

# RETIRING THE GODS



SHORT STORIES BY  
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# **RETIRING THE GODS**

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## GODS OF GODS, KINGS OF KINGS

Static. Sports commercial. Static. Deodorant commercial. Static. An old woman selling a hideous cubic zirconia cocktail ring.

There was static once more, and then there was light: the opening bumper to *The 700 Club*. Satisfied, the grizzled god seated on the couch across from the television laid the remote control to rest.

“Oh no,” said the equally grizzled god at his side, tugging at his itching bathrobe. “We are not watching this, Yahweh.” His arm—withered and gnarled, but still virile—reached past Yahweh for the remote, perched on the opposite arm of the couch. It rested in the light of a stray sunbeam that streaked through the otherwise dim common room. Pots of plastic flowers and crinkled magazines strove to create a sense of coziness, but managed nothing more than the antiseptic false homeyness of a doctor’s waiting room.

“It’s my turn to choose, Zeus!” Yahweh insisted around a persistent cough.

“Your turn,” Zeus repeated with a derisive glare. His fingers brushed against the black plastic, and fumbled to take hold. “Your turn doesn’t count if you’re gonna choose something unwatchable!”

“There’s nothing better on right now!”

“How do you know?”

“*I know!*”

“Oh please! Not that ‘omnipotent’ crap again!” Zeus snapped.

“You questioning me?” Yahweh coughed. “I’ll shove a lightning bolt—” wheeze “—where the sun don’t shine! Question *that!*”

“What would you know about smiting? Back in the day, *I* carried lightning bolts in my back pocket!” As Zeus worked the remote, the static interspersed with flashes of mortal inanity resumed. “Boy, did I feel sorry for you. *I* had civilized followers developing mathematics and astronomy. *You* had a tribe of sheep-humping, genocidal desert nomads!”

“And whose worshippers dominate the Earth now? Huh?” Yahweh demanded.

“All thanks to that hippy-dippy crotch dropping of yours,” said Zeus, still flipping channels. “Still riding his coattails. Pathetic!”

“Ah, go finger-bang a goat, you irrelevant old coot! When was the last time you were referred to as something other than a ‘myth’ or ‘false god?’” Yahweh’s lips curled back in a nasty grin.

Before Zeus could retort, a voluptuous goddess in white darted into the sitting room, glancing high and low with consternation. “Has anyone seen Odin?”

Zeus completed one lap of channel changing and continued on to a second.

“I think I saw him heading outside, Mary,” Yahweh said.

“I’m Isis,” she corrected.

“What—” cough “—whatever.”

“Out feeding the crows again.” Isis sighed and crossed her arms.

“My son’s coattails are my coattails too, you know,” Yahweh muttered.

“By Styx, knock off that Trinity nonsense!” Zeus roared. “You can’t be separate *and* the same!”

“Says you! You can’t even pick a decent program to watch, you think you know how the universe works?”

“Can you two get along for five minutes while I go get Odin?” Isis asked with an edge in her tone.

A blinding burst of light filtered in from the window.

“Shit!” Isis cried. “Ra’s out there, too!”

“You run along, honey,” Zeus dismissed. “While you’re busy playing nurse, why don’t you help Osiris glue his pecker back on?”

This prompted a cough, then a snicker, then a series of cackles from Yahweh. Zeus stopped flipping channels and joined in with his own thunderous laughter. Isis narrowed her eyes and stalked out.

## THE SUN GOD AT DUSK

“Elder Ra? It’s Thoth.”

The air smelled of mold, salt, and rotting meat. Thoth struggled at first to discern anything within the tepid nursing home cell sitting before him. The only illumination came from patches of sunlight bleeding through a curtain. These outlined a bed, a worn wooden table in front of the bed, a decrepit wheelchair parked at the table, and a desiccated god propped within the wheelchair, bound in linen trappings.

Thoth stepped inside the room, closing the numbered door behind himself, and made his way to the vacant stool at the opposite side of the table. Each of his measured footfalls pierced a shroud of silence. He bowed to the husk-like god, whose gaze remained distant, before lowering himself to a seat. Thoth straightened his spine to ramrod perfection—to the Father of Scribes, no posture felt more natural—and adjusted the cuffs of his crisp suit. His briefcase found a new resting place in his lap.

“Thank you for the audience,” Thoth said.

Quiet met these words, lengthening into the realm of discomfort. Ra had yet to react in any fashion.

“I- I know it’s been ages, Great One,” Thoth faltered. “It’s next to impossible to pull away



from my labors in the Underworld. Paperwork, all sorts of paperwork must be filed for each entrant, and Anubis doesn't have the head for it."

Another awkward silence followed, but Thoth was determined not to let it fester. He opened his briefcase, and rustled through the stack of parchment within. "To business, then. I've discovered something most troubling, something that will spell disaster for our remaining adherents unless it's corrected immediately."

At last, Ra snapped to awareness. He craned his crooked neck forward, and focused a burning stare on his visitor.

Thoth continued, relieved that something was getting through. "Here, have a look at the calendar." He selected a document to place on the table, then slid it toward Ra.

The old one creaked forward for a glimpse. His sour expression lingered downward, unchanged.

"The fifty-first day of *Peret*. Yes?" Thoth prompted.

Ra glanced up, begging the point with a scowl.

"Well, have a look outside." Thoth rested his briefcase on the floor, stood, and leaned toward the window. With a sweep of his arm, he drew back the curtain, liberating a plume of dust that curled through the air. His action revealed a blurry pane of glass facing a courtyard. Green blotches and glowing sun dominated the view. "Does that look like the middle of *Peret* to you?" Thoth asked.

Ra turned his head toward the window, squinting through several moments of study. "*Shomu*." His throat rasped from disuse.

"Precisely. It's all out of synch!" Thoth retook his chair. "Anubis has kept me so accursedly busy, I've only just noticed. Not only is this the wrong date and season, it's also the wrong year. You see, our current year is composed of 360 days plus the five days of chaos. That's close, but not close enough. Based on my new calculations, I've determined the true length of the year to be 365 and *one-fourth* days in duration. Over the millennia, our failure to observe the one-fourth day has misaligned the calendar of the Two Lands with respect to nature's order."

Thoth returned the flawed planner to his briefcase. "Elder Ra?" He hesitated. "You were the one who so graciously awarded me the five days of chaos the last time I needed to alter the

calendar. If you could now spare another quarter of a day, I—”

Searing light burst through the chamber, centered on the old god. Thoth was forced to avert his eyes.

“A QUARTER?!” Ra boomed. “Damn it, boy, do you think I’m made of time?”

Thoth blinked through his pain as the light subsided. “It’s not much time at all, Great One, just—”

“That was a lot of time in my day!” Ra declared. “I could’ve killed your father and boffed your mother with five hours to spare!”

“I understand your concern,” Thoth replied, summoning the whole of his patience. He didn’t have parents, as he was self-created, but didn’t bother correcting Ra on this detail. “However, this is necessary to repair the calendar. Our adherents won’t know when to plant or harvest otherwise, and my work is hardly done after that. I also discovered I need to account for the precession of the planet’s axis over thousands of—”

“Spare me your pedantic drive!”

Thoth quieted.

“Fine.” Ra paused. “I don’t will away the filaments of creation on a whim. If you want this quarter-day, you’ll have to play me for it. Dice, we shall play dice.”

Thoth sighed. “Elder Ra, that’s precisely how I secured the five days of chaos from you. In all of eternity, no one has ever defeated me at dice. Can’t we spare this formality so I may—?”

“Don’t take that tone with me!” Ra snapped. “I am the Creator, the first Pharaoh! You think because you’re the font of all wisdom, that I can’t teach you a few things? You’ve got another thing coming, whelp!”

Thoth faltered. “Great One, I meant no disrespect. Since the beginning, I have been your heart and your tongue, the executor of your will throughout time and space. But—”

“That’s right. I order, you obey. The game is dice, do you hear? Nothing comes for free, boy! *Nothing!*”

Thoth glanced askance for a moment, sullen, before making eye contact again. “We shall play. Of course we shall play. Where are your dice?”

“I have them!”

A feminine voice issued from the threshold. Thoth followed it to find the exuberant form of

Isis standing there, a gilded box clasped within her hands. She slipped toward the table, her sheer linen sheath fluttering behind her.

Ra tossed his head in her direction and grunted. "Those may as well be my testicles in there."

"Grandfather!" Isis gushed. Her perfume banished the mustiness in the air. She set the box on the table, then rounded Ra's wheelchair to drape her jeweled arms around him. "How are you?" She planted her lips on his sunken cheek.

"May Apophis choke to death on your entrails!" Ra snapped. "Does Osiris know what a conniving viper he has for a sister-wife? You should have ended up with your other brother, the one whose hard-on for mischief is matched only by yours!"

"That's wonderful, dear." Isis straightened, unruffled. She returned to the table to unpack the box and separate the dice, which shimmered with otherworldly quality. As her hands fell into a practiced rhythm, she glanced up toward the window. "The weather's pristine today. So unusual for this time of *Peret*."

"It's not actually *Peret*," Thoth corrected Isis in a meek tone.

"No?" Isis asked.

"Do you know how this vixen betrayed me?" Ra demanded of Thoth.

"Perhaps I'll take you through the grounds later, Grandfather," Isis suggested.

"Not before I claw out your heart and feed it to Amut!" Ra cried.

Isis replaced the lid on the box. "There, you're all set to play. But first, let me borrow your esteemed guest for a moment, hmm?"

Isis looked to Thoth. Her eyes belied the cheer pasted onto the rest of her face, begging him to follow her out of the room.

Thoth, eager to puzzle things out, obliged. They moved with haste, spurred by their elder's bile.

"Don't listen to her!" Ra called after them, desperation in his voice. "Do you hear me? Don't listen to that ear-poisoning spawn of a loose—!"

Isis slammed the door shut behind them. A door-lined corridor yawned in either direction, empty aside from their presence. After a pause, Isis turned to Thoth and shook her head in apology. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

Thoth finally allowed his confusion to manifest in a frown. “You’re his favorite! What happened?”

“I tricked his True Name out of him. I hold power over him now,” Isis answered, resigned. “It had to be done. You can see what he’s become, and it’s only getting worse. Having to see it day after day ... well. I had to do *something*.”

Thoth sighed. “I’ve been so distracted. I never realized how much has deteriorated,” he said, with several shades of meaning. “He’s fortunate you’re here, truly.”

Isis smiled, taking one of Thoth’s hands and patting it. “Maybe you ought to let him win this time. I’ll give you the quarter-day you seek. I can’t begin to repay you for all the aid you’ve given me over the millennia, but I’ll try to start somewhere.”

Thoth smiled back. “Allow me to repair time, then wrest more of it from Anubis. I’ll return here, and we shall see what more we can set to rights.”

## THE MESSENGERS RULE OLYMPUS

“For your own sake! It’s not wise to upset our Queen!” Iris pleaded, at the same time loathing the fact that she was pleading. Again.

Peals of mocking laughter poured down around her from all sides. Scores of lake nymphs, the *limnades*, had gathered to take in her message. It was easy to deliver; Iris was a creature of water herself. What wasn’t easy was maintaining her composure amid their amusement. Annoyance was her due, but the taunting sneers surrounding her lent an unsettling chill to the watery depths in which she floated.

“Then maybe that old crone ought to hobble down here herself and set us straight!” one of the *limnades* challenged over her sisters’ giggles. “Unless you do that dirty work now, too?”

“No, no. How could she?” another nymph chimed in. “Her hands are full with the burdens she bears like some pack-mule.” She gestured toward the ewer and caduceus Iris hugged against her side and brandished outward, respectively.

“Why, she’s too encumbered to fight!” another exclaimed. “Hold her down, sisters! Those pretty wings shall be mine!”

It was unwise to announce one’s intentions to a goddess of legendary speed. Iris’ snake-entwined staff cracked down upon the skull of the nymph who lunged for her. Fearing

retaliation, Iris tore for the water's surface.

Laughter surged in her wake—partly directed at her, partly at the nymph who reeled and convulsed.

The water's pressure eased as Iris swam upward, allowing her to move faster still. She blasted out of the lake and shot up into the air on her coveted golden wings, leaving the sylvan glen behind to race race race, but not up. Seaward: the desire of her aching heart. Olympus beckoned, but she had to compose herself first. It would do no good to let Hera see any hint of fear or indignation. None at all.

The sea glittered on the horizon like a string of diamonds. As Iris hastened on, the land separating her from it melted away, until she came upon a secluded beach surrounded by cliffs. She landed at the shoreline, sinking to her knees.

The tide rose to greet her, foamy waves breaking over her lap and the folds of her heavy wool peplos. Each wave carried away a measure of frustration, only to deposit a sense of peace just out of reach. That vast sea had been her home, once, before the Queen of Olympus had plucked her out. It had happened so long ago, she couldn't remember when or why. Likely, there'd been no why.

"Of course there was," a male voice murmured from behind. "She wanted another plaything. With Hera, it never goes any deeper than that."

Iris sprang to her feet and whirled around, flaring open her wings and raising her staff. She relaxed, however—marginally—when she recognized the god before her. He hadn't changed much over the centuries, except that thousands of leisurely sunny days had enriched his complexion. His muscular frame, once rigid with the obsession to prove himself, now assumed an easygoing self-assurance. He wore a suit such as modern mortals preferred, but had left his wingtips in the sand away from the shoreline, preferring to go barefoot on the beach.

At her "greeting," the god took his hands out of the pockets to raise them beside his head, amusement gleaming in his eyes.

Iris shoved aside her frustration, lowered her arm, and adopted as neutral a face as possible. "Hermes."

"Hello, Iris! I noticed you were in the neighborhood." Hermes pointed toward the sunny sky, at the rainbow blazing in her wake.

Fearing she wouldn't remain a closed book against someone adept at tearing out those pages, Iris hefted her ewer and rested it on her hip. "I have to get back to Olympus. We'll talk later." She fully intended for there to be no "later."

"Hera can wait, dear." Hermes darted in and took hold of her staff-bearing arm with an equally disarming smile. "It *has* been ages, and that's entirely my fault. You look lovely as ever, if troubled." His voice took on a note of concern. "I know that trouble all too well. Better than anyone, really."

The two messengers' paths had once crossed frequently in Olympus as each hurried to his or her next errand, but Iris knew there was always a limit to, and reason for, Hermes' sympathy. She shrugged off his arm, narrowing her eyes. "I can count on one hand the number of times you've ever sought me out. Each time, it was to involve me in some scheme."

"Dear girl! I don't have the time or energy anymore, trust me. I already secured my freedom. Who needs anything else?" Hermes returned his hands to his pockets, assuming a casual stance. "You know, *not* spending eternity at Zeus' whim has been eye-opening. My own will be done. Imagine that!" He nodded toward her ewer and caduceus. "Really, Iris, imagine it. Put aside the worry and aggravation for a moment, and let yourself think about what it'd be like to cast off your fetters once and for all." His eyes slipped past her, toward the glittering sea.

"Serving Hera is my duty," Iris countered without thought, not allowing her gaze to follow his.

"It's slavery. By Styx, Sisyphus has more rewarding work!" Hermes blazed with conviction. "If I can be free of Olympus, why not you?"

Iris' grip on her staff tightened. "You're only free because—"

"Because my dear father Zeus is in a better place. *And it's high time Hera joined him,*" Hermes finished. "She's ignored the Fates and the natural course for too long!"

The full implications of his words seeped through Iris' thoughts like a drop of poison diffusing through a cup of wine. She backed away several steps, shaking her head as her heart raced. "You want me to—"

"Help me unseat her. That's all." Hermes kept pace with her, unrelenting.

"That's all! Usurping the Queen of the Gods is trivial to you?"

“No, dear. It’s trivial to you.” He stopped, eyes alit with cunning. “Listen, I’ll tell you how.”

“No!” Iris trembled. “Whatever you have in mind, it’ll never work. Once it fails, you’ll make all signs point to me. I still bear the scars of honest mistakes. For *this*?”

“You’re a goddess too, Iris! Remember that!” Hermes snapped. “This is inevitable, but you’re the only one who can make it happen *now*, peacefully. Ares turns everything into a bloodbath. Athena? She’d drag out the inheritance battle for the rest of time. Between Zeus and Hera, there are more heirs to Olympus than any of us will ever know about. That sort of chaos is *not* what we need in the wake of Hera’s overdue exit.” Hermes waved a hand in dismissal.

He’d exposed his true motive, and left Iris feeling hurt and insulted. “You want Olympus! And you think *I’ll* be the pawn who delivers it to you?”

Hermes’ eyes bore through her with conviction. “You’re Hera’s voice among gods and men. All I ask is for that voice to attend to a few crucial legal matters. Deliver a few things for me, Iris. That’s it. Once I’m King, I’ll give you your freedom.”

The sea sent a particularly high wave lapping over their bare feet. As the water receded, it pulled at Iris, but couldn’t reclaim her.

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*It’s crazy. I can’t do it. I won’t—*

“Did we descend upon the Queen of Carthage?”

Iris jolted from her reverie, glancing up from her kneeling position before the familiar pair of raised thrones. Gnarled Hera, icy and terrible, sat straight-backed upon her throne, a skeletal form swimming in ill-fitting linen. Her voice creaked with rust, but its menace cut deeply through the misty, cavernous throne room of Olympus. Her hands clamped down upon either armrest as though they were a pair of pretty necks to throttle.

The throne beside Hera contained only dust, having sat empty for ages.

“There is no Carthage anymore, Madam,” Iris replied. “The closest equivalent is the wife of the President of Tun—”

“Did we descend upon her?”



Iris choked down a whimper, and lied. "Yes, Madam."

"What did we tell her?"

"That her famed beauty is nothing compared to yours, Madam, and that she would do well to assume a humbler disposition."

Hera paused for appraisal. "And how were we answered?"

"With awe and fullest reverence, Madam. She is no threat to you." What hapless mortal ever had been?

Hera was satisfied. "Have we assumed the shape of a Trojan woman, to set fire to their ships and sow their fields with salt?"

"Madam, the kingdom of Troy no longer—"

"There is yet land and sea, fool! Whatever name mortals give it, Troy lies beneath!" Hera seethed. "When we finish here, you will fly to the Underworld and remind Paris how his land suffers yet at his hands!"

*No, I won't, Iris thought. He's suffered enough.*

"And what of the *limnades*? Did we tell them what they could expect, should they continue to assume airs with us?"

This was the one errand Iris had actually attempted. She heaved an internal sigh. "Yes, Madam."

"What was the response?"

"They tried to tear off my wings, Madam." Perhaps those distant cousins of hers had been trying to do her a favor.

"What answer did they have for *us*?"

"Madam?"

"Stupid girl!" Hera snapped. "Did they leave no message to impart to us, or did you forget it?"

"No, Madam. They were preoccupied, and I was intent on escaping."

Hera's voice fell to a dangerous hush. "Do you think it apt, in the heat of debate, to leave the room mid-sentence? Do you think it apt, as our representative, to flee in the face of danger? Do you think that's what we would do?"

"No, Mad—"

“Silence!” Hera boomed, struggling to reach her feet. “You have difficulty keeping your ears open. Perhaps it’s because you haven’t yet learned when to shut your mouth. If we didn’t need your irksome voice, we would happily take it from you! We’d pick you up and beat sense into you, but we don’t find you worth the effort. Some asses are too stupid to follow, even after they’re whipped!”

Such considerations had never stopped the wrathful queen before. Hera was making excuses for herself, but Iris didn’t dare suggest as much.

“We will rain punishment upon the *limnades*,” Hera continued. “You may tell them so. Depart at once!”

In days past, such words from Hera, with ample corporal punishment to back them, would’ve driven Iris weeping, limping, and scurrying off to her next errand. This time, Hermes’ words burned in her ears, becoming the stuff of siren-song. Iris rose to her feet, gathered her ewer and caduceus, and walked out of the throne room with perfect calm.

In the airy halls of Olympus, she paused and peered through the clouds to take in the view far below: hills, valleys, forests, and cities, with welcoming blue seas embracing them all. Millions of times, she’d hurried through without a glance in any direction. Now, she realized, this might be the last time she ever looked down from that height. She wasn’t certain what awaited her: bloodless coup, or punishment beyond all reckoning. It didn’t matter. For even the slightest chance at peace, the risk was worth it.

Iris fanned out her wings. A fledgling rainbow pooled at her feet. She wouldn’t be paying a return visit to the *limnades*. Rather, she had a pile of documents Hermes had given her—documents she would file with Eunomia, keeper of Olympian law, on Hera’s behalf.

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Iris touched down on a sunlit patch of manicured grass, scored with streaks of cement. These paths wended from a sterile gray building looming nearby, the tentacles of a giant terrestrial squid. The building gave off just such an aura, of a monster that seized and never let go.

“Creepy, isn’t it?” Hermes stood tall beside her, beaming like Apollo. He exchanged a hug with Iris, who for once bore nothing in her arms that prevented contact. “But you have nothing to fear. Ah, here they come!”

Iris followed Hermes’ gaze, her light linen chiton fluttering in the breeze. A white van drifted down the path closest to the building, slowing to a halt a few feet away from the former messengers. The rear doors of the vehicle popped open, and two hulking orderlies emerged, each gripping the skeletal arm of a thrashing Hera. The same form that had seemed so powerful and unmovable within her throne on Olympus was now the picture of pathos.

“We won’t stand for this!” she screamed. “We’ll claw all your eyes out, and make a new Argus of them!”

“I killed the first one,” Hermes muttered.

Iris gaped, experiencing an odd mix of horror and gratification. Hermes looped an arm through hers.

“Dear Stepmother just isn’t what she used to be,” he mock-lamented. “It’s ever so fortunate that she designated me, her favorite stepson, as her attorney-in-fact and sole heir before this tragic madness took root.” Mischief danced in his eyes. “This wasn’t an easy decision to make, but it’s truly the best thing for her.”

The usurped queen thrashed and raved as the orderlies towed her past a set of doors leading into the building. Hermes guided Iris inside after the procession. Iris suppressed her trepidation, allowing Hermes to lead her on.

The assemblage walked past an unmanned front desk, into a common area. The orderlies hauled Hera past a television set displaying an infomercial for a thigh exerciser.

“We’ll castrate every man,” Hera screamed, “and make every woman pig-faced and barren!”

Opposite the television was a worn couch, occupied by two bathrobed Gods of Gods. Zeus fastened upon Hera’s spectacle with abject horror. Beside him, Yahweh doubled over in a fit of phlegm-laden hysterics.

Hermes stopped before the couch, beaming. “Hello, Dad! How long has it been? Millennia, now? It doesn’t matter. Let’s concentrate on what *does* matter: you and Stepmother will be together again, every single day, for the remainder of time. Isn’t that lovely?”

Zeus’ thousand-yard stare continued unbroken. Out of breath but not nearly out of

amusement, Yahweh collapsed to the floor, wheezing. The hazy, faceless specter of his triune spirit materialized within his dent in the couch to save his spot.

“Well, Dad, you’re a busy man,” Hermes said. “Enjoy!” He twisted his hand in a flippant wave, then turned and led Iris back toward the entrance, a spring in his step.

Iris was relieved to be free of the place. In fact, she couldn’t remember ever feeling as free as she did the moment they stepped past that choking dimness back into light.

Outside, Hermes kissed her on the cheek. “You’re welcome in Olympus anytime, but I recommend you spend at *least* a few hundred years remembering what freedom feels like.”

Iris glanced upward, stretched wings that felt light and strong, and chanced her first smile in ages.

## MAIL CALL

On the television in the common room blared the daily spectacle of mortals playing humiliating games of chance. Amid a chorus of disembodied shouts, a woman strained to guess the precise value of fiat currency that could be exchanged for a can of sink cleanser.

Embedded in the worn couch a few feet away from the picture rested two gods of gods, Zeus and Yahweh, both the image of vexation. Zeus' crankiness toward the universe, however, was not to last. Gna had just made her daily rounds, and Mary had brought him not one, but two pieces of mail: a crisp white envelope, and a garish postcard from a far-flung tropical locale.

There was no mail for Yahweh. There never was.

Zeus relished opening the envelope one tiny tear at a time, and made a prolonged show of unfolding the typewritten note inside, of holding it up in front of himself to read and reread. Beside him, Yahweh smoldered and pretended not to notice.

"Athena is stopping by for a visit next month!" Zeus boomed with pride. "You want to talk 'Immaculate Conception,' Yahweh? Athena's one hundred percent mine! Had this migraine one day that split my head clear open, and out she came."

The other god glanced at him sidelong. "She took your brains with her, apparently. But hey,

congratulations on siring one whole child who isn't a bastard."

"I had legitimate offspring," Zeus countered. "True, they all turned out to be major disappointments. *That's your fault, Hera!*"

His voice rose to thundering heights. Wherever Hera rested that day, she was blessedly out of earshot. In the wake of Zeus' tumult, there rose only the entreaties of a used car salesman.

"So," Yahweh grumbled, "what's the brat doing these days?"

"Huh? Who?" Zeus asked.

"Your daughter, begotten of the fattest head in creation."

"Athena? She became the patron of Hellas' most powerful *polis*."

Yahweh let out a snort that also served to clear his throat. "That was then. What's she doing *now*?"

Zeus sighed. "Freelancing, some shit."

"Well. 'Athena' is a fine stripper name, she's got that going for her."

"And what's *your* boy up to these days, Yahweh?" Zeus demanded. "Still a penniless carpenter? Did that hippy ever learn to *bathe* in water instead of just walking on it? When's he going to walk himself down to the unemployment office?"

Yahweh's expression contorted into a spiteful grin. "My boy's the messiah and prophet *de rigueur*! He beat out a ton of competition: Mithras, Attis, Apollonius of Tyana, Osiris, Horus. Even bested one of your brood! Dionysus, I think."

"Only by ripping off their shticks like some third-rate circus magician," Zeus scoffed. "The most *boring* ones at that. Uptight little nancy couldn't get himself laid at a drunken orgy!"

"What's it matter?" Yahweh asked. "He's at the height of worship, and so am I by extension."

Zeus glowered. "You've got that 'three in one' crap, and you've got Mary and a whole truckload of saints. How are you just one god, again?"

"I don't expect *you* to understand." Yahweh narrowed his eyes toward the other piece of mail in Zeus' hands. "Postcard?"

"Yeah. Poseidon."

Both gods emitted scornful harrumphs.

“Humidified geezer!” Yahweh snapped. “How many Hawaiian shirts will he pit out before he realizes how pathetic he’s being?”

“If he wants to squander eternity getting ripped with those Parrothead morons, he’s welcome to it,” Zeus dismissed. “I have better things to do.”

“You and me both. That’s the goddamned truth.”

They fell to silence and refocused on the television. The mortals spun a giant wheel, then breathlessly waited for it to stop spinning.

## FUTURE'S ERRAND

The Well of Urd lay still, reflecting a sky that changed with the days and seasons. From the center of the lake sprang the massive tree Yggdrasil, its leaves and branches shooting up higher than any mortal eye could follow.

Three sisters, the Norns, walked upon roots jutting from the water, orbiting Yggdrasil to curate the history of the nine worlds. The tree's trunk was so large that most of the time, each Norn only heard her sisters hard at work. Verdandi carved the runes describing the present moment, recording the destinies of everything from gods to specks of dust. Urd went over her work once it fell into the past, making corrections and striking out whatever was meant to be lost to time. Ahead of them both, Skuld had her own murky canvas that outlined the future, which Verdandi wrote over with events as they actually played out.

Skuld had been facing down a peculiar, worrying problem for some time. She'd made a complete orbit of the tree and reached the point where the beginning of time had been recorded. Just beside that, she was supposed to inscribe the runes detailing Ragnarok, the end of everything. Every time she attempted it, however, the tree's bark immediately healed itself.

This had never happened before. Bewildered, she'd dispatched a messenger to seek answers from the other worlds.



While Skuld waited, her sisters progressed, converging ever closer. Eventually, Verdandi rounded the tree and spotted Skuld. Her eyes widened with panic for a moment before she returned to her frantic efforts, constantly kneeling and rising on tiptoe to carve every inch of bark within reach. "What are you doing? Keep moving!"

"I can't add Ragnarok," Skuld explained.

"Try placing it a bit closer to the end, child." Urd's voice, rusty and weighted with the wisdom of experience, reached them both from afar.

"I'm as close to the end as possible," Skuld called back.

"Then try a different phrasing."

Skuld had already tried every possible variation she could think of, but she supposed another attempt wouldn't hurt. She scraped her knife along the tree's bark.

Once again, Yggdrasil mended itself scarcely before she'd lifted the knife.

At a loss, Skuld glanced to Verdandi. "Has Loki been held up? Have the giants?"

"No. And no," Verdandi replied without looking her way.

"That's enough," Urd chided Skuld. "Do you not see how busy she is?"

"Do something!" Verdandi cried.

Skuld focused on the bark in front of herself, mind and heart racing. The gap had to be filled. What with? Amid desperation, an idea came to her. She raised her knife again and carved out an ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail.

This rune took, glowing brightly through the haze of uncertainty. With it, Skuld prolonged the present fates of men and gods indefinitely, whatever they happened to be. Now all she could do was wait for her messenger.

Meanwhile, Verdandi kept getting closer. "Keep moving!"

"I can't," Skuld told her, "but I've bought us time."

Indeed, the ouroboros acted as an asymptote on fate. No matter how close Verdandi converged upon Skuld, she never got any closer to the end.

Verdandi threw Skuld a distraught look. "I don't know what you've done, but you can't leave things like this! The warriors in Valhalla grow restless. And the gods? Oh, the gods ...!"

"I don't want to leave it this way," Skuld insisted. "Be patient, at least until Ratatoskr returns."

Skuld waited, knife in hand, for what felt like ages. Eventually, she heard skittering from high above. Down came Ratatoskr the squirrel, carefully descending Yggdrasil with something thin and rectangular clutched in his teeth.

“It’s good to see you again, friend.” Relieved, Skuld stowed her knife in the sheath on her belt. Once the squirrel had climbed low enough, she stroked his head and back with one hand and relieved him of his burden with the other.

Ratatoskr swished his tail in appreciation. He leapt onto Skuld’s shoulder, curling into a ball against her neck as she unfolded and studied what he’d brought her. It was a glossy pamphlet filled with gleaming pictures of swimming pools, pastures, and candlelit dining halls.

*Is Your Pantheon Past Its Prime?* the front cover asked the reader. *While they prepare to journey into the West, they deserve the Best!*

Further words described a facility for housing gods who’d aged beyond usefulness.

Skuld frowned, perplexed. “What is this?” she murmured aloud. “Our gods don’t age.”

Ratatoskr sat up straight on her shoulder, chittering and squeaking with urgency.

He’d never led her astray before. *Something* at this ... retirement home explained Ragnarok’s delay. Skuld scoured the pamphlet until she found an address that, surprisingly, corresponded to the mortal realm.

“Something’s wrong in Midgard,” she announced. “It’s up to me to right it.”

“We record fate. We don’t influence it!” Verdandi scolded.

“If we don’t set fate back into motion, who will?” A glimmer of frustration arose in Skuld, an emotion she rarely experienced. “I should know the answer to that question, but I don’t. I only know I must get to Midgard.”

“This is fate in action, Verdandi,” Urd’s voice rose up again. “An uncertain future is never a good thing. Go on, young one. Find yourself.”

Skuld returned Ratatoskr to the tree. “Thank you.”

He chittered in parting, then leapt high up into the branches and vanished from sight.

Skuld turned away from the tree, hiking up her boots and adjusting her armor. She summoned a war-horse, threw on a hooded cloak, and commanded her trusty spear to appear in her hand. Once she mounted the horse, they took to the air, racing up past Yggdrasil’s massive branches.

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The sun shone brightly in Midgard, belying the fact that everything was on hold, days and nights playing out with no consequence. Skuld and her horse soared over the building depicted in the brochure: a shabby blight upon the landscape, sprawled out like a forgotten corpse on a battlefield.

Skuld wasn't certain where to begin her inquiry, but then she noticed a small courtyard buried deep within the building, lined with trees and rickety benches. Caged inside were half a dozen withered forms in thin gowns and ratty robes, hunched over benches or hobbling around.

*The gods!* Skuld realized with a jolt of shock.

She charged toward the courtyard, landing as far away as possible from the gathering. While her horse chuffed and swished his tail, Skuld slipped to the cracked pavement, spear in hand, to approach the gods cautiously on foot.

None looked her way, all seemingly lost in prisons of their own minds. They'd aged past recognition, but Skuld had no trouble identifying them. She recognized everything under fate's sway.

*How did this happen?* she wondered, tamping down a rising dread. Could they tell her?

"Odin!" Skuld called to the man with a shadowy socket where one of his eyes should've been. "What's become of you?"

Odin rose from his bench—only to stumble after a nearby cluster of sparrows. "Huginn! Muninn!" he cried, snatching at the air with skeletal fingers. "Be not aloof, but come to me now. I must hear the world's secrets!"

The birds hopped and skittered to get away from him, finally dispersing in a cloud of flapping wings. Odin froze in their wake, dejected. If he noticed Skuld, he gave no sign of it.

Skuld glanced between the others in horror. There was Thor, rooted to a bench as he strained to lift his hammer Mjöllnir from the ground. And there, Freya. She reached overhead to pluck a feather from the air, discarded by one of the birds that had escaped Odin, then

stood and flapped her arms. "I'm a bird! I'm a bird!"

A thundering horn-blast reverberated through the courtyard. The ground shook, sending birds flying, leaves falling, and squirrels scattering. Skuld brandished her spear and glanced about for danger. Her horse charged up beside her, ready for battle.

At the far end of the courtyard, a young woman hunched over in pain, covering her ears. She'd just arrived—and Heimdall had been standing at the entrance, Gjallarhorn at his lips, to announce her appearance.

To Skuld's surprise, she didn't know the woman on sight. She remained poised for battle.

As the young woman recovered, it became clear she had no martial bearing. Her transparent linen wrap left nothing to the imagination. Makeup and gold jewelry accentuated a flawless frame. Once she noticed the Skuld in her midst, she stretched her arms to either side. The colorful wings attached to them spread and caught the sunlight streaming down through the trees.

"I am Isis," she introduced herself in a calm, warm voice. "Throne-Mother of the Gods; Lady of Magic; Great Royal Wife of Osiris, the Great God, Lord of the West."

A foreign goddess, Skuld realized. One not subject to her sway.

"And you are?" Isis prompted.

"Skuld." Though still wary, she relaxed from her fighting stance and stood tall, rooting her spear at her side. "Some know me as Norn, others as Valkyrie. My concern is the future." She gestured between Odin, Thor, and the others with her free hand. "This was never supposed to happen."

"Well, even the gods must die." Isis lowered her arms and head, resigned. "They were admitted here one by one as their faculties failed them. I'm trying to keep them as comfortable as possible until they depart for the underworld. I don't have much help."

"What I mean is, Ragnarok should've happened first," Skuld said.

Isis frowned in confusion.

"It's fated that Loki should raise an army of giants and fight the gods until all lie dead, so the world may end and be reborn again," Skuld explained. "It was supposed to happen ages ago, but hasn't."

Freya staggered through the gap between the women, clutching her feather to her chest.

On her heels was Odin, reaching for her with both hands. “Here, bird!” he cried. “Evade me no longer!”

Isis let out a helpless sigh.

Skuld stifled her rising bewilderment. “Moreover, these gods are ageless, or at least they should be. Idunn keeps them young. Where is she?”

“Who?” Isis asked.

Skuld blinked her surprise. “Idunn isn’t here?”

Isis shook her head. “I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“If she’s not here, that explains their degeneration.” Skuld rammed the butt of her spear against the ground decisively. “It’s up to me to correct this.” If all the gods were so blighted, then no one else could.

“Is there something I can help with?” A smirk teased the corner of Isis’ mouth. “I’ve cheated fate a few times—no offense.”

Skuld needed Idunn. Failing that, the instigator of Ragnarok. “What of Loki? Is he here?”

“Sorry, but no. I’ve never met him either.”

“No great loss,” Skuld said. “I must find out what’s held him up. He shouldn’t need any prodding.” She strayed to her horse’s side, glancing over the courtyard one last time. “Thank you for looking after them.”

Isis glanced downward. “Someone has to,” she muttered.

“I hope it won’t be for much longer.” Skuld vaulted onto the horse’s back, then spurred him skyward.



“I don’t want to.” Loki spoke with his mouth full, gloating like he’d known this meeting would come.

The answer tried Skuld’s infinite patience, given how long it’d taken to track him down. Last she knew, he’d been confined to a cave. To her surprise, said cave had stood empty. Upon breaking free, he should’ve marshaled his forces for Ragnarok. Instead, he’d escaped

elsewhere.

Skuld had scoured Midgard fruitlessly before deciding to search Hel next. Lo, there was Loki: sprawled out on a bed of cushions at the foot of Hel's throne, digging out fistfuls of mixed nuts from a bowl to eat one by one. He weaved a hazelnut through the fingers of his left hand, occasionally tossing and catching it like a flipped coin.

His family surrounded him. Daughter Hel listed upon her throne, staring through Skuld. Loki's wife Sigyn knelt beside him, looking up warily as she stroked the back of the wolf Fenrir, who lay dozing with his muzzle in Sigyn's lap.

"What kind of answer is that, Loki?" Skuld frowned down at him. "Ragnarok awaits."

"Not now." Toss, catch. "Not now, either." Loki let out a sumptuous yawn and stretched. "Once you find a comfortable spot, it's hard to get up, you know?"

With blinding speed, Skuld stabbed the business end of her spear toward Loki, piercing his tunic—nothing more—and hoisting him high off the ground.

Loki yelped in surprise. He caught his toy-nut in one fist, limbs flailing.

Hel sat up straight, her dead eyes wide open. Fenrir reared and snarled as Sigyn threw her arms around the wolf's neck.

"Pay attention, Loki." Skuld shook her spear for emphasis. "The fate of every world is on hold. Idunn has gone missing. The gods have aged so much, they had to be placed in full-time care." At a sudden realization, confusion leaked past her fury. "How come you haven't joined them?"

"I don't age in my daughter's realm!" Loki cried. "Now put me down!"

Skuld hesitated. "Is there nothing more to it?"

Loki gestured helplessly. "What are you expecting me to say?"

"I'm wondering if you know where Idunn is."

Loki mirrored her scowl with one of annoyance, flinging an arm outward. "Go on, search wherever you like! I'll wait."

"I believe I will." If Skuld could bring Idunn to the other gods, they'd at least have their youth and faculties during Loki's petulant holdout.

Skuld flung Loki from the point of her spear. He yelped, sailing through the air to land in an undignified heap some distance away. Sigyn hurried over to help him up.

Loki ignored her to focus on Skuld. Angry glee set his features aflame. “They’ve all gone senile, huh? That’s almost worth leaving Hel to see—but, nah.”

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Skuld scoured every inch of Hel, but Idunn was nowhere to be found. She took to her horse and flew away with Loki’s irksome laughter biting her ears.

The trickster brought her as close to pure frustration as she could get. Ragnarok would only happen at his whim. In the meantime, the gods suffered. Skuld couldn’t move Loki, but she could keep searching for Idunn.

Eight more worlds remained. Asgard seemed the best one to try next.

She left Hel for Midgard, then rode up the rainbow bridge ascending into Asgard. The rainbow’s light grew fainter the closer she got. Well short of the fortress, she was forced to jump from the bridge onto a rocky outcropping.

Skuld perched with horse and spear outside the great, shadowy fortress. Absent its masters, it too was in a state of decline. Crumbling walls struggled to hold up threadbare banners. No torches were lit, no one announced her arrival. No sound or sight of life at all.

She took to the air again, leaping over the wall to land in the courtyard unchallenged. Inside was no better. A deathly stillness lay over the place. The smell of decay accompanied bare trees, animal carcasses reduced to bone, and vines that had withered before they’d had a chance to fully overtake abandoned buildings.

*Idunn can’t be here*, Skuld thought. Her very presence would’ve breathed life into the place. Still, perhaps Skuld would find clues as to her whereabouts. She left her horse behind to enter the fortress on foot, spear braced in both hands.

The cold, musty silence within was nearly palpable. Most of the stone building lay in darkness, with only the occasional square of overcast sunlight from a window aiding Skuld’s progress. Her footsteps echoed without answer at first.

Then she heard weeping within the banquet hall. Spear brandished protectively, Skuld approached the noise and peeked into the massive hall.

Moldy tapestries covered most of the windows. Long tables lay strewn with cups and plates knocked askew, a layer of dust blanketing everything. Bones and dried mead stains told of the last meal held ages earlier. Deep amid the mess knelt a tearful old man, his frame shaking with each sob.

Bragi. His harp lay on the ground beside him, most of its strings broken.

What was he doing here? Perhaps he was the last. By the time he'd reached advanced age, there might not have been anyone left to relocate him to the retirement home. Could he communicate, or was he as far gone as the others? Skuld lowered her spear to her side and drew closer, hoping to find out.

Bragi's head jerked up at her approach. The light of hope almost made him young again—but upon seeing who approached him, his face crumpled with grief.

"Bragi? It's Skuld," she spoke.

"I know," he murmured downward. "My apologies for this terrible reception."

His lucidity was encouraging. Skuld helped him to his feet. "What happened here? Where's Idunn?"

He swayed on weak legs under the weight of his sorrow. "I don't know. I searched everywhere, for as long as I could. Now I can no longer leave these walls. The others did. One by one, boxed up and borne off to that awful place." His eyes blazed. "I still possess my mind. I'd rather wither here alone than be cooped up with shells."

"I understand." Skuld kept a hold on Bragi's arm. In a bid to reassure him, she picked up and handed him his harp. "Here, sing something."

"In my wife's absence, my heart is dead." He waved her off.

"We'll bring her back," Skuld declared. "When and where did you see her last?"

"I don't remember. I only remember the last time she was taken from here, many ages ago." Bragi paused. With no poetic capacity, he nonetheless remained deliberate with his words. "A giant coveted Idunn, and kidnapped her with Loki's help. When the rest of us learned of Loki's treachery, we made him rescue her. He flew to the giant's abode in hawk form. To bear Idunn back, he transformed her into a nut and—"

"A nut?" Skuld straightened as though lightning had struck her spine. Of course, she should've realized. Loki had been flaunting Idunn right in her face. She stamped the butt of her



spear against the ground. "Courage, Bragi! I know where she is! Loki's taken her to Hel."

"Hel!" Bragi despaired, hunching over at the waist. "O bright light of my soul, locked away there for so long!"

Skuld already had a plan for getting Idunn back, which imbued her with purpose. "Come with me." She turned to leave the banquet hall, pulling Bragi's arm.

Bragi held back. "What help am I to you? My armor and weapons have aged as I have."

"Don't you want to rescue your wife and visit vengeance upon Loki?" Skuld asked.

As he thought about it, a grim resolve came over him. "We have more than a few grudges to settle. Let's ride."

"We'll head to Yggdrasil first," Skuld said, "then to Hel."

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Hel's cold, misty shadows parted almost fearfully for the pair on horseback, bound for the throne room. Bragi's armor was rusty, his weapons too corroded for use. Instead, he held his harp under one arm, charging for dear life. Skuld rode just behind, spear brandished. Ratatoskr the squirrel nestled against the nape of her neck, hidden between her hair and cloak.

At their destination, Loki leapt to his feet, grinning at the meager onslaught from ear to ear. "Look who figured it out! The saddest army I've ever seen!"

"Loki!" Sigyn jumped to her feet as well, bracing his elbow fearfully. Fenrir took to his feet beside her, snarling.

"Don't worry! This won't take a second!" Loki broke away from her to jog toward Bragi and Skuld.

Bragi charged straight on. When Loki side-stepped his horse, Bragi swung his harp at his face.

Loki blocked the blow with his forearm. The harp jolted from Bragi's hand and fell to the ground, splintering into pieces.

It wasn't much of a foray, but it wasn't meant to be. It was the distraction Skuld needed to swing around and flank Loki. She charged at him headlong, spear lowered, and ran him through

the shoulder.

At least, so she thought. Loki's form had no substance. Soon after she pierced it, it vanished into shadow.

A second later, she and her horse seemed to run headlong into an invisible wall. The horse crashed and fell, dazed. Skuld was thrown clear and landed hard on the stone floor, where she lay stunned for several moments.

*Get up. Hurry,* she urged herself.

As she struggled to reach her knees, her horse melted through the floor. Then a cage of iron bars emerged from the floor to surround her.

Skuld reached for her spear nearby, using it for balance while she pulled herself to her feet. Soon after she was standing again, the spear's shaft burst into flame. She was forced to drop it. Undaunted, she attacked the cage bars with her hands, struggling in vain to bend them.

Several feet away, old Bragi lay motionless on the ground, his horse also gone. Loki hovered over him, but his eyes tracked Skuld's progress. When she finally returned his gaze, he grinned nastily. "You couldn't see your own future well enough to avoid my trap. I was hoping for more out of you, but I suppose I can't complain. There'll be no Ragnarok! I want these wretches to *suffer!*"

Loki kicked Bragi in the gut for emphasis.

Bragi winced and curled into himself, gasping for air.

Loki leaned down toward him to continue gloating. "Now that Idunn and Skuld are mine, the gods will rot forever, while my family and I look on safely from Hel."

"You ... underestimate us ... at your peril." Bragi struggled to reach his knees.

"Boring tripe. You never were any fun, coward." Loki turned back to Skuld, smirking. The hazelnut reappeared in his left hand; he tossed and caught it as he spoke. "Get comfortable, my dear. There is no future now, aside from what I decree."

But Skuld had a trick of her own up her sleeve—or rather hidden between hair and cloak. "Go," she whispered.

On command, Ratatoskr emerged and leapt from her shoulder, through the bars, to seize upon the trickster god, clawing at his fist for the hazelnut trapped within.

The smugness vanished. Loki shrieked and stumbled backward, trying to shake off his

assailant.

Fenrir ran off, yelping. Sigyn tried to help Loki, but between his thrashing and the squirrel's nimble maneuvering, she couldn't lay hands on the creature. All the while, Hel remained listing in her throne.

With Loki distracted, the iron bars around Skuld evaporated. Bragi had since reached his knees, but could recover no further, as the spectacle before him had him doubled over with laughter.

The moment Ratatoskr won the struggle and dove away with the nut, Skuld tackled Loki, pinning his limbs to the ground. "I can't force you to end the worlds, but by Yggdrasil, I'll make you restore their beauty."

Loki struggled to no avail. "Let me go!"

Ratatoskr dropped the hazelnut before Bragi, then bounded over to leap back up onto Skuld's shoulder, poised to hassle Loki again if needed.

"I'm waiting," Skuld prompted.

Loki's eyes went wide with fear. "Fine!"

The hazelnut vanished. In its place appeared a luminous woman with a basket of fruits and nuts at her hip. Idunn glanced this way and that, gasping at her surroundings.

"My wife!" Bragi remained on his knees, reaching up to her.

Idunn gasped. "Bragi!" She dropped beside him, offering him the basket.

"Now let me go," Loki demanded. "And keep your damned rodents to yourself!"

Skuld held fast. "We're not through yet. The future you forestalled must be restored." She deliberated on how best to remedy the situation, and quickly hit upon an idea. "I'm taking you back to that cave in Midgard, where you'll be confined once again."

Loki glared at her with pure hatred.

Sigyn paled, her eyes wide. "No. Please!"

Skuld ignored her in favor of Loki. "Whenever you manage to escape, you can have your revenge by starting Ragnarok. In the meantime, the gods can have back some of the time you stole from them."

"Meddlesome hag!" Loki spat.

From Skuld's shoulder, Ratatoskr made an impressively threatening noise, his tail bristling.

“Perhaps it won’t take even that long,” Skuld replied. She cast a quick glance toward Bragi. Restored to youth, he held Idunn in his arms as both cried tears of joy.

“The gods at the retirement home will be more vengeful than happy,” Skuld continued. “Once they’re young again, they may just bring Ragnarok to you.”

## TESTAMENTS COLLIDE

The television blared in the common room as usual. On screen, the mortals had put together something vaguely resembling a court of law. They took turns explaining themselves to a judge-like figure, who in turn yelled at them for their trouble.

“You’re going down there, and you’re giving him what-for!” Yahweh declared. He addressed Yeshua, the young man seated on the couch perpendicular to his own, but his eyes never left the television screen directly in front of him.

“Why?” Yeshua asked.

“What do you mean ‘why?’ He defied me!” Yahweh returned.

“So? That was a long time ago. Just forget it!”

“I forget nothing! You’re my son, you’ll do as I say!”

Yeshua struggled to think around the crabby, arguing voices emanating from the television, and had trouble hearing himself past them. He reached for the remote on the nearby coffee table.

Thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. From his seat beside Yahweh, Zeus gave Yeshua a leery eye.

“I’m just lowering the volume a little, OK?” Yeshua did so, returned the remote to the table,

then struggled to organize his thoughts and emotions. “My whole life, I’ve been hearing about how bad this ‘Lucifer’ guy is and how I’m supposed to deal with him,” he started back up, “but you guys used to be friends. What’s the point of sending me to antagonize him now? You had this falling-out before I was born. Even if I did go ‘smite’ him or whatever—” he gestured air-quotes “—what good does that do? Doesn’t that just revive the conflict? Isn’t it time to give compassion and forgiveness a try?”

“No, no! Mercy is too good for him!” Yahweh finally deigned to glare at the younger man.

Yeshua stifled the spike in his temper and forced himself to maintain eye contact. “I don’t see why we can’t all just sit down together in a neutral place, like Wichita or something, and hash this out like mature adults.”

“Because I SAID SO!” Yahweh boomed, shaking the room to its foundation. The remote clattered and spun upon the table, eventually falling to the floor.

“Not bad,” Zeus grudgingly admitted under his breath.

“Okay, look, fine.” Yeshua stood. “I’ll go there, but I’m *talking* to him. Face to face, just like this. And I *pray* he’s not the giant five year-old you’ve turned out to be.”

Yahweh sent him a look of pure hatred. “You consummate weakling! I have no son!”

Yeshua’s patience had eroded at last. This time, he had to air the things he normally kept buried. It was a struggle to keep his voice level as he did so. “You know, I looked up to you for the longest time. I even *feared* you. I tried so hard to be everything you wanted, but I realize now there’s just no pleasing you. So why try? I still have Joseph—you know, the stepfather who was *there* for me? The one who took me to temple, taught me a trade, and still loves me no matter what? I don’t need any more bullying and errand-running!”

With that, he turned on his heel decisively and stalked out of the room.

Yahweh returned his withering glare to the television. The hapless mortals he beheld in that moment, he instantly judged unworthy.

Zeus could’ve piled on. In a rare moment of solidarity, however, he merely grumbled, “Kids today.”

“We raped and smote and plagued indiscriminately, and we *liked* it!” Yahweh declared.

“Liked it?” Zeus repeated. “Shit, that was the best part of the job.”

## THE END? NO WAY!

This short story collection is a work in progress, updated with new stories as time and brain-power permit. Updates are released through my mailing list. If you haven't already subscribed, please visit the following link: <http://eepurl.com/K7D1L> You'll also get first dibs on upcoming books and giveaways!

There's always more to read at my website: [www.ellismorning.com/fiction.html](http://www.ellismorning.com/fiction.html)

If you have any questions or comments, please email me: [contact@ellismorning.com](mailto:contact@ellismorning.com) I'd love to hear from you.

## THANKS FOR READING!

# ABOUT ELLIS

Ellis has always loved staging adventures in her head before going to sleep each night. When she was twelve, she started putting these adventures on paper.

For the next twenty years, she wrote with varying degrees of seriousness, but always as a hobby. In that time, she fell in love with Mark Twain and Kurt Vonnegut, the original *Star Trek* series, and *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Science fiction became her favorite domain to work in, but she also enjoyed reading fantasy, horror, Western, and detective stories, and incorporating their elements into her work. One of her favorite things to do was make people laugh.

Ellis denied being a writer for decades- but then she sold articles to [The Daily WTF](#), and a short story to [Analog Science Fiction and Fact](#). After quitting her full-time job to finish her first novel, it was time to own up to writing as her calling. She's currently having the time of her life penning the [Sword and Starship](#) series, and has ideas for many more stories and books to come.

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