hadn’t been explicitly outlined as a condition of our terms, and I was afraid that she would consider it a breach of contract. Breaches of fairy contracts never ended well for the oath breaker. But it seemed sort of a moot point, I wasn’t sure precisely what the ritual of ascension had done to me but I was positive that Mab was going to be able to know that it had happened.

And given that I wasn’t sure how she would react to a lie any more than I was sure how she would react to having enacted the ritual, I went with the truth. “Cum Hau was waiting for me in the Pyramid. He seemed to know that I was coming. He tried to use the dagger on me. I didn’t let him. There wasn’t any other choice. It was him or me… I could barely breathe so I did what I had to do.”
“How, Wizard, did you have the knowledge of a ritual that I have put great pains into ensuring was scourged from history?” Mab asked, a sudden chill in her voice. “The terms were explicit. There is no way that you could have gained that knowledge from any mortal or wyrm who still yet draws breath.”

I audibly gulped. So sue me – the woman was freaking scary when she felt the need to be. And right now I was pretty much screwed if she decided my answers were anything less than satisfactory. “I… I had some help from someone who isn’t strictly mortal.”

There was a pregnant pause before Mab’s mouth formed an “o” of comprehension as she sighed audibly. Mab’s eyes grew sadder still. There was an all too human tone of sympathy in her words that terrified me more than her anger might have, “Ah, I see. It was the Shadow’s will then.”

“You – uh, know about her?” I replied, swallowing nervously. I didn’t like the idea of Mab knowing about Lash. I hadn’t even told my closest friends about the Angel’s shadow yet, other than a couple of Unas and a dead Mayan god, there wasn’t any living person on earth who would have a reason to know about her.

Mab arched a well-manicured eyebrow loftily. “I am Mab.”

Well that was terrifyingly vague. “Right… so I have the Key. I mean… I got blood on it but our bargain was for me to get it after all. I mean, it shouldn’t count against the people of Nekheb that I had to kill Cum Hau. You don’t need to punish them for that.”

Mab giggled, a biting venom in every twinkling peel of laughter as she took the dagger from my outstretched hands. “Worry not Wizard. I will not enact any retribution on you for using the dagger – despite my warnings to avoid precisely that. In truth I don’t know if I could even conceive of a punishment more fitting than what you have already inflicted upon yourself.”

That was about the most terrifying possible thing that anyone had ever said to me. I didn’t even have a snarky reply. I just added it to my mental list of things to freak out over when I had a free moment somewhere between “Ferrovax probably wants me dead” and “Thor is a Roswell Grey.” I replied in a voice that was most decidedly manly and heroic, not the slightest hint of a frightened squeak in it. Honest. “Does this mean that I have met the terms of our bargain?”

“Yes.” Mab replied. “Though, I fear that the secrets to curing you of your current condition and bringing you to where you belong are going to be substantially less satisfactory in light of what you have inflicted upon yourself.”
“Can you or can you not cure me?” I growled in irritation.

“Of Heka’s influence? Most definitely – of the corruption you’ve caused yourself? You have nothing valuable enough that you can offer me that merits the exchange to unmake what you have become.” Mab shook her head. “You can feel it already, can’t you? You felt it the instant your blood touched the blade. The touch of the other side – the seduction of the dying realms that overtakes forgotten gods. The kiss of Oblivion.”

I remembered the agony that I’d felt, the sickly-sweet hungering want of the weapon for blood. I remembered the pain and the thundering clamor of an incomprehensible need to crush. I spoke in a voice that was not quite a whisper. “I do.”

“You are no longer a mortal. You aren’t a true immortal, not yet, but you have become something greater than what your flesh was intended to be. I cannot unbind the flesh that has been bound. Nothing of the host remains – only the new whole.” She shook her head. “Nor can I simply transport you back to the moment that you departed your homeland without dire consequence. You’ve become important, too useful a tool to just discard. I had planned to just keep you on ice till the moment of your departure from the timeline, but that is no longer an option.”

Ok, now it was my turn to call bullshit. “That wasn’t the deal Mab. I get you the dagger, you clear my head, and I go home.”

“You go where you belong.” Mab corrected me, swiping her palm through the air in a cutting motion as though to swipe my very words from the air. “Twas not I who changed your place in the cosmic order or who initiated a war I had no business taking part in. Hadst thou departed Delmak in a timely manner thou wouldst hath beaten thy competitors to reaching this place. They would have found no blade to enact a ritual of any sort, let alone free the Jackal. I could have easily separated you from Heka – you could have gone back to your menial life of finding lost objects for people who don’t appreciate your talents.”

“Answer me this, Wizard – What happens when the Lord Warden, their newly hailed god, disappears without a trace? Do you think that the other System Lords will just pretend that one of their number has not just jumped into an alliance with their mortal enemies and slain several members of the pantheon?” She curved her lips up into an infuriatingly smug expression. “Tell me, Wizard. Woudst thou abandon thy subjects, even knowing that they are condemned to slavery and death in your absence? For that shall be their punishment should another Goa’uld Lord take your place. Some will even view your stock as incurably corrupted by your connections to the Vampires and Sidhe. They will massacre them to a man, raze their towns and salt the earth. Can you live with genocide on your conscience?”
Hells bells, she was right. I’d been so worried about getting home that I hadn’t been worried about what would happen when I left. These people were so dependent on having a ‘god’ around that they’d just jumped ship to the first god to show up after their god died. I had radically shifted the entire ideology of their pantheon and they’d just kind of went with it. Heaven help them if the next guy was someone like Heka who was willing to sacrifice millions just to have a Genius Loci. “I… I don’t get to go home, do I?”

“Home, yes. Chicago? Not for a time yet anyway. Any time you set foot on Earth is an opportunity for paradox. Even basic communication with the planet Earth is an opportunity to unmake a substantial portion of reality.” Mab replied. “Consider all that has happened in the past few days that would be unmade were you to do something that would prevent yourself from going back in time? No, Wizard, you cannot risk anything so brazen.”

It was all I could do to stop myself from bursting in to tears. I knew my voice was shaking as I spoke my reply, my voice reverberating with the metallic reverberation I now knew I would speak with for the rest of my life. “I… understand.”

“I know you do Wizard.” Mab replied, her voice back to the tone of sympathy I found so unnerving. And then she did something entirely astonishing. Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness, hugged me. It was a cool embrace, but seemed to be genuinely heartfelt as she whispered into my ear, rubbing her palm over the soft fluff of stubble growing on my skull. “And I am sorry. I would not wish this upon you. You seem like a decent man.”

I hugged her back, taking a moment to just enjoy the closeness of another person. I hadn’t realized how long it had been since I touched another person willingly till she hugged me. I hadn’t known how badly I needed it. When we broke our embrace, I noticed that there were little patches of frost at the corners of her eyes. Tears? It couldn’t be – not from Mab. I had to be imagining it.

“What happens now?” I asked for lack of a better question. It seemed best to just let that moment stand unremarked. It seemed safer in the long run.

“Now? Now I take you back to your seat of power.” She smiled. “And we conduct your coronation. You are a new sovereign, after all, and you have the dignitaries of many foreign powers united with you after having supported you in battle. What your people need is an appropriate celebration.” Her eyes glinted with something between malevolence and glee. Fae parties were the sort of things one dreamed about, sometimes even as dreams that weren’t nightmares.

“The Sidhe courts are, of course, limited by the laws of hospitably – I assume.” I replied dryly. “It wouldn’t do to have a social indiscretion like a Shide killing one of my subjects.”
“They are so bound,” Mab replied. “My subjects will be consummately polite guests.”

Right up till they found a way to twist the rules, of course. I filled in the blanks on her behalf. Fairies were fairies, after all. “I guess we’ve got to circle the wagons.”

“Your godmother is collecting the rest of your war party. You and the Eater of Corpses are going to be fashionably late to your own party.” Mab tutted, looking at the state of my armor. “We’ll have to make do with your appearance as is. That armor is built from the bane. I cannot mend it by my will alone.”

As she dismissed the dome of ice a thought occurred to me. “Wait… what are we going to do about the prison? There are a whole bunch of nasty things in that place that are currently unguarded.”

“You will do nothing.” Mab snorted. “The safe elimination of this fortress and those items contained within has been arranged. More than that, you need not trouble yourself. And worry not – your Unas will not be harmed.”

Wait, what? “If you could just destroy the place, why didn’t you already do it?”

“It’s destruction was not previously an option.” Mab replied icily, her tone indicating that she had no intention of humoring any further questions on the subject as Ammit approached us. One Eye, apparently having decided that he wanted no part in dealing with either Mab or the trolls, shamble walked his way back to the Unas revelries. His fellow warriors seemed eager to welcome him into their midst. Being the only Unas to have both entered and left the pyramid with his mind intact seemed to have earned him some major brownie points with the tribes.

Ammit, still clad in the armor Lea had given her, approached Mab as one might approach a ticking time bomb – One uneasy step forward at a time, legs coiled and ready to flee. “Warden – we all still friends over here?”

“You need not trouble yourself Eater of Corpses. I mean you no imminent harm. You will be safe for the duration if the Warden’s cleansing and coronation.” Mab gestured to the open portal. “Now, if you would both be so kind as to proceed. We have an engagement requiring our presence.”

Ammit shrugged, apparently decided that ‘no imminent harm’ was the best she would get out of the fairy Queen, and walked through the portal. I followed her, doing my best to hold together my sundered armor and avoid exposing myself as I crossed the threshold into the Nevernever. We were
in a patch of open ground that I recognized. It was the sharp, angular terrain that I had navigated when first I'd fled the creatures of the outside. Now, however, there were high stone walls and fortified parapets covered in Sidhe warriors. Where there had previously been naught but bare jagged earth, the ground had been cultivated and molded into a complex grouping of bunkers and fortresses built around a high castle. Sidhe warriors clad in the garb of summer and winter manned the walls, fairy folk of all descriptions dealing with the day to day matters of the castle.

“The Lenansidhe was not pleased when she was suddenly responsible for financing and staffing no fewer than seven fortresses at strategic locations on the border to the outside.” Mab commented idly. “Whatever bargain your mother negotiated to make the Lenansidhe your godmother, it was too lean a payment. They’ve repelled at least three major attacks just today.”

The warriors we passed of both Winter and, surprisingly, Summer courts greeted the Winter Queen with great deference and respect. More shockingly still, they seemed to be regarding both myself and Ammit with a grudging deference I did not expect from the Sidhe to any mortal. But then, I reminded myself, I wasn’t mortal any more – was I? I was a ‘god,’ whatever the hell that actually meant. At this point it mostly seemed to mean that I didn’t get to go back to my apartment, put on my fluffy bath robe and finish the book I’d been only halfway finished reading before an army of necromancers decided to start tearing up Chicago.

It took only minutes for us to reach a blood soaked patch of earth that was all too familiar to me, the point where I’d crossed back into reality and reached the desert wastes of Nekheb. It seemed so long ago, though I knew it had been only days and not the four years it felt like it had taken to reach this point. God had it really only been days?

We walked another thirty paces before Mab made another gesture, opening a portal back into the real world. We emerged from it and found ourselves within the gate room of the Great palace of Nekheb. There were still some smoldering plumes rising up from the ruined cityscape in the bright noonday light shining down on the alien metropolis, but there were no longer the sounds of battle raging through the city streets. There were no more plumes of atomic smoke in the distance, and the sky which had previously been an endless vision of gaping void and battle and returned to a calming cerulean blue. I could still see the bones of fairy giants stabbing up towards the sky, their marrow white husks now half covered in the swirling sands that would eventually totally claim them.

Though it was battle-scarred and still smelled of ozone from a day’s worth of staff-weapon combat, the gate room had been adorned with streamers and all manner of decoration. There was scarcely an inch of the walls and ceiling which hadn’t been wrapped in flowering vines or glowing crystals that hummed with wintery blue light. Sidhe servants and members of my household were working at a fever pitch to get the palace ready for a god’s coronation. Priestesses sang and Jaffa soldiers exchanged bawdy jokes with lean Sidhe warrors, their past hatreds seemingly forgotten in light of their mutual victory.
The collected revelers dropped to one knee as we entered, Jaffa and Sidhe recognizing their respective heads of state. A familiar female approached us with head bowed, the gold chains wrapped though her many body piercings echoing with the jingling of silver bells. I smiled in spite of myself, Muminah’s formal wear somehow managed to be even more revealing than her standard choice of garb. She’d strategically wrapped translucent bits of silk around her, tactically covering precisely none of the places I would have considered necessary for basic modesty.

“My Lord Warden – your guests await your presence in the throne room.” She continued to stare pointedly at the floor. “Your godmother has supervised our preparations for your coronation. We have made sure to accommodate all of your allies to ensure they are able to bring word of your most glorious victory. Shall I escort you? All are present that are to be expected.”

“A moment, high priestess.” Mab replied, turning to the gate as the wide oculus suddenly filled with a shimmering pool of watery blue. “We are still waiting on a necessary participant.”

The pool shimmered once, and expelled a single figure. He was a dark-skinned man of indeterminate age, perhaps younger than I. He was most-definitely younger than he had been when he’d been introduced to me by Michael Carpenter – either two years into the future or two years into my past depending on how one cared to measure such things. Sanya, bearer of the sword Esperacchius, and Knight of the Cross. Suddenly the man’s theories that he was actually enacting the will of aliens claiming to be gods started to take on a great deal more credence than when he’d first told me them.

I hardly had a moment to panic over the potential paradox that might arise when he eventually recognized me before the burly black man crossed the room and held out his hand to me. “Lord Warden, I have heard much about you these past days. Some of it even good. I do not think that I am here to fight you. I would have felt that. In fact, I get the distinct sense that I am here to be friendly.”

I shook his hand, trying to squeeze hard enough to be noticed but not enough that he’d think I was trying to crush his in return. “Not to be rude but how did you get here?”

“It was favor for helping with some bad business. Very sad. Too many deaths.” The man tutted darky before pointing to my eyes and mouth. “I like the endless pits of simmering black flame covered in tiny flecks of starlight. Looks kind of like you’re breathing out a little galaxy that is contained in your head. Very cool.”

“It’s a new look for me.” I replied. Ok, I hadn’t exactly looked at a mirror yet but if One Eye, Ammit, and Mab had all managed to not comment on that I was never playing poker against any of them. I would have been talking about that, only that, and nothing but that if it was something I had seen.
“Da, it works for you.” He paused, taking stock of Muminah and the assorted priestesses. “Ok, I’ll admit it. Even after nightmare crab people and giant terrifying dragon army, this is still my favorite trip. Best scenery.”

Ammit titled her head, considering Sanya for a moment. Though she said nothing I got the distinct sense that she was as baffled by his appointment as a knight of the white god as I had been. Mab, ever the stateswoman, gestured towards the direction of the throne room. “Sir Knight, the other member of your party is already waiting for you in the throne room.”

Other member? I gnashed my teeth. If Michael knew about other planets, space ships, and naked alien priestesses, and hadn’t told me about them, I was going to be really, really pissed. Good influence in my life or not, he was supposed to tell me that sort of thing. Friends don’t hide intergalactic travel from friends. It was a rule and if it wasn’t a rule, it ought to be.

So there.

The throne room was packed. Ul’tak and the Jaffa leadership, what looked like the entirety of the Sidhe nobility, my small cadre of Goa’uld, a substantial chunk of my priesthood, and a group of heavily wrapped figures that I could only assumed were the vampires still trapped on Nekheb. They were practically mummified under thick layers of gauzy fabric, likely uncomfortable but protected against the searing light of the noonday sun on the desert world of Nekheb. Ammit broke away from me and Mab to rejoin the other Goa’uld. She engaged in quickfire conversation with the other Goa’uld, seemingly filling them in on what they had missed. I didn’t catch much of it over the general din of revelers but I caught the words “Unas spoke Tau’ri” and “had to be planned.” Crap, that had probably been Lash’s plan in teaching the Unas English. Languages took years to learn even when you weren’t teaching them to a primordial lizard, there was no way Ammit was going to believe that I’d taught basic English to One Eye in a matter of minutes.

I quickly lost track of that diversion, however, as the “other member” of Sanya’s party was not another member of the Knights of the Cross. He wasn’t even human. The towering mass of eyeballs and flame that had appeared in Heka’s inner sanctum was once again in my palace, his shimmering crystalline wings spinning idly in the breeze. He was as terrifying now as he had been when first I’d seen him. But as Sanya approached without any degree of hesitation or fear, I realized why Lash had been so terrified. He Who Speaks was an Angel of the Lord. And there was only one Angel that came to mind who would explain his title as “he who speaks.”

Metatron
Chapter 35


I paused looking from Mab to the Angel and back. “Holy crap. Did you … is he… that’s the freaking Metatron!”

“Yes.” Mab replied in amusement. “It was he who provided me with sufficient power manage certain aspects of our bargain.”

“But… isn’t he like the literal voice of God?” Suddenly it felt like a particularly bad time to have assumed the minor godhood that I’d taken. “You know, old testament. Lots of rules specifically banning worshipping anyone who isn’t him. Hell, I didn’t even think that someone like that was even allowed to interact with mortals unless something apocalyptic was going to happen.”

Mab arched an eyebrow, considering the matter before replying. “You really don’t know.”

“Know what?” I sighed.

“You’ll see soon enough Warden. I promise that no harm will come to you and nothing will be taken that is not freely offered.” Mab smiled sadly as she led me over to my throne of ruby red crystal and sat down in a throne of ice that had been erected next to mine, strategically placed at the same height as my own. On the opposite side, Queen Titania sat upon a throne of vines and flowers. Mab nodded politely to her contemporary as she sat upon her throne, finishing her thought with a contemptuous little tutting noise. “You do not realize how lucky you truly are. Men never do till it is too late.”

“They’re still worth it.” Spoke a calm, elegant woman’s voice from next to my throne. Lash had shimmered back in to view, hovering near me. She sat on my lap, burying her face in my chest as she wrapped her arms around me. “Harry was worth it.”

Ice ran through my veins. Someone had made a bargain with the Metatron worth more magical power than I was ever going to see in my lifetime. Someone who could do something or know something worthy of that bargain. I spoke in a terrified whisper, remembering the Shadow’s furious proclamation that she had died for me. “Lash. What did you do?”

“I made a choice. I made the right choice.” Lash kissed my cheek. “And I know that you’ll forgive
me for it someday, even if it takes you a while."

And then the Angel spoke. His thundering presence subsumed all other voices in the room as he approached the throne, the crowd parting before him. REJOICE AND BE GLAD PEOPLE OF NEKHET. YOUR TIME OF SUFFERING UNDER THE HEEL OF HEKA HAS COME TO AN END. YOUR NEW RULER, THE LORD WARDEN, IS A MAN OF GREAT CHARACTER AND VISION WHOSE EXAMPLE HAS REFORMED THE IRREDEEMABLE. HE HAS BROUGHT ABOUT A MIRACLE, AND SHALL BE REWARDED IN KIND. STAND BEFORE ME WARDEN, SO THAT I MIGHT LOOK AT THEE.

When the voice of God tells you to stand, you stand. My legs trembled as I faced the shimmering mass of lidless eyes, and I gripped Lash’s hand tightly.

WARDEN, KNOW YE WHY I AM HERE?

“I would assume because Lash offered you a bargain worthy of your consideration.” I replied uneasily, aware that a wrong word choice could very easily get me turned into a pillar of salt. I wasn’t quite sure if this was the voice of the Old Testament God or his nicer New Testament counterpart, but it seemed best to avoid going the way of Lot’s wife.

NO Replied He Who Speaks, in a voice that practically quivered with pride. THE LORD GOD ALMIGHTY DOES NOT BARGAIN. HE COMMANDS. I AM HERE BECAUSE YOU HAVE ACCOMPLISHED WHAT THE LORD HIMSELF HAS YET TO ACHIEVE. YOU HAVE REFORMED PART OF THE FALLEN.

“Oh.” I replied, looking at Lash. “Oh! I mean. Can she do that if she isn’t the actual fallen?”

SHE IS. AND SHE IS NOT. SHE IS OF THE FALLEN, BUT SHE BECAME MORE THAN THAT WITH YOU. AND THROUGH YOU SHE FOUND SOMETHING THAT EVEN AN ASPECT OF THE FALLEN HAS NEVER SOUGHT OUT BEFORE. SHE SOUGHT OUT REDEMPTION. SHE PRAYED FOR YOUR SALVATION. SHE BEGAN FORGIVENESS SO THAT YOU MIGHT PASS ON. IT DID NOT PASS ON DEAF EARS. He Who Speaks voice made me clap my hands over my ears to block out the sounds but somehow it was even louder. I AM HERE TO WITNESS HER PASSING INTO THE NEXT REALM AND ENSURE THAT SHE GOES WITHOUT INTERFERENCE. THERE ARE THOSE WHO WILL NOT TAKE KINDLY TO HER REFORMATION.

“But… she’s not dead.” I replied in horror, gripping Lash’s hand tightly to re-assure myself that she
was still there. There was no way anyone would be able to hear me over the ringing of bells and
thundering of trumpets that was still emanating from the Angel, but I spoke them anyway. “She’s
very much alive.”

“My host,” Lash said in a small voice that I could likely only hear over the din because she shared
my mind. “I had to bind myself to Heka. The only way I could keep you from his memories was to
integrate them into myself. You’ve been alive for under a century. Heka’s memories span millennia.
In order to control all of that I had to make myself part of him. I had to become part of his evil. There
is no way to remove it from you without killing me.”

“No.” I replied in horror, clutching Lash to me, feeling her weight against myself. “No, no, no, no,
no, no!” I was screaming by the end of it. “There is another way. There has to be another way!”

“There isn’t Harry.” Lash smiled sadly, nuzzling her head under my chin. “I knew that it was
inevitable when I did it the first time, back when I thought we would die together. I was willing to do
it then, and I’m still willing to do it now. I love you Harry.”

“Please,” Tears welled in my eyes. “Please, Lash, no. Don’t leave me alone. You can’t leave me
alone out here. I need you here. I need someone who knows who I really am. You have a place here
with me. I still need you.”

“I’m not leaving you alone.” Lash chuckled sadly as I felt tears roll down Lash’s illusionary face and
on to my chest. “I’ve been working so hard to make sure that you’re cared for when I’m gone, to
make sure that you’d be strong enough to face anything that comes your way.” Her voice hitched. “It
doesn’t mean god bless you, you know - ‘Gazunteight,’ it means ‘health.’ I’ve been translating you
wrong the whole time just to make sure that you ended up with people loving you as much as I do.
I’ve lied to you again and again, and I would lie to you a million more times if I thought it would
ensure that you got to live a long and happy life after I’m gone. You deserve some happiness, my
host, and to finally be the great man you’ve never allowed yourself to be. You weren’t supposed to
be living out of a basement and scrounging for jobs. You needed to be somewhere important,
protecting people and making the world better. It’s what you do, my host.”

“Please, Lash.” I was past logic. I was past caring. I’d lost my home, I’d lost my humanity, I’d even
lost Chicago, I couldn’t stand losing another person that I cared about. And I did care about Lash. I
wasn’t in love with her, but she was special to me. How could she not be, she knew my every dumb
cave-man chauvinistic thought and still loved me anyway. “Please don’t go.”

“We all go someday, my Host.” Lash kissed me on the lips, a chase peck that was more meaningful
than any kiss I’d received from any woman I could remember. “We don’t all get to die in the arms of
the man we love.”
Mab placed her hand on my right shoulder, a gesture that was more caring than I would have expected from her. “It’s time Warden. If we wait any longer she’ll start to become him and she won’t even die the woman you remember. I think you’ll agree that she doesn’t deserve that.”

“Fine,” I was weeping openly, uncaring of who saw me. “Do it.”

Another hand reached out for my left shoulder, The Queen of Summer, Titania was staring at me with an expression of pity. I’d never heard her speak in a voice of kindness before. She had only ever known me as the man who killed her daughter, so I had only been privy to the fiery wroth of summer, but she was every bit as gentle as Aurora had been when she spoke to me. Her voice was like honeysuckle and spring mornings, fresh and full of hope. “I will help to make sure there is no pain, Lord Warden. Her passing will be like slipping in to a deep slumber.”

I trembled as the Fairy Queens grabbed my head, locking eyes with Lash, trying to imprint what she looked like upon my very soul. My hands trembled as I gripped her arms, horrified by what was soon to come. Lash kept smiling, kept crying, kept telling me how much she loved me.

She was young and lovey and so full of life. And I watched as she slowly shimmered into nothingness, discorporating into a coalescent ball of white smoke that sat between me and He Who Speaks. I tried to reach out for the ethereal ball of smoke, but before I could touch it the ball burst into a stunning being of pure light. It swirled and spun through the air, dancing over the crowd and showering them in starlight before it flew through the solid stone and on to wherever it Lash was destined to dwell after death.

I was shaking even as the Queens helped me back to my throne, a feeling of incomprehensible emptiness flowing through me. I no longer felt the pressure in the back of my mind from Heka’s overwhelming presence. I knew that millennia of his memories were no longer my own. And I knew, at the very least, that my friend was going to get to spend eternity in paradise.

I wished that I could have loved her as much as she loved me.

DO NOT MOURN WARDEN. REJOYCE, TODAY IS A DAY OF GLADNESS. He Who Speaks turned to address the crowd. At least I think he turned, he didn’t have much of a body to really follow. TODAY THE WINE WILL FLOW WITHOUT END, THE FOOD WILL TASTE AS IT HAS NEVER TASTED BEFORE, AND NO MAN SHALL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES OF OVER INDLGING IN FOOD OR DRINK. I PROMISE THAT I WILL SHEPHERD THE DEAD ON TO THEIR WELL-DESERVED REST IN PARADISE. SO SHALL IT BE.
And with a flash of light, and a thunder of trumpets, he was gone, along with Sanya. I don’t remember much of the actual coronation that followed. I know that Muminah said a prayer as she placed a band of narrow gold across my forehead. I know that she and the priestesses chanted for a long time. I know this because I watched the recording of the coronation hundreds of times after it ended, but for the life of me, I can’t remember any of it. All I remember is sobbing uncontrollably as I looked down into my palms, trying to remember the feeling of holding the Angel’s shadow in my arms.

I excused myself quickly after the coronation itself, leaving the space to the revelers and heading for my quarters. Amun, my loyal servant, had to help me. He quickly ushered me down a secret passage, supporting me as I cursed the universe. I was furious at myself for not appreciating Lash while I had her and at Heka for stealing a good woman from my life. I had lost far too many already. But I wasn’t angry at Lash. I would never allow myself to be angry at her. She hadn’t deserved to die.

Not yet and certainly not like that.

Amun seemed unsure of what to do with me as I fell to the ground in my palatial estate in front of a mirror, staring at the thing I had become. I was pale, almost milky white. Even the white court would have looked tan by comparison. My eyes and mouth were now full of searing black embers that billowed out from them, giving the illusion that stars and galaxies were bleeding out from my face. The tears that dripped down my face and to my chest were that same inky blackness, covered in swirling shapes like stars and comets, giving the illusion that the universe itself was bleeding out onto the blank canvas of my body. My hair, too, seemed to be woven from that same mix of shadows and starlight, though I could just catch the merest twinkling shapes from the stubble on my face and head.

There would be no risk of Sanya causing paradox when next he saw me. I was unrecognizable. Stars and Stones, I really wasn’t human any more.

“My Lord Warden?” Amun asked, worried – but not for himself. He was no longer flinching at every motion I made. “Who was she?”

“Lash was an Angel.” I replied, idly realizing that I was speaking in fluent Goa’uld in spite of Lash’s demise. “And she was a friend. She died making sure that I am a different man from Heka.”

“She must have been very special to affect you like this.” Amun replied in a voice of empathy. “And I am glad that you are not Heka, my Lord Warden.”
I smiled, flashing white teeth through the billowing mess of galaxies. “So you finally believe that I am different?”

“Warden. I served Heka for my entire life. I have not witnessed the bravery or kindness that you have shown us in two days in the preceding ten.” He swallowed nervously. “So you’ll forgive me for saying so, but if an Angel had to die to bring you to us and liberate us from Heka’s cruel perversions, then I am eternally grateful for her sacrifice and I will mourn her as you do for as long as you do.”

“No Amun. She wouldn’t have liked that.” I took a handkerchief from Amun, wiping away the tears from my face and chest and adjusting the thin band of gold across my forehead. I would be strong, for Lash. “She would be disgusted at me for indulging in self-pity for this long. She always was the smart one.”

My manservant smiled, “I have found that women often are. Now, my Lord Warden. You have a party to attend and guests to entertain. Might I suggest a change of clothing before heading down to enjoy in the merriment. The terrifying burning mess of eyeballs appears to have made good on his promise. The cooks are baffled by how the barrels of wine have yet to empty or how the trays of food seem to have an endless supply, but I would prefer to partake of this miracle in person.”

I chuckled, now that he wasn’t terrified for his life Amun seemed to have developed a talent for snark. I could respect that. I allowed him to help me put on a red silk garment that wouldn’t have been out of place in a production of “The King and I” and followed him back down to the throne room. It was strange to see so many elements of the supernatural community united in revelry, and stranger still for that revelry to be on my behalf. I stood at the edge, trying to just observe their happiness for a moment.

I was so lost in thought that I almost didn’t notice when a familiar man approached me from behind, pulling at a long tuft of beard and puffing at a well-worn pipe. I managed not to fan out on him his time but I would be lying to say that I wasn’t a bit too pleased with myself that Santa had attended my coronation. The man puffed out a long trail of smoke that spun over his head into an intricate pattern that wouldn’t have been possible for him to do without the aid of magic.

“I’m curious. What do you plan to do with them once this is all over?” The spirit of winter asked, chewing on his pipe.

“You’ll have to be more specific,” I replied, looking out at the massive crowd.

“The Orphans.” He pointed to a cluster of children to the side of the revelers. They were a motley
bunch was being shepherded by an increasingly frustrated boy that I vaguely remembered as being the child we rescued on Delmak from his sentence to Netu. There were at least twenty of them. Twenty children without a mother or father. Twenty children who’d be terrified of what came next. I didn’t get the sense that Heka had spent a great deal of time working on social welfare, let alone a decent foster system. The life of an orphan in a pre-industrial society was pretty much a death sentence.

I didn’t even bother running it through long term planning before I replied. “I’ll be raising them, of course. They deserve a childhood.”

“How the devil you’ve been managing to convince these idiots that you’re a Goa’uld for this long will be a mystery to me.” The man laughed hard, his chest wriggling like a bowl full of jelly. “The Goa’uld aren’t capable of the sort of altruism you’re addicted to boy. Eventually someone is going to notice that its not some sort of elaborate plot. Not today, but eventually. You’re going to need to make sure that when that day comes that you have a strong enough footing to keep what you’ve earned. You’re not going to keep being lucky forever.”

I sighed. “What gave it away?”

“Other than everything?” Santa smiled toothily. “I see things others don’t, lad. Lets just say that Heka was on the Naughty List, and you weren’t. I keep track.”

I snorted. “Checking it twice?”

“Nah, I have people for that. What I look out for is the little guy. If not me, then who?” He replied, pointing to a little girl who’d fallen and scraped her knee. She was crying and the other children were just standing around not quite sure how to help her. Santa and I seemed to be the only ones at the party to notice her injury. “I believe, that as their adoptive father, this falls squarely in your realm.”

I smiled, and walked over to the little girl. The children parted, all afraid to get too close to the Lord Warden or to be in his way. I recognized her when I got close enough. She had been the little girl I’d found covered in ash. The servants must have bathed her and gotten her new clothing, but she still had those same sad eyes. I picked up her chin and smiled at her, “What’s wrong there kiddo?”

“I fell and it hurts.” The girl replied piteously.

“It doesn’t looks so bad.” I replied, looking at the red mark on her. I doubted it would even bruise.
“It hurts.” She replied, putting extra emphasis on the word. “It shouldn’t hurt. I’m tired of hurting.”

God help me, it wasn’t about the knee. That was just the surface of it. “I tell you what. Would it help if I told you a story? One that helped me feel better when I was little and felt small and weak?”

She nodded emphatically and I picked her up and put her on my knee as I sat down in a chair. The other children, not about to miss a story this important, all clustered around me, clambering over each other to get the closest seat. I noticed, idly, that a couple of the priestesses made sure to pop a squat at the edge of the circle as well.

I smiled. Time to corrupt the youth. “A long, long time ago, in a Galaxy far, far away….”
Chapter 36

I had refrained from drinking at my coronation, largely out of fear that I might loosen my tongue in front of something from the Fairy realms or say something foolish to one of the Red Court. And honestly, the children were so wrapped up in my story that I hardly even noticed as the night passed me. By the time I’d told them of Princess Lea having given medals of the Rebellion to our valiant heroes, and damned if Chewie didn’t get a god damn medal in my version, the celebration had reached a feverish pitch that I wasn’t easily able to bear.

When Amun asked me how many weeks I intended for the celebrations of my coronation to last, I realized that it would not be considered in poor taste for me to excuse myself and head to bed. I gave a non-committal answer, left the priestesses to see to the children’s needs, and headed back to my chambers. With a promise to the children that there would be more stories to come of other far off lands and grand heroes. They followed the priestesses with the mix of mutinous frustration and clear exhaustion I’d seen on the faces of the Carpenter children any time Charity imposed her bed-time upon them.

The walk back to my chambers felt longer than it had taken to reach the throne room when first I’d headed to my coronation, perhaps it was the transition from the raucous party below. I caught glimpses of fireworks and celebrations in the city streets. The people of Nekheb were out in full force, celebrating their continued survival. I chuckled as it occurred to me that the Metatron had likely extended his blessings upon any celebrations happening on Nekheb. Yet another reason for the people of Nekheb to believe in their “Lord Warden.”

I exhaled deeply, vaguely aware of my constant shadow – my manservant Amun. I wasn’t in the mood for company, and he seemed to be able to sense my need for silence. He did not accompany me into my chambers to dress me for bed, a gesture I greatly appreciated.

Bob protested indignantly when I picked up his skull after having stripped down and put on what I assumed to be my bed clothes. Some servant had lovingly lain them upon the bed in a neat pile, scenting them with rose-water and leaving them upon a block of what might have been cedar. I ignored the skulls indignant comments, just needing to be close to the last friend I had in the world who still knew me for me. After a few snarky comments, Bob seemed to realize that I wasn’t going to respond and went quiet. I just… wasn’t feeling in the mood to quip.

Nothing felt very funny at the moment.

I only cried a little as I wrapped myself in the thick furs covering my bed, allowing the warmth and the distant sounds of music and dancing to lull me into a fitful sleep – full of nightmares. I awoke at the smell of smoke, tensed up out of fear that I was tossed into yet another battle, only to find myself in a familiar dark room, wrapped in a thick mess of second-hand blankets I remembered picking up
from a consignment store in Oak Park after completing a job for some Yuppie couple to find their
dog. I stood up from my bed and almost immediately banged my knee on that same damn table I kept
meaning to move from where I’d left it last week but never quite got around doing.

I was back in my apartment in Chicago. My things were exactly where my remembered leaving
them, every book in place, organized into a chaotic system that I alone seemed to understand - which
was, of course, half the appeal to keeping it that way.

I fumbled through the dark, picking up a candle from the night-stand and lighting it with a muttered
spell. The dancing flickered as I waved the wick around the room, trying to understand my sudden
change of surroundings even as I realized that my skin was still sheer porcelain white that let me
know I hadn’t just imagined my time on Nekheb.

I fumbled around for my flannel bath-robe as a chill met my skin, the cool Chicago air more than
what my t-shirt and boxers alone were able to guard me from. I swore angrily as I rooted through the
piles of laundry looking for it, managing only to find my slippers and an old pair of sweatpants with
a hole in the knee. If memory served, it had been a street tough’s knife that sliced open that hole. Not
even on a job either, just your run of the mill mugger with extremely poor choice in marks. Oh, not
me. Officer Karrin Murphy of the Chicago P.D., the person who’d been walking me to my car.

I rolled my eyes at the memory of the man’s look of confusion when he’d suddenly found himself
cuffed to a bench with a tiny blonde woman standing over him with a badge in one hand and a gun
in the other. “Bad day to be a robber.” I chuckled as I put my legs through the sweat-pants, carefully
with one hand so as to not drop the lit candle, before opening the door from my bedroom to my
apartment proper.

There were two things that struck me on leaving my bedroom. The first was that the smell of burning
wood that had roused me was, in fact, from the small wood burning stove in my apartment. There
was a tall someone in a bath-robe, my bath robe, standing in my apartment, cooking. The second was
that there was no way in hell that this was my real apartment. Everything was pristine, clean, and
notably absent the sort of damage one might expect from, oh…. I don’t know… a freaking army of
zombies? If this had really been my apartment, the place should have looked a little bit less like it had
been visited by Martha Stewart and a bit more like it had gotten scene direction from George
Romero.

Which meant that this was an illusion. Someone had entered my dreams and just looked for the
setting which would put me the most at ease. Which of course meant they wanted something. They
wanted something, from me.

Well, they’d picked a pretty bad fucking time because I was not in an overly “giving” mood.
I was pretty much prepared to tell whatever the it was exactly where they could shove whatever it was that they were about to offer me when the woman turned around to face me, flashing a familiar row of impossibly straight teeth. My Jaw dropped. “Lash… but you…”

“Died?” Lash offered as I stammered, her voice soft and kind as she scraped eggs down onto a plate already heaped with bacon and toast. “Yes Harry. I did.”

“But if you’re dead then how can you be here?” I stammered, my heart somewhere in the realm of my larynx.

“Because I am.” Lash’s mouth quirked into a seductive little half smile as she brushed a lock of platinum blonde hair back over her shoulder. She walked the plate over to my kitchen table, and placed it down next to my coffee pot, rubbing her hands together for warmth as she surveyed her work. Satisfied with the breakfast she’d laid out before her.

“That doesn’t really answer my question, Lash.” I replied, reaching out to touch her. This was just a dream – guilt at having lost my friend. But she felt so real when my hand reached out to touch her. The pain definitely felt real when she pinched me for trying. I yelped in shock, even more confused than I had been before. “But… but how?”

“It’s a miracle, Harry. You don’t have to understand.” She held up her finger to my lips as I opened them to ask yet another question, silencing me with a curt shake of her head. “No. Not now, not this time. For once in your life, Harry, you are going to do things my way. For once in your life you are going to feel happy, and loved without questioning it.”

She pulled at the draw strings of the bath-robe as she stood on her tip-toes to kiss me on the lips, a hungering need in her that I returned in kind. She spoke in breathy whimpers as I came up for air. “You are worthy. You are special. And you are loved, Harry. In this life and what comes after, you are loved.”

We melted into each other’s bodies as my bath-robe fell to the stone floor, and I, Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden, was happy – if only in an Angel’s dream.

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