

# THE GREY IN BETWEEN



A SAGA OF HEROES  
AND VILLAINS BY  
FRANK MARTIN

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# The Grey In Between

By

Frank Martin

## Prologue: The Icons of Good and Evil

In a grey, windowless, doorless room, two figures appear. They are a man and woman of equal size and stature, wearing matching robes inverted only in their color scheme of black and white. The couple approaches a single table from either side. After taking a seat across from one another, they begin setting their stone pieces, also in white and black, on a chessboard resting upon the table.

They do so in silence, which is only broken once the Woman in White finishes placing all of her pieces up first. “Hello.”

“Hey, Mother,” the Man in Black replies with his eyes still on his task.

The Woman in White leans back in her seat, crossing her arms. “I hate it when you call me that.”

After standing up his king, the Man in Black’s eyes drift up towards his opponent’s pieces. “Well too bad.”

“How about I call you Father then?” the Woman in White suggests, sarcastically.

“Well, I would like you to call me Buttercup,” the Man in Black says, finally looking up at her. “But I don’t think it goes with my charming personality.”

The Woman in White smirks while surveying the board. “Always the smartass, aren’t you? It’s your move first by the way.”

The Man in Black’s hand waves over the board before selecting a pawn and moving it forward. “So how are things in your neck of the woods? Still sunny?”

The Woman in White rubs her chin, thinking for a few seconds before lifting her knight up and over her row of pawns. “I would watch your mouth, if I were you...”

“Or what?” the Man in Black challenges, mockingly. “You’ll banish me to darkness for all eternity?”

“No,” the Woman in White says, plainly. “You’d probably like it too much.”

They stare sharply at each other for a moment before rocking their heads back in laughter and resuming their game.

# Act 1: To Be as Gods

## Chapter 1: The Game

The match continues, as does the players' surprisingly pleasant banter. They discuss metaphysics and ethics, as well as humor and tragedy.

After a brief pause in the conversation, the Man in Black moves his rook up four spaces while deciding to shift gears to a more sensitive subject. "You know, it's becoming pretty full back home. I think you need to do a better job with these humans."

"Well, what do you propose I do?" the Woman in White asks, her voice sharp and annoyed.

The Man in Black shrugs. "I don't know. Set up a kindness tour or a virtue marketing campaign or something."

The Woman in White lets out a condescending chuckle as she waves her hand over the board, looking for a piece to move. "Very funny."

"I'm serious," The Man in Black says in a somber tone. "As much as I love to see their souls come my way, I really am getting sick of it. You need to do something. These humans are losing hope."

The Woman in White slams her hand down on the table, thrusting the chess pieces into the air. "Don't underestimate the power of the human spirit!"

After tumbling in circles, the pieces fall back down to the board, aligning perfectly in the spots they were before.

Pleading innocence, the Man in Black casually lifts his hands. "Whoa. Don't get all righteous on me. It's still your turn."

Sighing, the Woman in White looks off to the side. “Sorry. I just hate it when you don’t see the good in these humans.”

“Well...” The Man in Black smiles nervously, hesitant to finish his sentence. “You aren’t exactly winning the battle.”

Confused by the comment, the Woman in White scrunches her brow while finally moving her queen. “What battle?”

“You know,” the Man in Black explains, bobbing his head. “The whole good versus evil thing.”

Crossing her arms, the Woman in White leans back in her seat. “I didn’t know we were at war.”

Offended, the Man in Black allows his jaw to hang open while staring wide-eyed in the Woman in White’s direction. “Are you kidding me? I’m wearing this awful color for nothing?”

“The humans are neutral. You know this. Their moral alignment is their own decision. Not ours.”

The Man in Black releases his surprised expression with a scoff. He then lifts his black king from the board and holds it in front of his face, carefully examining its design while preaching to his opponent. “I know we gave them free will and all but their decisions affect us nonetheless. And right now, my domain has way more inhabitants than yours does.”

“You may have more,” the Woman in White acknowledges with a smirk, “but mine are more important.”

The Man in Black laughs as he places the king a space over to the left from where it stood. “Hello? Where have you been the last two hundred years?”

“Keep talking,” the Woman in White mutters while moving her bishop. “Keep talking. Check.”

Unconcerned with the chessboard, the Man in Black stares The Woman in White down with a steely gaze. “Okay. You want to put your money where your mouth is? The let’s do this.”

“Do what?” the Woman in White asks, curiously.

“A little game.” The Man in Black holds up his hands with his fingers spread out wide. “We pick five humans each and see who wins.”

Intrigued by the wager, the Woman in White’s eyebrows perk up. “Win what?”

Going on to explain, the Man in Black clasps his hands together and places them down on the table in front of him. “We look into the spirit of ten humans and see what lies in their hearts. You choose five that you think will fight for good and I’ll choose five that will fight for evil. Then we give them powers to battle on a godly scale and see which side wins: yours or mine.”

The interest on the Woman in White’s face immediately vanishes as she dismisses the wager. “No. Out of the question.”

Relaxing in his seat, the Man in Black puts on the show of a seasoned salesman, waving his hands around as he pitches his plan. “Oh, come on. We’ll only choose one continent. We’ll just give them abilities and see how they use them. No intervention. Besides, if you really are carrying the ‘big guns’ then you’ll have no chance of losing...right?”

The Woman in White listens and allows the Man in Black’s words a chance to percolate in her mind. She looks down at the board filled with lifeless stone figures and ponders their purpose. They are slaves, meant for nothing more than to serve the bidding of those in control of their actions. The Woman in White doesn’t pity the pieces. She doesn’t even concern herself with their outcome beyond her desire. They just exist. Just like everything she created exists.

And from there, her thoughts expand into contemplation far past the limits of human understanding.

“Okay,” the Woman in White says, finally looking up from the board.  
“You’re on.”

## Chapter 2: Up in Flames

“Good morning, baby.”

Following the smell of breakfast wafting through the house, Paul Hugo walks downstairs and enters the kitchen. He finds his wife, Linda, working over the stove and kisses her on the cheek.

“Hey, Paul,” she greets him while nestling into the kiss. “Sleep well?”

He nods with a smile. “Awesome, actually.”

Their two nine-year-old twins, Stephen and Laura, are already eating breakfast at the kitchen table when Linda slides an over easy egg onto a plate and places it down next to them. “That’s great. Now can you please eat something before you take the kids to school?”

He shakes his head while loading a stack of papers into his briefcase. “Can’t. I’m late for work.”

“You need to eat,” she pesters lovingly, waving a dirty spatula in his face.

Paul closes the briefcase and clicks it locked. “I’ll pick something up on the way.”

Linda slides into Paul for a hug as he lifts the briefcase from the counter. “Okay. But don’t go the whole day without eating again. You know being hungry gives you headaches.”

“Will do, honey.” Smiling, Paul pecks Linda on the lips with another quick kiss before turning his attention to his children. “Come on, kids.”

With their backpacks slung around their shoulders, Stephen and Laura dart towards the front door with their father trailing behind them. The three Hugos then exit their West Virginian suburban home and head straight for the pre-owned minivan parked in the driveway. Running through their daily

routine on autopilot, the two kids jump into the back while Paul enters the driver's seat, patting his pockets looking for the keys.

“Oh shoot,” he says upon realizing his search was unsuccessful. “Hold on, guys. I'll be right back.”

He steps out of the car and whistles to himself while walking back up to the house. He reaches out as he approaches the front door, but just before touching the handle, a fireball explodes from inside the house, shattering the windows all around him. The force blows the door straight off its hinges, sending Paul flying backwards and crashing into the front lawn with a thud.

He shakes his head, desperately trying to get rid of the constant ringing in his ears. His blurry vision slowly starts coming into focus as he stands, and his first clear thought is a terrible one.

“Oh, my God,” he mutters to himself. “Linda.”

Paul takes off towards the house while pointing to the terrified faces staring at him through the minivan's window. “Just stay in the car, kids!”

He enters the smoke-filled living room expecting to find an inferno, but all he spots are several small fires brewing around the floor. “Linda!”

“Paul?” a faint voice calls back to him from deeper in the house.

He makes a beeline across the living room and enters the kitchen to find his wife on her knees, fully clothed and staring at her hands covered in flames.

“Linda,” he says in disbelief. “Are you okay?”

She slowly looks up and Paul gasps in shock at the sight of two small flames burning within her eye sockets. “What... what's happening to me?”

### Chapter 3: Beauty and the Beast

Christine Reyes considers herself a caring and generous person. She always gives money to the homeless. She donates regularly to food and clothing drives. And she is one of the most respected pediatric doctors in all of Los Angeles. So then she wonders why she feels so guilty asking for a bigger budget from her boss.

She looks out the window at the skyscrapers towering over her cab and contemplates the long odds against her. Breton Enterprises, a billion-dollar corporation, had only just bought her practice a month ago and she's already going to ask for higher operating expenses. But Christine knows full well that the previous owners never gave a damn, so then why should Brian Breton? To him, her practice is just another name added to his ever-expanding list of assets. But she at least has to try.

After stepping out of the cab, Christine looks straight up and her jaw drops at the sheer height of the glass building before her. Still in awe, she then walks into the lobby and her jaw drops even more. Crystal walls and chandeliers light up the magnificent room with a near blinding sparkle. Televisions and couches are positioned in the corners, out of the way of the perpetual human motion zigzagging around the crowded lobby.

Christine is the only person in the entire room standing still. She carefully surveys every inch of the exquisite decor when a television off to the side grabs her attention. It's tuned into a cable news network with the headline "Creature Breaks out of Prison" flashing across the screen.

Christine focuses in on the female news anchor narrating the story. "Several inmates escaped from a maximum-security prison in Mexico City today after a bizarre and somewhat mysterious turn of events. Confusion

erupted around the prison as a result of what many are calling a monster attack. Prison officials are denying the reports, but eyewitnesses claim that one of the inmates, whose name is currently unknown, turned into a ‘steel creature’ before attacking the guards. The creature broke through the walls when...”

“Can I help you?” a voice asks, breaking Christine’s concentration.

She turns to find a receptionist staring at her from behind a large front desk. “Oh, sorry. I’m Christine Reyes. I have an appointment with Mr. Breton.”

“Hold on one moment.” The receptionist shifts her focus to the computer in front of her as Christine approaches the desk. “Yes, Dr. Reyes. Head on down to the elevators and take one up to the top floor. Someone will meet you there.”

“Thank you,” Christine says with a smile while walking deeper into the building.

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“What do you mean you’re backing out?!”

Brian Breton shoots out of his chair in a fit of anger, staring down the board members seated around the conference table.

“We aren’t yet, Brian,” the chairman at the far end of the table responds coolly. “But this expansion of the company worries us.”

Sunlight pours into the room from the floor to ceiling windows, and Breton closes his eyes, calming his rage in the light’s warmth at his back. “I can assure you, all of you, that the recent companies I have bought are a PR campaign to lighten my image in the public eye. That’s all. Give it a month or two and it won’t matter how well these companies do because the others will sky rocket.”

The chairman gathers the papers scattered in front of him, signaling the other board members to begin their departure. “I hope so, Brian, because if you’re wrong, we’re out. We’re going to break down the company and sell. End of story.”

The chairman tucks the papers under his arm and follows the others out of the room. Breton stares at the door after it shuts behind him. After several long, deep breaths, he turns to face the window behind his chair and looks out over the Los Angeles skyline. One by one, his eyes bounce from building to building, his mind running through a checklist of those he wishes to own and those he already does. Breton smiles like a king overlooking his kingdom from his own personal castle that towers over it all.

“It doesn’t matter what they do,” he whispers to himself. “I own this city from top to bottom and I will continue to...forever.”

Breton spins around and punches the back of his chair. “No matter what!”

The impact ignites the leather seat into a purple blaze of plasma that sends it flying across the table and slamming into the room’s far wall.

Breton’s eyes open wide in awe as he examines his hand in wonder. “What the devil?”

He closes it into another fist and slams down on the table. A shockwave jolts the gigantic table off the ground as a rush of purple plasma surges through it. As the energy dissipates, several spots along the surface erupt into flames. Breton then places his palm on the table and the energy from the flames retreat, traveling along the surface before being absorbed up into Breton’s body.

“Amazing,” he mutters, once again examining his arm as if it weren’t attached to his body.

Breton dashes towards the door and opens it only to discover one of his assistants with her fist raised ready to knock. “Mr. Breton! Sorry to get in your way, sir, but I came to tell you Dr. Reyes is here for her meeting.”

“Who?” Breton asks, unfamiliar with the name.

He brushes past her through the door and proceeds to walk down the hall while the assistant shuffles her steps to try and keep up. “Dr. Christine Reyes. She runs the pediatric hospital you acquired with the Osborne Ventures deal.”

Breton’s steps are wide and swift while his gaze remains firmly ahead. “What is she here for?”

“Well...I’m not sure.” The assistant opens her shoulder as she walks, waving to someone behind them. “But you can ask her yourself.”

Out the corner of his eye, Breton senses a woman running to catch up with him.

“Hello, Mr. Breton,” she greets him with a soft, gentle voice. “I just want to say thank you for—”

Breton briefly glances over in her direction, just long enough to form an opinion that the woman appeared quite young to be a doctor. “Can you cut the bullshit, Dr. Reyes? I’m a very busy man.”

“Sorry,” she stammers, fiddling her fingers with nervous energy. “I was just wondering if we could discuss increasing the hospital’s budget for this upcoming—”

Breton interrupts her proposal with a succinct chuckle. “You can’t be serious?”

“The hospital does a lot of good with just the basics,” Christine continues, “but it still struggles to help some community members that need additional resources.”

Breton stops suddenly and squares his body to face Christine. “The hospital is doing just fine financially. I looked at the numbers.”

“I know the numbers are there but—”

Breton holds up his hand, cutting her off. “No buts. There will be no budget increase. Have a nice day.”

Christine opens her mouth to speak, but Breton has already left her standing alone as he and his assistant continue down the hallway. She frowns while watching them grow smaller in the distance until the phone vibrating in her pocket draws her attention.

“Hello?” she answers. “Hi, Aunt Cindy...What?...When does she go under the knife?...Do they still live in Brooklyn?...Okay. I’ll take the next flight out...I’m so sorry. Tell her to feel better and I will get there as soon as I can. Bye.”

Christine hangs up and is already rushing back towards the elevators before the phone is returned to her pocket.

## Chapter 4: Avalanche

“Jared!!!!!!!!!!”

The screeching of his father’s voice barely registers inside Jared Lowe’s head, but it’s just enough to cause him to roll over and fall out of bed.

“Yeah, dad?!” he shouts back while still lying on the ground.

“Did you forget to plow the fields again, son?”

Jared’s eyes shoot open as he realizes his fault. The eighteen-year-old then pops up to his feet. “Sorry, pop! I’ll do it now.”

After throwing on a shirt and pair of jeans, Jared runs downstairs, practically hopping over the last few steps as he barges into the kitchen.

“Hey, mom.”

“Morning, kiddo,” she replies while pouring a cup of coffee.

Jared immediately opens the pantry and dives his head inside. “How ya feeling, ma?”

“Just fine.” She slowly sips from the hot mug in her hands. “Are you still going to that kickboxing class?”

“Yup,” Jared answers succinctly while pouring cereal into a bowl.

His mother tilts her head to the side, gawking curiously at her son. “I don’t understand why you bother with that stuff.”

He brings the bowl over to the table, kissing his mother’s cheek on the way. “Ya never know when there’s a damsel in distress to be rescued. I gotta be ready.”

She strains her cheeks to force a smile on her face. “Always trying to be a hero, aren’t you, Jared?”

He looks up with a mouth full of cereal and flashes her a wink. “You know it.”

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After breakfast, Jared wastes no time manning the tractor to mow the fields outside their Kansas home. About halfway through his chore, Jared suddenly stops, turns the tractor off, and jumps to the ground, lying down comfortably in the waist high grass. He takes a deep breath and stares into the bright blue sky, watching the fast moving clouds glide overhead.

“I wonder what it would be like to fly,” he murmurs to himself. “Just once.”

Jared closes his eyes and dreams of soaring through the clouds. He can practically feel the moisture on his face and the brisk wind parting his hair...then the ground suddenly jolts beneath his back.

Surprised, Jared quickly sits up in shock. “What was that?”

After looking around confused, Jared shakes his arms, ridding them of his jitters, and then walks back to the tractor.

He reaches out to climb up into the driver’s seat when the ground shakes again. “What in God’s name is going on?”

Jared spins in a circle, confused and disoriented, when another tremor abruptly rocks the field, knocking him to his knees. The boy puts his hands out to catch himself from falling face first into the ground but notices something strange as his palms hit the dirt. Jared can’t explain it. He doesn’t even know how to describe it. But he can suddenly feel the world below him. Not just feel the soil touching his fingers...but all of it. The entire field. He feels the energy of the earth become a part of him as he focuses his mind and takes control of the tremors.

“This can’t be,” he whispers in awe.

Jared stands and closes his eyes, focusing on his every breath. The field again quakes beneath his feet, stronger and greater than before. But this time Jared feels a part of it and wills the earthquake to subside...which it does.

Grinning from ear to ear, Jared opens his eyes and sprints back to his house. He barrels into the front door, where he finds his mother and father in the hallway, picking up fallen picture frames off the floor.

Jared runs straight past them on the way to the stairs, drawing his mother's concerned attention. "Jared, honey? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, son," his father adds. "That was quite a couple of quakes there."

Already upstairs, Jared yells back to them while frantically packing a duffel bag full of clothes. "Yeah. I'm fine. But I need to talk to you two about something."

With the bag slung over his shoulder, Jared runs back downstairs and stops in front of his parents, both of whom are waiting patiently for him at the bottom of the steps. "Listen. I know I help you guys out a lot on the farm, but something's come up and...I just gotta follow my gut with it."

His mother forms a concerned grimace. "Honey, what are you talking about?"

Jared knows what he wants to tell them... just not how to tell them. So he doesn't think. He just says it. "I'm going to New York."

Completely baffled by his son's statement, Jared's father scowls as he opens his arms up wide. "What? Where did this come from? No! Out of the question."

Jared tightens his hold on the strap around his shoulder to keep his frustration in check. “I’m eighteen now, Dad. You can’t stop me from leaving.”

“The hell I can,” his father fumes.

Jared takes a deep breath, venting his anger, before speaking calmly from the heart. “Look. Something’s happened to me. Something I’ve always dreamed about. And I can’t pass up this chance. I’m so sorry, but I have to do what is right. Goodbye.”

Jared slides past his parents, only briefly catching a glimpse of his mother’s confused expression. He doesn’t want her to worry, but she would never understand. Neither of them would. So Jared runs out of the house without looking back, tuning out his father’s screams behind him. He then forms a landslide beneath his feet, conjuring the wave of earth like it was the most natural thing in the world, and rides it into the horizon.

## Chapter 5: Sparks Will Fly

“This Sunday the Cleveland Browns are scheduled to play the New York Jets at MetLife Stadium. The Browns are the heavy favorite, but who knows if that’s still the case after the Browns star line backer, Stan Crossing, was checked into a New York City hospital this morning. The Browns wouldn’t comment as to why the line backer, who spent the Brown’s bye week doing community charities, was admitted. The only comment we received on the matter from a Browns spokesperson was that Crossing had ‘an unusual illness.’”

Seated underneath the flatscreen, Darlene Tremont stands and turns off the television. “No more TV for you, Christian.”

“Yo, ma!” Christian spreads his arms out, annoyed. “What the hell? They were talking about the Jets.”

Darlene walks across the waiting room to approach her twenty-year-old son. “I don’t care if it’s the State of the Union. This is more important.”

Christian turns his whole body away from his mother, clearly displaying his displeasure like a boy half his age. His baggy jeans and jacket two sizes too big are a clear fashion contrast to Darlene’s, who takes pride in wearing a classy ensemble to her job as an office secretary downtown.

Ignoring her son’s stubbornness, Darlene sits down next to him and places a loving hand on his thigh. “Listen, I spent a lot of money getting this lawyer for you. I hear she’s the best and we need her if you’re going to beat this charge. So pay attention, okay?”

Christian grimaces but looks back at her over his shoulder. “Aight.”

It’s an awkward situation. Christian doesn’t give a damn about what happens to him and Darlene knows that, too. But he’s always cared deeply

about his mother's feeling and doesn't want to see her unhappy. So he sucks it up and goes through the motions, even if she knows he's only doing it for her sake.

The uncomfortable tension between them is broken when a man in a suit enters the waiting room. "Darlene and Christian Tremont? You can come in now. We're ready for you."

Darlene and Christian follow him into the office, through a long hallway, and into a conference room overlooking the Manhattan skyline. Waiting in the room is a single Asian woman with short hair. She's dressed in a suit and seated comfortably at a long conference table.

"Have a seat," the man instructs, motioning to two chairs opposite the woman.

After the mother and son oblige, the man walks around the table and sits down next to the woman, who's nervously shaking while staring at the floor. She has still yet to look up, causing the man to lightly shrug against her shoulder. She breathes deep, as if suddenly realizing where she is, and then extends a trembling hand towards Darlene.

"Oh, sorry," she stammers. "My mind is somewhere else. I'm Betty Chang."

After shaking Darlene's hand, Betty turns her attention towards the young man seated across from her. "And you must be Christian."

"Yeah," Christian replies, arrogantly leaning back in his seat. "That's me."

Betty flips open a folder on the table and casually browses through its contents. "I understand you got into some trouble, Christian. Possession of a concealed weapon and aggravated assault."

Christian shrugs, indifferent to the charges. "Long story."

“Well...”

Betty pauses, struggling to turn the page in the folder with her shaking hands. Christian notices and looks up to find the woman’s eyes blinking rapidly. “You okay, Miss Chang? You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine,” she says, lifting a hand to cover her face. “Can you just excuse me for one second?”

Betty stands and darts off to a bathroom connected to the conference room.

After watching her sudden and bizarre exit, Darlene and Christian both turn to the man, who shares their look of confusion.

“She said she wasn’t feeling well earlier,” he explains with an unconfident shrug.

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Betty instinctually flips the light switch as she enters the bathroom and locks the door. She then leans over the sink and stares at her reflection in the mirror. Beads of sweat pour down her shaking forehead as she’s unable to control her rapid breaths.

“Come on, Betty,” she whispers to herself. “What’s the matter with you? Get a hold of yourself.”

She turns on the sink faucet and splashes the cold water across her face. Surprisingly, the liquid tingles against her skin and Betty winces, immediately grabbing a towel to wipe it off. She reaches to turn off the metal faucet when sparks fly from her hand as she touches it. “What the hell?”

Betty fearfully pulls her hand away and the sparks transform into an arc of electricity that connects between the shiny metal and the ends of her fingertips.

Now intrigued by the phenomenon, Betty holds her hand in the air, curiously staring at the electric strand. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

The arc absorbs completely into her hand, and Betty stares at it in shock while strolling over to the bathroom’s light switch. “Hmm. I wonder...”

She curiously reaches out, placing her palm just over the switch, and focuses with all her energy. Nothing happens at first, but Betty doesn’t give up. She continues to focus, reigning in her thoughts and applying them to the center of her palm. Slowly, a stream of electricity dances out of the switch and floats through the air before abruptly surging into Betty’s hand. She absorbs the continuous current for several seconds until lights flicker off, plunging the room into darkness.

“You little devil,” Betty whispers to herself, satisfied with the result.

## Chapter 6: Strangers on a Bus

Rocking back and forth on his heels, Jared waits impatiently at a bus terminal in the center of his small rural town. He's the only one standing on the curb with his bag tightly wrapped around his shoulder. Trying hard to occupy his bored mind, Jared is so busy looking around that he doesn't even notice when the bus finally pulls up in front of him. A wide smile grows across his face when the doors open up, but Jared's excitement quickly vanishes when he hops aboard only to find the bus completely cramped with people.

Frowning, Jared turns to the driver. "Sir, do you happen to know when the next bus to New York is?"

The skinny man shakes his head with a grimace. "Not until tomorrow, kid. Sorry. If you want to hit the Big Apple you're going to have to squeeze in."

The air is so hot and stuffy inside the bus that Jared is already breaking a sweat, but he doesn't have much of a choice. The teenage boy sighs, preparing himself to head down the aisle. After taking his first step, the driver shuts the door and pulls away from the curb, causing Jared to grab ahold of the rack above his head to keep his balance.

Slowly shuffling down the lane, Jared's eyes scan the crowded seats looking for an opening. He only finds two. The first is a tiny space next to an overweight man wearing a pair of shorts a size too small. The other is an aisle seat next to a pale young woman in gothic clothing and long black hair. His choice is a no-brainer.

Jared moves towards the girl sitting next to the window and politely gestures to the open seat. "Excuse me, miss. Mind if I sit here?"

She takes her eyes off the window, just barely registering Jared before returning to the view. “Sure. Go ahead.”

Jared is struck by the woman’s beauty, which she purposefully conceals beneath a dark persona of makeup and jewelry. He can tell she’s older than him, but not by much. He sits in the seat and clutches onto the duffel bag in his lap, trying not to stare at the woman beside him.

A minute or so passes with Jared periodically glancing over at the woman to try and catch another glimpse of her. Sensing his movements, she peeks over her shoulder and finds Jared looking at her out the corner of his eye.

“Can I help you?” she asks, annoyed.

A knot abruptly forms in Jared’s throat as he tries to speak.

“Oh...uh...nope.”

She rolls her eyes and goes back to staring out the window. A moment later, she looks back and again spots Jared eying her.

“You have a problem with me or something?” she snaps at him.

Caught off guard, Jared doesn’t think as he stammers out a response.

“What? No. I just...think you’re pretty. That’s all.”

The woman scoffs a single chuckle. “Yeah. Whatever.”

Embarrassed, Jared looks away and reluctantly starts to stand. “I’m sorry. I’ll switch seats if it’s—.”

He stops when the woman suddenly grabs onto his arm.

“It’s okay,” she says, straining her face to form an appreciative smile.

“You can stay. And thanks for the compliment.”

Jared smiles, too.

“You have a name?” the woman asks him as he sits back down.

Jared swallows while nodding a single time. “Jared Lowe.”

She extends her hand into the small open space between them.  
“Victoria Leaman. Nice to meet you, Jared.”

Jared accepts the woman’s firm handshake and then leans back comfortably in his seat.

A silence settles between the young couple for a few seconds until, much to Jared’s surprise, Victoria decides to continue their conversation. “I heard you tell the driver you’re going to New York.”

Jared nods his head while keeping his eyes trained on the back of the seat in front of him. “Yup. In comic books, New York City is where all the super heroes live, so I figured if I want to be one then that’s where I need to go.”

Victoria bites her lip to keep herself from laughing. “A super hero, huh? Don’t you need super powers for that?”

Jared turns to her ever so slightly and smirks. “Don’t worry. I already got that covered.”

Victoria’s head bobs up and down, encouraging him to continue.  
“And what’s in the bag? A costume?”

Jared shakes his head, completely oblivious of the sarcasm in Victoria’s question. “Nope. No costume. No secret identity. Just me. I’m going to be one of those heroes who stand in the spotlight and everybody loves.”

Victoria grins, amused by the boy’s confidence.  
“Sounds...interesting.”

“What about you?” Jared asks, eager to learn more about his new companion. “You headed all the way to New York or getting off sooner?”

Victoria shrugs. “Haven’t decided yet.”

“Haven’t decided yet?” Jared repeats, confused. “How do you get on a bus and not know where you’re going?”

“I’m just wandering,” Victoria responds plainly, as if it’s the most natural answer in the world.

But her explanation did nothing to assuage Jared’s confusion. “You don’t have a home?”

“I did…” Victoria pauses, her eyes falling to the floor before finishing her thought. “…but not anymore. I had to leave.”

“Why were you…?”

Jared’s eyes try to follow Victoria’s line of sight but stops upon spotting several scars running across her wrist. Victoria looks up and notices Jared staring at her arm. Embarrassed, she quickly pulls her long sleeved shirt down over hand, tucking it between her legs.

Snapping out of a trance, Jared uncomfortably darts his eyes to the floor. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too, Jared.” Victoria takes a deep breath and slowly shifts her gaze back out the window. “Me too.”

## Chapter 7: Brotherly Love

After their meeting with the lawyer was cut short, Christian and Darlene head home to the projects on the east side of the city. They walk into their apartment to find Christian's younger teenage brother, Orson, sitting on the couch watching television.

When the thick metal door slams shut, Orson points to the image of a reporter without taking his eyes off the screen. "Did you see this? The news says there was a blackout that took out two city blocks."

Christian makes a beeline straight for the kitchen while Darlene approaches the couch.

"I know," she replies. "We were stuck in it at the lawyer's office. Took us a while to get out of there, too. How are you, baby?"

Without ever looking away from the TV, Orson pokes out his cheek to receive a kiss from his mother. "I'm good."

"That's nice," she says while pulling her lips away.

Orson digs into the cushion, pulls out a remote, and clicks off the news report. "How did the meeting with the lawyer go, Mom?"

"It was strange," she starts to explain as Christian enters the room sipping a soda. "She was being really weird when we first got there. She went to the bathroom and that's when the blackout happened. When she came back she was ecstatic about something and had to rush out. We scheduled a makeup appointment, though."

Darlene then finishes up her story with a deep sigh. "It's been a long day so I'm going to bed. You two should get some rest. Good night, boys."

"Night, Ma," they say in unison.

Christian leans over to watch their mother disappear into the bedroom. Once she's out of sight, he crushes the soda can and dashes over to the couch.

"Did the lawyer really just leave like that?" Orson asks as his brother approaches.

As he slides into the open seat, Christian indifferently waves off the question. "Yeah. But don't worry about me, bro. You need to worry about tonight. The drop is still on, right?"

Orson nods a single time. "Yeah. I'm supposed to meet the rest of the gang at the warehouse ten minutes before."

"Good," Christian says with a grin. "Look at you. Running top dog at a re-up. My little bro is growing up so fast. I'm proud of you, kid. Don't screw this up, though. Stay calm and everything will go fine. You nervous?"

Orson lowers his head, shifting his gaze to the floor. "A little. We're not talkin' nickels and dimes anymore. This is heavy shit."

Sensing his brother's apprehension, Christian places a soft hand on Orson's shoulder. "It's just another deal. Ain't nothin' you haven't done a thousand times before. I wish I could be there with you, but I'm fighting this charge and..."

Orson looks up, flashing his brother a nervous smile. "I know."

Christian smiles back before pulling Orson in and embracing him with a hug. "You're gonna be great, Orson. Just great."

## Chapter 8: Last Stop

Night falls hard over New York City as the regional train pulls into Penn Station. Sitting quietly in the back seat, Vincent Turning waits patiently for the train to finish crawling forward and come to a complete stop. He doesn't move as the people around him all stand, preparing to depart the car. While standing in front of the door, waiting for it to open, the other passengers curiously look Vincent up and down. He's an obviously large figure, much larger than a normal man should be, yet they can't see an inch of skin under his long overcoat and the hat pulled down over his face.

Once the doors open, everyone abandons their curiosity of Vincent to exit the train, but Vincent remains seated. The conductor, waiting by the door for all the passengers to leave, turns his focus to Vincent in the back of the train when he notices the large man has yet to move.

"Excuse me, sir," the conductor shouts at him. "This train is not making any more trips for tonight. I'm afraid you're going to have to get off."

Vincent doesn't move an inch. "I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

The conductor walks towards the back to approach Vincent. "Sir, you have to exit the train."

"Okay then."

Vincent lunges forward out of his seat and grabs the conductor by the throat. The conductor's face grows wide in panic as Vincent emerges from the shadows, revealing himself to be a metal monstrosity covered in steel from head to toe. The only part of his body even resembling a man are his eyes, which leer down at the conductor through a shiny sneer.

"But you're going to have to get off first," Vincent growls.

Swinging his arm to the side, Vincent easily tosses the conductor through the window of the train and out onto the tracks. He then pulls his coat shut, once again covering up his metal form as he proceeds towards the door.

## Chapter 9: Speed Demon

Orson paces back and forth while looking around the empty warehouse. The space is big, too big, and making him nervous. There's no cover and nowhere to hide. Just him, the concrete floor, and the six other gang members there to watch his back.

Orson's teeth chatter harder and harder as his anxious energy grows with the echoing click of his footsteps. But he can't sit still. There's too much at stake. And the silence from the men behind him isn't helping any.

Suddenly, one of the many warehouse doors swing open and Orson stops cold, turning to spot seven men entering the warehouse's dim light from the darkness outside.

They're all dressed in black sweats except for one man upfront. He's wearing a suit and steps up to address the six gang members. "Who's in charge here?"

Orson approaches the man with his head held high. "I am."

"Good," the man says, nodding approvingly. "We both know what we're here to do, so I have just one question: where's the money?"

Orson waves over one of the gang members, who brings Orson a duffel bag. The man in the suit then snaps his fingers, causing one of the men behind him to hand him a briefcase that Orson hadn't even noticed was there.

Orson and the man in the suit eye each other down for a few moments until the man points at the bag. "I take it that's the correct amount? Counting it isn't exactly in my plans for the evening and I don't want to be here any longer than I have to."

"And you think I do?" Orson shoots back.

The man smiles while extending his arm with the briefcase. “We’re in agreement then.”

Orson reaches out with the bag and the two make the exchange. The man swiftly unzips the bag and peeks inside. He then looks back up with another smile. “We’re done here. Nice doing business with you.”

He starts to turn around when the many doors around the warehouse burst open as swarms of uniformed policemen storm the building.

“Freeze!” a voice booms out over the entire warehouse.

Both groups, the gangsters and men dressed in black, immediately draw their weapons and exchange fire with the officers as chaos erupts in every direction. Everyone present for the meeting scatters in a free for all, and Orson frantically looks around for a way out with the suitcase in hand. He spots a small door still unopened at the far end of the warehouse and dashes towards it. Lowering his shoulder, Orson busts through the door and into a tight alleyway. At first he breathes a sigh of relief, believing he escaped danger, but the flashing lights of a cop car suddenly flick on, paralyzing Orson in his tracks.

“Don’t move!” a voice orders through a loudspeaker.

Without thinking, Orson takes off running in the opposite direction. The voice yells out again, but Orson blocks it from his mind, focusing only on sprinting away.

A police siren echoes through the alley followed by the sharp screech of tires as the car speeds after its prey. In a matter of moments, Orson can sense the car gaining on him and abruptly turns onto the street when the alley comes to an end.

Continuing the chase, the car exits the alleyway by fishtailing onto the street and zooming off in pursuit. Orson runs as fast as he can while still

clutching the briefcase in his arms, but the car is once again right on his tail. He can hear the engine revving, not slowing down. For a moment, Orson believes that the car isn't going to stop. That it's just going to run him straight over.

Orson pushes harder, kicking his heels out with all his might as he's literally running for his life. He fights for every step forward when he inexplicably feels his feet grow lighter, almost as if his legs had become feathers. Orson is already moving as fast as he can, but he somehow manages to go faster. Quickly glancing over his shoulder, he even notices he's breaking free of the car behind him.

The distance between them grows and grows with every stride and Orson can hear the driver mutter to himself through the loudspeaker. "Hell almighty."

Orson glances back again, but this time he can't even see the car. In fact, he can't even see the street. He looks to his side and everything around him is a blur.

Panicked by his surroundings, Orson suddenly stops and the world once again comes into focus. He takes a moment to catch his breath and figure out how to get back home, but after examining the neighborhood, Orson quickly realizes he somehow just ran halfway across the city.

## Chapter 10: Son of Liberty

Standing on the busy Times Square sidewalk, Vincent acts as a tremendous obstacle to the throngs of people passing him by. His massive, almost unnatural frame blocks the path, causing the daytime crowds of children and tourists to bunch even closer together as they squeeze to get around him.

Vincent doesn't care, though. The flashing neon lights and blaring sounds transport him to another world, far from the decadence and degeneracy of the New York City he remembers.

It's been decades since he set foot in the Square. Not since the night before his court hearing when he sought to forget his troubles in a bender filled with prostitutes and alcohol. He wasn't particularly nervous about the many counts of aggravated assault he was facing. Mainly because he knew he was running if he was found guilty, anyway.

To this day, Vincent still doesn't think his crimes were his fault. Violence was the only thing he was ever good at. They, the military that trained him to be a killer, taught him to embrace that violence for a cause. And now the government he fought so hard for just wanted him to turn all that off at the drop of a hat. It was bullshit.

After fleeing to Mexico, Vincent realized the truth about the world. That there's the good, the bad, and those who think they can choose what side others are supposed to be on.

But Vincent already knows where he stands. That's why he believes he was chosen to wield the power of a god. Why his body was transformed into a fearsome metal goliath. Why he has returned home to The City Than

Never Sleeps. So that he may finally show those who created him that he cannot be controlled.

Lost in his deep self-reflection, Vincent is suddenly snapped back to reality by a young girl tugging on his overcoat. Looking down upon the curious girl, Vincent lifts up the brim of his hat to reveal the metallic face of a golem. He expects the girl to scream, but she smiles instead, pulling the hand of a woman behind her to get the woman's attention. "Mommy! Mommy! Look! It's a metal guy."

Distracted by her phone, the woman looks up annoyed only to meet Vincent's steely gaze. She's stunned at first, unsure as to what to make of the strange monster before her. Her eyes frantically shift back and forth between Vincent and the many costumed characters taking pictures around the Square, wondering if he's all part of the act. Having made up her mind, the woman screams at the top of her lungs, causing the gigantic mass of people to stop dead in their tracks.

The woman's loud shrill continues for several seconds until Vincent cuts her off by swiftly yanking her up off the ground by her throat. After allowing her a moment to futilely fight Vincent's grip, the metal monster jerks his hand to the side, snapping the woman's neck like a twig. He then casually flicks his wrist to toss her body into the middle of the stunned crowd like a rag doll.

Screams and shouts of terror erupt around the area as the mob starts to desperately push to flee. Throwing his overcoat and hat aside, Vincent smiles as he watches the people scatter like ants into the street. He then chases after them, barreling over some like road kill while knocking others clear across the Square with a swing of his fist.

Continuing his rampage, Vincent smashes cars into bits and hurls pushcarts into storefronts. The destruction spreads with every second that passes. The metal monster shows no mercy and takes no prisoners. The city is his to do with as he wishes.

After what feels like an eternity, a swarm of police units arrive and quickly cordon off the area with barricades and their cars. A short time later, news crews show up on the scene, either as reporters on the ground or choppers in the sky. The view doesn't matter, though. They all immediately start shooting with their cameras to broadcast images of the gigantic steel creature live across the world.

## Chapter 11: Fate

The last twenty-fours have been traumatizing for Linda Hugo. The firefighters never discovered a cause for the explosion inside her home and the doctors found nothing wrong with her despite being at the center of the blast. But things have calmed down since then. Her body returned to normal and she now sat quietly in a hospital bed, watching a soap opera and sipping on a cup of water.

That all changes when a breaking news story interrupts her show. After a brief introduction from a reporter, Linda's jaw drops when the broadcast shifts to live footage of metal monster rampaging through Times Square.

"Paul!" she shouts to her husband talking to doctors just outside the room. "Get in here!"

He hurries inside, his face drained and worn. "What is it, baby?"

"I need you to take me to New York," she declares while staring at the screen.

He shakes his head with a wry frown. "Linda..."

"Paul!" she snaps, cutting him off while pointing to the screen. "I don't care what the doctors say. Something is wrong with me and this is connected to it. I don't know how or why but I can feel it and I have to find out more...please."

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There have been few times in his life Stan Crossing was ever embarrassed or afraid, yet now he can't stop being either. He's been poked and prodded non-stop for hours, ever since his entire body morphed into stone right in the middle of the locker room.

Now, while resting on a mattress held up by cinderblocks in the back of the stadium, Crossing watches in shock as a creature of steel causes mayhem on the streets of New York.

The sports agent sitting beside him skeptically points to the television. “Stan, listen to yourself. You’re telling me this metal monster has something to do with you?”

“Yes,” Crossing replies with a distorted, gravely voice. “It has to be.”

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With his feet kicked up on the desk, Brian Breton holds up his hand while casually twirling a ball of energy in his palm. A high-rise view over downtown Los Angeles shines past the window behind him, but Breton focuses on the grid of large television sets mounted on the wall to his side.

Breton squints to concentrate solely on the middle screen, making sure the metal monster he sees on it is real. Smiling, he then flicks away the ball of energy and leans forward to click the intercom on his desk.

“Call the airport,” he orders, “and make sure they have my jet ready to depart for New York... ASAP.”

\*\*\*

Lying on his couch while clutching a pillow in his arms, Orson Tremont shakes uncontrollably. No matter how hard he tries, he can’t seem to stop moving. Tears begin to swell in the young man’s vibrating eyes, blurring his vision as he watches the battle between the cops and a metal creature in Times Square.

“This can’t be happening,” he mutters, rapidly. “This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening.”

\*\*\*

“Yes, I’m on the plane now... No, Aunt Cindy. They let you use your phone inflight... Soon. We should be landing any minute.”

Christine Reyes’s plane dips its nose, beginning a descent towards the New York City airport. She looks out the window, hoping to catch a glance of the famous Manhattan skyline when a tiny object catches her attention. The object is soaring towards her, rapidly growing in size until it takes the shape of a minivan. Christine doesn’t even have time to gasp as the vehicle clips the plane’s wing, spiraling it out of control.

Wracked with fear and desperation, the panicked passengers all scream and shout as the plane plunges downward towards the ocean. It then connects hard with the water, smashing into a hundred pieces that scatter all across the New York harbor.

\*\*\*

In the many, many hours they sit beside one another, the tension between Jared and Victoria fades into what both of them would describe as an odd yet friendly relationship. Much to the annoyance of those seated around them, their conversations consist of frequent laughter and giggles. So many, in fact, that neither of them even realize when they enter the island of Manhattan.

That all comes to an end when the bus suddenly jerks forward in a stop, causing both Victoria and Jared to smack their heads against the seats in front of them.

“What’s going on?” Jared pokes his head up and notices a large police barricade set up beyond several lanes of traffic. “This isn’t the bus terminal.”

The driver looks up over the barricade then yells back at the many grumbling passengers behind him. “There’s some huge monster thing in the street! The cops are trying to stop it!”

Jared falls back into his seat and stares dumbfounded for a moment before his face lights up into a smile. “This is my chance.”

He shoots up out of his seat and takes off run towards the front of the bus.

“Jared!” Victoria yells out to him.

The boy doesn’t even register her words. He’s already out the bus door and running through the congested traffic. Upon reaching the crowd, Jared spreads his hands out in front of him, causing the street to lift up and separate the barrier.

“Excuse me, people,” Jared says as he blows by the broken barricade, passing several stunned police officers along the way. “Super hero coming through!”

Jared runs straight through the desolate Times Square sporadically filled with bodies and debris. He stops in front of the steel monster, who has his back to him, and looks the massive figure up and down in awe.

“Hi...big...metal guy.”

The man of metal curiously turns around and towers over Jared’s puny frame. “Metal guy? The name’s Vincent, kid. And you must got a death wish or something messing with me.”

“I think I’ll go with the ‘or something’ part,” Jared quips.

He pushes his arms forward and forces the ground under Vincent’s feet to shoot upwards, tossing the metal monster into the air. Vincent flies backwards and slams into a giant television screen built into the side of a building. Sparks flare out from the collision and Vincent falls hard to the street, causing a small crater to form under his impact.

Satisfied with the attack, Jared smiles and runs up to the crater as Vincent slowly rises to his feet. Sneering at the boy, Vincent grabs a large

chunk of rubble from the crater wall and throws it at Jared, who dives out of the way. Jared then shoots another spike up from the ground, which sends Vincent flying through the air back the way he came.

Without ever turning to watch the monster land, Jared focuses in on the seemingly endless crowd of onlookers that has gathered outside the barricades. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. You’re all safe now. My name is Jared Lowe and I’ll be your superhero for today’s fight. You all can line up for autographs after I put this shiny bad guy down for good.”

With his showboating finished, Jared turns his attention back to Vincent, who has already risen to his feet and begun slowly approaching his opponent from the other side of the street.

“Now for the finale,” Jared mutters under his breath.

He concentrates with all his will, focusing on creating a single, powerful tremor to finish the fight. The ground begins to tremble and a roaring tidal wave forms in the pavement, moving strong and fast in Vincent’s direction. Smiling, the metal monster lifts his leg and stomps as the approaching wave reaches him, sending it back the way it came. Caught off guard by the reversal, Jared struggles to balance himself on the quaking ground beneath him. He loses his footing and stumbles backwards, smacking his head hard on a pile of debris.

Standing in the crowd, Victoria watches as Vincent picks up a car and prepares to throw it at his opponent. Across the street, Jared shakes his head, trying to regain his senses, but is oblivious to the car about to be tossed in his direction.

Pushing through the crowd, Victoria screams while slipping through the barricade. “Jared! Look out!”

“Hey!” an officer shouts at her. “Stop!”

Ignoring his demands, Victoria continues to run towards the action, even as Vincent launches the car through the air. Without a second thought, Victoria dives on top of Jared, covering his body with hers. Victoria then closes her eyes tightly and prepares for the inevitable impact...but it never comes.

She looks up slowly to find Jared already recovered and staring awe-struck with his eyes spread wide.

“The car,” he says in wonder. “It stopped.”

Victoria turns around and sees the car suspended in mid-air before her. “How did...”

Ecstatic, Jared smiles and grabs her by the shoulders. “You did it! You have powers, too!”

“No,” Victoria mumbles, still baffled in shock. “I can’t...”

Jared pulls Victoria in, hugging her tight. “I don’t believe it! This is unreal!”

Across the street, Vincent grinds his teeth in anger at the sight of the car seemingly frozen off the ground. Frustrated, he reaches over and rips a light post from the pavement. The metal monster then winds up and flings it like a javelin at the now standing couple.

Victoria quickly spots the light post flying at them out the corner of her eye and reacts by throwing her hands up to shield their faces. “Watch out!”

Again, the large pole suddenly stops in mid-air, and Jared holds his hand out as if to put it on display. “See! You can move things with your mind.”

Victoria brings her hands in and gawks at her palms in disbelief. “How in hell...”

“Stupid bitch!” Vincent growls through his teeth while walking towards them.

Slowly picking up speed, the metal monster starts charging as fast he can.

“You have to stop him, Victoria,” Jared urges. “Use your powers.”

“I’ll try,” she replies, skeptically.

Victoria puts her hands out towards the metal light post, and Jared leans in, whispering into her ear. “Just concentrate and focus.”

In her head, Victoria imagines the light post flying back towards the monster...and it does! But Vincent casually bats it aside like a fly while continuing to run at full speed. Next, Victoria moves her hands over to the car still hovering in the air. She pictures the same thing and the car flings in Vincent’s direction. Undeterred, the metal juggernaut lowers his shoulder and connects with the car head on, splitting it in two while continuing on his path. With only one option left, Victoria moves her hands to point at Vincent himself.

“Clear your mind,” Jared says to her. “Think of him and only him. You can do this. I know it.”

She focuses all her energy on building a barrier in front of them, constructing it with her thoughts. Suddenly, as Vincent closes in, the monster stops as if hitting an invisible brick wall and freezes in his tracks.

Jared’s face grows wide in a surprised smile. “You did it!”

But Victoria is not as quick to celebrate. She grinds her teeth, straining her fingers and hands while trying to keep Vincent contained.

“I...don’t think...I can...hold him.”

Vincent strains as well, fighting with all his might to move his metal body, which starts to creep forward an inch at a time. Blood trickles out of

Victoria's nose as she helplessly watches Vincent take one slow step after another.

Finally, Vincent breaks free from the mental barrier and continues his charge at full speed without missing a beat. Victoria is knocked backwards by the force of Vincent breaking through her hold, and Jared gasps, distraught by the sight of his friend falling to the ground.

“Vic!” Jared shouts, his voice cracking under panic.

He reaches out to her when Vincent suddenly tackles the distracted boy like a battering ram, spearing him straight into a van parked on the side of the road. Vincent backs away from the crushed vehicle and catches Jared's mangled body before it can fall to the ground. His face barely recognizable, Jared moans incomprehensibly with whatever life he still has left, bubbling the pool of blood drenching his mouth.

Victoria rolls over and screams upon seeing Jared dangling limp in Vincent's grasp. “Jared!”

Vincent smiles, amused by the young woman's heartache. “You see what happens when you try to stop me, little girl? People die.”

He then wraps his metal hand around Jared's entire head and squeezes, crushing the boy's skull and exploding blood and brain across the street. Victoria lets out an incoherent shrill of a cry that echoes between the skyscrapers while Vincent casually tosses Jared's headless corpse aside.

“Now, it's your turn,” Vincent taunts while walking towards Victoria.

Still lying on the ground, Victoria takes several rapid breaths of panic while scrambling to back away. She stops, though, when a rush of electricity suddenly surges up and down Vincent's metallic body, stopping him in his tracks. Vincent's cocky smile contorts into a pain filled grimace from the continuous current rushing through him. The attack continues until

Vincent's legs give out from under him, causing the metal monster to slam into the ground with a thud.

Confused, Victoria watches as several men and women, armed in hi-tech armor and weaponry, enter the scene, immediately fitting Vincent's unconscious body with restraints. Still in shock, she stands slowly, unsure as to what to make of her saviors when a man in a business suit approaches her with an open hand and a smile.

“Hello,” he says. “I’m from the Office of Supernatural Crisis, and we’re here to help.”

## Act 2: Rats Through The Maze

### Chapter 12: Regrets

The Man in Black leans back in his chair, expanding his chest with a deep, contemplative breath. “This is looking pretty tough right now.”

The Woman in White nods while resting her forehead in her hand. “I know. What’ve we done?”

“We?” the Man in Black asks, quizzically. “You’re the one who moved her bishop into G3 cornering my queen. I had nothing to do with it.”

The Woman in White looks at the Man in Black, puzzled by the comment. “How can you think of chess right now? We’ve ruined innocent lives and you’re worried about some stupid little game?”

The Man in Black shrugs with an indifferent grimace. “But isn’t that what we’re playing? A game?”

Standing out of her seat, the Woman in White shouts in a voice that trembles the room. “This isn’t a game! People are dying!”

“Then why’d you agree to it?” the Man in Black replies, calmly.

The Woman in White slowly and carefully sits back down, staring at the opponent across from her as she moves. “To show you that good always conquers evil. No matter what.”

Turning his attention back to the board, the Man in Black eases his arm forward to pick up one of his chess pieces. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“What are going to say?” the Woman in White asks, rhetorically. “That since your metal creature destroyed one of my soldiers you’re winning the battle?”

The Man in Black moves the piece a couple spaces forward. “No. What I’m saying is there’s something going on here that we don’t quite understand. I might be winning in terms of deaths, but that young woman...”

“The one who tried to save the boy?”

The Man in Black looks up and his eyes meet the Woman in White’s with a fixated gaze. “She was one of mine.”

Ignoring his dramatics, the Woman in White looks around the chessboard, planning her next move. “So? What’s your point?”

“She attempted suicide,” the Man in Black states, as if the explanation is obvious. “A damnable sin. I chose that tortured soul to fight for evil by giving her the power to finally unleash the rage she’d been building all her life...but she didn’t.”

The Woman in White scratches her chin while continuing to mull over the board. “Well, she had a change of heart. Free will. It’s the one thing we can never take away from these humans.”

“But that’s the thing,” the Man in Black says, relaxing back into his seat. “I looked into her heart and it was dark. She hated her life and truly wanted to die. Not anymore, though, and she didn’t change her mind on her own. Only after her telekinesis manifested did she find a reason to live.”

Although annoyed by the distraction, the Woman in White finally moves her chess piece. “What are you getting at?”

The Man in Black holds up his hands, displaying them as he speaks. “These powers have added a variable to our wager we never thought they could. We forgot that humans were never meant to be as gods, but we’ve made them just that. Now things inside of them are changing. Their morals, their beliefs, even their lives are not the same. Black will become white. Up will become down.”

The Woman in White looks up from the game board and locks into the Man in Black's eyes, knowing exactly what her counterpart will say next.

“And good,” he eventually claims, “will become evil.”

## Chapter 13: Briefing

An armored military transport, an odd sight on the streets of New York, pulls up to the curb in front of a public elementary school. John O'Malley, Director of the Office of Supernatural Crisis, steps out of the vehicle and ignores the overwhelming crowd shouting at him from behind a barricade. O'Malley takes several steps before being approached by Hopkins, his Chief of Staff.

"Hello, sir," Hopkins greets the Director with a folder in his hand.

O'Malley continues ahead, forcing Hopkins to walk alongside him. "What do you have for me?"

The two of them walk up the school's front steps side by side.

"Well, sir," Hopkins explains, "troops are stationed around the building and we're using the school as housing for these Aesir."

O'Malley stops his march forward to skeptically look up at his Chief of Staff. "'Aesir,' Hopkins?"

Hopkins shrugs. "That's what I told the press. I thought it fit...sir."

O'Malley rolls his eyes while resuming his walk towards the front door. "You always did enjoy the dramatic. Give me the run down."

After opening the folder, Hopkins removes several profiles and displays them for his boss as they walk. "We have six Aesir inside the building. One is Vincent Turning, the metal man that attacked Times Square. A former marine and convicted murderer, Turning was being held in a Mexican prison when he changed. He's locked up in the basement."

"Secure?" O'Malley asks while examining a mug shot of Vincent in human form.

“Yes, sir,” Hopkins replies. “In state of the art restraints. He isn’t going anywhere.”

“Good. What about the others?”

Upon reaching the front door, they both enter the school as Hopkins continues his briefing. “In the cafeteria we have five non-hostile Aesir from all over the continent.”

Curious, O’Malley rubs his chin. “Why here in New York?”

“Most of them were already in the area,” Hopkins answers.

O’Malley takes the folder and begins looking through the documents himself. “So who are they?”

Hopkins points to the first picture they come across of a handsome man in a sports jersey. “Stan Crossing.”

O’Malley’s eyebrows perk up. “The NFL linebacker?”

“Yes, sir. Doctors say his body is now one hundred percent stone and contains no organs or living tissue of any kind.”

O’Malley removes a scan of Crossing’s body from the folder and holds it up to the light. Nothing shines through. “How is he still living?”

“Well...” Hopkins’s voice drifts off when he’s unable to provide a suitable answer. “We don’t know.”

O’Malley returns the scan to the folder and moves on. “Who else?”

Leaning over O’Malley’s shoulders, Hopkins points to a series of surveillance photos of the Hudson River. “The other mysterious individual is Dr. Christine Reyes. She was recovered from the wreckage of Flight 616 that crashed in the harbor.”

O’Malley scrutinizes the photos and notices pieces of the plane floating in the water. “How’d it go down?”

“Turning threw a car at it.”

“Must’ve been quite a throw,” O’Malley notes, his eyes wide in surprise.

Remaining side by side, the two of them turn a corner and continue down the hall as Hopkins continues the story. “A search and rescue team was immediately sent to the crash site. All they found were bodies and debris, but the crew’s report states that water seemed to move like it was alive and then came aboard their ship.”

“Came aboard?” O’Malley repeats, skeptically.

“Yes,” Hopkins confirms. “It took the shape of a woman that claimed to be Dr. Reyes.”

O’Malley stops in the middle of the hall and turns to face Hopkins completely. “You mean to tell me there’s a water woman in this building?”

Hopkins swallows deeply as he nods. “Yes, sir. She appears to be sentient liquid with full psychic control over all water in her vicinity. She can even add it to her mass. It’s quite amazing.”

The Director clicks his tongue before resuming to walk. “I’m sure it is.”

“Also,” Hopkins adds, “Dr. Reyes was on her way to see a sick family member undergoing surgery. She asked about it and we learned the operation was a success.”

“They’re already making requests?” O’Malley asks, annoyed.

Hopkins chokes, unsure as to how to respond. “Well, I…”

“Forget it,” O’Malley says, uncaringly waving his hand. “I’ll tell her about it when I get a chance. Who’re the others?”

Hopkins reaches over and spreads out three photographs on the open folder in his boss’ arms. “The rest have all still retained their human appearance. Linda Hugo is a pyro-kinetic from West Virginia who drove up

with her husband last night. The other is Victoria Leamen, a runaway from Michigan who can move objects with her mind.”

Appearing to recognize her, O’Malley points to the young woman’s photo. “She was the one on television with the boy.”

Hopkins nods. “Yes. Jared Lowe. Another runaway from Kansas. He was killed by Turning. His parents are demanding to see the body, but it’s in the middle of an autopsy.”

O’Malley comes to the cafeteria door and stops. “Good. Who’s the last one?”

Hopkins shifts his gaze to the final picture of a boy. “Todd Klein. A thirteen year old from Vancouver, British Columbia.”

“How did he get here?” O’Malley asks, lifting the photograph for a closer look.

“He was recently adopted and his foster parents called the police when the boy started displaying ‘unusual’ behavior.”

O’Malley lowers the photo to look his Chief of Staff in the eyes. “What kind of unusual behavior?”

“We don’t know,” Hopkins replies with a shrug. “Apparently, the Canadian government wanted no part of him. They shipped him here when they found out about the others and haven’t shared any information about what the foster parents saw. The boy’s a mystery.”

“Well...” O’Malley takes a deep breath and hands the folder back to Hopkins before pushing open the cafeteria doors. “Time to meet these so-called Aesir.”

## Chapter 14: Crossed Paths

On a windy, sunny, New York morning, Brian Breton steps off his jet onto the small, private landing strip.

His pilot follows behind him. "I'm sorry the flight took so long, sir. The sky has been crazy ever since that plane went down yesterday."

Breton looks around, ignoring his sport coat flapping in the breeze. "Has my limo arrived yet?"

"Yes, sir." The pilot points to a hangar on the far side of the runway. "Right over there."

Breton leaves the pilot's side to approach the hangar and answers his ringing cell phone along the way. "Hello?"

An agitated female voice responds through the receiver. "Brian, it's Betty."

A nostalgic smile forms on Breton's face as he continues to walk. "What a coincidence. I land in New York and the queen bitch of Manhattan is the first person to call me."

"Cut the shit," Betty snaps at him. "I need to talk to you."

"Yeah. Well, I'm kind of preoccupied at the moment here, Betty. There has to be someone in the tri-state area you haven't screwed yet. Why don't you get on that?"

"Listen, you're the last person I want to be calling right now, but this can't wait. You've seen the news? Those people that were fighting in Times Square with superpowers?"

His curiosity piqued, Breton stops several feet from his limo at the threshold of the hangar. "Yeah. What about them?"

"I'm like them, Brian," she says, flatly. "I have powers."

Breton's jaw hangs open in shock for a moment before he can respond. "Bullshit."

"I'm not lying," Betty pleads. "I want to take advantage of this. You know, like cash in or something."

Breton resumes his walk towards the limo. A driver waiting by the door opens it for him, allowing Breton to slip inside with the phone still to his ear. "And why call me?"

"You're the only person I know who can make it happen," Betty explains. "I need your resources."

Placing the phone to his chest, Breton rolls down the limo's dividing glass and addresses the driver as he gets back into his seat.

"Take me to Manhattan," Breton commands.

"Yes, sir," the driver replies while turning the ignition.

Breton returns to the phone to his ear. "Betty, where are you? Your office?"

"No," she says. "My condo."

"Stay where you are. I'll be right there."

"What do you mean 'be right there?' Aren't you in—"

Breton hangs up before she could finish and casually tosses the phone on the empty seat beside him.

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Several hours later, Breton's limo cruises through uptown Manhattan at a steady speed. Amazed by the lack of traffic, the driver scans the road through his windshield and is stunned by the lack of cars. "This is crazy, Mr. Breton. I've never seen the city like this before. It's practically a ghost town. This Aesir thing really has everyone spooked."

Breton rolls his eyes annoyed. "I pay you to drive. Not to talk."

“Yes, sir,” the driver retorts, stiffening up in his seat.

The limo comes to a red light and the driver’s eyes carefully shift to an open bag of potato chips resting on the center console. Discreetly, he inches his hand off of the steering wheel and over to the bag, removing a chip and carefully popping one in his mouth.

The light turns green a moment later and the driver takes off down the street. With his eyes on the road, he reaches for another chip but misses, accidentally knocking the bag to the floor.

“Oh crap,” he whispers under his breath.

Inconspicuously glancing over his shoulder, the driver spots Breton looking out the window and seizes the opportunity to reach down for the bag. When he can’t feel for it, the driver quickly lowers his head to search.

“Look out!” Breton suddenly yells from the back seat.

The driver shoots his head up as fast as he can and sees a young girl with a ball standing in the road. He slams on the brakes, but it’s too late.

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It’s been over twelve hours since Orson left his apartment in the middle of night. He didn’t say a word to his mother or brother beforehand. Just rolled out of bed when he couldn’t sleep, threw on a hoodie, and spent the entire evening wandering the streets. He had no plan and no place to go, and that fact didn’t change when the sun eventually came up several long hours later.

Hungry and desperate for breakfast, Orson almost considers heading home, but he can’t. His brother won’t help him. Not after the way the deal went down last night. And it would break his poor mom’s heart to know her son is a freak. No. Orson knows that whatever’s happening to him is his problem, and he’s just going to have to figure it out on his own.

After tirelessly roaming the city all morning, Orson finds a secluded alleyway to rest. He sits down on a stoop and his eyes immediately hone in on a dumpster further down the alley. For a split second, he contemplates looking in it for food, but he pushes the idea aside. He isn't nearly starving enough to go dumpster diving. At least, not yet...or is he?

Orson gives the dumpster a second look when a screaming woman interrupts his thought. He looks back to the street and spots a little girl about to be hit by a limousine. Reacting on instinct, Orson propels himself ahead and notices the moment slowing down around him. The woman's scream lingers, frozen in the air. The speeding limo slows to a crawl merely inches from the girl's body, and Orson runs into the street, grabs ahold of her, and continues to the other side of the block.

"Cynthia!" the screaming woman shouts.

She sprints over to them and rips the girl from Orson's grasp. "Don't you ever run into the street again! You hear me?!"

The woman looks up at Orson, her face twisted in an agitated smile, before grabbing her daughter's hand and hustling down the street. "Come on, honey. Let's get out of here."

Orson lowers his head and sighs as the limo creeps forward alongside him.

"Hello there," a man in a suit says from behind a rolled down window.

Suspicious of the stranger's intentions, Orson looks up at him but doesn't say anything back. He just stares silently as the man smiles. "Not much of a talker, huh? Well, you look like you're starving. You hungry? Come for a ride and I'll buy you something to eat."

Orson starts walking down the street in the opposite direction. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Back up,” the man orders his driver.

The limo slowly reverses down the street as the man holds his hand out the window. When he passes Orson by, the man fires a ball of energy from his palm that rockets through the door of a clothing store and explodes inside. A fireball erupts out over the sidewalk, and Orson lifts his hands to shield himself from the heat and debris launching out over the street. He then turns back to the limo in shock and finds the man staring at him with two ferociously piercing eyes.

“You’re not the only one with gifts, son,” the man states, dryly. “Now I’ll ask you again: are you hungry?”

## Chapter 15: The Axis of Evil

Betty knows it's a couple hours too early for a drink, but after the day she had yesterday, she figures she deserves it. After popping the cork out of the bottle, Betty carefully pours the wine into a glass. When it's about halfway full, the front door to her condo blows off its hinges and flies into the living room. Betty jumps at the small explosion, spilling wine all over her countertop.

She ignores it, though, as she turns her focus to Breton walking into her living room.

"The door was locked," he says with a smug smile.

Betty's jaw drops in baffled shock. "What the hell was that?"

"Me," Breton replies plainly while surveying the damaged door.

Betty's eyes widen to match her hanging mouth. "You?!"

Breton casually walks into the open kitchen and lifts the spilt the glass from the countertop before refilling it with more wine. "Yes, me. See, this whole sudden trip to New York is because two days ago the strangest thing happened. I got super powers. Isn't that weird?"

Betty ignores Breton's sarcasm, eying him down as he coolly sips from the glass. "I don't believe it."

Holding the glass comfortably in his palm, Brian struts over to the living room and plops down on the couch. "Believe it, bitch. My body has become a living conduit of energy. I can absorb it, contain it, and then release it however I see fit. Pretty cool, huh?"

The corner of Betty's mouth lifts into a devilish smirk. "What about electricity?"

Breton stares into the glass, focusing on the wine swirling inside of it. “Like I said: if it’s energy, dear, then I can—“

Betty suddenly shoots her hands out, firing a stream of blue electricity at Brian seated on the couch. Without ever taking his eyes off the glass, Breton nonchalantly lifts his arm and absorbs the attack through his hand.

“Betty. Betty. Betty,” he taunts, finally looking over to her. “Seems like you need this drink more than I do. Why don’t you go pour yourself one and come have a seat?”

Breton then leans his head back as if yelling towards the door. “You want anything, Orson?”

Dressed in a dirty hoodie and baggy jeans, Orson enters the condo, his mouth full of the half eaten hotdog in his hands. “No, but thanks, Mr. Breton.”

Confused and annoyed, Betty’s face twists in disgust while looking Orson up and down. “Who the hell is this?”

Breton stands and walks over to Orson, wrapping his free arm around their new arrival’s shoulder. “This is Orson Tremont. A young man with a rather unique ability who crossed my path not thirty minutes ago.”

The phrase “unique ability” latched onto Betty’s mind as she recalls the term for them published in the morning paper. “This kid’s an Aesir?”

“Yup.” Breton nods with a proud smile. “Super-speed.”

Going back to the boy’s introduction, another thing Breton said lights a spark in Betty’s memory. “Wait a second. Tremont? You’re not related to Christian Tremont, are you?”

Orson nearly chokes on his hotdog when he hears the name. “Yeah. He’s my brother. How you know him?”

Betty smiles, amused by the coincidence. “Your mother hired me to defend him. I met with them two days ago right before—”

“Wait a second,” Breton says, cutting her off. “You two are connected to one another?”

Betty looks to Orson with the same perturbed expression as before. “Not directly. How did you find him, though?”

“I told you. On the drive over...” Breton’s sentence drifts off as he becomes lost in thought.

“What is it?” Betty asks, sensing something was troubling her guest.

Breton looks up to her slowly. “I just realized what’s going on.”

More focused on his stomach than their situation, Orson tries to participate in the conversation while scouring Betty’s fridge. “What do you mean?”

Breton places his wine glass down on the counter and begins wandering aimlessly around the condo. “I understand now why all this is happening. Why we have powers. Why we’re in New York City. Why we’re all here together.”

Betty rolls her eyes while picking up his glass. “And why is that, ‘Mr. Breton’?”

Breton stops pacing and spins around, a wide smile on his face. “Fate.”

Betty laughs and nearly chokes on a rather large gulp of wine in her mouth. “Fate? Really, Brian? I never took you for the religious type.”

Marching back over to the kitchen, Breton grabs the newspaper from the countertop and holds it up to show off the large picture of three Aesir battling on the front page. “There are more of us, Betty. Not a lot, but they’re out there. This metal creature is bad news. He went to Times Square

knowing damn well what he was going to do and there were two people with powers who just so happened to be there to stop him. You're telling me all that was by chance?"

Betty shrugs indifferently while bringing the wine glass to her lips for another sip. "Random coincidence?"

In a fit of rage, Brian releases the energy built up in his hand, blasting it against the wall. "No!"

Startled by the small explosion, Betty and Orson both turn to Breton, their stunned eyes wide in shock as he continues his speech. "Don't you get it? This is how it was meant to be. That metal monster. You and me. We're not selfless, thoughtful people. We're greedy, ruthless, and corrupt. We're not going to help people with these abilities. We're going to use them for ourselves. To earn money, power, and respect. We're not what humanity would call 'good' people, Betty, so then why were we given these gifts?"

"Why do you assume they were given to us?" Betty questions.

Breton takes the newspaper still in his hand and tosses it onto Betty's lap. "I'll tell you why. Because people like them have powers, too."

Betty looks down and focuses in on the picture of the young couple on the front page. "Those two kids?"

Emphasizing his point, Breton leans forward and jams a finger into the paper. "Exactly! We exist because they exist. We weren't brought here by luck. It was destiny. We were meant to find each other. That is why we were chosen."

With several boxes of leftover Chinese food in his arms, Orson heads on over to the couch and sits down next to Betty, dropping the boxes across the coffee table. "Excuse me, Mr. Breton. I don't mean to interrupt, but are you saying that we're in some kind of war?"

“Yes, Orson,” Breton says, placing a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “We’re in a war. Good and evil. Right and wrong. Us and them. Our paths crossed today just like theirs did yesterday.”

Orson nervously averts his gaze downward, conveniently focusing on taking an egg roll out of a container. “Well, I’m sorry, Mr. Breton, but I don’t think I can do this.”

Breton scrunches his brow confused. “What do you mean?”

Orson takes a big chomp out of the eggroll and mumbles his response with his mouth full. “It sounds like you want us to be super villains. I just don’t think I can handle that shit.”

Betty snorts while cozying up to Orson on the couch, wrapping one hand around the boy’s shoulder while balancing the wine glass in the other. “Don’t lie to yourself, kid. I know the gang your brother ran with. They were bad people. Real bad. And made a point to recruit family into their business. So don’t tell me you weren’t involved.”

Orson shakes his head and tosses the half-eaten eggroll back into the container. “That’s different. I was eager to please my brother because we didn’t have a choice. Running guns and drugs was all we knew. But these powers...they feel like a chance to do more. To be more.”

With a wry smile, Betty holds up her glass, gesturing to Breton standing before them. “As much as I hate this prick, he might be right. We aren’t the kinds of people who fight for truth and justice, and the fact that we’re somehow tied together because of that only makes this already strange situation even stranger.”

Orson shrugs with an uncertain grimace. “I guess. But then how come the metal man is locked away and not here with us?”

“Good point,” Breton says as he starts towards the broken doorway.  
“Then we should probably go get him.”

## Chapter 16: Addressing the Public

Reporters, bunched together in a caged playground, chat amongst themselves, all anxiously awaiting just a sliver of news about the mysterious Aesir. In front of them is a hastily put together stage and podium set up against the side of the school. Surrounding them, a growing group of civilians congregate just on the other side of the fence.

All around the school, the jumbled commotion abruptly comes to an end when a door swings open and Director O'Malley exits the building, stepping up onto the stage. He approaches the podium and the silent crowd of reporters erupts into a frenzy as he brings his mouth to the microphone.

Questions bombard the Director from every direction, but he raises his hand to demand focus. "May I have quiet, please? I will make a statement and then answer a few questions."

One by one, the manic reporters calm down, and O'Malley waits until he can hear only the breeze before continuing on. "The attack yesterday at Time Square was by an escaped convict whose name will not be released. What I can tell you is that he's just one of several individuals that have gained supernatural powers over the past twenty-four hours. As you've already read in the papers, these people have been dubbed the Aesir, and they are just as confused by this situation as the rest of us. We do not know how or why this has happened, but we have the brightest minds in the country working on finding the cause and reversing it. I know you're scared. You have every right to be. But I can assure you that the American people have nothing to fear from these Aesir and the situation is under control. I will now take several questions."

The reporters all shoot their hands up at the same time, desperately screaming for attention. “Director! Director!”

O’Malley points to a male reporter in the front of the crowd.

“Joshua Frost from The Post, sir” the reporter introduces himself. “Director O’Malley, how many Aesir are there and how far has this incident reached?”

O’Malley looks away from the reporter to address the crowd as a whole. “Reports of Aesir transformations have been limited to just the United States, Mexico, and Canada, so we don’t believe this is to be a global occurrence. As for their numbers, I cannot disclose that information at this moment. Next question.”

Once again, the hands of the reporters rise in unison and the shouting resumes. The Director arcs his arm to gesture to someone in the back, a woman who rises when the reporters lower their hands.

“Hello, Director,” she starts. “I’m Jane Singer from the Times and was wondering if the Aesir are in control of their abilities?”

“Not all Aesir are the same,” O’Malley explains. “The nature of their abilities varies wildly. So it’s tough to speak for all of them”

He prepares to call on a new reporter when the previous one shouts loudly, demanding a follow up. “Really what I’m getting at, Director, is if these Aesir could use their powers to cause harm. Just like the man at Times Square did.”

O’Malley takes a deep breath, preparing himself before answering. “You have to remember, Ms. Singer, these Aesir were normal human beings once and their power comes with the same responsibility given to a man with a weapon. After all, even the wrong person behind the wheel of a car could be dangerous. You brought up the metal man at Times Square, but as

was demonstrated yesterday when the men and women of the O.S.C. responded to the scene, we have the technology and the expertise to stop these individuals if they get out of line. I will take one last question.”

The hands go up once more and O’Malley picks a man standing in the middle of the crowd. “Director, how do we know that you pleading ignorant to this sudden crisis is nothing more than a cover-up? How do we know this problem wasn’t really caused by some classified government experiment? Or maybe even a private contractor?”

O’Malley looks away and allows himself a brief chuckle before returning to the microphone. “The truth is that you don’t know, but I promise that the only information we are withholding right now are the names of those involved and the nature of their abilities. The rest is a complete mystery. Even to us. Thank you and good day.”

## Chapter 17: Misery Loves Company

The reporters continue to shout as the Director walks off the stage and back into the school. Once inside the building, O'Malley finds Hopkins waiting for him.

"I think that went well," the Chief of Staff states.

O'Malley rolls his eyes. "I'm just glad I got through it without some religious nut blowing up the crowd."

Hopkins joins the Director's side as the two of them head down the hall.

"How are the Aesir holding up?" O'Malley asks.

"They're doing just fine, sir."

They turn a corner and continue towards a set of double doors located at the end of the corridor.

"Good," O'Malley replies, nodding approvingly. "I'm going to have a word with them. Meanwhile, try and get an update from the scientists."

Hopkins nods. "I'm on it."

As his Chief of Staff heads back down the hall, O'Malley pushes open the double doors in front of him, entering the large school cafeteria. Heavily armed O.S.C. commandos stand guard around the perimeter while the Aesir are dispersed throughout the room.

The young boy named Todd Klein sits alone at a table in the corner while Stan Crossing leans his rock body against the wall. Victoria Leamen and Christine Reyes sit across from one another at a table in the center, and O'Malley is put off at how relaxed Victoria appears while talking with a woman made entirely of water. Lastly, Linda Hugo and her husband Paul sit side by side at a table to the right. Paul holds Linda in his shaking arms, the

fear clearly displayed across his face. Not that O'Malley can blame him. From what the Director had been told, it seems as if the woman might burst into flames at any second. O'Malley then makes a mental note to keep his distance.

After grabbing a chair from the side, O'Malley drags it through the row of tables to the center of the room and sits down. "Sorry for the delay, folks. The press conference couldn't wait. There are a lot of frightened people out there."

Leaving her seat, Christine's body turns into a floating stream and flows through the air before reforming herself in front of the Director. "Yes. Frightened of us."

Although perturbed by what he just saw, O'Malley holds out his hands to reassure her. "I know how you must be feeling, Dr. Reyes. But the important thing is to remain calm and let the scientists conduct their tests so they can—"

"No!" Paul shouts, now clutching his wife even harder than before. "No more tests. Linda has been through enough."

Frustrated, Crossing slams his rock hard hand against the wall, practically shaking the entire building. "These tests might be the only way to make us human again! If that's how it's gotta be then I'll do whatever it takes."

Keeping his hands out in front of him, O'Malley stands to try and ease the growing tension. "Listen. You all have to remain calm. Panicking is only going to make things worse."

"You have a right to panic." Everyone's eyes follow the young voice to the corner of the room where Todd still sits, staring at the wall. "That metal man from yesterday was not a good person. People like him see these

powers as a chance to do whatever they want. There are only five of us in this room. There has to be more.”

“Then how come they didn’t come to New York?” Christine asks, her watery body constantly in motion. “How come they’re not here with us?”

Todd looks away from the wall to turn and face her. “Well if you were a bad person who suddenly got super powers, would you turn yourself in?”

O’Malley takes several steps towards the boy “Todd, I assure you, if there are more Aesir out there and they do break the law then we are more than capable of stopping them.”

Victoria looks up from staring at the floor. “Or we have to fight them. Just like Jared would have.”

Linda turns her head away from her husband’s shoulder and speaks with pain in her trembling voice. “I don’t want to fight. I just want this to end so my husband and I can go home.”

Sensing the growing anxiety in the air, O’Malley backtracks to stand beside his chair. “No one here is using their powers for fighting. Understand? I will not have this city become some type of super human battlefield. If any hostile Aesir arrive we can stop them.”

The Director’s sentiment lingers as the room grows quiet, but only until Victoria suddenly breaks the silence. “And what if you can’t?”

## Chapter 18: Jailbreak

Tucked into a dark corner at the end a long basement corridor, the metal man's body is strapped onto the concrete wall, helplessly pinned by several reinforced titanium restraints. Atop his head rests a small crown, which generates a constant current of electricity that surges throughout his body. The metal man is only barely coherent, grinding his teeth to fight off the pain.

Oblivious to the prisoner's torment, a lone guard sits at a table beside him, reading the newspaper while drinking a cup of coffee. He sips the scalding beverage slowly and chokes when a clanging noise down the hall startles him. The guard cautiously stands while placing the drink and paper down on the table. A figure moves in the distant shadows and the guard carefully places his hand on the sidearm at his hip.

The figure grows larger and larger until finally entering the light, revealing herself as another guard here to relieve her colleague from his shift.

"I hope our metal buddy here is keeping you company," the female guard says as she approaches.

The current guard rolls his eyes with a grimace. "Oh, he's a blast."

Taking his hand off the gun, the guard grabs his coffee as the female guard snatches the paper off the table.

"Mind if I borrow this," she says, dropping down into the chair and opening the paper. "I forgot to bring something to read."

The guard uncaringly waves at the request. "No problem. Keep it."

As he turns to walk away, the basement's concrete walls rumble and shake. The sudden, violent tremor only lasts a moment, but it was strong enough to put the guards on edge.

“What was that?” the guard asks, examining the ceiling

The new guard clicks her tongue and turns her attention back to the open newspaper. “Probably those special forces meatheads having fun with their new O.S.C. toys. Those guys think leveling an entire city is a good time.”

Ready to leave, the old guard lifts up his coffee, symbolically cheering the air. “Well, have fun watching the rust bucket.”

“Oh I will,” the new guard replies without looking up from the paper.

The old guard continues on down the hall, disappearing into the darkness his friend emerged from. After a few seconds, the new guard repositions her seat and puts her feet up on the table. “Damn. It’s gonna be a long shift.”

Several seconds after that, the old guard’s voice echoes through the darkness of the corridor. “Who are you? What are you doing here? Stop! Stop! Ahhh!”

“What the hell?” the new guard whispers, scrunching her brow.

A moment later, the old guard’s body enters the light by flying backwards and slamming into a wall of pipes. The body falls to the floor unconscious and the new guard leaps out of her seat, rushing to her colleague’s side. “Oh, my God.”

“Well...Yes. I am,” replies a voice from the darkness.

The guard looks up and finds Breton strutting towards her. Reacting on instinct, she swiftly draws her weapon from its holster and fires an electrical blast at the intruder, but Breton doesn’t even react. He simply allows the bolt to strike his body, which then absorbs the attack instantly.

The guard’s face widens in shocked confusion, which only multiplies when a moving blur zooms back and forth down the hall. Before she can

process what's happening, Orson suddenly appears by Breton's side and the guard comes to realize that the electrical weapon she was aiming forward is now no longer in her hands.

"P—please..." she stammers while backing away in terror. "Please don't."

Enjoying the woman's fear, Breton smiles as he continues walking towards her. "Don't what? This?"

Breton flicks his hand, unleashing a net of energy that engulfs the woman's body. The net then closes in around her, vaporizing her flesh and tissue until the energy fades away, leaving nothing but bones suspended in the air. The skeleton hovers for a moment, quiet and still, before falling to the floor. Breton then turns his attention towards a classified folder on the table.

"Vincent Turning," he mutters while scanning through the pages.

Breton looks up at the metal man named Vincent, who is still too busy fighting through the pain to realize what's happening around him.

"You have been a very bad man," Breton admires, looking Vincent up and down.

He reaches his hand out and fires a short, controlled blast at the crown atop Vincent's head, obliterating it to pieces. The surge of electricity vanishes in an instant, and Vincent's eyes shoot open as if suddenly jolted awake from a coma.

"Where—where am I?" he asks, his gaze shifting around the cramped basement. "And who are you?"

Breton leans in close to the restrained metal monster and flashes him his patented businessman smile. "We're like you. We've been given powers to control this world."

“Control...?” Vincent asks, intrigued by the word.

“Yes,” Breton acknowledges with a nod. “But certain people don’t want us to succeed. You attacked Times Square yesterday simply because you wanted to. Because you could. But you were stopped.”

Remembering his defeat, a menacing scowl forms on Vincent’s face. “Did you do this to me?”

Breton shakes his head. “No. The government did. We’re here to break you out.”

The sound of crackling pops grabs their attention and they all look down the hall to see a series of sparks flashing in the darkness, briefly illuminating a figure walking towards them. The electricity continues to dance around the approaching figure until Betty enters the light completely. “All the basement guards have been taken care of. Quietly, just like you asked. The rest of the building has no idea we’re here.”

Breton nods as Betty reaches them. She looks Vincent up and down. “So this is the big badass we came for?”

Ignoring Betty’s interruption, Vincent continues with his questions. “Why are you helping me?”

Breton takes a deep breath before answering. “I believe the four of us are the same. These powers were given to us so that we can do whatever we want with them. That is our entitlement. Our right. However, we can’t succeed alone. Any one of us can be defeated, just like you were yesterday. But together we could be unstoppable.”

Still attached to the wall, Vincent takes his time scanning the three Aesir in front of him. “There are others with powers. Ones that will fight us. What do you plan to do with them?”

Breton shrugs, not putting much thought into his answer. “Kill them, of course.”

“But how will you find them?” Vincent asks.

Breton replies as a thin smile inches across his face. “I think I have a pretty good idea where they are.”

## Chapter 19: Allies and Enemies

Gliding through the air like a floating stream, Christine flows towards the corner of the cafeteria and her body takes shape seated at a table across from Todd. The boy rests his head, buried in his hands on the table, and Christine greets him softly. “Hey. Your name’s Todd, right?”

Todd looks up, rubbing his eyes as they adjust to the light. “Yeah.”

“I’m Christine,” she says with a smile.

Todd returns the expression with a thin smile of his own. “I know. I heard you guys talking.”

Holding her hand out in front of her, Christine twists it back and forth, swishing around the water that makes up her form. “I hope this doesn’t freak you out.”

“No,” Todd replies, the smile genuinely growing larger on his face. “It’s actually kind of calming to look at you. Your body seems so peaceful and serene.”

Christine lifts her other hand and joins the two together, forming a continuous link between them. “That’s the funny thing about water. It can look calm and tranquil one moment, but all it takes is a little wind to turn it into a deadly storm.”

Watching Christine play around with her watery body, the smile fades from Todd’s face. “What about you? Will you ever become a deadly storm?”

Christine separates her hands and laughs off the boy’s question. “I hope not, Todd. But what about you? What’s your story? We’ve been here for a while now and you’ve barely said a word.”

Todd takes a deep breath and squints, looking at Christine in what appears to be her eyes. “Well, there isn’t much to tell. My parents were

killed when I was real young. Car accident. Ever since then I've moved from group home to group home. Foster family to foster family. Until two days ago when...you know."

"You mind me asking what happened?" Christine asks, gently.

Todd shrugs with a grimace. "I'm not really sure. I remember the world around me changing...like it was falling apart. Things would melt, explode, and turn to dust as if nothing was real. I just crawled into a corner of my room and closed my eyes hoping it went away. Which I guess it did. Eventually my foster mother found me and saw what happened. She called child services and now I'm here."

Christine's watery smile morphs into a frown. "I'm sorry you had to go through that, Todd. You must've been scared."

Todd's gaze slowly shifts away from Christine towards the rest of the Aesir scattered throughout the cafeteria. "I was at first because I had no idea what was going on. But looking back on it now, knowing I was the one who caused it, I'm not so sure. Something about that moment just felt...right."

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Pacing through the aisles, Victoria mumbles to herself while awaiting O'Malley's return. "I don't like this. I don't like this one bit."

Paul Hugo looks up at her, his wife still held tight in his arms. "Sit down, child. You're driving us crazy."

Crossing walks up to the middle of the room, each of his steps thundering against the floor. "Hey! Don't talk to her like that. You don't even have the right to be here. You're still human."

"I'm not leaving my wife," Paul replies, holding her even tighter.

"Whatever," Crossing grumbles in his gravelly voice.

Linda pushes off against her husband to address the room as a whole.  
“Stop fighting! Please.”

Crossing points his stone finger at the couple. “I don’t need to—”

Throwing her hands in the air, Victoria stops pacing and cuts Crossing off. “Wait! Everyone be quiet for a second. Do you hear that?”

She then tilts her head sideways, curiously lifting her ear to listen in.  
“I hear something. It sounds like a pounding.”

The others do the same as the room shakes ever so slightly. Paul then looks around for the source of the quake. “I felt it, too.”

Another jolt rumbles the floor and Crossing looks around confused.  
“What is that?”

An eerie calm settles in the air for a moment, which vanishes abruptly when another violent quake shakes the room. Then another. And another. Each one more frequent than the last until there’s almost no time between them.

In her full form, Christine walks from the corner of the room to the center. “An earthquake?”

“Not in New York,” Crossing answers.

Suddenly, Vincent crashes into the cafeteria and runs straight through the center of the room, tackling Crossing and then smashing him through the opposite wall.

The Aesir and O.S.C. commandos stand in shock of what they just witnessed. While they’re all looking in the opposite direction, Breton calmly emerges through the first hole that Vincent created, freely launching a barrage of energy blasts at the distracted guards around the room.

After the commandos are neutralized, Breton fires at Linda and her husband, but right before it hits them, Christine throws herself like a tidal wave in front of the blast, absorbing it completely.

Breton walks forward and Christine flows in front of him, reforming herself in the shape of a person. While closing the gap between them, Breton continues to shoot energy at her, but Christine's watery body negates every attack.

"What in God's name are you?" he asks in awe.

"What's wrong, Breton?" Christine mocks as they come face to face. "Don't recognize me?"

"Sorry, lady," he scoffs. "But all you puddles look the same."

"I'm the doctor you saw two days ago. I asked you for more money to help sick and dying children. You shrugged me off like I didn't exist."

A small smile crawls across Breton's face. "Christine Reyes. I remember you now. I knew you were a bitch."

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Betty and Orson enter the cafeteria through the giant hole in the wall and survey the chaos. Bodies of guards lie scattered across the floor. On one side of the room, Christine and Breton exchange a series of attacks while Vincent and Crossing trade brutal punches across from them.

Spotting a group of Aesir huddled in a corner, Betty walks quickly into the fray as Orson trudges slowly behind her.

"Betty, I don't know about this," he complains.

"Come on, kid," she replies without looking back at him. "It'll be fun."

Orson stops walking completely. "Is that what my speed is for? Hurting people?"

She glances over her shoulder to yell back at him. “You’re in a gang, Orson. Hurting people is what you do.”

Leaving Orson behind, Betty continues on without a second thought and targets Victoria across the room. “Here you go, sweetheart.”

Sparkling the air around her, Betty unleashes a bolt of lightning in Victoria’s direction. As it’s about to strike, a blur zooms through the cafeteria and swoops the unsuspecting Victoria out of the way.

As the blur comes to a stop, Victoria is shocked and surprised to have Orson’s arms around her body. She pushes him away and then notices the scorch marks on the wall where she’d just been standing.

“You...you just saved my life?” she asks Orson as the pieces come together in her head.

He nods, almost embarrassed by the answer. Victoria then traces the scorch marks to their source and spots Betty, who is now busy fighting off a wave of O.S.C. reinforcements from entering the room.

“And you’re an Aesir,” she says to Orson. “But that means you came with them.”

Ashamed, Orson’s gaze falls to the floor. “I know. Even I’m wondering why I’m here.”

Victoria smiles, placing a soft hand on Orson’s shoulder. “To save me. That’s why.”

Orson looks up with a thin smile, eager to hear more.

“A met a true hero the other day,” Victoria continues, “and he taught me that it doesn’t matter how you got to where you are in life. What matters is where you’re going next.”

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Stuck in an aisle of tables, Christine struggles to remain upright as Breton bombards her body with attacks. Strike after strike, he repeatedly blasts her form with energy. The water absorbs every attack, but the constant flow of power makes it difficult for Christine to keep herself together.

“Please...” she begs. “God...help me.”

But her soft cries are too weak to be heard. Breton smiles down at her, firing a single, continuous blast that floods her watery body with energy.

“It’s no use,” he taunts. “Know why? Because I’m God now.”

Suddenly, an unseen force rips Breton away, tackling him off of Christine and releasing her from his grasp. In an instant, Breton went from standing to being slammed into a wall across the room, and his eyes widen upon impact as he comes to realize Orson’s betrayal.

“You!?” Breton snarls angrily through gritted teeth. “Why?! We could have had it all! Everything!”

Orson grinds his teeth just as hard while fighting to keep Breton pinned to the wall. “I never wanted everything. Just enough to survive.”

Breton’s scowl slowly fades, morphing into a diabolical smile. “And now you don’t even have that.”

He unleashes a blast into Orson’s stomach, sending him soaring across the room.

“No!” Victoria screams.

She lifts her hands, catching Orson mid-flight by suspending him in the air. She then uses her powers to float her savior over to her and place his body on the floor beside her. Leaning over him, Victoria frantically scans Orson’s face for life, but it’s no use. Only a still, blank expression stares back at her.

Looking up with a vengeful, hate-filled sneer, Victoria stands and marches in Breton's direction. "What is wrong with you?!"

"I would ask you the same question," he replies through chuckles of laughter. "But clearly it's your fashion sense."

Victoria lifts her hands and prepares to attack when Crossing soars in front of her, halting her path forward. His rock body slams into a table across the room where Christine is still recovering, causing her body of water to splash into tiny droplets.

Laughing maniacally, Vincent steps up to take responsibility for the carnage. "Ha! Talk about killing two birds with one stone."

During his cackling, Vincent catches sight of Todd leering at him from the table in the corner of the room.

"What you looking at?" he grumbles at the boy.

"Oh, nothing," Todd remarks, casually. "I'm just admiring how shiny you are."

Todd's flippant tone draws the attention of everyone in the room, including Betty and the O.S.C. commandos, who stop fighting to turn towards the boy. Christine pulls her body back together from the water spilled across the floor, and Crossing pushes himself off a pile of rubble to get to his feet. Paul, who had been fearfully holding his wife in the corner, loosens his grasp on Linda as she turns to see what's going on. All of them, even Victoria and Breton, stare at Todd with dumbfound expressions, but none is more shocked than Vincent to be on the receiving end of the boy's mockery.

"What did you just say, kid?" he growls

Todd doesn't move and continues to sit peacefully. "I said you're very shiny. Like a lamppost or a spoon. Only uglier and dumber."

Vincent steps towards Todd, his fists clenched at his sides. “Why you little—”

Todd raises his palm to Vincent, which stops the metal man in his tracks. Vincent tries to move, but his large metal legs won’t budge. “What the...?! What is this?!”

With Vincent frozen in place, Todd casually stands and walks over to him as the entire room watches in suspense. The boy stops in front of Vincent and looks up, completely unafraid of the metal monster towering over him. “Not so tough now, are you?”

“What the holy hell did you do to me?” Vincent rambles, his voice trembling with panic.

“Nothing compared to what I will do,” Todd replies while raising his hand again.

“What—” Vincent stammers as his eyes follow the boy’s hand. “What are you doing?”

Todd’s hand stops in front of Vincent’s abdomen. A second later, a single bolt of lightning cracks down from the sky, blasting through the cafeteria roof and striking the top of Vincent’s head. The onlookers around the room all stumble back in shock as the metal monster screams in agonizing pain. Todd doesn’t move, though. He remains in the same position, continuing to torture Vincent by holding the bolt of lightning on top of him.

Vincent’s horrifying shrieks become desperate whimpers as the overpowering flow of electricity begins to melt his metal body. His entire form slowly droops down lower and lower until there’s nothing more than a puddle of liquid metal that spreads out over the floor under Todd’s shoes.

After releasing his hold on the lightning, Todd blankly looks up at the many disturbed expressions staring at him. “That was fun.”

Overcome with shock and dismay, Christine takes several steps cautious steps towards the boy. “You—you just killed him, Todd.”

He nods a single time, the blank expression remaining on his face. “I know.”

“How could you?” Christine asks, the disappointment quivering her voice.

“Simple,” Todd says with a shrug. “Like this.”

Another bolt of lightning shoots down from the sky and strikes the floor next to Christine’s watery body.

Christine fearfully jumps to the side, avoiding the bolt as much as the crumbling ceiling. “Todd! Stop this!”

“No,” he replies as another bolt strikes behind her.

She jumps out of the way again as sparks singe at the water in her wake. “What is wrong with you?!”

“Nothing is wrong with me, Christine. In fact, things have never felt more right. All my life I’ve been told what to do. Grown ups passed me around from home to home, family to family, like I was nothing more than their pet. I got to watch everybody else living their lives while I had nothing. But then this happened. I got the power to finally do whatever I want. Now I’m in charge. And nobody gets to tell me what to do ever again.”

Holding her hands out in front of her, Christine continues to warily approach the boy. “I understand, Todd. It must’ve been heard. But that doesn’t make it okay to hurt people. You don’t have to do this.”

“You’re right,” he says, plainly. “I don’t have to. I want to.”

From off to the side, Breton steps up and fires a blast at the boy, but a force field suddenly manifests around Todd and blocks the strike. Shocked that his attack was thwarted, Breton's surprise quickly turns to anger as he clenches his fists, fearlessly charging up the power within him. "You have no idea what you're talking about, kid. I'm the boss around here now. And I say who dies!"

Breton launches blast after blast at the boy, alternating between his left and right hands. Each attack explodes against Todd's force field and a massive plume of smoke engulfs the room.

Panting out of breath, Breton eventually stops firing and a tense silence lingers in the air as the smoke wafts up and out through a hole in the ceiling, revealing Todd standing at peace and completely unharmed. Wasting no time, Betty shoots electricity in Todd's direction, but the boy easily redirects it with a casual wave of his hand. Next, Crossing charges at him, but Todd vanishes out of thin air, allowing Crossing to run past before reappearing in the same spot.

Working together, Christine, Crossing, Victoria, Breton, and Betty all use their powers against the seemingly all-powerful child, but each of them is unable to land an attack. Even the O.S.C. commandos prove ineffective at hitting their target. Todd dodges and deflects everything they throw at him, teleporting around the room in the blink of an eye.

During the battle, O'Malley stumbles into the cafeteria and gawks at the chaos. "What the hell?"

In awe of the massive conflict, the Director's gaze scans the room and spots the Hugos cowering in the corner opposite him. "Paul! Linda! Get out of there. Now!"

Frantically searching for a break in the fight, Paul grabs Linda's hand and sprints through the carnage. They keep their heads low as blasts of electricity and plasma erupt overhead. Rubble and debris fly all around them, and halfway to the exit, Linda trips, stumbling to the floor.

Hearing her cries, Paul turns around, desperately scrambling to pick up his wife. "Linda. Get up. We have to go."

Sprawled across the dusty floor, she weeps while slowly looking up at her husband. "Paul...I'm scared. Help...me."

Paul reaches for Linda's hand but stops when he looks into her eyes and sees two small flames burning inside her pupils.

"Oh, my God," he whispers to himself while slowly backing away.

After climbing to her knees, Linda leans back and unleashes an inhuman shrill as a fireball erupts from within her body. The blast radiates out in every direction like a tidal wave of flames, causing a break in the battle.

"Get down!" Crossing yells as everyone dives to the floor.

The explosive blaze continues to engulf the room, causing the walls and the remaining ceiling to come crashing down. The crowd gathered outside the building watches in awe as the massive inferno rises high through the air before fading into the sky.

A collective series of coughs and gasps for air ring out through the dark cloud filling the destroyed cafeteria. As the dust clears, everyone still alive climbs out of the debris and looks up in the confusion, but all they can find is Linda, standing strong on a pile of rubble and completely covered in flames.

## Act 3: The Destiny of Men

### Chapter 20: Realization

“Wow.” The Man in Black leans back in his chair and wipes the sweat from his forehead. “I don’t know what’s more intense: this riveting game of chess or the fact that our other game might have sparked the Apocalypse.”

The Woman in White sucks in a deep breath while slowly closing her eyes. “This is all your fault. Damn you for baiting me into this.”

The Man in Black’s face widens in surprise. “You’re blaming me? I’m not the one that gave a thirteen-year-old boy complete command over every law of physics. And that woman...you made her the living embodiment of hellfire and brimstone. Are you actually trying to start Armageddon or is this just a big coincidence?”

The Woman in White opens her eyes and stares remorsefully into her empty hands. “I don’t know what happened. I looked into Todd’s heart and saw nothing but innocence. Pure innocence. And Linda...she was so happy and in love with her family. Everything about her life was in control, yet she allowed the power to overwhelm her. How could that be?”

The Man in Black tilts his head to glare at her condescendingly. “And I’m sure because you’re ‘all knowing’ you’re going to tell me why, right?”

The Woman in White looks up, her jaw hanging open in a blank expression. “I...I don’t know.”

The Man in Black leans forward, bringing his face only inches from his female counterpart. “I’ll tell you why: it’s because you believe.”

“Believe?” the Woman in White repeats, unsure if she heard him correctly.

The Man in Black nods with a smirk. “You believe in humanity, truth, justice and all that other fluff. But the reality is humanity is tainted, truth is a lie, and justice is unbalanced.”

The Woman in White points a defiant finger at her opponent’s chest. “Don’t try to spin what’s happening here. You did this.”

“No,” the Man in Black responds, shaking his head. “You’re wrong. I didn’t do this. You did.”

Offended and confused at the same time, the Woman in White sharpens her gaze. “What?”

The Man in Black begins to rant while leaning back comfortably in his seat. “We’re trying to pit the forces of good and evil against each other to see which side is stronger. But the truth is that there is no evil, just as there is no good. There’s only a point of view. There’s only judgment. A boy steal’s food to feed his starving family. A man kills a robber in a struggle to protect his wife. It’s free will. These humans have the power of choice, and now we’ve given them the ability to make grand choices on a scale they were never supposed to. I see it now.”

“See what?” the Woman in White asks, now genuinely interested in his answer.

“That when Man is given the power of gods there is no more good and evil. The black and white lines of their lives vanish and all that’s left is the grey in between.”

As the words simmer inside her head, the Woman in White’s line of sight slowly drifts away from the chessboard. “So then what’s there left to do?”

“Well, first I’m going to move this knight to put you in check mate,”  
the Man in Black groans as he pushes one of his pieces across the board.  
“Then I’m going to watch as our chosen warriors destroy the planet.”

## Chapter 21: Head of State

The fading glow of a setting sun crawls into the Oval Office. A handful of advisors and cabinet members crowd around the Resolute Desk, taking turns bickering back and forth with one another. Behind the desk sits the President, quietly ignoring the discussion with his face buried in his hands.

The phone on the desk rings suddenly, silencing everyone in the room except the President, who lifts his head up slowly. “Out. Now.”

Without a single objection, the room is swiftly vacated, leaving the President alone to take a deep breath and cautiously answer the phone. “Please tell me some good news.”

“Well, Mr. President,” Director O’Malley replies on the other end of the line, “I’m going to be honest with you: we don’t have much good news to tell.”

The President leans back in his seat and takes a deep sigh before speaking again. “John, when I first sent you up there this morning I was worried, but I was also confident you could contain the situation. More importantly, I thought you could do it quickly, safely, and quietly. Next thing I know, every channel in the country is replaying footage of an explosion inside a school, claiming these Aesir are to blame. Now explain to me what the hell happened because I have to address the nation in an hour and, God help me, I have no idea what to say.”

O’Malley’s hard steps echo through the phone as he paces back and forth. “We thought we had all the Aesir accounted for, but we were wrong. There were more and they attacked the school. For what reason? We don’t

know. What we do know is that there were four attackers and two of them are dead.”

“And the other two?” the President asks, closing his eyes, afraid of the answer.

“Escaped, sir.”

The President cringes, tensing his body to keep his frustration from being communicated through the phone. “So there are only two of those things left out there that will be a problem, right?”

“Well, sir...” O’Malley’s voice drifts off, reluctant to finish the sentence. “Not exactly. One of the Aesir taking refuge in the school became... hostile?”

Upon hearing the word, the President’s eyes shoot open. “Hostile?”

“He started attacking everyone regardless of what side they were on.”

Now alert and attentive, the President leans forward against the desk. “Where is he now?”

“After the explosion, the two rogue Aesir managed to sneak the unconscious boy out through the chaos.”

Another single word catches the President’s ear, causing him to jolt up out of his seat. “Boy?”

O’Malley pauses for a moment, filling the line with an awkward silence before answering. “Yes. The Aesir who turned was thirteen years old.”

The thought of a child with that kind of power causes the President to hesitate. The threat is still real, though, and he ignores his reservations to deal with the matter at hand. “Can you stop them if they attack again?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” O’Malley replies, his voice heavy with dismay. “I’m no longer able to confidently answer that question.”

The President sighs. “So what of this explosion? Who caused it? Us or them?”

O’Malley makes a hissing noise at the question, once again, reluctant to answer it. “That, too, is difficult to explain, sir.”

“Then explain it as best you can.”

A deep sigh reverberates through the phone as O’Malley prepares himself to speak. “The explosion was caused by an Aesir with us, but I don’t think it was intentional. The woman was trying to escape with her husband during the battle and accidentally activated her powers. That was the explosion you saw. Her husband and several of my men were killed in the blast. We got lucky, though. It could’ve been much worse.”

The President briefly tries to imagine how the scene unfolded before pushing the thought from his mind. “How is the woman now?”

“Her powers deactivated,” O’Malley replies, “but the event put her in catatonic state. “Her eyes are open yet she’s unresponsive. As if her mind just...vanished.”

The President lowers his head into his chest as he’s forced to ask an obvious question. “Is she a threat?”

“I...I don’t know, sir.”

The President turns around to look out the window at the back of the Oval Office. The sun’s dimming twilight, weaker than before, struggles to stretch out over the South Lawn, and the President pauses to admire the sight, just for a second, before returning to the conversation. “Well John, it seems that we have quite a situation on our hands. My job as the president is to ensure the safety of this country. Now I need to know: are America’s citizens safe tonight?”

O'Malley begins to respond almost immediately after the question is asked. "I'm sorry, Mr. President, but no. They're not."

## Chapter 22: Regroup and Rethink

While busily under construction during the day, a silent darkness fills the three-story brownstone during the night. Drop clothes, scaffolding, and a wide assortment of power tools lie still around the open kitchen and living room. The entire empty building settles into a peaceful calm that's abruptly shattered as the front door explodes off its hinges and Breton storms inside with Todd's unconscious body in his arms. Covered with a thick layer of dust, his suit is completely tattered and torn. An assortment of small scrapes litter his face, but they're nothing compared to the bleeding gash in the side of Todd's head.

"That was messed up, Brian," Betty declares, following in after him with an outfit just as mangled.

Breton hurries into the kitchen and places Todd gently on the counter. "I know."

Too scattered to think straight, Betty begins pacing around the first floor, her mind bouncing back and forth with images of the battle. "There were guns and super powers and...that bitch blew up the building!"

Ignoring Betty's frantic marching, Breton looks over Todd's body, checking the boy's vitals in the process. "I know. I was there. You don't have to yell."

"What the hell are we going to do?!" Betty screams up at the ceiling as she moves.

Fed up with her babbling, Breton snaps away from the counter to shout at her. "I said you don't have to yell!"

His booming voice stops Betty in her tracks. She pauses a moment, refusing to even look in his direction. She then walks over to a leather

armchair draped in plastic and plops down into the seat. “Well, now what, ‘fearless’ leader? Your plan went to hell.”

“Yes,” Breton acknowledges, calmly. “I’m aware.”

“We were screwed from the beginning.”

Breton shakes his head as he approaches Betty in her seat. “No. We weren’t. We were winning. Yes, that pathetic excuse for a gangbanger switched sides on us, but I took him out like it was nothing. And that Vincent guy was destroying everything in his path. He couldn’t be stopped.”

“You’re right.” Slouching in her seat, Betty nods in Todd’s direction. “Until he stepped in.”

Breton turns around slowly and admires the boy’s peaceful slumber. It’s a façade, though. Breton knows full well of the storm residing inside Todd’s heart and the power that goes along with it. “This kid wasn’t just fighting us. He was fighting everyone. Both sides.”

“So?” Betty asks, failing to see the point.

“He knew exactly what he was doing,” Breton replies while walking back over to the counter. “And he enjoyed it.”

Betty sits up in her chair, physically uncomfortable with Breton’s comment. “That just proves he’s insane, Brain.”

Breton shakes his head while staring down at Todd, imaging the possibilities of what the two of them could accomplish. “No. He’s not insane. Up until several days ago he was a normal, boring kid, but now he’s become so much more. The power changed him and made him see the truth about who he really is inside.”

Betty stands and takes several hard steps towards the kitchen, clearly aggravated by Breton’s line of thinking. “Were we even watching the same fight? There’s no limit to what this boy can do. For all we know he might

tear the whole world apart, and there's no way I'm going to be around him when it happens."

She turns and starts back towards the door, but stops when Breton calls out to her. "Think about it, Betty. All the other 'good' Aesir... They're nothing to us. We could beat them in an instant. But this kid... He could destroy everyone in the city with a single thought. We can't stand up to a power like that. Our only hope is to use it instead."

The rapid tapping of Betty's foot against the hardwood floor echoes around the room and lasts for several seconds until she spins back around. "You think you can convince him to join us? Last time the two of you spoke it didn't seem like he was your biggest fan."

"Don't worry," Breton says, turning to reveal the confident smirk across his face. "I can be very convincing."

## Chapter 23: Ground Zero

Wasting no time after his call with the president, O'Malley returns to the roofless cafeteria where the battle took place. The double doors he often had to walk through are now gone, leaving only a gaping hole for the Director to enter the room straight from the hallway. A fair amount of debris still covers the floor, enough that it's impossible to avoid stepping on as O'Malley carefully navigates through the wreckage. Like the roof, the far walls of the room have been completely obliterated, allowing him a clear view of the street outside. The formidable police barricade of cruisers and cops are now all that keeps the large crowd of reporters from pouring into the building, but it can't stop them from continuously snapping pictures while the Aesir, along with several O.S.C. commandos, continue with the clean up.

Using the water pressure of her body, Christine Reyes sprays the floor clean of all tiny bits of rubble while Stan Crossing takes advantage of his newfound strength to lift any large boulders too heavy for normal men to carry. All while Victoria Leamen uses her telekinesis to create a clear path to the floor, allowing medics to continue searching for any survivors that still may be trapped beneath the carnage.

After taking a moment to survey the destruction, O'Malley shouts over the commotion for all to hear. "Victoria. Christine. Crossing. I need to speak with you. Everyone else may continue."

The three Aesir stop and exchange confused glances with one another before approaching the Director.

"Follow me," he orders flatly while turning and heading back into the hall.

“I want you to understand something,” O’Malley continues as he marches forward with the Aesir trailing behind him. “What happened in that room an hour ago will never happen again. I admit those Aesir caught us off guard. We had no idea they even existed and were unprepared to deal with their arrival. I’m sorry you got caught in the middle of that fight, but I promise you will not be put in that position again.”

Frustrated, Crossing pounds a fist into the tiled wall, cutting off the rest of O’Malley’s speech as they turn a corner. “You’re sorry we got caught up in a fight? Excuse me, but we were the fight. That’s why they came here. Those Aesir attacked this building with the sole purpose of killing us.”

O’Malley shakes his head while lowering it into his chest. “There’s no evidence to suggest that.”

Having been walking with two legs, Christine’s lower body morphs into a small wave that flows up past O’Malley, gliding in front of him as he walks. “I disagree. I recognized one of those Aesir. His name is Brian Breton.”

“The billionaire?” O’Malley asks.

Christine nods with her head sitting atop a legless body. “I’ve met him and know how he thinks. If Breton has power, any kind of power, the last thing he would want is someone to challenge it. He came here to kill us. I’m sure of it.”

O’Malley stops in front of a door and turns to address all three Aesir at once. “Listen, I know how you must be feeling right now, but you can’t make rash decisions. Even if they did come here to harm you, they will not be allowed to again. I’ve sent a team to track them down and neutralize the problem.”

Victoria scoffs, rolling her head along with her eyes. “Did you not see the fight? They tore through your commandos like they were nothing. We fought them. We held them off. We need to be the ones to stop them.”

“No!” O’Malley snaps, firmly holding his hands up in defiance. “No more Aesir will be fighting each other. I will not allow it. Understand?”

Crossing steps up to puff his rock chest out in O’Malley’s face. “And what if we don’t?”

O’Malley takes a long, exhausted sigh before reaching his hand back to turn the doorknob behind him. The door swings open and O’Malley steps aside for the three Aesir to enter the classroom. Everything in the room is cleared to the back wall except a single metal bed in the center. Lying on the bed is Linda Hugo’s body with a blanket over top of her. Several pieces of medical equipment, scanners, IVs, and monitors, are positioned around the bed while a team of doctors and nurses shuffle around tirelessly. Oblivious of her surroundings, Linda stares blankly at the ceiling above, never blinking or flinching as the medical professionals endlessly poke and prod her body.

Hovering around the perimeter of the activity, the three Aesir stare in shock as O’Malley circles around them. “You’re not super heroes and this is not some kind of game. We have no idea why this happened to you, and we can’t control what we don’t understand. So right now, my main priority is keeping you three from winding up like this. I’m sorry, but that’s just the way it has to be.”

After several tense moments of silence, Christine turns to O’Malley as her fluid body, constantly in motion, grows still and calm. “Where’s Todd? He wasn’t under the rubble.”

The Director takes another deep sigh before replying with a pained frown. “With them.”



## Chapter 24: The New Recruit

Todd's eyes slowly flutter opens to the vague, blurry image of a body leaning over him.

“Rise and shine, darling,” the womanly outline says to him.

Todd struggles to sit up on a countertop. His back aches and a throbbing pain attacks his forehead.

“What happened?” he asks, rubbing his eyes. “Who are you and where am I?”

The woman comes into focus wearing a tattered blouse covered in dust. “How about one question at a time, okay? My name is Betty and you're in an empty house under construction not far from the school we found you in.”

Todd looks around, noticing the construction tools and equipment scattered throughout the half-finished kitchen. At least part of the woman's story checks out, but Todd isn't about to leave anything else to chance. His gaze snaps back to her, locking his leering eyes directly onto the woman's face. Betty squints, confused by the boy's expression, but she soon grabs ahold of her throat and begins choking out of nowhere.

“We...we saved you,” she pleads, gasping for air. Why are you—I...can't breathe.”

Todd smirks, amused by Betty's struggles as she drops to her knees. “Saved me? What makes you think I need saving.”

A man in an equally dilapidated suit casually enters the kitchen, tall and unafraid. “What's your name, boy?”

Todd sneers at the man. “Boy? Boy?!”

The man stops just shy of Betty, who continues to wheeze while lying on the floor. He doesn't help her up, though, keeping his humble focus on the boy seated on the counter in front of him. "My apologies. It was foolish of me to talk to you that way. But still, you know my associate's name and everyone refers to me as Breton. So I would only like to know what to call you in return."

Surprised by the man's respectful tone, Todd takes a deep breath, allowing his anger to subside. "T...Todd. Todd Klein."

Breton steps over Betty, who is now writhing on the floor, and pulls up a foldout chair to sit next to her. "I'd like to apologize for how I acted earlier at the school. I said some things I now regret because at the time I was unaware of your power."

Todd nods, pleased with Breton's praise, and looks down at Betty hanging on the edge of death. "Aren't you going to help her?"

Breton shrugs, never even bothering to look down at the dying woman at his feet. "The way I see at it, you're more powerful than both of us combined. If you're going to kill her then you're going to kill her and there's nothing I can do about it. By helping her I run the risk of angering you, putting myself in danger as well."

Todd watches Betty for a few more seconds before she suddenly sucks in a huge breath of relief. Instantly filled with life, Betty scrambles up to her hands and knees, desperately gasping for all the air she can get.

Breton smiles and stands from his chair to approach the boy seated at the counter. "Thank you, Todd, for sparing her life."

The adolescent hops off the counter to his feet and fearlessly looks up at Breton towering over him. "What do you want?"

Breton gets down on a knee, bringing his eyes to Todd's level. "To acknowledge that despite all my power, yours is far superior."

Todd stands tall and smiles. "That's a wise move."

"And my wisdom is yours," Breton says, bowing his head.

Rolling his eyes, Todd scoffs at the gesture. "Don't give me that. You could've killed me when I was knocked out or left me back at the school. You obviously brought me here for a reason. So what is it?"

Breton stands and looks to Betty, who slowly stands as well. She shrugs, more or less indifferent to the situation, and then turns to leave the room.

Now alone with the boy, Breton lets out a relaxed sigh while returning to sit in the foldout chair. "Todd, I see these powers, these gifts, as a way to obtain anything we want. Ultimate power is at our fingertips and we're free to use it however we see fit. So I asked myself: what do I want more than anything in the world? But I already know my answer. In fact, I've already achieved it. The question is...what do you want?"

Todd looks down for a second, contemplating his response, before looking back up and answering with a blank expression. "Everything."

## Chapter 25: Torn

O'Malley stands at the foot of Linda's bed, intently watching her lifeless body for any signs of movement. Her eyes don't blink as she stares deadpan at the ceiling, and her chest remains still, making O'Malley wonder if the woman was even breathing at all.

The other Aesir, along with all the nurses and technicians, have long since left the room. Only a single doctor remains, who changes a bag of fluids on an IV before walking over to stand beside O'Malley. "It's not looking good."

With his hands clasped behind his back, O'Malley sighs deeply, allowing his body to rise and fall with the breath. "What's your medical opinion?"

"The woman shot fire out of her body," the doctor answers while shrugging. "I think my medical opinion is worthless."

O'Malley nods, patient and understanding of the circumstances. "Still...I want to hear it."

After a deep breath, the doctor turns to face the Director. "She's catatonic. Her vitals are stable and she appears perfectly healthy. Assuming that her state has nothing to do with her ability to spontaneously combust, I would guess she's just in shock from the incident."

O'Malley keeps his eyes on Linda, scanning her body as he speaks. "Can it be reversed?"

"That's up to her," the doctor says while leaving the foot of the bed.

He traverses across the room and exits through the door, leaving O'Malley alone with Linda, who continues watching, hoping, praying that she'll be okay.

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In a classroom down the hall, where the desks are still neatly arranged in rows, Christine, Victoria, and Crossing stare off in different directions while contemplating what comes next. Victoria and Christine each sit in chairs on opposite sides of the room while Crossing, unable to find a seat capable of holding his weight, sits on the floor under the blackboard.

Suddenly, Victoria slams down on the desk, propelling herself out of the chair. “This is stupid! Why are we just sitting here waiting?!”

Christine keeps her eyes out the window, gazing at the growing crowds surrounding the school. “What would you have us do? We can’t go out there looking for a fight and we certainly can’t go home. There’s nowhere else to go.”

Pushing up off the tile floor, Crossing lumbers to his feet. “The girl has a point. The least they can do is find a cure for us. We’re here all alone.”

“I don’t care about a cure,” Victoria responds, shaking her head. “I don’t look like—”

“Like what?” Christine interjects, turning to face Victoria while her watery body rises upright. “A freak?”

Victoria stares the liquid woman down, her blank expression remaining unchanged as she finishes her thought. “Like someone that will stand out in a crowd.”

“But where will you go, Victoria?” a voice asks from behind them.

The three Aesir all turn to find O’Malley walking through the doorway. His head hangs low, heavy and burdened, as he sits down at a desk in the center of the room. “You ran away from home, remember? You left your clothes, lost your money, and have no place to stay. Right now, we’re your only option.”

The Director pauses long enough for the girl to let out a weary sigh before continuing on. “I know you're nervous, Victoria. I know you all are. But you have to understand that this is not just about you. It's about the whole city. This whole country, even.”

He pauses again to rub a hand across his face, kneading out the stress in one long motion. “There are three very dangerous people out there and they can strike at any moment. I know deep down you feel it's your duty to stop them, but I also know you want to be normal again. It must be difficult feeling that torn inside, and I understand your frustration. Believe me, I want this nightmare to end just like you do. But our priority right now, our number one priority, is keeping this city safe. Anything else will have to wait.”

Christine, Victoria, and Crossing all glance back and forth, gauging each other's reactions. No one speaks. Instead, the room remains silent and the three Aesir lower their heads to match O'Malley's melancholy expression.

## Chapter 26: Ambush

Leaning against a wall in the under construction kitchen, Betty watches Todd with a cautious curiosity. Sitting cross-legged in a deep meditation, the boy levitates above the counter, his eyes closed, peaceful and relaxed.

The sight perturbs Betty for reasons she can't quite understand. She shakes her head and scoffs, turning to enter the living room. There she finds Breton, leaning over to stare out the window at the night's clouded sky.

"That's one thing I hate about the city," he notes. "With all the lights it's impossible to see the stars."

Betty leans over, bringing her annoyed expression inches from the side of his face. "Brian, what the hell are you talking about? I don't give a shit about the stars when there's a psychotic walking time bomb going through puberty in the next room. What are we doing here?"

Breton stands up straight and turns to Betty, annoyed by her anxiety. "Relax, will ya? I have him under control."

She turns her head sideways to peculiarly examine Breton's face. "Really? Like you had him under control back at the school? Because about an hour ago you were on your knees kissing his ass."

Breton chuckles, amused by Betty's spunk. "See, that's your problem, Betty. You're such a bitch all the time you can never understand the art of manipulation."

He steps around her and stops in the open space between the kitchen and living room to observe Todd in his trance. "That boy is more powerful than you could imagine. I'm sure he's even stronger than he knows. And the

only possible way we can make him do what we want is to make him believe we're doing what he wants."

"But what about the other Aesir?" Betty asks. "They'll be moving soon."

Spinning on his heels, Breton turns back to Betty and meets her blank expression with a casual smile. "Don't worry. They'll be taken care of. It's only a matter of time."

In the kitchen behind him, Todd's peaceful meditation ends abruptly as his eyes shoot open.

"They're here," he whispers to himself.

Suddenly, the front and back doors to the house explode open, launching a shockwave of debris through the kitchen and living room. Breton and Betty dive to the ground to avoid the forceful blast while Todd remains tranquilly airborne above the counter.

A moment later, two squads of O.S.C. commandos in all black tactical gear charge inside. Those by the front door encounter Todd first and fire, but their hi-tech bullets, wrapped in an electrical charge, vanish before hitting Todd's body only to reappear on the other side of him, continuing their path straight into the wall. Shocked by the ineffectiveness of their weapons, the commandos hesitate to follow up. Todd forms a devious grin and waves his hand, tossing the commandos through the front window out onto the street.

Inside the house, the living room becomes a warzone as Betty, taking cover behind a large metal tool chest, engages the commandos in wild electrical battle. Back and forth, the two sides exchange electrical bullets and currents with one another, until Breton turns a corner and unleashes a wave of energy at the unsuspecting soldiers. Without anything to protect them, the

point blank blast overtakes the commandos completely, burning away their armor and leaving only their seared corpses behind.

Out of breath, Betty stands to thank Breton for the save, but he's already running towards the front door. He heads out into the darkness to find a street drenched in carnage. Several fires rage as the city block and the buildings around it lie in ruins. O.S.C. vehicles are flipped over with bodies of commandos strewn along the sidewalks. In the center of the destruction, Todd floats off the ground, aimlessly flinging cars around the neighborhood just by wiggling his fingers.

On his way over to the boy, Breton notices every body he walks by is completely lifeless. All except one, a woman under Todd's feet, struggling to breath through agonizing gasps of air.

"You left one alive?" Breton asks, staring at the woman's blood soaked face.

Still levitating, Todd's eyes scan the devastation before him. "Give her a couple of minutes and she'll join the rest."

"She has information I need," Breton asserts.

After a moment of contemplation, Todd gracefully descends through the air, gently lowering his feet to the pavement. "Then get it."

The boy turns and heads back into the house, never bothering to look up at Breton as he passes him by.

## Chapter 27: End of the Road

Out of all the public schools in Manhattan, O'Malley didn't pick one for his headquarters at random. He chose a school with access to a tunnel under the street, just in case he or his team needed to make a quick getaway undetected. Which is exactly what he plans to do as quickly as humanly possibly.

It's well after midnight when the Director decides to make his move. With his jacket off, his sleeves rolled up, and his tie flung over his shoulder, O'Malley personally leads a unit of O.S.C. commandos through the tunnels underneath the city. Behind them, a group of doctors carefully roll Linda on a stretcher followed by Christine, Victoria, Crossing, and another unit commandos.

The caravan is slow moving, and Crossing's restless eyes can't stop focusing at Linda's motionless body on the stretcher in front of him. "Look at us. Sneaking underground in the middle of the night. I can't stand running away."

Walking beside him, Christine forces her attention upwards at the old, dim light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. "Well, what do you expect us to do? Stay at the school? It's not safe there. We need to be someplace they can help us. Cure us."

"I know," Crossing admits, his rock countenance grimacing in a frustrated frown, "but this just feels..."

"Cowardly," Victoria says, finishing his sentence while staring at the ground.

Happy with her word choice, Crossing enthusiastically punches a fist into his hand. "Yes. We shouldn't be hiding."

Christine reaches out and runs her watery fingers along the concrete wall. “I don’t care. I just want to be normal again.”

“Quiet,” O’Malley bellows back at them in a hushed voice. “We’re almost there.”

The group continues on as the tunnel leads up into a ramp that spits them out into a park several blocks away. A series of street lamps light up the small grass field, and O’Malley keeps moving to a fleet of vehicles parked on the street around the corner.

Without hesitation, the commandos pile into two SUVs as the doctors open up the back of a black van. Only it isn’t a van. Looking inside, the Aesir quickly recognize it as an ambulance in disguise.

Working with rapid efficiency, the doctors prepare Linda for the trip as O’Malley instructs the other Aesir. “I’m going to ride upfront in an SUV. The ambulance is going to stay close behind. You three are going to follow in that black van behind you. The other SUV will bring up the rear.”

Victoria and Christine head towards the darkened van without saying a word, but Crossing steps up to O’Malley instead. “This is stupid. Why are we running away?”

“We have to,” O’Malley replies. “The school’s been compromised.”

Crossing shakes his head, unsatisfied with the response. “It doesn’t matter where we are. They’re going to come for us.”

Fed up, O’Malley jabs his finger in the van’s direction. “Just get in the vehicle, Stan. Please.”

As Crossing stomps away, O’Malley heads towards the front SUV, waving a commando to join him as he walks. “Any word from the squad tracking the rogues?”

“No contact since they engaged the targets,” the commando replies.

O'Malley frowns. "Well let me know the moment they call in."

"Yes, sir," the commando nods before jogging to the rear SUV.

O'Malley stops at the passenger side of the front SUV and scans the street one last time, making sure he's the only person not on board. He then opens the door and sticks his head inside. "All set?"

"Yes, sir," the driver answers. "We're good to go."

O'Malley steps up onto the running board and takes one last look at the caravan behind him before jumping into the seat and shutting the door. "All right. Let's move."

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The fleet of all black vehicles takes off, making several turns as it randomly zigzags across the island. Crossing looks out the tinted window from the back of the van and finds the city streets oddly desolate. There's no traffic. No pedestrians. Not even a police car. Almost as if the entire city vanished into thin air.

Crossing's attention is soon pulled away from the window by Victoria and Christine, who sit opposite him in the back of the van. Their focus is on the odd bench Crossing sits on, which is reinforced to support the weight of his rock body.

"What is it?" he asks the women.

Victoria quickly looks up at him and shrugs her shoulders. "What's what?"

"You're staring at me," he says, furrowing his rocky brow. "What is it?"

Christine averts her gaze by looking towards the front of the van. "It's nothing."

Crossing bends over to look under his legs. "It's this bench, isn't it?"

Both women rapidly shake their heads. “No. No. Not at all. What makes you say that.”

Frustrated, Crossing holds out his arms to express his displeasure. “It’s not my fault I weigh this much, okay? I can’t believe this. We’re being covertly transported in the middle of the night and you can’t stop staring at the bench holding me up.”

Victoria lowers her head, trying to hide her giggling smirk.

“Hey,” Crossing says to her, leaning forward into the space between them. “That’s the first time I’ve seen you smile.”

Smiling softly as well, Christine places her hand on Victoria’s shoulder. “And you shouldn’t feel the need to hide it.”

Victoria’s giggles burst into all out laughter as she wiggles her shoulders to shake off Christine’s hand. “Hey! You’re getting me wet.”

Christine pulls her hand back, her smile shifting into an embarrassed chuckle. “Oh, sorry.”

The three Aesir laugh as one while leaning back against the van’s walls.

“I have to admit. This does feel good,” Victoria happily confesses. “You’re right. I haven’t smiled since I met Jared on that bus. And God only knows when before that.”

She then sighs and shifts her gaze back and forth between the two inhuman looking Aesir beside her.

“I’m sorry,” she apologizes, humbly lowering her head. “I haven’t been fair to you guys. Here I am looking...normal and only caring about myself. I never stopped to consider how that must make you feel.”

Crossing’s rocky head lets out a churning noise as he shakes it. “Victoria. It’s okay. You don’t—”

She abruptly looks up, cutting him off. “No, I do. There’s a chance they won’t be able to fix us. That we’re stuck like this forever. Then both of you would never look human again. So I need to let you know that we’re in this together. No matter what. I promise that—”

A deafening boom suddenly erupts from under the van, tossing it straight up high into the air. The three unbuckled Aesir are instantly tossed around. They hover weightless for a moment as the van spins upside down in slow motion. Then, all at once, the van is yanked back down to the ground with force, slamming hard onto the sidewalk.

The three remaining vehicles in the caravan all stop at once. Armored commandos pour out of the SUVs and run over to the overturned van. As they reach the sidewalk, the van’s carriage suddenly pops off like a lid and Crossing emerges from inside, cradling Victoria in his rocky arms.

At the front of the van, a stream of water flows out through a crack in the broken windshield. After the water reforms into Christine on the sidewalk, she wastes no time opening the front door and pulling the van’s unconscious driver to safety.

As the commandos circle around the van to assist the Aesir in their rescue, a bolt of electricity surrounds the SUV in the back of the caravan. The ring of lightning closes in on the vehicle like a vice, causing it to explode in a massive fireball. Like the van before it, the car is sent flying through the air, hurtling towards the group like a fiery cannonball.

“Get down,” Crossing shouts.

The commandos all dive for cover, but Crossing stands tall with Victoria in his arms. The girl, weak and battered, lifts a hand up just enough to catch the flying SUV in mid-air. She pauses, struggling to suspend the vehicle long enough for Christine to put out the flames. Once the fire is

extinguished, Victoria collapses limp in Crossing's arms, dropping the SUV to the ground.

Without a second delay, Crossing runs over to the disguised ambulance as two doctors jump out the back with medical equipment in hand. One rushes over to the injured driver still at Christine's feet while the other tends to Victoria.

"She's hurt," Crossing explains. "I don't know how bad."

"Put her down," the doctor orders.

Crossing lays Victoria on the ground and brushes her hair to the side as she struggles to open her eyes. "Stan...I..."

"Just relax," he says as softly as his gravelly voice will allow. "You're going to be okay."

The sound of gunfire draws Crossing's attention back over his shoulder. The commandos are firing at Betty and Breton, who casually strut down the center of the street towards the back SUV. Betty holds up a shield of electricity that blocks the commandos' electrical rounds. The cover allows Breton to clap his hands together, unleashing a wave of energy that blows several commandos back into the windows of storefronts behind them. As the gunfire ceases, Betty spins her electrical shield into a bolt of lightning that whips at several more commandos, shocking them to the ground in a fit of convulsions.

Dragging several of their fallen comrades by their armor, the remaining commandos retreat to the SUV at the front of the caravan. They fall back behind the vehicle only to discover Todd standing fearlessly before them. The commandos left standing immediately aim their weapons but hesitate to fire. Todd smirks at their apprehension and holds his arms out, practically welcoming their ammunition.

“Fire!” one of the commandos shouts, breaking the silence.

Every commando pulls the trigger, unleashing a wave of electrical bullets that stop in front of Todd’s smirking face. The firing doesn’t cease until the commandos completely empty their clips, but by then the electrical charges have faded, leaving nothing more than a swarm of regular bullets hovering in front of Todd’s face. His smirk then slowly falls into a blank expression as the bullets turn around in mid-air and launch back towards their source. The rounds connect with the helpless commandos like a firing squad, peppering their armor and instantly dropping them to the ground.

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O’Malley’s aghast face swivels from side to side, surveying the chaotic warzone around him. After a moment of panic, he snaps out of his disbelief long enough to run back to the ambulance. “We have to retreat!”

Crossing, still kneeling by Victoria, looks up at the Director. “To where?!”

As he reaches the ambulance doors, O’Malley stops to look back at his downed commandos. “They’re surrounding us. We don’t stand a chance.”

Victoria grunts while slowly sitting up off the ground. “We...we have to fight.”

“No,” O’Malley orders, shaking his head. “No fighting.”

The doctor by Victoria’s side stands and turns to the Director. “She’s fine, but we need to get Linda Hugo out of here.”

Again, O’Malley shakes his head. “Not by yourself. We’re all leaving together.”

He then turns to Crossing. “Stan, I want you to take Victoria and—”

A bolt of electricity, writhing across the pavement like a snake, suddenly shoots up off the ground and strikes Crossing's rock body. The attack has no effect, and Crossing looks around confused to find Betty casually walking towards the group.

"We have to take a stand," he says, turning back towards O'Malley. "We can stop them."

Clenching his teeth, O'Malley looks to Crossing and then Victoria. Although the young woman and rock monstrosity couldn't be more different in appearance, they both wear the same steely gaze of defiance. They're determined and ready, fully committed to do what's necessary, and O'Malley knows he can't hold them back much longer.

The Director eyes the two Aesir down for a few more seconds before letting out a frustrated grunt and reluctantly nodding his head. "Fine. But we're getting Linda out of here first."

O'Malley and the doctor hop into the ambulance and pull Linda out on the stretcher. They then wheel her to the sidewalk, passing by Victoria and Crossing. The two Aesir stand tall and vigilant, watching as Betty continues to strut towards them.

"Two against one?" Betty taunts with a smirk. "Now that doesn't seem fair."

She lifts both hands in the air and begins swirling an electrical storm over her head. "But let's do this anyway."

She fires a bolt at Crossing, which he easily shrugs off his rock body.

"Tickles," he says, shaking his shoulders.

Irritated by the ineffective attack, Betty bares her teeth as she sprints forward, firing a bolt at Victoria next. Crossing steps in front to take the blast and swings a punch as Betty approaches. Ducking out of the way, Betty

easily maneuvers around Crossing's attack to reach Victoria, who she then tackles to the ground as a cradle of lighting encircles their bodies.

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Across the street, Christine still kneels by the injured driver's side as the doctor continues to check his vitals.

"How is he?" she asks.

The doctor removes his hand from the driver's chest and looks up at Christine. "Stable but unconscious. We need to—"

A blast of energy connects with the doctor's shoulder, sending him flying down the sidewalk. Shocked, Christine looks back over her shoulder to find Breton standing behind her.

"What you need to do is beg for mercy," he says, finishing the doctor's sentence.

Standing cautiously, Christine sidesteps into the street, away from the unconscious driver. "Leave them alone. It's us you want."

"Of course," he says, with a conceited shrug. "Killing them is just a bonus."

Christine stops in the middle of the road, clenching her hand into a firm fist of water. "You're an asshole."

Breton lifts his hand and smiles while charging a sphere of energy in his palm. "I am what the Devil made me."

He flicks his wrist, firing the blast in Christine's direction. Her body grows long and wavy, dodging the attack by contorting out of the way. Following up, Christine charges forward and tackles Breton to the ground as a massive wave. After hitting the ground, Breton easily rolls over backward and pops up to his feet, firing random blasts at the wall of water in front of him. The water quickly collapses together as Christine reforms her body.

She then easily evades every blast while extending her arms to punch Breton from a distance.

Soaking wet and frustrated, Breton clenches his fists and charges forward in a dead sprint. He screams while diving for Christine's body, but he splashes straight through it and smacks his face into the pavement behind her.

"Look at the great Brian Breton!" Christine laughs, pointing down at him. "Lying on the floor where he belongs."

Sneering up at her, Breton's tense body slowly stands as a massive aura of energy starts building all around him.

"Die!" he shouts, unleashing a bombardment of energy blasts at Christine with everything he has.

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Further down the road, Todd sits cross-legged on the hood of a car, casually watching the fighting from a distance. He studiously observes Christine as she takes on Breton's attacks. He then glances over towards Betty as her battle rages on with John and Victoria.

Across the street, a movement catches his eye. He looks over and spots O'Malley and a doctor running away from the battle while pushing a stretcher. Todd smiles curiously before vanishing into the air.

As they reach a break in the sidewalk, the doctor and O'Malley run towards the next block but stop when Todd suddenly appears on the street corner in front of them.

"Hello, Director," the boy says, calmly.

O'Malley sucks in a long breath of air as he takes his hands off the stretcher. "Please, Todd. Let us get Linda to safety."

“Why?” the boy asks, flippantly. “If anything she’s the most dangerous out of all of us.”

“She’s an innocent person caught up in all this just like you are.”

“No one’s innocent. Not you. Not me. Not little miss perfect on the stretcher over there. We all deserve what’s coming to us.”

Drawing Todd’s attention, O’Malley cautiously sidesteps away from the stretcher, entering the middle of the street. “Nothing’s coming to anyone. You’re doing this. You’re the one responsible and you can stop it. You choose what path to take. No one else.”

Todd steps off the curb to nonchalantly approach the stretcher. “That’s where you’re wrong, Director. It’s destiny. Where was I a week ago? What choices did I have then? I was just a boy. A worthless orphan that nobody wanted. But now that I have power you think my options are suddenly limitless? No. I still only have one path.”

Smiling, Todd lifts a hand, aiming it towards the doctor in front of him. “And that path is greatness.”

Confused, the doctor looks around as his breathing becomes heavy. He wheezes and grunts while the skin on his face slowly sags, drooping off his cheeks and chin. The doctor’s flesh continues to grow flaccid until it melts clean off, leaving nothing but the bone underneath.

O’Malley’s jaw drops as he watches the doctor’s grotesque demise in shock. “Oh, my God.”

“See,” Todd says, briefly glancing over to gauge O’Malley’s reaction. “Now you’re getting the picture.”

Unleashing a horrific scream of agony, the doctor drops to the ground, and Todd walks over him as he continues on towards the stretcher. “But some will stand in my way, and we can’t have that. Right, Mrs. Hugo?”

O'Malley takes a hard step forward. "Todd, don't—"

Todd raises his hand, causing O'Malley to stop of his own volition. "I wouldn't come any closer if I were you, Director. The only reason you're still alive is because I haven't decided how to kill you yet. But don't test me."

O'Malley retreats a step backwards and Todd looks down at Linda on the stretcher, her catatonic eyes still staring up at the cloudy night's sky.

"You don't look like much now," Todd says to her, "but I know you're in there. I can feel it. I feel the fire...the rage...the hate. You know what you've become. You know what's inside you and you hate yourself for it. I can stop it for you. I can make it all go away. All you have to do is tell me, Mrs. Hugo, what do you want?"

Leaning over her, Todd turns his ear to Linda's mouth as she slowly parts her lips and whispers. "The end."

Linda's hand suddenly shoots up and grabs ahold of Todd's wrist. He reflexively tries to pull it back but fails to break free from her hot, sizzling grasp.

"What—what's going on?" he stammers.

Two small sparks ignite fires inside Linda's eyes as a thin layer of smoke emanates off her body.

"My powers," Todd spouts, frantically trying and failing again and again to pull his arm away. "I can't—"

A fiery fountain slowly rises out of Linda's motionless body. The flames pass over Todd and continue growing, expanding into the sky. After watching the inferno climb with fascination, O'Malley runs down the street towards the other Aesir.

"Get down!" he screams.

The Aesir all stop fighting and turn to witness the towering blaze rise higher over the stretcher. The flames expand, causing Todd, still locked into Linda's grip, to lift his other arm, shielding himself from the immense heat. "It...burns...so much. I can't..."

All at once, the fiery spire collapses back down, absorbed into Linda's still body. A moment of silence fills the air before a gigantic explosion combusts out of her, erupting a giant fireball across the entire city block. The vehicles, both from the caravan and those parked along the side of the street, are tossed like toys into the air. Buildings rumble and quake as they're torn apart, several even collapsing into a rain of bricks. O'Malley dives through a window for cover inside a storefront while the other Aesir, unsuspecting of the blast, are thrown in every direction.

The flames and fire swirl like a living storm, filling the desolate street until there's nothing left but rubble. The smoke and dust eventually clears, replaced by a cacophony of coughs. One by one, the Aesir slowly emerge from the wreckage and immediately look to epicenter of the explosion, where Todd, battered, bruised and bleeding heavily, lies helpless on his stomach. Linda stands fearlessly in front of him, her body covered head to toe in a churning armor of flames.

Hacking up a dark mucus of ash, Todd pushes himself off the ground and looks up at Linda. She coldly stares down at him despite the bright flames burning in her eyes. The boy tries to stand but falls backwards, crawling away on his hands and feet.

"You...you, stupid bitch!" he barks. "Do you have any idea what I can do!?"

Todd pushes himself up off the ground, practically jumping to his feet. He then winds up his empty hand and throws, telepathically sending

several chunks of rubble flying towards Linda. The rock and debris connect with her fiery body but have no effect, breaking into tiny pieces upon impact. Un-phased, Linda walks forward, tall and emotionless.

Todd screams, building up a tangled aura of electricity, ice, and plasma that revolve around him. He then shoots his arms out, launching the mass in Linda's direction. Right as the strike is about to collide with her, Linda's body dissipates into flames that shoot straight past Todd's attack. The boy's eyes widen in startled panic as the living fire flows around him, engulfing his body in flames. Unable to fight back, Todd unleashes a blood-curdling scream while the fire sears away his flesh. Little by little, the flames scorch the muscles, wilting every bit of tissue to cinders. The remaining ash then blows away in the wind, and the flames come together to reform Linda's fiery body in Todd's place.

Speechless and paralyzed, the other Aesir look on in awe as Linda turns to them. Calm and composed, she lifts her arm towards Victoria on the ground and a powerful stream of fire extends out from her hand.

"No!" Christine yells as she dives in front of Victoria.

Her body stretches out into a wall of water that meets the flames head on. The fiery blast is extinguished, but Christine's steamy body, drained of its mass, loses even more form as it splashes hard against the pavement.

In the aftermath of the attack, Betty and Breton subtly share an opportunistic glance. Betty then fires several bolts of electricity at Christine, who screams as the current runs up and down her thin, feeble body. Still lying in the rubble, John leaps to his feet and charges at Betty only to be violently knocked off course by a blast of energy from Breton. Ignoring the ensuing battle, Linda turns to Victoria, who finally stands up as Linda slowly approaches her.

“You...” Victoria utters in disbelief. “You tried to kill me.”

Without responding, Linda launches another blast of fire at Victoria, but this time she’s ready. Victoria lifts her hands, using her powers to hold the massive flaming torrent back. She struggles, though, and the wave creeps closer and closer by the second. When it reaches her face, Victoria releases the blast and drops down, allowing the fire to shoot over her. Once it’s passed, she jumps back up and charges full speed at Linda across the street.

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Further down the block, O’Malley climbs out of the storefront he took shelter in. He dusts himself off, shakes away the ringing in his head, and looks up to discover a super-powered war raging across the devastated street. O’Malley’s eyes widen, shocked and awe-struck by the chaos. This isn’t what he wanted. This kind of madness is exactly what he was trying to avoid. Now it was out of his hands. All he could do was hope that the right side one...and the wrong side didn’t tear the city apart in the process.

Surveying the carnage, O’Malley’s eyes catch a glimpse of Betty. She’s standing over a puddle, laughing maniacally while driving electricity down into the water. “Feels good, huh?”

O’Malley charges at her, grabbing a boulder along the way. He lifts the large rock over his head, and Betty turns just as the Director smashes the stone across her face. She drops to the ground unconscious, and the puddle, now free from Betty’s current, re-forms back into Christine’s watery body.

“You, okay?” O’Malley asks, his hands getting wet as he helps Christine stand.

She struggles to her feet even with his assistance. “Water and electricity really don’t...”

Her sentence drifts off as she spots Breton repeatedly blasting Crossing with attacks, pinning him into the corner of a destroyed building.

“Stan!” she yells while shooting towards them in massive spray of water.

With every consecutive blast, Breton’s barrage of energy chisels and chips away at Crossing’s rock body.

“Look at you,” Breton laughs, continuing his assault. “You’re falling apart.”

“At least I’m not about to be blasted by a fire hose,” Crossing mutters between shots.

Breton stops his attacks just long enough to appear confused. “What?”

With the force of a tidal wave, Christine’s stream of water smashes into Breton from behind, pinning his back to a pile of rubble. Flowing all around him, the water doesn’t let up as it forcefully covers his entire face. A fountain dives into his mouth, filling his throat, smothering him completely. Desperately thrashing his arms and legs, the billionaire lies pressed into the ground, frantically struggling for even the smallest gasp of air.

“You never learn, do you, Breton?!” Christine’s voice taunts him, echoing out from within the fountain. “Well how about now, huh?! How does it feel to be the one struggling to stay alive!?”

O’Malley sprints over to them, screaming from across the street.

“Christine! No!”

“He’s not worth it,” Crossing says, slowly rising to his feet. “Just let him go.”

Distraught, O’Malley stops and puts his hands on his head, watching in helpless horror as Breton drowns in front of him. “You’re going to kill him. Just stop.”

The fountain continues to pump itself into Breton's mouth, causing him to gurgle and gag for several more seconds until it suddenly stops. The water flows down onto the ground next to Breton's body and slowly builds back up into Christine's womanly form.

Only she's not standing tall. Her shoulders are slumped and her back is arched, as she shakes her head while staring down into her hands. "I...I just wanted to hurt him so bad. I couldn't help myself."

Soaking wet, Breton rolls off the rubble and onto his knees, coughing as water continues to vacate his lungs.

"You should have you, bitch," he snarls, wobbling to his feet. "Because now you've made me—"

A wave of fire suddenly engulfs Breton's face, wrapping his head in a helmet of flames. The powerful CEO screams in agony, but only a whimper escapes the inferno. He drops to the ground, writhing uncontrollably several times before his body grows limp. The flames then fade as if they were never there, leaving only a blackened hump of charred flesh behind.

Christine, Crossing, and O'Malley turn and see Linda, her body still covered in flames, standing in the center of a huge circle of fire. Hobbling with her battered face smeared with soot, Victoria collapses in front of them to catch her breath.

"I...I can't take her," she murmurs. "She's gone insane. Absolutely out of her mind."

Faint sirens grow louder in the distance, drawing O'Malley's attention to the other end of the street. "Backups coming. We need to take cover and wait."

"Not this again," Christine complains. "You've seen what she can do. We need to stop her...now."

O'Malley turns back to the group. "She's sick, Christine. She needs help."

"What she needs is a straight jacket," Victoria retorts, pushing herself up to her feet. "She hasn't said a word this entire time. I think she's lost it."

The growing circle of fire around Linda pulsates, shooting a wave of flames out towards them.

"Watch out!" Crossing shouts, spinning around to cover O'Malley.

Victoria puts her hands up to divert the fire around her while Crossing, met with the full force of the flames, stands strong through the scorching attack. Digging her heels into the pavement, Christine fights against the blaze as well, extinguishing it as it hits her, but the heat is too much for her to handle. She screams as her water body fades into steam, evaporating straight into the blast. Seeing Christine in trouble, Victoria quickly slides over, pushing the flames around both of them to protect her.

After the fire subsides, Crossing releases his hold on O'Malley and looks down at Christine. Her body is a thin and weak version of itself, same as the last time she took a direct shot from Linda's flames. Seeing her on the ground, tended to by Victoria, Crossing comes to the inevitable conclusion that he should have realized from the start.

"I can stop her," the man of rock declares. "It has to be me."

O'Malley looks over Crossing's shoulder and spots Linda's fiery form walking towards them. The ring of flames around her is gone, but it could come back at any second. And that's kind of the point, isn't it? Anything could happen at any second. She could erupt like a volcano, devouring this entire island in lava. Or she could detonate like an atom bomb, leveling the city to ruins. He just doesn't know. It makes him feel powerless and out of control. Which is why, he realizes, it's time to let go.

“Okay,” the Director says, looking to no one in particular. “Do it.”

Crossing nods and turns to face Linda with his rock chest puffed out as far as it can go. After getting Victoria and Christine to their feet, O’Malley helps the women to the side of the street. John watches them the whole way, nodding once they reach the safety of an overturned car.

“Just try to keep the heat off me the best you can,” he yells to them.

Victoria lifts her hands, readying herself for anything. “You got it.”

Before Crossing has a chance to turn back to Linda, a wall of fire rises in front of him and falls down on top of his head. The force of the blow knocks him to a knee, completely engulfing his rock body in flames. Crossing looks up and all he can see is a swirling glow of orange and red. He tries to stand, but the intense heat burrows between the crevasses of his body, seeping so deep he can actually feel a burning within.

“Come on, Stan,” he whispers to himself. “You got this.”

Using both arms to shield his face from the pounding inferno, Crossing fights to his feet. From beside the sea of fire, Victoria’s shaking hands spread the flames the best she can, clearing a path for Crossing to move.

He struggles with every lumbering step, pushing one foot in front of the other. A forceful burst of flames pounds against the fiery wall, pushing against him, but Crossing holds his ground. Another short burst of flames pushes again, and this time Crossing stumbles back. He catches himself, though, quickly driving his rock feet into the ground and holding position.

Off to the side, Victoria fights to keep her shield up around Crossing, holding the full fury of the fire back and preventing it from overwhelming him.

“Come on, big guy,” she mutters through clenched teeth as a stream of blood trickles out her nose. “Hurry.”

The giant sea of fire expands, filling the street completely so that Christine only catches glimpses of John’s body stopped amidst the flames.

“Damn it,” she grumbles under her breath.

Summing up her strength, Christine dives through the flames and into the small pocket of Victoria’s shield. She kneels down next to Crossing and helps him up. “You have to get moving.”

“Christine, it’s too hot for you here,” he pleads to her. “You’re going to burn up.”

“Don’t worry about me. Just get to Linda.”

Christine unleashes a wave of water in front of them, pushing the flames back slightly and giving Crossing room to move. He stands and lowers his shoulder, running headlong directly into the fiery wall. As he vanishes behind the flames, the powerful inferno overwhelms Christine completely and she fades away into a thin trail of steam.

“Christine...” Victoria despairingly murmurs from the side of the street. “No...”

Releasing her powers, Victoria collapses backwards, and O’Malley swiftly moves in to catch her before she hits ground. “I got you. Just relax.”

Her eyes flutter, weak and exhausted, and O’Malley looks up at the swirling storm of flames where Crossing is no longer anywhere in sight.

“Just stop her, Stan,” the Director whispers to himself. “Please.”

Lost inside the blaze, John spins around aimlessly, looking for anything other than a churning wall of orange and red. It’s like he’s stuck in a flaming room, an endless fog of fire with no exit.

“Where...where am I?” he babbles.

Crossing holds his arm out in front of his face, desperately reaching for something to grab onto. "It's so...hot. I can't..."

He shields his eyes, struggling to look ahead, but stops when a dark womanly figure appears in the distance. He can't see her face. In fact, he can barely see her outline amongst the flames. But there's only one person it could be.

"Linda, what are you doing?" he asks while slowly pushing towards her. "You're going to kill us all."

She gives no response, remaining tall within the blaze.

"Linda!" Crossing screams while fighting for every step. "Stop this!"

As he moves closer, Linda's clear face comes into focus. Her expression is blank and emotionless with two small flames burning within her eyes. From the neck down, however, her body is completely wrapped in fire. She wears it like a skintight suit. Or perhaps the fire is her body. It's impossible for Crossing to tell.

"Linda..." the man of rock whimpers.

He moves up directly in front of her, still fighting against the torrential firestorm raging around him. Their gazes meet, and despite her cold, deadpan stare, Crossing notices a small tear evaporate off her cheek.

"End me..." she commands, her voice coarse and burnt.

Crossing shakes his head as the flames continue to dance between them. "No. I don't want to hurt you."

"...please," Linda pleads.

Crossing shakes his head again, this time closing his eyes and clenching his teeth to fend off the brutal heat squeezing him like a vice. "You're the one doing this, Linda. You're the one in control. Just stop it. Stop it and we can go home."

“If you don’t end me...” She reaches out, grabs his rock hands, and places them on either side of her head. “...I will end it all.”

Crossing opens his eyes and looks up slowly. Even now Linda refuses to display emotion. The literal fire in her eyes burns bright. Stern and rigid, her face is filled with unwavering conviction, nothing like the dreadfully nervous housewife Crossing met the day before.

Linda has been transformed into a pure embodiment of the fire that consumes her. Impartial. Dispassionate. Burning everything and everyone in its path without hesitation or remorse.

Crossing tries to deny it, but the truth stares down at him with blazing intensity. There is no other way.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, painfully.

He squeezes his hands together, crushing Linda’s head beneath his fingers of stone. She goes limp in his grasp...but only for a moment. Her body crumbles into a fine ash that rises into the flames. The fire around Crossing then slowly dissipates, fading away an ember at a time until he’s once again surrounded by the darkness of night.

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The sirens that had been wailing in the backdrop grow louder as a stream of emergency vehicles flood the area. The devastated street turns into a disco of flashing lights, and O’Malley, cradling Victoria in his arms, approaches the closest ambulance. A female EMT jumps out the back with a stretcher, and O’Malley doesn’t wait for instructions before placing Victoria down on top of it.

“She fainted,” he informs the EMT, who proceeds to take Victoria’s vitals.

With fire fighters and police officers scrambling all around them, O'Malley watches the EMT work when a figure comes up from behind and leans over the stretcher. "You did good, girl."

Although different, the familiar voice resonates with Victoria. She forces her eyes open and finds a burly man's face looking down at her. "Stan? You...you turned back."

The visitor is a man O'Malley has met many times before yet for the first time recognizes as the Pro Bowl linebacker Stan Crossing.

Pulling the stethoscope down around her neck, the EMT looks up at O'Malley and nods. "She'll be fine."

After letting out a long exhale, O'Malley turns and offers his hand to the man beside him. "Welcome back to reality, Mr. Crossing."

"Thank you, Director," Crossing replies, accepting the handshake with a smile.

As he retracts his hand, O'Malley's face sulks into a solemn frown. "Linda?"

Mirroring the Director's expression, Crossing takes a deep breath and shakes his head. They share a moment of somber silence that's interrupted by a yell from further down the street. "I got a live one!"

They look over their shoulders to see a policeman helping Betty off a pile of rubble.

"Watch out!" O'Malley shouts at him. "She's an Aesir!"

The policeman's face grows white and he slowly backs away from Betty to join a ring of officers that surround her with weapons drawn.

Groggy and struggling to stay on her feet, Betty raises her hands as if preparing to strike.

"Get back!" she screams, frantically. "Everyone, get back!"

Her panicking gaze bounces around the street, desperately searching for her partner. “Breton? Where’s Breton!?”

“He’s dead,” a woman declares from behind her.

Betty turns to the voice and is met with a hard fist straight to her jaw. She drops like a brick to the ground, and her attacker, a Hispanic woman wrapped in a towel, stands over top of her. “That’s for electrocuting me, bitch.”

O’Malley smiles as the police officers turn to him for orders. “Restrain her. I don’t think she’ll be a problem now.”

The officers handcuff Betty, and O’Malley passes them by to approach the woman who knocked her out. “Miss Reyes, I presume?”

“It’s Dr. Reyes, actually,” Christine replies with a smile.

She then turns her attention to the man beside the Director. “There’s something different about you. You get a haircut?”

Crossing laughs while simultaneously breathing a sigh of relief. “Almost thought you didn’t make it.”

“That makes two of us,” Christine admits. “Turns out steam is water, too, and I was able to pull myself back together.”

She looks past them to Victoria on the stretcher. “She going to be okay?”

O’Malley nods, and after a few awkward seconds, Crossing shrugs his shoulders. “So that’s it?”

O’Malley looks around at the devastation surrounding them. “Well, if you call leaving a decimated city street in your wake ‘it’...then yeah, that’s it.”

“He means the Aesir?” Christine retorts. “We get super powers, we fight, and then we turn back? Is that all this was?”

O'Malley shrugs with a baffled grimace. "I don't know. We may never know what really happened here or why. But what I can say for certainty is that I was wrong. I needed you and you stopped things from turning out worse. So thanks."

Crossing and Christine both bow their heads, too humble to accept the praise.

"Come on," O'Malley says, patting them on the back while laughing at their modesty. "Let's get you two checked out and make sure you're human for good. The last thing we want is any more surprises."

## Epilogue: Celestial Post-Game

The Woman in White and the Man in Black stand next to one another, carefully moving their chess pieces off to the side of the table.

“Well, congratulations,” the Man in Black grumbles, focused on the task. “Looks like you won.”

When all the pieces are off the board, the Woman in White slumps back down into her seat, disappointed despite the victory. “Don’t patronize me. Do you have any idea how many people were killed in our little game?”

Standing beside her, the Man in Black smugly crosses his arms. “Oh, come on. We both knew what the possible consequences were and accepted them. You won. Revel in it.”

“You don’t see human life the same way I do,” the Woman in White rues, shaking her head with her gaze lowered to the floor. “You couldn’t understand.”

“Actually,” the Man in Black muses, “I don’t think either of us quite understand these humans the way we thought we did. This game we created proves that.”

The Woman in White looks up with a stare hardened by righteousness. “All this game proved was that good always conquers over evil.”

Grimacing skeptically, the Man in Black leans forward onto the table. “Well, you did win, but I’m not sure ‘conquered’ is the word I would use.”

“How so?” the Woman in White asks, puzzled.

The Man in Black shrugs while still leaning forward. “The players changed sides so many times it was hard to keep score.”

“So what are you saying?” the Woman in White questions with leering eyes. “That our eternal conflict is pointless?”

The Man in Black pushes off the table to stand tall and stiff. “No. Just that when the end finally does come around, the lines these humans draw might not be as clear cut as we would like them to be.”

The Woman in White stands, bringing her eye level equal to her counterpart’s. “Maybe the power of the gods is best left in the hands of the immortal.”

“Amen,” the Man in Black chirps, nodding his head.

After staring each down for several tense beats, both figures laugh and turn to walk off side by side into the barren, grey horizon.

## About the Author

Frank Martin is a comic writer and author that is not as crazy as his work makes him out to be...seriously.

His novels include the zombie horror *Mountain Sickness* published by Severed Press and the YA sci-fi thriller *Predestiny* published by Crossroad Press. Frank has also had comic shorts appear in the "fluff noir" anthology series *Torsobear* published by Source Point Press. In addition, Frank wrote and produced the comic anthology series *Modern Testament*, which features a wide ensemble of artists throughout its four volumes. Frank's most recent sci-fi novel, *A Weapon's Journey*, was published by Crossroad Press this past spring.

Frank currently lives in New York with his wife and three kids. For more of his work you can visit his website at [www.frankthewriter.com](http://www.frankthewriter.com).

CHARACTER  
GALLERY

ART BY  
CODY  
CONYERS

# GODD



Vincent



CoCo

Victoria



ORSON





LINDA

Jared



# CHRISTINE



# CROSSING



Colo

# Breton



*Colo*

BETTY

