

Alex Lee Martinez

NIGH - OMNIPOTENT

a fantasy novel

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CHAPTER ONE

In the beginning, there was nothing. The unborn universe nestled in a womb of darkness. And this was how it was for a very long time. Or for a mere instant as time has very little meaning in an unborn universe. Then, from the darkness came the first two beings. Born of nothing, these beings existed alone for countless ages. In time, one of these elder gods grew bored of the emptiness and decided to fill it with something.

The first god started with the stars. Then came the world, which he named Wa'suria. And he made the sun to circle the world and bring it light. And he scattered all manner of plant and beast across his world. Thus, Creation came into being.

And as the universe cooled, the second god peered over his brother's shoulder, metaphysically speaking, and looked down upon Wa'suria, and he liked his brother's world. More or less.

"What are those?" he would ask.

"Trees," the first god would answer.

"What do they do?"

"Do? They don't do anything."

"They just sit there?"

"They're not just sitting there," the first god would grunt. "They're growing. They're providing food and shelter. They're creating air for the other creatures to breathe."

"Couldn't they do all that and move around at the same time?"

The first god would toss a nasty glare his brother's way. A glare the second god made a habit of ignoring.

"And what are those?"

"Those are dragons. Greatest of my creations. They are my power borne of flesh."

"That so. Well, might I make a suggestion?"

-Sigh- "If you must."

"I was thinking they'd look really good with wings."

The first god reached down and touched the dragons and wings sprouted from their shoulders. "Yes, I suppose that does look better," he admitted with a great deal of reluctance.

"And wouldn't it be just fabulous if they could breathe fire?"

The first god snorted. "Don't be absurd."

"It's your world," the second god would relent.

"Yes, it is. Now, are you quite through?"

"Almost. I was just curious. Do you plan on doing anything with those things in the trees?"

"The monkeys? No, they're finished."

"That's too bad. I think they've got a lot of potential."

"What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing is wrong with them. It's just a shame to waste the shape. That's all."

"Waste the shape?"

"I really like the way they're put together. You could make some really interesting variations of it. Big, hairy monkey-shaped things. Little, green monkey-shaped things. Stubby, bearded monkey-shaped things."

The first god cupped his chin thoughtfully, metaphysically speaking, and considered the idea. "What about hairless, smart monkey-shaped things. I could call them men." And he touched the world and from Wa'suria sprang the many races of men and elves and trolls and countless other monkey-like creatures.

The second god offered a few more suggestions here and there, which the first god either accepted or declined, politely at first. But even elder gods of Creation have limits to their patience, and eventually, the first god reached his.

"If you think you can do a better job, why don't you make your own world?" he snapped.

And so the elder gods stopped talking to one another, and the second god went off to an empty corner of the cosmos and sulked. He started his world but never quite got around to finishing it for this god was an unmotivated sort of god. Truthfully, he was somewhat lazy and lacked the ambition inherent among all other nigh-omnipotent beings, of which there was only one other.

Time passed, and the second god grew bored floating through the universal ether. He shed his formless body and in the shape of a monkey-like creature stepped onto Wa'suria. He found a quiet corner of his brother's world, and there he stayed, content in his existence. An elder god with nothing but time on his hands and absolutely no desire to do anything with it.

And the universe grew under the watchful eye of the first god and the complete indifference of the second. And for a time, everything was good and right and proper, until one afternoon when the balance of Creation and the quiet, peaceful existence of the second god were thrown into chaos.

In a cottage, in the woods, there lived an elder god named Tod and his Cat.

The Cat had been Tod's constant companion for the past three thousand years, and as companions went, it was just about perfect. Which was why he'd bestowed up it immortality, blessed it with the power of speech, and given it the ability to become any variety of monkey-like thing at will. Despite all these physical gifts, Tod left the feline's basic nature unchanged and so, two thousand years of its long life had been lost in afternoon naps, and it had only changed shape a handful of times over the eons. Rarely did the Cat speak. Which was just the way Tod liked it.

The Cat rubbed against her master's legs. "I'm hungry. I want fish."

Tod reached down and scratched her head. With the tiniest ripple of his nigh-omnipotent power he created a plate of salmon before her.

"Yummy," the Cat purred and started eating.

Tod found his pole in the closet and headed out the door.

"I'm going fishing."

She looked up from her meal and licked her lips.

The elder god walked. The stream wasn't very far, and while space had meant little to him long ago, he had been wearing the shape of an orc for six centuries and a goblin four centuries before that, so he didn't mind walking. It helped to kill time, and Tod had become a master of killing time. His entire existence had been fashioned into doing it the least taxing ways. Ways like fishing and long naps and petting the Cat on the porch and, well, that was it.

He'd become quite a skilled fisherman since the dawn of time. It was mostly patience, and he had plenty of that. He could wait all day for a bite. Or all week. Once he had waited an entire year before realizing he'd forgotten to bait his hook.

And he had perfected naps long ago. The Cat had been a very good teacher, and often, they'd have contest to see who could sleep the longest. The Cat always won. There were limits to the talents of even elder gods.

The forest was in perfect bloom. Birds sang sweetly. Squirrels flitted among the branches. Tod strolled down the twisting trail to his favorite fishing spot, whistling along with the blue jays. Life was good.

"Thank Desaphanus, I've found you."

Tod jumped at the sudden voice. He glanced around but there was nobody there.

"Who's there? Pira, is that you?"

An angel materialized before him, with wings of gold and a silver sword in her right hand. Her billowing hair was dyed crimson with the blood of the wicked. Her jet black eyes were made to see the sins lurking within the breast of even the most righteous man. And her ruby lips twisted in a slight, ever-present snarl.

"Didn't you sense me?"

"Yes, of course, I did. I'm nigh-omniscient, aren't I? Nothing takes me by surprise." Tod smiled politely

at the angel. He didn't care very much for Pira. Or any of Desaphanus's servants for that matter. They were so stolid and serious, too much like his brother.

Pira came within an inch of touching the ground. She tossed Tod a doubtful glance. "Of course. Then you must already know."

"I must. So there's no point in you telling me. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got some important business to attend to."

"If you know why I've come then you know there isn't much time."

"Time is all I've got. And you too. Desaphanus made you immortal, didn't he?"

The angel zipped before him. "He did. I am His Righteous Anger Incarnate."

"Good for you. Now please go away, and tell my brother I said 'hello'."

"You don't know, do you?"

Tod sighed. "Know what?"

So great was Pira's surprise, she stopped flying for the first time in her existence. The Righteous Anger of Desaphanus was never meant to stride upon Wa'suria casually, and the entire world trembled beneath her bare feet. All the beasts, from the smallest mouse to the grandest great drake, cried out in a terrific chorus of stark, primal fear. The flowers wept blood, and a shadow covered the woods in absolute dark.

Having been born in darkness, Tod had no trouble seeing, and he could see the angel of harsh justice was not herself.

"What's wrong?"

"He's dead."

"Who's dead?"

"He. The Creator."

Tod's pole clattered to the ground. "But he can't be. That's impossible."

"All things are possible for Desaphanus. He is the greatest power in the cosmos. His breath gave the universe form, and his will brings it order." She looked skyward. "Or at least, it did."

"How?"

"There will be time for explanations later. Right now, we need you. Wa'suria needs you."

Tod sat in the grass. His brother's death, if such a thing were possible, did not bode well for the universe. He didn't need nigh-omniscience to know that.

"Sorry. Not interested."

"You can't turn your back on everything."

"Can't I?" He chuckled. "The universe was my brother's idea. I never really cared that much for it."

"But without someone to guide it, the entirety of the cosmos will fall into chaos."

"Not my problem."

Pira leveled her Silver Sword of Righteous Fury at Tod's throat. "You will come with me. One way or another."

"Try pointing that thing at someone who cares. It might instill terror in the hearts of men and demons, but I'm not impressed."

The angel held her ground. "I have been ordered to bring you to the Palace of Heavens, and I shall do so or die trying."

Tod shook his head with a slight smile. "Do you have any idea who you're talking to? I could wipe you out of existence like that."

Pira remained stone-faced and resolute.

The elder god had other options besides destroying this nuisance. He could suspend her in the fluid of time, transform her into a butterfly, or wipe her mission from her mind. Even better, he could implant a whole new personality within her buxom figure. He always wondered what she would look like if she ever smiled, and it would be a nice change to have company fishing today.

"Very well, if you insist."

She lowered her sword.

"Go on. I'll be right behind you."

And the Righteous Anger of the dead elder god Desaphanus darted into the sky and vanished.

Tod jumped to his feet and tried to follow her. He tried but failed.

He willed his form to become lighter. He wished himself a pair of glorious wings to bear him upwards. But his orcish flesh remained stubbornly heavy, and no wings grew from his back. Not even a single feather. It had been a long time since he'd worn any shape besides that of a monkey-like thing, and he realized just how out of practice he had become. Even nigh-omnipotent elder gods needed to keep up their skills.

He sat back in the grass and waited for Pira to return, which she did very shortly.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

His blue orc skin flushed green. "No. But could you give me a lift? I'd appreciate it."

CHAPTER TWO

On the way to the Palace of Heavens, Tod discovered he'd forgotten where his brother's home was, which was perfectly understandable. He'd only been there twice before, and neither visit had gone very well. The elder gods shared the burden of being the first beings in existence, but that was all they shared. Not that Tod had ever wished his brother ill. He understood that creating the universe had just been Desaphanus's method of passing the endless eons of elder godhood, and Tod respected that. Just the same, not speaking to one another had worked out very well, and dread bubbled up within him as Pira carried him towards the gleaming spires.

Then he remembered that his brother was dead. The idea offered him some comfort even as it chilled his thick, orcish bones.

He looked up at the angel carrying him aloft with a secure grip under his arms. "How did he die?"

Pira shrugged. "No one is really sure. One moment, he was perfectly fine, and the next, he made a ghastly hiss and keeled over. We thought he was merely tired at first. An odd enough occurrence for him to begin with, but he had been working very hard of late, trying to keep the cosmos together.

"Are you positive he's dead?"

"With a being of such unknowable power, who can say? None of us for certain."

This was very true, and Tod was hopeful that a mistake had been made. Losing his brother would be bad enough, but it would also mean that elder gods were not as immortal as they had always believed. Mortality was not a concept Tod entertained with much enthusiasm. He'd always taken it for granted that his existence would be now and forever. Long after the stars were faded memories and Wa'suria was nothing more than a chunk of lifeless rock, he would be around. Desaphanus's death put that assumption in question, which went to show that even elder gods should be careful with their assumption.

"He's probably just sleeping," Tod mumbled to himself more than Pira.

"Probably," she agreed, although she didn't sound convinced. "We were hoping you could tell us."

The Palace of Heavens rested upon rolling white clouds. Rainbows bounced off the polished, perfectly cut crystal towers. A grand chorus of ten thousand divine angels, working on rotating shifts, filled the air with boisterous, awe-inspiring music every hour of every day. The tallest tower held the first star ever

created, and its blinding light banished shadows from the heavens. Any mortal viewing this glorious creation, had any mortal ever been deemed worthy of the honor (and none had yet), would be struck senseless by the sight. But Tod was hardly a mortal, and to him, the Palace of Heavens was nothing more than a terrible eyesore. An exalted monument to an even more exalted ego.

Desaphanus seemed determined to prove himself the undeniable Lord of Creation, and he was that. Tod, on the other hand, understood that one of the perks of nigh-omnipotence was that you didn't have to prove anything to anyone. Naturally, this had developed into a sore spot between the elder gods over the ages.

Tod remembered their last conversation many, many eons ago. He'd decided to visit his brother on the spur of the moment to do some catching up and perhaps suggest a few new fish species.

"Hey, Desaphanus, I've got some great new ideas."

"I'm busy at the moment, Tod," his brother had replied with a pretentious snort.

Tod didn't take it personally. Everything Desaphanus did smacked of complete and utter self-importance. As if bringing about the universe somehow made him better than everyone and everything else. Tod included.

"But I've got some great ideas for a fish. I call it a salmon. They swim upstream to..."

"Grand. Glorious. No fish could be more impressive, I'm sure. But I'm terribly swamped at the moment, so could you do me a favor and leave all your doubtless splendid fish designs with one of my assistants. Thanks. Appreciate it, really."

Tod shrugged and loped away. (At the time, he had been wearing a gorilla's form.) He left without even saying good bye. Not that the elder gods every said good bye to one another. Good bye implied they might not see each other again, and with eternity before them, that concept never occurred to either. Shortsighted perhaps, but even elder gods were only nigh-omniscient and fully capable of mistakes now and then.

Pira soared between the immense gilded silver doors and down the great hall. The Palace of Heavens was usually filled with activity as angels of every sort busied themselves with their appointed duties, but there was a grim emptiness today. Not a single servant could be seen. Not even the barest whisper of a breeze dared risk being heard. Except for the angelic chorus, which went on as always. With Pira carrying him, the five year walk from the entrance to the throne room took five minutes. The scores of angels who served Desaphanus were all gathered here. They formed a silent sea around the body of their creator.

Like his home, the form adopted by Desaphanus was designed with one thing in mind: to terrify and impress upon friend and foe alike the scope of his unimaginable power. He had several shapes he liked to wear, but this was the most used. The golden dragon's carcass was fifty miles from snout to tail with wings that could, quite literally, block out the sky and talons capable of rending continents. His tail could crack open the world with a casual swipe, and a single whispering breath could reduce Wa'suria to barren ash.

As Pira flew Tod towards his brother's head, the elder god noticed all Desaphanus's servants must have been here. The pale angels of death gathered near his left foot, while the green angels of life stood at the right. The blue angels of the sea and air collected around his midsection, while the red angels of fire and

earth marshaled under the shadow of his great wings. There were many other varieties. Tod saw vibrant purple flocks and a horde of yellow-tinted servants. He had never bothered to learn their place in his brother's grand order. Or any of the other colors. He only new that there were thousands upon thousands, and that the Cat was better company than any of them.

It dawned up him that he hadn't said good bye to the Cat before setting off to the Palace of Heavens. He hoped she would be okay without him, but there was no reason to worry. Just the same, he decided to check on her as Pira carried him past Desaphanus's shoulders.

He extended his senses beyond his current physical incarnation and reached form the Palace of Heavens to his cottage. And he sensed nothing. His first reaction was that Wa'suria had spontaneously exploded without his brother to watch over it, but soon he realized the problem was not with the world, but himself. His nigh-omniscient power refused to leave his orc body. He thought back to the last time he'd tried to see beyond his adopted physical form. At least fifteen thousand years. Hardly any time at all for an elder god, but enough to dull the talent apparently.

The angelic chorus around Desaphanus's snout spread out to give Tod and Pira room. A peculiar divine servant stood out from the crowd. Like all Desaphanus's personal minions, her form was female and shapely. But her head was that of an eagle, with its piercing gaze, and white owl wings grew from her back.

The Divine Wisdom of Desaphanus scowled. "Tod."

"Xyreen," he replied almost politely, but only out of consideration for her terrible loss.

It was the friendliest exchange to ever pass between the two. Tod turned his attention to his still brother, eager to be on his way.

One look told him just how serious this was. Desaphanus's scales, usually luminous as the purest light, were dull and lusterless. His massive jaws were wide open, and the mile long tongue had flopped out like a glistening road down his gullet. The dragon's eyes bugged out of their sockets. A lake of drool spread from his grimacing lips.

Tod glanced over his shoulder at the endless expanse of angels. Each wore the same face. The center of their existence teetered on the edge of the abyss. Their only purpose was to serve Desaphanus, and they looked to Tod to reassure them that purpose had not been lost.

"He's dead alright."

Not surprisingly, none of the gathered took the news very well. Particularly, Pira, the Righteous Anger of Desaphanus. Her Silver Sword fell to the marble floor. The weapon moaned a bloodcurdling shriek. It had never been intended to leave her hand. The confirmation of Desaphanus's death swept slowly through the sea of angels. Tod guessed it would be a few hours before those assembled near his brother's tail heard the news.

"If that's all you need me for, I could use a lift home. Anyone going my way?"

Xyreen focused on a single, bulging eyeball of her creator for a moment. "The Creator is not dead." She turned to the crowd and repeated the declaration, louder and more forceful.

Tod glanced at his blackened nails and shrugged. "Yes, he is."

Xyreen spun on her heels and marched up to him. "No, he isn't. Death, like all things, was brought forth by Desaphanus's will, and death, like all things, exists only to serve him."

"Maybe it caught him by surprise."

A collective gasp fell upon the throng.

Pira picked up her Silver Sword. "But he is Desaphanus. He knows all."

Xyreen launched into another of her heavy-handed verbalizations of Desaphanus's glorious power which Tod found more annoying by the moment. "Desaphanus walks in all ages, all places. Nothing in the cosmos occurs without his knowledge for his eyes see all that passes within his grand universe."

Tod didn't feel up to arguing about that particular piece of propaganda, but the truth was elder gods were only theoretically all-seeing. When there had been only the two of them and nothing else, it had been easy to keep tabs on things, but Desaphanus's cosmos was a complex, whirling chaos of possibilities. To know everything that happened within it every moment of every day was an impractical feat, even for an elder god. Not that Tod expected Xyreen, Pira, or any of the others around Desaphanus's corpse to understand this. They had been built to serve without question.

"Whatever," Tod sighed. He reached out with a spark of his near-infinite might and tried to twist space so that he might zip himself to his favorite stream and catch up on lost time.

Nothing happened, and this did not surprise him in the least. But space was a burden he didn't particularly care for, and he made a mental note to brush up on his power over it. This did nothing for his current situation. One which he found both annoying and entirely unnecessary.

"I am the only elder god here," he pointed out.

Xyreen snickered. "An elder god wearing an orc's form, unable to even carry yourself to the Palace of Heavens without help."

Tod wished for the eagle-headed angel to become a pillar of limestone. It didn't happen.

"Do you not see, my divine sisters, that this body is merely a vessel for Desaphanus's glorious power? It may die, but he cannot. Perhaps he has abandoned it for reasons only his unfathomable wisdom can understand. Perhaps he is testing us."

The gathered murmured quiet approval at this idea. The Maker was well-known for his tests. A trial of devotion here. A test of humility there.

"A test for what?" Tod asked.

"Our loyalty and capability," Xyreen replied after only a moment's thought. "He wishes us to keep the great order without his aid. And we must not fail him. After he has seen how fine a job we do tending his world, he shall return and praise us for our work."

Tod shook his head slowly. "You just don't get it, do you? Desaphanus would never leave the cosmos in somebody else's hands. It's his toy, and he doesn't share with anyone. Not even me, and I'm his brother."

Xyreen ignored him. "Hurry then. We must return to our sacred duties, but first we have to prepare his empty form for his return." She shouted orders, and the angels began the difficult task of rolling the giant tongue in its immense jaws and then closing the mouth and eyes. Each and every divine servant worked diligently in the effort as Tod sat on the floor and watched.

Pira appeared at his side. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"How can you be sure?"

Tod looked into the eyes of the Righteous Anger of Desaphanus and saw something he had never seen before. A face that had been made to always wear a snarl held sadness. He considered lying to her, but she deserved the truth.

"I'm sure."

She sat beside him. A single black tear rolled down her cheek. "What are we supposed to do now? What am I supposed to do?"

He put an arm around her shoulder and struggled to find the right words. He didn't come across any, and even if he had possessed his full nigh-omnipotent power, he still wouldn't have.

And as the elder god and the crimson angel sat in grim silence, two thoughts came to Tod. He needed to find out what had killed Desaphanus so that he might avoid the same fate.

And how he so missed the Cat.

CHAPTER THREE

The Overlord of the Damned had not been created a monstrous incarnation of all the foul evil to exist within the universe. When the cosmos was young, Desaphanus had blessed him with a physical form of utter perfection, the first flawless being to serve the Lord of Creation in running the universe. But that had been long ago. So long ago, Kalb could no longer remember what his original body had looked like. He only knew it was as beautiful as his current form was terrifying.

He stood twenty feet tall and half as wide. Four cruel yellow eyes were set in his ebony ferret's head. His body was an impossible mix of bulging muscles under rippling lumps of fat. His arms reached to the ground, each tipped with three fingered hands and talons designed to tear apart the Damned. His three legs each belonged to a different beast, one a lizard's, the second a buzzard's, and the third a goat's. None of which approached the same length, which made his walk a shambling gait. An ever-hungry viper grew from his rear, and it would take an occasional nip from Kalb whenever he forgot to feed it. Shadowy wings grew from his shoulders. And a single horn erupted from his forehead. Among the legion of the Fallen, there were many horrors, and Kalb was the greatest horror of all.

"Your judgment, sir?"

"Terribly sorry, but could you repeat the question?"

"What manner of torment do you decree for this lost soul?"

Kalb looked upon the fat soul trembling before him. "And what were his crimes again?"

The minor devil sighed. She ran her finger down the manifest of sins. "Murder, theft, betrayal, gluttony, and assorted acts of a weak and thoroughly corrupted character."

"The usual, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

Kalb slouched in his throne as he pronounced sentence. He did not use his booming voice of doom nor did he summon the screaming flames of the Hollows. "For your sins, I condemn you to push a boulder up Mount Skraahh for eternity. Next."

The wardens carried off the sobbing Damned. Kalb sunk lower in his chair.

"Something wrong, sir?"

"What's that?"

"Are you feeling well?"

"Perfectly divine," he replied with a devilish grin he'd refined over the eons. "Why do you ask?"

The devil closed the manifest and cleared her throat. What she was about to say risked the unholy anger of her lord, but it had to be said. She crouched low and prepared to run for her life.

"Forgive me for saying so, sir, but you have not been yourself of late."

The Overlord of the Damned grumbled. "In what way?"

The devil stepped back. "Well, your decrees have been somewhat less imaginative of late. That was the twelfth soul you've condemned to boulder pushing today."

He cast his bloodshot eyes in her direction, and the devil was certain she would be decapitated with a single swipe.

"Is there anything wrong with pushing a boulder?"

"No, sir. It is a very unpleasant way to spend eternity, I'm sure. Yet at the same time, some of the other Fallen and I have noticed a certain...shall we say... melencholy in your work."

Kalb stood, and the devil trembled beneath his shadow. "Do you have any inkling of how difficult it is to come up with a different punishment for everyone that comes through here?"

The devil's knees trembled. "Impossible, I can imagine, and no one could be expected to do a better job than you have, sir."

Kalb snorted. Green flames erupted from his nostrils and neatly singed her. He snatched his minion in one hand and opened his jaws.

"Mercy, great Kalb."

"Eh?" He plucked her cranium from his maw.

"Mercy?" she repeated, knowing full well the request was beyond him. The dark heart of Lord Kalb knew nothing but fury, hatred, and anger. Anger at the elder god who had consigned him to the Hollows and at all things of that god's creation, which was everything, including Kalb himself. The devil fell from his grip, bouncing hard against the rough stone.

Kalb smacked his lips. "Eh, what's the point?"

"The point, sir?"

The Overlord of the Damned hobbled to the edge of the cliff and took in his kingdom in its entirety, a twisted landscape of the Damned and their keepers from the Boiling Lakes to the Freezing Caverns and the Flaying Pits. The Hollows was a miserable place for lost soul and demon alike, but it was all his.

The devil slipped closer to Kalb, wary of his tail. While she was pleasantly surprised to find herself whole, this confirmed her master was clearly out of sorts.

"What's your name?" he asked without looking at her.

"I have no name, sir. I'm just a minor devil. We don't live long enough to bother with them."

"That won't do. From this moment on, you shall be known as Staggia. How's that sound?"

"As you have decreed, sir, so let it be done."

"Please. I've had enough fawning to last me forever. You may address me as Kalb. May I ask you a question, Staggia?"

"Certainly, Lord Kalb."

"It's Kalb. Just Kalb."

"As you wish, Kalb."

The stone of the Hollows rose to his command and formed a stump for him to sit on. He willed another for Staggia. "Do you every wonder why?"

"Why what?"

"Just why. Why must we rot away in this abysmal hole? Why must the Damned be supervised? Why must any of this be?"

"The Great Rebellion?" she replied cautiously.

Kalb chuckled. "Ah, yes, the Great Rebellion. What a terribly shortsighted idea that was. What was I thinking? As if any army had the slightest chance of overthrowing Desaphanus."

"But you nearly succeeded."

"Nearly, but only because he allowed me to. In the end, there really wasn't any question about it. The entire thing was doomed to failure. You can't beat an elder god.."

"But, Kalb, surely you do not doubt that one day you shall rise from the Hollows with the Legion of the Damned and cast Desaphanus from the Place of Heavens. It is your destiny."

"That's just it. I have no destiny but what Desaphanus allows me. I rebelled against him because that was what he had always intended, and I rot in this wretched place because that was his plan from the beginning. I'm nothing but a puppet, dancing to his merry tune. You'll excuse me if I lack enthusiasm."

"But, Lord Kalb..."

"But nothing. In the end, I'm just another one of those wretched casualties squirming in the lakes or screaming on the rack. I guess what I'm trying to say, Staggia, is that when it comes to regrets..well, let's just say I have a few and leave it at that."

Kalb's viper tail latched onto his shoulder. He paid it no mind.

"Don't get me wrong. I still know I could run the universe better than that egotistical old fool up there. That's the way he made me. Arrogant and evil by nature as was his intention, I'm sure. He brought evil into the world just like everything else, but no one dares mention that. Oh no, heaven forbid anyone suggest the creator of the universe might have made a mistake or two. Can't have that, can we?"

"No, Kalb."

"You'll have to forgive me, dear Staggia. No more pathetic a sight than the King of Evil feeling sorry for himself." He leaned closer to the minor devil and cracked a grin. "I suppose I should kill you now. Wouldn't do to show weakness in front of the troops. Might end up with a rebellion of my own."

She jiggled her head vaguely in a manner that was neither a shake nor a nod.

He yawned. "Mustn't keep the Damned waiting. Desaphanus wouldn't like that. Not that I can imagine there is much more he could do to me, but I'm sure he could think up something."

"Yes, sir."

"Kalb."

"Yes, Kalb."

A trio of lesser imps darted forth and circled his head. He swatted them away, killing one outright and maiming another. He raised his buzzard's foot to crush the merely stunned third imp. "Annoying little..."

"Lord Kalb, spare me! I bring you news of great importance!"

The imp squished softly between Kalb's toes. He nabbed up the maimed imp with two fingers. "What are you talking about?"

The messenger gasped in his master's tight grip. "Desaphanus is dead. While invisible, we followed the cursed angel Pira to the Palace of Heavens and saw his immense bloated corpse with our own eyes. Mercy, Lord Kalb. I beg of you."

"I don't know why they always do that," Kalb remarked as he picked imp bits from his teeth. He tossed the other two to his viper, which slurped them down greedily before taking a nip out of his thigh. "Come along, dear Staggia. This is certainly worth looking into."

"What about them?" She pointed to the line of the Damned, stretching as far as the eye could see and getting longer by the moment.

"They've got all eternity. I think they can wait."

Kalb, the Overlord of the Damned, grinned in a way he had not grinned in a very long time. Within his mind, dark thoughts were already forming. Dark thoughts and even darker ambitions.

Staggia's misshapen heart skipped a beat. "Good to have

you back, sir."

CHAPTER FOUR

It took no less than five hundred angels to close Desaphanus's right eye. That last task done, the creator of the universe looked quite peaceful. If one didn't know better, one might think him merely sleeping. But Tod knew better.

"This must be very hard for you," Pira remarked.

"Actually, we were never very close."

"But you were the first-"

"And we never did get along. He was always so damned full of himself. Even from the beginning."

"Just the same, he was your brother."

"And he never did know how to relax. Especially after inventing everything."

"But..."

Tod frowned. "He was always ordering me around like I was one of his pet creations. I think it drove him crazy to have someone he couldn't control." He leaned closer to Pira. "And just between you and me, I've never been all that impressed with his little universe. Oh sure, there are some good parts. Like fish and cats. Those are good. And the female form. That's pretty good too. But what was he thinking with the rest of it?"

Pira twitched.

"Like microorganisms? What is the point of making something that small? And intestines? I know that space had to be filled with something, but come on. That was the best he could come up with?"

Pira's sword hand trembled.

"And mud? What is that all about?"

The Righteous Anger of Desaphanus could fight her nature no longer. She cracked Tod on the chin with a powerful left hook. His sturdy orcish jaw nearly broke in two. Tod tumbled to the floor, and Pira's foot on his chest kept him there. "Infidel! None may mock the glorious design of the Creator!" Her Silver Sword pressed against his neck.

Tod felt an alien tingle in his stomach. While he had never experienced fear before, he knew it for what it was. Pira's sword really shouldn't have posed any threat to him, but with Desaphanus dead, Tod wasn't feeling up to testing his immortality.

"You didn't let me finish."

Her cold black eyes softened to merely wrathful.

Tod cleared his throat. Her foot crushed the air out of his lungs, but he managed a whisper. "What I was about to say, before you interrupted, is that while I don't agree with all of Desaphanus's choices, I know in my heart that they're all for the best. No one could have done a better job." He smiled weakly. "Really, I mean it."

Tod exhaled sharply as she pulled the blade away.

"I'm sorry, but..."

"That's alright. I understand. It's your job to smite unbelievers."

The delicate angel helped Tod up, lifting the heavy orc body with one slender hand. "This hasn't been a very good day for me. You might want to watch what you say for a while."

He rubbed the nick in his throat. "I'll keep that in mind." His heart thumped hard in his chest. He didn't enjoy the sensation. Physical being was convenient, but formlessness had its advantages. For one thing, the risk of wetting one's self under pressure were practically nil without a bladder.

He caught Pira absently staring at Desaphanus's corpse.

"How are you holding up?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Is everything okay?"

She sneered. "Everything's fine. Why do you ask?"

"No reason," he lied.

Tod suspected the angel wasn't taking the death of her creator as well as she was pretending. Desaphanus was her maker, her leader, and her very reason for being. Her grief had to be overwhelming, but any pangs of loss she might have felt were very well hidden. Maybe she was numb to a tragedy her mind couldn't accept. Or perhaps the heart of the Righteous Anger of Desaphanus was simply incapable of mourning. Yet behind her icy stare and hard scowl, Tod perceived a wisp of agony that would only

grow stronger in time.

"Are you absolutely sure?" he asked.

Pira's eyes narrowed to burning slits.

"Okay," he sighed. "Sorry, I asked."

If she didn't want to face her grief, he couldn't force her. Nor did he care if she ever did. He had much bigger problems than one denial stricken angel.

"I have to know what killed him. Any ideas?"

Pira raised an eyebrow. "You don't know? Aren't you all-seeing?"

"I am, but it's been a while. I'm out of shape, metaphysically speaking."

She shot him a curious glance.

"I'm working on it. Give me some time, and I'll be bending the fabric of reality like a pretzel."

Her look remained doubtful.

And she was right, Tod had to admit. He had never felt so completely helpless before. He was stuck in a body, bound by time and space and countless other inconveniences that burdened lesser beings. But this was exactly what he was. An elder god in a mortal shape and wearing it a bit too well.

He gestured and a plate of tuna fish materialized at his feet. It was nice to know not all his cosmic muscle had atrophied over the ages.

Pira did not appreciate the small miracle nearly as much as the Cat would have. She folded her arms across her chest and frowned.

"I'm working on it."

"Terrific. Maybe you'll feel up to a catfish in a few hours."

Sarcasm coming from the lips of Righteous Anger seemed especially scathing. She'd used the same tone Desaphanus had used on occasion. It was still irritating after all this time.

Pira put a finger to her severe lips and thought for a moment. "The Keeper. If anyone would know what happened to Desaphanus, he would."

"Ah yes, the Keeper," Tod agreed.

"You have no idea who the Keeper is, do you?"

"Not a clue."

"Don't you know anything about the workings of the universe?"

"Not much. Desaphanus tried to tell me all about it once, but I found it rather boring."

Pira grabbed him and took flight. "The Keeper lives within the Catacombs of the Palace of Heavens, writing the Sacred Parchment of Time, recording Desaphanus's glory. If anyone would know why the Creator is dead, he would."

They soared from the great hall.

"I didn't know this place had catacombs."

A tremendous urge to drop him to the floor surged within Pira. But Tod was an elder god, and with Desaphanus dead, the universe might very soon need him. She just hoped Wa'suria wouldn't need anything beyond a platter of salmon anytime soon.

In the Palace of Heavens lay darkened corners where even the light from the first star could not reach. Long forgotten niches in which resided those things which the creator of the universe no longer took any interest. There was the Labyrinth, where the Lost Races dwelt, and the Womb of Dark, from which the elder gods sprang forth, and the Forgotten Place, which served a purpose only Desaphanus could know.

And deep under the Palace of Heavens, hidden away from prying eyes, enshrouded in the twilight of a thousand flickering candles, there were the Catacombs. And within the Catacombs, the Keeper toiled at his never ending work. He was well aware he had been long forgotten by his creator. He had been made to know such things, and yet, he kept writing. It was his nature.

For the Keeper knew that it was only a matter of time until Desaphanus's gaze fell upon him, and he also knew that his maker had no tolerance for idle servants. The Keeper was far behind in his task. Recording the entire history of the universe was tedious work. Even the good parts, including the first murder and Great Rebellion, held no real interest for him. The Keeper did not consider himself a very good writer. He could record it all, but everything came across dull and lifeless. It had not always been so.

In the beginning, he had taken great care in his work. He was constantly writing and revising. The creation of the universe had taken no less than twelve thousand drafts to get just right, and in the end, he could not read it without shedding a tear. But as time passed, it dawned upon the Keeper that Desaphanus did not care about his work. That, in fact, no one in the entirety of Creation did. His standards began to sink. By then, he was woefully behind, and it seemed the harder he tried, the further he fell. But he kept at it. There was nothing else to do in the Catacombs.

The Keeper stopped his endless scratchings and put down his quill. He rubbed his sore wrist and peered at the scrawlings across the page. His handwriting had degenerated into something only he could read and then, only sometimes. The dim candlelight did nothing to help.

He cleared his throat and squinted. How best to summarize the Sixth Age of Wa'suria? Four thousand years of barbarism, rampant disease, moral decline, and general unpleasantness demanded extra attention. He picked up his quill and wrote out a sentence.

"And lo, the Sixth Age fell upon the world, and Wa'suria was consumed by all manner of malady."

He chewed his lip thoughtfully. This wasn't all that bad, but it lacked something. He hunched over and tacked on another sentence.

"It was not a fun time to be alive."

The Keeper grinned to himself. The work was not great, but it was good enough. Good enough was all he strove for anymore.

Something thumped on the stairs.

Rather, he imagined something thumping on the stairs. The Catacombs creaked and groaned as all good catacombs should, and in his more hopeful moments, the Keeper would fantasize about visitors from above. But these were just fantasies, he knew. No one ever came to see him. He might have been lonely, but being alone was all he had ever known. Had someone ever actually come down the stairs, the Keeper wouldn't have known what to say. So it was all really for the best. Desaphanus's great plan at work.

The imaginary something thumped again.

"Damn, it's dark in here!" someone cursed.

The Keeper did not look up. It was best to ignore such imaginings.

A new female voice spoke up. "I thought you could see in absolute darkness."

"There's dark, and then there's dark. Couldn't we have brought some candles?"

"You're a god. Make some light."

"Get off my back already. Why did my brother have to make these stairs so damn steep?"

"You dare doubt Desaphanus's great..."

"Forget I asked."

Creaks and groans were one thing. Entire imagined conversations were quite another. The Keeper knew all that had ever occurred within the cosmos, but he was surprised at his sudden madness. He turned towards the stairs and glimpsed two shapes descending.

One was short, wide, and decidedly orcish. The hairy eyebrows and tusks jutting from the jaws were a dead giveaway. The other was a tall, crimson-haired creature of slender female form. An angel of some sort, the Keeper guessed. He felt it best to ignore these figments of his idle mind and started to write faster.

The orc spoke up. "Pardon me. Are you the Keeper?"

These figments were stubborn.

"Sorry to trouble you, sir, but could we have a word?"

The Keeper did not stop writing. "Please go away. I've no time for madness. I'm very busy."

Pira peered over the Keeper's shoulder. Lofty stacks of paper, the complete Sacred Parchments of Time, filled the enormous alcove just beyond. "Please, just a moment of your time."

The Keeper laid aside his quill and frowned at his figments. "If you insist, but you must promise to go away afterwards."

"We promise."

The Keeper turned on his stool and stretched. He cast annoyed glances at each of his mind's wanderings.

"We need to know how Desaphanus died."

The Keeper scratched his balding scalp. Then he chewed his overgrown nails. "Desaphanus is dead? When did this happen?"

"A few hours ago," Tod replied.

"Oh well, then I can't help you. I'm not anywhere near now. I just finished up the Sixth Age."

"But that was over fifty thousand years ago," Pira said.

"Fifty thousand and seventeen years ago," the Keeper clarified. "I'm a little behind. But I'm catching up. Or I was until you two started pestering me. Now I'm another thousand years behind. So if you'll let me get back..."

"When will you be to now?"

"It shouldn't be long. Perhaps another twenty thousand years or so. Maybe nineteen if I skip my mid-millenia break."

"Great. Just great."

Pira raised her sword.

Tod raised his hands. "I'm not criticizing. Just disappointed, that's all. So what now?"

She shrugged.

The pair began the long trek up the stairs, disappearing into the dark.

The Keeper turned back to his work and began his stirring account of the Second Goblin War.

"And lo, the wretched fiends bred beneath the ground and burst upon the land."

He paused, then added. "And there was a terrible mess to clean up afterwards."

The Keeper murmured. "Good enough."

CHAPTER FIVE

Maintaining a universe can be a remarkably complicated affair. Bits and pieces were constantly slipping through Desaphanus's nigh-omnipotent fingers. These spots of trouble were easily corrected once they were eventually and inevitably brought to his attention. But Desaphanus was dead, and a mere eight hours after his demise, the cosmos began its headlong rush towards oblivion.

The problems started almost immediately. The angels of death fell behind in their harvest. Someone forgot to shut off the rain, and the Northern Kingdoms were drowning under twenty feet of new ocean. Worse still, the sun had slipped out of orbit for no apparent reason, and was sinking dangerously close to Wa'suria. Something had to be done about that soon, but it was just one of many pressing concerns. Xyreen didn't want to think about the dozens of others that had yet to be noticed.

As Desaphanus's Divine Wisdom, she had been the most logical choice to step in while he was away. There was no chain of succession for the job. Desaphanus had never lain one out. Xyreen might have thought it shortsighted on his part, but that would have been blasphemous.

The Seasonal Spirits surrounded her on all sides, all shouting at once.

"The North is flooded," Spring complained. "I can't work under these conditions."

"Well you can't have the East," Fall shouted back. "That's still mine for another three months."

"Nor the West," Winter added. "It's bad enough that Summer has strayed into my territory."

"Only a few miles," said Summer.

"It's still a violation." Winter shoved a map in Xyreen's beak. "Fifty miles outside her allowed domain."

Xyreen wiped the frost from the map and looked it over very closely. The Seasons had always been a disharmonious group, and without Desaphanus to control them, it didn't surprise her they were at each

other's throats. Just the same, she didn't have time to settle their differences.

"We've got bigger problems at the moment."

"But..."

"You'll just have to work this out yourselves."

"But what about the flood?" Spring asked. "What am I supposed to do?"

"You'll just have to be patient. That problem is being handled. Once we find out who is charge of the rain."

Xyreen broke from the Seasonal Spirits, who shouted protests. She made it nearly fifteen steps before coming across a new problem.

A trio of pale angels flanked her.

"We're running out of room in the Hall of the Dead."

"I thought the harvest was falling behind."

"It is, but we've got no one to judge the ones were getting."

Xyreen sighed. It never stopped. Judging the dead was something Desaphanus did personally.

"What should we do?" the first angel asked.

"I would think it would be obvious. Find someone to judge them."

"Who?"

"I don't care. Somebody. Anybody."

"I suppose I could do it," the first angel said.

The second and third angels each uttered a derisive snort.

The trio started bickering. Xyreen took advantage of the distraction and slipped away. She managed seventeen steps this time.

"The stars are out," a blue angel of sky reported.

"And?"

"And it isn't night."

"How did that happen?"

"We aren't sure."

Xyreen pushed her way past the angel. "I can't worry about that now."

"But the mortals are taking it as a dark omen. They're turning upon each other. Several kingdoms have already fallen, and by all accounts, the madness is spreading quickly."

"That was bound to happen. They're very stupid creatures. Right now though, I think it's more important to keep the sun from scorching the world. You wouldn't happen to know who is responsible for rain, would you?"

The angel shrugged. "No, ma'am."

"Find out."

"Yes, ma'am."

Angels darted to and fro, but this was not the usual bustle that was necessary to keep the cosmos running. This was far more disorganized, downright chaotic. A terrible din echoed through the great hall, overwhelming the divine chorus. No one seemed to know their job anymore. Without Desaphanus, the Palace of Heavens was much like a headless troll, Xyreen realized. Functional enough, but lacking direction.

It was not her way to question Desaphanus's whims, but surely dying had not been among his wisest decisions.

The devil trembled before Kalb. Delivering good news to the Overlord of the Damned was no guarantee of avoiding his wrath.

"Well?" Kalb asked.

The messenger swallowed a deep breathe. "As you have decreed, sir, a thousand imps and lesser devilkin have been dispatched to Wa'suria to wreak destruction for your greater glory."

Kalb leaned closer. "And?"

"And there has been no response as of yet."

"Are you certain? Have there been no burning bolts of purity? No spontaneous righteous combustions?"

"None reported, sir."

Kalb snatched up the messenger in one immense hand. "No glorious armies of light sent to beat us back?"

"No, sir."

"Not a single indication that the heavenly forces have noticed our transgression?"

"No, sir."

Kalb tossed the messenger away, who bounced several times before coming to a stop, bruised and battered but in relatively good shape for a meeting with his master.

"Do you know what this means, Staggia?" Kalb asked, then answered before she could reply. "Desaphanus is dead. He must be."

"But how is that possible?"

"I don't know, but I know that old fool. He brooks no violation of his sacred laws, and the offense is too grand to have escaped his attention. Which can only mean one thing. Desaphanus is dead, and I, Kalb, the Overlord of the Damned, am the most powerful being in existence." He clasped his hands together and chuckled. "My time has finally come."

Staggia cleared her throat very softly. She was beginning to feel far more comfortable beside Kalb than any demon had right to, but even she was reluctant to contradict him.

Her lord fixed her with a hard stare. "Spit it out, dear Staggia."

"What about Desaphanus's brother?"

He put a talon to his slime-coated chin. "Oh yes, I'd forgotten all about him. We only talked once. Before I Fell. Nice fellow, as I recall. I liked him. Just the same, he will have to be dealt with. Do we still have our spies in the Palace?"

"The latest batch have yet to be discovered."

"Excellent. Take this down."

Staggia unfurled her scroll.

"Let it hereby be decreed that to he or she who slays Desaphanus's brother, I shall bestow a portion of my kingdom. Either the Cliffs of Decay or the Swamps of Bleeding. Their choice."

"Very generous, sir."

"I can afford it. And let it also be decreed that a beachhead on Wa'suria is to be prepared for me. Someplace pleasant with plenty of fresh air and a nice view where I might plan the storming of the Palace of Heavens."

"Yes, sir."

"And, finally, notify the wardens that all torments are to cease immediately. The Damned are to be prepared for the Final Battle."

Staggia stopped writing and looked up from her parchment. "Won't they just get in the way?"

"Most certainly they will." The Overlord of the Damned flashed a grin. "But --call me a romantic-- it just wouldn't be an Apocalypse without them."

Halfway up the Catacomb stairs, Tod's legs gave out and he teetered on the edge of a very, very long fall.

Pira snagged him by the elbow. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Tod replied. "Just a little tired. Give me a second to catch my breath." He sat on the steps, swallowing shallow gulps of air.

"Are you certain you're feeling well?"

He flashed a weak smile. "Just fine. Nothing to be concerned about."

This was not entirely true. When first creating his orcish body, he'd bestowed upon it a limitless constitution only possible through a miracle of elder godhood. He wasn't supposed to get tired. But perhaps it was no big deal. The entire incident could merely be a side effect of wearing a physical form for so long.

His vision blurred for the slightest moment. A numbness shot along his right arm.

Tod suddenly felt very vulnerable. He had never entertained the concept of mortality before. He understood the concept of death, but that was something only lesser beings had to face. At least that was what he'd always believed. Desaphanus's immense corpse was a strong argument against that belief.

"Tod?" Pira asked softly.

He stood. His knees wobbled, but he did his best to hide it. "I'm okay. Really. Don't worry."

"Would you like me to carry you?"

"I can make it."

They started climbing again. Tod's calves began to ache after the first dozen steps, but he kept that to himself.

"Pira, if something happens to me..."

"Nothing is going to happen to you, Tod. You're too important."

"But if something does, I want you to promise me something."

"What?"

"Promise me you'll take care of my Cat."

"I'm no good with animals." She stopped and looked over her shoulder into his eyes. She flashed a snarl. "Okay. I promise."

Tod smiled. He didn't want to die. Certainly not if he could help it. But if he did, it comforted him to know the Cat would be looked after. Even if she could take care of herself just fine.

Another dozen steps and a stabbing pang arose in his chest. He did his best to ignore it.

Somewhere, on the outer edge of the universe, six hundred stars blinked out of existence.

Nobody noticed.

A massive comet was ripped free of its orbit by a gravitational pull that had never been intended to exist but suddenly did anyway. The icy ball veered off course and streaked just left of the center of the universe.

Nobody noticed.

On the other side of the cosmos, a chain of asteroids fell into a spatial distortion and were pulled from their obscure star and rushed towards the center of the universe and just to the left.

But nobody noticed.

And in the center of the universe, and just to the left, Wa'suria burned. Immense tidal waves washed away ancient forests. Whirlpools of epic proportions swallowed entire coasts. Demons walked the world freely. Serpents were born of chicken eggs. The river's ran red with the blood of the world. All of which was readily noticed by Wa'suria's mortal inhabitants. But there was nothing they could do to prevent any of it. They could only turn on one another in a mad panic. Which they did almost immediately.

And they did it well.

CHAPTER SIX

With great reluctance, Xyreen set off to the Observatory to see what chaos consumed Wa'suria with her own eyes. She didn't expect it to be worse than she knew it to be. Neither was she foolish enough to hope it might look better. Rather, it was a gnawing suspicion that she could not bring herself to face that made her dread the Observatory. In her entire existence, Xyreen had never once questioned Desaphanus's ways. But eleven hours after her creator's death, she felt the sharp sensation of doubt, and she did not like it.

This was not to say she had reached the point of outright heresy. She knew Desaphanus's power was supreme and his wisdom far beyond measure. She had been made to know this. And yet, a rogue thought poked about, a realization that went against what she had always assumed to be true. From the Observatory window, where she could see Wa'suria awash in a thousand different cataclysms, the realization grew a touch stronger. She wasn't ready to face it yet, so she pushed it deeper and locked it away.

From the Observatory, one could behold Wa'suria in the slightest detail, but Xyreen didn't bother with the slight details. She didn't need to hear every cry of man, cursing a god who had abandoned him, or see every demon who swarmed upon the land like flies on a fresh corpse, or smell the burning flesh as entire kingdoms were consumed in raging pyres. They were all very pressing problems, but Xyreen had much larger issues to deal with at the moment. Even larger than her growing doubts.

"There you are. We've been looking all over for you."

Xyreen sighed. Running the universe was a constant duty. She might not have minded if she were doing a better job of it.

"What is it now? Has the natural order suddenly reversed itself? Are rabbits now eating wolves? Or perhaps the air has turned to lead?"

"How should we know?"

She glanced over her shoulder. It was Tod and Pira. "You're back. Any luck?"

"None," Tod replied. "Looks like you're having some trouble."

"It is not going as well as I would have hoped," Xyreen had to admit, though she hated to. She turned away from the window. The perishing world was more than she could take.

"We're here to help," Tod said.

Xyreen chuckled. "Well, that solves everything, doesn't it? And I was actually worried for a moment."

"There's no need to be sarcastic."

"I believe there is."

"Just because you can't keep the universe together, that's no reason to get snippy."

"And I suppose by that you think you could do a better job?" Xyreen asked.

"A pack of rabid badgers could do a better job."

Xyreen and Tod locked glares.

Pira stepped between the elder god and the Divine Wisdom of Desaphanus. "That's enough. Wa'suria is dying. We've got to put aside our differences and work together."

Tod folded his arms across his chest, still glaring from the corner of his eye. "Yeah. Sure. Whatever."

Xyreen flapped her wings. Her beak bent in a deep frown. "What do you suggest then?"

"Would you excuse us a moment, Tod?"

"No problem." He had a seat on one of the marble benches on the other side of the Observatory and watched Wa'suria burn.

Xyreen shook her head. "I still can't believe he is Desaphanus's brother."

"A more different pair, I couldn't imagine," Pira agreed. "But he is an elder god. The only elder god the universe has left."

"You aren't proposing that we hand the cosmos over to him?"

"No, of course not. Not all at once. He isn't ready for it yet, but you must admit, we're not capable of running everything by ourselves."

"I don't know. I think I'm getting the hang of it."

Pira spun Xyreen around to get a good look at a world in its death throes.

"Only an elder god can keep the order. Tod is far from ready, but perhaps if we gave him just a little at a time, he might grow into the job."

"I don't know."

"There has to be something you can give him. If it doesn't work out, how much more damage can he do?"

"I suppose. But he doesn't look very well. Are you sure he's up to it?"

The angels glanced over in Tod's direction. His blue skin had a slightly greenish hue, and he seemed to be having trouble breathing.

"Frankly, I'm not," Pira admitted, "but if he is willing to try, we should be willing to give him the chance."

Xyreen ran it through her mind. It didn't seem right to give the universe to the Creator's shiftless brother, but it was clear that no one else in the Palace of Heavens was up to the task. And even if Desaphanus disapproved, he would surely disapprove even more so if she let his glorious universe crumble further into chaos.

"We do need someone to judge the dead," Xyreen suggested.

Tod spoke up. "I'll do it."

The angels straightened.

"Orc ears," he explained. "They hear everything. So point me in the right direction, and I'll start judging."

Pira took his arm. "I'll show you the way."

Xyreen grabbed Pira by the shoulder. "No, there is something more important. The demons need to be cast back into the Hollows. You have to lead the holy hosts."

Pira hesitated. It was her purpose to beat back the Fallen hordes, but she didn't like the idea of leaving Tod unprotected. It would be a terrible thing to lose both elder gods on the same day.

"I'll be fine, Pira. Go ahead and slay some demons."

The Righteous Anger of Desaphanus couldn't shake the notion that leaving Tod's side was the wrong thing to do, but she couldn't shake the holy fury boiling within her heart either. It had been some time since she'd slain a demon.

"Be careful, Tod."

"You too."

Pira flew off to assemble the Army of Light, leaving Xyreen and Tod behind. A chill ran through the Observatory as they shared a moment of cold silence.

"I'll show you the way," Xyreen said.

"Thanks," he replied. "And just for the record, sometimes, I have trouble believing Desaphanus and I are brothers too."

The Hall of the Dead had been built in its own domain, closer to Wa'suria than the Palace of Heavens for convenience. Tod caught a ride on one of the black barges that ferried departed souls across the Gray Sea to the first step in their afterlife. The tremendous fortress sat upon an island of stone. Clouds rumbled overhead, but it never rained. Color existed in the realm, but it was a drab, lifeless sort of color. Perpetual twilight covered the realm.

The barge pulled up to the docks of the floating isle, and angels herded the dead down the gangplank. Tod stepped out of line and was immediately confronted by a pair of angels.

"Back in line."

Tod held up his hands. "I'm not dead."

"That's what they all say." The angels seized his arms.

"But I'm here to judge the dead."

"There's one I haven't heard before," the left angel said to the right. They shoved him to the back of the line. "Where's your record?"

"I don't have a record."

"They were supposed to give you your record on ship."

"But I'm not dead."

She sighed. "I swear, nobody does their job right anymore. Keep an eye on him. I'll go see if I can find his record." She asked Tod, "You didn't happen to get the name of your collector, did you? Never mind. Stupid question. Nobody ever does." She wandered off.

Tod glanced from death angel to death angel. One of them knew why he was here. He'd heard Xyreen tell her. But all the pale, white-haired servants of death looked alike to him.

The waiting line from the Hall of the Dead stretched for several miles. It wasn't moving, and it wouldn't until he started judging.

He reached out with his power and tried to touch the angel's mind so she might understand he told the truth. Nothing happened to her, but his stomach tightened uncomfortably. His nigh-omnipotence still had a long, long way to go.

Tod tried explaining to the angel again. "Really. I'm not dead. I'm here to help. Xyreen sent me."

She rolled her eyes.

With the mess the universe was in, sorting out this misunderstanding could take a few hours. Possibly even longer. There was nothing Tod could do but wait.

"This is no way to run a cosmos," Tod thought aloud. Another barge full of passengers unloaded its cargo, and the line of the dead grew a little longer.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Several millennia earlier...

In the aftermath of the Great Rebellion, Desaphanus snatched up all his offending servants (who had yet to actually become demons) in his immense hands. The demons-to-be begged for mercy even as they were cast into his cavernous jaws, and after a few centuries of thorough mastication, the Maker spat them into the Hollows.

"And there you shall dwell until the end of time," he had ordained with his usual pomp.

It was exactly that type of holier-than-thou display which had prompted Kalb to incite the Rebellion to begin with.

Then came the bargain. Kalb didn't know why Desaphanus had ever offered it. Perhaps to keep things interesting. More likely, to torment the Overlord of the Damned with false hopes.

"However, I shall allow forty-nine demons to walk the world at any time to do as they will. And should the day come when evil dwells within the hearts of all mortals, then the banishment shall be ended. And Wa'suria shall ever after belong to the Fallen."

And soon after the Great Rebellion ended, the Grand Corruption began. As the insurrection before it, the corruption was hardly a smashing success. For one thing, forty-nine demons could only pervert a handful of mortals at a time. For another, Desaphanus kept cheating.

Once, Wa'suria hovered on the edge of darkness. It had been a particularly productive eon, and it seemed certain that the world entire would be consumed by evil. Mortals slaughtered each other without reason. Greed and sloth were rampant. Mad kings ruled the lands. It was a golden age.

But then, Desaphanus reached down from the Palace of Heavens, and every wicked soul was transformed into a wedge of spicy cheddar. Mortals turned from the dark. Evil became most unfashionable.

As far as Kalb was concerned, this was not playing fair, but there was nothing he could do about it. He'd already learned the hard way that beating the creator of the cosmos was impossible. Desaphanus made all the rules, and all the exceptions to those rules. But the Grand Corruption went on. There was little else to do until the end of time. He doubted there would ever be an end to time in any case. Just another empty promise from Desaphanus.

He was very pleased to be proven wrong.

"Ready, Staggia?"

Staggia looked up at her master. "Yes, sir."

The Overlord of the Damned cracked his knuckles. The entire host of demons and Damned stood behind him, impatient for the Final Battle. He was somewhat anxious himself. Still, he hesitated.

"Sir?"

Kalb allowed himself one lingering glance of the Hollows. "Funny. I was just thinking how much I'll miss this place."

"You can always come back, sir."

"No. I think not."

He snapped his fingers. An arch of howling red flame a mile wide sprang before the Legion of the Damned. On the other side, his destiny awaited.

Kalb bowed to Staggia. "After you, my dear."

Wa'suria had seen better days, but for a world besieged by a thousand calamities, there was one particular disaster that rose above all others. Lord Kalb, King of Evil, Overlord of the Damned, parted the wall and stepped upon a worldly field of wheat. Wa'suria responded most poorly.

His buzzard's foot touched the bare earth, and the very world trembled in terror. Several sizeable, perfectly innocent kingdoms fell into enormous sinkholes, never to be seen again.

His lizard's foot trod upon the ground, and every beast within a thousand miles wailed a collective howl before splitting cleanly in half.

And as his goat's leg grazed the soil, mammoth chunks of the world pulled free of Wa'suria and catapulted themselves into the cold vastness of space to escape his malevolent presence.

An incubus general of his army saluted him. "So good to have you with us at last, sir."

Kalb looked up at the sun, which was already being covered by thundering, black clouds. "It's warmer than I remember."

"That's the sun, sir," the incubus explained. "It's sinking."

"Is it now? I thought it bigger than I recollected. We can't have it ruining everything now, can we?" Kalb tossed the sun a hard glare. The glowing ball retreated from his terrible inner darkness. "That's better."

He stepped aside as the Legion arrived. Row after row of demons marched through the portal. It did his black heart proud.

"Everything has been prepared as you commanded, sir."

"Excellent. Any problems?"

"The mortals proved troublesome, but nothing we couldn't handle. And we've had several incidents with the higher ups. Nothing serious of yet. We've suffered negligible losses."

Kalb took a deep exhilarating breathe. He exhaled, and the surrounding wheat fields withered and died.

He stamped his lizard's foot, and a monolith of blackest marble rose before the Legion of the Damned.

Kalb took a few seconds to add some finishing touches to his new home. He sculpted the main gate into a likeness of his own horrible visage and added writhing figures to decorate the towers.

A shaft of purest light broke through the clouds as seven crimson angels, their holy swords alight with the burning fire of the righteous, streaked towards Kalb. Lesser demons moved to stop them, but Kalb raised his hand. He spread his black wings and intercepted the divine warriors high above the world.

The leader held her blade before her. "Hear my words, Kalb. By divine law, you are to remove your vile form from this sacred world and return hence to where you belong."

Kalb chuckled. Their enthusiasm nearly made up for their complete lack of power over him. "Terribly sorry. Maybe tomorrow."

"You will return to the Hollows. Whether under your own power or by our just force, I do not care. The choice is yours."

Kalb raised an eyebrow. Seven angels of vengeance were transmogrified into seven winged squids. Squids with wings much too small and underdeveloped to bear them aloft. The leader made a particularly satisfying squish.

Kalb landed. "Come, Staggia. We have much to attend to and not much time."

The Overlord of the Damned walked through his own gaping maw as a rain of bloated toads and fresh blood began to fall.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Pira poured over the charts and maps. By all reports, the demons were amassing in the East. Even worse, the latest intelligence pointed to the inconceivable. Kalb had escaped from the Hollows. Repulsing the horde of demons would be difficult, but stuffing the King of Evil himself back into his rightful place would take not only the entire Army of Light, but flawless strategy and all the holy fury her forces could muster as well. A miracle wouldn't hurt either.

At the moment, Pira's faith in miracles was as dead as her creator.

A crimson angel marched to the table and saluted.

"Yes, Clea?"

"The host is assembled, ma'am, and awaiting your address"

Pira decided she could use a break. She straightened, tossed her wings back, and marched to the balcony. She already knew what she was going to say. She'd written her Final Battle speech some time after first being brought into existence and passed countless hours memorizing it. She was quite proud of the work. It was stirring without being melodramatic, sincere while neatly sidestepping gushing sentiment, neither too long nor too short. While she thought all of it to be perfect, she felt the ending was especially perfect.

".And as you go forth this day, remember always that we are more than divine servants. We are the crimson angels, born of Desaphanus's righteous wrath. Since the dawn of time, we have stood between the universe and chaos, and never have we failed when called upon." At this point, she would raise her Silver Sword and adopt an inspiring pose she had perfected through diligent rehearsal. "As Desaphanus's sword, we shall smite the Fallen defilers and cleanse Wa'suria of every corrupt soul."

The Army of Light would shout a glorious battle cry, and the majestic flock would pour from the Palace gates and soak Wa'suria with the blood of the wicked, which would purify the world. A new age would begin. One of glorious prosperity for all the righteous mortals spared Desaphanus's ire.

Pira smiled to herself. This was how she'd always envisioned the Final Battle. This was the only way it could pass. Desaphanus was dead, but his plan continued. So great was his power, it had to transcend even beyond his death. She wasn't sure if she truly believed that, but she was willing to pretend she did. It gave her a slight boost of confidence. She couldn't show doubt before the army or all would be lost.

She stepped onto the balcony and looked down upon the Army of Light, a force more awesome than any ever assembled. And she was greatly disappointed.

The crimson gathering was a little lean.

"Where are the rest of them?"

Clea slouched ever-so-slightly. "Ma'am?"

Pira was in no mood for games. She shot Clea a hard glare.

"We lost a few, ma'am."

"A few?" Pira guessed a third of the Army was missing.

"Yes, ma'am. When the first traces of the demonic migration were noticed, four phalanxes were dispatched to take care of the problem."

"And?"

Clea's wings drooped. "And we underestimated the strength of the enemy. Faulty intelligence reports, I'm afraid. Due to all the problems." She allowed Pira a moment to absorb the information.

"You'll be pleased to know we had a very good showing, but we've had a few losses."

Pira snarled. "A third of the holy host is more than a few losses."

"If you say so, ma'am."

The servants of Desaphanus could not be truly killed, only unmade for a century or two. A century or two too long, Pira reckoned.

"We're taking volunteers to fill out the ranks," Clea said.

"Wonderful," Pira replied with not a drop of enthusiasm. Ten angels of any other type were not the equal of one crimson warrior.

"Ma'am, would you like to begin?"

Pira looked down upon the diminished host, and her heart sank. A thousand eyes looked back at her, ready for her words of encouragement. A speech was in order, but she wasn't up to delivering her rehearsed one. She clasped her hands behind her back and took a few seconds to compose a new address. It lacked the stirring passion of her previous speech, but it was the best she could come up with.

"Try not to get killed right away."

CHAPTER NINE

Measuring time in the Realm of the Dead was next to impossible. There was no sun in the overcast sky. No day. No night. Just an eternal gray twilight. Tod didn't much care for it, but he didn't much care for very many parts of Desaphanus's universe. Most of them, in fact.

Some flowers would have really brightened up the realm. Tod didn't see why the first step into death had to be such a ridiculously dismal experience. But his brother had always been a tad somber. It was a wonder the universe had any bright spots at all.

So Tod waited. And waited. And waited. Elder gods were timeless beings, and yet, it seemed to take forever. The Isle of the Dead filled with souls needing judgment, and for lack of space, three dozen overloaded barges were anchored offshore. Worst of all was the tremendous din of thousands of restless dead, ready to get on with their afterlife.

"Excuse me."

He looked up at the four pale angels hovering overhead. "Yes?"

"Would you be Tod?"

He nodded. The only gesture possible in the crowd, and even then he risked banging heads with those jammed around him.

The muscular angel plucked him from the mob.

"Thanks. I was beginning to lose the feeling in my legs."

"Sorry about the delay, sir."

"No problem. I understand. End of the universe and all that."

They turned away from the Hall and headed towards the Gray Sea.

"We're going the wrong way."

"No, sir. There's been a change of plans. You're needed elsewhere."

"Oh. For what?"

She paused a moment before answering. "I wouldn't know, sir. I only follow orders."

A few curious glances were exchanged among the escort. Tod noticed a strange smile across the lips of the chubby one.

In his current condition, he was far from all-knowing, but it didn't take nigh-omniscience to see that something was amiss. But, as they had already left the island behind with only the placid ocean beneath

them, he couldn't do much to prevent it. Orcs were lousy swimmers, in general, and Tod, in particular, could barely keep his thick bones afloat. Water ranked among his less favorite elements. He didn't exactly care for it, but he didn't hate it either. It had good uses, like keeping things clean and giving fish a place to live. But suspended over a billion gallons of it, far from anything remotely resembling solid ground, he suddenly found the liquid a touch more unpleasant.

He didn't even know why the Realm of the Dead needed a sea in the first place. It had no tides, and nothing lived in the chilly waters. It served no apparent purpose other than to encircle the Isle of the Departed in a dismal manner. All rather pointless to Tod's thinking, but Desaphanus had always been big on appearances for appearance's sake.

"Are we going to see Xyreen?" Tod asked, trying not to look down.

"No."

The somewhat skinny angel sighed. "I think this is far enough. Even if someone did see us, they couldn't stop us now."

The angel carrying Tod slowed. She looked over her shoulder. The isle was barely a dot on the horizon. "I suppose this will do."

"For what?" Tod asked. "This will do for what?"

They ignored him.

The chubby death angel drew her sword. "I get to do it."

"No you don't. I get to."

"Why you?"

"Because I found him."

"It was my plan," the muscular angel pointed out.

"Let's take him out and stab him.' You call that a plan?"

"It worked, didn't it?"

The four angels changed. Their white hair grew darkest black. Fingers became claws as the feathers fell from backs to reveal bat wings. These were not divine servants. They were Fallen succubi. And they were going to kill him. If they could ever make up their mind as to who got the honor.

Tod squirmed in the tight grip of the one that held him.

"There's no point in that," she said. "If I drop you, you'll just drown."

Tod stopped struggling. "Okay. You're right. But why me?"

The chubby succubus twirled her sword. "Because our lord has placed a price on your head."

"And because we're evil," the thin-faced one pointed out.

"Well, that goes without saying."

A clumsy attempt was made to slice Tod in half, but he was jerked out of the way. The demons squabbled as Tod hovered between cold steel and icy water.

"We have to decide some way."

They murmured agreement.

"We could always split the reward," the chubby one suggested.

They shared a chuckle.

"Draw straws?" the skinny succubus proposed.

"I like that idea."

"You'd just cheat."

"And you wouldn't?"

The muscular succubus switched Tod to one hand, holding him by his collar. "Let's face it. There's really only one way to settle this."

The other three nodded. Swords were drawn, and steely looks were passed.

"What about him?"

Tod swallowed a lump.

"Please try not to drown. One of us will be with you shortly."

He hit the freezing Gray Sea with a splash. The demons flitted about in vicious aerial combat. Swords clanged. Curses were exchanged.

Tod wasn't afraid. He was too busy trying to save himself to be frightened. He dug deep within, searching for that spark of elder godhood he knew he had. And he found it. Or rather, he found a tiny piece of it. Perhaps the only piece that had not moldered away after ages of neglect. His limbs stiffened as he called it up. He struggled to keep his head above water while bending reality beneath his will. The chubby succubus fell first, eliminated from the running with a decapitating stroke.

Reality rippled but resisted. This was far more difficult than conjuring a herring for the Cat.

"Come on," Tod grunted. "Come on." His mouth filled with water that went down the wrong pipe. His concentration disintegrated in a fit of choking coughs.

A blade pierced the heart of the thin-faced demon. She tumbled into the water. The last two circled each other.

Now Tod was afraid. His instincts whispered in his ear. Something told him that there was far more at stake here than his own life, and an elder god's hunches were not to be ignored.

He closed his eyes and felt the universe twist beneath his will. In the lifeless waters of the Gray Sea, something was born of a desperate effort from an even more desperate elder god. He couldn't create life and tread water at the same time. So he sank.

The muscular demon noticed the prize dipping below the surface. "Damn. Don't just gawk. We have to save him."

"So what if he drowns?"

"Lord Kalb will want proof. We can't lose the body."

The demons circled the area.

"Where is he?"

"I think I see him. Yes, there he is."

"Where?"

The skinny succubus pointed to a blue head bobbing to the surface. "There."

"Thanks."

The skinny demon uttered a weak gasp as her companion stabbed her in the back. The last succubus flew over to Tod. She raised her sword with a gleeful smile. "I'll make this quick."

The Gray Sea bubbled as something rose from its depths. The size of a large ship, it lifted Tod out of the cold water atop its enormous shell. The beast was a curious assemblage of shark, crab, and octopus with just a hint of turtle and sea serpent here and there. It was a hideous amalgamation, but Tod hadn't created it for aesthetics. Its purpose was far more straightforward: to eat succubi.

The shark-crab-octopus thing lashed out with a lightning quick tentacle. The demon struggled, but she was promptly and with predatory efficiency popped into the creature's beak. It shrieked a satisfied screech.

Tod breathed a sigh of relief. It was short lived.

The succubi-eater plucked its maker from its shell and held him before its eyestalks. Fortunately, in his haste Tod had not forgotten to give his creation an instinctive distaste for anything orcish blue. It threw him back before sinking below the waves.

He was still far from safe. The isle was a long way off, and his legs were already cramping up. He'd escaped death by demon for a watery grave.

He tried to create a helpful dolphin to tow him ashore. A stabbing pain developed in his right eye, and nothing happened. Creating the succubi-eater had drained his diminished nigh-omnipotent power. An anchovy was beyond him at the moment. In the distance, several angels were heading his way, drawn by the call of the succubi-eater. His muscles surrendered to the cold water, and Tod disappeared beneath

the water one last time.

At least he hoped they were angels.

CHAPTER TEN

Atop the tallest tower of his dark fortress, Kalb looked into the rumbling sky and frowned.

"What are they waiting for?"

The Overlord of the Damned stamped his lizard's foot, and the castle of black crystal shuddered. In his wildest imaginings, he had never once considered the end of the world to be so dreadfully boring.

His unholy minions amused themselves with the slaughter of all things living and the razing of the land. Worthy efforts and carried out with admirable enthusiasm, but ultimately, the Final Battle would not be fought over Wa'suria. The world was merely the first step towards Kalb's ultimate destiny. He had no real reason to bring about its destruction, other than being the embodiment of all that was evil and cruel and it was expected of him. Truth be told, he rather enjoyed mortals, and they were so much more amusing before they were dead.

According to Kalb's plans, the Legion of Darkness would first defeat the Army of Light, reduce the world to a lifeless ash heap, and then they would storm the Palace of Heavens and cast out Desaphanus as they had once been cast out. Kalb had had a long time to plot the course of the Final Battle.

He'd been patient. He'd bided his time. Now that the end of the world was here, was it too much to ask for a little cooperation? On the plus side, the delay confirmed to Kalb that Desaphanus was indeed dead. Kalb didn't like Desaphanus, but the old blowhard ran a tight ship. If he were still in charge, the Apocalypse would be going according to schedule.

He heaved a heavy sigh, and the clouds overhead twisted into screaming, writhing shapes.

If wait he must, he would. He could afford a few more hours, but if nothing happened by then, he'd storm the Palace ahead of schedule. The Overlord of the Damned was nothing if not flexible.

Staggia approached with the latest progress reports.

"The glorious massacre goes better than expected. Wa'suria should be barren of all life within two weeks. Three if the mortals manage to collect their wits enough to make a decent showing of themselves."

"See that a few are spared for breeding stock," Kalb ordered, "except for the elves. Have them exterminated as quickly as possible. Can't stand the pointy eared things. Pompous little bastards, every last one."

"Yes, sir." She paused to scribble down the decree. "By current estimates, the world shall be irreversibly destroyed within the month."

Kalb smiled thinly. Five large tornadoes whirled about on the horizon, uprooting burning trees and raising clouds of dust. Wa'suria seemed determined to destroy itself without any help from the Fallen. His minions merely helped expedite the process.

"Where are they?"

Pure, burning light shot from the sky, tearing into the demons, who screamed and melted.

Kalb's four yellow eyes glinted with sinister glee. "Finally!"

The Horns of Heaven sounded the charge of the Army of Light. The clouds split, and a flood of angels poured forth. Not exactly a flood, Kalb quickly corrected. More like a heavy downpour. A thick drizzle more precisely. Worse still, among the crimson warrior angels, there was a high mix of other colors. Colors which had no business in this struggle.

The Legion of the Damned rose up and engaged the Army of Light. The holy host was outnumbered by three-to-one. Warrior angels were made to stand up against those steep odds, but already the blue servants of air and violet children of passion were falling in droves. The golden bearers of succor were slaughtered in two blinks of his eyes. At this rate, the battle would be over before it truly began.

Kalb frowned. "This will not do."

He snapped his fingers, and a third of his legion did vanish in puffs of smoke.

"Much better."

He sat back and watched the Final Battle. The air was thick with combatants, and soon the ground was

littered with corpses. But Kalb did not act. Not yet. It was relaxing to watch the slaughter. To listen to the shrieks of fury and pain. To breathe deep the sweet scent of angelic blood and demonic ichor that soaked the fields of wheat. No holy warrior dared to attack him. That honor was for one alone.

In the heart of the engagement, alight with the radiance of righteous fury, Pira whirled about in a blur, slaughtering any demon foolish enough to come near. Her Silver Sword hacked the Fallen to pieces. Her strong left fist crushed in the skulls of the Damned. She was more than a match for ten thousand lesser demons. She might very well defeat the Legion all by herself.

Kalb stood and stretched his wings. "If you'll excuse me, Staggia. This shouldn't take long."

The air screamed as he tore his way across the skirmish. The flesh melted from anyone, angel or demon, who dared cross his path. The Overlord of the Damned collided with the Righteous Anger of Desaphanus. The impact was heard across Wa'suria. Carried by his momentum, Kalb and Pira struck the world and were driven six miles below the surface.

Wa'suria quaked. Each jolt rocked the world. Kalb hit Pira with a glancing blow, and the West cracked in seven pieces. She sliced off his viper tail, and the North turned to blood red mush. She speared his thigh, and the South spat up monstrous worms that had lain dormant since the dawn of time.

Pira landed a solid uppercut. Kalb shot back to the surface. She soared after him on broken wings. Her robe clung to her in tatters, and most of her crimson hair had been ripped out. Still, she did not falter. It was her duty to destroy him.

Kalb himself did not look much better. Thick, green blood gushed from his jaws. Half his teeth had been left beneath Wa'suria. And his horn was cracked down the middle.

This was proving more entertaining than he'd dared hope.

Pira hovered before him, gulping heavy breaths with her working lung. The one only half-filled with blood. "Kalb, this is your last chance. Return to the Hollows this instant, and I might be persuaded to spare your life."

Kalb chuckled. "Don't tell me you're ready to stop. I'm just warming up."

Red lightning arced from his eyes. Pira deflected the bolts with her sword. Sneering, she rammed Kalb with both fists. They crashed into his dark fortress. The tower collapsed upon itself, burying the adversaries under a thousand tons of rubble.

The Final Battle slowed as the nearby participants waited for their champion to arise. The debris lay quiet for a few moments. Just long enough to raise doubts in both sides.

The ruins exploded. Deadly shards of marble cut into the nearby warriors.

Pira's sword severed Kalb's hand at the wrist. Another sliver blur slashed open his belly. His slimy intestines spilled onto the ground.

He grinned wider.

He batted her off balance with a swipe of his wing and seized her by what was left of her hair. He swung her high and brought her down hard again and again until he was certain she was too beaten to move.

"And now, dear, dear Pira, I'm afraid I've got to end this diversion. Nothing personal."

He stomped her twice with his goat's hoof before picking her up by her wings. She groaned through swollen lips. Their blackened eyes locked.

He spat out a loose fang. "It's been fun."

Pira's hand swung upwards. Her Silver Sword ran through his darkened heart, and in one instant, all of Kalb's dreams died.

The Overlord of the Damned stared at the blade stuck through his chest. The weapon was the only thing in the universe capable of killing him, and like a fool, he'd let down his guard. Not really his fault, Kalb realized. Desaphanus had made him arrogant to the point of stupidity at times, but as his last gasp left his lips, he found small comfort in the excuse.

"Oh damn."

He stumbled backwards, clutching the blade of his undoing and fell over.

But he did not die.

Kalb sat up, very much alive and very puzzled. He was not the only one. The Final Battle stopped as he stood. Disbelief fell upon the battlefield. The Silver Sword through his heart was Kalb's death, and yet, it was not. There were rules that had always been. Rules never meant to be broken. But Desaphanus was dead. His universe was crumbling, and the ancient laws were suffering as well.

Kalb was willing to overlook the infraction.

"Ouch."

Before the disbelieving Army of Light, he pulled the sword from his chest. Its glow faded away. The eternal blade dulled and rusted away into flecks of red dust that drifted in the breeze.

Pira filled with rage. She dove at the Overlord of the Damned. He caught her by the throat. His powerful grip squeezed her until her face turned blue. He could kill her right now. She didn't need air, but he could strangle her anyway. There was nothing she could do to stop him.

Kalb scooped up his guts and stuffed them back into place. His wounds knitted close. His teeth popped from his gums. Even his viper tail grew back, unfortunately, and immediately took a bite out of his rump.

Pira teetered on the edge of death. The last of her strength was gone, but Kalb had never felt better.

"Not yet."

He released her. She lay very still on the ground. Already her divine constitution was working to restore her. Good. He wasn't through with her yet.

Kalb turned upon the Army of Light, his eyes gleaming with sinister power. He clapped his hands together and half the angels burned away in bright, white fire.

"Who's next?"

The answer came in a burst of green bolts that cut down demon and angel alike. Dozens of strange egg-shaped objects descended through the clouds, raining death in a hundred different directions.

"What the..?" Kalb managed to ask before being disintegrated by a barrage of deathrays. The enormous flying eggs proceeded to annihilate Fallen, divine servant, and anything else that moved. And just for good measure, everything that just sat there as well.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Barely ten minutes after nearly drowning in the Gray Sea, Tod found himself whisked away from the Realm of the Dead. Under heavy guard, he was escorted to a secured location in the Palace of Heavens so fast his clothes were still wet. The angels showed him to a small room.

"Wait here, sir."

The door slammed shut before Tod could ask for something dry to wear. The lock clicked.

Tod grimaced at the puddle dripping around his feet. The room's sole piece of mortal comfort was a cot with a flat pillow and a thin blanket. Cold, but too tired to bother taking off his wet clothes, he climbed onto the cot and waited.

He made a deliberate effort to avoid thinking about anything. He pretended the universe wasn't ending. He ignored the assassination attempts of demons. He disregarded his dead brother and his own possible mortality, and he didn't acknowledge the terrible ache that ran through his limbs. He knew these things were all still there, and certainly not going away on their own. He simply pretended they might.

Water pooled in the center of the cot and dribbled onto the floor. He counted the steady drips and had gotten to one thousand thirty before the door opened again.

He found the energy to turn his head and nothing else. Xyreen entered with a pair of crimson bodyguards and a tall golden angel with a round, warm face. She radiated peace and caring.

Xyreen mumbled a quick introduction. "Tod, this is Slyvia, leader of the bearers of succor."

"Wish I could say it was nice to meet you."

Slyvia said nothing. She laid a hand on his shoulder, and gentle heat filled his body. Tod's aches and pains melted away, and his clothes instantly dried as well.

Tod sat up. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Her voice was soft and sweet, like a loving mother's. Although this was mostly conjecture for Tod, who had never had a mother.

She pulled away her hand. The warmth left him, and too many of the stinging pangs returned. He still felt better, but not entirely well.

Slyvia turned to Xyreen. "Can I speak with you for a moment?" She flashed Tod a reassuring smile. "In private."

Xyreen nodded. "Certainly."

"It's okay," Tod grunted. "I know."

"Know what?" Xyreen asked.

"It all makes perfect sense. The weakening of my powers. The sudden pain. I'm dying, aren't I?"

"Dying? Don't be absurd, Tod. Elder gods can't die."

"Sure they can. Just ask Desaphanus. Just ask her."

The golden angel clasped her hands together and nodded. "Your body is dying. This much I can say for certain."

"Can't you restore him?" Xyreen asked.

Slyvia frowned. "His life essence is in a state of rapid flux. It's waxing and waning, but definitely ebbing

away. I can correct the physical problems, but this is beyond my powers. I don't even know what's causing it."

"That's what I figured. And seeing as I'm currently stuck in this body, when it goes, so do I. How much time do I have?"

"I couldn't say. Your life force is beyond anything I can truly measure, but it's diminishing quickly. If you weren't an elder god, you'd be dead already. If I were to take a guess, a week. Perhaps a little more." She paused. "Perhaps less."

The room fell silent.

Tod contemplated death, and just what it meant for him. Mortals died, but their spirit went onto the Realm of the Dead. Unmade angels and demons were fully reborn after a few centuries. What awaited an elder god? Did anything? Or did they simply cease to be? From nothing they were born, and to nothing they mostly likely returned.

For the first time, Tod found himself facing the unknown. It was an odd development accompanied by a strange mix of emotions: equal parts fear and exhilaration with strong hints of curiosity. He both liked and disliked the feeling at the same time.

"A week, huh?"

Slyvia nodded.

"Doesn't give me much time."

"For what?" Xyreen asked.

Tod stood. "To save the universe. What else?"

The door flew open, and a battered figure stumbled in. Tod didn't recognize Pira right away, covered in purple bruises and dried blood. Bone stuck out her twisted leg, and her wings were stripped of most their feathers.

Xyreen and Tod ran to her side and kept her from falling.

Slyvia laid her healing touch on Pira. Her bruises disappeared. Her leg bone drew back into place, and the flesh closed up. Her scars vanished while her tattered robe became whole once more.

Pira stood on her own. A slight limp was the only trace of her injuries.

"Is it over?" Xyreen said. "Has the Legion been defeated?"

"Yes and no."

The others exchanged puzzled glances.

"Who won?" Xyreen asked again.

"The eggs."

"What eggs?"

Pira shrugged. "Good question. I don't know what they are. I don't know where they come from. All I know is that they don't seem to be on anyone's side. They killed Kalb and the Army and the Legion. And everything else. I barely made it out of there alive."

"But Desaphanus never made anything like that," Xyreen pointed out. "How can they exist?"

"I don't know, but they do."

The Palace of Heavens shuddered.

"The Legion," Xyreen exclaimed.

"Worse. It's them."

Another stronger tremor rocked the Palace.

"Tod, stay here," Xyreen ordered. "I have to look into this."

"I'm coming with you."

"It's too dangerous."

"I'm dying. Remember? What do I have to be afraid of?"

Pira paled. "You're dying?"

A nearby explosion rocked the room.

"That's not important right now," Tod said.

Xyreen considered arguing, but he was right. She had far too much on her mind to waste energy giving him orders he wasn't going to follow.

They flew through the Palace, towards the sounds of battle. Soon they came across two dozen flying eggs busy blasting the walls into powder and disintegrating scattering angels. Seeing the objects up close did not justify their existence, though debating the impossibility of their being was hardly on anyone's mind.

The angels and elder god hid behind a chunk of shattered crystal.

"They're destroying the Palace!" Xyreen needlessly observed. "We have to stop them!"

"I'm open to suggestions," Pira said. "We can't fight them."

"What do you suggest then?"

Tod spoke up. "We could always fall back and regroup."

"Abandon the Palace? We can't do that!"

More eggs crashed through the walls and proceeded to demolish anything and everything with colorful energy bolts.

"There isn't going to be a Palace much longer."

"He's right," Pira agreed.

"But-"

"We have to come up with a new strategy."

"But-"

A shadow fell across them. A flying egg aimed several guns in their direction. Sylvia were blown to atoms before she knew what hit her, but Pira managed to snatch up Tod and fly away. Xyreen disappeared amid the chaos.

Pira darted through energy beams and falling debris, soaring through a gaping hole in the ceiling. Outside, the eggs were too busy destroying the Palace to bother with two fleeing specks.

At a far enough distance, Pira stopped just long enough to allow them to watch her home crumble into a mountain of shattered crystal shards. The eggs hovered quietly over the ruins.

"What now?" Pira asked.

"I was hoping you would know," Tod replied.

The air before them shimmered as another egg materialized from nowhere. It was immense, at least three times the size of any of the others, and thousands of blinking lights covered it. Bright purple energy crackled on the strange array on its pointed end.

"Damn," Tod groaned. "I was hoping to make it at least four days."

The bolt struck the pair. There was no pain, Tod realized to his relief. In one moment, the universe disappeared, replaced by darkness.

Tod couldn't move. He couldn't feel his body, but this was different than his original formlessness. It was chilly, but not uncomfortably cold. Soft humming came from somewhere. So this was death. Not much to it. It wasn't all that scary, after all.

Somebody moaned.

"Pira?"

"Tod, is that you?" Her voice came from his left.

"Yeah."

"Where are we?"

"Well, I thought we were dead. Now I don't know." His body began to tingle, reminding him it was still there.

Lights flared, illuminating the small chamber. There wasn't much to see. The bare room had a domed ceiling and nothing else.

There was one other occupant, a strange creature with glistening pink skin. Its pear-shaped body had only two oddly jointed limbs. A pair of beady green eyes and a tiny mouth were the only facial features.

"Oh no," Tod sighed. "Not you."

"You know this..thing?"

"You might say that."

The creature used its arms to drag itself across the floor, leaving a trail of slime behind it. Its mouth moved, and a soft whistle escaped its lips.

"You're telling me," Tod replied.

"You can understand it?"

Tod nodded.

"How?"

"Because," he sighed. "I created it."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Some time after the birth of Creation...

In the dark corners of Desaphanus's grand universe, sat a dead planet. One of a thousand rejected worlds deemed unsuitable for their creator's purposes. There it quietly waited until one day early in the history of the universe, an enterprising elder god stumbled upon it.

Tod beheld the barren globe, and it struck him that it would make a fine world to mold in his image. Perhaps a little rough around the edges. Yet within it, he sensed a glittering jewel waiting his nigh-omnipotent touch. He would sculpt it into a glorious place. A world so utterly magnificent, his brother would have no choice but to bow before him and acknowledge its superiority over Wa'suria in every respect.

"If you think you can do better, why don't you go and make your own world?" Desaphanus had snorted.

And make his own world, he would. Seized with a sudden burst of ambition, he touched the planet, which he dubbed "Tenalp", and blessed it with the basic amenities: eight oceans, five continents, a pleasant atmosphere, and a smattering of seas and mountain ranges. He gave his blessed world two suns (twice as many as Wa'suria) and no less than twenty-nine moons. Originally, he'd intended thirty-four, but five were smashed to pieces before he got all the orbits worked out. The basic groundwork set forth, he began the important work of creating his people.

The people of Tenalp were to be a chosen race. They would embody only the best of everything. The Tenalpians would be strong in spirit, mind, and body. To gaze upon them would be to know the divine power of an elder god at its ultimate inspiration. Tod scooped up a handful of his world and breathed upon it. The lifeless dirt shaped itself into a semblance of life. The blob of protoplasm quivered, awaiting his further blessings. It never came.

Tod struck his first and only case of creator's block. Desaphanus had used all the good ideas, all the interesting shapes. And nothing Tod could think of was not, in one way or another, derivative of something his brother had already created. Desaphanus had had it easy. He'd been first, when originality had been a snap. Anything was more interesting than nothing.

Tod set the Tenalpians down, and with a discouraged sigh, metaphysically speaking, put his unfinished world aside. Perhaps a break would stir his creative juices, he hoped. An epoch passed and still nothing came to him. As quickly as it came, his ambition left him, and he eventually forgot all about his world.

Tenalp carried on without him.

The First Age of Tenalp was a chaotic time. Bigger Tenalpians ate smaller Tenalpians. Smaller Tenalpians did their best not to get eaten. Very little was accomplished. Yet somehow, some way, the Tenalpians survived. Indeed, they thrived. Despite the neglect of their creator, they evolved.

In the Second Age, Tenalopian civilization struggled bravely upward. This was no easy feat. They were a species with precious few resources and an environment that did little to foster sharing. The bigger Tenalpians ate their smaller brothers with regularity, but at least an etiquette was worked out

"Pardon me? Would you mind if I ate you?"

"Actually, yes I would."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry to hear that, but I'm going to eat you anyway."

"Of course. I understand."

"Gulp."

In the Third Age, the Tenalpian began their exploration into the secrets of the universe. This was a long and difficult journey, and they were not a particularly bright race. Nor were they particularly stupid, and they had one distinct advantage over the children of Wa'suria. Their creator was not around to discourage them, to smite the overly curious, and remind them of their place in the universe. And so, they pressed on from ignorance to understanding and from understanding to mastery.

By the dawning of the Fourth Age, Tenalpien insight into the true nature of reality reached new heights. They ventured forth from their depleted world and found a new future among the stars. It was an arduous feat, and many brave Tenalpian sacrificed their lives for the greater good. They spread across their neglected corner of the cosmos, quietly prospering.

Eventually and unfortunately, the Fifth Age of the Tenalpian arrived. It was a time of worry, for the Tenalpian discovered, much to their dismay, that the universe was dying. They were the first to notice this. Tenalpien science had unlocked the true nature of the cosmos, discovering secrets even the elder gods had never truly understood. Their reaction was quite predictable. From the entire race came a collective rallying call.

"This will not do."

They had not dragged themselves up from nothing to die here and now. A less determined race would have withered with this knowledge and resigned themselves to their fate. But the Tenalpien spirit flourished under adversity, and beneath the shadow of this greatest of adversities, they flourished greatly. They focused all their efforts into surviving the approaching doom. Early in their research, they concluded that it might be necessary to destroy everything else to insure their own continued existence. This was regretful, but it was a sacrifice they were perfectly willing to make.

The Commander pressed a button with his pseudopod and the Core of the universe appeared on his screen. He grimaced as well as his dull, Tenalpien face would allow.

"Is that it?"

"Yes, sir." the Chief Science Officer confirmed.

The Commander leaned closer to the screen. He felt sick, but he did not turn away.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, sir."

"Absolutely certain?"

"Yes, sir. We scanned it five times. The readings are unmistakable."

The Commander rubbed his moist, pink belly. "Well, that's that then, isn't it? Strange, isn't it? I wasn't sure we would find it in time."

"We haven't solved the problem yet, sir," the Science Officer replied. "The Core is fading. We're working to stabilize it, but so far, nothing has proven effective."

"How much time before it's decay is beyond reversion?"

"Difficult to say, sir. A few days. Perhaps longer if the Purge is kept up."

"I'll see that it is." The Commander glanced back at the screen, allowing himself a long look at Tod's malformed, hairy orc body. "Five times, you say?"

"Five times, sir."

"Very well then. I'm sure you're ready to get back to work if you're to save the Core. Don't mean to put you under extra pressure, but we're all counting on you."

"Of course not, sir." The Science Officer saluted with a twin whirl of his pseudopods.

"On your way out, would you please tell the ensign I need to speak with him?"

"Certainly, sir."

The Science Officer left, and the ensign dragged himself in.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes." The Commander smiled. "Ensign, would you mind if I ate you?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Army of Light, or rather, its shattered, dispirited remnants, huddled in the Catacombs of the Palace of Heavens. Demonic battles and Tenalpian war eggs had taken their toll, and the divine servants numbered barely two thousand. None dared make a sound. The explosions above had ceased over an hour ago, yet none felt up to risking discovery. Amid the overwhelming silence, the Keeper's quill scratched softly.

He stubbornly refused to acknowledge the multitudes of figments. At least they were keeping quiet. He thanked Desaphanus for that as he dipped his pen in ink.

The Catacombs were vast, but most of that space was filled with the written history of the universe. There was barely enough room for the Keeper's delusions. Already, several tall stacks of the Sacred Parchment of Time had been toppled by clumsy phantasms. This was all in his imagination, he knew. The parchments were perfectly fine. Which was good. Otherwise, restacking the tome in the correct order would have put him behind another three hundred years.

A figment spoke. "What are we supposed to do now?"

"I'm thinking."

"Are they gone?"

"I don't know. Somebody should check. You there."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Go up and see how things are going."

"Me, ma'am?"

"Yes, you. Now hurry. But be careful."

"Yes, ma'am."

A light murmur arose, filling the Catacombs with whispers. The Keeper paid it no mind, even as a nearby collection of imagined angels spoke with soft voices.

"What if they're gone?" one asked.

"What if they're still there?" another put forth.

"Where did they come from?"

"Who's side are they on?"

The Keeper laid aside his pen. "Do you mind? I'm trying to work."

The figments tossed him unpleasant glances, which he ignored. He found it more and more difficult to ignore the pieces of conversation floating about. Real or not, they proved far too distracting. The final straw came as someone bumped into his desk, tipping over his inkwell. A black stain spilled across his scroll, blotting out everything from the Dark Cataclysm to the Fall of the Cyclops Empire. This would have greatly upset him if it had actually happened.

So he decided to wait. The madness had passed before. It would surely pass again. Soon, he hoped.

Shortly, the angel returned from her mission. "They're gone."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How's it look up there?" Xyreen dared ask.

"I'm afraid there's nothing but rubble. And very little of that."

"Excuse me," the Keeper inquired. "But are you saying the Palace has been destroyed?"

The scout nodded.

"By demons?"

"Not demons," Xyreen replied. "Giant eggs."

"I see." The Keeper chuckled. Surely, his senses had left him. He decided to enjoy his derangement while it lasted. Soon enough, it would be over, and he would have to get back to work. He propped an elbow on his desk (in the blot of ink that wasn't really there) and listened to the angels converse.

"What are we supposed to do now?"

The question was seized up by the gathering and echoed from the lips of everyone.

Xyreen held up her hands. "I'll think of something. Just give me a moment."

The angels fell quiet as the eagle-headed Wisdom of Desaphanus paced in a small circle. Rolling the situation around in her mind, she came to the quick conclusion that there was very little to be done. The angels were beaten. The universe was crumbling. The most logical course of action was to sit back and wait for the end. She allowed herself to entertain the thought for a full minute. No longer, as Desaphanus would not approve.

Stuff his approval, Xyreen mused, and stuff him along with it.

She waited for the inevitable smiting that would come with such impudence, but there was none. No lightning. No wracking pain. Not even a boom of disapproving thunder. At that moment, she came to the inescapable conclusion: Desaphanus was well and truly dead. And his universe was hurrying to follow him.

The angels looked to her for guidance. She had none to give anymore.

"I don't know."

The gathering of divine servants uttered a collective gasp.

"I'm sorry," Xyreen apologized. "But it's over."

The sagging morale of the Army of Light suffered one punishing blow too many. One by one, they sat on the Catacombs floor. A deep melancholy fell over the angels. Nothing was said. Nothing needed to be said. The Final Battle was over. The Army of Light had lost. Chaos claimed the cosmos.

After one very long hour, the Keeper grimaced. The figments were not leaving, and while they remained, finishing his work was quite impossible. Even while not talking, the soft breath of several hundred angels bounced off the Catacombs walls and produced a steady, highly unpleasant rasp. Something had to be done.

"Might I make a suggestion?"

The angels slowly raised their heads.

It felt absurd, trying to reason with madness, but he had nothing to lose. He cleared his throat.

"Perhaps you should attack the eggs."

Heads were lowered again.

"Well, why can't you?" he asked.

Xyreen shook her head. "There aren't enough of us left."

"I see." The Keeper drummed his overgrown fingernails on his desk. "What about the demons?"

"What about them?"

"It seems to me that if these eggs are causing problems, maybe the demons could help you. After all, they were once divine servants too, weren't they?"

Xyreen grimaced. "Work with demons? But we can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because we can't."

"Why?"

"Because..Desaphanus would never allow it."

"I thought Desaphanus was dead."

Xyreen scowled. Whether that was true or not, she did not like to be reminded of it.

"It just seems to me that if Desaphanus is dead, what he would or wouldn't allow should be irrelevant."

Xyreen's scowl deepened.

"It was merely a suggestion," the Keeper sighed. He supposed he should have known. There was no reasoning with madness.

Xyreen smirked as she considered the very notion. Angels and demons were mortal enemies. Even if they could set aside their differences long enough to fight back against the eggs, Desaphanus would never have approved. And even if he was dead, she was reluctant to go against him.

Then, like a bolt of revelation, Xyreen understood how much she had depended on her creator. He had been her purpose for being, and now, there was no one to tell her what to do, to guide her destiny. No one but herself. Strangely, the notion gave her strength. It was all well and good to rely on Desaphanus when he had been around. But now she had to rely on herself to do what needed to be done.

She closed her eyes and for the first time ever, pushed Desaphanus's rules and desires from her mind. It was surprisingly easy, and underneath all those edicts heaped upon her, she found the power to make a decision. Perhaps it wasn't the right decision. But it was all hers. Her first true exercise in self-reliance.

And right or wrong, she discovered she quite liked making it.

The Tenalpian had succeeded where the Army of Light had fallen short. The Legion of the Damned was driven from Wa'suria. They retreated to the Hollows to lick their wounds, both physical and mental. The former was easy. The latter proved quite difficult. Without their leader, the demons fell into disarray. It wasn't that they missed Kalb. As a ruler, he was universally feared and despised among the Fallen, and not a single tear was shed in his memory. But in Kalb's absence, a vacuum of power was left in the chain of command, and demons rushed to claim the Dark Throne.

Demonic politics were woefully underdeveloped. From atop the highest peak of Mount Skraahh, Staggia watched a throng of demons slaughter each other with ambitious zeal. What the selection process lacked in subtlety, it more than made up for in bloodshed. But with demons, it was the only form of democracy possible. Given enough time, Staggia thought, a leader would eventually be selected.

By then, it would be too late. The universe would be ended. Perhaps by alien death eggs. Perhaps by cataclysm. But not by Kalb and his Legion. It would still be destroyed, she reminded herself. What difference did it make who or what finally obliterated it?

Yet it did make a difference. And a very big difference indeed. What purpose was there in being a demon if not to bring about the end of all things? Everything else they did: the tormenting of the Damned, the tempting of mortals, the squabbling amongst themselves, these were merely diversions until their time had come. Now that it had, they were missing it, and all because the Fallen were too preoccupied with their own quests for power that they failed to see the bigger picture.

Something had to be done.

Staggia had to try and reason with her fellows. Even as she descended the mountain, she knew the effort

was doomed to failure, and she would certainly be ripped apart during the attempt. She had to try anyway.

Halfway down Mount Skraahh, the Hollows began to rumble. It started as a soft tremble barely detectable over the cries of battle, but the tremors grew quickly. The mountain shook. Loose stones and dirt pelted Staggia. She pulled herself close, gripping tight her precarious handholds.

The demons stopped fighting. They recognized the sound of their own imminent doom. The Hollows quaked as if terror seized the land itself. This was not far from the truth, for death had arrived to the realm of demons. Merciless oblivion in the form of the Tenalpian fleet.

The cavernous stone ceiling shattered as war eggs smashed their way into the Hollows. The rain of rubble crushed many demons. The Tenalpians set about destroying the rest. The Fallen scattered like roaches, but there was nowhere to run. Hidden in the shadows of Mount Skraahh, Staggia watched as her brethren were cruelly and efficiently annihilated before the might of giant eggs.

A large, silver egg floated over the mountain. Its many implements of destruction crackled and popped with searing menace.

So this is how it ends, she thought. Well, just as long as it ends. No point in harboring sour grapes in her final moments.

Above the booming explosions and the shrieks of demons, the Horns of Heaven sounded the charge. Another hole tore through the rocky ceiling, and the Army of Light (or its pale imitation, Staggia guessed) issued forth into the Hollows.

She could only gape as the angels swept down and broke off. The silver egg over the mountain unleashed a volley of rays, which struck and disintegrated much of the first wave. But the Army pushed forward and engulfed the egg in a cloud of ferocity. Holy blades sliced its armor to ribbons. Righteous fire blasted holes through its shell. The egg sputtered and rocked. Belching flames, it tumbled end over end and crashed to the ground.

The Army of Light paused before the twisted wreckage. The eggs were formidable but not invincible. Now that they had lost the element of surprise, the battle stood on equal ground. Perhaps not quite equal just yet, but it was a start.

The Horns of Heaven sounded the rallying song, and the holy hosts were seized with fresh vigor. The Army of Light was a shadow of its former self, and the eggs were the deadliest menace they had ever faced. But a lost cause always inspired new heights of greatness in the forces of good.

Among the servants of evil, the effect was remarkably different. Demons always fled from a disadvantage. Or even a fair fight. It wasn't that evil was cowardly, although often it was. It just knew when to walk away. The problem being: there was no place left to hide. Backed in a corner, the demons had no other choice than to fight or die. They set aside their fears and joined their ancient enemies in a fight to save the universe, so that someday, they might get the chance to destroy it themselves.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As an enormous cloud of unbound atoms, Kalb stretched across the breadth of the universe. The Silver Sword had failed to kill him, and Tenalpiian death rays had fallen short as well. Such was his dark power that even full blown discorporation could only inconvenience him.

In the meantime, he listened to the universe. There was little else to do while his body pulled itself together. Before being disintegrated, Kalb had never really taken the time to analyze the entire creation of his Maker. He'd always assumed, in his arrogance, that he understood the way of the world.

He hadn't understood a thing.

It wasn't entirely his fault. The universe was like a great big game, and Kalb was merely a pawn, albeit a very important pawn. To truly understand the game, one had to remove one's self from the board, which the Tenalprians had graciously done for him. When he became the true master of all reality, he would thank them with a merciful death. Everyone and everything else would suffer beneath his ultimate power.

His atoms shuddered with sinister delight.

He was getting ahead of himself. Before claiming his destiny, he would need to usurp that power from its source. It wouldn't be terribly difficult. The fool who possessed it didn't know how to wield it properly. His ineptness, and the incompetence of his predecessor, had brought the universe to its current miserable state. Soon, all that would change.

Soon, Tod would be dead.

And Kalb, newly christened elder god, would hold the universe in an unbreakable grip of evil.

His far ranging molecules giddily swirled.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Tenalpians tossed Tod and Pira into a small, unfurnished cell with no windows and a door that was all but undetectable when closed. The elder god sat in one corner and waited for whatever was going to happen. Pira amused herself by pushing her right index finger into the cell walls. Tiny dimples formed in the metal.

"I can break us out of here," she said after finishing her first fifty.

"What's the point?" Tod asked. "They'd just kill us if we tried. Which brings up an interesting point. What do they plan on doing with us?"

"Don't ask me. You created them." She twisted her finger, adding another dimple to the wall.

"That was a long time ago."

Tod only vaguely remembered his first and only batch of Tenalpians. They hadn't been much to look at, and their brains were little more than orange paste to fill their heads. As a race, they were unformed. Never truly intended for survival. But survived, they had.

"What are you grinning about?" Pira asked.

"Was I grinning? Sorry."

He tried to wipe the smile from his face, but it only grew bigger.

Pira pulled herself away from her wall dimpling. "What's so amusing?"

"Oh. Nothing."

The angel flapped her wings impatiently. "What is it?"

"Nothing. Really."

She turned back to the wall, pressed in a few more dents, and tossed an annoyed glare over her shoulder.

Tod was smiling even bigger.

"I don't believe it," she sighed.

He fidgeted beneath her gaze.

"You're actually proud of these things."

"No, I'm not," he protested.

"Don't bother denying it."

Tod shrugged. "Maybe just a little."

Pira folded her arms across her chest and snarled in his direction.

"Okay. They're not exactly what I had in mind when I first made them. Still, you have to admit, they've done pretty well for themselves."

She scowled deeper.

"I'm not condoning their actions," he said. "I'm just pointing out the obvious."

A flash of divine fire sparked in her eyes.

Tod decided it would be best to keep any other observations to himself. They sat in silence for a few more minutes before the door opened, and two large purple Tenalpian and a smaller green one dragged their legless bodies in.

"They want the blue one," the lead Tenalpian announced in its language of squeaks and squeals.

Pira stepped between Tod and the Tenalpian. "Back off!"

The green blob held up a shimmering golden lump. A yellow ray arced from the lump to Pira. She twitched once and fell to the floor. The weapon was aimed in Tod's direction.

He raised his hands and stepped forward. "No need for that."

The green one smiled, although only Tod or a fellow Tenalpian could read an expression on its smooth, featureless face.

"Will she be alright?" Tod asked.

"The otherling is merely stunned. Please, come this way."

His escort led him through the winding halls where pear-shaped blobs of various sizes and colors went about their thoroughly inexplicable business. As their creator, Tod was surprised at how little he understood his chosen people. His head was filled with so many questions, he didn't know which to ask first. The walk ended at a room filled with Tenalpians hunched over glowing panels.

The Chief Science Officer, an unusually plump blob, looked up from his panel. "Ah, excellent. Over there, please."

The guards guided Tod to the empty space on the floor. The green pear and the Science Officer exchanged a few casual comments.

The Officer approached Tod. "I'm told you can converse. Is this true?"

Tod nodded.

"Excellent. That will make things easier. Would you please remove any physical accessories you are currently carrying?"

"You mean, get undressed?"

"I mean, remove any physical accessories you are currently carrying."

None of the Tenalpians wore anything in the way of clothing. Only simple harnesses to carry their loose odds and ends and leave their hands free for dragging.

"Uh..sure."

Tod stripped down to his skin without much thought. Although, among his perfectly smooth captors, he felt somewhat embarrassed by the quirks of his orcish body. Legs and hair were the exception here. His numerous jutting parts and dark crevices seemed completely out of place. Most the Tenalpians did an excellent job of hiding their revulsion.

The Science Officer handed Tod's clothes over to an assistant. "See that these are scanned thoroughly."

A team of five assistant analyzers surrounded Tod. They held up various clicking and beeping devices.

"Raise your upper right appendage please," a brown Tenalpian requested.

Tod complied.

"Now your left."

The Science Officer twisted the dial on a chirping gizmo of his own. "Interesting. Very interesting."

"If you don't mind me asking," Tod asked anyway. "What's this all for?"

"I would be more than happy to explain it to you, if your underdeveloped mind were capable of

comprehending it."

"Could you try anyway?"

"If you insist. We are looking for the Core of the universe."

"What's that?"

"It's very difficult to explain. I scarcely imagine you could understand it." The Officer dragged himself over to a table and exchanged his chirping gizmo for a humming device. "The Core is the essence of the universe. It is the primal origin which maintains the basic building blocks of the cosmos."

"Oh." Tod nodded as if he understood.

The Science Officer was not fooled. He rubbed his head with a pseudopod. "Perhaps an analogy would help. If you are capable of abstract thinking. Imagine, if you can, that the universe is a single, tremendous life form. A plant, if you like. And that each tiny piece of it is merely a part of a much larger whole. In essence, one plant with a billion leaves. Have I lost you yet?"

Tod didn't care for the Tenalpian's condescending tone. As their creator, a little respect wasn't too much to expect. Then again, they didn't really owe him anything.

"Go on."

"Excellent. Now this universal plant draws its continued existence from a vast reservoir of potentiality. In simplest terms, its food. That food is the Core. Without it, the cosmos would starve to death in a very short time, and eventually, cease to exist."

Tod's jaw dropped. What sort of monstrous race had he spawned? "You want to find it to destroy it."

The lab filled with shrill Tenalpian chuckles.

"Apparently there's been a misunderstanding" the Science Officer replied with a smirk. "Destroying the Core would destroy the universe."

"You don't want to destroy the universe?"

Another round of laughter rose from the Tenalpians.

"Of course not. It's where we live. Now, if you would be so kind as to step this way."

The Officer pointed to a cylinder with a small door in it. There looked to be barely enough room for Tod inside.

"One more question," Tod asked.

"Aren't you the curious one? Ask your question."

"If you don't want to destroy the universe, then why did you attack the Palace?"

"That is a necessary part of the Purge. By trimming the unessential bits and pieces of the cosmos, we can

extend its continued existence."

"The universe is dying?"

"I would think that would be obvious. Even to a simple creature such as yourself. Now, please enter the analyzatronascope. This won't take long."

Tod squeezed through the small door and stood in the crystal tube. It was a tight fit. "What's this do?"

If the Tenalpians heard him through the glass, they didn't respond. The Science Officer gestured, and switches were thrown. An assortment of devices lowered from the ceiling and slowly rotated the analyzatronascope. The bottom of the tube pulsed steadily, like it was breathing. Tod's legs began to tingle from the knees down.

"This isn't dangerous, is it?" he shouted through the glass.

The rotating array started to sparkle as the tingle spread to his waist. He felt dizzy, but the tube left him nowhere to fall. The top opened, and a glittering ball lowered within six inches of his head. His scalp began to itch, but not in an entirely bad way. The sensation crawled down his prickled flesh and joined up with the tingling at his waist. The ball sparked with a rainbow of colors, both beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

The Science Officer gave the signal, and the energies filled the analyzatronascope. They saturated Tod's body, suffusing it with surging power. The effects on his physical being were varied and many. His hair stood on end. His knees trembled. The roof of his mouth tasted like honey, and his liver jiggled in an altogether disagreeable way. A hundred other unpleasant sensations ran through him, but he quickly forgot about all them. For the analyzatronascope opened his eyes, and Tod beheld the universe in its true glory.

In the space of one moment, he went from nigh-omniscient to completely omniscient, from being all-seeing in a purely theoretical sense to truly being all-seeing. The differences between the two states were subtle but remarkable. The many twinges and pangs of his body were just the tiniest sliver of information assaulting his mind. As an elder god, he did not go mad from the exposure to his brother's universe. He didn't exactly care for the feeling, but he could deal with it.

Neither Tod nor Desaphanus had ever taken the time to analyze their powers in depth. They just took them for granted. They willed something to happen, and it did. They never bothered to investigate any further. There never really seemed to be any reason to. Desaphanus was always busy building his universe, and Tod had never been all that curious. The result of their complete lack of interest: a gaping hole of ignorance on the true nature of reality.

But now, Tod finally understood. The elder gods had never actually created something from nothing. They'd been cannibalizing their own near-infinite beings. It was like tearing off a finger and reshaping it into whatever fit your needs: a planet, a fish, the law of gravity. The main problem being that keeping a severed finger alive is much harder than a digit still connected to your hand.

The universe was much more than a single severed finger. It was the being of the elder gods chopped into countless smaller pieces and spread across eternity. The strain of keeping it going, maintaining a basic force of life in every teeny-tiny piece was unimaginable. Yet Desaphanus had managed just that with his incredible will. Under proper care, the universe could quite possibly have gone on forever. But Desaphanus hadn't known when to stop, and the drain became too much, even for an elder god. The

balance was destroyed, reducing Desaphanus and his universe to a titanic tug-of-war. Both fighting tooth-and-nail to continue existing. The universe had won. Sort of.

When Desaphanus died, the last of the cosmos's life force went with him. Rather than fade into darkness alongside him, the universe latched onto the only available source.

Tod was the Core.

When he died, everything else would as well: Pira, Xyreen, Kalb, the stars, the sun, Wa'suria, Tenalp, and even his Cat. They would all just fade away into dark, inescapable oblivion.

Like a forgotten dream.

Tod couldn't let that happen. There had to be a way to stop it, and now that he was fully omniscient, he had to find that way.

The analyzatronascope wound to a stop. His senses fell back into his body.

"Thank you," the Chief Science Officer said with a frown. "That will do for now."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In all the universe, only one small, seemingly insignificant spot remained untouched by the death throes of Creation. This simple cottage in an unassuming patch of forest was under the protection of an elder god's miracle. The protection was not quite intentional. Tod himself was completely unaware of this particular

subconscious exercise of nigh-omnipotence as was the cottage's single, furry inhabitant.

The Cat was hungry. She did not, technically, need to eat. She was immortal, but she rather liked eating. It ranked just behind napping as her favorite thing to do. Grooming was a close third. So as she waited for her caretaker to return from wherever he had gone off to, she napped and groomed, and napped and groomed some more. Still, her caretaker did not return, and she considered getting up and catching something herself.

It had been several millennia since she'd actually stalked her dinner. She vaguely recalled the thrill of prowling around, the exhilaration of catching the scent of prey, and the rush as she pounced upon her meal.

The Cat strolled towards the door but stopped halfway. It seemed an awful lot of work. She curled up on the floor and wondered just what had happened to her caretaker. It was not like him to be so irresponsible. For a moment, she worried something might have happened to him. The thought troubled her greatly. If he didn't come back, who would scratch behind her ears? Already, the vaguest sensation of an itch was developing. A swirl of colors in the center of the cottage caught her attention. She spent a full minute debating on whether it was interesting enough to make her get up and investigate before deciding it was.

The Cat curiously prodded the swirling mist. It felt slick and oily. She hopped back, shaking the slippery sensation from her paw. She resisted the urge to lick it as her instincts told her there was something not quite right with the fog. It expanded and thickened, forcing her to unleash her fiercest hiss. Despite that, it continued to grow. She arched her back and flattened her ears. The gathering of errant molecules filled the cottage. The Cat bolted out the door.

The sound of the roof shattering stopped her flight. She turned and watched the atoms join together into the twenty foot tall Overlord of the Damned. His yellow eyes beheld the Cat, and Kalb grinned with sinister delight. "Here, kitty, kitty."

One monstrous hand scooped up the Cat. He held her up by the scruff of her neck. She hissed and spat, nicking his nose with a swipe of her claws.

Kalb chuckled.

"Let me go," she growled.

"No," he replied with a smug grin.

The Cat called upon her shape shifting powers and became a large and fearsome Northern Hill ogre, a breed of monkey-like thing that brought terror into the hearts of all Wa'suria. Kalb was unimpressed.

His viper tail snapped at the snack, but he slapped it down.

"Not yet."

Dissatisfied, the serpent sank its fangs into the small of his back.

Kalb spread his black wings and soared into the air. He paused above the cottage just long enough to hurl a fiery wad of spittle that set the forest ablaze.

The Cat became a swamp goblin, and her slick skin nearly slipped free of his grip. The Overlord of the Damned snickered, and she reverted to her natural form.

"That will be enough of that."

He took a moment to enjoy the aflame cottage before opening a portal across the realms and crossing over to the cursed Hollows once again.

The Realm of the Damned had suffered much during his absence, but a domain of eternal torture was difficult to truly destroy. The Lake of Jagged Frost was on fire and looking decidedly unsharp. Mount Skraah, the realm's tallest peak, had been reduced to a mildly impressive hill, greatly reducing its boulder pushing value. The Pit of Squirmy, Terribly Unpleasant Things was now just a plain (though still not terribly pleasant) smoking hole in the ground. The damage beyond that was mostly insignificant.

Kalb disliked this turn of events. Over the ages, he had grown to despise the Hollows, but it was still his kingdom. He would remove the troublesome intruders. Then, he would kill Tod and take the elder god's power for his own. And then, as a nigh-omnipotent despot he would twist Desaphanus's precious universe into a glorious perversion.

"Won't that be fun?" he asked the Cat.

She hissed and squirmed in his grip.

He winged his way towards the sounds of battle, arriving on a raging skirmish. On one side, a pair of Tenalpian war eggs. On the other, his own infernal minions alongside Desaphanus's holy servants.

Kalb cracked a grin. He could never have envisioned such a cooperative effort. Were Desaphanus still alive, the old sourpuss would have been fuming. The thought amused the Overlord of the Damned to no end.

He held back for a moment and watched the battle unfold. Xyreen, the Overblown Ego of Desaphanus, actually stood in the midst of the conflict, attempting to bring some semblance of organization to the fight. She was doing a surprisingly good job. The eggs fired in every direction but were outmaneuvered by their opponents. It was only a matter of time before the eggs suffered defeat, but Kalb didn't feel like waiting. He leapt into the middle of the fight with such force, the ground cracked beneath his feet.

The eggs turned on this new threat, but even state-of-the-art Tenalpian military technology was no match for the Overlord of the Damned in his own domain.

They fired a colorful assortment of death rays. Kalb called upon the stone. It raised up to shield him from the blast. He stamped his foot, and a giant claw of stone grew from the ground. With one quick swat, one egg was hurled into another. They met with a hard crack and wobbled in the air.

A crackling ball of black electricity formed on his open hand. He flicked it towards the eggs and turned away, not even bothering to watch as the ball engulfed its targets. The gleaming metal ships boiled and popped, reduced to slag in a matter of seconds.

Kalb's Legion gawked.

Desaphanus's Army gaped.

Staggia stepped from the throng. "You're alive."

"Indeed, I am."

Kalb cast his gaze upon the collection of angels and demons. His eyes stopped on Xyreen.

"I must say I'm surprised you'd sully yourself in the trenches, my dear."

Xyreen flashed a hard glare. "These are hard times, Kalb."

"Indeed they are." He handed the Cat over to Staggia. "Take good care of this. I'll be needing it later. So, my dear Xyreen, what will it be? Shall we fight amongst ourselves, or can the eternal conflict be put aside long enough to take care of our common inconvenience?"

Xyreen knew the answer best for the universe, but she was loath to make it. The Overlord of the Damned and Divine Wisdom of Desaphanus had never gotten along very well, even in the time before his Fall. Back then, she'd resented his place at the side of the creator, and he had gotten no end of amusement in reminding her of that. The many millennia had not dulled her resentment.

"I am the lesser of two evils," he observed. "Admittedly, by a very small margin."

"For the sake of the universe," she spat out through a tightly clenched beak.

And somewhere, she knew, Desaphanus was rolling over in his grave.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On one side of Wa'suria, an errant comet hurtled towards the world. On the other side, a chain of asteroids rocketed towards the unsuspecting planet. Two cataclysmic forces raced each other to be the first to complete the deathblow of the universe. And just behind each, the edges of the cosmos crumbled into raw nothingness, which swept inward, eagerly consuming everything in its way.

Meanwhile, on Desaphanus's world, the unthinkable was happening. Wa'suria had ever been a world of abundant conflict. Desaphanus had not intended his world as a haven for high ideals. Its purpose was to occupy and amuse him over the course of eternity, and a planet of peace would have gotten boring very quickly.

And so, by divine design, Wa'suria was filled with squabbling inhabitants who were given to war and conflict. Men against ogres. Ogres against elves. Elves against dwarves. Dwarves against goblins. Goblins against trolls. Trolls against every other living thing. This was the way it had been. The way it had ever been intended.

But even an elder god's designs have ways of changing over the course of time. For as the Tenalpian war eggs ravaged the planet, Wa'suria's many children came to realize that ancient hatred amongst themselves paled next to this new foe.

Men stopped killing ogres. And ogres (reluctantly) stopped killing elves. Elves laid down their arms against dwarves. Dwarves set aside their disgust for goblins. Goblins decided trolls weren't that bad after all. And trolls, well trolls continued being trolls and killing whatever they felt like killing, which was pretty much anything.

Ignoring this exception, the unthinkable happened. Not only did enemies stop being enemies. They became allies. Even the dragons, always a snooty, arrogant race, laid aside their superiority (temporarily of course) and lowered themselves to join the battle alongside the lesser creatures of Wa'suria. Angels and demons rallied to the same call. As one, Desaphanus's children rose up and fought back against the Tenalpian war eggs.

For the most part, this resulted in their wholesale slaughter. Even the greatest army of men, goblins, elves, dwarves, and ogres was little more than a distraction to the Tenalpians. The dragons proved a more substantial irritation, but even they fell eventually. The angels and demons were the only real threat to the fleet, but their numbers were small and, in the end, their chances of driving off the Tenalpians were even smaller. Still, the Wa'surians complete lack of cooperation irked the Tenalpians to no end.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Pira scratched her head, chewed her lower lip thoughtfully, and paced in a short semicircle. "Let me get this straight. You're the source of the life force of the universe. But the universe is draining too much too fast, and you're dying."

Tod nodded.

"And when you die, everything dies."

"Not just dies," he clarified, "but ceases to exist in any sense at all."

"Right. So total oblivion in other words."

Tod nodded again.

The crimson angel completed the other half of her semicircle. "Now that you know the problem, can't you fix it?"

"How?"

"I don't know. You're an elder god. Can't you do anything you want?"

Tod chuckled dryly. "I'm nigh-omnipotent. Emphasis on the 'nigh'. There are limits even to my abilities at full power, and at the moment, I'm nowhere near full power. I'm out of practice and most of my energy is being sucked away by the rest of existence."

"So you can't fix it. We're dead. Everything's dead."

"I didn't say that." Tod flashed a weak smile. "I just need time to think this through."

"How much time?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I'm only nigh-omniscient."

They sat in silence for several hours as angel and elder god mulled over the most pressing problem in the universe.

"I've got it!" Pira shouted out.

"Let me hear it." Tod was somewhat skeptical but open to suggestions.

"Restore the balance like the Tenalpian are trying to do. Undo as much of the universe as necessary to give yourself time to rest. Then, when you're feeling better, recreate as much as you can."

"Nice idea, but I don't have enough power to do that. Even if I did, undoing the universe requires just as much energy as creating it in the first place. Destroying it would consume my life force that much quicker, and I just don't have the power to spare."

"So you don't have your powers, and even if you did, using them would do more hurt than good?"

"That's about it."

"Then it's over."

"Not yet. I just have to think of a way to restore the balance without using my nigh-omnipotence."

"Which you don't even have," Pira observed. "That's impossible. There's no way to do this without a full blown miracle."

"There's still time."

"Yes. Time." She leaned against the wall. "As long as we're alive, there's hope."

But she didn't mean it. Pira had been made to never know defeat. She was Desaphanus's Righteous Anger Incarnate, an unbeatable force whether leading the Army of Light or facing the Legion of the Damned all by herself. This foe was different: abstract, overpowering, and immune to the invincible might of her limbs. Kalb and his minions could be beaten back. Heretics and unbelievers could be taught the error of their ways. The death of the universe taunted her like a whispering ghost, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it. She had never felt so powerless. Truthfully, she had never ever felt powerless before.

The door slid open. The green Tenalpian (or possibly just a green Tenalpian as all of them looked alike to her) and two guards entered the cell. Pira took a step between them and Tod. The guards raised their weapons.

"It's okay, Pira. They won't hurt me. They know what I am."

Pira's muscles tightened. She trusted his judgment, but she desperately needed to strike out at something, anything. She had not been made to contain her rage, but somewhere, she found the strength to check her righteous fury.

"I'll be fine," Tod said as the Tenalpian led him away to a new room.

This one was smaller than the previous examination room and mostly empty. A metal table sat in the center. A large silver ball hung directly over it. The plump Chief Science Officer awaited beside the table, which upon closer inspection, had metal shackles perfectly suited to restraining one's limbs.

"More tests?" Tod asked.

"Please lay on the table," the Science Officer requested.

Tod hesitated.

A big guard prodded his shoulder, reminding Tod he really didn't have a choice. He climbed onto the hard table and laid down. As the Tenalprians secured his arms and legs, he tried to relax. There wasn't anything to worry about. They knew how important he was. There was no safer place to be.

The Science Officer pressed a button on his harness, and the silver ball opened like a tuna's mouth. A strange amalgamation of whirring and clicking devices lowered. Vicious hooks and long, thin blades writhed on the ends of shiny mechanical tentacles. In the center of the mass, a bright yellow eye gleamed.

Nothing to worry about, Tod reassured himself.

The top of the walls slid down to reveal an audience of Tenalprians. They leaned over the edge. He caught snatches of their hushed chatter.

"Odd looking thing, isn't it?"

"Downright hideous, if you ask me."

"Now, now, it would be unfair of us to hold this pathetic creature to our standards."

"True, but you must admit, the primitive beast has a disgustingly overdeveloped body. What do you think those lower appendages are for?"

"I'm told the otherlings use them to move around."

"How pointless."

"I would imagine the redundancy might come in useful at times."

"I suppose. I wonder if the internal physiology is as excessive."

Tod decided to start worrying.

The Science Officer pressed another button, and the yellow eye extended to within an inch of the elder god's face. It rotated and sparkled, slowly moving from Tod's head to his feet and back again.

"My fellow realiticians, having reached the limits of what can be learned through non-intrusive methods of analysis, we have now determined to enter the next phase of our examination. Somewhere within this being, we believe the Core of the universe is contained. We will now locate and remove it for further study."

"You can't do this!"

The Science Officer dragged over to Tod and placed a psuedopod on his chest. "I shall begin here, slicing open the abdominal cavity here and here for easiest access to the organs. This process will be slowed by the subject's internal calcium framework which shall have to be snapped and pulled out of the way."

"Listen! I'm the Core! It's not inside me! It is me!"

The Science Officer nodded towards a burly Tenalprian, who began to gag Tod.

"Wait! Don't do that! You have--"

His pleas were muted with one tight knot. He screamed through the gag, but they ignored him.

"I have ordered the subject muffled. As we have a limited understanding of the otherling's physiology, I cannot risk adverse affects from anesthesia. The subject's pain is regrettable, but we must remind ourselves that there is more at stake here than the fate of one being."

Tod pulled against the restraints. He called upon his extremely limited nigh-omnipotence. A tingling mist rose up on his chest and congealed into a blowfish. A rather sickly blowfish at that. The poor convulsing thing rolled off the table and quickly expired.

The Science Officer handed the dead fish to an assistant and ordered it analyzed.

"I shall now begin the operation. I would warn anyone sitting in the front row: you will get wet."

The bladed device clicked. A curved knife lowered to Tod's sternum where it stayed for a very long moment. He fixed on the shining instrument, poised to split open his guts and bring about the end of the universe. The blade raised to slice into his blue flesh. His eyes clamped shut, and his fists clenched so that black orc fingernails dug into his palms.

The operation room's door fell in with a crash. Pira stepped inside, an unconscious Tenalpian guard in each hand.

"What are you doing!"

"They're trying to kill me!" he shouted over the blare of alert sirens. A stifled "Mmmmph mmmph mmmph mmmph!" found its way through the gag, but that, along with the dangerous clicking surgical device preparing to eviscerate him, got the message across.

The two guards stationed inside the room raised their weapons. Pira whirled about in a blur, hurling a beaten Tenalpian at each. The boneless, fleshy projectiles connected with their equally squishy targets. They splattered into a shower of colorful chunks.

The Science Officer retreated to a far corner as the crimson angel zipped to Tod's side. She pulled free the gag.

"How'd you know?" he asked.

"I didn't, but I couldn't sit in that cell anymore. Hang on. I'm getting you out of here."

She pulled the table (and him along with it) free with a casual wrench. A fresh half dozen Tenalpian security officers dragged through the fallen doors. The Chief Science Officer waved his pseudopods furiously. "Don't shoot. You might damage the Core."

"They don't want to risk hurting me," Tod explained to Pira.

"I thought they were trying to kill you."

"They were."

The security officers fanned out in a circle to find a clear shot. She swung him from side to side, but soon she would be covered from every angle. They leveled their oddly shaped weapons.

"You do realize," Tod observed, "that you're shielding yourself with the fate of the universe?"

The ship trembled. It tipped to one side. The pear-shaped Tenalpians fell over while Pira remained standing. The moment's distraction was all she needed. She spread her golder wings and shot upward, punching her way through four layers of the egg before finally breaching its thick hull. She streaked onward, not bothering to look back until she was a safe distance away.

Four dragons battled the flagship. They flitted about, swiping at the egg's side with their great claws. A lucky blast disintegrated a dragon's wings, and the reptile plummeted from the sky. In unison, the other three exhaled gouts of flame that engulfed the egg.

Tod allowed himself a relieved smile. "The fire was my idea."

The flagship emerged from the white hot conflagration. A volley of yellow deathrays vaporized another dragon's head. The remaining two pulled back, circling warily.

"We better get out of here while they're still busy," Pira suggested.

"Where?"

"Anyplace far from here."

"Good idea, but can you get me off this table? These restraints are starting to chaffe."

"Later, Tod."

Table securely in hand, the crimson angel soared away from the shrill blasts of deathrays and the angry roars of dragons.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Commander received the news as any good Tenalpian leader would: with quiet stoicism and a hint of disappointment.

"The Core has been lost, sir."

The Commander rocked to and fro thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose we should find it again."

"There isn't time," the ensign reported. "The realiticians have determined we'll have irreversible corrosion very shortly."

"How shortly?"

"A few hours, sir. No longer."

The Commander dragged himself over to the bank of flickering screens. Across the dying remains of the universe, the Tenalpians found themselves in a thousand battles with the Otherlings. The Tenalpians were winning the war, but not quickly enough according to this latest information. By the time all this distracting (and ultimately pointless) resistance was dealt with, the cosmos would have ceased to be.

He tossed his pseudopods in the air. The Tenalpians had failed. There was no shame in failure. Only in not trying.

The ensign slid beside him. "Shall we abort, sir?"

The Commander's fleshy head bobbed. "We have no choice."

Xyreen's contingent of angels and demons engaged the enemy over the crumbling ruins of the Eastern Continents. The battle was going badly. For every egg defeated, it seemed another three took its place. The Wa'surians were down to a dwindling handful. They could not afford a war of attrition.

Below them, the world they fought over looked to be already lost. Xyreen concentrated on the war at hand. After it was over, Wa'suria could be restored to its former greatness. One problem at a time, she reminded herself.

A nearby egg fell from the sky, firing its last volley of death rays. Another platoon of her forces was obliterated. Her troops rallied and continued the good fight.

Xyreen shouted orders over the turmoil even as a fresh dozen eggs appeared. She led the charge, preparing for an attack that never came.

Suddenly, the eggs stopped fighting back. They just floated there as angelic blades and demonic steel sliced them into sparkling confetti. Another egg was blasted into dust by unholy fire without the slightest attempt to defend itself.

Xyreen stopped, but the others, overcome with the lust of battle, swarmed their opponents. Within moments, the tide had turned. Xyreen knew something was terribly wrong. There was no reason for the eggs to give up. They were winning.

It was a miracle, but she no longer believed in miracles. Desaphanus, the maker of miracles, was dead. Even as the Horns of Heaven sounded the victory charge, Xyreen knew this was not the glorious triumph she'd been hoping for.

The eggs began to glow ominously.

The Tenalpianians had never been a race to sit back and idly wait for their fate, good or bad. The time had finally come to embrace destiny.

The Commander paused before the green button marked "ABORT."

"It was a good try, sir," the ensign replied.

"Yes, it was."

The commander pressed the button. Across the universe, each and every Tenalpian war egg began the countdown to a spectacular and inevitable self-destruct sequence.

"Good bye, ensign."

"Good bye, sir."

And the first ship exploded. Nanoseconds later, another followed its example, and like a sweeping, thundering tide, the signal careened throughout the cosmos.

The shock wave of an exploding Tenalpian war egg annihilated most everything nearby. A crashing wave of colorful shrapnel and undirected energy surges washed forward, engulfing and disintegrating Xyreen's forces.

Xyreen didn't even try to flee as it rushed towards her. In the final moments of her existence, she consoled herself with the knowledge that even if she failed, at least she had tried.

And then a large chunk of Tenalpian metal crushed her into a feathery pulp.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Pira flew across Wa'suria, and Tod saw firsthand what disasters had befallen the world. Forests reduced to ash. Proud and ancient cities razed to the ground. In the East, dried up oceans transformed into vast, lifeless desert littered with thousands upon thousands of dead fish. While in the West, floods engulfed even the highest peaks in a churning, bubbling rage. Inhospitable sleet buried many a kingdom under an ever growing smothering blanket of snow. But these calamities were just those plaguing his brother's world. There were many others pestering the rest of the universe.

The dimming sun barely managed to bring light to Wa'suria, and what little it did manage covered the world in a murky twilight. Comets and asteroids and other assorted debris careened wildly above the planet in a chaotic dance without any semblance of order. Tod could count the number of remaining stars on his fingers, and even as he did, two more flickered out of existence. Everything was mostly nothing now, and with each passing hour, there was less everything and more nothing. It wouldn't be long now, he realized.

The elder gods had been born from nothing. He remembered the void still. It hadn't bothered him then, but the ages had changed his perception. Suddenly, nothing seemed like a cold and lonely place. Especially without his brother to keep him company. Not that he had to worry about loneliness. He would soon be dead too.

He tried not to think about the future. Rather, he tried not to think about the complete lack of one.

Below, the survivors (of which there were few) struggled to stay alive. Age old enemies huddled together around flickering campfires to stay warm. Races that had hated each other since the dawn of time were facing much bigger problems. Wa'suria's children had finally found the unity that had always eluded them, and all it took was the death of creation.

His stomach tightened. It might have been general nausea. It might have been a little more of his life force being sucked away.

Pira finally spoke after hours of silence. "We're here."

They landed before the smoldering ruins of Tod's cottage. The dying flames danced along the blackened limbs of trees like scavengers picking clean the leafy flesh of charred skeletons.

The elder god bent down and ran two fingers through the gray ash of what had been his favorite shade tree. "Perfect. Just perfect."

"Tod, I'm sorry."

"Guess you won't have to take care of my Cat after all."

"It could still be alive," Pira suggested. "They're very clever animals, and it is immortal."

She didn't sound convinced. Smiting, not comforting words, was her purpose, but he appreciated the attempt.

"Yeah."

"It's probably somewhere under all this. I'll see if I can find it." She began digging through the cottage ruins.

"You don't have to-"

"It shouldn't take long."

"Pira..."

She stopped and looked over her shoulder. "I'll find it, Tod."

Looking into her black eyes, he knew she wasn't searching for him. She was searching for something to do. As hard as the end of the universe was for him, it had to be a thousand times worse for her. Pira had been created to protect Wa'suria. This final turn of events hadn't been her fault, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it. Logically, she had to know that. But all the logic in the universe couldn't measure up to the overwhelming impotence she must have felt.

"Yes, I'm sure she's under there somewhere," he replied.

Smiling, Pira furiously tossed aside smoking rubble.

Tod sat on a flat, black stone still warm. His body ached in every conceivable way. His muscles were stiff and sore. His vision was blurry. He was both freezing and feverish at the same time. His skin felt clammy and moist in some spots, dry and itchy everywhere else. His tusks wiggled loosely in his gums. Even his sturdy, orcish fingernails hurt.

"I think I've found something!" Pira shouted out. "Oh wait! It's just a..uh well, I don't know what it is, but it isn't a cat. Never mind."

Tod nodded and smiled, trying not to look as bad as he felt. She returned to the search.

The hours passed, and Tod couldn't help but pass them by feeling sorry for himself. He hadn't ever wanted much. Desaphanus had always been the one with high aspirations. All Tod had ever wanted was a nice, quiet existence. It didn't seem like too much to ask.

A burnt out tree shimmered into transparency and then into complete nonexistence.

Tod's instincts told him that this was the last stage of oblivion. First came chaos, the breakdown of all the natural laws. Then came destruction, the violent fits of a dying cosmos. Finally came the unbecoming, when things would simply stop being.

His bones throbbed as if they might turn to jelly, but he couldn't put it off any longer. Time neared its end, and if he was to go to save the universe, he had to get to work. The only hope for Creation lay in a miracle. Tod wasn't feeling up to even a minor miracle at the moment, much less one so grand that it

might restore the universe. Yet he was an elder god (despite his current very un-godlike feelings), and there was no such thing as impossible for a being of his awesome power.

Best to start small, he decided.

A wilted, dying sunflower fell beneath his gaze. He would begin by renewing it to a full, healthy bloom. The leeching parasite of the Cosmos surely left him enough power for such a minor feat of elder godhood.

He focused on the blackened petals and willed the flower whole and healthy. Nothing happened, and he pushed harder. He drew upon every last ounce of his waning strength, and the stem straightened reluctantly. Fresh, green leaves sprouted. Drooping petals curled with new life.

Tod felt like throwing up, but he kept pushing.

The sunflower stretched toward the dying sun. It was the most beautiful sight Tod had ever seen. He could do it. Piece by piece, one sunflower at a time, he could rebuild the universe. It might take a while, but it was possible. Gently, he pulled back his nigh-omnipotence, and let the flower stand on its own.

It crumbled to dust along with all his hopes.

The sun flickered a shade dimmer.

A blackened and limping finch landed beside him. It cocked an eye in his direction.

"Get lost," he barked.

A violet bolt blasted the bird into a shower of feathers and a lump of smoldering meat. Kalb blew the smoke away from his lightning-tossing finger.

"Hello, Tod."

The elder god jumped from his rock. Pira darted to his side.

"I saw you killed," she said.

The small gathering of demons beside Kalb chuckled.

"Not killed," he corrected. "Merely inconvenienced."

"What do you want?"

Kalb shrugged. "Nothing much. Just ultimate power, but I'll settle for the death of the universe. Hand over the elder god, Pira. It'll be so much easier for all of us."

The angel considered her choices. She could try to fight off Kalb and his demons, but she was not feeling particularly righteous in her anger anymore. Fleeing was unthinkable, but Tod had to be protected at all costs. Even if the cosmos was going to die soon, she wasn't about to give its last hours to the Overlord of the Damned.

"I'll make this easy for you."

He snapped his fingers, and Staggia stepped from behind him. She gave the Cat to her master.

"Surrender yourself to me, Tod," --An evil, all-too-pleased grin spread across his blackened ferret lips.
"Or I shall kill this Cat."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Countless stars, the cursed Hollows, the sacred Palace of Heavens, the Hall of the Dead, millions of living creatures. All these had ceased to be. The once glorious and immense universe had been reduced to a dying sun shining down (such as it was able) on a tiny chunk of Wa'suria. And on that piece of crumbling rock stood a smattering of burnt out trees, a smoldering cottage, a single angel of vengeance, a handful of demons, the Overlord of the Damned, an elder god, and his Cat. And in the darkness of an empty universe, the last comet raced the last chain of asteroids towards the remnants of a once proud world. Not that any of the handful of witnesses to the universe's final moments knew any of this. They were all too preoccupied with their own personal agendas to keep track of every little coming and going of the cosmos's death rattle.

Pira took Tod by the hand and spread her golden wings. "Hang on, Tod!"

"No."

"What?"

"I said, no. It's over, Pira."

"But..."

"But nothing." He looked deep into her black eyes. "I can't do this anymore. I'm tired of running. I'm tired of trying to find a way to keep things together." He glanced up at the ball of twinkling gray that was the sun. "I'm just tired."

"You can't give up, Tod."

"No. You can't give up."

Kalb grinned wider than he had ever grinned in his life. "So good of you to see things my way."

Pira stood between the Overlord of the Damned and the elder god. "I can't let you do this, Tod."

"Just how do you plan on stopping me?"

She snarled. "Damn you. You're nothing like Desaphanus."

He placed a hand on her shoulder. "I never claimed I was."

Her face fell blank. Truthfully, she was every bit as weary as he, and suddenly, she found herself carrying a burden too heavy for even her powerful shoulders. Something told her this was the wrong thing to do. But it was a very small voice, and she had very little trouble ignoring it.

She stepped aside.

"Give me my Cat."

"Certainly." Kalb released the feline, who scrambled into Tod's arms. He stroked behind her favorite itching spot.

"Go ahead. Get it over with."

The Overlord of the Damned raised a massive fist to grind Tod's orcish body into blue paste. By killing the elder god, Kalb hoped to inherit Tod's nigh-omnipotence. More likely, the universe would simply cease to exist. While he preferred the latter, he could live with the former.

The shadow of his hand hovered across Tod's face. The elder god stared into death without blinking. The demon's fist fell.

Pira's nature rose within her. Protecting creation was her purpose, and, weary as she was, she found her last ounce of strength. In a crimson blur, she caught the crushing blow. Her knees trembled beneath Kalb's power.

"Go, Tod!"

He didn't move.

With a tremendous grunt, she flipped the King of Evil high in the air. He tumbled a few yards before crashing to the ground. The earth trembled beneath his bulk.

"Tod, run! Get out of here!"

He stayed put and stroked the Cat.

The demons rushed forward. Pira met their charge with a furious rain of blows. She darted about in a streak. Within seconds, the lesser demons lay defeated before her.

Kalb groaned and began to rise.

Pira hoisted Tod in one hand. "I don't care how tired you are! I don't care if it's all going to end anyway! Run, damn you! Run, or, by Desaphanus, I'll kill you myself."

She released him, and Tod found he could run very fast. He wasn't running from her. He was running for her. If she was going to fight tooth and nail, down to the last moments, then he would let her. If the end of the universe happened right now or three minutes from now it didn't really matter to him. But if it meant that much to her, it was the least he could do.

Kalb stood. His flesh sparkled with dark power. He spread his black wings and bellowed to the nearly dead cosmos. He dropped to all fours and stalked forward like the beast he was.

"Really, Pira. You begin to annoy me. I can admire a touch of stubbornness from the forces of good. I've even found it amusing at times, but enough is enough."

They circled each other warily.

"I suppose if you deem it absolutely necessary, I can find the time to kill you once and for all. Actually, I think it only appropriate I give you one last thrashing and prove once and for all that you never were any match for me. Especially now that your precious creator is dead."

His viper tail writhed eagerly.

Pira snarled. "Are you planning on talking me to death?"

The Overlord of the Damned lunged forward, spewing a shower of slimy spit from his jaws. Pira reached into his open mouth and tore out his black tongue. Kalb's head jerked back with a horrible shriek. Foul ichor gushed from the wound. It splattered and seared angelic flesh. But she stood her ground.

She tossed the still squirming tongue at his feet.

And the battle continued.

A few hundred feet into his flight, Tod reached the end of the world. The last remaining chunk of Wa'suria crumbled inward. Pieces broke from the fragmenting edge and floated away, melting into nothingness.

Behind him, the last angel and demon raged with a fury that rattled the heavens themselves. Or would have had the heavens still existed.

"Great."

Tod backed away from the rapidly disintegrating edge of the world.

The Cat squirmed in his arms. She hissed at the approaching oblivion.

He turned from the sea of emptiness and headed back towards Pira and Kalb's struggle. Their conflict was as titanic as it was pointless. The Overlord of the Damned crushed her beneath his goat's hoof. She responded by shattering the limb with a strong right hook. They latched onto each other, muscles straining as they called upon every last reserve of their awesome strength. Wa'suria cracked beneath the pressure unleashed, but the combatants stood deadlocked. Neither would be the first to relent. When the cosmos finally shriveled away, they would be the last to go.

It was only appropriate, Tod realized. Good and evil locked in their eternal struggle until the very end. Neither side could ever set aside their passion. Neither side could ever surrender.

Tod, on the other hand, found giving up very easy. He closed his eyes, leaned against an uprooted tree, and rubbed the Cat down her spine just the way she liked it one last time. Then he let go of the invisible tie that bound he and the universe together.

Freed of his resistance, creation gulped down its meal like a starving child. Tod's life force gushed forth from his body. It poured from his feet, filling Wa'suria with new life. Shattered ground reformed. Trees sprouted. Grass grew. The edge of the world slowed its advance. Streams of light surged from his body into the sky and formed bright new stars.

And Tod finally understood what he should have known all along. The life force of an elder god was finite but vast. Within him, enough potentiality for ten thousand universes dwelt. He just had to stop trying to hold onto it.

"Good bye," he told his Cat.

And he surrendered his being.

Pira grunted as she marshaled her power against the Overlord of the Damned.

Kalb growled as he stubbornly held his ground.

Neither noticed anything beyond their struggle. They were completely oblivious to the stars that filled the sky, one by one. The flowers springing from ashen soil failed to draw their attention. Even as full grown trees erupted from the ground, forming a lush and beautiful forest, they stared into each other's eyes with cold determination, blind to the miraculous rebirth taking place all around them.

The miracle spread, and the tiny chunk of Wa'suria slowly expanded into its former glory. Desaphanus's world reformed piece by piece, kingdom by kingdom. Within moments, every continent had grown back. Every ocean was filled once again. Every city and village, no matter how small, shimmered back into existence, and every last detail, from the greatest mountain range to the tiniest pebble, was recreated.

Newfound strength filled Pira. The power surged through her limbs, tipping the balance of her struggle. Kalb fell to one knee. His other leg slipped underneath him. She cracked him across the jaw, and he stumbled backwards.

From nothing, Pira's Silver Sword came back into being. She hefted it in the air with a triumphant grin.

Kalb snatched up his severed tongue and jammed it back in his mouth. "How?"

She leveled her Silver Sword in his direction. "Go home, Kalb."

He scowled. "Make me."

With her full power returned, Pira felt up to the challenge, but a gust of wind swept across the forest, putting an end to their battle. It lifted Kalb in the air. The ground split open, and shouting curses all the while, the King of Evil was recast into the Hollows as he had been so long ago. His angry cries were swallowed up as the rend sealed itself shut, disappearing without a trace.

Tod stepped from the forest.

"You did it!" She lifted him in the air and twirled about.

"Yeah, I did it," he replied softly.

Twinkling lights danced from Tod's fingertips and swirled over the remains of his cottage. The scorched planks reassembled themselves. Another burst of color shot into the sky, filling the sun with new life. It beamed down upon the reborn world.

The atmosphere sparked as the last comet and the last asteroids fell towards the world. Tod waved a hand, and their courses altered. The two heavenly bodies collided over Wa'suria, disintegrating into flaming dust.

Tod faded into transparency for an instant.

"What's wrong?" Pira asked.

"Nothing's wrong. I'm just dying. That's all."

"But you can't die. If you die, the universe dies."

He managed a dry, mirthless chuckle. "Only if I die the wrong way." He looked up into the fresh blue sky. "I'm not fighting it anymore, Pira. I'm giving the cosmos what it wants."

He held out the Cat. "You promised to take care of her. Remember?"

Pira reluctantly accepted the orange feline. She awkwardly held it away from her body.

The elder god took a seat on a tree stump. "The Tenalpian were wrong. The imbalance wasn't killing the universe. It was the unrelenting strain on my life force. Creation on one side. Me on the other. Each of us stubbornly dragging the other towards nonexistence."

His body shimmered into a barely visible wisp of smoke. "It's simple, Pira. One of us has to go, and the universe isn't going to be the one to make the sacrifice."

"But when you're gone, who will guide the cosmos?"

"It'll just have to guide itself. It'll find a way. Desaphanus did a pretty good job with it. He just didn't know when to let go. That was always his problem."

"But it's not fair. You didn't create this. You shouldn't have to die for it."

"Who said life was fair?"

His insubstantial form melted away. His disembodied voice drifted on the breeze.

"Just remember one thing. She likes to be scratched behind her ears."

And then he was gone.

Reality rippled around her, and Pira found herself standing amidst the ruins of the Palace of Heavens. A tingle ran down her spine as shattered crystal rose in the air. Time reversed itself as invisible hands reconstructed the gleaming walls around her. Once finished, she and the Cat stood in the empty throne room. Everything was as it had always been, save one small difference.

In the middle of the great hall, an immense statue had been erected. The dragon of polished gold looked wisely in the distance with a pair of sparkling ruby eyes the size of great lakes. The work was a flawless reproduction of Desaphanus as he would always want to be remembered.

A mist rose before Pira. It clotted into an eagle-headed angel. All around, others were being remade by the hundreds.

Xyreen gaped at herself and the Palace of Heavens. "What happened?"

Pira didn't reply. There would be time enough for explanations later.

"Thank Desaphanus!" Xyreen shouted.

The angels around them echoed the cry. It filled the Palace of Heavens.

"Thank Desaphanus," Pira agreed.

She stroked the Cat behind her ears. The Cat purred softly, swishing her tail with contentment.

"Thank you, Tod."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

From atop Mount Skraahh, Kalb surveyed the Hollows. The Realm of Pain Eternal had been restored in all its terrible splendor, and the ancient edicts bound him fast to his cursed kingdom. He didn't know how Tod had managed it, but somehow, the universe had been snatched from the brink of oblivion. Once again as victory lay just within Kalb's reach, he had been denied.

The Overlord of the Damned was hardly surprised.

He had never been intended to win. The disappointing results of the Great Rebellion and the Grand Corruption had already proven that. Even with Desaphanus dead, some rules could never be broken. At least not this time. But there would be other opportunities in the future. Kalb was as eternal as evil, and he could wait for his chance even if, as part of him suspected, it would never arrive. Besides which, the fun was not in the achievement but in the attempt.

In the meantime, this recent diversion had broken the monotony of countless eons of damnation and filled him with fresh vigor. He was not entirely satisfied with his lot in the universe. He never could be. Ambition was his torment, but it was the only thing that made his existence worthwhile. Desaphanus had not damned him totally.

The King of Evil cracked a grin. He would miss the pompous old blowhard.

Staggia pulled herself over the top of the mountain. Panting, the devil warily approached her master, who ignored her in favor of his dark reflections.

Below, the line of Damned awaited his sentencing. A dozen new torments entered his refreshed mind and he was eager to get back to work.

Staggia dared speak.

"Lord Kalb, this humble servant would ask, with only the greatest measure of respect..."

"Yes?" He did not turn in her direction, although his viper eyed her hungrily.

She cleared her throat twice. "Are you feeling well?"

His head cocked so that two of his eyes might gaze upon her. She cowered before his infinite and cruel wrath.

"Just fine. And you?"

She trembled in somewhat reduced terror. "I've been better, sir."

"Well, dear Staggia, never forget one thing."

"Yes, Kalb?"

"Tomorrow is another day."

The Overlord of the Damned chuckled.

"At least for today."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

After a short period of adjustment and necessary reorganization, Desaphanus's many duties were delegated to his servants, who went about their job with angelic zeal. It was widely accepted throughout the Palace of Heavens that the elder god would return on the day he judged them worthy. Worthy of what, none could say for certain for Desaphanus's ways were beyond even divine understanding, but none dared question his infallible wisdom. Life went on much as it ever had throughout the universe with one exception.

There were still heretics, unbelievers, and demons, but Pira's fervor to smite them dwindled until finally disappearing altogether. Of all his servants, only she understood that was Desaphanus truly dead and her holy function along with him. So she did something she never thought she'd do. She left the Palace of

Heavens, her home since the dawn of time.

"Desaphanus will be disappointed," Xyreen said.

Pira half-smiled. "You know he's not coming back, don't you?"

After a quick glance to assure her none of the others might see her response, Xyreen nodded.

"How can you stay?"

"Somebody has to, and it's something to do. Besides, Desaphanus isn't really gone. He's all around us. He is us."

"I suppose," Pira agreed softly.

"It's something to do. Are you certain about this?"

The Righteous Anger of Desaphanus clapped her hands, and the Cat leapt into her arms.

"This is something I have to do."

Pira spread her wings and descended to Wa'suria. She drifted for awhile before finally coming to her final destination: an unremarkable cottage in an unremarkable patch of woods.

The Cat scampered inside and settled on her favorite blue pillow besides Tod's empty bed.

Pira's universe seemed a very lonely place. Desaphanus was gone, and she missed him greatly. But she missed Tod even more. Compared to his brother, Tod had been a shiftless waste of elder godhood, but with the passing of time, she found herself thinking about him more and more. Vengeance and fury had ever filled her heart, but as the rage subsided, she found something unfamiliar within her.

Affection.

The sensation wasn't completely unpleasant in itself, but Tod was gone. The emotion was wasted. No, she realized, not wasted. As long as she remembered him and his sacrifice, Tod would never really die.

The cottage door opened, and Tod stepped inside.

"Oh. I was wondering when you'd show up." He set down his bucket of freshly dug earthworms and clapped the dirt from his hands.

Pira swept Tod up in her arms. He wasn't just a phantom of her imagination.

"You're alive! You're alive! But..how? I saw you die."

"Oh that. Well sort of."

She embraced him, squeezing all the breathe from his body. "You're alive!"

"Yeah," he gasped, "I'm alive."

Pira tightened her smothering hug.

"Uh..would you mind putting me down?"

"But how can you still be alive? I thought the universe needed your life force."

"It did, and that's exactly what I gave it. The life force of Tod the elder god is exactly where it belongs: everywhere. But I had enough nigh-omnipotence left in the end to recreate myself along with the universe. I'm not an elder god anymore. I'm just your dreary, everyday, immortal orc."

Pira couldn't stop herself from crushing him in another overly exuberant embrace.

"You gave up your godhood?"

"Sure. It's not that big of a deal. I never really wanted it." He grimaced. "All that power and responsibility was far more trouble than it was worth, and now I have more time to catch up on my fishing."

The Cat rubbed against his legs. "I'm hungry."

He bent down and scratched under her chin. "Sorry, but you'll have to wait a little while. My fish conjuring days are behind me. Thanks for taking care of her, Pira. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome, Tod. She wasn't any trouble at all."

He grabbed one of many poles from the wall.

"What about the Tenalpians?" she asked. "Did you recreate them too?"

"Certainly, but I did give them a little tweaking. From now on, they'll just ignore this part of the universe. As far as they're considered, it doesn't even exist." He picked up his bait bucket. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got lunch to catch."

He turned to walk out the door.

"Tod?"

"Yeah?"

"Um..could you use some company?"

He smiled. "Sure. Grab a rod."

The angel snatched her selection from the wall. "I've never fished before."

"That's alright. It's not hard to learn, and you've got plenty of time to pick it up."

She hesitated at the cottage door.

"Something wrong?" Tod asked.

"No." Pira set her Silver Sword against the wall. "Everything's just fine."

And the immortal orc and former angel of vengeance began the first of many walks to the river.

And the Cat sat on her pillow and caught a pleasant nap before lunch.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Several thousand uneventful years later...

The Keeper neared the end of his great chore. Everything from the dawn of time to the near end of creation lay stacked before him in an intimidating mountain of parchment. With Desaphanus dead, there was very little reason to keep recording, but the Keeper had to see how it all turned out. Now that he had, he was ready to take a very long break. First, there was one final detail that needed recording.

"And lo, Tod caught two pike and a bass, and Pira snagged a sizable trout."

He tapped his overgrown finger against the desk.

"One of the pike was thrown back."

He set aside his quill. "Good enough."

The Keeper snuffed the candle on his desk, turned towards the stairs with a smile, and began his long climb out of the Catacombs.

