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Somewhere between Heaven and Hell

Across the Ethereal Plane, a battle looms. Norse Frost Giants and Egyptian Demons struggle to assemble. They are unlikely allies in a war that has lasted a millennia. Still, these beings of The Darkness are aligned together, ready to strike down the forces of The Light.

The Frost Giants range in size from huge to massive and are armed with clubs and axes. They attempt to communicate with the Demons; however, the Demons speak in an ancient Egyptian tongue that makes conversing impossible. Hastily scrawled maps are drawn in the sand but they are difficult to decipher. This will not prove to be of much consequence as the plan is essentially to overpower those facing them.

Durinn, a dwarf, is a Norse general. His leadership and battle tactical abilities are superior; however, his forces are gravely outnumbered – a fact not lost on those in his charge.

One of his lieutenants, Nike, the Roman goddess of

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Victory, stares across the Plane. ‘There seem to be more of them today.’

Durinn nods. ‘And fewer of us.’

It is a particularly foggy day on the Plane. The archers from The Light cannot hit their targets with regularity. This does not play to Durinn’s advantage. In order to defeat the enemy, his forces need to keep them at bay. However, this battle will be fought at close quarters – further diminishing his odds in an already bleak situation.

The Frost Giants beat their chest and roar. The Demons light their spears. Within minutes, they will charge The Light.

At Durinn’s command, the Roman and Greek demigods assume a defensive phalanx. His orders must be followed to the letter if they are going to survive the onslaught. Even still, the odds are stacked against them.

The Frost Giants charge directly into the clash, intent on making quick work of their enemy. The phalanx holds strong. For a while.

The Demons hurl their flaming spears into Durinn’s defenses. Most of these are blocked by shields; however, many are not. A Roman demigod is pierced in the heart. He drops his bow and falls to the ground. The others leave him writhing in pain as his last seconds pass. There is nothing that can be done for him.

The Frost Giants swing their axes, beheading those on the front lines. At last, the archers can properly engage. Close range arrows pierce the mighty chests of demons and giants. But it is too little, too late. The phalanx collapses and the archers are overrun. The demigods scatter for protection, as the

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forces of The Light are routed.

An unidentifiable hero rides into the fray on horseback. This hero exhibits no fear and skilfully manoeuvres through the carnage. The Frost Giants take notice. They redirect their attention to this newcomer.

An alpha giant attacks. Wildly swinging a club, he attempts to knock the hero from the steed. His hands are met by the blade of a broadsword. The club and his hands fall to the ground. The Frost Giant wails but his agony is short-lived. The hero's blade slashes his throat and he drops to the ground. Dead. Or something like it.

The hero dismounts the horse and is soon surrounded by a pack of Demons. Flaming spears fly but they are blocked by a shield marked by a feline emblem. Soon, the cadre of Demons is reduced to nothing. Black ash fills the air.

The blunt end of a spear connects with the back of the hero's head. Now standing over the hero is a Demon with a newly lit spear. He thrusts it downward. The hero rolls away in the nick of time.

The Demon has trouble freeing the spear from the ground. Now, it is he who is in danger. Instead of fighting back, he seethes. 'Strike me down, slave to The Light. We shall meet again.'

'Perhaps. But not today.' The hero plunges the broadsword deep into the Demon's chest and he bursts into flames.

The remaining Frost Giants and Demons are intimidated. They scatter, rushing back to whence they came. They would regroup and live to fight again another day.

Satisfied, the hero sheathes the sword and removes the

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helmet. A gush of dazzling reddish blonde hair falls to the shoulders. This is no hero – this is a heroine. Freya, the Norse goddess of Beauty stands triumphant, her exquisite looks matched only by her battle skills. She senses motion from behind and, in a single fluid motion, unsheathes her sword and holds it to the throat of her would be attacker.

‘Easy.’

The voice of Durinn gives her pause. She sheathes the broadsword.

‘What took you so long?’ Durinn asked. ‘So much for your legendary timing.’

Freya is still distracted. She watches the horizon intently. ‘Maybe, I thought you’d handle this one on your own.’

Dismayed, Durinn responds. ‘You do realise, O Queen of the Valkyries, how grotesquely outnumbered we are? And this isn’t a recent occurrence. Our Egyptian brothers and sisters are not sending their troops as they once did.’

Freya stares him down. ‘Of course, I am aware. But we must fight on. Our very existence depends upon it.’

Durinn nods. ‘The Spheri Eternus. It is the last known portal between Heaven, Hell, earth and all other realms.’

‘And need I remind you what will happen if The Darkness were to gain its control?’

‘No. The Darkness would have carte blanche over the fate of all worlds. Life, as we know it, would end.’

The slightest glimmer of a smile creeps across Freya’s face. At least, Durinn understands what is at stake.

Durinn, however, has not finished complaining. ‘We are overrun on a daily basis. We are losing ground. Slowly,

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naturally but still. Our forces are no match for theirs. We need help from the Egyptians, or all will be lost.'

Freya's smile disappears. Instead, fury flashes in her eyes. 'You will follow my instructions. Now is a time to rise to greatness. I trust that is something you would like.'

Durinn stammers. 'Of course, it is, my queen. But reinforcements are needed.'

'And reinforcements you shall have. Athena is on a special mission to bring a major god back into the war.'

Durinn perks up. 'That is wonderful news! Could it be Horus, the Egyptian god of War? We need him! Or perhaps, Mars? Or Ares? Or even a trusted Greek Titan?'

Freya doesn't respond.

'Someone else, then?' Durinn asks. 'Can you give me a hint?'

Freya frowns. 'Word is, he was once quite the archer.'

Durinn puts his head in his hands. Apollo was not the god he was hoping for.

2

The God of Leisure

This little love nest has everything lovers could want. Canopied bed. Soft white linens. Room service. And a beautiful goddess.

Venus, the Roman goddess of Love and Beauty, lies naked across the bed. She has brought her hair down, so it covers the nipples on her exposed breasts. Just leaving a little to the imagination but not too much.

Venus is a sight to behold. Long blonde hair and a perfect hourglass figure. Her light skin and ruby lips are enough to make her an otherworldly pinup model but there is much more to her than that. Describing her sexual appetite as voracious does not do it justice – it is without bounds. She overwhelms every lover she's ever been with. All except Apollo.

She loves Apollo's suite in Heaven's hotel. It is a utopia for carnal delight. Dozens of candles flicker throughout the room. The walls, the ceiling and even the floor are mirrored – which makes every lovemaking session appear as an orgy. Except for the actual orgies; they appear as a carnal house of sexual depravity. Sofas and chairs aplenty are scattered throughout the

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room. And she's tried them all on for size.

The Hotel Bar in Heaven is a wondrous place. Gods and goddesses from a myriad of mythologies make reservations years in advance to taste the fine wines and nectars, to dine on the scrumptious ambrosias and just to be seen. It's an experience worth waiting several lifetimes to enjoy. And the waitlist is frequently that long.

The bar's colours are white and cerulean, the colour of the sky. Exotic flora decorates every nook and portico. Waterfalls emerge from thin air. And actual fluffy, white clouds float majestically in the air amongst the tables.

Most gods wait impatiently for their tables. The Atrium remains packed as no one seated ever wants to leave. However, most gods are not Apollo. Apollo doesn't just have a table – he has his own table. It remains empty just in case he decides to make an appearance. The sight of Apollo entering the bar makes the goddesses swoon and draws the ire of the male gods. They cannot help but like him, as arrogant as he may be.

Lesser Enochian angels escort Apollo past the velvet rope to his table, which offers a panoramic view of the Heavens. Already seated at his table is his best friend, Bacchus, the Roman god of Wine.

Bacchus rises to hug his pal. 'Running a little late there, Apollo. Was beginning to think you weren't coming.'

Apollo chuckles. 'I was with Venus, so I can assure you, I was coming.' Apollo takes a sip of the nectar that had been brought without a request. If there's one thing to love about Heaven, it's the service. 'She was insatiable today. Every time I

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tried to leave, she'd cling on tighter. I swear I was watching the sands fall through the hourglass, wondering when, or even if, I'd be allowed to make my escape.'

'Oh, to have such problems.' Bacchus grins. 'You know, I would expect Venus to have more self-respect. She is the Roman goddess of Beauty, after all.'

'I think you've solved the riddle, dear friend. She's Roman. Aphrodite would never sink to such levels.'

This angers Bacchus slightly. He is, of course, used to being treated like a knock-off god. A poor man's Dionysus. Still, his Italian vintages far exceed those of his Greek counterpart.

Bacchus' takes the last swallow of his wine and an angel immediately refills it. She pours slowly, trying to simultaneously be careful and catch Apollo's eye. However, she overfills Bacchus' glass, spilling drops of his precious wine on the table. In a flash, another angel is there to clean the mess.

Apollo cannot help but laugh at Bacchus' despair. He knows how much Bacchus values his wines – he brings his own bottles to supplement Heaven's vast wine list. To Apollo, it was particularly humorous that he was the cause of the mishap. Had he have looked her in the eye and winked, the angel might have emptied the entire bottle in Bacchus' lap.

Almost certainly the most handsome of the male gods, Apollo lived the life of a rock star in Heaven. The son of Zeus had it all – perfect looks, perfect charm all wrapped up in a perfect body. And his hair. Oh, how he loved his flowing sandy blonde curls.

Across the table was Bacchus. Bacchus was not as blessed with the physical beauty as his friend. He was slightly portly

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and his lips and teeth were permanently stained with red wine. However, Bacchus' quick wit and humorous observations still made him quite the hit with the goddesses.

'So, what shall we do today?' Bacchus asks.

'I thought we might eat and drink,' Apollo replies. 'But not necessarily in that order.'

Bacchus smiles. 'I was hoping you'd say that.'

They drink in silence for a few short minutes. Bacchus chugs his wine while Apollo sips nectar. Soon, they are joined by their friends – Pan and Kyrene.

Pan isn't a satyr. He is the satyr. A truly powerful wilderness god, at least in his heyday. Pan would party and frolic on earth where he was worshipped by shepherds and consorted with nymphs. Occasionally a hothead, Pan threw outrageous parties where he would panic the mortals by displaying his horns, tail and goat legs. But typically, he would entertain by playing his own invention, the pan flute.

Kyrene was a forest nymph. Petite and beautiful, she is one of the most desirable of all the nymphs. She harbours an unrequited crush on Apollo.

Sadly, Apollo doesn't show much interest. Still, he likes having her around. Eye candy that looks good on the arm. A cute sense of humour. Generally, Kyrene was a lot of fun but those occasional jealous fits make her the wildcard in this group.

Bacchus rises to greet his friends. He gives Pan a large hug. These two have three things in common – wine, goddesses and song. Kyrene is standoffish to Bacchus. She doesn't want to seem overly attentive to him, especially when Apollo is nearby.

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Pan sits between Apollo and Bacchus. Kyrene deposits herself on Apollo's lap. Drinks for the two of them are brought immediately.

Apollo is taken aback. 'Uh, Kyrene?'

'Yes, my dear?' she responds.

'You should probably move. I can't reach my drink.'

Kyrene turns and picks up his glass. She wiggles a bit as she hands it to him. She frowns. 'Nothing going on down there?'

Bacchus laughs. 'He'd be a fertility god if there were. Apparently, he spent all day with Venus.'

Kyrene cheeks turn a shade of green. She gets up in a huff and sits in the chair furthest from Apollo.

Pan looks her way. 'I'm a fertility god,' he offers.

Kyrene snaps back. 'Not interested.'

This brings a hearty round of laughter from the table. All join in except Kyrene, who is still pouting.

'You know, all things considered, Heaven is a pretty wonderful place. Here, we sit back and relax. Nothing like the olden days, when we had mortals to worry with,' Bacchus muses.

'Ha! Mortals!' Apollo can barely contain himself. 'A fickle creature to be sure. Now, they worship different gods and some worship none at all.'

'I sometimes miss humanity, though,' Bacchus says. 'The offerings, especially. There was this one instance where a goat was sacrificed to me. A goat! Can you imagine?'

Pan is peeved. 'You got something against goats?'

'Of course not. It just seemed like they had the wrong god in mind.'

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Pan is still peeved. ‘You know, there were plenty of goats sacrificed to me.’

‘Of course, there were. I just didn’t have any wine to go with such a scrumptious feast. I mean, what wine pairs well with stringy meat?’

Pan is about half a second from making a huge mistake. Rolling through his satyr mind is a question. Can he punch Bacchus and still be invited back into the VIP section in Heaven’s atrium bar? Probably not. So, Pan thinks better of getting physical with Bacchus and instead lets loose a fiery insult. ‘I’m sure Dionysus would have something appropriate. He certainly makes a lot more wine than you ever could.’

Bacchus is speechless. Fortunately, Apollo intervenes. ‘Appropriate or not, I’ve always preferred Bacchus’ vineyard to those of my half-brother’s. So, you two relax and enjoy the sunset.’

Pan’s glare eases. ‘You were once the Sun God, I’m sure you received some of the most finest offerings.’

Apollo thinks backward in time. ‘You know, the gifts would pile up at Delphi. And I’m speaking of real gifts – gold, silver and the like. There were so many, I took to distributing them among my followers. Nymphs, mostly.’

Kyrene’s eyes shoot daggers across the table. ‘I don’t believe you ever gave any to me.’

‘Well,’ Apollo replies, ‘I’m sure that was unintentional. I mean, I thought I serviced all the nymphs quite nicely.’

The green hue returns to Kyrene’s face. She sits with her arms crossed and glares at Apollo.

Pan notices this and pretends to comfort her. ‘Apollo

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never gave me any gold either. But then, I assume he had no romantic intentions with me either.'

'That's enough, Pan,' Apollo said. 'She's angry enough as it is. No sense in making it worse.'

Kyrene is, for the moment, mollified.

Bacchus moves to change the subject. 'Here's something odd, Apollo. I was visiting Olympus and you will never guess who wasn't there.'

Apollo thinks. 'I don't know. My dad?'

'Exactly,' Bacchus verified. 'I mean, isn't he always there?'

'Pretty much. Unless he was out creating more half-siblings for me.'

Bacchus rubs his beard. 'Perhaps. But I got the impression he hadn't been there in some time.'

Apollo shakes his head. 'I'm the wrong one to ask about Zeus' whereabouts. I've been avoiding him for centuries.'

'Why is that?'

'Because Dad doesn't agree with his lifestyle,' a voice behind Apollo said.

Apollo turns around and is surprised to see his half-sister, Athena, the Greek goddess of Wisdom. 'Well sis, how wonderful to see you. But it's still early. Shouldn't you be off in battle? Fighting the good fight?'

'I left early today,' Athena replied. 'I'm on another mission.'

'And what mission might that be?' Apollo asked.

Before she could answer, Bacchus interrupts. 'What was the body count like today?'

Athena cocks her head. 'You're interested in the war?'

Bacchus smiles. 'Certainly. Mostly as a spectator, of course.'

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Did any major gods meet their demise today?’

‘Well, not particularly. We did lose a Welsh river goddess named Damona.’

Bacchus high fives Pan although Pan seems less than thrilled about the news.

Athena is ticked. ‘Okay, what was that about?’

‘Can’t tell you. You’ll just get mad.’

‘I’m already mad.’

Bacchus realises he probably shouldn’t have said anything. ‘It’s just something Pan and I keep track of.’

Athena is fuming. ‘Tell me you’re not wagering on the battles.’

Bacchus is trapped. ‘Well...’

Athena is now fully enraged. ‘Listen, god of Drunkenness, do you have any idea what we’re fighting for?’

Bacchus scratches his head. ‘Is it still that portal thing?’

‘Yes, damn you! Do you even know what happens if we lose control of it?’

Bacchus gestures as if he has an idea but in reality, he doesn’t. ‘Something bad?’

Athena sits down next to Apollo and slams her shield onto the floor. As soon as she sits, an angel dashes over with a glass of nectar.

‘Yes, bad things. Very bad things. Including Heaven and Olympus being reduced to rubble. I’m sure you Romans must have a place that is sacred to you. That will be gone as well.’

Bacchus shudders.

Apollo intervenes. ‘Okay, sis, I think he gets your point. So, you said you were on some sort of a mission?’

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Athena exhales. 'Yes, Apollo, I am. I am here to recruit you to join the battle.'

The table explodes with laughter.

Athena ignores them the best she can and focuses on Apollo. 'We are losing this war. The Darkness continues to gain ground. Soon, they will overrun us entirely. We need someone strong to join us. We need you. I need you.'

Apollo waves her off. 'I have no interest in fighting. You know that. This is a conversation we've had before and frankly, one I am weary of.'

'You were such a wonderful warrior. You slew beasts and Titans. Olympus would have been destroyed if you and I had not saved it.'

Bacchus feels the need to re-engage the conversation. 'That was millennia ago. Apollo is not even the same Apollo.'

Athena ignores him. She grabs her bow from her back and hurls it at Apollo. He catches it by the grip inches before it would strike him in the face.

'Remember, how you used to use this bow? Remember Python? Remember your mother?' Athena asked. 'Oh, your twin sister, Artemis, has been missing for months. Likely being tortured by Anubis and his ilk. You want that on your head?'

Apollo stares at the bow. He falls into a trance.

Hera, the Greek goddess of Marriage, has little patience for Zeus' infidelities. From her throne on Mount Olympus, she summons the great monster, Python, to eliminate one of her rivals. She promises to reward her handsomely if she will kill Leto, the mother to Apollo and Artemis. Python is more than

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happy to take her up on this.

Hera directs Python to Mount Parnassus, where Leto's home is. Though a goddess, Leto lives a simple and quiet life. She hides from Hera's wrath and picks olives from the nearby vines.

Python spies Leto near a creek. She is washing her face and her flowing robe rustles in the breeze. The slight sound of the wind gives Python the ability to move undetected. She slithers and stalks Leto, preparing to strike.

By the time Leto looks up, Python is close by. She cocks her massive head. 'I assume you know who I am.'

Leto stands stunned. 'Hera sent you. Am I right?'

'That she did. So, I assume you know why I'm here.'

Leto nods. She slowly backs away from the giant serpent but trips and falls to the rocky ground.

Python arches the muscles in her back, bringing her monstrous head high in the air. With the majority of her body on the land, she is roughly twenty feet tall. Her lengthy tongue reaches out a few feet from Leto's face.

Leto is not going down without a fight. She flings rocks at the Titan's head. This only serves to anger her.

'Oh, Leto,' she says, 'I was going to make this quick and painless. But now, I think I'll have a little fun before devouring you.'

Python swings her mighty tail at Leto's legs. She falls hard on the rocky ground. She struggles to her feet but is met once again with the tremendous force of the tail. She is flung solidly against the base of the mountain.

Python slithers closer. Her forked tongue is now fully in

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range of Leto's face, so Python licks Leto's skin and ululates with satisfaction. 'I'm torn,' she said. 'Do I swallow you whole? Or do I squeeze the life out of you first? Either way, I will feed well today.'

Python suddenly feels a sharp pain in her back. She turns quickly to see the shaft of an arrow protruding from her skin. She simultaneously hits Leto with her tail and looks to find the perpetrator of the arrow.

It is Apollo, maybe eight years of age. The youngster has readied his golden bow to launch another missile into the serpent.

Python smiles as only a snake can. 'Ah, Apollo, how convenient of you to make an appearance. You can bear witness to your mother's undoing before I kill you as well. My reward will most certainly be increased tenfold.'

'Apollo! Run!' Leto screams.

'Sorry, mother, that I cannot do,' Apollo replies. He fires another arrow towards the great beast but it misses its mark.

Python laughs. 'You're a little out of your element, young one. Perhaps, you should listen to your mother. Not that it will do you any good now.'

Leto rises to her feet and leaps onto the serpent's back. Python shakes Leto off as if she were a gnat, sending her flying back to the base of the mountain.

But now, Apollo is ready. Python turns to look at him as Apollo's arrow connects with the serpent, piercing her eyelid and blinding her in her right eye. A second later, Apollo has reloaded. His aim is once again true and Python's left eye goes dark.

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Now all Python can do is thrash about wildly. She hisses. 'Come closer, young one. This fight is not yet complete.'

'Apollo,' his mother pleads. 'Please take your leave at once. She cannot hurt us anymore.'

'I don't think that's the case,' Apollo replies.

Python's huge nostrils flare. She can smell Apollo. She slithers towards him and arches her back. She is preparing to strike.

However, Apollo does not back down. A fresh arrow lines the bow. He lets loose of the string and the arrow lodges in Python's throat. The serpent can no longer breathe. She coughs and desperately tries to remove the barb. But Apollo is on her in a flash, driving the arrow deeper into Python's neck. Python falls to the ground with a tremendous thud. She would be the first Titan Apollo slew but certainly not the last.

Leto scolds her son for not listening to her requests. 'Apollo, I told you to run. Why would you not listen to me?'

'Because only I could save you.'

'Apollo! Apollo!' Athena is practically screaming in his ear. This awakens Apollo from his archery-induced trance. She is furious. 'Have you listened to a word I've said?'

'Most of it,' Apollo lies.

'I'll bet he was daydreaming about Venus,' Bacchus inserts.

Expecting the worst, Athena says, 'Please tell me you weren't.'

'No. I wasn't. But thanks for asking,' Apollo replies, copping an attitude.

'Well, what then?'

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Almost on cue, Venus enters Heaven's atrium. Apollo notices her immediately. She looks fabulous. Her blonde hair was perfect. She oozes sensuality, wrapped in a sultry, skintight satin sheath. All the male gods and most of the goddesses leer lustily in her direction. She air-kisses all she comes in contact with but makes a beeline towards Apollo. When she arrives at his table, she plants a prolonged French kiss on his lips.

Bacchus and Pan's jaws drop to the floor. Kyrene turns a green shade of envy. Athena simply rolls her eyes.

'Not this again,' Athena mutters.

Venus extends her hand to Apollo. He rises from the table and begins to follow her.

Athena is livid. 'Please, Apollo, think about what we were talking about. We need you in this war.'

Apollo smirks. 'I will give it all the necessary consideration it is due.'

Bacchus laughs. 'Athena, I think you have your answer.'

Suddenly, Apollo begins to phase in and out of view. Literally becoming transparent. Venus drops his hand in utter fright.

Bacchus is astonished. 'Apollo, you're disappearing!'

Apollo winks. 'Of course I am. Wouldn't want to keep the goddess of love waiting.'

Athena cries, 'No, Apollo, you're really vanishing. I can see through you!'

Apollo looks at his hands and sees they are right. His hands are barely visible. 'What is happening to me?'

He barely gets the words out before he disappears completely. The patrons of Heaven's Atrium murmur in shock.

3

Soul Swap Hold ‘em

The Treachery Bar and Grill lies within the Ninth Circle of Hell. Here history’s villains wish they could meet their final demise. However, that is not to be. Outside, their agony is apparent. Some are buried from the waist down in deep ice; others are completely encapsulated in it. Just outside of their senses is warmth. But they will never feel it. They will never escape their curse.

On the inside, the denizens are able to move freely. Here, the Lords of the Underworld relax. Embers from the burning ceiling fall upon them but they do not mind. The Treachery Bar is a favourite place.

Hades, the Greek god of the Underworld; Pluto, the Roman god of the Underworld; and Hel, the Norse goddess of Death sit at a table fashioned of human remains. The tabletop is made of stretched skin. The table legs are constructed of bones. The chairs are a mixture of each. Skulls rest upon the backs of their seats.

The three are engaged in a never-ending game of Soul

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Swap Hold'em. These gods do not wager money – they wager the very essence of those around them. Each chip is inlaid with souls desperately trying to escape their eternal predicament. But no relief will ever occur. Their very essence will belong to Hades. Or Hel. Or Pluto.

Hel collects the antes and deals the cards. Without even looking at his hand, Hades goes all-in. The others immediately fold.

Hel makes an observation. 'It is my understanding that these games of chance are more interesting when clairvoyance is not evoked.'

Pluto nods. 'Perhaps, we could try playing without seeing into the future.'

Hel laughs. 'I'm not sure that's possible. I trust you two less than I trust Loki.' Hel is the quintessential Goth goddess. Spiked black hair, porcelain skin, piercing green eyes and a generally nasty attitude. The war is her favourite pastime. Occasionally, she will lead her beloved Frost Giants across the Ethereal Plane. They tend to fare better when she is by their side. Her beauty lies on the right side of her face. The left side, not so much. It is like a skull, an astounding dissimilarity from the right. She's delectable on one segment but equally frightening on the other.

Hades tosses his chips into the center of the table. 'Well then, I'm bored. Surely someone must have a devious plan. It's not like we have mortals to torment any longer.'

There is a silence at the table. Hel lights a cigar off of the burning chair behind her. 'I understand there is a woodland festival hosted by Pan,' she says, 'Perhaps, we could terrorise

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some fauns and nymphs. I particularly dislike the nymphs.'

Hades shrugs. 'Seems like we do that a lot. Never really accomplishes anything except for minor amusement. Pluto? You have any ideas?'

Pluto doesn't speak very often. At a whopping six-foot-six and two hundred eighty pounds, he's essentially the muscle of the group. But he's as slow as he is big. 'How about this?' Pluto said. 'We could invade Jotenheim. I've never killed a Frost Giant before.'

Hades winces. He knows what to expect.

Hel's eyes flash from green to red. 'You do know that the Frost Giants are in my charge, right? Or are you really that dense?'

Pluto doesn't understand. 'I thought we were fighting the Frost Giants. Do I have that wrong?'

Hel backhands Pluto across the face.

Hades laughs. 'Be careful, Hel hath fury.'

This draws the ire of the god sitting alone at the neighbouring table. Anubis, the Egyptian god of the Underworld, has casually watched the exchanges between the three but now he is annoyed. Nobody, including Hel, can lay a hand on Pluto. Especially, when he figures so deeply in Anubis' plan.

Anubis walks to the table and violently lifts Hel from her seat. He twists her arm behind her back. Hel moans in pain. Hades rises to confront Anubis. Anubis lets go of Hel and reaches for a red-hot poker stick from one of the Treachery's many fireplaces. He holds it to Hades' face. 'Do you remember who the leader is here? Or would this flaming stick lodged into

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one of your eye sockets help remind you?’

Hades relents. ‘You, my Lord, are the leader.’

‘Yes. And you will not question my actions again.’ Anubis points to Hel, who is still rubbing her elbow. ‘You two should get out of my sight. I have important matters to discuss with Pluto.’

Hades takes Hel by the hand and leads her away. She glares daggers as she takes her leave.

Anubis invites Pluto to his private table. There, his jackal-headed helmet rests. Anubis lays it aside. He wants to talk to Pluto god-to-god.

‘Pluto, do you believe in fate?’

‘Well, yes. Of course.’

‘You are wrong. There is no such thing as fate. Not for immortals, anyway.’

Pluto nods as if he understands.

Anubis continues. ‘We are gods. Gods make their own choices, take their own risks and reap their own rewards.’

The beautiful demon goddess Inanna slinks behind Anubis as he speaks. Her forked tongue licks him on the neck and earlobe. But Anubis is far too focused on Pluto to pay her any attention.

‘Pluto, let me tell you a story. I was once a minor deity. Set, the Desert god, pushed me from my station. He trampled upon my ambitions and left me to survive on my own. But you see, Set had an enemy, Osiris. They waged war of epic proportions until Set ultimately defeated him. However, Osiris had a son. You know him as Horus. And what Set wasn’t counting on was what a worthy adversary Horus would be.’

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Anubis shrugs Inanna off and rises from the table. Pluto joins him and they walk and talk.

'All of Set's time was spent battling Horus. And that's when I made my play to recapture the Underworld. Set's armies were depleted and no match for mine. I regained my place and have held it for thousands of years. Do you understand what I am telling you?'

Pluto is slow to answer. 'I think so.'

'Then, let me spell it out for you. I made my own choices, took my own risks and reaped my own rewards. I have no use for fate. And neither should you.'

Pluto still does not understand.

'And don't think that The Light doesn't engage in similar atrocities. All of those Titans were not evil, yet they still suffered. Prometheus gave fire to the mortals. Zeus murdered Kronos, his own father. And then, there's the story of Helios, the Greek Sun god. His son was tragically killed and during his period of mourning, Zeus replaced him with his own offspring.'

Pluto connects the dots. 'Apollo.'

Anubis smiles. 'The very same.'

'I did not know the true history.'

'So now I look to you, my new general. This is your time. This is your chance. This is time to reap your rewards.'

Pluto looks confused. 'My liege, I do not understand.'

'I am offering you the opportunity to erase this son of Zeus with impunity. You will deal a harsh blow to The Light and be celebrated like never before. Hades would

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kill for a mission such as this. I trust you will too.'

'But how?' Pluto asks. 'I cannot breach Heaven's gates or Mount Olympus. And he is immortal. He cannot die.'

'Ah but you will not be going to Heaven nor Mount Olympus.'

'Where, then?'

Anubis smiles an evil grin. 'Oh, I'll think you'll like my plan.'