

Ashes of the Dawn

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By David Foxfire

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The story is currently an unofficial story set in a variant of the Forgotten Realms based on various Twitch Streams and gameplay podcasts including *Acquisitions Incorporated*, *Dice Camera Action*, and *Force Grey*. Other parts of this story take place in a fictionalized variant of the Modern World, with their own versions of real-life people, places, and organizations. Due to the nature of this use, this novel is considered a fan work. As such, the novel is published under the Wizards of the Coast Fan Content Policy, as listed in <https://company.wizards.com/fancontentpolicy>.

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Important Note:

The Forgotten Realms depicted in the story is a variant of the Perkinsverse Forgotten Realms, which forked from the version of the Forgotten Realms depicted in various Twitch Streams, including *Acquisitions Incorporated* and *Dice Camera Action*. The story begins roughly a month after the *Waffle Inc.* crossover, at this time the timeline deviates from the Twitch Streams, only with some general events duplicated and most, if not all, of the characters included. From the events of this story, this version of the Forgotten Realms branches off into its own timeline.

Special Thanks Go to:

Wizards of the Coast, for obvious reasons. Even if it's just for not sending me a Cease and Desist letter.

Everyone associated with *Penny Arcade*, PAX, *Acquisitions Incorporated*, and *Dice Camera Action*. Especially Anne Prosser Robinson and her character, Evelyn Avalona Helvig Marthain. Without Lady Evelyn of the Spires, there wouldn't be Matthew Christopher.

The Foxfire Studios Discord Server, with the few friendly voices that chat there, especially those who supplied me feedback, and some editing help, in creating this book through to the final version. At one time, this book was a near 600-page monster with several scenes that got away from me. Having someone to suggest where to take out and what to add in was a tremendous help. Special Props goes to Bread#5614 in that server, who became my proofreader for the final draft. Even with a college degree, grammar trips me up. I could have never found those small errors I just couldn't find for the life of me without him.

All those who support me and my future projects through the various crowdsourcing venues on the Foxfire Studios web site, I cannot thank you enough for your support. To see a carrot in a world of nothing but sticks is a rare sight indeed. Thank you very much for being a carrot. If you wish to be one of them, to go foxfirestudios.net and go to the Support Page from the site menu.

And lastly, I would like to thank God for not merely striking me down right where I stand. At least *He* understands where I'm coming from and what my intentions are, even as I make God the Father a character in this story, stat block God the Son, and transmute God the Holy Spirit into the Fiery Phoenix. One man's sacrilege is another one's holy worship.

And last but not least, a Disclaimer: I apologize to Christopher Perkins over what happens to him over the course of this story and will go on record and claim that Matthew Christopher is *not* to be on any table with him as the Dungeon Master. I know Chris. I've devoted a lot of time, energy, and heart into the little guy, and I don't want to have him take five steps out or Waterdeep and get wacked outright by a DM wishing to take out his payback on my Player Characters.

Introduction

I've been working on this book for quite some time. In fact, it can be said that I've been thinking up this book since the 1980s. But it wasn't until the popularity of *Dice Camera Action* and its sudden and unfortunate cancellation that prompted me to type it up. And then there's the campaign who's release date became my deadline. *Descent into Avernus?* Really, Wizards. Really?

But what I can say, I couldn't think of a better way for me to introduce myself proper into the greater D&D community than with this novel, free of charge (Well, you can support me through my web site if you so wish.)

My name is David Gonterman. David Foxfire's my nom de plume. I started with Dungeons & Dragons the First Edition, little to no friends to play the game with...and the Satanic Panic. To think that I used to be part of Assemblies of God Church at the time. While I didn't directly get any flack about it (I was the kind of kid few people talk about, if at all. If I were a kid today, people would be betting when I'll have my rampage.) it did provide my first taste of a crisis of faith. There are so many bad things, really bad things, that Christians need to address: Homelessness, Troubled Youth, Drugs, Crime, Education, Environment, The Word of Faith Movement...and they decide to rail against Rock Music, Video Games, and D&D? Of all the things that would make me irredeemably hellbound, in spite of what Chris has done for me on the Cross, it would have to be *liking a fucking Role Playing Game?*

There was a lot of reasons why I renounced Christianity, from current trends in religion to the abysmal record televangelists sill have to what counts as *Superbook* in the current year, (CGI is a sin against animation) and countless of other things...but it was the Satanic Panic that put me on the path to renouncing Christianity.

Let me be clear here. I renounced *Christianity*, the religion. I did not renounce Christ. Let's make the distinction on exactly what I'm ashamed of. It's not the gospel, it's the bastards and bastishes peddling it.

So, I found myself lost in the wilderness, drifting away like a wandering star, unsure that God would ever give a flying fuck if I live or die, and settled for being content with just listening to the voices in my head, until I reconnected with the creator deity in the most unlikely of places:

Dungeons & Dragons Fifth Edition.

I got back to D&D in the later stages of Fourth Edition, with the Encounters program. I jumped over to 5th Edition while it was in the D&D Next playtest form and never looked back. (And may everybody say, Amen.) Eventually I went from being a Player to becoming a Dungeon Master, and eventually into Content Creation, and that's where the light went back on.

I was doing more than just typing up campaigns, quests, and modules for the players—friends, audience, family members, and what not—to play on. I was creating worlds. I started with mucking about the Forgotten Realms and then graduated to creating my own campaign settings from scratch. One of them holds center stage in this very novel.

You can zoom all out to the big picture and set up a whole planet, or even planets, with continents, oceans, a pantheon and even a cosmology with different planes, or you can dive straight down to work on a humble village with intricate detail, setting every house with precision. You can either set up entire kingdoms with the type of government, the military and economy and all that, or even focus on a single character with a detailed Stat Block, a backstory including an account of their childhood and education, with notes on what would drive that character, their loves and their hates. You can build dungeons of many styles and purposes, bring up powerful wizards and monsters to go up against the Player Characters, set up challenges for even the locals to tackle, I can go on.

One time, while I was doing all this, I leaned back from the Microsoft One Note book that has all of my notes, sketches, maps clips from the 5etools web site (I'd use D&D Beyond but Cancel Culture has stripped almost all my faith in social media,) an assortment of picture files and generated material from donjon. I just look at all of that and just had this one thought:

Is this how Yahweh did it?

Yahweh, the God of the Bible. The creator deity of Earth. The God of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The being they say created the heavens and the earth from scratch.

Am I doing the same?

Sure, there are differences, no argument with me there. I'm using a computer with an internet connection and Microsoft Office. God used atoms, elements, light, energy, matter. He snapped his fingers and caused the Big Bang. He made gases swirl around to create rocks, then gathered around rocks to create planets, then triggered fusion to turn them into stars. I'd like to see the slide rulers and abacuses he used to calibrate orbits and formulate compositions to create a world that can sustain life. I'd like to see how he triggered that water cycle. The experiments he made while starting with single-cell organisms; how closely did he follow Charles Darwin's evolutionary scale and where did he jump over some parts, leading up to the creation of Man in His own image. The very act that turned him into either Him Michelangelo da Vinci or Victor Frankenstein, depending on who you ask. You can interpret Genesis 1 whatever you wish. Me? God dropped the science by the megaton and created over billions of years this wonderful and awe-inspiring machine that can move in perpetuity.

You're standing on a tiny blue marble suspended on a sunbeam spinning at 1,000 miles an hour and hurtling around the sun at 67,000 miles an hour. In the middle a cosmic clockwork more intricate than any Swiss watchmaker can ever hope to ponder. Just crank out Nighwish's *Endless Forms Most Beautiful* on the headphones, go out stargazing, and ponder the idea that someone was behind all that.

Am I doing *the exact same thing* that God has done? Am I doing the very act of Creation and going through that Job-like whirlwind tour of that act at the same time?

That opened my eyes in ways I'd never thought possible by anything short of LSD.

I learned more about God through creating D&D campaigns and the settings they're in, than through a year of Sundays holding down a pew being bored out of my fricking skull. Thirty years ago, people were calling Dungeons & Dragons a tool of the Devil. Today? *That very same game* brought me back to God.

D&D has come a long way since it's humble and rocky origins into a world-wide phenomenon that revealed the game for what it really is. The Internet with all these Twitch Streams and Youtube Videos, and podcasts from the Penny Arcade guys and Geek and Sundry, showed what you can do with the game. And it revealed that the game is not a gateway until evil at all. In fact, it was just another misunderstood and untapped media, just like Television, Comic Books, Rock and Rap Music, animation, movies, and all the else. It can be used as a force for Good. It could even be used to bring people to God. Like it did to me.

And that's what I want to do. I wanted to come back from the wilderness I exiled myself into and come back to Christianity with a flower to hand. I'm here to reconcile Dungeons & Dragons with Christianity. To bridge that thirty-year plus old gap and mend some long-term wounds. Maybe we can get together and put what I learned in the wilderness to a good cause. Maybe we can put up a series of Bible Stories into a D&D campaign, create an RPG version of *Superbook* or *Flying House*. Make a Vacation Bible School like none other.

Or, part of me expects this: The Church would just throw my peace offering to the ground and stomp on it with their three-decade held moral indignation over something they didn't bother to understand. And I'll just go back to the wilderness where I belong, and never be heard of from Christianity, or maybe even Christ himself, ever again.

I'm taking the biggest risk of my life with this book. I'm even wagering my very soul on this effort. Dungeons & Dragons have given me so much in my life, carried me through tough and even dark times, and brought me back to a person I thought would never care if I lived or died. It's a wager I'll gladly make, and even if I roll a Nat 1 on the result, I would have no regrets.

I didn't care if I were saved or not. I just wanted to have soul that is worth saving.

And with this novel, I believe I got my wish.

The time has come for me.

The time to overcome and do what is right.

For the world to see.

And from the Ashes of the Dawn I arise!

Dragonforce
"Ashes of the Dawn"
From *Reaching into Infinity*

Prologue

The Castle Ward of the City of Waterdeep
Kythorn 18, 1492 DR (Year of Three Ships Sailing)
10:25 AM, Late Morning

The following occurs just past Episode 121 of *Dice Camera Action* and before *Omin's Four* for Acquisitions Incorporated. Events in this story may follow some scenes in future episodes and modules from this point, but this story will eventually create its own forked timeline from the 'Perkinsverse.'

In the beginning there was darkness.

No, not because reality was formless and empty, but because Matthew Christopher of Renton Washington was unconscious.

The last thing he remembered was him crashing through some rift in space and time, falling through eternity, seeing infinity spinning around him in an endless starry void.

It took him a while for him to hear anything above the roar of the blood through his ears. Even though he was fairly shaken from the impact, he managed to pick up the sounds of a frenzied conversation.

“By the Gods! Someone just dropped from that...thing!”

“Hold that thing back while I get to him, Omin!”

“My-my-my...**My Cabbages!!**”

“Evelyn, he's already in the Deadbook! He crashed into that building and landed hard!”

“We don't know if he's dead yet, Strix!”

“How do we know if he's a 'he,' Omin?”

“We save him first, Strix, *then* we find out what gender he is!”

“Why?! Why is it *always* my *Cabbages?!*”

“We got it at bay, someone send a healer!”

“Ah got him!”

Evelyn Marthain, Paladin of Lathander, knew something like this would happen. These things always happen during a total eclipse. Of course, any follower of the Morninglord knows what an eclipse is: The Moon orbiting Toril passes under the Sun casting a shadow underneath. When the moon passes by, so does the shadow, and the Light of Lathander just goes back to shining. That shouldn't cause too much of a problem—eclipses are temporary, after all—if it weren't for bad things happening in the shadow of that moon. Eclipses weaken the borders between realms, and eventually it's weakened enough for something to fall through. Normally it comes in the form of some cosmic horror that those who follow the light need to defeat.

What she didn't expect was someone falling off that...whatever that...monstrosity...is.

He bounced off that creature and crashed through a window.

At that point, instinct kicked in and she rushed to him.

The sight of him gave her pause. A slender teenaged man about as tall as she is, with brown hair with spikes, dressed in a proper Lathanderite outfit of white with gold trim. With leather boots under the pants legs, his hands wearing white gloves, a pocket watch hanging off one of the surprising number of pockets on his shirt. What she found odd, in that moment, was that he had a belt with a strange device of some kind

strapped to his right hip, a book hung in a leather pouch on the left, and a shiny golden star pinned on his vest.

This was not someone she recognized but helping one of her own faith was in order. Kneeling to lay *healing hands* on this young man, she found something she did recognize: In the center of that star, decorated with various colored crystals that resembled stained glass, is the symbol of a winding road leading to a sunrise. The holy symbol of Lathander, the Morninglord.

“Sweet Lathander in all your glory,” Evelyn half-gasped, half-prayed, “Did you bring this child to me?” That made her hug him even more and letting her healing power flow into him.

In his unconscious haze, he felt someone embrace him, and felt what could possibly be the nicest warmth he ever felt. The warmth filled his whole body, stitching scratches, soothing pains, and filling life into his limbs.

His head felt like it was in a haze. Most of the memories of the past couple hours or so, in real time, were fuzzy. He remembered an eclipse happening, followed by the emergence of some sort of Lovecraftian horror, and something within him just exploded on a cosmic scale. Everything else he tried to recollect seemed to be missing pieces here and there.

He hoped to get most of them back in his head later.

He opened his eyes and saw the blue eyes of what he thought the cutest angel he’d ever seen. A cherubic face smiled at him with curly golden blonde hair. She wore white with gold trim, a golden armor chest plate with a sun motif, and solar patterned tattoos on her shoulders and upper arms. She looked familiar, and hopefully he’ll find out once his senses returned.

Evelyn saw his eyes open, revealing a pair of silver moons, or at least it looked like silver moons.

“Oh, praise Lathander yoah all right,” the blonde cherub said, “Good thang ya got ‘im watching over ya!”

In his post-impact stupor, Evelyn looked like she glowed in the noon-day sun, adding to her angelic appearance.

“Wubbie wubbie blue eyes wubbie wubbie whole world,” was all he could mutter before he felt his head clear.

As Evelyn saw the youth get his wits back, she could swear that he had a glint of recognition in his eyes, as if the young man knows her or at least heard of her.

He still tried to shake his vision back into focus, aided Evelyn’s hand on his face. “For a moment, I thought you were an Angel, ma’am,” the young man said. “You’re...You’re Evelyn Marthain, aren’t you?”

The paladin kept smiling. “Yoah heard of me? That’s a surprised. Yes, I’m Evelyn Marthain, follower of Lathander. How’d ya heard of me?”

“The Morninglord can’t say enough about ya.” That made her blush. “My name’s Matthew Christopher. Nice to meet...”

Evelyn could see that he saw something behind her, and by the expression, what was behind her wasn’t friendly.

“...Incoming!”

Evelyn moved Matt to one side and rolled to the other, just as a hairy spider leg slammed into the ground where they were.

“Looks like our friend here’s still got some fight in ‘im!” Matt said as he rose to his feet, reaching for something strapped to his right hip. He pulled out what looked like a handheld version of a ship’s cannon.

The odd contraption had runes down the length of the barrel and around a cylinder. When he flicked the cylinder outward, a familiar light swirled around it, filling the six holes inside.

“Just so you know, I’m not the kind of Lathanderite you’re used to,” he said, as he flicked the device in the opposite direction, causing the cylinder to return to its initial position and the inscriptions across the barrel to illuminate.

“Oh?” Evelyn blinked. “You’re not a Cleric or Paladin? Those who follow the Morninglord usually fall into those camps.”

“You’ll see,” he said as he leaned against the wall, gun held up, and looking over the window where that woolly appendage came through. “It’s much smaller than when I first fought ‘im. I think we can finish it off.”

“Leave that to me!” Evelyn took to the air on her winged boots, while Matthew rushed out a door and back toward that spider with a wolf’s head. Evelyn whipped out a sword and caused it to go aflame. “The Light of Lathander com—**EEEEK!**”

A spider leg grabbed one of Evelyn’s in midair and tried to wrap some webbing around it. She struggled to pull her leg free and hoping that she doesn’t pull it off in the process. “Oh mah goodness, showin’ mah prostetic leg raite now’s gonna...wait, what’s he doin’?”

Matthew braced himself and pulled the pulled the trigger.

Any follower of the Morninglord would recognize what came out of that cannon as sunlight, but it just didn’t beam down all warm and gentle like the sunshine Lathander was known for. This light looked, sounded, and felt *solid*. The beam punched through the leg holding Evelyn, the monster that leg was connected to, and kept on going until it hit the brick outside wall of a building across the street. As the beam dissipated from the impact, she could see the color of the bricks were stripped away, like something left in the sun so long that the light baked the color off.

Evelyn couldn’t believe what she just saw. She never seen the Light of Lathander do *that!* *Nobody in Toril* had ever seen the Light of Lathander do *that!*

She turned to Matthew pointing at the decolored patch of brick wall. “How in tarnation did you...”

She had to dodge another furry appendage.

“...tell me later.” Plenty of time for explanations after the monster issue was settled. She dropped down on the beast with a flaming sword, cleaving two more such appendages free from the rest of the body, causing unnatural looking blood to spray about.

“Haularake! How many times have I told Jim Darkmagic not to eat his own cooking?!”

That came from a near-bald man with pointed ears in blue armor. “I don’t know everything yet, but it’s clear you want this dead.”

He pushed Matthew back, getting in front of him. “Name’s Omin. I’ll cover you, so you can keep doing...” He waved to the gun in Matthew’s hands, “...*that*. Whatever *that* is. Keep doing *that!* Just, please, watch where you’re aiming.”

Matthew nodded. “Sure thing, Mister Dran.”

Ominifis Hereward Dran blinked for a moment wondering how this stranger knew his name, but then just joined the golden paladin in combat. “Miss Marthain, who’s your friend?”

“Matthew just showed up along with this demon, Omin.” Evelyn said between swings of her flaming sword. “Ah was about ta ask him after we kill this baddie.”

“Priorities, eh? Say no more...whoa!”

Another large spider leg was about to reach out from behind Omin Dran and wrap around his neck like a constrictor snake, but another searing light fried it. Omin didn't see the strike until he saw it punch out the other side.

Omin looked back to see where that light came from. It was definitely from this Matthew's gun.

"Nice shooting, Tex," he said with a wink, and then resumed providing cover for his allies to strike back at the monster. Without warning, a rising heat from behind Matthew caused him to instinctively hunker down.

A fireball hurled over Matt's head and slammed into the horror, immolating where it strikes. He didn't know what smelled worse, the eldritch barbeque in front, the burning webs around him, or the tiefling who tossed the fireball in the first place.

Omin called out from behind him. "Strix! Watch it with that! Remember, friendly fire!"

Matthew spun around to see a hag-like woman in a ragged dark-toned and ragged dress. She had horns poking through unkempt hair and the hanging odor of someone who has never bathed in several months. "ACK!! Sorry, Newbie!" She looked to Matthew as if she was about to freak out. "I didn't want to kill you...yet!! I want to kill that spider first! It's gross! It's disgusting! And it spits out belk from its legs! We kill that first then we'll deal with you..."

The beast flailed about as its end drew nearer. It's flailing limbs knocking Evelyn out of the air and Omin to the ground. It was all but covered in ichor, and most of the remaining tentacles was either waving limp or just flopped to the cobblestones.

The monster was reaching its limits.

And Matthew saw his chance. He raised the gun, but instead of pulling the trigger, he uttered an incantation. A spell cast in Celestial.

The cylinder began to spin, faster and faster, as a glow accumulated brighter and brighter in the chamber. It was as if it were drawing in the light of the by now returned sunshine!

When he pulled the trigger this time, it wasn't a mere beam of solid sunshine.

"Waitasec," Strix spoke up. "That's a...that's not a...No. It couldn't be..."

It was an arcing flare of sunfire that erupted out from the gun and on top of the beast, causing it to burn with intensity. Its otherworldly death screams got punctuated with the sound of burning flesh and hair, eventually reducing the otherworldly horror to ash and dust that covered the street underneath.

The flare stayed on it for a good thirty minutes before Matthew managed to pull his finger off the trigger. When he did the star-fire ceased and the cylinder of the revolver slowed its spinning until it stopped.

Where was once a demon, all that remained was a mere whitened three-inch circle on the city street and the black dust that caked the street around it.

Matt just stood there, taking big breaths. "Did...Did we...git 'im?" He almost had to peel his gloved hand off the handle of the gun when he slid it back in its holster.

Evelyn looked at the char that was once a demon, then looked at Omin. Omin looked at the char, then back at Evelyn. Then they both looked at the char, and then back at each other, and then back at Matthew.

"I'm not completely sure," Omin said. "I think there's still a bit of demon left. Maybe some bone...or sinew...or splotch of ichor...that was left from...I hate to see what that wolf-spider has done to Lathander to call for *that* response from you, good sir!"

"Ah hear ya there, Omin," Evelyn said. "The Morninglord loves trying out new things, but ah've gotta admit, Matthew. What yoah just did, *that* was a surprise. That demon must've angered the Morninglord enough to learn new ways to smite somethin'! But it's smote all right. We ain't seein' that bad guy again!"

“Good.” Matt nodded. With the adrenaline wearing off, he dropped to all fours and started throwing up. Before the others could lend their assistance, Matt lifted a finger, as if to tell the others to wait while his stomach emptied itself.

Thirty seconds later, he was gulping up air again, with the former contents of his stomach soaking the cobblestones. He felt a hand pat his back as he did so.

Omin handed him a waterskin. “Might need a little of this.”

“Thanks...” Matthew said as he took the waterskin. Washing out his mouth at first, took some long drinks of water. When he was sated, he leaned back so that he was sitting on his heels and sighed. “That’s simply great. I’ve only been here three minutes, and I’m already making a berk out of myself.”

“I don’t know half of what happened, but I won’t blame you for puking,” Omin said, “Matthew, is it?”

He looked over to Omin and had that same tinge of recognition. He nodded. “You must be Omin Dran, CEO of Acquisitions Incorporated, rumored to be Lord of Waterdeep...and ever so loveable magnificent bastard, but that’s what Lathander told me about ya.”

Omin had to shrug, as if admitting to that last part. “You’ve heard of our brand.”

“Who hasn’t,” Matthew gave a light laugh. “Though if I told you how *I* heard of Acq Inc., you’d might throw me into a loony bin.”

“I think you’ve lost your marbles already!” cackled the Tiefling from behind. “Evelyn, who is this barmy berk?”

Matthew held out his hand. “Matthew Christopher, by the way.”

Omin shook it and nodded. “Pleasure. I hope you have an explanation for...” He motioned to the charred remains. “...whatever the hell you just did!! I know Lathander’s light, but that light wasn’t in a divine spell.”

Matthew nodded. “Yeah. It’s a long story about how that, and me, got here. Maybe we should get off the streets so I can find a place to tell you before...”

“Strix, if there’s anyone who knows the Morninglord more than anyone you know, it’s me. If someone has the Light of Lathander in him, I’d...”

“That was **Eldritch Blast and Witch Bolt**, Evelyn! Those are a *warlock* spells!!” The tiefling witch looked like she was going to have a nervous breakdown.

Matthew pointed to Strix. “Is she always like this?”

“Afraid so, Matt,” Omin said. “But she called it. I have warlocks on my payroll. I know Eldritch Blast and Witch Bolt when I see it.”

“He’s a Lathanderite, Strix,” Evelyn said as she fluttered between Strix and Matt. “What makes you think a Latahnderite can...”

“He’s a **warlock**, Evelyn!” Strix replied. “Since *when* did *Lathander* have **Warlocks**!?”

That got to Evelyn. She paused, blinked, and then turned to Matthew, with a very confused look on her face. “Yoah not a warlock...are you?”

That got a nod from Matthew.

She frowned. “A warlock...of *Lathander*?”

That got another nod, just as the City Watch has just arrived.

“Ah, Waterdeep’s finest, late as usual.” Omin went up to the group, gesturing broadly. “It’s all taken care of, goodsirs. I’ll handle things from here.”

“What in the Nine Hells did you *do*, Omin Dran?!” The leader said with a glare that would’ve killed Omin if it could.

“How would I know, Captain Woodlow? That demon just dropped out of the sky. I’d know as much as you would.”

At the same time, another young man with a lute over his shoulder and a small beard on his chin, walked up to Evelyn and motioned over to Matthew. “Ah, nothing like arriving after the action to let me know that Perkins isn’t running things today. Evelyn, who’s your friend? And why is he shooting off sunshine-flavored Eldritch Blasts?”

While all this is going on, Strix just wandered around Matthew, growling a bit as she looked like she was sniffing him out, jerking back whenever he moved toward her. “Who is this guy? Where’d he come from? I never thought Lathander would make a *pact* with a blood! As if he were Asmodeus or someone! But it doesn’t matter...you’ll be killed...everyone dies...maybe it’s for the...Waaaaagh!!” Matthew just blinked and moved his hand toward the tiefling, but she backed away. “I Know Magic, Barmy! I’ll hex you!” she snapped, gritting her teeth and snarling. “I’ll turn that gun of yours into a noodle! Stand back!!”

“Diath, I just met Matthew,” Omin said, “Let’s just say...He’s from out of town.”

Diath gave an exasperated sigh and a wave of his hand. “So, what were you intending to do with this kid? Make him another Intern of your and feed him to...”

“I was *about* to send him over to the Spires, Captain Woodlow. Warlock or not, he *is* a follower of the Morninglord.”

“A follower of the Morninglord? With the spell *I* saw when I first saw the scene?” Diath protested as he approached the paladin. “You’re not the only one who can tell the difference between an *arcane* spell from a *divine* one. Evelyn, you know Lathander more than anyone in Waterdeep. Had he ever had a warlock before?”

Evelyn shook her head, “Ah haven’t heard of one?”

“Wait wait wait,” Paultin said. “Think about this, Evie.” He pointed to Matthew. “He’s a *warlock*. Of the Morninglord, I’ll give you that. But. A. Warlock. And you’re going to send him to the Spires? How would you know they won’t just cast him out as a...”

There was a loud tap of something smacking the cobblestone street, a tap louder than it should be, causing everyone to look over to where that noise came from.

It came from the walking cane of a dark-skinned being in a flowing gown of Lathanderite white and gold, with long pointed ears poking out from her head, and a fount of white hair flowing over the side of her head and down to her waist.

Evelyn was quick to approach her. “Sister Talastin, what brings you here.”

Sister Talastin didn’t move her head, but just kept staring ahead with whited eyes, as she acknowledged the Paladin’s presence. “The interdimensional rift caused by that eclipse no less, Evelyn,” she said in a soft voice, so unlike a drow. “And even I can sense that the crisis has passed. I take it that demon has been dispatched.”

“It has. But someone came along with it,” Evelyn said as she tried to guide the blind priestess over toward Matthew. “This young man is Matthew Christopher, and ah’m kinda mixed ‘bout him. Ah don’t think ah’ve never seen a Lathanderite like him before.”

“How so?” Talastin asked as she let Evelyn lead her.

“I don’t know, your grace. Has Lathander ever had a warlock before?”

That caused Talastin to raise an eyebrow before moving closer to Matthew.

He held fast, trying hard not to step back from her. “er, you’ve g-gotta excuse me, ma’am,” Matthew stammered.

“Let me guess, Matthew,” the blind drow replied with a soft voice as she walked up to Matthew. “You’ve had unpleasant experiences with drow before.”

Matthew nodded at first before he realized that she was blind. “Y-y...yes’m.”

“You aren’t the first,” Sister Talasin said as she reached out to touch his face.

This caused him to flinch at first, but then he noticed her pale, sightless eyes.

“Oh, you’re blind,” Matthew said. “I didn’t know that, I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Talastin just smiled at him as she felt around Matthew’s face to feel out his appearance. “You’re quite young, Matthew, but I could tell you had a grand adventure. And from what I’m sensing from the young main, yes Evelyn. He *is* filled with the Light of Lathander. In the form of a *Warlock Pact*. I’m very interested in how this came to be, Matthew. Let me take you to the Spires.”

She then stood up and offered her hand to Matthew.

“Much appreciated,” Matthew said, and then stammered a bit. “Your...grace? Is that the term I should use?”

Talastin just smiled and nodded.

“Thank you, I’m not familiar with your customs, but I’ll learn fast.” Matthew said as she walked behind Sister Talastin toward the series of golden towers in the city scape.

“Oh,” Matthew added, “Do you know of a certain wizard named Elminster of Shadowdale...”

“I’m sorry, Matthew,” Talastin said. “But...Elminster...is no longer with us.” There were several concerned looks from among the Watch.

From the sad tone, Matthew realized what that meant for the Sage of Shadowdale.

“What happened to him?”

“There has been a rash of assassinations of Masked Lords here in town,” Diath said. “During that time, they managed to get the best of Elminster. He had to disintegrate his own body, or dissolve into the Weave, or whatever wizards do, I wouldn’t have the foggiest...”

“Great,” Matthew sighed. “I figured he might be the *only* one in all of this place who’d believe me, and he’s dead, or what counts as ‘dead’ to a wizard.”

Spires of the Morning, Castle Ward
4:15 PM, Tharsun.

“I’d like to start off by thanking you all for coming and putting up with me to this point,” Matthew said to the gathered throng. Evelyn and Talastin were up on front, with Diath, Paultin, Strix, off to one side. To the other side, in spite of the stink eye Diath gave him, sat Omin Dran, as a representative of the Lords of Waterdeep rather than Acquisitions Incorporated. There was a couple dozen other Lathanderites of various races; humans, elves, halflings, and a couple gnomes; all curious over this stranger. In the back stood an olive-skinned woman with black hair in rows, wearing a flowing black wizards robe and carrying a large staff.

“It means more to me than what I can say,” Matthew began. “I can only imagine how much of a stranger I am to you all. What I’m about to say it’ll be hard to understand, some might be hard to accept, but since I’ve already agreed to be put under a *Zone of Truth* so that it’ll be verified.” He straightened up a bit, trying to look official. “Not that I wanted to lie anyway: My name’s Matthew Christopher. I come from a city named Renton, in a state called Washington, in a country named America. Don’t bother racking your brain, that place isn’t on Toril. I’d be surprised if anyone has ever heard of...”

“Your homeworld wouldn’t be known as Earth, is it?” Omin Dran said.

Matthew was drinking from a waterskin as Omin said that, which made the spit take quite memorable. “How in tarnation did you...”

“I haven’t told anyone about this, but I think I can say it here: I found myself in Renton one day. And even visited a company named Wizards of the Coast. Judging by the shocked expression, Matthew, I think you know of the group.”

Matthew nodded.

Omin leaned back and brought his fingertips together. “Feel free to tell us what you’d want to share. The spell won’t force you to say anything you want to keep quiet on.”

“That’s good to hear,” Matthew replied. “Some of what I’ll say might be a bit too much for most people’s taste.”

“I agree with you here. I’ve seen enough of Matthew’s home world to be convinced that that everything Matthew needs to say about his home world would be, at best, watered down. Not just the technological advancements or the wonders what go on there, but also because of the deity that lives there.”

Talastin raised an eyebrow. “*Deity*, Omin...singular...as in...*just one*?”

Matthew just groaned and held his head in his hands. “The Morninglord told me there be days like this. The less I talk about Yeshu, that’s his name in Common, the better. He’s a power greater than all the pantheons of Toril combined. I don’t even want to mention his real name for fear that uttering it would shatter this realm.”

What was said next made the temperature of Matthew’s chest drop twenty degrees, and it came from Strix: “He’s got olive skin, dark curly hair, wears a simple robe, and has holes on his wrist.” She pointed to his own upper arms. “As if there was a nail through them.”

Matthew had to gulp as the tiefling described Him: “Y-Yeah...that’s him. But where did you see him, Strix?”

The tiefling took a deep breath, gulped a couple times, and said just one word: “Sigil.”

“That’s total barkle, Strix,” Diath said, “There’s no way that’s possible. You of all people, Strix, know what Sigil is like. No God can enter Sigil. The Lady of Pain wouldn’t allow...”

Strix looked as white as a sheet. “When I was an orphan in a Bakery there, I saw a blood that matched his description. Nailprints and all. He bought a pie. I didn’t know he was a power until I found some religious

book during my stay in Barovia!” She then dug through her robes and pulled out a small green book. “I have it here,” she said tossing it to Matthew. “It took me ages to get *Comprehend Languages* to work with it.”

Matthew was almost in analeptic shock when he saw what Strix handed to him. While it was waterlogged and had too much gunk to open it without ripping apart the thin pages, he could recognize one of those Gideon New Testaments with Palms and Proverbs anywhere. He just didn’t expect a Tiefling from Sigil to just hand one to him while in the Spires of the Morning in Waterdeep!

By this time, Matthew realized that the *Zone of Truth* is not just affecting him. Both Omin and Strix told the truth all right.

“So He really *can* enter Sigil.” It was all Matthew could say until the dryness in his mouth made him nearly chug down a whole waterskin. “Just great, Yeshu, just fricking great,” he muttered under his breath. “If I get my ass burned at the stake because of you...”

“If this Yeshu can do things that not even Lathander can,” Omin mused. “Why haven’t *we* heard of him?”

“That part I can tell you.” Matthew said. “He bound himself to a non-interference pact. He is not to inject Himself into any other realm or multiverse, including this one. In return, he has my home world, and the universe that world’s in, all to himself. He doesn’t interfere into any other universe’s business and never had a reason to.”

“Until recently,” Omin said.

Matthew nodded. “Three days ago...my world’s time...someone from my world thought it was a good idea to open a rift between your world and mine in order to summon a demon. The very demon we just fought.” He looked up at the crowd. “That would break Yeshu’s pact.”

“Like what happened with the Ashtown Concordance,” Diath muttered under his breath.

“Times a thousand, Diath. And the deities here know it. So a group them headed to my world, led by the Morninglord himself. This might come as a shock to everyone here, but Lathander and Yeshu know each other. In fact, Yeshu was once Lathander’s mentor. And from what Lathander has done here on Toril, I’m glad to say that Yeshu is very proud of him.”

That revelation turned all the confusion and shock in Evelyn into overwhelming pride in her deity. “I’d never doubt that in the world,” she said with a smile.

“However, because of the limits brought on by the agreement, your deities’ powers would be greatly diminished. Yeshu decided that they should all partner up with a human in my world to help them out. That’s where I come in. I was...I mean, am...Lathander’s partner.”

Chapter 1

Saturday, August 19, 2017

On the roof of Wizards of the Coast Headquarters in Renton, Washington

9:00 AM; 48:00 hours before the Great American Eclipse

A lone figure stood at the roof of the building. The blonde man in a white outfit stood there, leaning against the corporate logo, watching the sun rising over the buildings of the city around him.

Nobody downstairs would have noticed his presence, but he was aware of every thought, word, and deed that is going on below him, especially with Wizards of the Coast.

He didn't like what he was overhearing. Wizards of the Coast is going along their Tomb of Annihilation campaign, which is coinciding with the Death Curse affecting the world of Toril.

He frowned, then he grumbled. He could still sense everyone in Toril suffering from what Acererak inflicted upon their world and remembered how one of his favored followers endure something he wouldn't wish on Asmodeus just to stall it—to *just stall* it—on two of her friends.

He knew that they weren't profiting over the suffering of others, not intentionally. But that didn't stop the idea from ruffling the feathers of his white downy wings.

"You can't believe how hard it is, My Lord," the angel said with a clenched fist, "to resist the urge to go down there, grab Christopher Perkins by the collar, and..."

You weren't the first one to say that about him. Oh, and Good Morning, Lathander.

The angel—better known in Toril as the deity named Lathander the Morninglord—felt Yeshu's presence before he saw it. He was a voice that could barely be heard over a whisper and sending ripples throughout the cosmos at the same time.

Below, the mortals just went along their way, oblivious to the two holy beings discussing matters on top of the Wizards of the Coast building.

"I'm glad to see you here, Yeshu." Lathander replied, accustomed to using the Faerunian Common name of the God of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The very God countless people in this world, including those still in the greater Seattle area, pray to.

The presence started to coalesce into a ball of light, a sign of focused attention. It floated over to the other resonating friendship and good cheer toward him. *"You're not that hard to find, my friend. I only wished that our meeting wasn't the usual shooting the breeze over at Monica's."*

Lathander sighed. "Not this time, I'm afraid. I don't suppose you heard about what's going on."

"Here at Wizards?" Yeshu said, *"Yes. From what I figured out this next campaign's a nasty one. They pulled out all the stops with this Tomb of Annihilation campaign."*

Lathander chuckled.

"But what's going on in Toril? I'm afraid not. You know the Agreement: I don't interfere in your world, and nobody barges into my turf. As it should be."

"I heard this Fifth Edition is getting good."

"It's catching on like wildfire. It doesn't interest me that much, but even angels enjoy it on their spare time. You can thank the internet pulling back most of the mystery and misunderstandings on that game. You'd like the internet show, Dice Camera Action. The Evelyn Marthain character would be perfect as one of your followers."

"Didn't she get turned into a robot in that show, Yeshu?"

“What do you mean about her getting roboti...”

Lathander pressed a finger to his forehead and let his memories go through Episode 52 of *Dice Camera Action* from his point of view.

The glow dimmed. *“If I were cable of wincing in this form, I would...I’m very sorry to hear this. Would you want me to hold Chris Perkins down while you tell your displeasure over him personally?”*

Lathander shook his head. “No, I’m here for a more pressing problem, one direr than *raise dead* no longer working.”

The glow moved a bit closer, Lathander could know that the God of this World is listening.

“Someone’s taking advantage of what’s going on in my world to do something nasty enough for us to suspend our agreement. As you know, there is going to be an eclipse coming in this world.”

“47 Hours, 57 Minutes, and 23 Seconds, from now.”

“You probably know how tentative the borders between realities can get during a total solar eclipse. What normally happens is little more than some poor sod entering Ravenloft or Kenders making their appearance in the Sword Coast. Those we can handle.”

“You found something worse happening?”

Lathander nodded. “I have received word that a group of people are planning to send a demon from the Underdark of my world, to your own. It will be a threat that threatens both our worlds, Yeshu.”

A sudden cloud covered the sky above them. This time, everyone could hear the distant rumble. Including a young man with the carry on. He looked up at the sign on the Wizards of the Coast building.

“Some of my compatriots got together to work on our end. We’ve located a group of Drow in Menzoberranzan that tried to contact Lolth, but instead reached out to a demon I’ve yet to hear about. They discovered that they’ve found someone from another world capable of opening portal with the intent to push it through...through to your world, My Lord.”

“A portal from your world to mine.” There was another rolling thunder. *“And you’ve come here to stop that. Please, let me know your plan.”*

Lathander knew that Yeshu was wise to his actions and knew his presence the moment he touched down on the Wizards of the Coast building. Nevertheless, he asked out of courtesy. As heavy handed as he could get—ask anyone during the Old Testament—Yeshu maintained a modicum of decency.

“I have four of my fellow deities with me, a couple of them you know; including my beloved, Chauntea.”

“Don’t tell me that Corellon and Moradin are among this group...”

“I shouldn’t tell you then.”

“Great. Those two have been at each other since they were born. The peoples they created are no better.”

Lathander shrugged. “You know how dwarves and elves can be.”

“I suppose you can thank Tolkien and the movies they made out of his books. Does your team have anything planned?”

“That’s what caused me to seek You out, Father. I ran through the numbers and calculated what might happen, and the chances of us driving that demon back are slim. The only sure way I have seen a victorious outcome has you getting involved. Preferably in a way that doesn’t trigger the Rapture or some other cataclysmic event. Otherwise, I’m open to ideas.”

Lathander could practically hear the wheels turning in Yeshu’s infinite mind. He was crunching numbers as well, looking at every possible scenario he could think of. Direct involvement has proven to be world-

shaking enough with just one realm to deal with. Combining that with the possibility of it spilling into another multiverse is something to be avoided at all costs. He considered tapping His Son to get involved in His name, acting in the same capacity He had in the Gospels. However, even with the utmost in care in His execution, the mere presence of Jesus Christ would inadvertently trigger the Rapture the instant He touched the earth.

However, a thought comes to Him. Lathander remains an angel. In fact, Lathander is still, even after all of this time, the highest ranking angel He ever has. And he's still in Good Standing. In fact, all five of them...Lathander...Chauntea...Gond...Moradin and Corellon...all of them are still Angels in Good Standing. None of these five have fallen. Not even the two who quarrel like Cain and Abel.

Sometimes I regret having you go off into your own, Lathander. Have you ever pondered what human history would be like if you were my right-hand angel? You had the position when Lucifer fell, you know. Earth's Son of the Morning. Earth's highest of all Heaven. Earth's top Archangel. I just know that things would have been different.

“For starters, Father, you would need to find another Satan. I would never put up with Lucifer's antics. However, I can safely say that humanity's capacity for evil is formidable enough without anyone prodding them. Speaking of humans...”

Lathander arrived at the conclusion just as Yeshu did. He had partnered Angels with a human previously, with a great deal of success. Being a celestial loyal to God doesn't mean that they don't possess the desire for companionship. Even Lathander himself is not above such desired.

Throughout time, whenever an angel and a human bear responsibility for certain tasks together, such relationships remain strong to this day. It would be possible in this modern time to do the same. Perhaps this Anna Prosser Robinson would be a good fit. An introduction to Lathander the Morninglord, would be in order, and perhaps the two of them would be able to avert this calamity...

But then something walking up this floor caught his eye. A young teenaged boy dragging around a suitcase as if he were Sisyphus rolling that stone.

“Oh, you poor kid,” God thought out loud. *“Don't tell me that you were kicked out of your home...”*

“Pardon, Father?” Lathander said, his own train of thought broken. He was severely considering meeting Anna and making her a Paladin herself.

God motioned Lathander over to the ledge. *“I think I found the answer to our dilemma.”*

Only a fluttering of a dove's wings betrayed their presence as the two touched down on the concrete hallway leading up to the front door of Wizards of the Coast headquarters. Inside, a group of children were about to start a tour, while a receptionist was busy taking calls.

The ball of light led Lathander to the brown-haired, brown-eyed, mid teenaged man dragging around that carry-on suitcase. “Poor guy looks like he's ran away from home.”

“Worse,” God replied. *“He's a throwaway. His name is Matthew Christopher. Quite a fan of D&D, and is a part-time intern here. Sometimes he drops by here to show his creations to people here. I heard that he was creating a campaign inspired by Bible Stories. Superbook RPG he calls it..”*

“He looks like he never had a friend in the world,” Lathander said as he looked at him, his proverbial heartstrings pulled. By now Matthew was sitting down in front of Mitzy, the dragon sculpture hanging above the lobby.

“As it seems, his mother would no longer house him. She was constantly hounding him for one thing or another, be it for showing boyish spunk, or for not being ‘The Man of the House,’ or because he ‘wastes his time’ on a game that is supposed to be ‘of the devil’ and he should get a job, then hunt for a second one, and then get straight A's, and then..”

“This Matthew’s not even through puberty!” Lathander interjected. “He should be learning what to do with his life.”

“That’s why he’s so into Dungeons & Dragons. I know he’s got a great potential with creating content for D&D.” Yeshu sighed. *“But his single mon would have none of that. He forced him to choose between the game and his home.”*

“He chose the game.”

“He didn’t have a choice. D&D is his Pearl of Great Price. It is keeping him from doing something that he would eternally regret. His only hope is that someone would help him. Maybe someone in Wizards, like Mike Mearls or Jeremy Crawford or—Heaven help us—Chris Perkins...I’ve even seen Jerry Holkins and Anne Robinson wander around that building, maybe they can help...”

Lathander was so drawn to the kid that he had Yeshu floating behind him. “Yeshu, if you don’t mind, assign me to him.”

God had to give a smile behind Lathander’s back. He knew Lathander would say something like that. Besides, he saw what Lathander would be doing to the kid and he knew, those two would be perfect together. But still, keeping up with his reputation for being mysterious, he mocked surprise. *“Lathander!”*

Lathander looked back at the glowing presence. “I’m still an angel here, am I? You didn’t cast me out, right?”

“Well...” God took his time to give his answer. *“No. You’re still an angel. I can send you, if you wish.”*

Lathander smiled. “Thank you, Father. It isn’t every day I help You out, after all the wisdom and freedom you gave me.”

God’s last pause was more for dramatic effect. *“As freely you have received, may you freely give. Go with My blessings, Lathander the Morninglord. You are now Matthew Christopher’s Angel.”*

With that, Lathander gave God—who’s presence of light was in the mid-process of fading away—a thankful nod. Disappearing into a nearby restroom, Lathander decided to take on a form that would help introduce himself to his new ward. The only thing that remained of his original attire was the cord headband that he flipped out to put around his neck like a bolo tie, with his holy symbol as the clasp. Aside from that, he appeared as another rank and file employee.

Sure, he might be doing this officially as an Angel sent from God.

But what he’ll do is not too different from what he does in Toril.

Angel or Deity, it won’t matter for Matthew Christopher. He’s a lost lamb soon to be brought to the Light of Lathander.

Chapter 2

The front lobby of Wizards of the Coast headquarters.
9:10 AM; 47:50 before the eclipse.

“Good morning everyone in the Seattle area, this is KOMO news 97.7 FM and 1000 AM, and here is the top of the news. The rash of homeless disappearing continues for the twelfth straight day with reports of seven people reported missing from a tent camp in West Bellevue. Police is still clueless as to the perpetrators of the kidnappings, any possible motives or patterns, or any sign as to...”

Matthew switched off the radio app of his cell phone as he stepped into the lobby, making way for the group that was leaving. He didn’t have to look at them to know the look of abject disgust one of them had for him. By now he’s ground accustomed to people looking at him with disdain. He stopped wondering why people who have never even seen him before look like they just hate him so much.

He knew he was early for the meeting with Mike Mearls at 11. Having explained his situation to one of the people he had worked for, Mike arranged a meeting to introduce him to a colleague who could temporarily care for him. Anything was better than spending the night outside, where who knows what could be lurking in any back alley. Or for that matter just alongside any sidewalk. The homeless population in Seattle is increasing and there’s no sign to it slowing down, and Matthew Christopher is now just another check on that statistic.

That meeting, however, was nearly two hours away. With nothing better to do and no place to go, he simply sat in the lobby, trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible.

“Hey there,” came a voice that nearly caused him to jump out of his seat. “I hope Mitzy doesn’t mind me sitting next to ya.”

Perhaps it was the result of a curse of some kind, but people were uncomfortably harsh to Matthew. If the people walking down the street don’t say it, they certainly show it. They show it in the way they move away from the sidewalk, from the way they pulled their effects close and lead their children away, with the way they look at him with a look of disgust. It was almost as if his very existence offended the planet.

So naturally, this person who sat down next to Matthew, all smiles and such, just set off every alarm in Matthew’s brain. As if by instinct, he slid as far as he could to the other edge of the bench.

“N-Not if I c-care,” Matt managed to reply. “I’m just-just waiting f-for someone from high...from higher up, anyway. Name’s Matthew, b-by the way.”

I’ve never seen a stutter that bad in Faerun, Lathander thought. That ain’t a good sign.

Lathander did what he could to keep it casual. “Good Morning, Matthew...”

Yeah, Morninlord, real slick there. Ten seconds in...

“...My name is Larry, and I’ve just become a new intern here. I just saw you break off from a tour group and sat down looking like you got lost or something.”

Matt shook his head. “I j-just sent a message to Mike Mearls. He s’in a c-couple m-m-meetings right now, but he’ll-he’ll catch up with me afterward. He p-penciled me in f-for Eleven, so I’m just sit-t-ting and lighting ‘til then.”

Larry nodded. “What for, may I ask? I don’t know how you’d know him that much.”

Matt looked over at Larry’s bolo. “T-That’s Lathander’s Holy S...sss...symbol.”

Larry gave it a once over.

“You’re w-working on D&D?”

Larry nodded.

“Well, I...I...I playtest D&D. Got in-into it since 5th Edition c-came around. Since I liv...live not too far from here, I thought I-I-I’d pay Wizards a...a visit one day. They had a D&D Next playt-test group that invited me one day, and be..before I knew it, I’ve been doing int-t-ternships after school, playt-t-testing future modules. You’ll love *T-Tomb of Annihilation*.”

Matt would have noticed Larrys’ wincing if he wasn’t so focused on finding out when the proverbial other shoe would drop.

“I’m s-sorry, I t-tend t’ stutter. Really bad.”

“I wouldn’t’ve noticed it if you didn’t tell me,” Larry replied.

“Even if-f you don’t incorporate t-that pesky Death Curse, It...It’s a it’s a it’s a wild adventure straight out-ta Indiana Jones. And t-there’s even dinosaurs involved. I might jus-just run it in an easy mode, j-just so I only use t-the good st-stuff in there.”

“Easy mode?” Lathander asked, raising an eyebrow in curiosity.

“Everyone get-ts a free *Raise Dead*. Only at t-the second does the curse take hold.”

Larry had to nod at that, “Seems like a good way to play it for new people.”

Matthew didn’t know why he should be talking to a stranger about this, but it wasn’t as if there was any other topic to talk about. At least not like here.

“I-I’ve been working on’n alternate campaign t-to put on the *Dungeon Masters Guild*, j-just like what I did earlier with *C-Curse of Strahd*.”

Larry raised an eyebrow. “What did you do?”

“Imagine th-that t-the real dread lord in Barovia is not S-Strahd...but T-Tatyana.”

Larry whistled. “That’s a twist.”

“It made bronze i-in downloads. Got me plenty of j-jink for my source books. And it event...eventually insp-pired me to do something like t-this,” Matthew dug into his book bag to get a loose-leaf binder. “It’s either incredibly ge...genius or complete in-insanity, but I went and..d-did it anyway.”

“Genius *and* Insane,” Larry said, “This is something I’ve gotta see.”

Matthew showed him the binder. *Project: Superbook* on the cover. “With-th all the experience and tips I got...got from being in Wizards, I managed t-to create my fi-first draft of a campaign setting an-a series of Adventurers League modules. It-It’s something I got ins...inspired t’do when I heard of the Satanic Panic.”

Larry asked to see the book. With a bet of hesitation at first, the boy slowly offered it to him.

As he was thumbing through the pages, he noted five completed modules so far, all ready to be submitted to the Dungeon Masters Guild.

To be honest, I’ve never really read a D&D module before, in any edition, Lathander thought. But the way Matt wrote these makes it readable enough. It begins like I’d expect, a bunch of player characters banding together searching for fortune and glory...but then it looks like they’ve heard word of some holy man who...

He got to the page where he gave Jesus Christ a Stat Block. Several Stat Blocks. One for the Gospel Times, one for when he ascended into heaven, and one for when he returns to Earth at the end of the Left Behind scenario to kick some Global Community ass.

“I am impressed, Matthew. You’ve done your homework with this.”

“Yeah, I-I only hope I’m even close.” Matthew’s voice still tripped over every other word, but talking about something in common always gives a bit of a confidence boost. “You t-try stat blocking J-Jesus Christ.”

This kid thought of everything! He even had a note on where he put the nail prints! I think he'll win Jesus' bar bet.

"In t-the campaign, the party find t-themselves following Him as-he goes a-along His own st-story, which is a stylized v-variant of th-the Gospels."

"I see..." Larry said as he kept flipping the pages. "This is *unique!*"

"S-so far, I only have t-the first parts of it. I st-still hava problem wi-with how to depict t-the Passion Play."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"Well," Matthew thought for a moment. "I want t-to have an option f-for the player characters to actually res..actually rescue Jesus from the Pharisees. In-In-Instead of the Cross, Jesus might make a diff...a different heroic sacrifice and t-take a fatal blow meant for the party. Of course, He g-gets back up in th-three days, unless the party has th-their own *Rai-Raise Dead* spells, o'course, but but be-between his death and his resurrection, I'm planning s-something nasty. World War Z s-scenario caused by a mourning and piss-pissed off Yahweh, anyone?"

Larry nodded, but he really noticed the stuttering coming out of Matthew. *Lord, I've seen a lot of people with rough childhoods get stutters this bad.*

"Well...I *d-do* try to keep as close t-to the source as I can...although I did have'ta do some artistic licenses. I hope G..I hope God doesn't mind."

"Artistic licenses or not, I can see several Christian Groups who would love to see this, Matthew..."

Matt sighed at this point. "I wish th-that was t-true."

Larry noticed the drop of the child's shoulders. "No luck so far?"

"I-I-It's not that," Matthew said as he slid the binder back in place and zippered up the luggage. "T-T-There's actually a p-pastor who can help me, Mike said he'll fill him inta...into what's happening..."

"I can understand if you don't want to...talk about it."

"W-W-Why do I get t-the inkling that telling you...telling you this is...th-this is a good idea?"

Larry just shrugged. "I'm no reverend, but I know a troubled soul when I see it. Maybe telling me what's bothering you would do you some good."

Matthew just sighed and looked at the floor under him. "It's...it's just what counts as f-f-family to me."

"Your family doesn't approve?"

Matthew grumbled a bit. "I d-don't hava family. I j-just have a mother."

Larry had to just blink over what Matthew said.

"I'm one'a those poor b-bastard kids of divorce who was j-just handed to the...to the mother and left to-to rot. I doubt she even W-wanted me out-outside of alimony and ch-child support payments, but then Dad just..."

He sighed again. "He just d-dined on a bullet in front of her."

Larry just drew in breath through his teeth.

"I d-didn't hear it tho, not until I got h-home from school. B-But ever since then, I c-can't go a day in the house wi-without her ragging on me about one thing or another. She's convinced that I-I shouldn't be thinking of anything other than earning money, p-p-paying the bills, and d-dropping th-this stutterin act. She keeps harping th-that I should be 'the Man of the house,' an g-grow the fuck up...as if I w-were cap-able of doing do."

Larry was aghast, but not at the cuss. He'd heard worse. All deities heard worse. Lathander could only shudder pondering what sort of verbal abuse God keeps getting.

"Matthew...aren't you...just..."

"Fourteen. I know. Not t-that she cared. I keep t-telling her that I need t-to stay in school and learn a t-trade, but she won't see that, or hear...hear anything cuz I j-just cant-t-talk nomral. She keeps kicking me out because I-I'm not doing three part...three part-t-time jobs and cookin' an cleanin' while she goes 'looking for a new Daddy...' Or rather, looking t-to get pregnant so she can hook inta...into some other poor sod's wallet."

Larry just shook his head. "That should be more of an outrage than you think, Matthew. Have you called anyone about it? Aren't there any, like Child Services, or something like that."

"I tried. None of them would as much as look at me. They...they can't get...p-past my stutter."

"But the school you gone to...shouldn't they..."

"They jus-just said that I m-m-missed too much school 'cus I was in shelters s-so much that they j-just flunked me out."

Larry grimaced, looking disgusted and hurt.

"Th-t-that was last T-Thursday. Yesterday my mom just st-started to drag me from place-ta-to place trying t' get me hired in every restaurant and coffee bar, railing at-at me over being lazy and ungrateful all the time, and t-to fucking knock off th-this right fuck-k-king now."

"Fourteen years of age, constantly thrown out of your home, kicked out of school, and with a speech impediment. That doesn't make you very employable."

"And th-then she decided that I spend t-too much t-time making stuff for 'some stupid wasta time game' and tried t-to burn my rulebooks...and t-the binder."

"She tried to burn your books!?" Larry was now livid. "This isn't the dark ages, Matthew Christopher..."

Crap! Lathander scolded himself. *You just said his last name before he said it! Lathander, stop sucking!*

"...book burning shouldn't be happening in the twenty-first century!"

Matthew wasn't plussed by the response. "Have you heard of Ev-Evergreen State College? They make a bonfire of wrongth-thinking books every other month. I doubt they have any...anything beyond Harry P-Potter an' Handmaid's T-Tale in th-their library."

Lathander didn't know what to think about it. If there's anyone who knows about the Satanic Panic, it's him. To think that there are some groups who have not learned a thing form history. Or even remember history. In places that are *supposed to teach you about History*.

Matthew just sighed. "I can't. I just c-can't. I c-can't let her t-take away something s-so dear to me. Something I spent fffour years over." Matthew looked up to Larry with a look of guilt and shame. His voice was barely a whisper, and what he said next, it had a sob in it. "D-Don't tell anyone this." He covered his mouth. "Th-there's a gun...in my b-bag. I had...t-ta hold back...at my own mother...at..."

Larry just shook his head. "Oh my god."

Matthew bowed his head. "It's a...it's a miracle that I left with th-this," he tapped the luggage with his foot, "and the clothes on my back, but i-it's all I have now. She was t-tearing apart everything else I owned, claiming that I'm n-not a ch-child of anyone as I left." He sighed. "Th-that was l-last night."

Larry paused for a moment, taking in what this poor child had to say.

“I could see you roaming the city in the middle of the night. Keeping away from the gangs and the drugs and all the homeless bums. Spending the last coin you’d think you’d ever have to stave off hunger before you started to think of doing something desperate. In the night, you’ve no doubt cried your eyes out to the only one you think would understand you.”

That’s exactly what happened. Matthew thought. *Who is this guy?!*

“You feared what you’d become if your Mother did burn those books, and all of your dreams and meaning and purpose along with it. I’ve seen people’s souls just get smaller and smaller without that hope. You’d wonder if you’d even be worth the blood this Deity shed long ago.” Larry looked at Matt. “You were afraid that you’d curse God and die.”

By this time, Matt somehow figured out something, something that reminded him too much over what he watched in his research. This Larry knows too much about him, and he’s mentioning God in a positive manner too much as well. There’s just one explanation that came to his mind.

Mathew looked straight into his new friend’s eyes. There was a glint in his eyes that one would show when they’re calling someone on their bull.

He reached over at Larry, reached over his shoulder, and acted like he pulled a chain. Almost as if Lathander was a desk lamp.

Larry certainly glowed like he was one.

The angel could just hear the Father’s snickering as He decided to let the glow appear to Matthew, revealing ‘Larry’ as an angel. *He’s onto you, beeeeaatch.*

Nevertheless, Matthew was surprised that he was able to do that. “I-I thought that only hap-happened on television.”

“How were you able to recognize an angel in the Wild?!”

“Th-there’s just one exp-expl-explanation why y-you said what-what-cha said. To me. With a st-straight face. Not even a c-cop or t-truant officer would p-pull that off.” The look of relief in Matt’s face kept Larry’s mouth from going dry. “You didn’t have t-to hide it from me, pal. I’m j-just glad that y-you’re here. Is Larry your real name th-though, I’d like to know...more about...who He...”

That was when he realized what was pinging at his mind so, the brightness in his eyes, the warmth of the sun on his skin, the way his hair is styled, the symbol on his bolo...that symbol...

Matthew tore into his bag and pulled out one of the books. He flipped through the pages like mad. He got to a section on Forgotten Realm deities, and when he stopped on a particular page. He gasped.

He examined the symbol on Larry’s bolo. His eyes went wide.

He then flipped it over to show a familiar image. The all familiar image of Lathander holding a baby. He held it up against ‘Larry.’

It was a perfect match.

“*Lathander?* Y-You’re *Lathander*. You look j-just like...just like in the b-books...”

“*Now* you’re go all gasping and going ‘Oh My God!’ at me?” Lathander shook his head. “You outed me as an Angel sent from God, and you didn’t bat an eye. You finally figure out which angel I am, and *now* you freak?” He tilted his head. “Humans these days. Desensitized by movies and television.”

“You’re...you’re a...”

Lathander nodded as he gave a wry smile. “Yes...as crazy as that sounds.”

Matthew just stood there just in utter shock, his brain just refusing to believe what he’s seeing.

“I know what you’re thinking. How can an Angel sent by God be a deity of the Forgotten Realms? Fortunately, I was about to show you a decent explanation over how *that’s* possible...which means for starters...”

He snapped his fingers, and in Matthew’s eyes, all time stopped. A woman in a *Magic: The Gathering* shirt was escorting a group of visitors, one of them was tossing a d20 that hovered midair. A secretary fumbled her phone, causing it to flip away from her hand. It just hung there, five inches from her fingertips. A bird who got inside the lobby froze in mid-flap. If Mitzy the dragon would spring to life from its suspended position above the pair, it could only look down and continue to witness the conversation.

“Now then, second order of business, find a place to stash that suitcase.” He pulled out a small toy chest out of his pocket, and when he flipped it open, another larger chest appeared in front of both of them.

“Leomund’s Se-sec-secret Chest,” Matthew said with excitement in his voice.

“Good eye. Stuff that suitcase in there, if you don’t mind. No sense lugging it around us where we’re going.” Matthew opened the chest and hefted the carry-on in there. “It’s a custom spell that stores the chest in a place I designed. It won’t get lost in the Ethereal Plane. Also, to be mentioned is that the gun you just mentioned needed to be put in a safe place one way or another. I doubt you’ll be needing it for the immediate future.”

The chest closed, and with a tap of the smaller chest, it vanished. Lathander handed the toy chest to Matthew. “Just keep that in your pocket, it’ll come in handy later. But now that your books are safe, I can move on to my explanation.” He then moved up to Matt’s side and placed an arm around him. “God’s the type who prefers to show rather than tell. It’s best I do the same.”

He then gave Matthew a nod. “You haven’t eaten recently, have you? I’d hate to see you puke while all this.”

“Eaten?” Matt finally found his voice. “J-Just an hour and a half ago I-I...”

Chapter 3

Time Unknown

Location Unknown

For a moment, Matthew thought he was on a guided tour throughout the astral plane and maybe even several other ones. He felt like he was falling every direction at once, grateful to have Lathander tucking him under his arms. The flapping of his wings filling his ears. While Lathander was just taking off into the air like an angel would usually do, Matthew thought he was just launched into low earth orbit.

All around them, Matt could see the *Wizards of the Coast* building turn from a bustling business to an empty warehouse, and then deconstruct itself. Followed by the city around them fleeing away with the forest reclaiming the civilization. In time, all of Seattle vanished before Matthew's eyes, reverting to pristine wilderness.

"I feel it's best to start at the beginning," He heard Lathander say as he took into the clouds. "Before Wizards and TSR, before the birth of your country, before the time of the Bible, before the time of humanity, before even the time of the dinosaurs, and long before there was a Faerun. In the Beginning, even before Genesis Chapter 1, Verse 1, I was a high-tier archangel in your God's presence. As you might have guessed, I'm in the Light Division. An Angel of Light. In fact, I was second only to Lucifer. I'm sure you know what happened to him."

Matthew feared that his eyes as well as his ears would pop because of the altitude—he never flown before, even in a plane—but before that could registered in his mind, he felt his body go...strange...like he had a body...but then not. The clouds parted to reveal a vast battlefield, a battle that appeared to go in reverse. It was like someone was rewinding a video.

"I don't know if what you're about to see would be terrifying or awesome, but either way we won't be in any danger." Lathander said as he landed between two angels of light ready to go at each other's throats. "Nobody can see or hear us, and you won't have to worry about getting struck by an errant arrow or blow. Or step on some butterfly and alter the timeline for that matter."

When Lathander set Matt down, he took a moment to drink in the atmosphere by taking a few deep breaths. The air had the scent of steel, smoke, and blood.

There were countless angels all around the two. All of them frozen in mid battle surrounding the two Lathander focused on. They were both tall chiseled and majestic white-winged figures, towering above the others. They both had identical white and gold outfits.

As he looked, Matt found a notable difference between the two. One of them was a longer haired version of Lathander, he was certain on that. The other had a goatee, enranged eyes, and a golden sash over his left shoulder, with an insignia showing some rank. They were both looking at each other as if they were seeing a reflection in the mirror and is disgusted with what they saw.

"L-L-Let me guess," Matthew said, "The one with t-the evil beard is Lucifer. Pardon my french, b-but he looks like a total Dick."

"He is, even before his Fall. He only gotten worse afterward."

"S-Sometimes I wonder w-why he did b-become Satan."

"You're about to find out," Lathander said. "Cover your ears if you need to, this may get loud."

Matthew cupped his ears and nodded.

The world erupted into violence. The metal on metal cacophony of medieval warfare filled Matt's ears, as swords, pikes, bows, staves, feathers, spittle, blood, sweat, and bodily fluids flew past, and then *through*, the young man's body. Ducking down was instinctive, and he crouched to focus on the two Angels of Light, intent to hear what they were saying.

"It's over, Lucifer!" Younger Lathander challenged through the crossed swords. "Your rebellion is crushed! There's no way that you can win now! Did you really think that The Father will let you take over the throne while he's sitting on it?!"

Lucifer's face contorted to a twisted mask of rage. "I knew you want to use this rebellion to double cross me! I trusted you, Amaunator! You were a brother to me!"

Matthew made a T sign with his hands, "Time Out!"

Lathander – his current day version – waved his hand, causing everything to freeze in place again.

"He called you Amaunator," Matthew commented. "I was wondering what that was about."

"Oh, that. Amaunator is my given name. I kept it well into my time as a deity. However, over the centuries I changed so much as a deity that a name change became necessary. Yeshu did the same thing if you think about it, if you compare how he's depicted in both Testaments."

Matthew raised an eyebrow. "Yeshu?"

"That's what the Father would be called in Faerunian Common. If there was anyone who'd actually pray to him.

"But he's not...not a deity in y-your world?"

"Right, I'll explain as we go on."

Matthew nodded. "O-Okay then, you can press Play again."

Lathander rewound a couple seconds before starting time again.

"Whoa! I think I saw that death blow from a video game!" Matthew started to feel queasy from witnessing all the bloodshed. "This battle's get-getting ugly. God had b-b-better bring a stop of this."

"He's just about to. Right about. Now."

Lathander grabbed Matthew by the belt and did another launch straight up. From the vantage point above Matthew was able to see nearly every angel in Heaven crash into Lucifer and his group. By now, Lucifer was almost covered in the blood of countless angels that he managed to kill, trying to take as many of them with them when he got pushed over into the great abyss himself.

Before his great fall, the young Amaunator descended to the would-be usurper. With angels holding restraining Lucifer, Amaunator laid hands on him and with great strength, pulled one of the wings from the traitor's back. Relieving him of his once-lofty golden sash, Amaunator thought about giving him a mighty push off. But then he fell into a temptation of his own.

He punted him between the legs.

"You will regret this, Jehovah!" Lucifer bellowed as he tumbled into the darkness. "This is all *your* fault. *You* were the one who caused all this. You brought this *Evil* in this world. *Your* masterpiece will end up destroying everything! *You've created a monster, God, and before I'm done, I will make you admit it!*"

Lathander let his former superior's voice echo throughout the vacating area until it faded, along with the din of battle, before he explained the matter. "He was referring to humans, the man God made in His image," he said. "Everybody was on board when Yeshu was making all this, this world, this reality, the heavens and the earth. Everybody loved this green paradise that you call Earth. Enjoyed the flora and fauna that occupied the realm. They marveled at the elaborate design, and how the many cycles and systems were built to maintain this world for perpetuity." He paused. "Contrary to the wooden literal interpretation, creating such a perfect machine like this universe takes millions and millions of years, real time. I can get behind the idea of 'days,' it's 'twenty-four hour periods,' I have problems with."

"Every n-now an' then I-I-I think 'bout that," Matt said. "I was more in...in favor of Carl Sagan's scope. Part art, p-part science."

"The father took a major risk when creating mankind." Lathander continued. "Making people who can think. Not by instinct, but of conscious thought. People who can reason, learn, feel, love, create...and at

the same time, hate, destroy, kill, and undo what God has made. Some religions speak of Original Sin, caused by when Adam and Eve ate the apple. That's just allegory, that never happened."

"W-What do you mean by th-that?" Matthew asked. "Th-Those are the kind of high-level t-thoughts I think of sitting on...sitting on the john."

Lathander nodded. "Best place for them. You ask me, the idea of a Sin Nature was brought up by organized religions meant to control the masses. I never promoted such an idea to *my* worshippers. I believe in Duality of Nature. There is Light and Darkness in every person's soul. There's was a philosopher who quoted that, I think."

"I think he was Carl Jung."

"Yesh, that's the guy!"

"Remind me t-to download some b-books for ya."

"I try to instill the need in people to be The Light, since the world around them is pretty Dark already. Obviously, it's impossible to completely eradicate Darkness, but you can bring the two sides of you into balance both personally and in the world around you."

Matthew took a few seconds to take it all in. "I take it y-you had your own misgivings about...bout us humans."

Lathander sighed. "Indeed, I have. However, I didn't want to turn on the Father like Lucifer did. Once I felt that everything had return to calm, and the dust settled, I went to the Father personally."

And with that, Lathander took to the skies and streaked across the quieting battleground, through pastures and forest, until they reached a metropolis of white marble, streets of gold, and gates of jasper. He streaked head on toward a pillar of pure white light until it all but filled Matthew's vision.

For a moment, he felt he was floating in a milky white space. A brief feeling of solitude overtook him, though his body instinctively tensed, as he often did when in the presence of others; it was clear he was not alone.

"Great," Matthew muttered, "I should've expected y-you t-t-to show up. Please d-d-don't smite me all at once."

No mere mortal can imagine what it's like to enter the presence of God. Some would even say that there is no mortal who could even survive a second gazing up to see him.

That didn't stop Matthew from trying. He looked straight up at that bright light in front of him, a hand above his eyes to create some shade. It was more out of curiosity than anything else. What would God look like? Does he have a physical form, or assume a physical form? If he talked from this close, would he hear it in his ears or in his head?

This is what I like about you, Matthew. A voice called to him. You kept your curiosity.

The voice seemed to appear from everywhere and nowhere. At the same time booming like thunder and a soft voice right next to him. Matthew could sense His presence, a being as wise as the ages and powerful as the mountains, but thankfully to Matthew's soul, it also felt like a long-lost friend, as if God was welcoming him in.

"Yesu! How long have you been here?" Lathander asked, his usual stoic façade a bit sheepish in the presence of the Lord.

I expected you to bring him here, so I just sat here waiting for you two.

Matthew could feel a hand pat him on the head, when he did, all of his fears and worries about being in front of The Lord just vanished, as if they have jumped out of his mind and ran screaming away from the light, leaving behind an intense sense of calm and contentment. In that moment, he had nothing to fear, not from Yesu, not from anything.

If I had enough time, I'd give you time to wrap your brain around all this infinity around you, Matthew, but time isn't on my side right now. I'll set things up in a way you'd best understand.

Matthew could see what looks like a corner office appear around him. With hard wood furniture, bookshelves packed with tomes, windows that opened up to outer space, and sitting on a chair on a large office desk was a figure that looked a bit too much like Patrick Stewart.

"There. Now we can get together," he said as he tapped on the table by a chair. An invitation to join him.

He had a binder that Matthew found all familiar and a couple Post-it Notes.

"Oh, my compliments on your handwriting. Not too many people have good handwriting these days, since the advent of home computers."

"T-thank you. T-That's my c-campaign setting."

"And a grand one it is. I just wanted to jot down a couple notes on it. For when you put it into a publishable format."

"H-How'd you..."

God gave a charitable smile. "Infinite being, remember?"

Matthew slapped his head. "R-right."

"Bible Stories in a Role Playing Game format. It is a very fascinating idea. But for another time, let us get back on why the Morninglord brought you here."

"Yeah, th-that's what blew my mind, sir." Matthew wondered how he should address the Almighty, but when the time came, he just fell on his default of 'Sir.' "You had L-Lathander one time as...not just a-a-an Angel of Light...He could've replaced Lucifer!?"

"He still can, should he choose to do so. Like a child who grew up and went on his own, he is welcome to make his own path. I couldn't be more proud of him, but every now and then I still wonder what Earth would be like with the Morninglord as my right-hand angel."

"But he had som...something k-keeping him from d-doing that."

Yeshu nodded. “Yes, he did. As much as I frown upon open rebellion, I also detest blind obedience. I welcome honest debate and people asking questions about my actions. In fact, I enjoy the occasional opportunity to connect with someone and have them see things from my perspective.”

He closed the binder and tapped at it, causing it to vanish.

“However,” He sighed, “There is the One Big Question that, even in your time, I find myself unable to answer. I’d probably would never have an answer. The one on Life, the Universe, and Everything.”

“I always th-thought it was f-forty-two.”

God laughed. A gut-busting, happy, wall-bouncing laugh.

“A fine guess, for a mortal that enjoys reading,” He replied in amusement. “However, the actual answer is quite complex. Perhaps you shall see.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in, Number One.”

Matthew’s hand met his forehead as he stifled a laugh.

God smiled as the long haired and recently sashed Amaunator, walked in. “I hope you’ve cooled down since...”

“I was about to ask the same thing about you, Amaunator. That was a tough time, for all of us.”

“Indeed,” the angel said as he took a seat across from Him. Matthew didn’t know if ‘Amaunator’ was aware of him, but the human in the room didn’t want to complicate the matters by speaking up.

“So, how’s it feel, this new appointed position in My kingdom?” God asked. “Even though the way it was earned was regrettable.”

“Tell me about it,” Amaunator confided, easing back into his chair. “Why do I get the feeling that he’d actually do that if he were provoked enough?”

“I noticed that for a long time, but I believed he could be kept in check. While he was indeed capable, he had quite the desire to push the limits of his role.” He leaned forward. “As an angel, Amaunator, you cannot rise any higher under me. *That*, I’m afraid, was something that annoyed Lucifer more than anything else in his life.”

“He went about it the wrong way, milord.”

“Those who grasp for it, will never have it, and those who never would reach for it shall have it in their hands.” He kept his eyes keen on his subordinate. “I can tell that you don’t want to make the same mistake.”

Amaunator sighed. “You said that I can ask you anything, if I can, sir.”

“Always, Amaunator. It is clear you have something on your mind. Might as well let it out.”

Amaunator nodded, and then drew a breath. “Sir, I know that you have your reasons why You created Man. I’d like to know what that reason is. Even if it’s one of those reasons I couldn’t understand, I just want to be about to accept you creating humans with free will and a capacity for both good and evil.”

Amaunator closed his eyes and reached up to the sash.

“Father, I’m going to be your new Angel of Light, I’m going to be replacing Lucifer, and I have no desire to usurp You. I need to be on the same page, or at least the same book, as you. Even if that answer can’t be said easily, at least offer me something that I could accept. Otherwise...”

He pulled the sash off and placed it on the desk.

“I’m afraid that I won’t be able to accept this position. If I cannot at least understand why you’ve done what you’ve done, I’ll have to relinquish this position You gave me. I’m sorry, sir.”

Yahweh listened at what Amaunator said with intent and care. He knew what happened disquieted him so. And he wasn't the only one to say it.

Amaunator was the twentieth angel who voiced that concern, Matthew. By now I realized that this was something stewing in these angels long before Lucifer got any ideas. You've probably seen this yourself. Lucifer's rebellion was an extreme result of this.

God got up, walked around the desk, passed Matthew, and placed a hand on Amaunator. "You're right about one thing, son. It's a very complicated answer, something I can't easily say in enough words to satisfy your need to know. In fact, the only way I can answer that question is not to tell, but to show."

He then walked toward a bookshelf and pulled out a very ancient looking book. A binder that looked older than any binder should be.

"And by showing, I intend to not only show you how I did it, but to offer you a chance to do something you may not have considered."

Jehovah plopped that binder on the table with a slight cloud of dust, right in front of Matthew. The binder was well kept but looked like an antique. The chrome in the metal rings were toned, the binder was of thin wood panels hinged in place and cracked, and the pages yellow with age. It was all covered in faded leather with a series of glyphs burned on the cover:

Λόγος

It's Greek, Matthew, he heard God say in his head. 'Logos.' It's an ancient concept, as old as I. Even though it's roughly translated into Word, it's not the kind you speak. You'll find out if you look into it. I'm sure that you will know what's written, even if you've never read Celestial before.

"What I did in the act of creation isn't exactly sparking a star alight with a snap of my fingers," God said. "Creating takes a lot of thought, attention, planning, and intent. It requires research, computations, formulas, graphs, and a lot of other things. I had to create not with my voice, but with my mind. I made very extensive notes on what I did, and even today I still go over what I learned as new discoveries come up." He tapped the binder. "This is all of my notes on how I created everything, Amaunator. From the big bang to how the animals became to even a detailed design on mankind."

Matt's jaw dropped when he heard that. Not only did He create the heavens and the earth, he *wrote it all down?*

Amaunator raised an eyebrow. "You took and kept notes?"

"Show me anyone who doesn't have a need keep notes on things, even an infinite being like myself."

God glanced over at Matthew as he pondered opening the binder. It was organized nice and neat with tabs and labels and flags sticking out. The smell of old paper and various inks filled his nose, and he wondered whether or not he'd go insane just by cracking it open, even though it was all he could do not to just do that.

"There are several other angels who had the same problem as you, Amaunator. There's a pair that are constantly bickering but had a long-running debate on the subject. If you look hard enough, there are even several fallen angels who already left Lucifer, I'm certain that you can draw some of them in. If you wish to do so, I'd like you to gather those kindred minds and souls together. I will let you have this binder. It will give you the tools and materials to do what I have done."

Matthew saw God's hand reach out and, at first, he thought he used his divine prowess to duplicate the book, but then he thought. Maybe it's just an illusion. This is a sort of Virtual Reality, after all. The book in front of him still felt solid to his touch.

Amaunator got up, looking at God with disbelief. "You want me...I mean us...to create our own world."

Yes." God responded, gesturing broadly. "You've seen me create the heavens and the earth, and now I invite you and your like-minded friends to do the same. I can easily set up an alternate dimension with the

same amount of material for you to duplicate the process.” He then shrugs. “You can even modify your creation if you wish, if you believe it an improvement.” He sighs. “A word of warning though: If you go along with this, it will change you. In the same ways that it changed me. It may be quite intense at times, and you might not remain as mere angels at the end. Knowledge and Insight is known to do that. But if you do go through all of that, I assure you: You will understand and appreciate what I’ve done and why I did it a lot better. The full reason in *word* might not be there, but the *spirit* of the reason will be yours.”

God placed a hand on Amaunator’s shoulder. “I suggest you think about this for a bit, ponder what you’re about to do before you decide to do this. Whatever you do, either way, you’ll always have a place here”

When he heard that last part, Amaunator looked right at God. He stammered a bit, but then managed to nod a response.

Amaunator then took the book and walked out the door, while the modern version of him, Lathander, watched it all from ten feet away. He looked over at Yeshu and nodded. He wondered how much Matthew heard of that because he’s given in to the temptation to open that binder.

“You’ve got t-the whole Periodic...the Periodic Table of Elements in here.” Matthew flipped a page or two. “I d-don’t know much ‘bout this...this kind of math, but y-you showed a lotta work in these formulas on how ta...how to...about these Gravitational Pulls. I might-ve needed t-to use Excel to get to th-this level.” Some more pages flipped and a brief scan. “You wrote d-down your discovery of th-the three laws of Thermodynamics! This is...all th-this looks like...like a computer script. Creation’s Source C-Code.”

“You see, Lathander,” God said with a smile, “Matthew figured it out rather quickly, didn’t he? It is a shame such desire for learning and wonder is not more common in his time.”

As he kept flipping the pages, Matthew could see in his mind’s eye all of creation, the known universe, from the outer reaches of space to the minute orbit of an atom’s electron. How the many cycles created in the makeup of reality, from the intricate as a swiss watch orbits of suns, planets, and moons form the possibility of life, to the way water flows into the oceans, get evaporated into clouds, and then returns to the earth in rain. How Order and Chaos provide a balance point upon which reality spins around to a gyroscopic stability. He saw it all, the whole machine that was all that was. The glorious masterpiece of Creation.

“Everything’s connected.” Matthew said in a reverent whisper, but then his face fell a bit. He closed the book, with a frown. “I only wish...I only wish...I was a p-p-part of it.”

“By now you must realize what Amaunator did next.”

God took a moment to pace the room as He spoke. “This angel gathered around all of his friends, some he knew from his own childhood, some who he met along the way in his life, some who found the hard way of Lucifer’s path distasteful. There was even one that became his true love.”

Matthew looked at Lathander with a blink. “Angels c-can fall in love?”

“Wait till you meet Chauntea,” Lathander replied.

Yeshu continued. “Amaunator didn’t need that long to think about it. Using the Logos book, he gathered his friends, his allies, and even his rivals, and formed his own world. Then another. And another. Over time, a whole new universe came to be.” Yeshu paused in his pacing. “That universe became known as The Realms, and you may have seen various fantasy works inspired by it, be it in classical artwork, fiction, and games. The world from JRR Tolkien and Narnia from CS Lewis are in there. As well as the worlds you know more about: Toril, Oerth, Krynn, Eberron, even Ravenloft. All the possible worlds you would play in. They’re all in there.”

“...and all of th-that were made by...*angels*?”

Lathander sat down next to Matthew, “Well, to be more honest, Matthew, we started as Angels. Even though I knew that it would change me, having it happen was another matter altogether.”

“It happened when the sentient beings that they created, and in this case is more than just Humans,” Yeshu continued. “You also have Dwarves, Elves, Halfings, Gnomes, Dragonborn, even Tieflings as well. They were all designed with the same capacity for Good and Evil, the same sentience and intelligence as you have, Matthew. When they looked up to their creators in the same way Adam looked up to Me, they saw in those people’s eyes the same thing I felt.”

Lathander nodded. “It was at that moment, when I saw people reaching out to me in the sunrise, I...I couldn’t deny them. I found my answer, but the answer came with a price. When the people there started praying to us at first, I thought it was silly, but then I felt my whole being change. We all just felt ourselves becoming something more than just angels, in fact, we felt we’ve evolved so far above who we were as you would’ve been above primates, if you weren’t created separately from that species.”

“That’s debatable,” Matthew mused.

“We all ascended when that happened, we could no longer be mere angels any more than you could return to your mother’s womb.”

“As I said previously, Matt,” God interjected, “about grasping for something but losing it, but what you don’t intend to have will fall into your hand. Lucifer wanted to become a God, he wanted everything. He ended up losing it all and becoming a mockery of his former self.”

“My ambition only went up to being God’s left-hand man, Jesus Christ being his right.” Lathander sighed. “If it weren’t for that nagging question of mine, I’d be just content to be God’s Number One, His right-hand man. I never wanted to become a God. I ended up becoming one anyway.”

Matthew looked over at Lathander’s embarrassed expression over it all, and almost on instinct, placed a hand on the Morninglord’s shoulder.

“You just proved my point, Matthew,” Yeshu said. “An angel came to you to help you along your life, and here you are, consoling that same angel in return. That’s how humans are capable of understanding and emphasizing with things, something only sentient beings with free will and the capacity for Good and Evil are capable of doing. And to think that you can do that without the need for your mouth.”

Matthew nodded. “Any...anyway, I wonder what you t-think about it. I know you d-d-don’t like other gods muscling into your business. It’s the first c-commandment, after all.”

Yeshu turned to Lathander and just smiled. “True. But when I look at what Lathander and his group have become, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride in them. However, I am far too powerful to exist in their multiverse. I found that out myself when I found myself wanting something that was being sold in a place named Sigil. So I just walked over there.”

Matthew’s body temperature dropped several degrees. “Sir, in all due respect, you shouldn’t be able to do that. The Lady of Pain keeps Gods out of Sigil.”

“And that should’ve included me should it? And yet there I was, buying the best pie I’ve ever tasted. If you see this tiefling named Strix, say ‘Hello’ to her for me.”

It was all Lathander could do to put Matthew’s jaw back in place. “I’m afraid he’s not exaggerating. Yeshu really can enter Sigil. If he could do that, heavens know what he’d do, without even thinking about it.”

“So I made a promise, formed a pact for myself,” Yeshu continued. “I stay out of their world, and they remain in theirs. That has been the one law I have held firm for billions of years.”

Matthew had to say it. “I c-can hear that ‘until now’ from a...from a mile away.”

“It has come to my attention that someone is summoning some evil bring from The Realms to here,” God continued. “There are some details missing, but they seem confident it will happen this coming week, during an eclipse most likely.”

“That’s just this Monday,” Matthew said. “That don’t give you that much time.”

God nodded. “Lathander’s group tried to stop it from their side but were unsuccessful. They then decided to come here to work on this side of the ritual. The only problem is whatever or not I get involved, which I’m afraid is necessary.”

Matthew’s mind ran through several possible scenarios. His mind kept going to an old gospel track where a Pagan Dungeon Master wooed several kids into summoning an eldritch horror. “W-wh-would you be able to...able to get in-involved?”

God took a breath and exhaled. “I need someone to partner with Lathander, a human from Earth. ‘A son of Adam,’ I believe is the proper term. And not just him, everyone in his group needs a partner so that they can be powerful enough to stop that summon from occurring, and failing that, push the beast back before it destroys my world. It is a dangerous task, even for the Highest Angel in all...”

Matthew slapped his right hand on the desk. “I-I’m in.”

That surprised both Jesus and Lathander.

“L-Lord, you need someone w-well versed in D&D to work wi..with Lathander and...and his friends. Someone who knows th-the Forgotten Realms like th-the back...like th-the back of his hand. I-I’ve been studyin’ the Realms f-for several years now.” Matt nodded. “Here I...Here I am, Lord. S-Se-Send me.”

“I thank you for stepping up, son.” God turned up to Lathander with a smile. “He’d going to need to know some magic in order to do this, Lathander, since you’ve got more experience in that, I’ll give you my blessing to...”

“Hold on for a moment there,” Lathander said. “I’d be glad to have Matt as a partner and all, in fact, if he were in the Realms, he’d be in our church by now. But I can’t do that with Matthew. I can’t be Matt’s God, Yeshu. *You* are his God. I don’t want to take what is *yours*.”

“You don’t have to,” God said as he placed a hand on Lathander’s arm, and the other on Matthew’s. “There is a way around this rule, something you may not have considered. You might not be a deity in my world, but you’re still a Celestial.”

Lathander pondered. “What do you mean by...”

Chapter 4

The backdrop of the office dimmed around Matthew, as the two deities continued to talk. No matter how he strained to listen, no matter how he squinted to see, eventually his senses became clouded and obscured by nothingness.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, gentle enough to prevent a startled reaction. Slowly, a warmth built from that point of contact. The boy could feel the warmth on his back, the warmth of a sunrise.

Turning his back to the dark, he faced the light of a sunrise, showing the light amid rolling hills and valleys. The sun grew brighter, and warmer, as it shined in his face. Before him, a hand extended from the light, as if to lead.

It felt incredibly comforting, as the bright warm light that emanated from the angel just washed through the arm and into him. Though that contact lasted only an instant, the sensation persisted as he was enveloped in the sunshine. Matthew wondered what this sensation could have been. He tried to blink his vision back.

“This is not the way I traditionally do it, Lord,” Lathander’s voice returned, ushering in the return of Matthew’s other senses. The walls of the office returned, as if nothing had transpired.

“Why, Lathander,” Yeshu smiled at the angel. “I thought you were all into trying new things. This is the only possible way you can connect with someone in my world without breaking any of the rules.”

Matthew still felt the light, flowing into his arm as if it were liquid. It didn’t felt like an expected divine presence. It felt more like a natural energy, primal and raw. The sheer amount of energy was both awe-inspiring and terrifying in its potential.

This wasn’t a divine connection. Matthew just knew it. This connection from Lathander. It wasn’t divine.

It was *arcane*.

It was almost as if...he made a pact

A warlock pact.

“Lathander,” Matthew finally said, “Have y-you ever had a warlock before?”

“No,” Lathander replied. “Have you ever casted magic before?”

Matthew shook his head.

“This is the most I can do to aid you,” Yeshu replied as he stood up, “Others had and will come, and I will do the same for them. I’ll be here for guidance and to observe, as you would expect me to do.” He then turned to Lathander and handed him that very familiar sash. “The rest is up to you, Lathander.”

“Yes, sir,” the Angel of Light replied, turning to look toward his first ever warlock.

“Good. I’ll leave you to train him then. This will be very dangerous, so make sure he’s ready.”

With the most subtle of twinkles, Yeshu faded from sight. Matthew could still sense his presence, or rather his existence, even though his attention was shifting elsewhere.

“Great. All this stuff to do, so little time.” He said, pulling out something in his shirt pocket. . He touched it several times with his fingers. To Lathander, he seemed to be using some sort of conjuring device

“What is it you’re doing there?” Lathander asked, his curiosity taking hold.

“Forty-fourty-three hours, t-thirty-four minutes, twenty-eight seconds,” Matthew responded, showing the timer application on his cell phone, counting down to the start of the eclipse. “That ain’t-ta lot-lot-lotta time for us to...to get ready.”

“Had I known it was to be this complicated, Matt, I would’ve come here much sooner.” Lathander looked at the screen and made a grave nod. “If I knew I’m going to get a warlock, I’d show up sooner.” He looked at Matthew. “I do have the means to stretch time. It might not be much, but it’s better than , to ensure we have as much as needed to prepare.”

Matthew nodded.

“But first, let’s make it official. You might not have a typical connection with me, it doesn’t make you any less of a Lathanderite power, as far as I’m concerned.” Lathander held Matthew’s shirt sleeve, and his clothes flashed in an increasingly brightness. “And since you’re an official Lathanderite now, you shall wear vestments more suitable to your station.”

The flash receded from Matthew’s eyes. Gone were his Earthbound clothes, replaced with a white collared shirt trimmed with gold, bound with a leather belt with a gold belt buckle, draping over matching pants, over leather boots.

“I-I don’t know if this is a personal question, but I think I’m going t-to have a problem keeping this outfit clean,” Matthew said as he looked himself over.

“A common complaint.” Lathander responded dryly.

“Still might need-da laundrymat nearby.” Matthew straightened up the collar. “All that’s needed is’n insignia of some sort, something with your symbol if t-that’s possible.”

“This should be sufficient,” Lathander held out his hand, showing a six-pointed star made of a chromed metal, with a gold inlay of Lathander’s own holy symbol of a road leading up to the sunrise.

“I always wanted one of these,” Matthew replied, beaming brightly as Lathander pinned it to him.

Soon after, Matthew’s vision blurred again as Lathander took his arm and launched into the air once more. Reaching apex, they soared high above a literarily heavenly sight. A series of spired buildings and cathedrals with tall trees accompanying them, with birds skirting the skyline and beams of light that surged straight up from the spires, as if reaching up to a near blinding presence of light in the distance.

Chapter 5

Twilight Forest

9:30 PM; 47:30 before the eclipse.

Matthew just hung under Lathander's arm, hearing the flapping of his wings, assuring, or rather assuming that the Morninglord knows where he's going. Because he couldn't barely see his angelic patron beyond his arm.

"I take it you've heard of Ravenloft," Lathander said.

"I-I have," Matthew said, after breathing in air that felt thicker than normal. "It's more t-than *Curse of Strahd*, though. It's a bunch of connected demiplanes designed t-to be a personal hell of a single being."

"True, but where we're going is a variation of that. It uses the same mechanics, especially with its own mists, but you'll find it to be a bit more idyllic. Let me set you down here."

Matthew felt himself lowered to what felt like solid ground below his feet. When he did, he could see the mists recede, revealing a lush forest underneath a night sky. He found himself in a path made of wood chips and loam.

"Welcome to the Twilight Forest, a refuge for some, a neutral corner for discussions, a place for get-togethers, and a perfect place to figure out what our pact should be like. There's a friend here that'll give me some pointers."

"And you said that t-time is slowed," Matthew said as he pulled out the cell phone and called up the countdown clock.

The clock was running again, but much slower. Matthew counted the time it took between ticks on the seconds.

"Mississippi one...Mississippi two...Mississippi three—"

Tick.

"...t-three seconds. Time's slowed down to a...to a third, which makes the total time...if I stay here all t-the time..." After some more tapping. "...just under six days."

"Still a short time," Lathander said, "but more than if we stay on Earth. I still might need to take a short cut or two. But first, let me show you around."

Matthew saw the mist fade back a good hundred yards in all directions, and much further down the path he was walking along. Lathander just floated a bit behind him. The mists hung where it stopped, as if ensuring him that he won't stray too far off. He could see a clearing up ahead, a glen of short rolling hills. "This reminds me of Ravenloft, although I d-don't think it's a traditional Domain of Dread."

"It works like it in mechanics," Lathander said, "but the purpose is different. A couple of us made this demiplane as a communal space, we maintain this space together..."

That's when a feminine and motherly voice came up from behind. "...Even though I tend to care for it the most, Sunshine!"

That was accompanied by another fluttering of wings. Before Matthew could turn his head to see who was incoming, Lathander was caught in a flying tackle. There was only a confused fluttering of wings for an instant, and then he saw what charged into his patron.

The other angel was shorter than he was. In fact, as she pulled back from her embrace with Lathander, he could've sworn she was a halfling. A rather tall halfling. She was different form the kind of halfling he'd recognize; she wore shoes and all, but most of the other features, the shortened statue, the slight point in her ears, the ever-present smile that just seemed to radiate from her, and the timber and pitch of her voice

that reminded him of the kind of wee folk that didn't mind being called wee folk. "How was Yeshu, Lathander?"

Lathander looked over at the woman angel with an expression that was clearly affection to Matthew. "As I expected him to be considering the situation. He sensed that his world would be a bit tense by itself without this summoning and getting involved directly would do more harm than good."

She sighed. "I feared that would happen."

"But He didn't leave us hanging. He sent me this young man to represent Him." Lathander called for Matthew, who approached the pair. "This is Matthew Christopher. Yeshu said that he brought him to me, but last time I checked I volunteered to be his angel." Lathander nodded to Matthew. "Nevertheless, we're partners now."

The halfling raised an eyebrow as if Lathander said something strange.

"Matthew, I'd like to introduce to you one of my dear friends and fellow angel-turned-deities. This is Chauntea, the Earthmother. We've been a pair for...well, since before there was a creation."

Matthew smiled and held out his hand. "Nice t-to meet cha, Ma'am."

Chauntea looked over at the human and appeared to smile with her whole face. "Oh, sonny, there's something you should know about me right off the bat. I'm a hugger."

Chauntea grabbed Matthew with both hands and pulled him close into a hug to tight she buried his head between her breasts.

"I should've warned you about that. Please don't suffocate him, Chauntea."

"Oh, he'll be all right," Chauntea said as she continued her embrace him. "Even though I'm from another world, I can still play the Mother Nature part. I'm sure Gaia won't mind." She pulled Matt up to look at Matt's eyes. "Won't ya, Sweetie."

Matt felt too warm and fuzzy for words as he looked back at the green swirling pools in her golden glowing face. He could hear a gentle breeze flowing through wide pastures, and she smelled of spice and fruits. It all overwhelmed his senses and his head, and he couldn't help but wish that he'd just stay there, in Chauntea's arms, forever.

"So Yeshu connected you to this child, Sunshine?" Chauntea said to Lathander. "I don't sense any divine connection on him, though. Is he drawing the power from the Father?"

Lathander shook his head. "The Father made the connection between us, but it's not a divine connection."

It took Chauntea a few seconds to put a proverbial finger on it, and she gasped when she did.

"A *warlock pact*?" Chauntea said as he pulled Matt back. "And here I thought you'd raise your partner in your traditional Lathanderite ways."

Matt's body was limp and warm, his arms heavy by his side, his eyes closed, and a contented smile on his face. His mind was full of a pastoral farmland, wet grass, and bright sunshine. It just filled him with a sense of belonging, like he was home.

"It's not like I'm going to get Earth's answer to Evelyn Marthain," Lathander said. "It was Yeshu's idea. It is the only way I could pair with a Son of Adam."

"But still, that puts you in uncharted waters." Chauntea stroked Matt's face, letting the touch guide the human back to reality. "Good thing there's someone here that can give you some pointers."

"A *warlock*, Morninglord?" That came from an even softer feminine voice, smooth and silky, with a hint of celerity in the tone. "Did Yeshu set you up with a warlock? How interesting!"

The two turned toward the other side of the campfire. Matt had to blink a little bit more so that he could see himself.

Matt saw an elven beauty in a gossamer robe. Her skin glowing in an ethereal glow, and her black hair had their own twinkle of stars. The fabric on the gown was just thick enough not to be see-through, but it didn't leave much else to Matt's imagination.

The elf woman just looked at Matthew with an amused smile, "and to think my time here's going to be dull." She then saw the surprised look in Matthew's eyes, which gave her the idea on holding a pose that showed her curves through her gown.

"Do you like what you see?" the elf said as she hooked Matthew's chin with a finger to look right into his eyes, seeing him getting turned on. "I can tell you do. I'd be more than happy to show you around..."

"That's enough, Corellon!" Chauntea yelled at the woman. "Matthew's not ready for that sort of attention."

"C-Corellon?" Matthew said, surprised. He looked back at the elf, who just moved her lips to his ears.

"You thought I was a guy, right?" the elven goddess cooed at him, her voice giving out a giggle that echoed throughout his whole body.

She looked on to this bashful teen with a bemused smile. "I heard that you play a lot of D&D, Matthew Christopher. You should know me pretty much."

At that moment, Matthew smacked his head. "I...I forgot you c-could do that!"

The elf giggled. "What, take on a form of my own choosing?" She began to change before Matt's eyes, from the beauty to a handsome, if not somewhat androgynous, elven gentleman. The half-transparent robe turned into light-green tunic and slacks. "I am Corellon, after all. Creator of all Elvenkind."

He then took Lathander's arm. "If you'll excuse me, young Matthew; I must bring the Morninglord up to speed on matters. I'm sure that Chauntea will show you around and introduce you to the others."

Chapter 6

Twilight Forest

9:40 PM; 47:20 before the eclipse.

The Twilight Forest is a five-mile radius area surrounded by the mists, which can create pathways to any world in the Realms. While it can open up a link to Earth, the plane reserved for the Lady of Pain, known as Sigil, is the only place the Mists will not reach. North is an arbitrary direction, of course, but had there been directions designated, from the North to the West laid a rolling rolling creek that flowed over a water wheel rigged to an generator. Off to the East is a small village with a dozen buildings and more than two dozen villagers; humans, elves, and halflings, all of whom tending to the space, making sure that the houses are kept, working a small tavern for everyone to visit—which Chauntea brought Matthew to—and in general being the denizens of a humble village. All of them just smiled and waved at Matthew as Chauntea walked him around.

“So, you’re taking in Warlocks now?” Corellon asked, a sly grin on his face as he savored a glass of wine.

“It was the only way Yeshu could allow one of His to join us.” Lathander replied, looking none too confident. “Needless to say, I am not accustomed to Warlocks in my midst, my friend.”

“Of course, you’re not,” Corellon smirked. “You’re used to Divine casters like Clerics and Paladins. Rigid, filtered, cut-and-dry energies. Warlocks have a more direct and more flowing connection that defies your conventional Divine casters.”

Lathander nodded. “What is it I should do, then? The last thing I want to do is to seek out Asmodeus.”

“I don’t blame you there.” Corellon remarked. “Start off by taking what you’re used to and compare it to an arcane equivalent. Once you get the basics, you can customize the pact to minute details, more so than any cleric or paladin. You’re blazing a trail with each one you acquire and *that* should exhilarate you.”

Lathander had to smile on that. “You know me too well, Corellon. So, let’s get something to start off with before Matthew gets himself into trouble with Moradin.”

“Ha! What’s a wee kin’ like you lookin’ at me fer?,” Moradin said with a roaring laugh. Being the creator of all Dwarves, he was of short and stout statue, graying dark hair and beard with braids and gold rings, hands that were built to strike hammers on anvils, and a glint in his eyes that shows the promise of a mountain’s strength and a stubborn streak a mile long. With him was a red-haired man wearing a brown apron and sporting tools in just about every possible pocket and loop on him.

“Just never seen a mightier beard!” Matthew nodded as he introduced himself. “Matthew Christopher.”

“Pleased ta meet cha, ladd-” Moradin noticed the magical energy flowing through the human when he shook Matthew’s hand. “Now hold onna minute here. I know Lathander’s light when I see it, but never like this!!”

“So it’s true,” Gond added. “A warlock pact.”

“It was the only workable alternative coming from where I’m from.” Matthew responded sheepishly.

“Is he from Earth too?” a strawberry blonde woman about Matthew’s age spoke up, wearing a fine adventuring tunic and slacks adorned with pouches and belts. “So Lathander finally got his partner, did he? Personally, I thought he’d just pick up Anne Robinson and turn her into Evelyn for...”

“Matthew?” Her jaw dropped when she saw who was sitting with the Dwarves. “Matthew Christopher?”

Matthew blinked when she saw her.

“I keep seeing you in church, but you just keep to yourself, not talking to anybody. I’m Marcie Chanster, one of the regulars at Lynd Avenue Assemblies of God.”

Marcie could see Matthew try to recognize her, as if he did see her there, but...

“People were trying to talk to you on Sundays, but you were just too quiet.”

Matthew sighed. “I only got t-there because of Daniel. I met him while we were playtesting *Tomb of Annihilation*. I didn’t know *p-pastors* play D&D. He invited me to go to his church and check it out.” He sighed again and looked over to Marcie. “I guess I didn’t see you t-there, didn’t I? I’m not much o’ a t-talker.”

Elsewhere, Lathander and Corellon hovered over a large sheet of paper, on one side, written in elvish, is the basic design of the pact Corellon uses for his warlocks: A shortened spell list of favorite spells...

the Fey Presence
The Misty Escape
the Charm Defenses
the Dark Illusion

...was written in the left side. There was even a copy of the Fifth Edition *Player's Handbook* near this paper. Of course, the team had to buy the entire collection of the Fifth Edition rulebooks for such an occasion.

"I know that you're more into healing and protection, as well as light," Corellon said. "I would suggest that your first feature would be a form of healing. You're used to providing healing magic, so there's no sense to not add that to your warlock pact. It might be a bit random on the amount, but you can provide Matthew with a pool of healing."

"I was wondering if that was possible," Lathander pondered, glancing over the sheet of paper.

"You offer paladins healing pools all the time, it'll be the same principle for Matthew." Corellon added. "Warlocks start off with two Cantrips, but I think you can grant him a couple extras, ones you're the most used for. *Light* and *Sacred Flame*, since we're talking about you."

"I want to hold off on *Sacred Flame*. Is there any way I can combine *Thaumaturgy* and *Prestidigitation*?"

"I think you'll find those two similar. Plenty of casters who have those two find themselves merging them so much that they find it becoming one cantrip."

Lathander nodded as he wrote down a list:

Starting Cantrips:

Light
Thaumaturgy/Prestidigitation
Mage Hand
Eldritch Blast

"*Eldritch Blast*, Lathander?" Corellon said. "That would compress your light into a narrow beam. Do you think it'll be a bit too hot?"

"Every now and then I thought about that, and even experimented with it. While it is too hot to use it straight from their hands, I was thinking of something that could make it easier. Now for the bigger spells. A couple from the first circle."

"I know of a fine defensive spell, *Armor of Agathys*. It'll absorb some damage that Matthew will inevitably take. There's also a favorite among warlocks of Asmodeus that he might be flattered to see a celestial version."

"*Infernal Rebuke*?"

"You got it. By the way, Earth's Weave doesn't have most people using it, so it might provide more energy than on Toril. You might have Matt have more spellcasting energy than you're accustomed to."

"Noted. What about Pact Boons and Invocations?"

"That depends on what kind of guy you want Matt to be, honestly. Do you have any goals on him?"

Lathander leaned back. "Good question. I have some ideas, but I want to know more about Matthew. For now, I'm thinking of a practical approach: I'd like him to have more useful spells, and some ritual casting. There's a Pact Boon that specializes on that, if I recall."

"Pact of the Tome and Book of Ancient Secrets?" Corellon gave Lathander a sly grin. "You might need to change the name on the 'Book of *Shadows*, 'Morninglord.'"

"Or maybe I'd just play along with it." Lathander shrugged. "You can't have light without shadows."

Corellon's smile widened when he heard that. "The Shadow of the Morninglord. I kinda like it. But let's start with some of the cantrips and move on from there. I've only seen a bit about Matthew, but I've seen enough to know that you'd like to do this hand's on. I heard he has no father."

Lathander nodded.

"I've known for being a proxy parent toward some of my warlocks. I'd suggest you do the same to Matthew." Corellon raised an eyebrow when Lathander looked at her. "You can't be Matthew's deity, but he doesn't need a deity."

“I didn’t know people thought that *I-I* was antisocial,” Matthew told Marcie. “I always thought that people just d-didn’t like me, that’s all. I’m sure there’s some people who have their reasons, but I c-couldn’t see it. While once or twice a month, I’ll be able to brush it off, but sometimes it’s two to three times a day.” He sighed. “I don’t know if you know what I-I’m talking about.”

Marcie replied as she reached out for his forearm.

Matthew flinched.

Marcie drew back her hand as if it got shocked.

“Sorry,” Matthew replied. “Didn’t mean t-to startle you, but sometimes when people reach an out to me, it’s either t-to push me away or smack me.”

“Is that what you think everyone is like?”

“You aren’t the weird kid,” Matthew said. “You have a t-two-parent home?”

“Of course, and sometimes I wish my father would back off, what about you?”

Matthew shook his head. “I w-wish I had your problem. My father k-killed himself, and my mother wished I-I’d just die.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’ve heard that tone in his voice before, Marcie,” came the voice of Lathander as he approached Matthew. “I’m afraid he’s not kidding. But then again, how hard it is for someone to see how another person perceives the world?”

It just feels strange, t-that’s all,” Matthew replied. “Everyone’s so...nice to me. I’ve never seen so many people smiling at me, saying hello, seeing me as a...p-person...” Matthew couldn’t help but bow his head, embarrassment, and shame flooding over him. “I don’t know how to handle it.”

But then he felt Lathander’s hand on his shoulder. It would have to be Lathander, because all those dark moods fled from that flowing light.

“Come, I have deiced to teach you your first spells. You cannot be a proper warlock and not be able to cast anything.”

“Right,” Matthew said as he moved close to his patron to show him the way. “Wh-where we’re going?”

“To the Mansion. It has a good library, and while I teach you the first spells, I might just bring you up to speed on more general things as well.”

Matthew gave a wry smile. “Do you think we have enough time t-to take me through school?”

Marcie didn’t hear that part. The realization about something that she thought was different finally caught up with him. “He usually has this chronic stutter. He can’t even say a full sentence without tripping over every other word. But now it’s not as bad.”

“You can thank the Morninglord for that,” Gond replied. “He has that way with humans in Toril. That’s why he’s worshipped so much. Simply because Matthew’s a Son of Adam, doesn’t make him any less under Lathander’s wing.”

“If he be singin’ the Morninglord’s praises like that blonde paladin he talks ‘bout before he’s done with ‘im,” Moradin said from behind Gond, “I won’t be surprised.”

Chapter 7

The Twilight Forest Mansion

9:45 PM; 47:15 before the eclipse.

Lathander was familiar with the concept of orphans. Being a world of magic, dragons, monsters, roving bandits, the occasional megalomaniac, and of course, the crap that Acererak is pulling right now, Toril has more than her fair share of orphans. It's very common for a child lose a parent, perhaps both, to everything from adventuring accidents, spells gone awry, and war that left entire battlefields strewn with the bodies of mothers and fathers.

Earth might not have to deal with any threat above the occasional despot, and nowhere near anything like the Tarrasque, but she does have similar issues surrounding orphans.

However, for a world with all these fantastic technical advancements, such as that 'Magic Slate' Matthew has (He calls it a Cell Phone, but Lathander took one look at the thing found out what they meant by 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is *indistinguishable from magic*'), *but how they deal with orphans in this planet are...well, the Morninglord would claim that they're not nearly up to his standards. But only, that's too kind.*

"Why do you think I showed you to him?" A familiar voice seemed to echo in his head. "*Matthew Christopher doesn't need a god. He needs a father.*"

He looked down to Matthew and rested a reassuring hand upon his head, causing Matthew to settle deeper into his wings.

"So you'll be t-teaching me magic in The Mansion." the boy asked.

"It will be your home, for our time combating the Eclipse." Lathander spoke softly. "It is where we will practice your spells, starting with a couple cantrips, and we'll work from there."

"Sounds good to me," Matthew replied.

"I thought you'd appreciate that. This humble little abode is the heart of this small realm. Within, I am able to access the very fabric of reality about the Twilight Forest. I can, as humans have said, 'play God' within."

"From that...that tone of your voice you find omnipotence overrated."

"I believe it removes much of the enjoyment," Lathander said as he walked up to the gate, which opens by itself, as if sensed his presence.

"If Master does everything, what would *I* do to occupy myself?" came a voice from beyond the door.

The two doors open to reveal a young chambermaid, dressed in a long black dress and white apron. She made a flourished curtsy in front of Lathander. "The Library is ready for you, Master," she said with a bow.

"This is Tanya, the maid of our mansion. She's the one who keeps everything tidy and ensures things run smoothly." Lathander introduced the young brunette. "This is the young man I told you about, he'll be staying here."

"Welcome to the Mansion, Matthew Christopher," she said as she curtsied to Matthew. "I've prepared a room for you on the third floor. If there is anything you need, please don't hesitate to ask. I look forward to serving you, Master Matthew." She then took one of his hands in both of hers and bowed in near reverence.

Matthew didn't know what to think. From recently homeless, to 'Master Matthew' in less than an hour. It all seemed too good to be true. "Th-thank ya," he said. "You've gotta excuse me. I-I've never had a maid before."

Tanya just smiled at him, she smiled with her whole face. “In time you’ll wonder what you’ll ever do without me.” She then stood up. “Follow me, good sirs, the Library awaits you.”

Tanya stood up, spun around in a twirl, and led the pair into a spacious main hall with a fireplace that flared to life as they entered the room. Murals of various adventures and sceneries hang on the walls. A glowing orb of starry space floating on a pedestal on the floor, holding several orbs orbiting around a central doughnut shape like a gearless orrery. And in one corner by the fireplace, a grandfather clock ticked the seconds away.

Matthew looked on in awe. The house reminded him of his late grandfather’s house, and a memory of it resembling an opulent and splendid castle in the preschool child’s eyes.

There was a circling staircase leading up, where Tanya walked over, her strapped shoes neatly tapping on the floor. She stopped, twirled around, and stood there with her hands in front, waiting for the two to join her after they checked out the orb of starscape.

“That’s a model of all the worlds in The Realms,” Lathander said as he looked over Matthew as he checked out the worlds. “There’s Toril, Oerth, Krynn, Eberron, Athas, even that cluster of demiplanes that is Ravenloft. You can see several others there if you look, but I included labels for the major worlds. And that doughnut in the Center, that’s Sigil.”

When Lathander placed a hand on Matthew’s shoulder, he looked up to him with that ever-increasing spark in his eyes. “I could see little st-stringy things between them all.”

Lathander nodded. “Those are the rifts between worlds, Matthew. Over millennia, we have seen many of these same rifts. They were once considered rare events, but then *that* happened.”

Lathander pointed from a stray strand from the world marked Toril that just goes out to the wall. To a world that’s not in this orrery because it’s considered out of bounds.

“Let me guess, that one’s t-to my world.”

“Correct. That should not have happened. We are going over research, trying to find out what happened and how to undo it.” Lathander shrugged. “I hope I’d get at the answer while you’re there.”

“Something I’ll be helping y-you with, of course,” Matthew said.

Lathander nodded as he guided him toward the stairs. Tanya stood there, not moving from where she stopped, until the pair walked up to her. She then did a bounce, spun around and led them up the stairs to the second floor. Matthew noticed the fireplace in the main hall shut off with a *floosh* as they walked upward. Tanya stopped at another hall one floor up. This hall had a fireplace, which sparked to life, a pair of matching doors at the middle of the hallway, and a side door at the top of the hall. There was two pair of suits of armor that framed the two side doors, and another grandfather clock.

“The fireplaces automatically turn on and off when someone is in the room,” Tanya said. “The small room here is where I sleep in.” She went to the other door to the right, a thicker wooden door, opened it. She gave the pair a curtsy as she left them in. “This is where your library awaits, good Sirs.”

They entered a vast office, with yet another fireplace that just sparked to life—and *floosh* went the one in the upper hall—with a couple chairs facing each other with an ottoman in between. In the middle is a large writing desk with some other chairs in front of it. To the right, a well-stocked library with books up to the ceiling and a ladder to get to the higher parts. Oh, how he wondered what was in those. Tanya walked over to the bookshelves and picked up a duster to brush off the dust from the books. To keep with her theme, in one corner, is another grandfather clock. Ticking away the seconds; all in sync. A steady *clack...clack...clack...clack...clack* of the gears, pulleys, and levers drowning out all the outside sounds. It really was relaxing.

“I’m really going t-to like this place,” Matthew said as he looked at all the shelves. “You really like Grandfather Clocks for some reason.”

“You’ll never know when someone needs to know the time. I also find the ticking they make comforting.” Lathander said. “I take it you like reading.”

“Yeah, I d-do. Though in my world, p-people don’t enjoy reading as much as...much as they should.” Matthew admitted with a sigh. “I got t-teased for being ‘a reader’ in...”

Matthew suddenly stopped. He felt something in his head. It wasn’t a painful sensation, but Matthew did feel something out of place. It was as if his train of thought had derailed. Instinctively, something in his head caused Matthew to flinch.

Lathander was behind it, he presumed. He never had someone get in his head before. “W-W-What are you doing t-to me?” he asked, starting to feel a slight uneasiness in his stomach.

“It’s a technique I didn’t want to use off the bat,” the Morninglord replied. “Even here we don’t have much time. I apologize for not asking.”

“It...it didn’t hurt,” Matthew said, “I just d-didn’t expect it. I just hope you’re c-careful, that’s all.”

Lathander drew Matthew’s eyes back on his. “I have no intention of subverting your personality or changing your memories. I just wanted to find an empty space to-”

“I’m more c-concerned with what *you’ll find* in my head!” Matthew pointed at his head. “Like D-Death Metal, and first p-person shooters, or kiss...kissin’ someone like Tanya. I d-don’t think you’d want to look at...at that!”

Lathander just smiled. A smile that Matthew felt as well as saw. *It will be all right, son.*

Matthew felt the message in his head.

In my long life, I have seen and experienced far worse than what you might have in there. There is so much more you can have in your head, with a little help.

The warmth just flowed over his person, like he was being hugged from the inside out.

“Your mind is like a vast library, with so many books that you cannot fill them all in one life. I can easily find an empty one and fill that without doing much damage to you. I don’t have to change what’s already written. Here’s a bit of an example.”

Matthew felt the angel slip between the folds of his mind, walking past what transformed into, in Matthew’s eyes, an infinite stretch of bookshelves, stretching out into infinity. The angel found a book, a fresh virgin Moleskine-type book, even wrapped from a shelf stuffed with like books. It would’ve been available for sale everywhere else.

He unwrapped that book, opened it, traced the pages with his finger and...It just opened up in his mind, knowledge of numbers and what to do with them. Sure, he knows the basics: Adding and Subtracting, Multiplying and Subtracting, some form of fractions...make that everything to do with fractions now, then how to solve for X, how to formulate a graph, find the area under the curve, even the basics behind alchemy.

He still wondered whatever the sheer amount of how to do Math that popped into his head, or how quick it got in there, made him gasp.

“See, Matthew. That is I will do. How are you feeling, my son?”

“It feels like a fog lifting on things I didn’t understand before.” Matthew admitted, “It feels kinda like cheating, though. Is this really okay?”

“Well, you’re not going to sit down and do one of those College Entrance Exams afterward, if that’s what you’re thinking. It is what we need to do to ensure you are ready.” Lathander responded as he worked. “Under normal circumstances, we would be doing this in a more traditional sense; however, time is of the essence.”

Matthew could feel his wings fold over him, like in a hug, while his hands kept his face up, his eyes locked onto those of the Morninglord. He saw himself as the baby Lathander was holding in that picture, almost as if he was his own.

“Papa?” Matthew spoke but above a whisper.

Lathander gave pause when he heard Matthew whisper that, as he sat there droopy eyed. Of course, he’d end up saying that. The Lord said this would happen.

“It’s all right, my child,” Lathander said as he sees the boy settle warm and limp in his arms. “You’re here with me now. Let the world you came from, the world outside, the world I pluck you out of, let it drift away. It’s just us now, you and me, a father and his son.”

He could see Matthew’s face slack, his eyes losing focus. His body falling limp on the seat, with only Lathander holding his face up to keep him standing straight.

“We’re going to go on a little trip, my child. You and me. There’s a lot of places for you to see, things for you to learn, and a lot for me to teach you. All the things you need to know to be my child, and my warlock...and eventually a man of your own.”

Matthew’s eyes began to droop, his eyes half closed, and his lip started to hang a bit. It was all he could do just to just keep seeing that glowing white from his patron, but the rest of him just fell into a warm, soft, peaceful sleep.

“You look as though you’d just slip away into a dream, are you,” Lathander said.

“...uh-huh...”

“Then go ahead, slip away, and let me in. It’ll be all right. You’ll be safe here.”

Matthew’s eyes finally dropped closed.

Being an angel of light isn't the easiest of duties. In fact, it's a big responsibility. Not only does the Light that Lathander always brings with him was possible to instill hope and bolster the better angels of whoever the Light falls upon, but it also reveals their true nature, in a way that even the parts that most people wouldn't want to see. With those suns that is Lathander's eyes looking down into someone's soul, someone who thinks they're brave find out that they're cowards. People who show themselves pious realize that they're more of a manipulative demagogue than the Devil. People who are convinced that they are incurably deplorable find out that in order to cover all of their sins, Jesus Christ only needed to prick his finger. People who would think nothing of punching Nazis find themselves willing, able, and anxious of firing the ovens themselves.

Lathander knew that Matthew Christopher was someone who was missing a parental role long before he saw it through the Light. It was a hole in the youth's heart that the Morninglord is all too happy to fill.

“Papa.”

He kept calling him that as he hugged him. As he was hugged by both arms and wings of the angel. The Archangel Lathander for those on Earth. Lathander the Morninglord for those on Toril

But in this little world, to Matthew Christopher. He was just...

“Papa.”

Father and son, the two journeyed together. Walking through the woods, fishing, tossing a ball around. Learning how magic works, how to draw in the power, how to mold it to a spell. Becoming a bird to learn how they fly, turning into a fish to experience swimming. Hunting as wolves, turning into volcanos to feel the flow of lava, floating in space as sparkling stars...they tried out everything...and they were together.

A father and his son.

The light filled his eyes, the rhythmic passing of time filling his ears, the warmth filling his arms and legs. He breathed it all in and felt it fill his lungs, feeling it slip in and out of his mouth as he exhaled. It just flooded through his whole being, driving out all thought, and cares, and senses. He felt it fill up spaces in him he never thought were there. . It just felt so right, so proper. He was meant for this. It was something that should be. He was meant for this.

He was meant to be with him.

To be with his father.

It was what he was longed for so much, to be a son, to be his son, his child.

Matthew's eyes opened up with a flash. His eyes were glowing like twin suns. He could see the office room he was in, but it was only as if he was dreaming.

He still felt so calm, relaxed, warm, safe, loved, that he didn't feel like moving at all, but he found his own body moving, on its own. He stood up from the chair, looking half-asleep, with a goofy smile on his face.

Matthew felt his head turn to his left, his eyes focusing on a book on the table. It was in a satchel.

"Fetch that for me," Lathander said.

Matthew nodded, but when he tried to move over toward the book but froze after one step.

He just couldn't move.

That surprised Matt a bit, and his mind stirred a bit, seeking a reason.

"Do not be alarmed," Lathander explained what happened. "I have the power to hold you in place if need be. It is not as punishment; merely to ensure your safety in times when you need to be pulled back from something dangerous."

An intense sense of comfort and assurance flooded over Matthew, it eased him back into his trance, sinking back into that sweet warm inner peace.

"Let us start with the *mage hand*. Reach out with your hand toward the book but concentrate on an imaginary hand reaching out from your physical hand."

He saw his body spring into action. His right hand stretched out in a grasping form, and out of his mouth came an intonation of some kind, a word in an language that resembled Pentecostal tongues at first, but as the hand gestures, the incantations, and the mentally reaching with his mind toward the book, it began to feel more familiar to him.

"Start at your hand and form another one in your mind. Focus on it, clear your mind of anything bit that hand..."

A spectral hand appeared from his right arm, moving toward the book...it disappeared after a couple feet.

"It seems like you are understanding the concept. Try it again, it will come to you with practice."

Matthew repeated the hand gesture and vocal incantation, and the spectral hand reformed. This time, the hand reached the book. His hand became guided again, his fingers controlled as it mimicked the *Mage Hand* until it picked up the book. Matthew's lips pulled into a smile, as he felt the approval from Latha...from Papa.

He willed the spectral hand back, carrying the book toward him, until the book found itself in Matthew's physical hand.

Matthew pulled the book close to his chest, closed his eyes, and smiled. He was beside himself with a newfound sense of pride.

"This is *your* Mage Hand, Matthew," Lathander said, "Your very first spell. There will be others. Some will aid you, some will defend you, and some will fight for you..."

Those words echoed through the teen's head, as true as the night sky in the forest being full of stars, while the satchel got snapped in place on the belt around him. Matthew couldn't help but nod.

"Yes...and they'll always be there for you, even when no one else will." Lathander held out his hands.

"Always there?" Matthew handed the book to Lathander.

"This is your Book of Shadows," Lathander said as he slipped the book in a satchel. "Your spells will be collected in this Book, and I will put in other things as well, as they become reveland."

Matthew nodded, not wishing to speak and break the spell, as he sat back on the chair and placed the book on his lap.

“Now that you gotten to your first spell, adding more to it would be easier.” Lathander said, as he settled back in front of him. Holding his hands, bringing his wings over, his eye’s locked into the child’s.

The world faded away from Matthew as the warm light flooded over him again. He just stood there with a smile on his face as he felt the sun shower. By now he just let it happen, let Papa do his work.

The stream of sacred knowledge flowing unheeded into his memories, unheeded by exterior noise and social pressure. A small stream turned into a steady brook flowing with knowledge of various topics, such as several topics Lathander picked up and found useful. All those applied sciences, the memorization of all the elements, the in-depth rules of physics. He now knows what to do in the wild, what knots to make, how to make a fire, what plants are safe to be with, what’s you can find that’s edible. His mind fills with literature from the greats, both of Earth and in Toril, the playwrights and philosophers. His patron guided him through the history of Faerun, from the dawn of the Reckoning throughout the Spellplague right up to where the Death Curse began.

Lathander watched over the dreaming Matthew as his brain sopped up knowledge like a sponge, making sure that the flow was steady. He just wanted the basics now, and move on to more detailed stuff later, such as the ways of the Awakened, and how his less formal relationship can mesh well with the more devout followers. Even though his soul might belong to Yeshu, Matthew remains Lathander’s child, and he needs to be comfortable with the others. He walks to his own beat, but he’s under the same sun.

There were some reflex twitches from Matthew, a wrist here, an eye there, a quiver of the lip, but nothing that would alert the Morninglord of any danger.

He just stood there for the next half hour, his mind filled, his soul soothed, and his heart warmed.

Only did Lathander let go of his hands when Matthew slumped back on the ottoman, his body limp, his lips producing a half sigh, half whine, before he blinked his eyes back awake. He looked up and gave him a sheepish smile.

“How’re you doing, Matthew.”

Matthew’s voice was like someone who was half-dreaming. “So far so good, papa.”

Lathander had to smile, with a bit of a smirk. “You’ve gotta excuse me for being a bit concerned and all. “I merely wish to see you aren’t changed too much.”

Matthew tilted his head. “C-changed? If you did change me, papa, would I notice? Sure, I could easily blend into with your other followers, but I’m still me. I just hope they don’t think of me as too casual in talking with ya.”

“Matthew, do me a favor, and say my name. Just say it and focus on what you’re saying.”

“Yer name, papa? Of course it’s...papa...” He stopped; his eyes opened a bit more. Lathander can see the wheels turn in his head. “Papa...pa...mmm...Pa...pa...I know your name don’t I. L...L-a-t-h-a-n-d-e-r...that spells Papa...oops...hehe...papa.” He gave Lathander a sheepish grin. “I think something *did* change.”

Lathander just placed his hand on him. “I expected such a response, my son.”

“I hope to be a good son to you, Papa.” Matthew couldn’t help but smile at what he’s calling him.

“You already are, Matthew,” Lathander said, with a welcoming and approving smile. He never had that much issue about slipping into this role, especially when God gave him the green light to do so.

Matthew took Lathander’s arms and pulled them back to where they were on his head. “Then it’s all right. It just feels so right. You being my dad...it’s just so right.”

Lathander breathed a sigh of relief. “So that’s what our relationship will be, not as much Patron and Warlock, or thank goodness not Deity and Worshipper, but Father and Son. You’re right, it just feels so proper.”

“So proper...so right...” Matthew nodded and settled back into La..papa’s...his father’s embrace. “You’re my father then.” Lathander saw him slip back into that trance he was in, as if he were a child rushing back to his parent’s arms. “Papa is papa is papa...I’ve gotta ask, tho. Is this how Evelyn got started?”

Lathander belt out a roaring laugh.

“Were dates involved?”

“Matthew!” Lathander couldn’t scold him that much while laughing.

“Were there some time in...”

A finger pressed against Matthew’s lips were enough to quiet *that* train of thought. “Something for you to think about when you’re older, son,” he managed to say.

Matthew’s cheeked blushed as he giggled. He never had a chance to talk back like that and get away with it in years.

“Let’s see if you got what I told you down pact, Son. Come with me.”

Lathander led Matthew across the hall. They entered a wide room consisting of several musical instruments, a fireplace that held a small fire, a spongy padded carpet in the center and upholstered chairs lining the walls. He could hear the rhythmic ticking of the grandfather clock behind him, keeping his mind in sync to the ticks, centering him to this reality.

Tanya stood there back to the fireplace. She had set up a couple candles and chests, and she was twisting a Rubik’s Cube.

“This conservatory is used mostly for performances, such as musicians and dancers, but it’s spacious enough for you to practice the less dangerous spells. Tanya will have something set up outside for you to test attack spells.”

Tanya nodded. “Yes, please, I love this house too much for it to be hurt.”

Matthew looked down to his hand, and he felt the inner glow, the light just under his skin, and the warmth that seemed to build as he flexed his fingers. He felt them grow hot. He feared too hot. In fact, Lathander saw him jerk back his hand and flap it as if it caught fire.

“Ah,” Lathander said as he eyes widened a bit. “I was worried that would happen. In that regard, I had Tanya fetch something.” He turned to the maid, who reached into an apron pocket.

She pulled out a pair of white gloves and walked up to Matthew. “Let me slip these on you. These gloves will protect your hands, and help you channel the light in you.”

“Always wear them, son.” Lathander said. “Let them be part of your uniform.”

As Tanya slipped the gloves on Matthew, making sure that the fingers fill the spaces just right, he found the gloves quite comfortable, as soft as cashmere. The cuffs had a series of glyphs that glowed a bit and he felt something click in his head. He never was comfortable wearing gloves before; he found them cumbersome and interfered with his sense of touch. But these gloves just felt to so right wearing them, as if they’re made for him. They just looked more powerful, more proper. He couldn’t feel more comfortable wearing them, even to the point where he didn’t feel fully clothed until they’re on.

The last time he felt anything like this, he was still using binkies. But these gloves looked more dignified, even formal. He knew he’ll always wear them.

“I might need a couple more of these,” Matthew said, “In case I need to put one in the wash.”

“I have some spares already waiting for you in your room, Master,” Tanya said as she started closing shutters, one by one.

“You’re really on top of things, Tanya,” Matthew said.

She did a dip of a bow. “It’s part of my role as your maid. And I do it well.”

She kept closing shutters until the room faded into near darkness.

“I need to make some light, right?” Matthew said. He went back to concentrating on the bloodstream, and his now-gloved hands glowed brighter and brighter until it formed a ball of light in his hand.

He felt the warmth rise in his hands, but not to the point of it burning.

“So far so good,” Lathander said. “Now then, take that light and place it somewhere, or toss it anywhere. The light cantrip will glow bright wherever you place it lands.”

Matthew looked around to see where he could place it, but then he just decided to bring it to the star on his chest. The star glowed bright, lighting up the room.

“That works,” Lathander said. “I also have Tanya here set up some things for you to use some of your first spells on.” She picked the Rubik’s cube back up. “Like that puzzle cube she likes to twist around.”

“A Rubik’s Cube?” Matthew said. “Can I?”

He reached out with his *Mage Hand* and picked up the puzzle cube, but then he decided to try something out. He reached out with his other hand and...

“I didn’t know I can have one for both arms!”

Lathander smiled in approval. His warlock son picks it up quick. “You have two arms for a reason, you know.”

The two hands grabbed a firm hold the Rubik’s cube and started to twist it, in rapid fire movements as Matthew went through the sorting routine used to bring the cube back to solid sides.

Tanya was awestruck. “You know how to solve them!?”

Matthew gave Tanya a sly grin as she tossed it back to her. “I sure do.”

“I’m surprised that you can solve those, Matthew,” Lathander said.

“Up to five by five cubes, papa” Matthew said.

“Son, you just upstaged the entire Forgotten Realms pantheon! Asmodeus would *sell his soul to you* to learn how to solve a Rubik’s Cube!”

Matthew chuckled, but then looked over to the windows, still shuttered. He drew in his breath and was about to throw out his hands when.

“Whoa now!” Lathander held up his hand, causing Matthew to freeze in place. This was one of those times where Lathander stepped in to ensure things did not end in catastrophe. “Not yet, I just needed to keep you from using Thaumaturgy at full oomph open those windows.”

“Y-yes, please,” Tanya said, showing a pout. “I don’t want to lug a ladder and a toolbox up the outside of the Mansion to fix them.”

“You only need to use just a bit of power,” Matthew said. “Gently now.”

Matthew could feel Lathander take over and guide them into putting out just enough power into that cantrip to just open the windows, instead of slamming them open with a crash.

Tanya sighed in relief as the windows opened with just a few creaks, but no slams.

Matthew smiled. “There, better. Like I said, small steps at first. I want to make sure that you’ll won’t destroy the place.”

Matthew had to agree to that. “Thanks, Papa.”

“Now then,” Lathander said, “Let see some sparks appear out of your hands.”

The memory played out in his head, and with a hum and a flick, a swarm of the flaming end of sparklers (only without the stick it came from) circled around his hand.

“Make your eyes glow.”

Matt’s eyes produced a glowing amber that almost made beams from his eyeballs.

“I have some candles here,” Tanya piped up, opening a small box and producing small wax candles. “Snap your fingers and light them.”

He did so and a candleflame flared to life.

“Now, put them out.” she quickly ordered.

A flick of his wrist, and the candle is snuffed out.

Lathander watched on as his charge just went to town with his first cantrips, feeling a sense of pride for how he brightened up the lad’s life. He was like a kid with a favorite toy, and he made sure whatever smudge on his clothes were cleaned off using *Prestidigitation*. Matthew made the scent of sawdust and citrus flow around him, whip out a wooden pencil all sharpened and ready to write with by a flick of his hand, altered his voice to perfectly resemble his patron. Made music appear in the airHe kept doing those and several other effects, such as juggling items with his *Mage Hands* and putting the Light into a Yo-Yo and pulled off some tricks with the glowing ball. He even showed his talent in penmanship by writing a couple lines from Queen’s *Bohemian Rhapsody* with a nearby dip pen while several other pens created an ornate border. He found a large sheet of paper in the Office Desk for the occasion.

“That’s some immaculate handwriting, Matt,” Lathander had to say.

“Thanks,” Matthew replied. “I thought I’d make my handwriting into an artstyle once the school went from handwriting to computers. I keep seeing other’s writing reduce to chicken...”

Matthew had to move quick to catch a drop of sweat that fell from his face.

It was then when he found himself feeling winded, and he was even panting.

“Whoa,” Matthew said as he sat back on the chair. “That’s quite a workout.”

Lathander patted him into the shoulder. “Understandable. After all, you’re just starting. You’ll get stronger as you go. Let’s take a breather.”

Matthew smiled as he sat on the spongy carpet, while Tanya ducked out for something cold to drink. He felt like he just ran a mile.

He checked the earth time on his cell phone: 10:25 AM. His best estimations gave him an hour and a half to the meeting.

“Time sure flies,” Matthew said.

“Right. We will finish with an offensive spell for you to use in self-defense. It is something I wanted to get to work for long before you came to my life Matthew.”

“And that is?”

“*Eldritch Blast*. It’s the most basic Warlock attack. Every decade or so a Lathanderite tried to incorporate the Light into that cantrip.”

“Let me guess,” Matthew said, “It burned their hand off.”

Lathander nodded. “The first one tried it and spontaneously combusted.”

Matthew winced.

“The second one used an implement, a rod or wand, with some success, until the rod got too hot to handle. But...”

Matthew snapped his fingers. “Wait a sec. You need something to channel that spell right, a rod of some part...”

Lathander scratched his chin.

“Something that can shoot the blast...” He thought about it for a second.

Then he got an idea.

Followed by his mouth growing dry.

“What’s wrong?” Lathander asked.

Matthew reached for the toy chest.

“I don’t know if you’re going to like what I’m about to show you, Papa.”

He popped open the chest to summon the bigger one. He dived into the chest in a way Lathander worried about him falling in. He got to his book bag, unzipped it, and dug his way to the bottom of the book.

He pulled himself back, revealing a locked box.

“That wasn’t the first time I had to spend a night in the streets, and I don’t have to tell you how dangerous it is. I needed something to defend myself with.”

He pulled out a key and opened the box. He then took a breath and opened it.

Lathander has heard of firearms before, but he never got a good close look at one.

It was a Smith & Wesson .38 Magnum Revolver. With three full moon clips.

“I’m still shocked to no end how I got the thing legally, licensed to boot. Fortunately for me, I never had to use the thing. It’s not loaded, by the way.”

Lathander picked the gun up, more curious than anything else. He flipped out the cylinder, and it was indeed empty.

“Sometimes I think about that thing in my bag all this time and...UGH!” Matthew shuddered as if in a chill.

The thought that he had that gun in his book bag at Wizards of the Coast only passed through Lathander’s head for a moment, but then an idea came up.

“Maybe we can put this gun to a better purpose.” He turned to Matthew. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to take this to Gond. Maybe we can use this for *Eldritch Blast*.”

“Like a rod, Papa?”

Lathander nodded. “Yeah.”

In front of the Mansion, The Twilight Forest

Gond twirled the revolver in his hand when Lathander gave it to him. “You need a *Rod of the Pactkeeper* out of this?” Gond said. “Strange, unusual for Toril, but doable. I might need to team up with Corellon to convert it, she has more experience in making them.”

“It will be mainly for *Eldritch Blast*, but if you can enchant it into a *Pactkeeper Rod*, so much the better,” Lathander added. “It must ensure that he can use *Eldritch Blast*, if the rune incantations are correct,” Lathander added. “He will also need some ways to keep it hidden so that nobody would notice. Matthew told me about people like him going on rampages with guns, and the last thing he wanted was to be included with them.”

“No surer way of causing a scene if you ask me,” Gond replied as he looked the gun over. “You two are headed to Wizards? I think It’ll be done by then.”

That was enough for the two to give Gond the nod and hop over to the waiting carriage drawn by a pair of Clydesdale horses. The vehicle could’ve been just as home in the wild west as it was going down the King’s Road.

“Do you think that’s not going to turn any heads over there,” Gond wondered as he saw them climb aboard.

“I used to see a couple of them give passenger rides around the historic parts of town,” Matthew replied. “Until the homeless took everywhere over. Some would think that someone’s looking for a nicer place to do that in. Besides, even with the animal regulations, at least most people would think of the driver as someone who’s employed.”

He found Marcie sitting there, wearing a long, aproned dress with a loose, puffy sleeved blouse. Her forearms were wrapped, and her hair were tied back with a cord. She was sitting next to Moradin who had an arm around her. She was leaning against the dwarven deity like he was her boyfriend.

“I take it you two are partners?” Matthew said.

“Aye, laddie,” Moradin said. “We get along very well.” He messed with her hair, making her giggle. “Got a lot in common, we do.”

“When did you meet?”

“Last Thursday,” Marcie replied.

“I thought you were out on a Renaissance Fair with your folks, Marcie.”

Marcie noticed the confused look from Lathander. “My parents were big on Renaissance Fairs; they perform like bards with costumes and music. I usually join them, but I’m more into dwarven stuff, especially with metalsmithing. I always watch smithies and even help out.” She leaned back. “I fell in love with the Dwarves. They’ve become my favorite people! About the same time, I got interested into metal smithing. I even binge watch all those smithing shows on TV, furiously taking notes to try for myself one day.”

“Aye, now that’s how ta do it!” Moradin said as he kept at the reins. “Ye gotta have a fire in yer belly before ya can have one ta make swords with!”

She sighed. “I had to skip this recent one because I had a dentist appointment. I was on my way home, feeling really bummed out, when I found myself walking through what I first thought was a thick fog.”

“And you end up here.”

Marcie nodded. “I didn’t know what was going on, outside of not being as scared as I should be. I just followed the trees accompanied by critters until I found the village with a huge open-air metal-smithy that I couldn’t help but watch. That’s when I saw dwarves. I mean, actual dwarves.”

“Aye, and here comes this pretty girl arrivin’ here just like Snow White,” Moradin said, “judging by all the critters followin’ her. I decided to walk up tae the lass and get ta know her.”

“Next thing I knew, I was having drinks with ‘im! Of course, they went easy for me with something light.”

“Dwarven Stout innae fer those who c’nt take der liquor.”

“Tell him about the one thing about that evening that sums up your mountainfolk’s sensibilities, Moradin.”

Moradin had to chuckle. “We made the lass a pretty dress, and she wore it as she joined us!”

Marcie had to blush and smile at that. Even as Matthew looked on with wide eyes.

“Of course, she wanted t’have a whack at the ol’ Anvil.” Moradin just laughed, “Oh, she was a right natural she was, hammerin’ like she’d been forgin’ blades all her days.”

“My first little project was this,” She reached down her right boot and pulled out a dagger. Not the most elaborate or adorned blade ever made, but a respectable first blade any rookie would forge. It had a bright and shiny surface with a sharp center ridge and near razor edges. “Not bad for my first time.”

Marcie shook her head. “Moradin wanted to talk to them about us...” She leaned out the wagon to talk to who was pulling the two horses. “Did you get to them yet?”

“Aye, that I did,” Moradin said from the shotgun seat. “Even did that ‘Angel sent from Yeshu’ bit as well, the glow an’ ever’tthin.” He turned back to yell, “No dwarf would be caught dead with wings!!” He chuckled. “I want t’ set up a smithy here on Earth ever since I heard about them rediscovering how to make Damascus Steel.”

“That when you take several plates of different metal and weld them into a billet,” Marcie beamed with pride as she went on about how the lost ancient smithy technique was re-discovered. “When you make something out of it, the metal has a pattern of stripes which can be twist around.”

“I never got th’ chance t’ put Damascus Steel in me Realms, laddie,” Moradin said as the mist gave way to a side street on Renton. “Buggars!” Moradin said as he felt the air temperature change from a pleasant cool to a heat wave. “I wanna set up a forge here t’ study Damascus Steel so I c’n share it t’ me people. I needed tae git me some assistants, and ye’ Lord saw fit t’ grace me wi’ Marcie here.”

Marcie had to laugh, and blush, at the dwarf’s flirting.

“She’s a good kid,” Moradin said. “An she puts up wi’ me somethin’ nice. She’d make a fine dwarf.”

“Don’t get any ideas, Moradin!” Chauntea scolded at him from the shotgun seat.

“Too late!” Moardin said with a laugh.

To illustrate the matter, Marcie showed Matthew a necklace with a large crystal hanging off her neck. “Wait til *this* gets fully powered.” She winked.

But then something pinged at her.

“Matthew!”

“Pardon?”

“Your voice!”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Your stutter. It’s *gone!*”

He blinked for a second, and then thought back. He listened to the memory of what he was saying. She was right. He wasn’t stuttering anymore.

He just pointed at Lathander. “Thank God for him.”

Moradin snorted while Marcie just looked over at the Morninglord.

“Suuuure, you would have some explanations in mind, but as far as everyone on Earth is involved, “Thank God for him.”

Lathander was used to receiving high praise, just not in this manner.

“I’ll even go up against God and say, ‘Thank You for him.’ That’s my praise and I’m sticking to it.”

Chapter 8

Meeting Room 1, Wizards of the Coast Headquarters, Renton, Washington

11:15 AM

45 Hours and 45 Minutes before the Eclipse.

Pastor Daniel Lionheart didn't know what to think when he got into the elevator with two people who were welcomed into the building like celebrities.

"Anna Prosser, Jerry Holkins," Daniel said as he introduced himself. "Seen you a lot on Twitch."

"Glad to hear that," Anna replied, "I heard that you wanted to start a stream yourself. A Christian-themed D&D game?"

"Yes," Daniel said, "With the way this game grew in popularity, I see a perfect opportunity to make one. I came here because Mike Mearls told me that they might help out."

"*Christian* D&D?" Jerry said, "That's two words I never thought would go together."

"Especially after what happened in the eighties." Daniel said as he held the elevator door open for Christopher Perkins. "But nowadays, now with D&D being more mainstream, I think it's long time to bridge this gap."

"And while Wizards can't too do much for the creation or promotion," Chris said as he walked in, "there are some things we can do behind the scenes."

"I heard that there's someone who already made a campaign series," Anne added as the elevator resumed its climb. "Some kid named, Matt..."

"Matthew Christopher," Daniel replied. "He goes to my church. He made a series of Adventurers League modules incorporating several Bible stories and linked them together in its own campaign world."

"*That's* something I've got to see," Anna said.

"Tell me about it," Jerry said, "Not too long ago, Christians were calling the game the work of the devil. Now, they want to make their own campaigns?!"

The elevator released the four to the right floor.

"We can thank the three of you for that," Daniel said as he headed up to the conference room door. "It started with *Stranger Things* on Netflix, and then streams where the game is played—*Critical Role*, *Force Grey*, *Acquisitions Incorporated*, *Dice Camera Action*, and all the others."

"All that helped destigmatize the game," Chris said, "which was what Wizards wanted to do with D&D. Every now and then I hear of Christians saying that they relate to Evelyn."

"Why thank you," Anna said, "When I got into *Dice Camera Action*, I didn't know I had a hand in taking *Dungeons & Dragons* from being satanic to something someone would call..."

Anna then opened the door.

"...a gift...from...God."

When Anna first opened the door, she thought someone was doing an excellent cosplay for the Morninglord. Plenty of people do that here at Wizards for one reason or another. Anna herself wasn't above cosplaying herself.

But in the instant, she saw this blonde guy talking to Ed Greenwood and Mike Mearls, she imagined herself as her beloved Paladin. Before she became a construct, that is.

"Well, Lord Lathander, I'm probably the few people who know of people from your world to visit here. You should've been here earlier, you would've met Elminsiter."

She just *knew*.

“I doubt we’d believe you otherwise. I thought you were another one who wanted to slip into the intern pool uninvited. That happens every other month.”

“Yeah, that’s our biggest concern,” a young man who dressed much like what Evelyn would wear. “Being called crazy. I’ve seen too many movies where that happened.”

Everyone else was laughing.

“Exactly, Matthew,” Mike Mearls said. “If your partner didn’t turn on that Angelic Glow I wouldn’t’ve believed him.”

“I’m surprised that you were like me.” Matthew had a nonchalant post toward Lathander. “Oh, an angel, cool beans. And then find out who that angel is, and *then* you go OMG.”

“Yeah,” the taller blond said. “I really need to talk to Roma Downey about that.”

Everyone was laughing. Except for Anna Prosser.

She just looked at *the real Lathander* with her eyes wide open and her jaw hanging.

“Well, what Matthew said is true. I really was...” Quote Marks. “... an ‘Angel sent from God’ for a time, but then I left the proverbial nest. I was curious about creating a world, so I teamed up with others to build some, some of those worlds you set campaigns in. Every now and then I come back to touch base with the Father, wh is actually happy over what I’ve done with what I made. It wasn’t like God would’ve. He wouldn’t’ve.

“Yoah...” She caught herself from sounding off like Evelyn Marthain.

But not soon enough for Lathander to hear it. For an instant, he thought that Evelyn was right behind him.

“You’re really Lathander, are you?”

He turned toward the still shocked Anna Prosser. With a smile as bright as the sun.

“You must be Lady Prosser.” He gave his most winning smile, extending a hand to greet her.

She turned giddy as he took her hand and kissed it.

“Evelyn Marthain says hello.”

Anna thought she’d just faint right then and there. In her imagination, her rendition of the Paladin was already melting in his arms.

The three people behind her couldn’t believe it either. Even the Christian Pastor who knew who he really was. After all, he’s seen angels before. It was why he got chummy with that Irish-accented coffee cart lady in front of the building.

“You’re an angel.” Daniel said. “You’re really an angel. *Lathander* is an angel?! How?!”

“That’s something I’d like to know,” said Jerry. “This is some shit! I take that back, *Holy Shit!* Emphasis on the ‘Holy!’”

Lathander managed to catch a glimpse at the one in the back.

“Chris Perkins, I presume?”

“Why yes, I...”

“Excuse me for a moment, people.”

It happened in an instant, but in the eyes of everyone else in the room, it hung there for an eternity, as Lathander pulled back a fist and drove it through Chris Perkins’ face.

He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

Everyone was in utter shock.

Except for Ed Greenwood. “This is a surprise. Usually it’s *Elminster* or *Mordenkainen* who shows up and knocks out someone. You should’ve been here around the heyday of the Fourth Edition, folks. Those two would never let us live it down.” He walked up to Lathander. “I take it that was for what he did to Evelyn, good sir?”

He nodded. “Nobody puts my most faithful girl in a construct.”

“Well,” Matthew muttered. “He *did* tell me he is tempted to do that.” He turned to Jerry. “I don’t think you’d want to include this in your next *Penny Arcade* strip, Jerry.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” he replied, still a bit wide-eyed.

Lathander interrupted. “For the record, Omin Dran is *not* to convert to me. I have enough glorious bastards in my flock.”

Jerry almost snapped to attention. “Sir, no, Sir!”

Lathander made an ice pack appear, with an Acquisitions Incorporated logo on it, and slid the still stiff-as-a-board Chris to another conference room.

“Feeling better, Papa,” Matthew said as Lathander returned.

Lathander nodded. “Yeah, much better. Now then, down to business. I wanted to talk to you about two matters, one of which involves my partner here, and his pet project which attempts to address a matter that many of us, especially myself wanted to deal with for too long.” He turned to Daniel. “You would know this the most, Reverend, with the attempts to bridge the gap between D&D and people of faith.”

Daniel nodded. “That’s why I admire Matthew making a campaign world with Him as the sole deity. He’s trying to get ‘Project Superbook’ to the point where people can playtest but...” Daniel sighed. “He’s been...”

Lathander interrupted. “...having problems with home, I know.” He looked over at Matthew. “I have taken him in as one of my own. He might still be a Christian, but since he and I are partners, some would say that he’s my first Lathanderite form Earth.”

Daniel gave Lathander a look of *are you ... kidding me?*

Lathander saw that. “I know you wanted to put in somewhere where he can be safe and cared for. However, The Father has allowed me to intervene,” he shrugged. “He let me take him in.”

Anna’s curiosity got the better of her. She poked Matthew. “So, tell me, Matt. What kind of Lathanderite are you?” She glanced over to the angel. “Are you a Cleric or a Paladin?”

What Matthew whispered back made Anna raise an eyebrow: “Neither.”

“As God sees it, I am his guardian angel.” He cleared his throat. “Just so you know, I was at one time one of God’s angels before I became a deity of my own. I didn’t fell as much as grew up and left the nest. Every now and then I return here to tough base with the Lord.”

* Author’s Note: As mentioned earlier, David Foxfire apologizes to Chris Perkins for what happened to him during this book. But even Yeshu would say that he had this coming.

“That...” Daniel started, paused, but then just resumed. “That explains a lot.”

“But in business, I understand you may not support this directly, but I do know one can self-publish this work with the proper connections and capital.”

“You just need a look at my rolodex?” Mike Meals asked. “I can do that for you in a couple minutes.”

“Please accept my thanks,” Lathander said. “Matthew aims to reconcile what happened thirty years ago.”

“My father was around during the 90s, in the aftermath of that moral panic,” Daniel said. “It wasn’t pretty. People were driven out of homes, forced into exorcisms, committed into insane asylums, even killed, just because they played the game or even looked toward the rulebooks. Pa claimed that more souls were driven from Christ than toward Him. Some people even today claim that time as the moment they left the Church. I think I speak for all of us; nobody of us wants a repeat of that.”

Mike just shook his head. “I doubt that religious people would care about a role-playing game today.”

“They would care about something that would remind them of the fears behind that moral panic. You’re not going to believe what I’m about to say.” Lathander turned to Anna with a majestic, outstretched hand.

“Lady Prosser, who is responsible for the character of Strix?”

Anna perked up, almost as if Evelyn would do so if Lathander called on her. “Holly Conrad.”

“She called you earlier today, did she?”

“Well, she got on the phone with me and she told me that there’s some sort of shadow falling under Renton. Up to now, I didn’t think much about it.” She looked up to Lathander. “She’s on to something, isn’t she?”

Lathander gave a grim nod. “Yes, she is. In Faerun, a group of drow has contained a deeply evil entity. Unconstrained it would warp anyone and anything around it in ways most inhuman. Under normal circumstances, we could summon a wide assortment of heroes to go down into the Underdark and deal with the dark elves and their plot on its own, but they have connected to someone in this world and will attempt to summon that demon in this plane of existence.”

“Shades of the *Dark Dungeons* tract.” Daniel said. “It’s the only thing it reminds me of.”

Anna nodded. Jerry doubly so. The others in the room agreed.

“Someone running a D&D game where they forced someone to die so that they could summon Cthulhu.”

Jerry did a double take, “someone’s going to make that tract happen *for real!*?”

“W-why would anyone want to do *that*?” Anne asked.

“I don’t think we should worry about the *why*,” Matt replied. “We should just find a way to stop it and stop it without having it spill out into the public. The last thing we need is every news channel jumping to conclusions.”

Everyone felt the sense of dread.

Mike Mearls broke the soft silence, “What do you want *us* to do?”

Anna took the moment to switch to a familiar southern accent. “Would ya want me to turn inta Evelyn an’ help ya out?”

Lathander just had to laugh. “While I would appreciate that greatly, what I’d like you to do is to keep this quiet. This event’s going to involve this company in one way or another, there’s no avoiding it. I need you all to keep a low profile over this. Keep this from getting into the press until after all this is done. If you want to make a statement afterward, by all means. But until then...”

“You don’t want to make a bad situation worse,” Jerry said.

“I won’t blame you,” Ed added.

“Agreed,” Mike replied.

“Although I think it would be best that we keep in touch,” Anna said. “If all this is going to happen around Renton, maybe we should keep a line of communication open.”

“You know, that might not be a bad idea.” Lathander thought, turning to Matthew once more. “The chest, if you please.”

“Got it,” Matthew said as he got up. “Let me have a little room, you’re about to see something awesome.”

He then proceeded to go through the *Secured Chest* summoning ritual, with the green magical flame.

Everyone looked over to see what is happening. Nobody has seen a magic spell cast in front of their eyes, and even wondered if it were possible until the green flame appeared.

“Green Flame!!”

Everyone turned to Jerry.

“Sorry, couldn’t resist.”

“*Leomund’s Secret Chest* isn’t a spell most clerics or paladins can cast, can they?” Anna asked Lathander.

“You’re right, Anna,” Lathander said, and then moved up to her. “If you hand around Matthew enough, you’ll find out that he’s not a divine spellcaster.”

Anna was just about to piece together what he said when Matthew pulled out two items. One looked like some small Citizen’s Band radio. And a collapsed antenna with some glowing crystals set in its base. He pulled out a slip of paper before closing the chest.

“Nice to know there’s instructions over this.” Matthew was about to unfold the paper, but then remembered to send back the chest. That took another demonstrated ritual.

“Wait til you see what I can do with cantrips,” Matthew said as he read the paper. “Instructions to Install and Use this Interdimensional Communication Device: Take Heed, these two wonders are specially designed to provide voice communication to a pocket dimension that is the basecamp of Lathander’s team. To set up the device, set the antenna up on the roof of your building in a nondescript place. It can be powered with the standard electrical supply from any normal wall outlet. A heavy-duty power cord, readily available in your maintenance room, is preferable. The radio device can be plugged like any normal electric device and is connected to the antennae wirelessly. The channel selector is preset to several like devices installed in the pocket dimension or in other more portable versions. Some of these channels can also connect to various Sending Stones we have on our persons.” He paused to dig into a pocket. “I got one of those two,” he pulled out the small rock that had a face. “Looks like I’m channel 15.”

“I thought that *Sending Stones* can only be paired,” Jerry said.

“Normally,” Lathander said. “But Gond has some Wonderbringers setting up a network with multiple Sending Stones. It’s easier to do it here with Earth Technology, he just needs to repurpose a Citizen’s Band. Gond’s cause celebre is trying to get Faerunian equivalents to Earth inventions. And with this, we can easily co-ordinate our efforts, and maybe we could use it after the eclipse, for one reason or another.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Mike said. “I’ll set up an empty room for a communication link this afternoon.”

“I will help you install it,” Lathander said, “Gond is a marvel when it comes to making things simple for others. Matthew, please set up the panel.”

“Yessir,” Matthew said as he picked it up. “Any room would do, Mr. Mearls. The less conspicuous the better.”

Matthew didn't take long to push a spare desk and chair in place, with Daniel's help. And all he had to do is to plug it in and make sure that the wireless antenna points in the right direction. A few test turns led to a light showing a connection was established.

"I might need to come back here every now and then to set up something, and there might not be a need for it, but if we do," Matthew knocked on the beige box. "We have this."

Daniel and Anna nodded.

"I still can't believe that you partnered with a D&D deity, Matthew" Daniel said. "Even if he *was* an angel."

"Still is," Matthew replied.

Daniel stood up and sighed. "It's still worrying me though. About you. I can understand a bunch of Angels running their own world, and that they're here to push back something that came from that world, but I don't know about having you involved."

He saw Matthew summon the chest again, depositing the wrappings, stray scraps of plastic, and the spare screw or two into it. And pulling out what looked like a large book, decked out in white with gold trim and gold guild on the pages. He then pulled out what looked like a holster—with no gun, thank God—and snapped that in place as well. When he stood up, he looked less to Daniel like a kid from Seattle and more like someone who walked out of the Sword Coast.

"I know that you have worries about me, Reverend, but think about it. Do you know other option that doesn't involve me shuttled from place to place like the unwanted toy only to be dumped onto the streets with just a twenty, a pat on my head, and a pretty-please don't do drugs? I know you wanted to keep me in some semblance of faith, that you're trying to tell me that God's there for me, but until this morning...look at what went on around me. Me believing in God? *Any* God? Until this morning, it would be easier for me to believe in Santa Claus!"

Matthew let out a long sigh. "A deity from another planet is being nice to me when he didn't have to, he took me in when he shouldn't, gave me a home even though I, by all accounts, wouldn't mean a thing to him. Lathander is doing what the people of this world ought to be doing, but they flat out won't. Even if they were told to do so, even under threat of Divine Retribution, they won't. If I were God, I'd be pissed off to no end."

And with that, he headed to the door, but as he crossed the doorway, he paused. And looked back. "I know you think I might be losing my soul, or any hope of salvation, if I go this route." He shook his head. "If that's the case, what would I have lost? Would I have even the chance of entering Heaven anyway? Even if God says, 'Well Done, Good and Faithful Student,' would I even be welcomed in?"

And with that, he headed down the stairs, leaving Daniel with his thoughts.

"It's not God he's doubting, nor is it Christ he's ashamed of," He heard a voice say, "it's Humanity."

Daniel turned around to see Lathander leaning against a wall.

"I might not be worthy to take Matthew into my tribe, but I just can't send him away. I shudder to think what would've happened to him if nobody was there to pull him out of that dark place. If I didn't do it, who would?"

Daniel had to nod as Lathander walked up to him.

"Look, I'm not going to force this decision on you, but I'd like to show you more of what goes on inside, and especially how Yeshu gets involved here. But it's up to you to decide if you want to get involved or not. And the more of God's people working with me, the better." He hands Daniel a slip of paper with a list of directions. "If you're interested, travel to this place in the outskirts of town. You'll find it covered with a thick fog, regardless of the weather. Even though you'll be in whiteout for a good hundred feet just keep driving straight through it. When you find yourself on a forest road, you're in the right direction, just

proceed over to a house in a clearing.” He then walked through the door himself. “You might be surprised at what you’ll find.”

“Hey there, Matt,” Marice said as she saw Matthew bound down the stairs and into the lobby. “How was Mearls, Anna, Jerry, and Chris?”

“You don’t want to know what happened to Chris, Marcie?”

“Let me guess, Morninglord had to do it, didn’t he?”

“No comment,” Matthew said. “But did anything happen while we were up there.”

“While you were upstairs, Matthew,” Marcie said after sipping her mocha. “I caught this girl cosplaying as a drow, and it was so immaculate she actually looked like a natural dark elf.”

“Now that is some serious dedication to the look,” Matthew commented.

“Either that or she was naturally that dark-skinned. She was passing around this flier.”

Matthew looked at the flier. “Hmm, looks like whoever this ‘Mistress Blackleaf’ character is, she’s setting up a LARP with a...a cash prize, is she serious?”

“It’s not just that, Matt, when I saw the date this LARP takes place, my eyes nearly fell out, look!”

“Monday at 10:00 AM Sharp, location to be announced by Instant Messages...Marcie, that’s during the eclipse.”

“Coincidence?”

“Only one way to find out. Come on, let’s pry Moradin from those fangirls so we can get back home, the Angels’ll going to need to see this.”

The two looked over at the dwarf striking up a conversation to a bunch of gushing young woman. “Every time I come around these parts, I find out that when ye see a dwarf, ye’r just happy!”

Marcie had to sigh. “We’re going to need some crow bars.”

Chapter 9

Twilight Forest

11:20 AM; 45:40 before the Eclipse

Even though the pocket dimension is in a perpetual dusk, with the skies full of stars, it still adheres to a circadian cycle. There is a sun that breaks the horizon for about an hour or so around Eight o'clock AM, but eventually dives back down by Noontime, that remains until Seven PM. Now the low light dims all the more until there is total darkness in some of the denser forest. Of course, most of the busier streets are alit with lamps, to ensure safe passage along them.

Located in a glade by the mansion, Chauntea kept a flower garden consisting of an series of flower beds shaped like Eastern Trigrams set in an octagonal pattern, with a large apples tree in the center, one of the tallest trees in the forest, surrounded by benches for others to sit, but Chauntea prefers to sit against the trunk, feeling the live flowing in the wood, usually with her beloved Lathander lounging alongside her.

Being angels, Lathander and Chauntea didn't need to sleep. Those two can just sit there and watch the stars and galaxies above them all night. Matthew of course is another matter. As well taken into these two angels as their adopted child, Matthew Christopher is still mortal. And he long since lulled into a gentle sleep under the Earthmother's hand running through his hair. Between the stroking, the smells of the flowers, the sounds of the leaves, the feel of the ground below him. And the gentle mental touch by the goddess. Papa's beloved goddess.

Matthew's mind floated in the air surrounded by her presence, his consciousness consisting only as a cloud of starstuff, a mass of possibilities, as the strands of divinity flow through his being, freeing and confining him, controlling him as it could be controlled by him. Like with his dad, Chauntea gave him some dreams where he spent some quality time with the two of them. From passing a ball around, to trips to the moon; to more fanciful moments where they turned him into a bird so that he could fly, swam like a fish, roam around like a wolf and watch plants, flowers, and trees grow in a rapidly accelerating rate. A 2000-year old tree from seed to canopy, in the space of five minutes.

This was the childhood he always wished for.

"I knew you'd enjoy this place, my child," Chauntea murred into his mind as Lathander sat next to her, allowing Matthew to drape his legs over his. "You'll always be welcomed here, and you can stay here as long as you need. For the rest of eternity if you so wished. With this forest, with this garden, with us, save and secure." By now she could speak that in Celestial, the angel's native language, knowing that Matthew can now understand that.

"mama," that was all the dreaming Matthew could say in her arms.

Part of what Lathander taught him was Celestial, which got him fluent enough to speak it like his native English. He was speaking Celestial as well ever since he returned to the Twilight Forest.

"That's right my dear," Chauntea cooed in his head. "I am your mother now, as much your mother as the world around you. Smell the flowers, hear the breeze, feel my feathers, my little one."

Matthew just settled into Chauntea's arms and wings, and sighed, as he felt himself sink into a redwood tree that stretched up into the sky, taking in sunlight in the leaves, drinking in water from the roots, feeling the birds and animals nest and frolic around him and joining with the other trees into one big canopy in a lush green paradise.

"I made the mistake of visiting that single mother of his while you were at Wizards," she told Lathander, knowing that Matthew would not overhear. "I came to her in official Angel Mode. Glow and all. I found her just washing the same plate over and over, mindlessly staring off into nothing. From what I pick up with my child here, that was a sign to get to his room and lock the door before she goes looking for a head to rip off. If you didn't take him in, Morninglord, I would have."

“Aren’t we both taking him in, Chauntea?” Lathander replied. “He just called you ‘mama’. And I think you’d be a better one than she would be.”

“That what I told him when I had enough of her complaining about how he does nothing for her. But when she said,” she shifted to a mocking tone for this part, “*Go ahead, that worthless brat’s just like his deadbeat father anyway*. Uuuuugh! I blew my temper.” She sighed. “I ended up shattering every plate in that house with a glare.”

Lathander gave a bit of a knowing smile. “Don’t you hate times when you forget your own strength?”

“I don’t know if she was screaming in despair or rage.” She pulled Matthew close in a hug with both her arms and wings. “I hope the Father would forgive me. I just can’t live with myself if I leave you with her.”

Matthew just sighed out another ‘mama’ when she did that.

“That’s right, my child,” he heard, or rather felt, the goddess say, as she moved one hand toward the Angel of Light uniform he wore, and made golden filaments appear on the fabric, making a rose motif weave alongside the trimming. “A rose can’t bloom in poisoned earth, and so you are here, to grow and bloom, you are my son now, and I’m your eternal loving Mama, just as your patron, and my beloved, is your forever Papa. You’re a part of us now, a part of our family, and we will always be here for you. Let us support you and sustain you, as you become a destined place in our realms, our little angel.”

He had to smile. The place he was in, the angelic parents, their words in his head and touches to his soul, they filled in the remaining spaces in his being, becoming as real to him as the smells and sounds and touches, and memories and knowledge and spell scripts. He knows that they’ve done some things to him, put thoughts in his head, prompt him to think of them as his parents. They could’ve molded him into whatever they wished, and he wouldn’t care. Rewrite his memories, overwriting his will, emptying his mind so that they can wear him like a suit. Prompt them to present himself to them on his knees when they wake him up. As long as he remains theirs, he’ll be whatever they wished. He belonged with them. He just belonged. He just wanted to be with...

“Sleep now, my child,” Chauntea whispered in Matthew’s ear. “You’ve got a busy day tomorrow.”

Matthew slumped with a sigh, dropping into a freefall to a deep slumber.

“How is the spell teaching going, Sunshine?”

“I think he’s gone through enough memory-writing for the evening,” Lathander said. “Besides, we’ve finished giving him the first four big spells. I taught him your choice of *Armor of Agathys* and *Cure Wounds*, even though he already has my healing light.”

“You could never have enough healing, Sunshine, especially at the early levels. I take it you have the more offensive spells, so he can fight back against those before him...before us.”

Lathander nodded. “I had to flavor some parts. One was a celestial variant of *Hellish Rebuke* while the other...I designed something special for him. An offensive spell that would replace several spells as he levels up.” He made a hand gesture of a gun. “Several spells have the effect of calling down a beam of light to smite down someone. I set up a spell where he can point at anything with that gun of his and call down a beam of light from the heavens, which he can move around if need be. He’s already calling it the *Hammer of Dawn*.”

Chauntea sighed. “I thought that *Eldritch Blast* is the reason behind that gun.”

“It is.”

Gond let Corellon busy himself with the barrel of the gun. The elf has made *Rods of the Pactkeeper* before and even though it's converting a handgun into it and using Celestial runes to make it, this one for Matthew was no different.

“According to the flyer Marcie had, there isn't much else here at the start. Some pictures of previous LARPs and treasure chests, as well as the typical ‘Subscribe for more updates’ with a picture of a bird, an F and some other odd-looking symbols. Here's something; A list of places and times to register, the most recent one's 2-5 PM today, at the 32-Bit Arcade Tavern. An address is given as well. Look for someone cosplaying as a Drow who calls herself ‘Mistress Blackleaf.’”

When Corellon heard ‘drow,’ he cringed.

“I've heard that Marcie got a closer look at her and thought that her makeup was done by a professional, almost too good.”

Corellon sighed. “Is that the only lead we have on whatever's summoning that demon?”

“Afraid so, pal. You don't have to be there. I know how you get with Dark Elves.”

Gond glanced over at the Fey deity and saw the same expression of hurt and betrayal that Yeshu had when Lucifer betrayed him, an angel God looked at in the same way Lathander looked at Matthew Christopher—as so much a son that Jesus would consider him like a brother.

“If anyone needs to send them back to Toril, it should be a party that has me on its roster.”

Moradin investigated the crystal that was hanging off Marcie's neck for a good couple days, her real time. "It looks like it's ready. This crystal's attuned to ye now, an all that's needed is the special regent to make it a transformation necklace. From what I know about these things, it take in the blood of someone that will make the one it's attuned to...that's ye, Marcie."

Marcie rocked a bit where she sat, wearing her general purpose dress. Her knee bounced a bit.

"...to transform intae which race that blood is from. In ye case, it's dwarven blood. Or to be more precise, my own blood."

Marcie raised her eyebrow. "You can bleed?"

"Only when I have tae, stories say that both me and Corellon...and other folks...created our respective folk out of our own blood. While ye now know that there was some science involved, biologicalgenwhatsis..."

He reached over for a dagger, but Marcie stopped him.

"Not that I want to stop you, Mordain, but I just need to make sure that there's no germs where you're cutting."

She had a first aid kit and a bottle of rubbing alcohol with her.

Moradin snorted. "Ye're gonna insist that I use that."

Marcie nodded. "I'm just caring for ya, Moradin. I won't live with myself if I didn't make sure that there's no germs where you're slicing, and that you're patched up afterward so the cut can heal."

Moradin smiled as he took the alcohol. "Ye'd make quite a proper dwarf, lassie."

Marcie smiled. "Probably why I agreed to getting that gem made."

To this day, it has been Matthew's greatest fear.

Nightmares of him muttering insanely on a video tape to go to a news studio wakes him up in a cold sweat! He could see the monster he dreaded becoming in a padded room in his mind. He wasn't in a strait jacket, though. The poor devil just glared at him with angry eyes and black scrubs.

Matthew himself looked on in a flowing angelic robe, white cloth with a glittering gold pattern, white leggings and slippers, his hands enveloped in his gloves, his eyes glowing with adopted light. Perhaps he'll earn those wings once his inner demons have been dealt with.

The expression of his dark side would have been considered open rage, but you'd have to be able to feel something in order to be that angry. Not the all-consuming nihilistic emptiness and a bereft of purpose, place or even an identity of his own.

Matthew himself looked on in a flowing angelic robe, white cloth with a glittering gold pattern, white leggings and slippers, his hands enveloped in his gloves, his eyes glowing with adopted light. Perhaps he'll earn those wings once his inner demons have been dealt with.

Matthew looked down on the one he feared he was becoming, not with a sense of shame, or fear, or disgust over what he was capable of doing.

Matthew only felt pity for him.

"I grieve for you. For you had no father who's face to remember, or who's guns you were destined to bear. I was fortunate enough to have a face to know now, with a memory to keep, and I will return to him now that I've bested my darkness. I wish for you to have a peaceful end, and that you will enjoy an eternal sleep. Gods know, you deserve it."

Matthew raised his white hand and let out a soft-voiced incantation, almost singing it, like it was a lullaby.

The glaring eyes from the Matthew in black began to soften, and then droop, and then close, as his body started to slump over and then collapse on the padded floor, asleep.

He lifted his hand up, and the dozing demon rose into the air.

With his other hand, he called on linen tape to fly over to the sleeping figure and started to wrap him like a mummy. First the fingers of his hand, followed by the hands, then up his arms while the tape spun around his legs, tighter and tighter, stiffening the limbs straight as the wrapping bound the body tight and then up to his neck. A second layer of tape bound the legs together, winding up the body, gathering the arms as they crossed over his chest, and then wrapped around his neck, lifting his head up. This allowed it to cover his chin, his mouth, his nose, his eyes, until it covered his whole face, erasing it from sight.

There was some reflex twitching from the body as the wrapping tightens all the more, tighter and tighter, until all movement became impossible.

When the whole body was wrapped into a white mummy, Matthew made a circling motion with his finger.

A thick white substance flowed onto the wrapped body, starting with binding the legs together, going up the waist, wrapping over his arms, tighter and tighter and tighter. As it was laid, the liquid started to harden into plaster. The white coating rendered any form of distinction impossible, until it was just some sort of giant totem.

A floor panel slid away, and a stone sarcophagus appeared from the floor, rising up. As it did so, Matthew found a mask on his gloved hands, a death mask that he pulled over the puppet's, its face without holes or features.

He placed it over the mummy's face as the plaster coating was still jelling over his head. "There's a duty I have to do. A role I need to play." he spoke, allowing the plaster to seal the mask in place

"And I can't do it without being in a state of grace."

He knocked on the shell, and found it solid, stiff, and still, without a twitch, without a sound. Just a smooth surface of a white plaster effigy.

“In order to do that, you must go away.”

The lid to the coffin opened up to reveal a thick amber substance. He read once that some ancient kingdoms encase their mummies in honey, to protect it from the elements. In this case, it's to further drown his dark side into silent darkness, and an ever-sweet place of eternal rest.

He watched the effigy sink deep into the amber liquid until he could barely see it.

The lid came back on, sealing the mummy inside.

All was darkness.

All was quiet.

All was still.

Matthew Christopher had his first full night of peaceful sleep in his whole memory.

Marcie made sure that Moradin's cut on his palm is dressed, with a cotton pad on the palm and Marcie wrapping the hand with an elastic tape. "Knowing you, you won't need long to heal, but I appreciate you letting me wrap this up."

"Ye got a strong spirit, and yer not afraid t' git ya hands dirty, and ye got skills we desire, what more could someone like me want?"

Moradin took Marcie's hands in his own, including the bandaged one, knowing that the blood he shed on the crystal has already seeped into the crystal.

"I know that ye have yer own world, Marcie Chanster, an' while I can't speak fer every dwarven clan in Faerun, but I'm sure ye'll have a place in me world. I just know ye'll have a treasure in yer Damascus Steel, find yer way in a clan, have yer own, ye wouldn't know."

Marcie chuckled and rubbed her head. "Yeah, the future can be anything."

"Anything ye want it do, mi Snow," Moradin said as he turned back to the crystal to snap it back in its casing.

Being capable of sitting still for his Dad doesn't surprise Matthew anymore. Sitting on his knees in front of his Dad, white-gloved hands on his lap, taking in every bit of wisdom and knowledge. Papa's hold on Matthew's attention so strong he couldn't pull away even if he wanted to. They were both on a stubby table, the Book of Shadows open to the page of a diagram of a generic human body with various points showing where pressure points are at.

"Your healing light can easily be placed on top of a surface wound like a cut or a scrape, or even heat up muscles to relax them for pain management. You've done that before already with the bumps you and some others got into."

Matthew nodded, showing the warmth of pride Papa had of him.

"Here's where we take that to the next level. As you see there, there are various points in the body where that person's life energy is flowing through."

Matthew nodded. "I've heard of them."

"There are over 600 of them in a given body, depending on the individual. The ones I'm showing you are more general throughout several races, including every kind of human you have on Earth. There are several uses for these pressure points, most of them can be used with the healing light, for when you really need to get into an internal injury, like a broken bone, or ruptured organ. With enough practice you can even nullify poison, relieve temporary ailments, and later on even bring someone back from the dead. Perhaps with time, you could even perform miracles like curing blindness and deafness, and making the lame walk."

"Hopefully I won't accidentally hit the one that causes heads to explode," Matthew quipped.

"I will make sure that does not come to pass, my son." Lathander gave a soft smile. "I can teach you some that can stun or subdue someone without hurting them, or at least give you time to escape if you need to. There are also the points where you can disable the senses, some that can calm down emotions and even induce a trance if need be. There is one I'll show you when you're ready for it; it'll be dangerous if you try it now: A series of pressure point that will put someone into a state of stasis, where everything is put on pause, even a person's heartbeat, breathing and even aging process, only to have it restart later without a hitch. I had to use it a couple times to keep a body and soul safe for one reason or another."

Matthew wasn't sure he could hold that much responsibility.

Lathander smiled. "You seem to be quite attached to me, my son. Given what I have seen of your experiences, it would only be natural at this point in time, yes?"

Matthew laughed. "Is it that obvious? I could just see yourself at your side, even when you're back to being a deity, like your shadow or something."

"Like my shadow," Lathander said. "You can't have light shining on something without creating a shadow behind it. It's this duality in balance that the Father has put into the design of the Logos."

Matthew understood the concepts of Yin and Yang, from the forces of nature to the many facets of his own heart. Light and Dark, Strength and Gentleness, Spirit and Animal, they all complement each other and must be kept in balance. "If that's what you want from me, I hope to be the very shadow you need to cast, Papa."

Lathander smiled and patted Matthew on his head. "I know you will be, my son. All things in good time." He paused while Matthew chuckled. "Now then, if Gond is ready, we can see how much arcane energy you can manipulate."

"I could see them in the back of my mind, if you can believe that," Matthew said that morning. They're like two sets of orbs, one green and one yellow white. There're five green orbs, and that's for that healing light you granted me..."

“You can never have enough ways to heal from any wounds, Matthew,” Lathander said, “Especially when you’re a novice.”

“The books say that I should only have one.”

“I think the answer is the world you’re from, Matt,” Chauntea replied. “You’ve probably heard of the Weave, the source of magical energy in Toril.”

“Yeah, it’s almost as if it’s a flowing kind of power that people tap in to cast...wait a sec.” Matthew snapped his fingers. “There’s a lot of spellcasters in Toril. All those people casting spells is stretching out Toril’s weave, sometimes to the point of overuse.”

“Precisely. We have a deity focusing on Magic, Mystra. She had to intervene more than once in Toril’s history to preserve the weave.” Lathander responded. “In fact, I believe you may have these extra casts due to the majority of Earth’s population remaining unconnected to its weave.”

Matthew nodded. “Now then, how do they recharge. I know how they do it in the books, they recharge with any rest, unlike your normal supply of,” he made quote marks, “‘Spell Slots,’ which needs a full night’s sleep.”

“I discussed this with Corellon,” Lathander responded. “He said they will return to readiness with time. Although I don’t know how long that will be until you cast anything. It is possible these times will vary by spell as well. We will not know unless we try it out.”

“So, let’s try them out.” Matthew requested.

Outside the mansion, Gond and Tanya had placed a few targets on small pillars out in the open glen. They had just placed the last one on a pedestal as Matthew and his father arrived. Tanya, upon approaching them offered up a small case. “The Solar Striker, a special *Rod of the Pactkeeper* designed just for you.” Tanya replied, opening the case to show off the modified revolver, along with a small edged blade. The Dwarves also threw in a dagger with the Damascus Steel technique they’re trying out. You’ll never know when it comes in handy.”

The gun was a work of art with engravings on the handle, the cylinder, and especially the barrel.

“Thank you for your hard work, Gond.” Matthew graciously accepted the gun, feeling the handle slip into his hand. He felt a strange connection to it, almost instantly. “Whoa, it’s almost like I found a part of me I didn’t know existed, much less lost.”

“Then the bond is working,” Gond said as he let the group toward the targets. “Each *Rod of the Pactkeeper* bonds to its owner and the connection you have to your patron. You’re tied to it now, and you can always sense its location when you’re away from it. It might be a bit bothersome if you’re separated too far from it.”

“Let me test that,” Matthew said, as he laid the gun on the porch and walked away from it. It was almost as if he had a hand detached from his body and is crawling on its fingers. “Doesn’t feel so bad, but at least I won’t lose it and that’s the key.”

“Hey, when I cast that cantrip, it felt like I just loaded the gun with six *Eldritch Bullets*. All right, here goes: The Light of Lathander in *Eldritch Blast*...in three, two, one...”

He pulled the trigger.

The white beam of crackling sunshine charged out of the barrel, thundered down the field, punched flat the soda can, and sent it flying into the woods. The accompanying FWOOSH resembled a matchstick igniting something flammable from one end to another, not as loud as expected. There was almost no kick, or burning, and that last part is what Matthew smiled over.

“Yes!” Matthew exclaimed, “It works!”

Lathander gave a nod of praise as Matthew continued to test, firing at six targets and managing to knock but one off its pedestal. “Your aim is modest, but I am sure it will improve over time.”

Matthew nodded as he holstered the revolver. “Okay, how about we try this spell next?” He went for the script for the *Coronic Armor* and called on the shield. As a soft white glow bordered his figure like an ecliptic corona, he felt his whole body coated with a layer of frost, which grew colder and colder, until it looked like he was wearing a coat of ice. It left him a bit doubled over, shivering from the cold, with his breath visible. “That...needs some getting used to.”

“Well, that is why you’re doing it here, of course.”

Next up was to try out Rebuke. Gond picked up one of the un-spent targets and tossed it at Matthew. As it reflected off the *Aarmor* he had cast, Matthew raised his hand. The explosion of fire shooting from Matthew’s fingers shot off in Gond’s general direction, causing him to duck in response.

“Oh! I’m sorry, Gond!” Matthew flinched, feeling a bit sheepish. He also felt something spark back up in his mind. “But... I think one of my spells is ready again.”

“Oh, it’s okay. It would seem Corellon is right in his theory,” Gond replied, brushing himself off. “It would seem it would take around half a minute for that spell to refresh. Perhaps with mastery, it may return sooner.”

“I see, kinda like working a muscle, right?” Matthew checked out the revolver and noticed that the residual energies from the bullets have faded away. “Also it should be noted that these *Eldritch Bullets* only last so long in the chamber. After a while, they’ll fizzle out.”

“Noted.” Gond replied with a curious look.

“I’m going to need to figure out how long these cooldowns last, and keep ‘im in mind,” Matthew said. “My biggest worry is running out of spell slots when I’m in a fight.”

“It is important to manage your resources in each situation, my son.” Lathander spoke up.

Matthew holstered his gun once more, glancing around to the others. “I just hope that I work with a team. I might not have enough to go so—”

“So how’s ye Dawnslinger, Morin’ Lord?”

That was Marcie’s voice. Or at least sounded like Marcie’s voice.

It was Marcie all right. But she was about a foot shorter and what she lost in height, she made up for it in stockiness. Her hands were also larger and looked like they were much stronger. She still wore that same dress, but it had a vest of plate armor and her skirt had a jingle of a chain mail slip underneath. She had a mace hanging off a belt and a shield slung behind her back!

Marcie looked like she was turned into a dwarf. Right down to the dialect of her speech!

Matthew just sighed. “Okay, you’re going to have to explain what happened here. Is it *Polymorph*?”

“Nay,” Marcie said as she pointed at the pendant. “This bauble’s has its transformatin’ magic set in. Aye c’n be a mountain folk with it on,” she then moved up to Matthew, “An’ ye gonna need me help laddie! Yer pops might’ve set ye up real nice with the magic, but there’s no way ye goin’ out there by ye’self! I’ll be out in front fer this aventure!” She then smirked. “And I’m nae sayin’ no, Dawnslinger.”

Lathander rolled his eyes. “Dawnslinger?”

“I just seen he fire off spells with that gun of his,” Marcie brought her two hands together. “Dawnbringer, Gunslinger...Dawnslinger.”

“Do you have any idea how corny that sounded, Marcie?” Lathander replied with his usual seriousness.

“Don’t knock it, Lathander, it fits,” Gond replied.

“That what *he* said, Mornin’lord, an’ it nae be th’ last time ye hear it.” Marice said, not missing a beat.
“But anyway, did anyone look into that flier I found?”

Chapter 10

Travelling down South 3rd Street, heading toward 32-Bit Arcade Tavern

1025 South 3rd Street, Renton, WA

3:12 PM

41:48 before the Eclipse.

Marcie and Matthew re-entered the main world through the mists into a side street and parked their carriage by a nearby corner. They got out and walked the rest of the way on foot. Matthew and Marcie at front, Lathander behind them, and Moradin in back.

“I doubt that there’s anything in ‘ere that c’n give me a buzz.” Moradin just waddled over to the tavern front door.

Matthew and Marice just flashed their Under 21 ID cards. “We’re here for the LARP registration, not the booze,” Matthew said.

“The worst I drink is kombucha anyway,” Marice added.

They didn’t bother checking Moradin as he walked in.

Moradin had a gut-buster of a laugh, even though the others were amazed over his own ‘cosplay.’ It seems that he and Marcie wasn’t the only one to come out not just cosplaying as dwarves but also had what they thought was too-perfect prosthetics. Especially the couple waitresses who dressed up like serving wenches. “Like I said earlier, Marcie, whenever anyone in this world sees one of us Dwarves, they just get happy. Can ye pretty lassies show me to the bar, pretty please? It’s past three o’clock and I’m still sober!”

As wild parties go, what’s happening inside the tavern was on a slower gear. Granted, they’re drinking. There were the usual video games and pinball machines, some of which were brand new from Stern and the unique *Wizard of Oz* pinball that had the biggest draw. A couple classic machines from the 80s, various compilation machines with several games at once, and of course a set of tables with various games that were played alongside most adult beverage.

“If ye can’t see with yer eyes that there should be a damn comma in me age, you should clock yerself off right now and go see an eye doctor,” Moradin said as he hopped on to the bar stool. “Now here’s a blooming twenty dollar note. Give me a bottle of yer strongest drink that *still* wouldn’t get me to lose one of those highway sobriety tests and keep it coming!” He then spun around to lean back at the bar with a contented chuckle and a wink toward a bar maid.

Matthew just rolled her eyes at Moradin. “Dwarves, go fig.”

“There’s a lot o’ other cosplayers here,” Marcie here. “Check out those two dressed up like drow.”

Matthew had to chuckle. “Yeah I see ‘im. They’ve got to have it done by a professional. That black skin paint looked airbrushed.”

“And check out that lady wi’ the wine glass,” Marcie added. “That color’s on the *palms* on her hands. And it’s not smudging off to the glass!” She then moved closer and covered her mouth. “You ask me, I dinnae think it’s paint.”

Matthew did the same. “I just saw that pointed ear twitch as well. I’m just guessing here, but I don’t think this is makeup.”

“Are ye saying these guys ain’t cosplaying?”

“Either they have one of those transformation baubles like you’ve got or...”

Someone who looked almost humanoid nearly bumped into the pair. With the all-white skin, the bald head, the elf ears sticking out about four inches from the side, and the black eyeliner, lipstick, and even teeth.

Marcie winced when she saw him. “No self-respecting elf would go out looking like *that*,” she whispered low enough so only Matthew could hear. “He looks more undead than fey.”

But that didn’t stop this whatever this person is from glaring hostile at Matthew. That didn’t keep Matthew from sliding his hand inside his shirt, as if he was about to pull out something, as this zombie stared him down with a silent desire to rip his head off. “Best move along, I don’t want trouble.” His voice was low and steady. Like a wolf’s growl.

At first the zombie turned away.

“My God, Matthew,” Marcie had to say. “That guy looked like he wanted to kill you. What could you have done that always get this response?”

Matthew shook his head. “If even Yeshu doesn’t know, I wouldn’t be surprised.” He scanned the room. “We’ve got a couple young’ins who came here with their parents. I supposed they were curious over what all this is about.”

“And then there’s an empty table in the far wall.” Marcie said, “Also, those drow are a bit too preoccupied by the two of us. Hey, Matt! Did you have a copy of that playtest? Maybe we can make a trial session and try to draw that drow woman to us?”

Matthew just smiled and pulled out his miniature chest. “It’s worth a shot.”

As the zombie looking humanoid stormed away, he looked back, pondering what to do next. His rage at this little boy with the punchable face and the pretensions of normalcy was too much for him to resist. He headed over to his car to retrieve something that would help him remove this blight of existence. As he had his hands on that bike lock, a hand grabbed his wrist with an unheard-of strength.

“What in blazes is wrong with you?” the tall blonde man wearing white with gold said to him.

He was looking right into the zombie wanna be’s eyes, with twin suns that seemed to look past the surface, into his mind, and down into his soul.

That was all he could stand seeing who he really is. The truth doesn’t care about feelings, or laws that criminalize hurting them.

He looked over at the slack-jawed miscreant who was muttering “I’m not a...not a...not a...” over and over.

“It’s probably because I’m from another world, but I can’t understand why some of you want to pretend you’re someone you’re not,” Lathander said to the quivering excuse of a human being. “Why does anyone assign any pride or shame over something you had no control over when you were born,” he shook his head in shame, “May the Father help me if I ever will.” He grabbed the dreg by the collar. “So you built up this lie that you’re some elven mistress just so that you can get out of your house in the morning,” Lathander said. “I take it back. You’ll need a house to get out of first. That glance I gave you told me that you were homeless for five years. Yet another wayward child of this world...”

With a free hand, he pressed his fingers to his head in a typical telepathic gesture. “I’m going to have to duck back for a bit, Matt. Will you be okay?”

By this time Matthew knows that the *Message* cantrip has a very generous time limit, up to thirty seconds, instead of the 25 Word Limit in the books.

I got Moradin with me, so yeah. What you need to do?

“I confronted that rude elf from earlier. I may have scarred him with the Light and I it is not in my nature to leave him sniveling on the ground.”

Did you just Penance Stare someone? I thought you were in the Light Division, not the Avenger Division.

Lathander chuckled at his son’s scolding.

So you’re taking him into the Forest to do...whatever?

“Unfortunately, yes, but I’ll tell you more later. Be careful, my boy.”

My six is watched, be sure yours is too.

And with that, Lathander dragged the broken thing to a side alley, and into a mist wall.

Twilight Forest

One minute, Jason Trunston, or Desmond as he prefers to be called as, or rather demands on threat of criminal charges, was being dragged through a thick fog, and the next, he was thrown into a river and dunked as if he was a tea bag. After about fifteen minutes of being picked up and dropped in the water, he was flopped on a straw mat over a dirt floor of a thick forest under a starry night sky. He found himself next to a wagon dressed like a witch and a cauldron over a roaring fire, with something bubbling in the wrought iron bowl.

The angel's sighing brought Jason's attention back to him. "I must have words with God about this insane world from which you come. I would never allow such things to happen to the people of this world."

"So, what's with the holy act?" Jason spoke in a moment of bravery. He tried to stand up straight...only to have a group of vines snaking around his arms and legs and pulling him back up against one of the trees. "Is this going to be televised or something?"

"No, dearie. We wouldn't think of such a thing." It came from that witch figure, in a malevolent tone. The silver haired woman was rather fetching, wrapped in purple robes with an air of malevolence around her as she continued to stir whatever was bubbling in the cauldron.

"Did you not say you were done with picking up Earth's strays, Lathander?" she asked the angel, a look of frustration turning her face to that menacing scowl. "This is not an orphanage. You cannot save them all."

"I am well aware of my 'adoptive' tendencies." The angel crossed his arms. "However, you did mention you needed someone to assist you with your potions and herbs, did you not?"

"Now wait just a sec," Jason spoke up again. "I never said I'd be going along with this!"

The hag waved her hand toward Jason, and he felt his anger leave him, like a bucket of water poured over a fire.

"Isn't...this...kidnap...ping..." Jason's voice fades until he just stood there silent.

"*Calm your Emotions, sweetie,*" she said. "Grandmother Wintertouch will be with ya in a second." She then turned to Lathander. "Any suggestions on what to do with 'im?" She pulled out a potion vial from somewhere in the folds of her gown, a reddish liquid that looked a bit too close to blood. There was a label tied to a stopper with a dropper set inside.

"Do what you wish with him-," Lathander replied, pausing before turning to the door. "It appears Yeshu is calling to me, claiming that he found a clue. I have to see what this is about."

With that, Lathander popped out the wings and took off into the air, before disappearing among the trees.

Jason, still tied to the tree, finally found his voice. "What *is* this place?"

Silverskin Wintertouch was already at work. She ladled up some of the brew she had in the cauldron and poured it into a clay bottle. "A realm between realms, sweetie. A place of refuge for those who fall between the Chosen and Forsaken. Heaven to some, Hell to others."

He saw her drop in a single drop of the Styx fluid in the bottle. She then put a stopper to the bottle and shook it vigorously. "I might not know a single bit about what kind of life you had, though I doubt it'll matter in a few moments."

He just stared at the clay bottle, doing his best to scoot away from her despite being tied rather tightly to the tree.

Silverskin sighed. She moved up to him and traced a fingernail along his face. "We have unfortunates like you in just about any realm this forest's mist can reach. Some of us would love to snatch up all of them and free them of life's misfortunes."

She then uncorked the bottle and brought it up to his lips. The heavy scent of mints and ice filled his nose, sending waves of dizziness by breathing it in alone. "I'm sure that the life I'll give you would be better than what you had up to now, wouldn't you agree?"

He felt that he was getting the most intense hit in his life. It felt just like his first ever heroin hit—the one addicts are constantly chasing but can never catch—combined with something that was already changing the colors of his vision and swirling the leaves and birds filling his ears. He could feel his tongue stretch out to taste the liquid. “I guess s...”

“Good!” She lifted his head up and poured the contents of that bottle down his throat, rubbing his adam’s apple to make sure everything goes down. “This will get you started along the way.”

32-Bit Tavern

A handful of people gathered around the table Matthew and Marcie occupied, curious to see what sort of game the two were setting up. Such games were common in the establishment, and the general bustling of a bar was punctuated by the clattering roll of dice from time to time.

The player characters were about to go to a tavern where they heard a holy man named Yeshua was at, drinking dwarves under the table. They heard rumors that he could heal the sick with a touch, raise the dead without a spell, multiply food with a mere blessing, and other things.

However, en route, they run into a bunch of black-cloaked figures dragging a woman among them, they were carrying stones and bad intentions in their eyes. A passive Religion check—A Dwarven Cleric was proficient in that skill—revealed this group as the Shandhearen, a Lawful Neutral religious group of legalistic demagogues who believe that anyone who doesn't adhere to their laws are irredeemable deplorables. The party knows that this Shandhearen hate Yeshua with a purple passion and wish to trap him in a scene that will cause him to get arrested, so they can press the courts to kill him.

The party intercept a group of three of these Shandhearen who reveal themselves to be assassins. Two of them were already dispatched, but the third managed to send a blow dart right toward Marcie's character.

"Damnit, He Hit!" Marcie said.

"Good news," Matt said, rolling the pyramid shaped die, "You only took three points of damage, but then you realize that the site of the wound is starting to burn from the inside, and you can feel it coarse throughout your body."

"A poison dart, the jerk!" Marcie said.

"You need to make a Constitution Save, Marcie. The Difficulty Class is 12. Debbie, your Bless spell is still up. That adds the pyramid die, the d4, to the d20 that everybody was getting to know quite well. Roll both, Marcie, and add your Constitution Modifier, which is 3. If the total is 12 or above, you save."

"All right," Marcie said, and rolled her d20, her eyes starting to sink as it tumbled to its lowest mark. "...a nat 1..." Marcie hung her head.

By now everyone knows what a d4—or as the pyramid-shaped object is more cordially known, 'the caltrop'—is, as well as the ever-present twenty-sided die is. Matthew tend to give out an exceptional explanation of the game.

"All right," Marcie said, and rolled her d20.

Everyone gasped.

There was one chuckle from the black-toned elf from the back.

"...a nat 1..." Marcie hung her head.

"Hold it!" Matthew said. "Hold it. Look at your character sheet, Marcie. As a Halfling, you have a feature called Lucky. In the event of a 1 on your d20 roll, you can reroll it and take the other result. You may roll again."

Marcie breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank the Lord," she said, and rolled again.

The second roll is a 9. She winced.

"Roll the d4."

"Oh! Right!" Marcie said, and rolled the pyramid die. It came up a 2.

"9 plus 2 plus 3 equals 14. You saved."

Marcie yelled out, "YES!"

Matthew described the outcome. “When you got hit, you could feel the poison surge through you, you were just about to black out when you hear a voice form on high: ‘We’re having none of that!’ The next thing you knew the poison lost its punch. The sudden recovery took the assassin by surprise. You’re up.”

The top of Matt’s Dungeon Master screen had several cards hanging off it. A common method to showing who’s turn in the initiative order it was. Matt also had a 3-D printed hanging arrow to show who’s turn it is. He moved that arrow to Marcie’s card.

“Okay,” Marcie said. “Now I’m mad. I’m going after him with my shortsword. Er, you did say he was surprised?”

“I did say he was, didn’t I?” Matt said. “And from where he’s standing...”

In the middle of the table was a map of a cobbled street. Little miniatures were on it depicting the battle. Two of the assassins were down, and the third...had his back facing Mike’s dragonborn figurine.

“...when you move up to attack...”

Marcie moved her halfling rogue mini up to the assassin, across from the dragonborn.

“...you are now flanking the feeb. You can now attack with Advantage. Roll two d20s and take the higher result.”

“Don’t forget the d4, Marcie,” One of the onlooker popped up. “Take that bastard out!”

With the three dice rolled, Marcie came up with a 17.

“That hits! This attack qualifies as a sneak attack!”

“All right!” Marcie said, looking back at her sheet. “That means I get to add...three more six siders to my d6 weapon dice, and then add my Dexterity Modifier, which is 4, to the total, right?”

“You’re catching on, Marcie. Roll damage.”

She rolled: “5 plus 3 plus 1...plus 6...plus 2, that’s 16 points of piercing damage.”

“Let’s see who’s the real D&D fans in this room.” Matthew stood up and placed his hands together. “How do you want to do this?”

A couple dozen cheered!

“Heh heh heh, God Bless Matthew Mercer.”

From the vantage point of the grid, where the scene takes place in a cobblestoned Eastern European village, Marcie, the Halfling Rogue roared her disapproval of nearly getting killed. She charged straight up to the assassin, who got his arms held back by the hulking dragon man who snatched the assassin up in a full-Nelson hold.

“Careful. The red and shiny arms are mine,” Mike the Dragonborn warned Marcie the Halfling as she leapt up to strike the assassin with her short sword.

The stab went right between the ribs and pierced lung and heart. The assassin gurgled and lurched, made one last glance at the rogue, tried to mutter a curse, and fell limp. Mike dropped the now dead assassin, who collapsed on the ground.

“If I have a Gold Dragon for every time you halflings cheated death...” The Dwarven Cleric said as he rushed over to Marcie’s halfling. He placed a soothing hand on the puncture wound and draw on her light from on high. The pain, itching, and residual flames from the poison receded.

Marcie didn’t even have the time to thank her friend.

“There they are!” An elderly and cranky voice said.

The three looked up to find a good dozen or so men in similar cloaks, the oldest pointing an accusatory finger at the rogue. “They killed three of our men! Seize them and add them to this harlot, the cobblestones will have their thirst for sinner blood slaked tonight—”

“**Objection!**” The voice came from the tavern. A voice of a strange but familiar dialect, it sounded Yiddish. It also carried an authority not unlike the Gods. “You’ve gotta excuse me, I always wanted to say that.”

“You’ve gotta excuse me, I always wanted to say that.”

The three turned over to see who it was.

He didn’t look like much. An olive-skinned man of Middle Eastern descent. Light Brown hair that cascaded down his shoulders, amber eyes that just barely restrained the glow of omnipotence. A soft short beard covering his cheeks. He had on simple clothes, a blue-greyish robe faded by the sun, and sandals. But this man’s eyes, they had a gaze that could look into your soul and find everything about you with a glance. And yes, he was pointing his finger as if he were Phoenix Wright.

A finger of a hand, whose wrist sported a scarred over wound, as if someone punched a nail through that arm.

The man crossed his arms and sighed. “You guys again! Don’t you ever give up? Can’t a guy drink some stout in peace in this town?”

The elderly Shandhearen pointed at the plain-looking man. “Not until you pay for your sin, Yeshua!”

“Still pissed off at me for eating that pear that hung over that fence, are you?”

“You ate it during our holy fast day!”

“While you were pigging out on pork belly at the same moment!” Yeshua said. “Boiled to boot. And pulled out of the pot with a three-pronged fork!”

“**Enough!**” the old man looked like his head would explode. His eyes were crazed.

“We both know the fast is voluntary, and I haven’t eaten all day. None of the proper rulers here would blame me for picking at some low-hanging fruit.” He then lowered his gaze, turning to the red-dressed and awfully bruised woman they’re dragging by the arm. “But that’s not the reason you’re here, are you?”

A young woman, in deep dark-toned skin, with a silky white dress, long silver hair, and pointed elven ears, walked up to the table. She looked down at the new figure Matthew set on the grid, on the other side of the mass of figures on the other side of the three. “You know, Matthew, that miniature you set down looks quite familiar to Jesus. Doesn’t this count as idolatry?”

“Oh, please,” Matthew said. “You think God doesn’t know the difference between an Idol and a Game Miniature? Not even Mohammad Peacebeuponhim is *that* dense.”

Back to the grid world. The Cleric finally had his surprise fade enough to ask the newcomer. “Are you the one named Yeshua, the one they call the Son of God?”

Yeshua just looked at the Cleric and asked, “If I say yes, would you believe me?”

The Cleric just shook his head. “Aren’t we *all* Sons of God, in a way?”

Yeshua’s smile at the Cleric would brighten night into day. “We will get along just fine.” He then turned to the Shandhearen. “Out with it!”

They threw the red-dressed woman right into Yeshua’s feet. She cried out and favored her dislocated shoulder.

“This woman is a prostitute who was caught in the very act.” the elder said.

“And what was that act?” Yeshua retorted. “Something you or your underlings paid for?”

It was all the Elder could do not to just charge right up and throttle Yeshua. “In according to the laws of this land, she is to be stoned!”

And with that, everyone in the Shandhearen side found a rock, some of them picked up a stone from the ground, while others had one in their hands the whole time. All of them were chomping at the bit looking for someone to throw it at. Yeshua, the Harlot, the Party Members, a passing bird, anything.

The elder pointed a finger, with a hand that held a stone, right at Yeshua. “But. What. Say. You?”

Yeshua just stood there for a moment. He sighed and closed his eyes. He looked like he was muttering something, but nobody else heard it, save for the player characters. “This is the third time this has happened. Hold your attacks, friends. Let them make the first move.”

He opened his eyes and said out loud. “Whoever is without sin, let them cast the first stone.”

On the table, the pause was just five seconds. In the theater of the mind, it lasted for an eternity. As one by one, the Shandhearen left, in the time of Matthew removing their tokens one at a time. In the end, only the five remained. And the elder, who just pointed an accusatory finger at Yeshua and said, “This isn’t over, filth!” And with that, he stormed away.

Yeshua knelt to the battered and half-broken woman and helped her up to a sitting position. To the Cleric’s surprise, she saw the healing magic, but not the drawing of power that she’s used to. The cleric didn’t sense any link to any Power from him. No, the magic was coming from him! He’s a Power! He’s the Deity they were looking for!

“Where are your accusers, ma’am?” He said to the woman, as he placed a cloak over her. “Is there anyone here to condemn you?”

Back to the table. One of the youths had to say it. “I’d like to see the stat block you made for Jesus Christ.”

Matthew had a smile a mile wide. “I’m not telling.”

The others were just surprised. “You actually put Jesus Christ in the game!” one of them said, “I didn’t know that was allowed.”

“One man’s heresy,” said the dark-skinned, pointed-eared, martini-drinking woman who walked up to the table, “Is another man’s holy praise, really.”

“That’s why I did it,” Matthew replied, acknowledging the approaching woman. “Besides, if God wants to fry everyone who played Dungeons & Dragons, wouldn’t he have done so by now?”

Back to the characters on the table. Yeshua was looking at the party members.

It took a while for them to figure out what his unasked question was. “No way,” the cleric said, “We can’t cast the stone.”

Marcie just returned the crossed arms expression. “You think *I’m* without sin?”

The dragonborn added, “We just killed three men.”

“You killed three men while defending this woman’s life,” Yeshua said. “None shall fault you for that.”

He then turned back to the woman, who was on her knees. “A bit of irony about casting stones.” The woman looked up at Yeshua with the same adoration some of the player characters players felt when they accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. Yeshua lifted her up to her feet, held her face, and kissed her on the forehead. “Those who want to cast the stone are not qualified to do so. Those who are, do not wish to throw them. I do not condemn you either. Go in peace, and sin no more.”

The woman gave Yeshua the biggest of hugs and joyous of thanks. It took some time for her to get the strength enough to walk away on her own.

Yeshua then turned to the party and embraced them as well. “You have my thanks for helping me out. Please, join me for a meal, and to hear more of what I have to ask of you.”

“And *that’s* how you do it,” Matthew exclaimed, looking around to the onlookers. “That’s how you make a Christian-themed D&D game. Congratulations on surviving the jump-in.”

Matthew handed the two new players a certificate. “Keep your character sheets, the d20s, and this, it shows that your character has gained 100 Experience Points and 25 Gold. There’s also a code that you can use on D&D Beyond to get a trial subscription.”

Once the people on the table walked away and he started to gather back the pieces, the long-eared person of color approached him. She managed to see the *Secret Chest* appear; he dug out the toy chest, which caught her eye, and before she wondered if he has a whole Dungeon Master’s Kit in his clothes, he made the larger chest appear. She didn’t notice it yet.

“I never thought I’d ever see the day,” the drow maiden said. “Thirty years ago, Christians were burning this game. Today, I just saw Christ make an appearance.”

“They did it with Rock and Roll,” Matthew said as he put everything back into a repurposed Starter Set box. “It can be done with Dungeons & Dragons.” He looked up at the narrowed purple eyes with a reddish eyeglare. “Mistress Blackleaf, I presume. Nice cosplay, by the way.”

Blackleaf looked on with narrowed eyebrows as he put everything back in place, using smaller boxes for the minis and dice, and slipping the notebook in a pocket on the lid. Matt didn’t know if she was interested or just being condescending. But then again, at this close to her, he realizes that her resemblance of a drow is too good to be mere costume and makeup. Her face and skin tone looked just too smooth to be makeup. She even had a pendent made of metal and jewels. It was of an eight-pointed star with a ruby in the center. Spider webs stretched out to fill the spaces around this star.

Blackleaf smiled, although her smile made her look like a predator eyeing him down like prey. “Why thank you, servant of the Morninglord. Looove the way you designed that Lathanderite outfit to look like a Western sheriff. Although I think you overdid it with the pockets...”

“I didn’t want to stuff everything in a backpack,” Matthew said as he tapped the smaller and larger chests together, “My back thanks me every day.”

Blackleaf smirked and chuckled as she saw the larger chest disappear. This one has promise. “Maybe I could help you out here.” She passed him a flier. “There’s going to be a LARP game tomorrow night in the warehouse not too far from here. The winner can gain plenty of coin and maybe even some other things that you would not believe was possible. We’re talking *real* magic here, not like that silly gimmick you did with that chest. Who knows, you might be able to pull off feats Jesus himself would do.”

Matthew smirked. “You think that chest trick was something?” Matthew made sure to take stock of what he was sensing. Something about Blackleaf didn’t seem natural. He sensed a power within her that matched his own. Only darker, more maleficent, and vicious.

This was worse than any passing glance of disgust, rage, and fear he usually gets.

Twilight Forest

Whatever this young girl's name is, she couldn't tell you. She just didn't know. In fact, she didn't remember a moment prior to her waking up on that straw mat, clay bottle on the ground in front of her, the forest air on her skin cool and crisp over her face. And now she just stood there in her blue aproned dress all nice and poofy, with bloomer over white stockings and ankle length boots, her dark blonde hair cascading off her shoulders and back, held in place with a ribbon. She looked calm and contented, as if the Twilight Forest accepted her into its collective arms.

Grandma Silverskin, that lovely and loving witch, just called her Raimi, and she just took her word for it. She said she was her Grandmother, so it must be true. She wanted her to just sit there and drink her fill from her brew, and she couldn't think of any other thing to do.

Her memories were erased as she quaffed that third brew with the Styx water. What remained from her old life vanished after that with the next potion, consisting of a drop of blood from a virgin girl, a scorpion's tail, an adder's fang, a spider drowned in the potion, and a tiny heart that was still beating when he drank it. Grandma told him to take his medicine, and so he just quaffed it before he tasted anything.

Grandmother Silverskin watched and made sure that the potion worked the way it did, transforming the former Jason Trunston into a woman. She looked barely sixteen, in a body that just exudes innocence, if she weren't so lost in her own mind. Silverskin chose the name 'Raimi' and imprinted it upon her.

"I was wondering if you were going to pay me a visit, Gond," Silverskin told the Wonderbringer as she walked up to the scene. She poured more of the hallucinogenic brew into that bottle, handing it to Raimi. "Drink up my pretty. It'll make you feel better."

"That memory erasing potion worked too well," Gond replied. "Are you sure you didn't overdo it?"

"No way," Silverskin replied. "I'm very careful with Styx water." Silverskin knew that her newest child won't be listening. She's off in her own world now, sinking into a hallucinogenic world full of love, kindness, and understanding, oblivious to whoever's around her. "Normally when someone drinks this, they struggle, panicking as they lose their memories, and even then, you do not lose all of your memories. Not this guy. I watched as this guy just give up, like he wanted to lose them." She looked toward the girl and her thousand-yard stare. "That shouldn't have happened, I'm surprised that she's still able to breathe."

Gond was in shock. "How...how is that possible? There's no way that a normal being to be reduced to this state...at the age he was? Nobody should be this small inside after the age of ten. Not even a Son of Adam!"

"It was the damnest thing I've ever seen myself." Silverskin replied. "Why do I get the sinking feeling that we're going to run into more like who...this little one...was?"

The empty bottle slipped out of Raimi's fingers as she stood there, her eyes and face so blank that she could very well be a doll's. She just stood there, present in only body.

Gond just sighed and shook his head. "We broke it, Silverskin. It's up to us to fix it." Gond sighed. "I fear that there are more of these wayward souls on Earth than we can handle here. What do you plan to do with... Raimi, was it?"

"Aye. I'll give her a couple more bottles of the base stuff to make sure everything sets, and then I'll make sure she can function. I might put her in with the Gliderhavens as far as family goes."

"If she wants, I could teach her as my assistant." Gond nodded in approval. "She'll have a happy life once she settles in."

The presence of God

“You are not the first person to bring this to my attention today, Lathander.” Yeshe isn’t anything if not more patient than a thousand saints combined. Even so, Lathander could guess he was a bit annoyed.

“It looks like I’m not the only one who noticed it,” Lathander replied. “I know that your world was plagued with racism before, and last time I’ve been here, you humans have all but defeated that inner demon. Not only is Civil Rights put into law, but America has even elected a Black President,” He held up two fingers. “Twice.”

“Simple gestures and actions will not undermine a systemic problem, Lathander.”

Lathander’s mouth went dry. “It is a systemic issue? Why do they not change such a system?”

“If only it were that simple,” the Lord replied. “It is a system where those in power reign by greed. Those who have incredible wealth use it to ensure their position on top, to lord over those who have not. Those who have not generally fall into origins of non-Caucasian humans. Many an angel wished that it didn’t fall among racial lines, but it did. Though this wealthy elite holds power across the entire world and discriminates against them, they also hold disdain for those of their own color. In fact, you’d probably see it yourself, with all the homeless in Seattle, it’ll be worse in a couple years. I see a San Francisco with billionaires in their mansions completely surrounded by people in tents.”

Lathander shook his head.

“It is a system where being born into wealth provides an imbalanced structure of power. Those who have wealth, are allowed to make decisions that affect everyone. Often it is with the result that those with wealth enact rules and laws that enrich themselves further, at the expense of the less-fortunate.”

“But the people have a voice! They have a way to choose who represents them.” Lathander cried out.

“My dear Lathander, that voice is but a whisper in comparison to the voice the wealthy have.”

“How do they maintain such wealth? I thought it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God!”

Yeshe placed his hand on an exasperated Lathander. “They are akin to the Dragons of your world, Lathander. They care not for anything more than a bed of gold and jewels to lie upon, and will burn and pillage the villages to get more, despite having little use for more. The people have not the tools to fight back; they must merely survive, hoping the dragons will not come for them or their subsistence.”

“I can’t believe that your world still has this problem today,” Lathander spoke up, trying to maintain composure, but his voice raised at this part. “You do not have tieflings in your world, or drow, or orcs or goblins. You don’t even have dwarves, elves, and halflings! *All you have in your world is Humans!* Earth only has one race!”

“If you didn’t put all those different races in your worlds, Lathander,” Yeshe sighed, “you would have the same problem. It seems to be the nature of mortals to band together by similarities; it is how tribes formed in ancient times. In those ancient times, mortals feared what was different, and fear naturally led to violence. I am ashamed of what cruelty mortals are capable of when they believe they are my ‘chosen people’.”

“You *are* aware that more people have been killed in *your name* than by any other, am I right, Yeshe?” came a raspy, seething and sinister voice. “I think I have some of them in Soul Coin form. And don’t get me started on the one who the Mists of Ravenloft managed to snag.”

Lathander turned around to see who said that.

Standing before both of them, with arms crossed was a red-skintoned man in a stiff robe, with a molded lower beard, fanged teeth, yellow eyes, and horns that jutted out from his temples. He had an oppressive

heat emanating from him, and the scent of brimstone. He was holding a rod with a large red gemstone on top.

“What?” Asmodeus grinned. “Do you think that Adolf Hitler actually committed suicide in the arms of his mistress in that bunker before the Allies got him? I verified it myself: The bastards’ a Dread Lord...”

Almost every angel in heaven appeared all at once, aiming a sword, dagger, arrow, or even a menacing glare at the Lord of the Nine Hells.

“I’m not the Devil you’re after, you gits!” Asmodeus dismissed the gathering throng of angels. “Pike off!”

Yeshu waved the angels to back off, but they all kept their eyes on the devil man.

“What in blazes are *you* doing here, Asmodeus?” Lathander accused.

“Why, the very same reason you’re here, ‘Number One’.” Asmodeus answered mockingly. “I came here to share an important clue over our common problem. You better find a chair to sit down, Morninglord. You’ve got a whole lot of our fellow deities blaming you personally for this.”

“What trick is this, Asmodeus?” Lathander was incredulous. “I severely doubt that I would have it in me to create this...”

What Asmodeus said next drained all the color from the angel.

“Strix Skizzik and Diath Woodlow. I believe you know those two quite well.”

32-Bit Tavern

“Can I guess that the bad guy’s gonna be drow?” Matthew said. “And you’ve staged the place to resemble the Underdark.”

Blackleaf raised an eyebrow at that. “So, what if it is? Drow are excellent villains. And my beloved Lolth is a very popular goddess for many a group I’m around. Tell, me, Sir Christopher. What do people on this plane think of your precious Morninglord?”

“The Best Friend Forever of one Evelyn Avalona Helvig Marthain.”

Mistress Blackleaf’s expression narrowed when she heard that. She reached out for Matthew for a moment, as if sensing who *he* is. Her hand shot back as if she touched something too hot.

“Although with me, it’s different. My entry to your LARP, my dear.”

“What’s the policy on characters?”

Blackleaf chuckled. “Anything from Wizards would do, including the Unearthed Arcana. What are you having in mind?”

Matthew just looked at Blackleaf. “I’ll leave that to be a surprise for everyone. You don’t show all your cards, why should I?”

“I see.” Mistress Blackleaf’s eyes went wide in surprise. But just as quickly smile returned, as well as her sultry expression. “I see.”

“Think I can join into your LARP?” Matthew asked. “I’ll consider it, if the coin is good.”

Mistress Blackleaf pulled out a small folded sheet of paper. “A fifty-thousand-dollar prize divided among all those who make it at the end. And oh yeah, you can have a party.”

Matthew nodded.

“However, there is a caveat. When you enter this game, you must stay in character, the whole way, no matter what.” Blackleaf’s eyes were cold as she leaned in. “Breaking character when you’re in this game will have...dire consequences. Maybe eternal. I’m looking forward to seeing what a Lathanderite from Earth is like. Maybe Anna Prosser can team up with you.”

“There’s no need to worry about breaking character,” He gave her a smile as he walked away, “when you are one.”

Blackleaf just smiled, and then her eyes narrowed. She glanced over to one side and nodded toward someone.

Matthew walked up to the bar. “We’ve got a lead,” he said to the dwarf.

“If what I was sensing from her,” Moradin said. “Corellon ain’t gonna like it.”

“Yeah, I got a good look up close. Close to know cosmetic prosthetics or even plastic surgery if I saw it. She looks like she was polymorphed into a dark elf, or...”

“We *are* dealing with Drow. *Real* drow.”

“Let’s head back before something bad happens. Things are getting too good here, I keep expecting to roll a natural 1 in real life.”

“Yer worryin’ too much, Laddie,” Moradin said as he hopped off the barstool he was on.

It was all happening too perfect up to this point, and it was pricking at Matthew’s mind. It’s been too long for something bad to happen, and he’s been dodging fate too many times. At any time, Matthew believed, Murphy’s Law will kick in the door and show his ugly face.

It is not *if* the dice rolls a Nat 1, but *when*.

“Show’s over, Holy Roller.” An otherworldly voice spoke up, belonging to the owner of the gun pressing at his back.

Matthew didn’t have to glance back to know that the person sticking that gun to his back was one of those Drow patrons. A patron who wasn’t exactly dressing up for the occasion.

“Drink up,” Matthew said. “That’s one fine looking cosplay you’re wearing.”

Chapter 11

The presence of God.

“Have you ever heard of the Ashton Concordance?” Asmodeus asked.

Yeshu shook his head.

“I only contend myself with the Material world and my people,” Lathander said, “and you know that Yeshu doesn’t interfere with our Realms. Neither of us would’ve known.”

Asmodeus snorted. “There were two warring families battling around the multiverse. A tiefling family, the Skizziks, and a family of celestials, the Lorcatha. The battle threatened to tear the multiverse apart, so a delegation of the two families met together to settle this matter. They created the Ashtown Concordance to keep them separated.” “The balance was set. As long as there wasn’t a pairing of any kind between the Skizzik and a Lorcatha, everything was fine.” The devil looked at the Morninglord. “I think you know where this is going, Lathander.”

“It would be safe to say that Strix would be a Skizzik,” Lathander simply nodded in response. “Being that she’s a tiefling.”

“It looks like Diath was another matter.” Asmodeus continued. “I doubt either of you would’ve known.”

“If Diath is a Lorcatha,” Yeshu concluded. “That would violate the Ashton Concordance.”

“It happened during, according to Earth’s time, Episode 52 of *Dice Camera Action*. In our timeline, the Death Curse has just reared its ugly head. Strix and Diath were suffering from that, along with every other people who ever been resurrected.” The Lord of the Nine Hells responded. “Which, in Toril, means pretty much everyone. I’m on the record saying that Van Richten is to blame for the ritual that created those rings, but I do know of some devils and even celestials who blame, Lathander, for this.”

Lathander gave the grave answer: “The ritual was a Vistani Gypsy *Wedding*.”

The ritual is slowing the Death Curse.” Asmodeus interrupted. “It’s doing so at the expense of everyone and everything else. Tell me, Morninglord; is that fair?”

That made Lathander snarl.

“But it doesn’t change the fact that the ritual broke the Ashton Concordance.” He sighed. “You of *all people*, Lathander should know that ignorance and rejection of their heritage is no excuse. No amount of belief can change that.”

“Are we unable to separate them?” Yeshu pondered aloud. “It would seem that this hinges on them being together.”

“Oh, if it were only that simple.” Asmodeus rolled his eyes. “Strix and Diath love each other. Can’t separate them, either. Undoing a Vistani Gypsy ritual can have catastrophic consequences. Probably worse than the breaking of the Ashton Concordance itself.” He sighed. “Every possibility I could think of is not a good one, something to think about considering who said that.”

He then turned to Lathander. “On top of all this, you went and took in one of these Sons of Adam and made your very first warlock?” He smiled, his tone mocking as usual. “I didn’t think you were capable of getting off your high horse. I have to say I’m flattered by the imitation.”

“Do not test my patience, Asmodeus.” It was clear Lathander was at his limit, judging by that fist he shook.

“If the ritual is the root of the problem,” Yeshu intervened. “Then we need to fix this first, assuming it will solve many of the other issues as well. I will need some time to ponder.”

That’s what brought me here in the first place.” Asmodeus replied. “I’m out of ideas. I was hoping you could come up with some sort of answer.”

“The Concordance was broken because of this Strix and Diath not knowing who their families were, or at the least, not caring,” Yeshu scratched his chin. “The straightest path to a solution would have to involve removing them from their...” Yeshu snapped his fingers. “That’s it! There’s the answer. We make it so that neither one is of House Skizziks nor of House Lorcatha. We only need to do this to *either* Strix or Diath to get it to work, but if we can get both of them into another family, so much the better.”

He waved a hand to a side, and a wide sheet of parchment floated into place. A series of cloves of fire began to write the legal document required, a Pact of Adoption, in seven languages in one sheet: Faerunian Common, Elven, Dwarven, Celestial, Infernal, Earth Aramaic, and in the center in a larger space, the Planar Common of Sigil.

Asmodeus smiled as he saw the contract being inked, and his eye for details checked to ensure that the contract was proper, with all the clauses legit and the legal effects binding. “Simple, elegant, and unlike most of my deals, souls need not be involved. You do not disappoint, Yeshu.”

The adoption contract hung in the air for the ink to dry, and then it rolled into a tube and bound by a silk band. Yeshu took the scroll and handed it to Asmodeus. “I assume you know of someone who’d sign this. I have two copies of this if you need to do both, but I think you only need one.”

“Very well. Now I only need to find someone who’ll do the adoption.”

“I suggest you be as quick as possible.”

“I can make things happen.” Asmodeus remarked as he opened a door to a wasteland that smelled too much like brimstone and walked through it. But not before pausing to give a sly glance back.

“After all, there’s a lot of people who would be more than willing to kiss this rod over it.”

Yeshu and Lathander shot back to him. “Will you get going?!”

Silence hung in the air after the door closed.

Lathander finally sighed. “Sometimes things are much too complicated than it should be. I know of some deities from the Higher Planes who’ll accuse me for all this.”

“I know that you feel that you’re responsible for this, we’ll deal with that later,” Yeshu replied. “Right now, we must close the rifts between *our* worlds. That’s what brought us together in the first place, Lathander.”

32-Bit Tavern

3:50 PM; 41:10 before the Eclipse

Moradin had better luck ferrying Marcie out of the tavern than getting Matthew out of trouble. The two drow had enough of a bouncer role to drag Matthew out the back, without creating a scene.

“Okay, so we’re all...” Marcie remarked as she found someone missing among their ranks. “Has anyone seen Matthew?”

Matthew found himself in the alleyway behind the Tavern, in company of two dark-skinned Drow. Hands above his head, he stumbled a bit as the gun to his back pushed him forward.

“What do you want with me, huh?” Matthew asked, a bit hesitant in his tone. Drow were one thing, but the all too real gun at his back was enough to put him on edge. “I don’t have any money or anything, I’m just a kid!”

“Oh, we don’t want to *kill* you.” said the voice behind him. “We just don’t like soft-hearted sun-huggers.”

Matt could practically feel the smile behind him. With them concentrating on the gun at his back, he was capable of putting his left hand on his right wrist above his head, concealing his incantation with a nervous sigh. This was either going to save his skin, or reintroduce himself to Yeshu with a halo on his head.

“Keep moving, Lightbearer.” the drow pushed him again, toward an unmarked, windowless van. “We’ll decide your fate on the way.”

Matthew stumbled again, his hands dropping from above his head, to his chest. “It’s either slavery or spider food, right?”

“I hadn’t considered the slavery, really.” The other drow snickered. “Spider food seems much more suitable a fate for one who worships the sun.”

Matthew snorted. “You wanna know what I like the most about you Spider worshippers?”

“What?”

In an instant, the familiar cool of the *Armor of Agathys* formed a wall of ice between his body and the gun at his back

“No matter what I do to you, I won’t feel bad.”

The startled drow pulled the trigger in surprise response. The bullet only connected with the ice, shattering it upon impact and leaving Matthew unscathed, causing the two to stumble apart from the sudden force. With the armor’s protection, he reached into his coat and pulled out his revolver.

For a moment, he hesitated. This wasn’t an arcade game. This isn’t even on a tabletop RPG anymore. Even though they’re dark elves, there are *still living beings!* Would what he’s about to do count as murder even though they...

Another shot to his back shattered the rest of the *Armor*. That settled the matter to Matthew. It was him, or them. Self Defense, according to the Law...and the Lord.

Besides, isn’t scenarios like this why he got that gun in the first place?

It only took a moment, but he raised the gun and squeezed the handle, pulling the trigger in a smooth motion. With a slight flinch, the light seared the Drow in front of him through the chest, causing them to scream out and collapse in a heap on the pavement. With a quick turn, Matthew dispatched the other Drow with a similar shot.

While he waited nervously for the adrenaline to wear off and he can start shuddering, the third drow he didn’t even notice made her presence known. She was taking advantage of the shadows, a blade in her

hand. Taking advantage of this moment, she lunged swift and silent, burying the dagger in Matthew's back with cold, ruthless efficiency.

"That wasn't *Sacred Flame*...or any kind of *divine* spell. What sort of a Lathanderite *are* you, boy?" the feminine voice spoke softly, hushing him as she gripped the handle of that blade tight.

Matthew hadn't the courage, nor the frame of mind to respond, what with the dagger piercing his back. A fortunate step caused that blade to pierce less vital areas, but the sheer shock to his system kept him quiet. An immense fatigue began to wash over him as the venomous blade did its dirty work.

Even though his vision was getting blurry, Blackleaf's voice was still as clear as day, "Wait a harasting minute. I know this connection. This is an arcane pact!"

God damnit, He thought. *Blackleaf had to have on hand that staple of all drow, Sleeping Poison.*

"A *warlock*, Lathander?" She cooed as she kicked Matthew's knee out, forcing him to kneel. "The Morninglord now has *warlocks*?" She chuckled, mocking the boy. "I surmised he'd have to go to some extreme lengths, but *this*? What would poor, sweet Evelyn Marthain say?"

It took all his strength just to meek out a retort. "Does all of...his followers...have to act...like Pollyanna?"

"You've only been here one day, right?" She reached over and pulled his ear, which to Matthew hurt worse than it should have. "You honestly don't think you'll stand a chance against me or my beloved Miska, do you?"

Matthew just groaned in pain as he tried to turn his head, but his head just felt too heavy. He felt the odd sensation of searing heat around his wound and a bitter cold in his extremities. He could only shudder at why the Drow hadn't finished him off yet.

"Where are ya, Laddie?" He heard Moradin shout out from behind them, at a tone that implied he was closing in on their location.

Mistress Blackleaf whispered into Matthew's ear. "Something to remember me by, kid." And with that, she vanished in a coiling mass of darkness, leaving only the dagger as proof she was ever there.

The next voice Matthew heard was Moradin's. "Och! Found 'im!"

"I knew something like this would happen. Can you move, Matthew?" He heard, as something cold covered his shoulder in an attempt to numb the pain. He could barely recognize Marcie as everything started to lull into sleep.

"That dagger ye pulled out had that sleeping poison Drow's famous fer. Nothing I can't cure, rest assured." Moradin sighed, picking the boy up carefully. "Better get 'im to a safe place, Marcie."

The unconsciousness of sleep claimed Matthew in short order. His last waking thought was of his Father and Patron, and how he would scold him over this mishap."

Matthew's Room, The Mansion, Twilight Forest
6:40 PM; 38:20 before the Eclipse

Matthew feared the worst when he felt consciousness return to him, but then he smelled a familiar mahogany wood and the aroma of the fireplace. It was when he heard the ticking of grandmother clocks when he realized where he was.

"I came as soon as I heard the news, Matthew. Looks like we both knew that the proverbial Natural 1 was coming, but I doubt either one of us expected that." Lathander spoke in a slightly anxious tone, standing at the foot of the bed. "That Blackleaf took us all off guard."

Matthew could feel the plush bed under him, he was lying on some sort of wedge, on his stomach. He felt slightly elevated, with the cool air of the evening on his bare back.

"See what I mean about how hard it is to get the vestments of your faith clean." Matthew said softly, in a surprisingly apologetic tone.

Lathander snorted while a female drow laughed. "Of all things to be concerned about!" He then sighed. "Uniforms can be replaced and cleaned. It is the one wearing it that I worry over."

He was in the main bedroom, his bedroom, in the Mansion, all right. He was in the canopied bed, slumped over a rolled-up rug so that his back was within reach. There was a thick, wet, cloth of sometime stretched over the right shoulder, where the stab was. Everyone else in the room—Lathander, Marcie, and Tanya—was behind his field of vision.

"Do not push yourself, my son." Lathander ordered, walking to the right side of the bed. "I spoke with Moradin and Marcie as your injury was attended. The said if the Drow were aiming to take you somewhere, they may have taken others."

"There's been a rash of homeless people being kidnapped, Papa," Matthew responded, slowly trying to adjust his position for comfort. "It's been in the news. I don't know if it's related though."

"I have heard about them as well. Yet another item for those two to look into. But I'm more worried about how you're taking this, you being my warlock and all."

"Feels like I have a swamp on my back or something."

"A sheet of seaweed with several healing herbs and some tea tree oil," Tanya said from over his shoulder. "There's a nice witch at the outskirts of the village who mixes up most of the medicines here."

"Tanya, I kinda didn't want you to see me like this." Matthew tried to shift his weight around over the pile of pillows he was over, only to have his right shoulder complaining in response.

"Master Christopher, are you trying to impress me?" Tanya said. "Now now, even the mightiest of heroes needs proper medicinal attention."

Tanya drizzled something above that sheet adhered over that wound. "Just relax." the vapor of mint and grasses that wafted over to his nose. The area behind his shoulder—where he could remember where that dagger stabbed him, felt ice cold, almost to the point where he could see his own breath. "Your shoulder may still be a bit tender for an hour or so," Tanya instructed. "Even with divine healing, there'll still be some sore muscles and stiffness. And then there's the residual bits of Drow poison that had to run out of your system. "A little rest and you'll be ready to get back into the adventure."

"Thanks," Matthew sighed, trying not to make his teeth chatter from the cold. "I knew this would happen sooner or later. I could just hear you scold me over it. No, Matthew, this is no longer happening on a tabletop. No, Matthew, there are no more saving throws or waiting for a turn order. And no, Matthew, you do not get to roll up another character sheet when you die."

"I will not scold you over that then." Lathander patted his warlock on the head, sending more of that warm light inside. "And not even a 'No, Matthew, just because you took down the two immediate threats does not

mean that there is a third waiting for you to jump in.’ But it is like what they say about this Murphy’s Law. If it can go wrong, it will.”

“It looks like nobody’s immune from that rule.”

“Not even deities.” Lathander shifted gears. “Before you were going through your first live encounter, were you able to find out anything about your assailants?”

“Like, what exactly?” Matthew asked.

“Any particular names, places, any evidence of a plan of sorts.” Lathander responded. “Though it may be difficult, please tell me what you can remember. We will exchange information upon my return.”

“That I did get, Papa. Before she left, she said something about her ‘beloved Miska’. M-I-S-K-A Whatever that is.”

“Miska, you say.” Lathander responded, as he got up to leave. “I will look into it. I’m sure you’ll be eager to get back in after a while, my son. But for now, just rest and recollect, my son.” He then turned to Tanya. “Make sure he stays put, Tanya.”

“Of course, Master.”

“Well, while y’re out of commission,” Marcie gave a sidelong smirk at the maid looking after him, “Guess I’ll go about makin’ somethin’ to protect ya. Can’t have ya facin’ down baddies in nothin’ but cloth, if today’s adventure is any indication.”

“Thanks Marcie,” Matthew responded. “I owe you big, for that.”

“Jus’ keep in mind who’s lookin’ out for ya, and give ‘em proper thanks.” Marcie smirked as she turned to leave.

“A dwarf’s dwarf, that girl,” Tanya smiled as she watched Marcie leave. “Tough and stubborn, but caring.”

“So, uh...” Matthew fidgeted, feeling more vulnerable than ever in front of the girl. “I’m sorry to make you do all this for me.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble.” Tanya gave him a light smile. “Besides, I expected that from you, going to all sorts of lengths to be all rough and tough, just like any boy.”

“Believe me, it wasn’t intentional.” Matthew replied sheepishly. “I took the chance to do something amazing once I found out I was in combat. Made a perfectly cool one-liner before I did it too.”

“Cool?” she asked him, unfamiliar with his use of slang. “I thought Lathanderites would be more into warmth.”

“Doh!” Matthew sighed. “I forgot that you came here from Baldur’s Gate. You’re not used to Earth Slang. I meant about wanting to get some form of hero and all. I’m going to get known sooner or later.”

Tanya gave him a playful smile. “Well, I’m no expert, but what I think makes Lathander the Morninglord so wonderful is that he is a man of his word, and that his actions often speak for his character.”

“Really?” Matthew blushed a bit more intensely at her winning smile. “It’s not because he’s super tall, or handsome, or anything like that?”

“Well, those things certainly don’t hurt,” Tanya admitted honestly, reaching to snuff out the candles. “But tall and handsome people can be quite conceited, manipulative, or worse. A man has to have more than looks and stature, you know.”

“Right.” Matthew gave a sigh of relief, feeling the warmth of hope inside. “G-good to know. Thanks again, Tanya.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Master Christopher.” she picked up the remaining candle to take with her. “I’ll check up on you in a few hours. Rest well, Master.”

Chapter 12

The Presence of God

7:00 PM; 38:00 before the Eclipse

Having gathered the information from the encounter on Earth from Moradin, Marcie and Matthew, it was time to present it to Yeshu for his input and advice. Touching down within his Lord's presence, he was about to speak aloud; a figure in the Lord's presence gave him pause.

Standing with Yeshu was a being with the appearance of an anthropomorphic fox. Such kin were commonplace in his world, they tend to live around the lower planes between the Nine Hells and the Endless Abyss, but he knows this particular vixen all too well. In fact, everyone who has even heard of the city of Sigil know of her.

"First *our* Lord of the Nine Hells, and now *you!*" Lathander said with his arms crossed. "How in blazes did you get here, Shemeshka?"

Her ears of Shemeshka the Maurauder twitched in the air as she noticed his presence, and spun around, twirling her tail as if it were a long dress. "Oh, *there* you are, Number One," she said, her voice sounding like she found it the bottom of a whiskey bottle. "I was wondering where you were. I was worried that you would bail on your followers once you realized what that Vistani Wedding Ritual has done."

Lathander choked down a snarl. "Nevermind that, just tell me why you're here, Shemeshka?"

The Arcanaloth turned on the Coquettishness. "Oh, sweet innocent little ol' me?"

"And your attempt at an Amphail accent is abysmal! Do not do an Evelyn impression again. What business have you with Yeshu?"

"Oh, just doing some of the crosstrade, that's all." Shemeshka pulled out a book from her gown in one hand, tipped her razorvine crown with the other. "King of the Crosstrades and all."

"I'm surprised that you were able to get that book this quickly," Yeshu spoke in his kind and even tone "I will ensure my Son receives it soon."

"I just happened to have it around," Shemeshka said. "There was a wizard in the Demiplane of Ravenloft who was trying to make a teleportation circle out from under Stahd's gaze. I helped him out in exchange for his services, since he did show some promise. Of course, he's stuck in Sigil now, because if Strahd ever catch him back in Barovia...So, did *you* get *it*?"

"I don't know what is more shocking," Yeshu said as he produced a plastic card. "That there's an actual Starbucks in the City of Doors, or you just wanting a gift card for that place?"

"You can't imagine, Yeshu, how much I want this?" Shemeshka tail actually wagged as she held that card. Have you any, idea, how much I like Pumpkin Spice Lattes?! How can I, or for that matter how can *anyone*, despise a world, or a people, that created such a decadent, luxurious, and delightful drink?!"

She then looked up and lifted her head until her head was upside down behind her neck. "Do you need anything, Lathander, or do you just want to talk to daddy?"

"Will you mind?" Lathander shot back. But then he changed his tone. "I think the King of the Crosstrade should know this as well. My partner got a good look at the drow woman running the LARP that's about to happen during the eclipse."

"Ooooh," Shemeshka cooed as she listened to the information Lathander had for her. "You got something about that summoning I heard...Hold a moment...How could there be *drow* in Yeshu's world?"

"That's what I intend to find out," Lathander stated adamantly. I am confident you and your contacts are able to bring me more information. I have a theory that she is not from our world."

“I’ll have to look into it.” Shemeshka gave a wily smirk. “I will keep my ears out for any sort of Drow activity in my logs. For a price.”

“A price?” Lathander raised an eyebrow. “What sort of price?”

“Oh, nothing major.” the fox remarked, her tail dancing about in excitement. “Just confirm this little rumor for me. Do you actually have a warlock in your employ?”

“Yes, I have a warlock. It was the only way to allow one of Yeshu’s children into my employ.” Lathander explained. “Is that satisfactory payment?”

“Oh, I was expecting a much better story,” Shemeshka pouted. “But yes, it is satisfactory. Does he know what part you play in all this, Morninglord?”

The mansion in the Twilight Forest
9:00 PM; 36:00 before the Eclipse

“Master Christopher, Lord Lathander wishes to see you.” Tanya spoke softly as she roused him from a light sleep. “I don’t want to be a bother, but it sounds pretty urgent.”

Matthew slowly rose from his bed, running a hand through his hair and slowly turning to get out of bed. “Must be pretty important.” he replied in a bit of a daze. “How long was I out?”

“Just a few hours, really.” Tanya spoke, gesturing to the open door. “I’ll make the bed while you’re having your talk with Lord Lathander. I hope it’s nothing serious!”

The cool evening air found its way into the mansion, making the hardwood floors quite cold for those traveling barefoot. His footfalls were light on the floor as he made haste for the study; a place where Lathander was often found. Pushing through the heavy oaken door, he found Lathander in thought, facing the fireplace as it crackled and popped with its warmth. He was favoring his head as if he had a headache.”

“You called for me, Papa,” Matthew said, wondering if that migraine was from something *he* done.

“You might need to sit down for this, Matthew,” Lathander said. “I just found the true origin of the mess we both are in, and right now I am wishing I have never heard of it.”

Matthew went for the chair opposite Lathander, needing a little extra push to get into it comfortably.

“I am confident you know,” Lathander spoke with a curious tone, “but are you familiar with the Ashtown Concordance?”

“I heard about it from *Dice Camera Action*,” Matthew pondered aloud. “I think it’s about two warring families. A tiefling family, the Skizziks, and a family of celestials, the Lorcatha. They were gonna tear the universe apart with all their fighting, so they created the Ashtown Concordance to keep them separated. Why do you ask?”

That is an accurate recount,” came the voice of Chauntea from the doorway. “Strix was a Skizzik and Diath a Lorcatha. However, neither of them are aware of their lineage, so they thought nothing of forming a bond together. Regardless if you think in the letter or spirit of the law; ignorance of their heritage is no excuse.”

“What kind of bond?”

“That bring us to the shocking part. As you know, the Death Curse was affecting three of the four members of the Waffle Crew, only Evelyn was spared. Van Richten had a ritual that would take bits of Evelyn’s soul and put them into protective rings, not to break the curse for those two, but to keep it at bay. I know that it would be at the cost of Evelyn’s soul, and I was planning on having her return as an angel. I didn’t count on her ending up in a construct body, but you can thank Paultin Seppa’s quick thinking and great luck for that, otherwise, she would be sucked into the device causing the Death Curse herself. But then I found out something that would’ve caused me to stop that plan.”

Once again, Matthew Christopher’s mind went back to what little he knew about the ritual himself, from watching the Twitch stream. He started to full in the blanks until he the moment he realized.

He had to gulp several times to generate enough saliva in his mouth to speak.

“That ritual...It was a *wedding* ritual, isn’t it?”

Lathander nodded. “They’ve already attracted the attention from the denizens of Sigil, and...”

Matthew raised a hand, stopping him.

“I need a moment.” Matthew slowly got up from his seat.

And walked out the door.

Out the mansion.

Walking past the locals without noticing them. Not even Tanya.

He walked down the path.

Into the forest.

Past the trees.

He kept going.

Until he thought he was by himself.

The natural leaves in the wind and chirping on the birds faded away.

He fell to his knees.

He looked up

It was completely quiet.

*God...**DAMN!***

God Damn You Chris Perkins!

You knew about it!

YOU FUCKING

KNEW!! GOD

DAMN IT!!

YOU KNEW!!

Matthew's voice was not only loud, magically amplified loud, but the kind of loudness more accompanied by a certain rock band depicted in Douglas Adam's books. The kind of bands that play in one planet and the audience stationed in another. That loud.

The outburst smacked the village, rattling windows, shaking trees, and sending birds off into the sky.

It pushed past the mists and broke through the borders that separated the demiplane and the Outer plane of Elysium where the pocket dimension came from.

It then branched out in both directions, breaking through to Bytopia and the Beast Lands.

Then over at Mount Celestial and Arborea.

And so, on and so on, around the whole Great Wheel in both directions, until the shockwaves reached the Lower Planes, smacking demon and devil alike like a Tsunami.

It was the loudest in Hades, where the two waves smacked each other, causing the river Styx to stop flowing for a good thirty seconds. The ground zero of the impact was an total extinction event for everyone and everything in the surrounding fifteen miles.

For a good five minutes, the entire Blood War was in full pause.

Even the Lady of Pain lifted up her head to notice.

"My *God*, young man!" Asmodeus muttered from his throne, all the way down to the lowest point of the winding tail at the bottom of Nessus, the ninth layer of the Hells. "Do you praise Yeshu with that mouth?!"

Matthew kept pounding the dirt screaming out a stream of curses, for as long as his voice can hold. Eventually, he just hovered there, on his hands and knees, panting.

“Feel better?”

Matthew looked up, leaning back on his haunches, and found Lathander by the trees, his fingers in his ears trying to get the hearing back in them.

“Yeah...” Matthew managed to say after a couple deep breaths. “Yeah...I do feel better. As long as you’re not mad at me cussing, yeah. I feel better.”

“I do believe, Matthew, that you were doing that for me, my friends, and a good chunk of the Forgotten Realms pantheon. I would be eating that soap along with you.”

“So,” Matthew said, favoring his own head this time. All that swearing wasn’t good for the brain. “Now that we know what started this mess? Do you know of any means to fix it?”

“Like I started to say before you needed to relieve a little teenage angst, they’ve already attracted the attention from the denizens of Sigil, and they they will no doubt have others make more forceful manners to separate the two.”

“Which will be impossible,” Chauntea said as she arrived on the scene. She was about to chastise Matthew over his language, but Lathander just told her why he did it. Now she didn’t blame him, and in fact was grateful that he went to an out of the way place to do that. “From what I heard, Strix and Diath do have a thing for each other. It’s true love. Not even the Lady of Pain can keep them apart.”

“Having spoken with Yeshu, we can restore balance by simply having one or both of them join another family house.” Lathander added, leaving out that he spoke with Asmodeus about it. “It is easier said than done, but the Concordance only states that the Skizziks and the Lorcatcha must be separated. If one or both of them is of neither of those houses, balance will be restored.”

“And we have this Miska whoever he is.” Matthew spoke up in turn.

“It would appear that ‘Miska’ is Miska, the Wolf Spider.” came another voice from the trees. “The so-called Prince of Demons.”

“Ah, the son of Yeshu comes to visit!” Chauntea gave the young, olive-skinned man a gentle hug. “Thank you for helping us with our little dimensional problem, Jesus.”

“Well, you know that while God the Father can’t enter the Realms himself, *I* could just reduce myself down to what I was during the Gospels and can just waltz right on in. Even to Sigil. Although I do keep my visits here to a bare minimum, you know me by now.”

Matthew put two and two together and found out who he was looking at. Matthew’s depiction of Him in the setting wasn’t that far off, even though he did chad him up a bit. A tall man of middle eastern descent, deep olive skin, black curly hair that cascaded down to his neck. A simple gray-toned robe with an overcoat. And sandaled feet. The only color came from the red sash hanging off of him. He didn’t have any glow or any display of His divinity, nothing to have anyone catch wise over what he is upon their first impression of him.

Which was just the way He was in the first four books of the New Testament.

Which was just the way He wishes to present himself as.

Even though Matthew Christopher had that in mind when he Stat Blocked the Son of God, seeing Him face to face still made him...not gush out in awe and fear over being in His presence, but to cross his arms, raise an eyebrow, and go, “*You’re* Jesus Christ?”

The Nazarene a humble smile. “I don’t look like much do I? It’s part of my charm. And uh...I have to say it.” He pointed a thumb skyward. “The last time I heard that level of cussing was from Peter after I got

arrested. He was spewing out language that would traumatize drill instructors...right up to the crowing of that rooster.”

Matthew winced.

“I’d complain,” Jesus said as he helped Matthew up, “but then I had to bite into that soap bar myself.”

Matthew took that hand and was pulled up, but then he paused before he let go.

“The world’s gotta know: Was it palms or wrists?”

Jesus turned his arm and pulled back the sleeve of his cloak to give a good view. The scarred over puncture wounds were just beyond the wrist bones of his lower arms.

“Good guess on the palms,” Jesus said. “I’ll admit, the classic stigmata makes for a very visceral image, but driving them through the palms proved too impractical. They also tied me down with rope, I wasn’t going anywhere.”

By now, Matthew just started to stammer. He wasn’t sure if he should bow, shake his hand, ask for an autograph or...

“Just sharing a brew with me would do,” Jesus said with a wink. “But that’ll be for later, but right now, I just need to talk shop with you and your patron. Would you mind taking a walk with me, young man?”

“Oh, not at all.” Matthew responded, looking to Lathander and Chauntea. “I’ll be back in a little while.”

A short while later, Matthew and the son of God were taking a walk down one of the paths near the mansion. Still favoring that shoulder, the two discussed the various stories of Jesus’s life. He was a beacon to others not by divinity, but by simpler methods: caring for one’s neighbor, helping those in need and acting with honesty and integrity whether others were around.

“You probably know what’s happening with me.” Matthew looked apologetic. “If you’re mad at me for becoming a Lathanderite, and a warlock to boot...I understand.” Jesus looked on at Matthew who turned away his gaze.

“Remember who made that warlock pact, Matthew.” Jesus placed a hand on his good shoulder. “It wasn’t like you’re going to be a Christian anyway. All I’ve ever asked of you all is to treat each other with love and respect. You need not worship to do good deeds. You need not believe in a higher power for one to exist. It is unfortunate that so many have claimed to be exercising the Lord’s will when they could not be further from it; Even more so when they believe they are the Lord’s ‘chosen people’.”

Matthew sighed again; his head dipped. “You should know by now, after all this is done, Lathander and Chauntea are going to take me home with them. I don’t know where I’ll end up but I know I won’t be in your world after all...”

“And do you think I wouldn’t have *that* accounted for?” Jesus smiled once more. “There is a plan in the works, which involves more than just you and what this Blackleaf is doing. But that is a story for another time. Let’s get back in touch with your parents.”

“I find myself culpable to all of this, I’m afraid,” Lathander admitted. “While I didn’t come up with that Vistani Wedding to buy some more time for the Waffle Crew, I did allow it. And I *did* allow Evelyn to be that sacrifice.”

“You didn’t know every detail there,” Jesus said, leaning against the wall with a book in his hand. “Chris, on the other hand, he was the one who knew the campaign. To think, that what happened in that program actually happened in your world.”

“That last part is hard to believe,” Matthew curiously eyed the book held by the young man. It had a black oilcloth cover, much like a bible, but with some unfamiliar writing and a raven icon on the cover.

“Ever since I’ve heard about this Vistani Wedding Ritual, I did some research. This book has everything about it. I could even perform this ritual if I have to.”

“Where in the Nine Hells did you get *that*?” Matthew exclaimed in disbelief.

“Remember, God works in mysterious ways.” Jesus pushed himself off from where he was leaning. “To bring you up to speed, Matthew, the repairing of the Accordance is already begun. Asmodeus, of all people, asked for my feedback. I presented the idea to have another family to adopt either Strix or Diath.”

However mentally, Matthew got this thought in Jesus’ voice. *It appears that yugoloths like their Pumpkin Spice Lattes.*

“Wait, you’re putting faith in *Asmodeus*?” Matthew asked.

“Say what you will about the Lord of the Nine Hells, Matthew,” Lathander said. “Unlike Lucifer, Asmodeus has standards. There are rules to his game, and he breaks them at his peril. If he had to get someone to sign adoption papers to end this, he’ll make it happen.”

“But still, you’re going to need something to deal with the rifts,” Matthew thought aloud. “We’re only putting out one fire, with this eclipse. I can only guess this is making more than just one mess,”

“We would, Matthew,” Chauntea said. “But we all have our own portfolios and responsibilities. There simply isn’t enough cosmic power to go around.”

“I’d have angels looking into it from Earth’s end,” Jesus replied. “But that wouldn’t be allowed by the Father’s non-interference pact.”

“What I’m about to say, people, you’re not going to like. You might think it’s the craziest thing you’ll ever hear.”

Everyone turned to Matthew.

“What about the ritual?” Matthew looked at Jesus, then Chauntea, and then Lathander. “Is it possible to go through that ritual and survive?”

Chapter 13

The Twilight Forest

9:10 PM; 35:50 before the Eclipse

Matthew knew what Chauntea is going to say even as he was saying it. “Matthew Christopher, that has got to be the craziest thing I’ve ever heard! You’ve seen that episode, young man, especially with what it did to Evelyn! You think I’d let you do that yourself?!” The main difference between this and what he’s used to is the actual concern she showed for him. It was a far cry from the apathetic response to which he was accustomed.

“I’ve seen that happen before my own eyes.” Lathander had the same mixture of sternness, concern, and fear for his Warlock. “I almost lost her to the soul-monger. I don’t want to feel that moment again.”

“He *did* tell you that you wouldn’t like it,” Jesus interjected. “However, wasn’t Evelyn’s death caused by something other than that ritual?”

Matthew leaned to one side to see who said that. “This might be just me being a mortal, Jesus, but I don’t think that’s helping.”

Chauntea nodded. “That demon’s going to be summoned in little more than a day. We can’t have Matthew doing this kind of stunt when he has a job to do.”

“Like I said,” Matthew responded meekly, “it was just a thought.”

Nobody noticed the silence that hung around them until people started to notice the flipping of pages.

“Evelyn’s death,” Jesus said aloud, face down in his book. “came from the ritual needing parts of her soul to create those protective rings.”

“Correct,” Lathander said.

“Let me theorize for a moment.” Jesus continued. “Only to mortal humans could such soul donations be fatal. It’s not the same with angels; they can donate a piece of their souls into someone and recover after a time, much like a human would after a blood donation. From what I heard of from you, that’s how you create Chosen.”

“Yes, that is what I did with Stedd Whitehorn.” Lathander responded. “Your point?”

“Making that ritual survivable is easy on paper. Take a piece of your essence, and transplant that into Matthew to replace the pieces of his soul he’ll offer to wed you two. We exchange parts of your souls with Matthew, rather than simply taking from him.”

“Even if I do believe that it’ll work, I don’t want it happening this weekend.” Chauntea replied. “This can wait until after his role has been fulfilled.”

Lathander just looked at Christ as He thumbed over the book. “There’s something you’re not telling us.”

“I can think of one deity who could be vital in tipping this coming battle to our favor, and then that very same deity who, unshackled by any realm or faith, free from any other realm, can focus on restoring them.” Jesus responded, closing the book and looking to the others. “A god from *your* realms, everyone, but is still loyal to me, to be my eyes and ears to the Realms and act in my stead. You’ve probably heard of him. His name is Amaunator.”

The room fell silent.

“Amaunator?” Matthew replied. “But Lathander...”

“I’m not talking about Lathander,” Jesus said. “Every now and then, Lathander, you ponder the idea of your former self, and your current self, becoming two different people, separate from each other, because of something known as the Heresy of the Three-Faced Sun.”

Matthew crossed his arms. “Oh yeah, that. It’s the part where Lathander once again becomes Amaunator, and teams up with two other deities to form a sun trinity.” He then blinked a moment as the thought Jesus had in his head jumped to his own brain. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” He pointed to Lathander. “You’re thinking of splitting the two versions of him into separate beings?”

Lathander just crossed his arms and closed his eyes. It wasn’t something he liked touching. “As I told Matthew, I have zero desire to return to my former self. I transformed myself from Amaunator to Lathander for a reason and a purpose, for the sake of all the realms.”

“But what if it is possible for your former self to become a separate being?” Matthew spoke again, trying to break up the flow of conversation.

“I fear that would be just too selfish on my part,” Lathander said. “I don’t think I have the right to do this to you, Matthew. It is not right to do this without your consent, and your consent requires you to know the risks involved.”

“How successful do we get by Monday Morning?” Matthew crossed his arms. He fell silent for a long time. He then turned to Jesus. “I need to know the odds.”

“You won’t stand a chance unless you do this. Blackleaf is far too powerful for you to handle now, and there simply isn’t enough time to train you to where you would be ready.” Jesus knew someone who needed to be told the truth by the way they look at them.

“I’m going to need some time to think,” Matthew got up to walk out of the room.

Only to return and grab Jesus by the collar. “And you’re coming with me?”

Leaving the room with Christ in tow, Matthew pushed the door open to the library. Among all the tomes and scrolls of knowledge gathered across time, he plopped his one-time Lord and Savior onto a chair. Then he handed him a whole bottle of wine.

He then got a bottle of his own and drank a couple chugs, straight from the bottle.

“I don’t know what is worse, Jesus,” Matthew said with a mixture of trepidation and irritation. “Me wagering my immortal soul to do something that maybe just maybe tip everything to our favor, risking any possibility of salvation in the process, or *you not talking me out of it!*” He plopped on his own chair, across from the olive man, and sighed. “I didn’t want to show all of them how scared I am right now.”

Lathander and Chauntea couldn't believe that was going on. Everything about what happened just dropped on the two like several sacks of bricks, one after another. The Ashton Concordance. The inadvertent breaking of the Concordance. The chaos that linked one thing to another. The summoning at the other end of that chain of events. And the possibility that *the very same ritual* is needed, with the Morninglord's first warlock as the main part of it, to deal with that summoning.

"At least someone is dealing with fixing that Concordance," Chauntea worried. "I only wish we didn't have to depend on Asmodeus."

"Me neither," Lathander assured her, "we must be prepared for the worst-case scenario. Not just for Earth's sake, but for the Realms as well."

"But the risk would be much too great," Chauntea said. "I'd be convinced to do this was *after* this weekend, after that eclipse, when everything has settled down and we can get on with our lives. But to do that *now*?"

Lathander just sat there in the seat he dropped himself in, just staring into the fireplace, looking for...something...an explanation? An alternative? Another option?

"You know, Sunshine," Chauntea spoke, having reached an interesting concept. "If Amaunator were to be reborn by our union, it won't be just from you. He would have a part of me as well. It will soften some much-needed edges. His focus on law, and the bureaucratic nature would be toned down considerably. He will be a lot warmer, will be able to smile and laugh, and all those things we'd expect from someone representing the noonday sun. And then we'd have Matthew's own youthfulness and spirit to combine it all in."

Lathander only sighed.

"We both know that Matthew would gladly get on that slab in Evelyn's slot. He knows that he'd gladly drink from that cup that you'll offer him. He might not be the most religious of followers, but he's already just as loyal as Evelyn Marthain."

"I was only hoping that we'd just bear a child that would become this reborn Amaunator," Lathander said, "But turning *Matthew* into Amaunator? I have no desire to burden Matthew with being a deity."

"We don't have to, Lathander." Chauntea stroked his shoulders. "He'll be his own man. He may not even be interested in the Three-Faced Sun. Perhaps he'll just hand you the Light Domain and be done with it. What if the Three-Faced Sun doesn't involve *you*...but your children? Our Children?"

“I’m scared, Jesus.” Matthew admitted. “I finally have what has been missing for most of my life. I have loving parents, friends and all these neat and amazing new abilities. I’m scared of not having those anymore, or not being who I am to enjoy them. I know, it’s dumb and it’s selfish, but I’m scared of just... Disappearing forever and leaving all of these gifts behind.”

The silence hung in the air. Jesus sat across from the boy, focused on him as he poured his heart out.

“Then, there’s a part of me that wants to do it *because* I was given these wonderful things. I owe it to Lathander, who didn’t have to do any of the amazing things he did for me. He went out of his way to help someone he didn’t even know. I guess it was out of pity, but that’s better than nothing. It isn’t much, but it’s the only way I can really repay the kindness he showed me.”

Jesus just did what he’s always known for doing in situations like this, when someone is just pouring his heart out and telling him what is burdening his soul. He listens. He doesn’t judge, doesn’t smite, doesn’t condemn, and in some cases he doesn’t even answer back. He just listens. More often than not, that’s all that was needed. The road out of darkness can start with a caring ear. Yeshu knew that long before Adam drew up his first breath.

Matthew looked right into Jesus’s eyes. “I gotta square with you, Jesus: I don’t give a rusty possum’s fart if I’m saved or not. If I’m was just going to be a mere number in the pews, don’t bother with me. Delete my name from the Bloodlife Registry if you wish. As long as I mattered to someone while I’m here, if anything I’ve ever done amounted to a damn thing, if someone actually remembers me when I’m gone, no matter what eternity I’ll face, I’ll be happy. Up until the moment you sent Lathander to me, I believed that I wasn’t worth your piss let alone your blood. A nothing. A non-being. Completely worthless. A blight on existence. A zit on reality’s ass only meant to be popped without any thought about it. Eternal Damnation in Hell would be too good for me.”

“I didn’t really want to be saved, Jesus. What I wanted is to know that I’m worth saving; to be worth the blood you shed on Calgary. I don’t know why, but if I go with this, even if I die, I would know that I’m worth it.”

It was then where Jesus nodded. “In that, Matthew, I think we both agree. I’ve seen too many people today with their souls so small that not even the Devil would want them. And every now and then look at the amount I paid for such a person and wondered if I should ask for change. A pint from Red Cross perhaps. But you, you’ve got a soul big enough for you to wager in this fashion.”

He nodded and then smiled. “Your Mama and Papa is intending to donate parts of their own soul and implant them into yours, replacing the parts you’ll donate. Granted, that will change you. You might not think that you’re the same being you were when you started. But I’m sure that you’ll survive.”

Matthew had to pause for a moment or two.

“I’m going to be this new Amaunator, am I?”

“You’ll still be Matthew, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Chapter 14

Sunday, August 20, 2017

Twilight Forest

Midnight; 33:00 before the eclipse

Despite its name, there was a time in the Twilight Forest when the sun was visible. A small clearing opened to a hill that provided a wondrous view of the horizon. Although most of the area was encircled in a cloudy haze, this particular space was where Lathander would often go to greet the sun as it rose. Here, on this hill, the ritual was to take place.

The slab, with a padded top to rest a body, was still there, surrounded by a lush, colorful, and fragrant garden, with bees bussing from flower to flower dutifully pollinating the bushes. Behind that slab was a gazebo with white painted wood bound by vines with bouquets hanging on the top. The gazebo had an unobstructed view of the countryside, with the farms, forests, lakes, various other villages and cities, and a mountain range out in the distance with only the just-rising sun breaking through to shine onto that shelter. At each side of the slab stood Lathander and Chauntea, draped in angelic finery.

Matthew approached the slab, covered in a flowing robe normally reserved for angels. His eyes showed that he was nervous beyond words, but he knew he would be doing it.

“He’s going to do it,” Marcie whispered to Tanya. “I can’t believe he’s going to do it.”

“I believe everyone has that same sentiment,” Tanya added.

“Though he’s nervous,” Moradin spoke. “Looks like the lad’s mind’s made up.”

“I’d still think we should’ve done it *after* the eclipse,” Gond commented in apprehension. “For sanity’s sake.”

“But It had to be done here and now.” Corellon gave Gond a knowing nod. “It’s best to get this over with.”

“Shall we begin, then?” Jesus asked around the congregation.

“I thought that you had something special to wear,” Corellon said as she looked the Nazarene over. “Are those faded robes the only thing you have?”

“I never did have an elaborate wardrobe, and I’m not about to start now,” Jesus said as he stepped up toward Matthew. “Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, for something like this.” the boy responded, taking a nervous breath. “Do you have everything, Jesus. This ritual needs two rings, one for Papa and one for Mama, for the parts of my soul to go in. We’re also going to need someone dressed like a raven or someone who is a raven or whatever You can use as a raven.”

“I got everything we need and then some.” Christ asked for Matthew’s hands, carefully putting a ring on each. “You’re getting a ring on each hand yourself for this version of the ritual. These are to ensure you receive the parts necessary for a proper soul in the exchange.”

“Got it. And the bird. I don’t see raven one anywhere.”

“Why should I need a bird of any kind when I’m a part of a deity that has another part that can fit that role better?”

Matthew wondered why He said that.

“I’m part of a trinity, remember?” Jesus said as he walked up to the front of the table. “Everyone, allow me to introduce to you the lesser known and often misunderstood part of Yeshu, who will be our raven in this event. In the Faerunian Common tongue, his name is Penuma. Christians here know him as the comforter I promised them when I ascended back into heaven. And fifty days after my departure, on Acts chapter 2, he arrived.”

He held out his hand, and a ball of golden flame erupted from his hand, and out rose this majestic fire bird. With each flap of his wings, an ethereal trail of light flowed and swirled out from the feathers. When it settled in place and gave the others a bow of its head, he stood there with a noble grace.

Everyone was awestruck at the phoenix's arrival, especially Matthew.

“Penuma is a ‘deeds not words’ kind of being. Christians associate him with an added blessing sought after post-conversion where they receive the ‘Baptism of the Holy Ghost,’ where they begin to talk in tongues. That actually is a rarity. Penuma’s gifts go so much broader. Broader than what is written in the Bible.

“Every dream from the young and vision from the old. Every flash of insight rising in a person’s mind. Every talent that makes a person unique. Every ping of love, every glint of conviction, every noble thought, every eureka moment, every life-affirming laugh. Every spark of hope in everyone heart that keeps them from falling into any dark place. *That* is the work of Penuma. It is the hope and prayers that God has for this planet and all who are in it to not just endure the trials and tribulations they face, but to overcome and thrive. To rise above their shortcomings and past sins, to forgive themselves and move on with their lives, to improve, explore, discover, and evolve.”

Jesus placed a hand on Matthew’s shoulder. “With this act, son, you will be worth the price I paid. It’s people like you that reaffirms my hopes for humanity, and I’m very proud of you. I know that you won’t be before the Father yet, but I’ll already say it: Well done, good and faithful servant. I implore you, Matthew. No matter what happens, that you remember that.”

Matthew gave Jesus a silent acknowledgement.

Jesus then looked around to the assembled group. “Now then, to business.”

Matthew climbed up on the table and eased onto his back, stretching a bit before offering his hands out to his parents.

Both Chauntea and Lathander slipped their rings on, and each held one of Matthew’s hands. The congregation remained silent, watching the ritual begin.

As Jesus began the chant, Penuma looked down to Matthew. He looked just as nervous as he is resolute. He cooed over to him, assuring him that he’ll be there for him. He’ll be with him through the whole way.

Matthew closed his eyes. It didn’t take him long to feel it. A pull at the insides of his arms. It wasn’t a physical pull, it didn’t hurt, but he could feel his own life force flow out into his hands. He felt weaker, sleepy, numb. As the seconds passed, he felt his consciousness drift, as if it was being slowly, carefully pulled apart. His senses dulled further, and he could no longer hear the wind, smell the grass or even feel the hands holding his own. He became unable to open his eyes. Wondering if this was his last moment, his mind began to dim.

“You must be Matthew Christopher, the Warlock of Lathander. Hail, and Well Met, friend.” A voice, clear as day, echoed in his mind. This voice called to him, dispelling the haze around his mind. His senses returned one by one, until he could perceive a figure; the one calling to him.

The figure that had a golden light that seemed to originate from under his skin. With silver-white hair and wearing a black gown with silver trims, he looked to be dressed as some sort of judge. His face was that of someone who was more known for his sternness, a brow wrinkled but not his eyes or mouth. He looked like he never smiled once in his life.

“The last time I witnessed an act of pure love and sacrifice like what you’ve done, the very Son of Yeshu was crucified.” the figure spoke, his voice reverberating through Matthew’s consciousness.

Matthew blinked at what the figure was talking about, but slowly his memories returned. “Amaunator?”

“Aye, that I am, friend.” he responded. “It is through your cooperation that I am called, in order to set right what has been cast into chaos.”

“Uh... yeah,” Matthew did his best to understand. “That’s the plan, more or less.”

“Then it shall be so.” Amaunator responded, slowly reducing in size and age, until he resembled his charge in stature and appearance.

At first, Matthew thought he was looking in a mirror. A thought that was quickly dashed as the reflection pulled him into the proverbial glass. The with the exception of what they were dressed—with Matthew wearing Lathanderite robes and Amaunator his judicial robe—the two looked like identical twins, holding each other’s hands.

“Y-You’re...becoming me!” Matthew said.

“Nay, my friend,” Amaunator replied, the swirling lifestreams giving way to a quiet peace. The night sky, full of stars, slowly returned to view. “We are becoming something entirely new. Lathander is known for being an Angel of Light, the God of the Morning. It is a domain that I leave with him. We are His shadow. A Holy Darkness. A Sacred Night. A righteous complement cast by the Light.”

Matthew saw his twin lose his physical form, and turn into a mass of star stuff, black with bright pinpricks, which began to envelop Matthew, melting his own form to mix into it, becoming a single mass.

The time has come for me. The time for me to overcome and do what is right for the world to see. And from the Ashes of the Dawn, I arise!

After what seemed an eternity, Matthew finally opened his eyes. Still feeling breath in his lungs and warm blood pumping in his core, he breathed his first new breath of life. He felt a bit chill on the arms, which Mama and Papa still held. The two rings that was around his parent's fingers, and the ring hang around his own neck, was glowing with a soft white light.

"We did it, right?" Matthew sat up, looking around to the approaching congregation.

"It was no trouble at all." Jesus nodded.

Lathander and Chauntea nodded as well, not holding back tears. "We could never thank you enough, Matthew."

"It was the least I could do for my mother and father." he replied humbly.

"You don't look all right, Matt," Marice said. "You look a bit out of it."

Matthew could only smile as he felt the energy course through him. "Well, that's kinda... hard to explain."

An orchestra of energy, growing ever so louder, and louder...Matthew hugged himself tight. Feeling his mind flood with knowledge and wisdom that just wasn't there before. All the notes, and formulas, all the research and eureka moments. It was all in there.

"I can feel it, the world revolving. The turning of time, the changing seasons, dance of the planets. The earth spinning under my feet, the planets hurtling around the sun. The winds carrying the water in clouds to fall to earth, to be carried back to the ocean by streams to be picked up again. The predation of the animals that ends with the top animal passing on and becoming the grass for the lowliest of creatures to eat. The beating of everyone's hearts, pumping fluid and energy throughout you. Everything's connected. And I can see it all."

"That's pretty... Deep, for you, at least." Marcie smirked.

He felt his body radiate a light that absorbed his very person. Reaching out with his hands, the shadows cast by the sunlight pull free from the bounds of earth, streaming up toward his form, seeping into the angelic robes, turning white into black. As the light dimmed, he appeared over a decade older, with a head of silver hair and eyes to match.

He felt something try to poke behind him, a pair of limbs that he didn't noticed before. Or was it even there a minute ago. They were pushing out from behind his back, over his shoulder blades.

He had to hunch over a bit to feel them poke out through the slits in the back of the robe, and with a big stretch of his arms and the kind of loud boisterous yawn one would make after just waking up, he pushed out with muscles on his shoulders that weren't there before.

A pair of wings erupted out back. A pair of black wings, warm and downy, erupting out from his back. They stretch out to its full length, a good three yards out from each side.

Filling with air, they soar above the others, feeling the warmth of the light above and casting a shadow below to the table that bore his angels birth.

This new angel just stretched with all six of his limbs, as if getting the blood flowing after waking up from a long nap. It was like jumping into a swimming pool, feeling the initial chill, but then finding it rather comforting and relaxing once the initial shock faded away. He felt himself floating in a sea of air, like a cloud drifting in the currents.

The shadow he casted seemed to draw up to him, as if his form was sucking up all the darkness, that wonderful lovely shade, into his form, seeping into his clothes, caressing into his body.

While he still felt the odd feeling that he's not quite the Matthew Christopher he once knew, there was a sense of peace about it, things will improve as the new parts of them accumulated into him. The weight of worry and concern over what happened, and is happening to him, just fell from him, as well as the doubts in

his mind, all the dross and dreck a human would have. It all sloughed off him and fell away, and with it all of its weight on his soul.

No longer does he have to worry about not being a part of a tribe or a nation or a family. No longer is he without purpose or meaning. He has all that now.

He still has a long way to go, a lot of growing and learning and living, but now he's no longer afraid.

He floated down into the others, surprised over how light he felt, as if gravity has no hold on him, and landed without a sound in front of the table.

Marcie headed over to this new winged being that was once her friend. "Are you all right Matthew?" She moved up to see those silver eyes of his. "Are you still you?"

He blinked a couple times. "Yeah...of course I am. I just became something more."

"Jesus," Corellon asked, "have you ever had an Angel of Shadow before?"

Jesus shook his head, his eyes showed that *even he* was as surprised as everyone else. "Shadow Angels are the rarest possible angels ever to be created. Only a dozen of them ever existed in the history of creation. The last one was almost a whole century ago. I haven't seen one in ages. They say that it's an omen when one shows up."

"But who are you," Marcie asked. "Are you Matthew, or...are you..."

The smile and glint Marcie saw in the just born angel told him that he's still Matthew Christopher. But she just knew...he became something more.

Chapter 15

His head was still in a blur even after an hour later. He thought ducking into the forest proper to get some fresh air was in order.

He just hovered there, above the river, his black wings keeping him aloft, the darkness of the forest wrapping around him like a thick warm blanket. The sound of the crickets and birds filling his ears while the twinkle of fireflies flit around him. Some of them even got in his hair and formed a crown on his head while his half dreaming eyes pondered whatever they should be open or closed.

He is definitely a different being than Matthew, that much is certain. Sure, he had his name, his mannerisms, his memories. The spellcasting that Lathander gave him. The love in his heart for his Angelic father. It was all there.

But he's...not himself. From what he was sensing inside his being, it's as if he himself has become a being of power, and grace, and nobility. A being of vast cosmic power bound in a physical form. He looked at his hands, hands encased in white gloves. Hands that could reach up and touch the moon, hold it in his hand, spin it as it hung in the sky.

He snapped his fingers, creating a snap more pronounced and crisper than he could ever make before, and all time just stopped. Everything stopped. The trees, the stream, the fireflies, the crickets, all the sound. It was just frozen silence, save for him.

"I no longer have the Light domain," he said, "I still retain my dominion over time. An important responsibility. I wonder if I'm ready to wield it yet." He hummed. "How much of me is the Amaunator of old, and what parts were leavened in there by my mother or...Matthew?"

It felt weird, saying that name. As if Matthew was someone else. A him that is not him. That Son of Adam that was so brave and heroic to do the deed that made him?

The Son of Adam that was drifting inside his very being, aware of everything.

Oh man, this sucks! He heard his own voice, a youthful, feisty, and all too familiar voice of the teenager form Renton say in his head. *There's two of us now. The ritual done split my personality!*

"I'm afraid so, other me," the angel said. "And you're not alone in all this. It feels like *I* have another me in my head as well. We're definitely two personalities...two personas...*Two Matthews.*"

Y-yeah...this is going to get some getting used to.

"Indeed, my brother, and I hope I can call you that.

Sure...although we might need to figure out who's the older brother.

That made the angel laugh. A hearty loud heart-soothing laugh.

"We also might need to know how we can each take control, and when."

Yeah, we might need a tag mechanic or something.

"Yeah, since we're on good speaking terms with each other, It should be easy for us to tag in control!"

The Angel could feel the Son of Adam grow a bit tired. The ritual catching up to him. *You're okay at the wheel? You still need to find out who this new you is...yer not me...an not...yer old self...might need...to find...*

The angel wrapped his arms and wings around himself. "Yeah, I could use some time in control. I need to find out a bit more about myself, and that that behind is. You go and rest now, brother, you earned it. I'll make sure to stay out of too much trouble."

The Son of Adam grew still and quiet. The Angel sensed him fall asleep inside him, and make sure he's tucked into something comfortable.

He reopened his eyes, silver and glowing like twin moons, with a light was could be soft and gentle, but anyone who saw them would see a wisdom and fierceness that won't be denied. It went with a face that showed a smile of someone who could take on the world and would relish doing so.

“Rest well, Matthew. You earned it. I'll be here when you wake up.” His voice was deep, low, adult. It could speak any language known in several multiverse, or at the least, make anyone who hear it hear it in their own native tongue.

He stretched out with all six of his limbs, two arms, two legs, and two wings. He felt his muscles tense and relax, felt the blood flow through his body, the warmth of life and freedom in his core.

He could feel all the shadows around him, the darkness under the trees, inside nooks covered by bushes. The shadow over his body, with the black wings and black robe made him almost invisible in the darkness. As if he was a part of it. Or are the shadows as much a part of him as his own body? He could feel his senses stretch out among the motes of darkness around him, feeling the shadow as if it were the air against his face. It was more than just the absence of light. No, far from it. It was like a force all its own, not an opposite, but a complement. He could draw it to him, hold it in his hand, mold it into shapes. He could tuck it under his wings to hold him aloft. Form a platform set his feet on as if they were solid ground. He molded it into a perch for a bird and wrapped it around a squirrel he found in the trees. The critter squirmed at first, but then calmed down in the blanket of darkness and even started to brux.

The part that surprised him the most is that this darkness didn't felt evil at all. There was nothing bad about this darkness. In fact, it felt like he was in his element.

A holy darkness. A sacred night. A complement reflected by The Light.

A shadow from, and for, his father, the Angel of Light, and the God of the Sun.

“The Angel of Shadow,” he mused to himself. “I'm an Angel of Shadow. I like it.”

Amaunator stopped over at the village to check up on Lathander and Chauntea. He kept to the shadows, his element and he felt his glimmer go out in waves. It was almost instinctive, just like being able to use those wings. It wasn't as if he could cloud people's minds so that they won't see him until he wants them to: To an angel, everyone's mind is clouded until the angel, or the Father, opens said person's eyes to make them see. He smiles in approval knowing that, between the glimmer and keeping to the shadows, he won't be noticed if he didn't want to.

He found the pair in a lounge, sitting next to each other, in a warm embrace, glass of wine resting there with two empty glasses. The two looked like they stopped worrying about their son and focused more on each other.

"As it should be," the angel said, and snapped his fingers.

The wine bottle found itself accompanying a full one, while the bartender found another 4 Gold Pieces on the bar.

Only the flapping of his wings betrayed his presence as he flew toward the mansion. His floated above the building before touching down on the Master Bedroom Balcony.

Before going in through the door, he discovered something important about being an angel. Yes, it is possible to tuck those wings back into his back so that they won't get in the way when inside a building. But it requires a bit of an effort to do it. He mused how long it would take to adjust to folding those majestic wings inward. He headed into the room and toward the closet, pulling the door open to look himself over in the mirror on the back of the heavy oak door.

He looked more like a fully-grown Matthew Christopher, about six feet seven, with a face that looked chiseled, hair that was a dignified grey, and silver eyes that could just stare into his own reflection and look into every corner of that being's mind, then down into his heart, and then every inch of his soul. As he reached for his uniform, he gave a slight chuckle as he realized he wasn't quite as small as his usual form.

"I guess we should improvise, then." With a wave of his hand, he bent the shadows of the room around him once more, calling upon their energies to form a suit of black and silver in Lathanderite pattern. The uniform provided him with a sharp look, down to the black gloves that helped secure a new holster and book. Another look in the mirror and he nodded in approval with the reflection. He looked sharp, attractive, proper.

"Master Matthew?"

With a startled yelp dismissing that suave and debonair look, he turned around.

"Ah, Tanya, didn't see you come up." he greeted her sheepishly. Same old Matthew.

Tanya started to look down in her typical servant maid manner, but curiosity kept pulling her gaze up to those silver eyes of his. They just seem to just stare right into her soul, seeing everything that is behind them, everything she's thinking, everything she knows. She could get lost in them.

"My goodness, you've changed." she looked up at him with concern. "Lord Lathander and Lady Chauntea wanted me to see if you're feeling well."

"I'm all right, I'm sorry to have worried you." he apologized. "I just needed some time to clear my head. A lot has happened, and I needed some time to come to terms with it on my own first."

The angel's voice, soft and low, was a bit strange to ears more used to a youthful and spunky voice of Master Matthew. But as strange as this Angel Matthew's voice was, it had its own charm. It could just flow into the maid's ears and just reside in her head, grabbing her full attention and driving out any other stray thought. It'll remain dead center in her attention until *it* decides to let go.

"So," Tanya said, her heart skipping a bit. "How's it like? Being turned into an Angel?"

“It’s still like looking into a mirror and seeing someone I’d like to get to know. I’d like to find out along with you, but first, there’s work to be done.” His silver eyes looked like they sparkled when she saw them, and he could see her eyes locked into his. It was rather obvious how she felt about this new him. He then looked back into Tanya’s eyes, he reached out and touched her hand. Her eyes seemed to drift a bit into a dream.

This angel that Matthew has become, this Amaunator, has become more real to her than anything else in the world. Even more so than this mansion. Even more so than herself, this lowly humble maid standing before him. He is becoming everything to her. Have...his voice would be her will. His wish, her very desires. Everything he will say...oh, to just have him command her. Just to she can serve her, be his every...

“You can call me either name. Matthew Christopher, Amaunator, I can use either name.” He leaned close to Tanya’s ear and whispered in it. His breath just sent jolts up and down her spine. “I’ll let you pick with one.”

The contact made her gasp, “Amaunator!” When the shock passed, she sighed in contentment. “When we’re alone, just the two of us, may I call you Amaunator?” Her lips trembled as if a word was at the tip of her tongue.

“Master Amaunator, if you wish to say.”

It was almost like a dam burst in her. “...m...master...Master Amaunator...” She almost whispered it. Not daring to raise her voice to him. She, a mere humble maid, couldn’t deserve this attention, this care and love.

He nodded and smiled. “I appreciate what you do here. I’m honored to have you as my Maid.” His voice was still soft and gentle to her ears, but when they got to her head, his words grabbed her attention and kept it. “Rest assured, as long as you are in my care, you need not worry about anything. Ask, and it shall be so.”

Tanya’s voice was soft and wavy, as her body felt warm in his arms. “Yes, my Lord.”

He drew her into his arms, wrapped his arms around her, and even kissed her on the forehead. She never felt more...safe...warm...loved...he became everything to her. A lover’s caress. A wise man’s wisdom. A husband’s embrace. A youthful friend holding hands with hers. He was all of those things and more.

And she was *his*.

The angel spoke not into her ears, but into her very mind. The words becoming as much a part of her mind like a programmed in set of instructions to be dutifully carried out. Without question or hesitation. “I will be out accruing supplies for a job long overdue. You have some things to do while I’m gone: Please prepare the office for my work, make sure that there’s a warm pot for tea, a small basket of snacks, and have it well-lit and warm. Once all that is done, you will only allow me in there. Nobody else goes in unless the place is on fire.”

“As you wish, my Master.”

“And once I am there, you will remain there, at my side, at all times, ready to be there whenever I want you and to do whatever I tell you. I know you’ll obey my every word, and that you will always be safe with me, such as your life is as my humble maid.”

Her voice was warm and almost passionate. “As I shall be, Master.”

“I’ll let you go now, so you can get started.”

And with that, he kissed her again, and she felt that same intense wave of bliss that nearly caused her to collapse to the...

She found herself kneeling on the carpet. Alone in the room. Master was gone.

Master is off on his errand.

Tanya sprang up with a little bounce in her step and headed toward the stairs. She's got a lot of work to do, and she wants it all done before Master Amaunator returns.

Chapter 16

Brentwood, MO

August 1, 2017; 8:23 PM

He planned and double planned this. Getting the needed cash for the job is no problem. In spite of what some televangelists would say, God ain't short on cash. The trickier part was finding a time and place to get the laptop. He decided to jump back in time a couple weeks to the first of the month, and then move to a random city in the Midwest. There was a great computer store where he'd get a laptop with all the bells and whistles. Something portable and powerful enough to do some light graphic work. One of those high-class laptops used for gaming would suit just well. He got a separate mouse and keyboard so that he won't pound the built-in keyboard into oblivion, a couple USB drives, a carrying case for the whole thing, and a spare power brick, just in case.

Once the purchase was made, he took off into the sky, heading back west, reminding himself to jump back to one minute after he make the jump back (so that Mom and Dad won't worry too much about him) and...

He noticed something below him that caught his attention like a bright and shining object.

And his angelic nature kicked in. Help this poor soul. It was almost like instinct.

No rest for the wicked, I suppose. And he tucked in his wings to form a falcon-esque stoop.

The fog was thick at the abandoned bridge over the Missouri River where Debbie Sharonist stood leaning against the rail. Although the St. Louis regional area were scarcely two hundred yards away, she might have been in a little world of her own. The only light amid that cloud of black night fog came from an arc light on the bridge.

She heard a cop car speed by at one end of that bridge. The woman stepped away from the rail and crouched beside a post. She saw a flash of the red taillight on the black and white; a moment later it was lost in the fog.

As the noise of the motor died away, she stood up again and placed his hands upon the rail.

She listened, afraid that another cab might be coming across the bridge; then, reassured, she leaned over the rail and stared downward.

The deep, impenetrable mist seemed to invite her plunge. She paused for a second, as many do when they are about to commit suicide, until the impulse of desperation and despair finally got enough to overcome her fear. She swung her body up and over.

Her mind and body reeled, tumbling downward toward her demise. In nearly an instant, her momentum shifted ninety degrees sideways, held firm in an iron grip. She was only aware of the beating of large wings and the gentle drop to the pavement of the road. Coming to her senses, her instinct caused her to squirm free of the grasp, putting some safe distance between herself and whatever plucked her from freefall.

"Just to let you know if you're going to properly kill yourself," the angel said with a voice that felt like an arctic breeze in the middle of the typical St. Louis heat wave in her head, "you're going to need a better spot. From the height of that bridge the fall wouldn't kill you."

"Just... Just what are you?" she exclaimed, shrinking back in terror.

"It...should be obvious." Amaunator replied, keeping his voice even and calm, and giving those two black wings a good stretch.

She looked up at him and took a moment to assess the situation. This was a giant of a man, with outstretched wings—she never thought that angel wings could come in black—and silver eyes that had an otherworldly glow to them. She regretted not carrying her purse; though her plans tonight would not have required it.

But still, she still had enough bravado to cross her arms and show a bit of snarkiness in her voice: “You don’t suppose you’re going to talk to me about God, how much he loves me, and wants me to find a better life?”

The angel had to pause for a moment.

“Well?”

He sighed. “Plan B then. Just skip ahead to giving you an alternative to discard the gift of life you were given, which is what I came here to do in the first place. If God gets mentioned, he gets mentioned. If not, well, he’s a busy guy, he knows I got this.”

“What do you know?” she shot back. “And what do you care, anyway?”

“Would you like to talk it over?” he asked, his tone calm and completely unfazed by her protests.

“I...” Debbie turned to look at the river, and the bridge from where she leapt moments before. “I guess.”

“Go ahead.” Amaunator responded, keeping himself a comfortable distance from her. “It is only you and I here, you need not worry.”

“Go stand under the streetlight first.” Debbie turned to look at him. “I want to make sure you’re not some monster or something.”

“Fair enough.” the angel obliged, taking a short walk to the light beside the road, where a small bench sat, presumably to wait for a bus. Under the light, he looked like a very tall man with a tremendous pair of wings protruding from his back.

Black feathered wings. She never seen or heard of an angel with raven wings before. At first, she thought those were like the wings of a bat. But now that she got a good look of them, they do have their own elegance.

“Satisfied?” he asked, that unwavering tone still as calm as ever.

“Oh what the hell, I could be dead anyway.” she responded, her eyes wide as she saw those wings flex and stretch. “Well, mister Angel, it’s not much of a story. Probably not going to help my case by telling you, but here goes. I came here from Tennessee because my parents threw me out.” She looked down, as if in shame. “I found out that I like girls.”

“As if that’s a bad thing.” Amaunator responded, taking the moment to step out from under the streetlight.

“Doesn’t God turn gay people away from Heaven?” she stopped her story, turning to him worriedly.

“Quite the opposite, to be truthful.” he spoke, taking a look up into the night sky. “You’ll be shocked to find who He takes into his table. You’re a long way from home, out here in St. Louis.”

Debbie sighed, fidgeting awkwardly as if she was confessing to a parent. “I had a girlfriend in town. We met online. She always said that she’d take me in if I got in trouble with my parents, like if they’d kick me out.” There was a pause. “Sounded too good to be true. Turns out it was; all of a sudden, things ‘changed’ and she couldn’t see me anymore. I tried to reach out to her, but she wouldn’t answer.”

Amaunator gave a slow, understanding nod. “So, the bridge was your only way out?”

“That’s what brought me to that bridge. I just wandered around the city aimlessly, until I decided to jump from there. I was on that bridge all night, trying to find a reason not to do it. I don’t even have a computer, or I’d have Tuesdays and Thursdays to give me something that can act as hope.”

“Tuesdays and Thursdays?” he asked. “What significance do those days have for you?”

“I doubt you’ve heard of it. Tuesdays are *Dice Camera Action*, and Thursdays are *Critical Role...*”

The angel’s eyes just lit up. “You watch those shows too?!”

She nodded and then just blinked. “Are you sure you’re an angel, mister? Not only do you have black wings, you also talk like you at least watch if not play Dungeons & Dragons. Ain’t that supposed to be...”

“Oh pshaw.” The angel said. “It so happens I have a number of friends who share interest in such programs. Would you like to meet some of them?”

“Between that, or giving the bridge another try,” Debbie gave a teary-eyed smile. “I’d like to meet them. Very much, mister Angel.” She then squinted. “Did God give you a name?”

“They call me Amaunator, or if that sounds too ‘in character,’ Matthew will do.” Amaunator gave an inviting smile and extended his hand.

“Debbie, Mr. Amaunator.” she introduced herself, taking his hand. “Please, take me to meet your friends.”

Boss, I got a Debbie Sharonist I saved from roping. I need some info on her.

Roping, Matthew? She jumped off a bridge.

Work with me here. There is a possibility that she might help us over to Renton. I’m going to take her there.

Wait, what. Debbie Sharonist? I she was supposed to have committed suicide a bridge over I-70 but nobody found a body. Nobody had a clue over...Matthew!! What day and time did you say you’re at right now?

Thank you very much for alerting me on what happened at your end, my Lord. The last thing I wanted to do is create a time paradox just after I got my wings.

You knucklehead.

Chapter 17

Twilight Forest

The flight back to the Twilight Forest was terrifying at first for the terrestrial Debbie. Arms wrapped around the shoulders and neck of the angel Amaunator; she buried her face into his neck as he kept a swift but relatively level flight path toward the mists leading to his home. He touched down gently, crouching to let the tense and trembling girl off his back.

“I hope that’s the only time I need to do that.” She shakily got to her feet. “I don’t even like roller coasters, even less riding a suspended one without a track!”

Amaunator gave her a chuckle over her remark. “I only do it when I need to. Unfortunately, I need to do it a lot.” Amaunator replied, flexing his wings a few times before pulling them in. “There a little trick I have to use as well. Let me tag in my other me.”

“The...other you?” she asked, tilting her head as the angel began to glow brightly.

“You will see.” the angel replied, his figure taking on a form of light.

Debbie had to shield her eyes for a moment before it faded away.

And standing where that Angel was is a small brown-haired boy, dressed in an overcoat and pants, with the white and gold color scheme Anna Prosser made familiar in the live episodes of *Dice Camera Action*.

“Great. The tag system works.” He blinked for a moment before he saw Debbie. “Hey there!”

“No way did that just happen!” Debbie exclaimed, more in sheer surprise than anything else. “Where’d mister Amaunator go?”

“Oh, he’s in here.” Matthew smiled, pointing to his head, and then over his heart. “After all that flying around, he needed a break. Just because my other me’s an angel doesn’t mean he doesn’t need breathers.”

“So you’re not Amaunator?” she asked, puzzled.

“Well, sorta yes, sorta no.” Matthew responded, gesturing to the town that sprawled out before them. “My name’s Matthew, and this the Twilight Forest. My home. Let me show you around!”

Debbie couldn’t believe her eyes, as she followed Matthew into the town center. Her head turned in every possible direction it could, and her eyes remained unblinking as she tried to take in the sheer spectacle. Honest-to-God Dwarves and Elves were going about their daily business, greeting each other, and running errands to and fro, amid the vibrant glow of the brightest torches she’d ever seen.

“This is like some high-budget movie or something!” she gasped, smiling ear to ear. “Like I’ve really stepped into the high fantasy worlds found in books. Amazing.”

“I heard what you did over at St. Louuuuuis,” came a voice from an approaching Corellon. “I think your mother and father want to have a word with you about that.”

“Oh, wonderful.” Matthew just rolled his eyes. he said. “In my defense, you daft elf, I wasn’t behind the wheel.”

Debbie turned around to see not just an elf, but an elf that looked like he walked right out of that high-budget movie. She just hung her jaw in awe.

The elf just put his arms at his hips and raised an eyebrow. “Never saw a fay this close before, have you?”

“Debbie,” Matthew introduced her to the elf. “This is Corellon. They’ll have to show you around, while I go explain what’s going on.”

Corellon bowed before Debbie as Matthew made a hasty exit for the Mansion.

“Corellon,” Debbie said. “That name has a familiar ring to it...”

Matthew made his way toward the mansion, pondering what he was going to tell his parents. Pushing through the heavy mansion door, the familiar warmth of home greeted him in a way he was growing more accustomed to as time went on. His path led him to the Curios room once more, where the Morninglord was sitting.

“Your maid almost kept me away from that library at the barrel of a gun, Matthew Christopher.” Lathander’s voice was dripping with mock indignation.

“I *did* tell her that she is not to let anyone else in unless the place is on fire, Papa,” Matthew said.

He snorted. “So my Angelic Son is running around dressed in black,” Lathander gave a generous smile. “Is this the rebellious teen phase I have heard so much about?”

“C’mon, Papa. Don’t tell me *you* never had a phase like this.” he playfully fought back, joining his father at the fire, sitting across from him. “Recklessly swooping in and rescuing damsels in distress, saving souls and buzzing churches as if you were Tom Cruise? I bet that’s how you met Mom.”

“I will not go into such details,” Lathander replied, steepling his fingers with curiosity. “However, I will ask you to explain what Gond is doing with his frequent trips to Earth. He mentioned you had something to do with it. Care to tell me why?”

“Oh, that...” Matthew trailed off sheepishly. “The last time Gond and I were talking, I told him about what Earth technology could do. His eyes lit up, and... well... I mean, he sorta brought some things back with him.”

“What sort of things?” Lathander asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“I went to Earth looking for a laptop to put my campaign in a digital format for easy sharing.” Matthew did his best to explain. “It was something I wanted to do long before we met. I talked to Gond about it, and like he usually does, he went a little overboard with it.”

“How overboard.” Lathander’s tone was not of question, but of demand.

“The library here has electricity, and how I have a computer.” Matthew braced himself for the worst, seeing the heated stare of the Morninglord upon him. “And...I take the responsibility for this, father, but Gond gets all the blame. I have the means to reach Wizards of the Coast from here, through what we call ‘the internet’ on Earth.”

“Is that so.” Lathander remained fiercely stern. “I will permit this, on a probationary basis. However, if a threat arises as a result of such connection, I will speak with Gond directly to dismantle it. Is that clear?”

“Y-yes, Papa.” Matthew responded meekly, shrinking back into the chair. Lathander was an intimidating father figure, but he guessed it was merely because he misunderstood the advancements of Earth.

“With that said, tell me more about this new visitor.” Lathander’s expression softened, returning to more of the dad to whom Matthew was accustomed.

“Her name is Debbie. She was planning to kill herself before Amaunator intervened.” Matthew did his best to say that Amaunator was in charge of that decision, just in case. “He saved her and after some time to talk, he brought her here.”

“Oh, how unfortunate that someone would consider rescinding the gifts given to them by their creators.” Lathander gave a solemn look. “She had no family, no friends?”

“Not really.” Matthew responded, not too surprised Lathander made the same analogy as Amaunator. “She was kinda like me. Parents threw her out, friends turned their back on her when she needed them.”

“Ah, I see. She must have believed there were no other options to seek.”

“Yeah, Papa. He brought her here, and when Corellon told me you were looking for me, I left her in their care.”

Lathander raised an eyebrow. “Corellon?” He said, giving a frown.

Matthew shifted his weight again. “Not the wisest of decisions?”

“Depends on whatever this Debbie has a soft spot for elves,” Lathander said. “I take it you did this on a snap judgement.”

“He was the first person I saw,” Matthew said. “And he said that you, Papa, was on the warpath.”

“I might have had my concerns over an internet connection, Matthew, whatever *that* is, but it didn’t put me on any warpaths. Or anything else that resembles any divine wrath.”

“Oh,” Matthew leaned back and looked around. It was apparent to the Morninglord that his son was waxing comical. “Corellon told me in long details about how pissed off you were, throwing tables, smiting vampires, and turning people’s skin red like lobsters! Melanoma, grant me your vengeance.”

Lathander was just roaring in laughter. “Now *that* is the Matthew Christopher I took under my wings. I was worried about you after that ritual and seeing that part of you return is a great relief. So, tell me, son. How’s Amaunator? The other you.”

Matthew sighed a bit. “The other me. That’s the key. It’s not like I’m possessed by something. It’s feels like...there’s another person inside me. Who’s like me but...not. The other guy’s feeling the same way. We even found a way to tag each other in the proverbial driver’s seat. I wonder if this is how people with split personalities feel like.”

Lathander leaned forward. “I have seen situations like yours, my son. Many a time someone in my temple is asked to be an exorcist only to find out that the being ‘possessing’ someone is no demon at all. Usually such split personality is caused by someone traumatic, such as extreme abuse or warfare.”

Matthew sighed again. “Looks like the Vistani Wedding Ritual counts as well.”

Lathander took his hand. “Perhaps,” he said, his voice warm as ever. “But you did that for a noble cause, and you’ve become something higher than yourself. Your Mother and I will always admire that. And I want to make sure you know. We will both be there for you. Both of you.”

Matthew looked straight at Lathander eyes and smiled. “Thanks, Papa. Now then, should we see what sort of trouble Gond got himself into?”

Lathander just snorted and shook his head. “Same old Matthew.”

“I never felt as part of that church,” Debbie said to Corellon as she leaned up against them. “Not as much as I feel next to you right now, if you’d believe that. If I had to say why, it’s probably because I’m a lesbian. It’s the gay gene, if you believe in that.”

“Love is love, my dear.” Corellon gave her a friendly smile. “I doubt your Lord particularly cares whom your love is for, just as long as you have it. It is your fellow humans who hate, after all.”

“I appreciate that,” Debbie said as she leaned back closer to the elf. “If only I heard that five years ago.”

“But if you did, we wouldn’t’ve met, right?”

Debbie sighed and rested her chin on her hands. She was scolding herself for wishing that Corellon could...but she so wished that she was an...

A warm gentle hand caressed Debbie’s shoulder, and she was filled with an overwhelming sense of joy and acceptance. Feelings she knew she needed, though not knowing how those sensations truly felt.

“It’s very peculiar that as of late, our little town has been taking in a number of Earth strays.” Corellon noticed this and smiled. “We were but a small town here, but first Moradin showed up with Marcie, followed by Lathander bringing Matthew into the fold.”

“And what about you, Corellon?” she asked with a little curiosity. “Have you already taken someone from our world into yours?”

“I have now,” they smiled lightly. “Welcome to our little home, Debbie.”

“Hello?” came a familiar voice from the computer sitting on Matthew’s desk. “Is this contraption working?”

“Yes, it’s working just fine, sir.” Matthew responded, looking over to Lathander for approval. He made a face but smiled and nodded.

Matthew turned back to the video screen on his laptop. “Gond does live up to his title, doesn’t he? I just wished he didn’t go off on creating constructs that could...”

“I heard that!” the voice of Gond came through on the other end as well. “See, Yeshe? With a little ingenuity, we no longer need to continuously summon those in the Forest to us. We can reach out through this.”

“Oh, I see.” the voice of Yeshe added among the faint sound of clicking keys. “As you know, I am quite busy here on my end, so I must return to my tasks.”

“Thanks for testing this out, fellows!” an ecstatic Gond replied before the feed cut out.

“I somehow knew that Yeshe is too old school for the internet.”

“Well he does get prayed to all the time,” Lathander said. “I doubt He needs an Internet connection.”

“True enough. But with this link we can connect between here and *Heaven*, where we can not only coordinate with other angel groups, but groups on earth as well, thanks to the Internet.”

Matthew then leaned up, and back so that he’s looking over to what’s behind him. And saw his father. Lathander’s stern face was leavened by being upside down in his son’s vision.

Matthew knew what he was about to say, so he headed his father off at the pass. “I’m focusing on our mission with Miska right now. That’s our priority, Papa. Suuuure, I might think about using this to distribute my campaign setting after all this.”

“The key word being *after*,” Lathander said. “Once the world is saved and there’s a Wizards of the Coast to send it to.”

“Exactly.” Matthew smiled.

Lathander gave him a nod. “You probably have some time to kill before Sunday Morning then. I take it you will at least now, get started in converting that binder of yours.”

“Provided I’m not needed right now.”

Lathander messed with Matthew’s hair. “Maybe after that Tanya would let people into the library then.”

“Well, considering that I’m the one who went gaga for dwarves,” Marcie told Debbie as she sat by her in the tavern bench, with a spread of cheese and meats with a pretzel. A pair of ales by the side. “...It’s only fair that you’d go for elves.”

“What can I say, Corellon is a beauty.” Debbie flushed, laughing to herself. “We talked a long time about everything from love and affection, the wonders the Creator of Elves themselves could do, to what is happening to Earth during the coming eclipse.”

“How much did Corellon tell ya, Debs?”

“Plenty. Right down to the parts where there used to be an angel from heaven, and that they’re here to stop someone from summoning some nasty monster.” Debbie smacked the table. “Are they serious?”

Marcie nodded. “I’ve seen it happening. They’d even went stabby stab on Matthew.”

Debbie winced. “Can’t you call the cops on this?”

“What would we tell them?” Marcie replied, taking a long drink. “Would we tell them some dark elf lady stabbed him and left no trace of her presence? If we’re lucky, we’ll just be laughed out of the prescient. If not, it’s a strait jacket and padded cell.”

“Fair enough,” Debbie replied, slowly drinking from her mug as well. “Still, there has to be something I can do to help. Everyone has been so kind to me here, it wouldn’t be right if I didn’t give back.”

“There is,” Marcie added as she reached for a pocket. “I’ve been partnering with the dwarves here. They can really treat a girl like a princess if they like her.” She then pulled out a pendant. “And I can turn into a dwarf with this necklace.”

“Wow, that’s pretty fantastic!” Debbie exclaimed, eyes wide and peering through that beautiful pendant. “Is there an Elf version of it?”

“Oh ho, what’s this about now?” Marcie teased the girl. “Does someone have the hots for Corellon?”

“S-shut up, I do not!” Debbie gave quite the obvious lie. “...I mean, is it that obvious?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“Oh. Well, is there an elf version of that crystal?”

“I’m sure Corellon could make one for you, though you’d have to ask them.”

Matthew started up the stairs toward the second floor, laptop under his arm and a bag of the other necessary items to keep it running, but it was Amaunator who knocked on the door.

The thick wooden door opened up without much of a peep, revealing the maid giving the angel a well-practiced curtsy and a reverent smile. “Everything is ready for you, milord. I have even moved a lamp table so that you will have easy access of a plug for that laptop.”

“Thank you, my dear,” he said, and those simple words of praise just filled Tanya with utter joy. Even though she tried not to look up, to keep her servile pose as a proper maid, she couldn’t help but giggle and shudder a bit. She didn’t look up until she felt his hand under her chin, lifting her face so that she’ll look at him, and the lifting her up to a standing position.

“I take it you’re enjoying this.”

“Yes, my Lord Amaunator,” Tanya said, she saw his eyes smile along with his mouth. “I...I hope I...”

He could tell by the way she was shifting her legs. The way she was sighing in her breath. The look in her eyes. He could tell that she likes him. He could even see the little daydream she had while he was away, of herself and him, taking a walk in the woods, finding a good sized willow tree to hide in, where he took her into his arms, bringing her lips to his and...

“I’ll always enjoy having you with me, Tanya.”

Another wave of rapturous joy flooded her. She then giggled some more and, taking his arm, showed him to the desk.

There was plenty of room for the laptop, which she helped plugged in, with the separate mouse and keyboard. She took the liberties of finding his bookbag and placed the binder on the table. Next to her beloved tea set on the side, the silver polished to a shine. The pot rested on a single electric warmer on one corner, and the rest laid ready on the tray: Four cups with saucers, an assortment of teas, sweeteners, a cut-up lemon, and even a basket of cake snacks.

“You sure go all out,” he said, giving Tanya a good squeeze around her back.

“Thank you, Master Amaunator,” she said. “Shall I?”

“Of course,” he said as he sat down to power up his computer. She started brewing the tea in front of her. “I’m glad everything’s in order, although I have to admit that I don’t know how you want the books organized on the shelves.”

He glanced over at the shelves. Even with a cursory search from his chair, he could tell that the books were put in the expected hodgepodge method. Not much in organization. And definitely not indexed; although most people would consider the bookshelves not large enough to warrant any form of a card catalog, but the part of the angel that still remember how the original Amaunator was like would appreciate such a thing.

Fortunately for the current Amaunator, he’s computer savvy. And he has a laptop, with a couple USB drives.

The angel just smiled back at Tanya. “It’s all right. I didn’t expect you to go that far. Besides, there are some things it’s best I do.”

He booted up the computer and opened up Microsoft Access. He then waved one of his hands at the bookshelves. When he did that, every book at once floated away from the shelves. They started to fly around at breakneck speed as the Angel sorted them all. One by one each book zipped up to the angel who, with a wave of his other hand caused the attached keyboard to type away all the general info about each of the books into the Access database. He also found a roll of paper tape and a pen where he could put an index label on each book as well: Subject Category, Subcategory, Author Name, and Title; all to be sorted Alphabetically. It started slow, but gradually increased speed as the sorting kept at it. It didn’t take long for the books to just become a blur.

“If there’s one thing I learned from my former incarnation,” he said, pausing to drink some of the tea Tanya poured for him, “organization’s a necessary evil, and it’s best to keep it simple. And since I intend to keep this laptop here in this room, I figure having the card catalog here,” He tapped at the laptop, “would be a good idea. If there’s one thing these computers are good at, is sifting data. The hard part is always putting it all in here in the first place.”

“Do you want me to...”

Another hand on her back soothed her down, driving out all concerns over her duty. “It’s all right, my dear. I don’t want to bother you with...” He smirks. “...my own obsessive-compulsive quirks. Besides, it’s best that I do the heavy sorting, and I don’t want you to get in the way of...whoa!” A book nearly brushed his nose. “Wild tomes. I’d like some more tea please. Orange Currant, with cream.”

By the time Tanya finished with the second cup and refilling the pot to get it heated, the books were about halfway sorted. How long did he spend doing this little chore, oh, she didn’t care. To see the smile on his face as she offered him the cup was worth it all.

“I like the way you’re so sweet and nice toward me, Lord Amaunator,” Tanya said. “I wondered if you’d be grumpy and hard-edged like the original one.”

The angel smiled. “You can thank Chauntea’s influence. But then again, I didn’t want to be an identical clone to the original.” He gave her a glance. “I’d like to make my own way.”

Tanya nodded. “Understandable, although I have to notice that you feel more at ease with me near.”

“I like having you around,” he said. He reached up to scratch her head only to flinch a bit. “Ugh! That war wound’s still a bit sore.”

“Oh dear,” Tanya said as she pulled out a vial she got hidden in the snack basket. “I’ve got something for that. Mind if I rub your shoulder a bit?”

“Please,” Matthew said with a smile. “It seems that I can still get ouchies, even as an Angel being.”

“Can you take off your shirt, so I can get there, please.”

He did so, unbuttoning the shirt and pulling it off. Tanya could still see the just-knitted scar on his right shoulder, as well as a couple blackened and feathered slits on the shoulder blades.

“I’m surprised you can do that,” she said as she poured some of the muscle potion into her hands. “Retract those wings. Would that be painful? I mean, having them tucked into your back like that.”

“Not painful as much as it feels like I’m in some straight jacket,” Matthew said as he leaned into his maid’s fingers. “Especially when I pull them in. I just feel so much relief when I pop them out.” His shoulder relaxed more as she rubbed in the herbal mixture. As the books are finished sorting themselves and all the needed info is stored into the Access database, he gave her a warm smile. “Thanks, Tanya.”

Tanya shuddered in utter joy at what she heard. “You are quite welcome, Master.”

“Now with *that* annoying thing no longer racking my brain,” he reached for the binder. “Now for the main business.”

He saved the database on the USB drive and pulled it out. He found some paper tape and made a label for that, labeling it “Card Catalog: Use Access,” he dropped that into the top drawer and grabbed another one. He labeled that “Penumaria.”

“Penumaria?” Tanya asked.

“*Project Superbook* is a placeholder name until I found a better one, and once I heard of the Holy Spirits’ former name—Penuma—I figure I’d name the setting after him.” He glanced over. “This might take a while. Go ahead and pull a stool next to me after the next refill.”

“Of course, Master,” she said as he opened the binder and fired up OneNote. He figured that it would be the best way to transfer the binder format from paper to digital.

Tanya found the ottoman slide into place next to the angel as she brewed the next cup, which she dutifully sat on while the angel started to type away.

Tanya could hear the grandfather clock tick slower, and slower, the time between the ticks growing, a second, tick, a couple seconds, tick, five seconds, tick...

She saw the screen go into overdrive, the typing on the screen going over a thousand words per minute.

Thirty seconds...tick...

It only paused to open up a program known as Gimp. It even has a little hello sign announcing itself on the screen before it appears. Tanya found that very well mannered. A wave of his, and the graphics he needed sketched itself on the screen, within seconds, it hopped from Gimp to OneNote.

More than a minute...tick...

It was as if time outside has stopped.

Like reality only consisted of this very room.

Just the two of them.

“Let me warm that up for you, Master.”

The angel smiled at her as she did so, letting a wing to float over her shoulder so that he'll have two hands free to do his work.

Chapter 18

Sunday, August 20, 2017

Lynn Avenue Assemblies of God

Renton, WA

7:15 AM; 25:45 before the eclipse.

“I didn’t see you last night, Daniel.”

Pastor Daniel Lionhart looked up from his coffee to find Matthew Christopher at the other side of the table, smiling like a cat with a bird in his mouth.

“Matthew? I didn’t know you’d be up this early on a Sunday morning!”

“I’ve decided to turn over a new leaf?” Matthew just shrugged.

“Just where have you been? The last I’ve heard about you; you’ve been scampering about somewhere in some arcade bar and got into trouble.” He raised an eyebrow, “You haven’t taken up drinking, have you?”

“I’d let you know that the worst I ever tried is kombucha, Reverend,” Matthew mock scolded. “Emphasis on ‘tried.’ The angels and I have been looking around for clues over that summoning that’s happening tomorrow, and with my help we found a lot.” Matthew leaned back on a chair with his own Pumpkin Spice Latte and placed a book satchel on the table. “I assume you were too busy with this morning’s sermon.”

Daniel nodded. “Yeah, you know me by now, the Lord’s work ain’t no nine to five job. I have a sermon on how we should be fighting against principles and ideals that are pulling us apart. A modern take on Ephesians 6:12. I think it would be a good point to make in advance on what’s going to happen.”

Matthew nodded. “I just hope that most of the people here can understand high concept stuff.”

“You’d be surprised,” Daniel smiled. “By the way, what have you been doing? I don’t suppose that Lathander didn’t turn you into some Pollyanna-ish, proselytizing paladin.”

“Try saying *that* three times fast,” Matthew quipped. “The Morninglord’ll kick my ass if I go off like Evelyn.” He then reached into the book satchel. He pulled out a printed and bound version of Matthew’s campaign setting with the new title and logo: A firebird landing over the word “Penumaria” in an elaborate lettering.

“I finally got a laptop to digitize my campaign setting, and even getting a new name for it. It might be needing a few more proofreading, some extra spellchecking and all, but it’s not ready for beta play.” Matthew watched Daniel flip through the pages with ever-widening eyes. “We can go along with setting up a D&D Vacation Bible School to develop what I’m calling Penumaria now.”

“This seems very thorough, Matthew.” Daniel responded, taking a preliminary glance through the binder. “You must have put some serious thought into it.”

Matthew rubbed a foot behind his other leg. “I still need to develop a couple campaigns before I can do that. Right now, I’m just have conversions of *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* and *Princes of the Apocalypse* right now. However, there’s more pressing matters I need to take care of before getting this put into a distributable, digital format.”

“Definitely, considering that that Penumaria would be very controversial. I mean, a Christian-themed D&D setting?”

Matthew made a hand gesture that tilted back and forth. “Any decent idea has a tendency to be polarizing. There’s always going to be people who don’t like it, but I know I’m not the only one wondering what Penumaria’d be like.”

Most churches now have a room that serves coffee, their own little pre-sermon coffee house with beans from the various countries they're sending missionaries out of. And the Lynd Avenue Assemblies of God was no different. Only here, Pastor Daniel had the option of having a focus on coffee beans from his ancestral home of Kenya. "His grandfather immigrated to America during the 70s," Lathander said. "Legally, may I add. Granddad found out that there were plenty of inner city youths are getting into trouble with the law, so he decided to make a ministry out of a trend they deal with troubled youths back in Africa."

"I heard that they try to reform them instead of incarcerate them," Gond replied. "They hold the troubled kid up and remind him of all the good they can do, and that they can right whatever wrong they made and find redemption from whatever bad thing they've done. I admire that."

"True. He helped countless kids that way, especially those who were about to go on the wrong tracks before they make a mess out of themselves. At first people saw him as a pillar of this community, but recently he's been getting a lot of flak. He's been helping other people get out of dark places..."

"Just like you did with Matthew."

Lathander nodded. "He's even talked several dozen people out of hate groups, but there's been a small online group denigrating him for doing so."

"How so?" Gond said with a raised eyebrow. "What's wrong with pulling people out of these hate gangs?"

"I tried looking into it, Gond," Lathander sighed. "And I had to stop before I get tempted to smite someone with sunburn." Gond could see the anger and outrage in his eyes. "They were railing against him because he's helping white men." He tapped his coffee cup on the table for emphasis. "*Because* they were *white* and *men*. Didn't Reverend King and all the other Civil Rights folk rail against countering racism with racism?"

"You found that out too, I see." Gond replied. "There's been a recent political trend that claims to be against racism and prejudice, but they only see people only as what group they are in: Race, Ethnicity, Religion, Class, Sex, Gender...I showed Corellon a list of genders I found and even *Ze* called bullshit on three-quarters of them. That wouldn't be a problem if they didn't put a value on these outer labels, calling one label good and another bad. You wouldn't guess who they put on the absolute lowest on the totem pole, the group that they hate the most while claiming that they're so privileged and has their lives all so easy." Gond paused for effect as Lathander just stood there dumbfounded. "People like your warlock, Lathander."

"The race issue again," Lathander said with a growl. "I heard an earful of that form Yeshu."

"At first I was as livid as you are. I told the tech angels that the Humans here shouldn't have all these hang-ups on race, since this world is pretty much all humans. 'Earth only has one race,' I said. 'Tell that to Twitter,' they said. I can't look at that site for five seconds without wishing to smite all of Silicon Valley with an electromagnetic pulse."

"All the more reason to get Matthew off this planet, especially now that I have a part of myself in him."

Gond drew a long sip of Kona brew. "At least Matthew has something on the inside, now more than ever, unlike that undead elf you picked up yesterday."

Lathander raised an eyebrow. "The one I sent to Silverskin?"

"None other. She thought that she'd make him forget a good chunk of his adult life with one of her Styx potions. You know the usual drill, get them to forget some traumatic event so that they can move on with her life. Turns out that the drink erased *everything* about him: His memories, his personality, his...well, whatever would count as his talents, even his name. *Everything*. The man was reduced to a mere doll. She had to rebuild him from scratch, and even turn him into a girl to boot."

Lathander couldn't believe his eyes. "How is that possible. Even if he's homeless, nobody as old as he was could be *that* empty inside."

Gond sighed. "That's what I said as well. But it appears that these people focus so much about the number of boxes they checked that they fail to develop anything inside of them, no self-reflection, no skills or

talents, no discernable traits, just a cookie cutter persona based on those checked boxes and rote responses to anything. They think that their whole lives are what they identify as. No wonder they'd see mere words, be it spoken or written, as much as an existential threat to their existence as a bullet to their head."

Lathander looked incredulous. "That's insane, Wonderbringer. You can't have a sentient being identifying with only what he's born with, and what is on the surface. What sort of being would want to live like that? Their souls would be so small that not even Asmodeus would want them. I should know. While he was with God, he said that there were too many people in the world where he wouldn't even make a deal with, because they're not worth the ink and paper for the contract. When your soul is so small *the devil* doesn't want it..."

"And we have people like that, by the tens of thousands, walking around us right now. People for whom you could just put one drop of Styx water on their forehead and they'll be completely erased." Gond shook his head. "I hate to see what would happen if you put them to the Light."

Daniel announced before the sermon that he intended to set up a Vacation Bible School that will playtest the campaign setting as well as teach the bible stories behind the game, and that he has plenty of D&D players in the pews wanting to be Dungeon Masters for this.

The rest of the hour and the half consisted of the traditional things you'd find in a church service. Hymnals, prayers, offerings, praise, a scene where the those in the pews can get up to greet each other—imagine the surprise for those who shook Lathander and Chauntea's hands—and the main sermon on how empathy and an open mind is vital in the world today. The sermon lasted just enough for the families there to head out to the traditional Sunday meal.

"Now that I've gotten my own business out of the way, let's talk about that summoning that your angelic friends came from." Daniel asked. "Have you found anything?"

"If you don't want this to be a remake of that movie made after that gospel tract, Daniel, prepare to be disappointed," Matthew replied.

Lathander nodded. "Right down to the name of the perpetrator of the summons."

Daniel raised an eyebrow. "Mistress Frost?"

"Close," Marcie replied. "Mistress *Blackleaf*. And just to add to the matter, she's presenting herself as a drow."

Daniel had to blink. "A Drow?"

Matthew nodded. "I met her face to face. And it's no cosplay or plastic surgery. She's a bona fide drow. She also has a bunch of other people just like her. Pointed ears, poisoned daggers, and all." He lifted his arm, having to rotate his shoulder a bit, to point to his back. "Nabbed me good one time."

Daniel gasped and reached out of Matthew. "All you all right?"

Matthew just chuckled. "I'm in a team, remember. And not it's not just angels, but..."

Someone placed a hand on Matt's shoulder, and the next thing Matt knew he was against a wall.

It was one of the deacons, and he looked spooked. "We've got trouble."

"What's the matter, Benjamin."

"You are *not* going to believe this, pal, and like it *even less*. They're back."

Matthew had to almost peel himself off the wall as Lathander and Marcie headed over to him. "Son, are you all right?"

Matthew nodded. "I forgot how light I am in normal mode. It's not that it didn't happen every other week before."

Marcie shook her head. "*That* just shouldn't happen, Matthew," she said, turning to Lathander. "Can you pick up what's happening outside?"

"Easier done than said," Lathander said as he turned toward the front door toward the parking lot.

And turned white as a sheet.

"Papa, you look like you've saw a ghost."

"In a way, I have."

Matthew Christopher couldn't believe his eyes.

Bothered Against Dungeons & Dragons is back.

A six-member protest crowd is protesting their cause by bullhorns and the kind of signs you'd usually find from Westboro Baptist Church on the parking lot of the Lynn Avenue Assemblies of God church!

But as Matthew kept his distance in the back of the counter crowd, he saw something that made having to wait for a cop that might not come the least of his problems.

Matthew's mother stood among the other members of her organization, using a bullhorn she brought to ensure her voice was heard. "Matthew Christopher, get your ass here! You're coming home with me! Don't you dare talk back to your mother!"

"Oh, *Hell* No!" Matthew blurted out his response, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. Confronting his mother after everything had happened still wasn't easy for him. "Not only did you throw me out of the house, *for the last flipping time* may I add, you went have to do *this?!?*"

"I told you to stop playing that stupid game and get a job!" his mother shouted, as a growing crowd was forming to witness the unfolding scenario. "You're not going to live in my house without earning your keep."

"Even if I'm old enough to work *which I'm not*, do you think I'll live with someone who's making *this* much of an embarrassment of herself?!" Matthew responded,

If looks would kill, that woman would've committed filicide right on the spot.

"Stand back, Matthew," Daniel said as he tapped Matthew's shoulder. The by not micro-flinch caused Matthew to step back. "I'll handle this."

Daniel had to sigh and frown his displeasure. He didn't have to do this, getting between a mother and her child, but he has no choice. Matthew wasn't the only one who just. Have. Had. Enough.

"Ma'am, I don't think this is the best way to go about talking to your son." the pastor spoke up. "How about we put the bullhorn down, step inside and-"

"Enough, Reverend. I'm here for my son, and I am not leaving without him!" she nearly blew out the speaker as she shouted into the bullhorn. "Don't make me get the police here."

"This isn't going to work." Daniel responded, putting his hands up dismissively. "While you are the boy's legal guardian, I can't morally turn him over to you; I don't think you have his best interests in mind."

"Don't YOU tell me what I can and cannot do with my own son." Matthew's mother snapped back at the pastor. "Law says he is *mine!*"

At this point, Matthew wasn't in the right frame of mind to stand up to his mother. With Daniel keeping her occupied, he took the first chance he could and disappeared into the crowd. Breaking into a full sprint, he wanted to put as much distance between him and the unfolding scene.

He ducked back into the church. Back into the synagogue, he took a moment to collect himself on a nearby bench.

He was trying to breath his nerves down. But then a voice from inside the core of his being didn't help matters.

'I might be a respectful of law and that honoring your parents is a virtue, but this is too much, bro,' Amaunator's voice in his head was all but dripping with indignation. *'That woman just sees you as property! Didn't your country amend their constitution to stop this practice?'*

“Like I need to tell *you* this.” Matthew thought, conversing with the entity in his head. “By now you know what happened with my birth father.”

‘Being that we have the same memories, I do. If I were running things, that wouldn’t be a recorded as a suicide. And if it’s one thing I just cannot stand, it’s people playing games with Laws and using them for the wrong reasons.’

“Do you want me to tag you in and...”

There were some police sirens.

“Oh, thank God. The cops are actually doing their jobs.”

‘Looks like there’s no need. Looks like Pastor Daniel handled the situation and the local authorities can take it from there.’

“Unless the cops come and look for...”

There was a door opening at the far end, and with the church empty, there was no drowning out the voice. “Matthew Christopher? Can you come out? This is the police; we need to speak with you.”

Matthew’s voice was barely a whisper. ‘My apologies in advance: Shit Damn Fuck N...’

‘Let me tag in before you do anything worse to your church membership.’

Matthew felt himself fade away as his body became enveloped by a mass of shadows, and he felt his other self take over. The cops were called do what Child Protective Services call ‘Reunification,’ which in Matthew’s case was that he was forced by the courts to return to his Mother. So that she can continue to hound, scold, pester, and nag him to do things for her. Sure, he can refuse, but that would make him a juvenile delinquent and end up in juvenile detention for a couple days and *then* back to his Mother. And all of the meantime Miska ends up fully summoned and tearing through the Washington Coast while she’s constantly smacking him with a spoon going, “I don’t give a fuck if you knew that was fucking happened! Where is your paycheck so that I can make rent, you lazy bum!? And if you *knew* that demon spider was coming out of that eclipse why didn’t you do something about it, you worthless bastard?!”

Or that was what he would be ruminated on if he was still his Human self. The Angel of Shadow would never stand for something like that. Even if he isn’t a deity of any stretch, he’d...

The cop found him. “Sir, have you seen a young teenager hiding here, five feet tall, brown hair, dresses in white with gold trim, we need to talk to him.”

“I don’t think he’s here, Officer.” Amaunator wondered whatever or not that was a lie, but then he realized that they’re looking for a Matthew Christopher who really isn’t anywhere on this planet, being that he’s hiding inside him. “He’s probably ran off once he recognized that woman causing a scene...”

“That’s his mother, sir, she wants him back with her. She’s got a court order demanding that she gets him back.”

“You’re going to find him first, sir. I doubt he’s anywhere...”

“Wait a minute, who are you, sir. Can I see some ID?”

Amaunator sighed and raised his hand.

From where he stood, seeing and hearing through the eyes and ears of his angelic big brother, Matthew saw time go into reverse. It was as if someone hit reverse on a video tape or film for the past minute and a half, only it was all of reality, rewinding. He even felt himself revert to his human self, even though the Angel self was still in the driver’s seat.

With Amaunator's eyes flashing inside Matthew Christopher's body, he ducked into another corner and, with a couple hand gestures and some whispered incantation, the teenaged youth felt the Weave get drew into his body.

Matthew saw his body fade translucent, then transparent, until he was invisible. As he was checking his non-existent body over, he heard the door open and the cop walk in.

Shhhhhh.

Matthew's body froze. Even under the effects of the *Invisibility* spell, you can still be heard. And as he saw the cop look around the synagogue, he knew, he just flat *knew*, that if his big brother was keeping him paralyzed, he would've made himself known. A cough, a sneeze, a grunt, a gasp, any kind of sound would've tipped the cop off that he's still here. He never expected to be grateful not to be in control over his body in his life, but when he cop walked out a hall further into the church, he certainly was.

Even as he found himself back in control of his body as he ducked out of the house and into a bush until the cop got into his car and pulled away.

"You had to...rewind time," Matthew said.

'I had to do it, brother,' he heard Amaunator say. 'It's not something I want to, though. I don't need to tell you how dangerous what I just did is.'

"Don't want to create a time paradox, right?" Matthew smirked.

'That's one of the many hazards of time travel. It's why I don't like doing it.'

"Why do I get the feeling that you'd be forced to muck with the timeline more often than you should?"

'Don't remind me. Looks like the cops are bugging out and taking that woman with them.'

Matthew peeked over the bushes to see his mother screaming and stomping, with her hands cuffed behind her back, berating a cop in the driver's seat whose shades are barely hiding him reaching his limit on her.

'Daniel would be wondering where we are. Let's get back to him. He still needs to get up to speed.'

"Yeah," Matthew said as he wiggled out from under the bushes. "I just hope he doesn't flip out too much over what else we did."

Chapter 19

Lind Avenue Assemblies of God, Renton Washington
12:30 PM; 20:30 before the Eclipse

“You did *What!!?*”

Daniel’s outburst as he leaned forward in his office’s leather chair was as dramatic as it was expected. “Matthew, were you even considering what could have happened if things went south?”

“I didn’t want to do it at first, but even God agreed that what I’d learn from Lathander wouldn’t be enough,” Lathander said. “We have less than 20 hours now, and the only way we could provide the boy with a fighting chance was to bring him into our midst as a half-angel. He wasn’t the first one to get such a blessing on this planet.”

“I can understand *that* part, mister,” Daniel interjected. “But the Vistani Wedding Ritual? Are you flipping insane, Lathander?! You *of all people* knew what happened in Episode 52! You almost lost your favorite paladin over that ritual, only to have her get stuffed in that clockwork body.”

“You can blame Chris Perkins on *that*,” Matthew quipped as he elbowed his patron. “He’s still nursing that shiner.”

Daniel turned to Matthew. “And you’re not helping his cause, Matthew Christopher. *You* were on that slab, giving up parts of your soul...” Daniel looked straight into Matthew’s still-silver eyes with concern. “Why would you risk your mortal soul on such a gamble?”

“He was nice to me.” Matthew said.

“I know he is, Matthew but you agreed to-”

Matthew stood up and smacked the desk between himself and Daniel.

“He was nice to me!”

When Matthew Christopher said that, his voice didn’t just raise, but deepened as well. It sounded more adult. Daniel would’ve just attributed it to puberty, his voice just cracked at that moment, but his silver eyes were glowing as well. It showed a soul inside the young man that is definitely more than just a mere mortal soul. It had resolution, conviction, a bit of authority. Just like his adopted father.

Daniel sat back down.

Matthew’s voice went back to normal. “I know you were trying to find someone to take me in, to let me know that I’m worth a damn. That someone would care if I lived or died. But that unicorn of a person just doesn’t exist, do they? God had to find a deity *from another planet*, to do what *his own creation* should be doing, but *won’t*. If I were Yahweh, I’d be pissed. Maybe pissed off enough to blow that trumpet and start the rapture right then and there.”

“But what about *this* world, Matthew,” Daniel tried to protest, to try to get him to think that maybe he’d consider going back. “What about what should be reality? The way you’re going, it’s almost like...”

“...like I’m living in some fantasy world?” Matthew finished the thought.

Daniel nodded. “It isn’t healthy.”

“Sure, I might be...but what option do I have?” He sighed. “I kinda envy you, Pastor Lionheart. You can get a life in this world. A career, a family, friends, and fun. What options do I have in this real world? I’m a teenager with no education, no friends and no family. Is there anything here for me? Why should I want to stay in a world where there’s nothing good for me?”

Daniel just stared at Matthew, who could tell that the pastor was trying to think.

Matthew gave the pastor a good thirty seconds before continuing.

“Just God? God’s the only thing you can think of.” Matthew sigh was heavy in disappointment. “Is God the only one who flipping cares?”

“Matthew, please.”

“If you were in my shoes, with no family, no friends, no home and no future, what would you do? So Lathander comes out of nowhere and offers me those things. Sure, all the red flags in the world went off in my head; but was there any other options? Options that don’t involve adding of the rising homelessness in Seattle? Maybe to become one of the homeless people that were kidnapped recently. I heard the news before I came here; five more vanishings and still no leads. So I may be given a chance at a life that could be a complete lie...”

Matthew sat back down, nearly flopping on the chair.

“...but it’s still a life.”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t have taken his help.” the pastor responded. “Just that you were *extremely* lucky things worked out for you.”

Matthew pointed to Lathander as he slumped back in his chair. “He’s an angel, what do you expect? But I did what I did, and I don’t regret it: I offered parts of my soul to bind Lathander and Chauntea, and they gave me a part of their essence to ensure that I’d live through it. I did it to repay that kindness. It was a debt that I owed. I was lucky enough to remain in one piece, even though there’s more pieces of me now.”

“What do you mean by that?” Daniel was concerned. “Will you be all right?”

“I’m still me, if that’s what you mean,” Matthew added. “I just have an angel persona now. Maybe over time I’ll get these two sides of me to merge together like they’re supposed to, but for now.” He then had to laugh. “We’re forming a one-man tag team. Trying to make the best of things.”

“Are you sure?” Daniel said, crossing his arms.

“I have to be,” Matthew replied. “We will need his powers to combat the drow, and to find the place for that LARP.”

“The Live Action roleplay game that Mistress Blackleaf is setting up?” Daniel responded, looking up at the ceiling slightly. “Do we have any information at all to work with?”

“Oh, so conveniently timed in the same time of the eclipse that the ritual to summon that demon is about to happen. Talk about your coincidence.” Matthew shrugged. “If you ask me, if it’s going to happen it’s going to happen in that LARP.”

“We don’t know where it is.” Lathander said. “Mistress Blackleaf is apparently going to reveal that bit about two to three hours before the event, which is strange.”

“It’s not really that strange.” Daniel scratched his chin. “In recent years some events had to have their locations secret and announce them on a non-public Twitter or E-mail so keep the protest horde from blocking the streets. This LARP has to be local, or else why would they advertise it here?”

“I’m guessing it’s somewhere in the outskirts of the whole Seattle area,” Matthew pondered. “Doesn’t do much to narrow it down.”

“I think that’s where we come in,” Lathander replied. “Or rather, what my compatriots come in...”

He then gave Matthew a firm squeeze on his shoulder and made a wry face.

“And what a certain Wonderbringer and a troublemaking little half-angel has brought into my place.”

The Twilight Forest

Gond and Corellon looked over at the little doodad in his lab. It was a small device with a few lights on it, with a button or two on the sides. “I think that’ll do it. Corellon, please stand over here.”

“Right here?” the elf replied, striking a fancy pose. They took a few moments before changing poses. “Like this?”

Gond rolled his eyes. “Corellon, you don’t have to do anything like...”

He switched to female, made his clothes appear like a cocktail waitress—body-hugging bodice, fishnet stockings, bow tie, and all. Gond thanked the gods that she just said no to the bunny ears and tail—and leaned forward to give everyone a good view. “Or perhaps like this?”

“Would you mind?! You daft elf.” The Wonderbringer pointed the device at the elf. Some LED bulbs on the device started to flash and a soft beep sounded. “It would seem like it’s functioning properly. It’s built to detect the arcane energy signature of fey bloodlines, and while it couldn’t tell the different between types of elves, that means dark elves as well.”

“I still can’t believe the humans haven’t made use of Earth’s Weave,” Corellon smirked. “How amusing that they can do so much without it.”

“I don’t wanna think what they’d do if they did.” Moradin spoke up, pushing off the wall on which he was leaning. “They’re pretty good at killin’ each other without it. The last thing Earth needs is a megalomaniac who can cast a *Fireball* of any size, let alone a *Wish*. Some general might want to kidnap Matthew and brainwash him into some weapon.”

“Either way, the Drow, and presumably everyone else affiliated with them, would be tapping into Earth’s Weave to make this event happen,” Gond replied, turning to look between Moradin and Corellon. “All we need to do is find the highest concentration of Weave energy that isn’t us, and we’ll find them.”

“Aye, you’ll even have some time to get t’know your lady friend, Corellon.” Moradin chuckled, patting them on the back.

“Lady friend? What do you mean by that?” they asked curiously.

“Ye always pick up a stray every time ye come here, Elf, and this Debbie girl is it.”

“I wanted her to think about it, fellows.” Corellon protested, after reverting to his male form and a more presentable elven suit. “It’s a crucial decision.”

“Aye, and I think she’s got a decision in mind.”

Outside in a nearby clearing, Debbie waited for Corellon's return. It had been a while since her arrival here, and with little to keep her on Earth, she fully immersed herself in this wonderful new world, with this wonderful new partner. She even found a flowing peasant's robe to help her blend in, which is what she wore when she walked up to the Mansion.

When she saw Corellon not as much as walk but glide out the front door, her nerves tensed a bit, then slowly eased as they offered her a beautiful smile and greeting.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, my dear." Corellon gave a gentle flip of their hair that sent Debbie swooning with delight. Even with knowing that he's officially trans, and pretty much lets people use whatever pronoun they want—Debbie uses a more approvable 'they, them, and theirs;' leave the typo pronouns for Twitter, thank you so much—she couldn't keep herself from thinking that they can be quite a charmer. "Work before pleasure, you know how it is. I trust you've made your decision?"

Debbie gave a bit of a nod, eyes wide open and full of hope.

"Just as you wish nothing more than for me to take you in." Corellon's voice almost sounded like an invitation to bed. "And I mean all of you, your heart and mind, your body and soul, I shall claim every part of you as mine."

"You are so beautiful," Debbie said as her hand reached up to touch Corellon's ear, it twitched to her touch. "So beautiful."

"You're too kind," Corellon said, her voice a contented purr in Debbie's ears. "I will not hurt you; you are safe with me. I know you want to offer yourself to me."

Debbie felt red hot all over her body, she hugged herself, feeling like she could just combust right where she stood. "If only I could...if only..."

"Be honest, Debbie. Even though you know that this world belongs to Yeshu, were you really going to go to Him?"

That made Debbie close her eyes and run through her memories. It wasn't much to talk about.

"You doubted all that was real," Corellon said, walking up to Debbie, her presence giving out a cool breeze over her body. "That there was really something else out there in the world, that there's no such thing as angels and deities and dwarves and elves. And yet here I am."

Debbie opened her eyes and was locked into hers. Those eyes held her in place and would not let go.

"And yet here we are..." Debbie's lips quivered a bit, trying to find the words, but they just couldn't come out.

By now Corellon realized what was happening. Debbie could see a mixture of sadness, regret, and desire in her face. "I want to be with you, milord."

"You wish to be mine?" Corellon said.

Debbie's heart almost stopped. It finally happened. 'yes.'

"You wish to offer yourself to me, give your whole being, body and soul, to me, to have me claim you as my own," Corellon said as she touched Debbie's shoulder. "And if I could, you want me to turn you into one of mine."

On the mere touch from Corellon, Debbie was filled, head to toe, in an all-encompassing sense of joy, happiness, and contentment beyond greater than what she thought she was capable of. It intoxicated her, causing her to feel woozy, the world around her fading in a haze.

"And so I shall, my dear." Corellon's voice echoed throughout Debbie's mind, driving out all thought, as she wrapped her arms around her. "It is why you were here, what you were born to be. You were destined for

just this moment. All your life led you to me. To bring yourself before me. To offer your whole being to me. This is what you were destined to be.” Her lips reached her ears and her voice set in her minds as if it were true from on high.

“It’s time, my new elf,” Corellon said to her, in a voice showing a soft divinity, a noble gentleness. “Your old self was a mere caterpillar for who you’re really are. It’s time for you to shed your old body, your old identity, and release yourself as a butterfly. Let it happen, Delshabra. It’s what you ever wanted in your life. It’s what you were born to become. Awaken to who you are. Rise up to your true self.”

“I...” Delshabra’s voice was barely a whisper, and she didn’t know if she had a body anymore or not, all she knew is that she’s with Corellon, and that’s all that matters. “I don’t know...what to do.”

“You do, my child,” Corellon said as her lips reached her new child’s. “It’s all you really want to do.”

And then Corellon kissed her on the lips.

Daniel couldn't help but sit there in awe as the mist parted to reveal the forest. Seeing the path turn from asphalt to wood chips as the concrete jungle of an abandoned industrial district give way to tall trees and frolicking small animals took his breath away. "I knew it'd be like another world," he said, "but I can't imagine—whoa!!"

Daniel ducked as a red-haired, red bearded angel bolted toward him at breakneck speed. He smelled of shop class and new technology. The angel buzzed the wagon a yard above Daniel's head and flew into the mist. After he vanished, the pastor heard powerful wings beat down hard, as if launching someone straight up in the air.

"Looks like Gond completed his Weave device," Lathander noted. "He mentioned we could find the event's location by detecting connections to Earth's magical energies. Since so few, if anyone on Earth is capable of tapping into the Weave, they will be very easy to find."

"Weave? Oh, right. I didn't expect you to say that about Earth." Daniel remembered, giving a slight nod.

"So, once we have that location set up, Marcie and I will be going in. We won't stand out quite as someone like Lathander or Moradin." Matthew spoke up, looking toward the village. "I've also got something for you, if you want it."

The wagon stopped in front of the mansion where Tanya awaited to greet them. She guided them into what seemed an elaborate antique curio shop. Several shelves, tables and displays were packed full of small antique items, figurines, relics, and various other bric-a-brac with a round table with a small pile of side and a stuffed bookshelf nearby.

Two padded chairs face the lit hearth—which lit when Daniel walked into the room—with an oak table between them, on which the maid set down her tea set. "Tanya's been living here a lot longer than I've been here, but since I'm going to be put in charge with the monitoring of the realms for Yeshu, she has been helping me out."

Corellon smiled with pride at the new elf that knelt before him. “{I know that you wouldn’t mind one iota about keeping in that servant outfit, but necessity dictates that you wear something sensible for tonight.}” He switched to his native tongue, Elvish, knowing that the feyblooded girl knew exactly what he’s saying. He walked up to touch her head. “{There’s always time for such indulgences later.}”

The elf that was once Debbie knelt there, her eyes closed, in her first reverie, remembering that sweet surrender she had so few moments ago. She felt lost in all the lovemaking she had with her Master that she could almost feel...but then the touch brought her back to a serene calm.

Very few elves experience the Mysteries of Arvandor. Even fewer humans. Debbie was the latest human to answer the call to come to the Elven all-father and merge into him.

And merge she did. Corellon let Debbie enter his body in ways she couldn’t possibly imagine. She was, for a time, part of Corellon Larethian.

Merged as she is with the creator of all elves, she had almost all of the wisdom, knowledge and nature, she learned how easy it is to meld with the woods, to creep silent among the shadows, to connect into the weave, how her perspective could grow from her own formerly short life and the little world around her into a scope as broad and as long as she wishes. She knew how to mold her body, to change gender, or even be androgynous if she wished. She felt Corellon’s very nature and desires like a song in her heart, and welcomed it into her own soul, adding her own in a chorus.

Her body slumped back down to her knees. Her hair flowed back over her shoulders and down to the small of her back, and her ears, long and pointed, twitched to the sound of His voice.

She didn’t care if she spoke and heard in Elvish. It flowed through her ears and out her mouth so smooth and eloquent that she’d wouldn’t want to use any other language. She never cared if the whole world disappeared, and it would be just her and her Lord.

To be with Corellon, forever. She would love nothing less. Nothing less for her Master.

“{My beloved child, my chosen in this world, my dear Delshabra.}” Corellon knew that she’ll understand Elven. In fact, it would be the only language she’ll say for the moment. The new elf just stayed there on her knees, her back straight, her head tilted forward. She felt nothing but the ever-present joy and pride of being in his presence.

She was taller than who she was, now. She could feel the grace of the feylands in her body even though she was still, resting in revelry as the memories of her transformation played over, and over, and over again. The memories of the changing, the glory, the lovemaking, oooh, the lovemaking. She never thought it would have felt to good, so right. Oh, how much did she ache for this moment. She was truly loved. Of only she could remain in this state forever, to never leave, to just be under the glory of her God.

“{Awaken and Arise, Delshabra.}”

She opened her eyes, a pair of the deepest green, and stood up, her movement smooth as glass. Her previously short hair cascaded long in a ponytail, and a pair of slender long pointed ears and a sharp nose adorned her face. Her skin was so bronze that it was almost brown. She looked at Corellon with love and desire in her eyes, and she knew that he loved what he saw. It filled her with joy and contentment, seeing him pleased. She’s all for him now. Whatever he wishes, she would think of nothing but what he wants.

“{I know you might not like what I want you to do, child. I know that my people wish nothing more than to be with me forever, but it is something you must do.}”

Delshabra’s smile weakened a but, she doesn’t want to leave her master’s presence for even a second, but she knows that what Corellon would say would be right. “{What is your bidding, my master?}”

“{You will return to my friends, and together, we will drive this creature back to our worlds. Once we do, you will return to me, and I will bring you to my people in the Realms.}”

“{As you wish.}” She gave him a slight bow.

“{You will become part of my people, and in time, they will accept you as one of their own. You will be my gift to them, as my Chosen. My people tend to be stagnant at times, and I need to send some fresh blood to re-energize the ranks. You will be that fresh blood, with a fresh perspective, with memories new and fascinating for those to share. You will offer those memories to yours unrestricted, Delshabra, wherever you go. And when I find a suitable mate for you, you will bear his children. They will be mighty and mystical. Star Children. A dawn of a new age of Elves.}”

Delshabra’s smile returned. “{Yes. A New Age. I would love nothing more than be a part of it.}”

“We’ve already getting a party forming,” Lathander said. “Matthew and I will deliver most of the firepower, Marcie’s a tank, and Corellon’s setting us up with someone who can sneak around. A multiclass rogue/wizard, as I’d call it. There’s just one thing missing: We need a healer.” He sighed and turned to Daniel “It’s a common makeup for any party, someone to keep the party on their collective feet. I think you’d make a perfect cleric for my team, and there’s something that can even help you out. Tanya?”

Tanya approached Lathadner and Daniel with something that looked like a pole wrapped in a cloth. Lathander took it and unwrapped what appeared to be a staff of petrified wood. It looked as old as the planet itself. There were cracks in several places, as if it were shattered one time.”

“This staff has a history throughout the Old Testament,” Lathander began. “It was originally Abraham’s. All the way back to Genesis 10. Abraham handed it over to Issac, and then Jacob, who gave it to Joseph when they were reunited. Moses found it before he was forced into exile where he found that burning bush. He took it with him when he was forced to remain in the wilderness. It was lost for a while until Yoshua, the first Biblical Judge, appeared with it, and it was handed down Judge to Judge until Samuel. It later resurfaced with Elijah, and then Elisha, and then so on throughout the rest of the prophets, until Jesus Christ himself found it when he was still a kid in Egypt.”

Daniel’s eyes just grew wider and wider as he heard the tale of this biblical artifact. He never thought he’d see something like it in his life.

“Jesus had that staff with him right to the garden, where he was about to get arrested. Peter, being the asshole that he gets at times, attacked the romans with a blade, until Jesus blocked it with this staff. It instantly shattered into seven pieces. And it remained so until His resurrection, where he reassembled it. When he finally ascended back into Heaven, He took that staff with Him.”

“Broken into seven...” Daniel realized what he was looking at. “This is...”

“Bring in contact with all those holy men, ending with the Son of God, has imbued it with powerful healing magic, and a very strong sense of order. Reverend Daniel Lionheart, I present to you Earth’s very own Rod of Seven Parts.”

Lathander held it for Daniels to take hold of it himself. When he had it in his own hands, the divine energies that surged into his arms was like nothing he’d ever felt before. It was like his first experience with the Holy Spirit. Even though he has never seen how the Rod would work in Fifth Edition, he felt confident that he could make use of it.

He looked over at the angel. “I don’t think...I’m worthy of...”

I doubt anyone on this planet is worthy of holding that Staff.

The voice of God just echoed through his head.

You have The Staff because The Staff is needed. And the Staff needs you to have it, at least for the moment.

He gave the rod a good grip.

Let me show you how to attune to this Staff.

He switched his eyes from the staff to Lathander, then back to the staff, then to Lathander, then to the staff...and then he headed out of the room with all the curios.

“You’ve gotta excuse me.”

It didn't take Daniel to try out what the Rod of Seven Parts would do. It took him longer to find out what he would wear as the team cleric. He always played clerics in games, and often he brings along his own ethnic flavor into the game. "The one thing about Role Playing Games," he said in one sermon, "is that it's innately all-inclusive and diverse, because of the most important part of the game which Wizards of the Coast (or for that matter Pazio or White Wolf) has no control over: The people on the table. They have full agency to be whatever they want, even to experiment with different genders, cultures, and identities. In fact, as long as said character can mesh well with the party, it's encouraged."

Daniel preferred to design characters with styles native to his homeland. In the forgotten realms, his characters are predominantly Chultan, and occasionally Zakaran, characters. His characters often wear Dashikis and Brocades with Kente styles. To his delight, he found something of that style in the mansion, so that he can now look the part of one of his player characters. He walked around the village to take in the surroundings and to get a feel for what the rod could do.

"Is this Yeshu a Deity of your world?" said one of the children who had approached him.

"That He is," Daniel said. "I doubt you'd heard of him that much. He doesn't often have Clerics."

"He doesn't?" the child wondered. "So you gotta be really special, if he doesn't have many!"

"Thank you, child." Daniel smiled proudly. "I do my best in His name."

"Kinda makes ye wonder why God dinnae try His hand at bein' a D&D deity durin' th' Eighties." came a voice that only vaguely sounded familiar to Daniel. He heard her do a dwarf impression, but never this good. "I think he coulda made a statement."

"Well, it's only because His followers didn't understand the game," Daniel said as he rose, not looking behind him. "That, and my dad kept telling me that he's more into...soli...taire."

That was when he turned around and saw Marcie. Or rather, a version of Marcie that didn't even reach his torso, she stood about a foot shorter and her arms and hands were large. If he didn't know better, he'd think he walked into some movie, if the place didn't give him the idea already. "Man, you really did transform into a dwarf."

"It's the bauble Moradin gave me!" Marcie said tapping at the pendant. "It be easier tae go about doin' investigatin' business if ye use a disguise. And when runnin' about lookin' intae something that smacked of D&D, why not join in on th' fun." She smiled. "Besides, it ain't every day ye can know what it's like ta be one o' the characters, and ye can with that Rod."

"I can't say that I never thought about it." Daniel looked Marcie up and down. "I take it that's only temporary."

Marcie sighed. "Aye that it is. They tell me I'd be more than welcome under th' Mountain, but..." She looked up to the starry sky. "Did Matthew tell you that he intended to stay, that he found his place here."

"Yeah, he did. As much as I wanted to get him back into reality...If I did, I doubt he'd be happy." Daniel responded, giving a light sigh. "Even if I found a great foster home for him to be a part of, I doubt he'd enjoy it nearly as much as being the son of the Morninglord."

"Aye. He said that he envies me, 'cause I have something to go back to."

"Matthew might have something to go back to, finally. Penumaria."

"That the name of that campaign he's been workin' on?"

"Yes, he showed me some of the things he worked on. If there is one thing keeping him on Earth, the campaign setting would be it."

Chapter 20

Twilight Forest

1:00 PM; 20 Hours before the Eclipse.

Raimi Gilderhaven still wore that aproned blue dress with the ankle-length boots as she greeted the group in the garden. On top of this pretty dress she twirled around in was a belt with an assortment of tools. There were more tools on wristbands that covered her forearms, and a pair of goggles with a headlamp strapped in front of the hairband.

And then there are the rings. Ten of them, one on each finger, each of them controlling a single doll replica of Raimi floating around her, each of them in an identical dress, albeit in a different color. They could form a rainbow if lined up right. One was tending to her hair, three held spears, marching in a circle around her, four were helping Tanya with her tea set and two were sitting on her lap. Each of them had a dress with a different color and a number on their backs.

“When I found out how to make these little constructs, I just couldn’t stop,” she said. “I couldn’t imagine how much they can do in their little forms.” She let out a giggle as one of her dolls got into a ticklish spot behind her right ear. “If I knew how much fun I’d have making them, I’d wouldn’t be so skeptical working for Mr. Gond.”

Moradin chuckled. “Do them little ladies got Earth Tech in ‘im?”

“Yeah, each of them has an Arduino and it’s controlled by a Raspberry Pi,” Gond said, as Raimi illustrated by flicking a wrist and showing the microcomputer under her armlet. “I might not be bullish on social media, but I’m very giddy on this Internet of Things. It’s more up my alley. This is the kind of wonder I’d like to emulate on Toril.”

Moradin nodded. “Aye, I shant blame ye, even though Toril has yet to discover electricity.”

“Yeah. Every now and then I still wonder if I should bring some of these earth inventions to Toril, just to give the tech there a good boost.”

“That be a double-edged sword if there ever be, pal.”

“True, interjecting alien tech in a world that’s not ready, it could do more harm than good.” Gond sighed. “But I doubt that, if it does happen, we’d have a choice in the matter.”

“When it does happen, Gond,” Matthew said. “It’ll come when the time is right and when the people need it.”

“That sounded like something Angel You would say, Matt,” Gond replied.

“True, but you know this as much as I: Necessity is the mother of Invention. And it’s only a matter of time when something becomes necessary.”

And with that, Matthew knelt on a straw mat, opened his book and began the ritual on the page. *Find Familiar* on the heading.

“And I fear that Matthew himself would run into this necessity sooner rather than later,” Lathander said as he sat in the back watching all this. “I just ran into the biggest downpoint to having a warlock.”

“And that is?” Moradin replied.

“Warlocks can’t swap spells easily,” Corellon answered. “A Cleric and Paladin can swap spells each day with their devotionals. A Wizard keeps a spell book with their library of spells, and they can decide which spells they want to memories every day. But a Warlock’s just like a bard, ranger, or Sorcerer. Once we put in a spell,” Corellon tapped his head to illustrate. “It’s stuck in there. It’s not easily replaced. Granted,

with a Book of Shadows it is possible to do rituals, and like Matthew here, they can pick up rituals everywhere. But the spells we teach them, they're the spells they're stuck with."

"Keep focused, Matthew," Lathander told Matthew. "You'll break concentration on your ritual."

Matthew nodded.

"He was about to say that Ritual Casting is quite versatile, and he's right. There's a lot more ritual spells out there than is listed in the *Player's Handbook*."

"Tell me any instance whar a *Player's Handbook I* in any RPG system dat had everyth'in right." Marcie quipped. "Even Fifth Edition Dungeons & Dragons."

"My son has picked up a lot already: Detecting magic and traps, getting a feel of a certain item, ensuring that food and water were all right to eat, and all the other needs that don't go into actual combat. But I fear that won't be enough."

"That's why we have spell wands and spell scrolls, Lathander," Gond spoke up. "You can always provide him with an assortment of those. I know that Denir's made up a whole system of spells on cards. I think I have a good assortment of them for all of you to pick around."

"I'd hate to see Matthew need to multiclass, but I fear he might do that." Lathander leaned back as a stream of star stuff spiraled down from the heavens. "There's some parts of the plan that are still up in the air."

The star stuff coalesced into a raven that formed in front of Matthew as he finished the summoning. It Matthew would've done it sometime earlier, Lathander would've questioned his warlock's choice in familiars in relation to who he has a pact with. He could've gotten a cat, or a dog which was more the speed of someone of his statue.

However, given that he is now known as the Angel of Shadows with wings like a raven, it be only natural that one flew into the garden from the darkness of the woods. It settled upon Matthew's arm as if it had known him well.

"He called himself Slypheed," Matthew said, giving a chuckle. "That's what I'll call him."

"The bird told you that?" Lathander asked.

"Yeah. Not only can I have him do the recon, He can do this mimicry trick that's very useful. But it's the added eyes and ears that I'll need to sneak around undetected. I'll be with Delshabra to investigate the location Gond sniffed out."

Matthew nodded. "Nevertheless, she's a wood elf now. She can just slip around the forest, or rather just about everywhere, and not even be seen or heard. It'll be hard for me to keep up."

"I believe now that you are partially angelic," Lathander corrected. "You have the ability to walk among humans undetected. At least, Amaunator does."

"Provided they don't use magical means of detection," Matthew replied.

"That's where teamwork comes in."

Corner of 217th Avenue S and 83rd Street S, Renton, WA
1:15 PM; 19:45 before the Eclipse.

Toward the outskirts of the city stood a decaying industrial complex. With fewer businesses working inside the city limits, the various office buildings and warehouses fell into neglect: Broken windows were not replaced, siding remained unwashed and a blanket of rust permeated the entire zone. Along the borders, the tell-tale sign of overgrowth and plant life had encroached.

“You’d think that someone would’ve set up a tent here,” Daniel said as he looked around. “But this place is even deserted by the skid row types. Something’s up.”

“Something’s really up, people,” Matthew replied after tapping on his cell phone. “We have no bars.”

Marcie and Delshabra went for their own phones. And they found that they couldn’t connect to anything as well.

“No cellular and no wireless,” Delshabra commented. “If I were still human, I’d be feeling like I’ve just gone blind.”

“No way this should happ’n,” Marcie replied. “We’ve got an cell tower behind ev’ry billboard in this town.” She looked up. “S’mbody’s jamming us!”

“Not necessarily us,” Matthew added. “But someone does have a jammer.” He turned to Gond. “You said you had a hunch?”

“Aye. I somehow expected this to happen,” Gond said as he turned the horses to go around the block.

“That’s why we dropped Raimi off over at Wizards to control the Speaking Stone network device. Now’s a good time to try it out. Does everyone have a Speaking Stone?”

The group reached into pockets and bags, displaying them to the Wondermaker.

He brought his own up to his face. “Hello, Raimi, are you there. Please respond in a party line.”

A second later, every other stone carried Raimi’s voice. “Loud and clear. Let me guess, someone’s blocking phone signals?”

“Aye that it is, however, whoever’s doing this didn’t count on the Weave. Keep us connected, girl.”

“Yes sir.”

While Gond stroked his beard in approval of this workaround, there was a knock on the carriage door. Daniel, being the closest to it, leaned forward to push it open.

“Corellon?” he asked the elf, who looked like he had news to say.

“Lathander was summoned to Yeshu to tell him of new developments. He asked me to stand in for him until he returns.”

“Bad timing but can’t be helped.” Matthew shrugged somewhat, looking around. “In the meantime, I’ll have a look around.”

He whistled using two fingers in his mouth, and after a couple moments, the raven landed on top of the wagon. “I doubt the Drow will bat an eye at a bird flying through the sky.”

With a gesture, he instructed Slypheed to take flight. Using his new skill, Matthew was able to see a place where the players would gather and prepare for the game. From there, a moment of travel allowed him to see the layout of the warehouses, though he was not able to see what lay within.

He waited for the bird to return to the wagon before he opened his eyes again.

The Presence of God

“How’s Matthew doing?” Yeshu asked “I heard that the transplant split his mind a bit.”

Lathander knew that Yeshu had the answer to that already, but there are times when he asked these kinds of questions because he wanted the conversation.

“Well, his mind has indeed twinned, if that’s what you’re asking. He’s taking it quite well. I was afraid that Matthew would lose himself into his angel persona completely, but the two somehow found a way to get along.”

“Good.” Yeshu nodded. “I’m still going to be needing Human Matthew, even after this event. I also want him to have a good life after all this is done, before his mortal life passes on and he becomes Amaunator permanently.”

“That’s what I wish as well, Sir.”

Yeshu looked out to the distance and seeing the pocket dimension before Him. “He talked to me about his campaign world earlier. He told me that he wanted to make Penumaria a real world. Not only as an experiment where I can play D&D deity, but also as a halfway point for those caught betwixt and between the two binary options for their afterlife.” He shrugs. “I have to admit that it happens more often than I’d expect.”

“I don’t think you’d be able to have a world in the Relams, sir.”

“It doesn’t have to be in the Realms. Your pocket dimension is set in an interdimensional corridor, a wormhole some call it, between my universe and a place just shy of the Far Realm over at your multiverse. It’s a neutral zone, perfect to set up a pocket universe halfway between My worlds and yours. If Matthew sets up his campaign setting there, I’d be able to exert some influence. I’ll be able to set someone to monitor the multiverse for me. Matthew...or rather, Amaunator, would be perfect for that job.”

“That would be a good idea,” Lathander said as he reached for the folder Yeshu brought with Him. “But how are you going to build a world there? Even when you did created Earth, you had to have the raw material to build it, even if you *do* have to make it yourself.”

Yeshu pondered it for a while. “I don’t know why, but I have a sinking feeling that I might not be the one to do the building, but I digress. You might not like what you’re about to see.”

Lathander wondered why Yeshu would say that as he opened the folder.

It didn’t take him long to find out.

“My Lord...this can’t be right...he should be above fifty!”

Corner of 217th Avenue S and 83rd Street S, Renton, WA
1:20 PM; 19:40 before the Eclipse.

“I have a general idea of what the area looks like. Debbie and I will go on ahead and have a look around.”

Naturally, the main gate was locked. The whole maze was corralled by the pre-existing chain link fence, allowing this one gate to be a single entry and exit point. The gate itself was held together by a length of rugged chain and a shiny lock; proof that this particular entry was newer than its surroundings.

“May I?” Delshabra smirked as she held the lock in one hand, pulling a hair pin from behind one of those long elven ears. It was barely a moment of clicking and twisting before the lock popped open, allowing the gates to push open easily. “Nothing a little dexterity can’t handle.”

The interior was littered with crates and boxes, with some painted rather crudely to resemble bushes and trees. Certainly not the most high-quality production, but it was enough for role-playing purposes.

“Something I don’t get, Debbie,” Matthew said. “How long have they been planning all this, and how were they able to keep people from finding out? With this scope you’d at least have a news crew noticing...”

She was on top of that shipping crate before Matthew even knew it, holding up a hand to ask for silence. Matthew took this moment to peek over the

It was one of those drow he met yesterday, still bruised and limping a bit from the last encounter with him. He was working on moving some of the painted boxes and crates into position, stopping and looking around. He shook his head with a shrug and resumed pushing.

“I’m going to tag in Amaunator.” Matthew whispered, looking around. “He’ll move toward the center warehouse. We’ll report back in twenty minutes. Is that enough time?”

“Depends on what they do.” Delshabra smirked. “If they’re standing around picking their noses for that time, I may not have any good news to report.”

“Got it.” Matthew said as he closed his eyes and reached inwardly to start the transformation. The shadows of the hedges, buildings, fences, and rocks broke away from their hiding places, moving on their own, they gathered all over the small frame of Matthew Christopher. As soon as the darkness enveloped the child like a cocoon, it broke away as a pair of black wings flew out. A five-foot teenager turned into a six-foot adult, white with gold into black with silver, brown hair to gray, and a tense and concerned expression became focused and resolute.

“Let’s see what you got in here, Blackleaf,” Amaunator said. He waved his hand in front of him, and his physical form vanished.

While Delshabra observed the drow assembling a cave-like dungeon by the warehouse, Amaunator approached the central one. Inside, it resembled a Mayan temple, complete with a raised dais in the center, with the roof removed to show the sky above. The dais leveled up to a plateau with a clay circle set with a set of nine square blank stones.

Due to his angel nature, Amaunator was capable of approaching the circle uncontested, and while still invisible unseen, moving his hand toward one of the stones. When he touched it, he could sense the magical energy rest inside it. He even saw it glow as it showed a pattern of deep purple spirals and other fractals.

“Summoning Magic,” Amaunator mused. “With nine of them, they could summon something tremendous.”

As he was looking at the other eight, he was also keeping his head on a swivel looking for anyone following him. Upon returning his focus to the circle, he spotted a square groove in the center of the dais, a trap door.

“What is this?” he pondered as he moved to the otherwise just carefully enough panel. He found a latch and...paused. “Don’t want to trigger a trap.”

He backed away and used his *mage hand* to pull on the latch. Once tripped, a chest rose from the opening, rising up on a pedestal to around chest high.

“There’s real gold in there.” came a voice from behind him.

Turning on his heel, Amaunator discovered it was the ebony-skinned elf, Mistress Blackleaf. Wearing a form-fitting white dress, she brandished a whip and quite the annoyed expression.

“Sure, your boss knows what we’re planning by now, but that doesn’t mean that we would gyp anyone who actually wins.” She chuckled. “Who does Yahweh think we drow *are*? Philistines? Put that box back.”

Amaunator had the *mage hand* do so.

Blackleaf chuckled as she saw the chest recede. “That’s a good trespassing Angel sent from God, and can I assume that’s what you are?” She looked around again, her tone fiendishly antagonistic. “I can sense you flitting about. I can smell your scent of jasmine and pretensions, feel your warmth and self-importance. I don’t suppose you can bring it upon yourself to state your business with something as lowly and wretched as myself.”

Amaunator kept invisible, knowing not to blow his cover. Clearly, she wasn’t alone with all the other drow milling about beneath them. “We’re not that elitist, Blackleaf. By now you know how skittish these humans can get. Imagine the world-wide shock and horror that would befall this world if they get visited by as little as a single alien. Have you heard what happened when that UFO crash-landed just north of Las Vegas?”

“Alas for the gullibility of humans,” Blackleaf mused. “Especially the ones known as Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve.”

“Imagine the freak-out we would have on our hands when humans found out how many of us are flitting about among them. People would think that the world’s going to end.”

“You might not have to worry about whatever form of eschatology this world would get by tomorrow afternoon, provided that this ball of shit and earth ever makes it there.” she replied, folding her arms together.

“You have me at a disadvantage, Blackleaf. You know the world ‘eschatology’.”

“And you have me at a disadvantage, my angelic friend. You know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

“A discrepancy that I’ll gladly rectify. You can call me Amaunator.”

Mistress Blackleaf raised an eyebrow. “Amaunator? The dead Forgotten Realms deity?”

“Different being, similar abilities, same name. That’s all you need to know.”

Chapter 21

A history of escape rooms and puzzle solving games gave Marcie a little edge when it came to searching and exploration. When she found a door to one of the smaller warehouses that was unlocked, (“Sloppy,” she said,) she opened it to reveal something familiar.

“Let’s see if ye saw anythin’ similar, elf,” Marcie said into her speaking stone. “I spy, with me little eye, a scene that could be suitable fer a haunted house, with a dungeon motif that seems amateuristic enough, wi’ enough items here to give th’ impression of some sorta puzzle to solve. What do ye elven eyes see?”

“Cute. I got inside one of them myself,” Dalshabra voice said, coming out of that stone. “But what I got into looks like a Wizard’s tower. Right now I’m looking at a puzzle where you balance vials of liquid to create a third color. But I had to bypass some patrolling dark elf, I hope you can remain unseen...well...being who *you* are.”

“I’d love ta see the kind of Dark Elf that would get th’ better o’ me, Debs. I got the eyes of a hawk and the ears of a fox.”

“Marcie, please. when you’re in Dwarf mode, you breathe so loud you break my reverie.”

“Heyo, found sum’tin’. Sort of box with a keypad. There’s a sign. ‘Enter code to receive Badge, please take a Maximum of three.’ And there’s a bucketful o’ them.”

“I saw one here as well. From what I guess, each of the four smaller dungeons will have a badge to give to those who complete the challenges. You’ll find that code at the end.”

“And you need ta get all four o’ these little baubles to...”

Marcie heard someone enter form the other side of the warehouse.

“...someone’s coming. Gotta bail.”

“Don’t run, Marcie. Your footsteps are like an elephant when you’re a dwarf. They’re never known for being elegant.”

“Elegant, Delshabra, or prancing?”

“Marcie, knock it off!”

Marcie had to let out a chuckle as she ducked around a prop shrubbery. The surprisingly loud approach of what normally consist of stealthy dark elves gave her pause. The drow was indeed injured. Battered and bruised from who-knows-what, he still was looking around, despite a bandaged eye. Seeming sure that he saw something, Marcie could guess it would be a matter of time before he noticed her.

The mace she held in her had was not made to fend off dark elves made of sterner stuff.

But fortunately, she had an option: Gond really did make good with his supply of spell scrolls set on cards. They were about a size of a standard Tarot card. This particular one was of *Hold Person*. Marcie threw straight at the drow. He caught it without a second thought, and as a result, was indeed a held person.

With her only opposition frozen in place, it was easy for her to get back out of the maze and back to Daniel. She knew that the pastor would scold her for being this risky, but she just had to know.

The presence of God

“But now you know who you’re up against, Lathander. I’m sorry for putting you up to this part in all this.”

“It threw us all for a loop, sir,” Lathander replied, slipping the folder into his jacket. “From the look on your face, you doubt that any of us could save her.”

Yeshu looked down and sighed for a while. He looked back up, and the sad look in His eyes told Lathander everything. “I think she’s the kind of people you just need to stop.”

Lathander nodded and patted Yeshu on the shoulder. “So that’s what we’ll do, in the meantime, I need to get to the team with this. They’ll need to see it.”

“Go with grace, my son.”

Lathander dropped to Earth gracefully, touching down outside the industrial complex his compatriots were in the process of investigating. Lathander floated down to the broken pavement among the left behind buildings and half-reclaimed parking lots. He looked back and forth across the empty space. He couldn’t hear another car or pedestrian or any animal other than a stray dog or bird for about a half-mile.

It didn’t take him long to figure out why things were just a wee bit too quiet. He could sense him. A malevolent presence he hoped that he would never run across while he’s here.

A presence that was all too familiar.

“Lucifer.” Lathander spoke up, his tone stern and serious. “I know you’re here. Show yourself. You do not want me to come find you and start Round Two.”

The figure that faded into existence wasn’t anything you’d expect. Most people would’ve expected a red-skinned man in horns, a goatee, a sarcastic smile, and quite a dresser. But those who have studied what makes Lucifer tick knows that the most successful trick he has ever pulled on humanity is that he looked like a tiefling. He never assumed that form.

But he did have the sharp three-piece of black, the goatee, and the sarcastic smile. He also had his remaining one wing. “And here you are, hoping that we’d never run across each other while you’re here. Come to see the pre-game show, *your Majesty?*”

“What is it you have in store for these humans?” Lathander asked directly. “Have you any idea the damage that would be caused by...”

“Oh, where is your sense of *fun*, Morninglord?” Lucifer laughed, putting his hands in his pockets. “What, can’t I cause a little Earthly mayhem every century or so? C’mon, you angel types are such squares.” He raised an eyebrow. “Am I hearing this right, Lathander? You have a *warlock* now? Tsk Tsk Tsk.

“Playing with God’s creation for your own amusement.” Lathander spat. “Tsk indeed!”

“Do you even listen to yourself?” Lucifer scoffed, dismissing him with a hand. “No wonder people don’t go to Church anymore.”

“Maybe not on *this* world.” Lathander shot back, his gaze drifting to the warehouse behind the Dark One.

“Oh, *that?*” Lucifer caught the drifting look. “You think I had a hand in that eldritch horror ritual?”

“Well, now that you mentioned it, *Yes!!*” Lathander raised his voice.

“Hah, you’d think that.” Lucifer brought his own opinion. “But no, this is entirely the work of humans. Humans who have rejected the Lord, his son, and all the empty prom...”

The devil’s next conscious moment was of him pulling himself off the ground and putting his jaw back in place.

“That’s quite a right cross you got there. I’m surprised Chris Perkins lived to tell the tale.” He looked up to find Lathander floating above him with a vicious expression. “Look, I know you’d think that I’d like to have at least some credit for this, But I can’t. Like I said, this is all the work of humans.”

“Tell me what you know about this creature.” Lathander didn’t have to hint at what he’d do if Lucifer didn’t

“Guess I can’t keep it from you, right?” Lucifer snorted. “Get it through your sun-baked skull.” He said the next part in the slow and louder pace one make trying to get a message across to someone who doesn’t speak the same language. “I didn’t...have a...thing to *do with it*.”

Lathander did his best poker face, but inside, he was surprised.

“All I wanted was to get Yahweh to admit I was right about humans. *That they are monsters!* With that glorious free will and their dual natures and their choices in life.”

“You have no idea who would be causing this?”

“Of course, I don’t! I think that warlock of yours is getting close, though. I’d ask him.”

Lathander put his hand on his hips, but then he heard Lucifer starting to chuckle. However, he was more focused on what was behind him: A door to some abandoned shack with a keypad lock.

“Why are you laughing?”

A lock that was being pressed with an unseen hand.

“You know, to see your world so controlled like so many puppets by these humans playing some ridiculous game. It’s a plan worthy of my own machinations.” he stopped to see Lathander begin to smile, unaware of the glowing door that popped open. “All right, now what’s with that look?”

“You’ve probably heard of the Planescape setting, Lucifer,”

“Why of course I have. D&D’s one of my favorite games.”

“You probably heard of Sigil, right? The city of Doors?” The door crept open, but not to the inside of that shack.

“Yes, that city. A city that can be reached by every possible world in your multiverse.” He rolled his eyes. “Unless you’re a deity of course, and if you’re here.”

By now Lathander’s smile was like that of a cat playing with a mouse. “Are you sure about that?”

He then made a slight movement with his head, as if he was seeing something behind Lucifer.

“Oh, come on, Sunshine,” the Devil sneered as he walked backwards. “You actually think you’re going to trick *me* that that ‘there’s something terrible behind you’ trick? What kind of idiot do you take m...”

He nearly tripped backwards through that door...and his head ducked into another neighborhood. It wasn’t the steel and concrete of the abandoned warehouse in outer Renton. It was a series of brick, wood, cinder, and pollution. The sky was gray, bleak, and smog.

Or rather it would be the sky. The sight the doorway gave was of a back-alley way that stretched out toward the horizon.

A horizon that went *up*, not down.

“Well what do you know, Slewfoot!” Lathander proclaimed. “You really *can* get into Sigil from here.”

Lucifer’s eyes held sheer terror as he scrambled to pull himself out of that portal.

And right into Lathander’s face.

“What the Hell?!” Lucifer said as he tried to keep most of him at Earth’s side of the portal. “You shouldn’t be able to do this, Morninglord! No deity can enter this place.”

Lathander had the kind of smile the cat would have with a mouse in his mouth. “For once you are right, but you forgot one thing.”

Lucifer realized it before he said it, and the expression on his face was the face he’d find all too familiar. It was the face many a people made when they realized that they made some very bad spiritual life decisions and the only question they have about their afterlife is what layer of Hell they’re going to end up in.

“In this world, I am no god!”

In a repeat of the kick that shoved Lucifer off Heaven, Lathander kicked Lucifer through the portal, sending him toppling backward into the alley.

“Send my regards to the Lady of Pain,” Lathander said, and closed the door.

He made sure that the door is locked and back to normal before he walked away. It’s been a long time since he had such a smug smirk on his face. Sure, the Father would be angry at him for what he’s done, but he didn’t care.

“Now I know where Matthew got it from,” he mused.

“Are you sure you’re an angel?” Blackleaf asked to the air around her. “I expected you to go off telling me about the goodness of your deity by now.”

“If you actually wanted to be saved I would’ve at least mention that part.” Amaunator folded his arms. “But even the deaf can tell that you won’t hear of it. I could sense a deep resentment in you, Blackleaf. Your soul is just screaming for violence. Vengeance. Destruction. I just don’t know yet why, though. Not even Lolth would bring her own drow to this nihilistic mindset and she’s Chaotic Evil.”

His so-called revelations made Blackleaf laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Amaunator asked.

“You thought I was a Drow from the Realms?” She pretended to notice the raised eyebrow. “Far from it. I’m here to show God the hypocrisy of His faith. To show him what happens when he allows monsters to act in His name.”

Amaunator raised an eyebrow, wondering what she’s talking about, but inside his psyche, he heard his other self connect the dots: *Not only did she know a word no drow would think of, she’s talking about Yeshu as if He owes her money.*

The angel’s eyes went wide open. *That means?*

“That’s right, Angel Boy, I’m from Earth!” Blackleaf said.

“If that’s the case,” Amaunator replied, “you weren’t born a dark elf. Dark skinned, maybe, but not an Elf. Not here.”

“You got it right there, I wasn’t born one, I had to become one. I couldn’t stand to be something God calls his creation. Not after what they’ve done to me. Has He even told you?”

“He didn’t,” Amaunator said. “I doubt that God in any form has even looked at you unkindly.”

“You expect me to believe *that bullshit*? Right after what his followers have done to me!?! Do you want me to tell you what your God is really like, with the way he tells Christians what they really are?!” She snarled. “The lives they wrecked! The fortunes they stole! The way they twist an arm to get a confession out of you and they kept twisting *until it’s confessed right?! I’m glad that religion is getting into the ash heap where it belongs.*”

Internally, Matthew pondered that outburst. *Two minutes ago, I would’ve wondered why in blazes would a dark elf say something like that, but now I think I’m getting a clue.*

“All I wanted was to live in peace and do things my own way. You know, live and let live?” she continued. “But no, you nosy, boorish bible-thumpers have to butt into everything and force people to live the way you want them to.”

She got rubbed the wrong way by some religious nut earlier in her life, partner. Could be anything, bilked by a televangelist, sent to an exorcist for something a shrink would be better suited for, assaulted by a priest who wanted to molest little girls for a change? Take your pick, you might be right.

“As I suspected,” Amaunator said. “You have grievances with those who claim to be His followers, not with the Lord Himself.” The sigh was almost audible. “Some of the most disgusting and abhorrent acts were committed in the name of God, when He Himself would disapprove.”

“All you need to know is that when I bring Miska to this world, he’ll put this whole stinking world into a nice little ball of webbing and consume it all. The countries, the cultures, the people, all that history, every shred of this stinking humanity, this mistake that *your God* has made. It’s all going to burn to ashes. And I’ll be standing on the smoldering ashes, knowing that I’ve been avenged.”

“Again, I ask—”

She flicked a ball of pink light toward in an instant.

“—Are you really an angel?!”

It coated him with something that seemed to stick to him like spiderwebs, even spreading all over his body, within seconds his still-invisible form had an outline glow.

Crap! Faerie Fire! You’ve just got...

Something wrapped around his ankles, causing him to teeter over. If he didn’t have his wings out to keep himself from falling to the ground...

“Knew I’d find out where you were flitting about if I just kept you talking,” Blackleaf said with a smug smile. “Anyone can only bounce around their voice for so long before you get figured out.”

“What can I say,” Amaunator said as he flapped to the air, seeing that his legs were wrapped by a whip that produced spider webbing the bound his legs together. He saw that the whip came from one of Blackleaf’s servantboy lackies. He managed to count five of them. “I’m a sucker for conversations like this. Besides, how else was I going to learn what’s really goi...”

A second such whip found its way around his left arm, coating it in webbing.

Blackleaf walked toward the outlined figure and tilted her head. “You look, and sound, kinda familiar. Have I threatened you earlier?”

Might as well show yourself, Big Bro, you’ve been made.

He made himself appear out of thin air, still caught in the outline glow. If the resemblance of Matthew Christopher didn’t make Blackleaf realize who he was, the revolver he pulled out of inside his suit blazer did.

“You’re Matthew Christopher, aren’t you?” Blackleaf said with a bemused smile. “That *boy?!?*”

It was Amaunator’s voice, but Matthew’s words. “Just to you’ll know, I’ll turn fifteen this November.”

“Like I said,” she said as she produced a whip of her own. “A mere *boy!*”

She started her attack.

Amaunator concentrated on his hold of time, gabbing it with his mental hand and squeezing it tight, slowing it to a.

Blackleaf’s whip approached him unimpeded. It didn’t touch him directly, but the webbing it produced made a direct hit on his chest.

“You’re not the only one who can do magic here, Mister Wings!” Blackleaf gave a pull and drive the angel to the ground.

“He’s the one!” Another one of the drow said as he walked up. “He’s the one who shot me. That Warlock of that Angel!”

“I knew he looked familiar. It’s hard to forget the look on the face of someone when you stab them, after all.” Blackleaf switched to a mocking tone that Matthew knew all too well. “Isn’t this city a gun free zone, little boy?”

Amaunator considered this a good moment to call up the flames of the celestial rebuke. However, he covered himself with the star fire instead of his attackers. He knew that it would not harm him, being an angel and all, but it would burn the webbing off him.

“Where he’s going, he won’t be needing th—”

His voice was cut short, as was his life, with the *thunk* of an metal arrow to his back.

“It *is* a gun free zone, Blackleaf...but nobody said anything about *hand crossbows!*” came from Delshabra, who was on that roof with a handheld crossbow.

Blackleaf looked at the Wild Elf with a look of disdain.

Amaunator still had his wits and saw an opening. This time he slowed time enough for him to pull away the rest of the webbing once he got his arms free.

From his vantage point, Blackleaf was in slow motion as she reached back and summoned the weave, causing a purple glowing ball to appear in her fist.

Judging by the way those stones around the dais starting to glow, Amaunator knew it was best that he’s be elsewhere. But he took too much time, even with his stranglehold on the flow of time, to pull himself free.

He drew his gun fast.

But Mistress Blackleaf started her downward throw of her fist into the dais faster.

However, Delshabra was even faster than her. A spell card was spinning into the air toward the drow priestess even as she was about to cast her spell, the card connected with her head and fixed on her face like a Shinto charm scroll on a dead body. The card activated, enveloping her in a green flame that dissipated the arcane energy she produced.

And stunned her for enough time for Amaunator to knock her off the dais with an *Eldritch Bullet* to the head. He knew it wouldn’t hurt her as much as the fall would, but it gave him enough time to take to the sky.

“{Clutch Nat Twenty on the Initiative, my elven friend,}” Amaunator told Delshabra, in Elvish no less, as he swooped her under an arm as he bolted out of the roof.

“{Was there any doubt, Midnight Angel?}” Delshabra proved more graceful and less prone to airsickness than her former human self. “{Let’s get outta—Heads up!}”

A crossbow bolt nearly grazed a wing.

Amaunator had to swoop down and streaked through the storage crates at breakneck speed until he barrel rolled over the gate Delshabra picked earlier, Marcie caught up with Benjamin and were on their way to the wagon, and when they landed on top of that vehicle themselves, Delshabra and the just-reverted Matthew found by a familiar face.

“Welcome back, Papa,” Matthew replied. “You won’t believe what happened while you’re away.”

“I could imagine,” Lathander replied. “Wait until you see what Yeshe told me. Let’s get back to the mansion so that we can swap notes.”

Matthew knew the pensive expression on his patron’s face by now. “Something tells me that we both should be sitting down on this.”

“You cannot be any more wrong, my son.”

Lucifer found himself crashing through a pile of garbage, the contents of which he could pretty much do without knowing. The heat, humidity, and smog accompanying the scene did not help the smell any. He got up all but coated in liquid muck, and tried to force his remaining eye open to see where he was thrown in.

Lucifer grumbled incoherently as he surveyed his surroundings. It seemed he was just in another city at first, but then he saw the horizon, or what horizon he could see. He could see the city just move on and on in the distance, where it only curves up in the distance instead of fading down.

He looked up to see a series of what looked like sun-like orbs of light just floating in the sky. As he kept looking up, he could see what looked like a circular rocky mass where this entire city is just wrapping around, and these stars are orbiting.

Lucifer was so enthralled by what he saw that he almost didn't see the shadow rising behind him. He slowly turned around to see a woman figure in a black robe floating in the air. She looked down on the invader in a face framed by a multitude of blades with even more blades forming her entire head.

At first, she just floated there, not aware of anything, but then she opened her eyes and looked down to her latest visitor.

“Shit.” Lucifer nervously smiled, eyes looking at all those blades. “You don't suppose you want to talk this out...”

Her eyes flashed red and her lips lowered into a snarl.

Then everything in Lucifer's eyes faded to red.

Chapter 22

The Mansion in the Twilight Forest

2:34 PM 18:36 before the Eclipse

“Looks like Amaunator still has his old habits.” Lathander approached Matthew with an amused tone to his voice. “He rearranged all the books in the shelves.”

Matthew just made an exasperated sigh as he showed the USB Card Catalog. “Are you aware how disorganized that library was, Papa? At least now we got a digital database of all the books.”

“Why do I get the feeling that I’m going to appreciate that computer of yours,” Lathander deadpanned.

“If we didn’t have to deal with Miska tomorrow, I would’ve provided one of those wooden Card Catalog cabinets and all the cards printed and all.” He turned on the computer, plugged the USB drive in place, and opened the Access database. “But then again I do like the way a computer can search records.” He turned to the bookshelves. “I organized the books by Author then Title. First, the instant access section,” he pointed toward the almost bare shelves set aside under a complete set of two encyclopedias. One is the last printed Encyclopedia Britannica, the other being a printed Encyclopedia focusing on the Realms. “The Library proper starts on the next bookshelf and wraps around to the other side, and then around the wall. And then there’s the section of the books we don’t want out in the open. Basically grimoires, books on earth, various dangerous rituals, and whatnot. They go in that secret chamber behind that hidden door.”

The smile Matthew gave Lathander made the Morninglord smile. Amaunator had a penchant for keeping things in order; at times to an absurd degree. Earth Humans would call such a tendency Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and Lathander would agree with that assessment. On all three words. He had to deal with this very quirk when *he* was Amaunator and still had to deal with it in a lessened effect even after reinventing himself as Lathander.

It appears that *this* Amaunator still had that quirk.

But the smile his son gave when he says, “The things I do when I’m bored,” was clearly Matthew Christopher. The Matthew Christopher whom he took under his wing, peeled away the toxicity and stuttering of his environment, and brought to the fore the good-natured and optimistic young man with a glint in his silver eyes that one has with a soul that’s larger than life.

“Shelf C, Row 2,” Matthew said as he pinned a blue clip to the card before sliding the shelf back in place. “*Hordes of the Abyss* would have something on this ‘Miska, the Wolf Spider’.” He ducked around the bookshelves and in three seconds reappeared with a book in his hands. “No index, but everything’s in alphabetical order. Better than nothing, I guess. Here it is.”

He walked over to the desk to place the book on the desk, opened up to show an illustration of what would happen if a wolf got raped with a spider and decided to bring the abyssal spawn to term.

“I didn’t know Lolth made driders out of animals,” was all Lathander could say about the illustration.

“The records didn’t say where this beastie came from, though the Demonweb is a good guess,” Matthew began. “It says that it happened when the Realms was just forming, when Order and Chaos were still primal forces. Miska was created to spread chaos for chaos sake, twisting and bending everything it touches and leaving destruction and devastation in its wake. There had to have a battle on Oerth where he showed up that ended up imprisoning Miska in the outer plane of Pandemonium. It’s a high-rank-”

“You were thinking of *devils* when you mentioned rank. *Demons* don’t go that route.”

“Gotcha. Miska’s a demon prince who, as you said, looks like a drider wolf. Some people said that Miska’s came from the Demonweb, before he went to Pandemonium. I can assume that he made his own Demonweb there.”

Lathander mulled it over. “From what I know about Oreth, there was a group called the Wind Dukes that made an artifact to defeat Miska. A staff of pure Law and Order which, when the banishment happened, shattered into seven pieces.”

Matthew looked up. “A Rod of Seven Parts? That sounds familiar.”

“The staff Daniel has is this world’s version of that.”

“Do you think he’s the one who would be destined to do the actual banishment? The pastor’s attuned to that staff.”

“I aim to stop the ritual before its completion.”

“We should prepare for the worst though,” Matthew said. “A contingency for when it all hits the fan.”

“We’ll both head back over to Heaven to discuss that with the Almighty himself.”

“You got it, Papa.”

Lathander rubbed Matt’s head, creating a giggle. Definitely not what the Amaunator of old would do, and that pleased the Morninglord.

“So what’s in that manila folder?”

Lathander sighed. “You better be sitting down on this one, Matt. They found the identity of Mistress Blackleaf in the Bloodlife Registry.”

“I knew that was a codename,” Matthew said as he slipped onto the chair.

“I forgive you in advance for the next cuss word you’re going to say,” Lathander said.

“What do you mean by that?” Matthew said as he opened the folder. “She said that she came from this world, which means that must’ve been some plastic surgery to turn from an African Ameri...Holy Shit.”

“That’s exactly what *I* said, son.” Lathander shrugged. “Although I never said it *that* way. I did thought it though.”

Matthew switched between Lathander and the picture of the folder, perplexed enough to leave his jaw hanging.

“Blackleaf was born a...Papa, this happened during the...this has been going on for decades.”

Lathander nodded. “Yeah, and of all the things Sons of Adam are known as, holding a grudge is near the top of that list.”

“But how?” He had to just shake that folder, still not believing just what he saw.

“What I think would be helpful beforehand is a map. Can you provide a map at the meeting?”

“With a little help from Sylpheed, I believe I can.”

5:12 PM, 15:48 before the eclipse

“The LARP area takes over five different stations,” Matthew said over a benchmark map of the play area. “There are four smaller quests in the surrounding small warehouses. These four awards a badge when you complete the challenge. A team would have to visit all four stations to get a badge, and then go to the main larger warehouses. The badges would unlock the final challenge, and once they best that, the badges would unlock the award. Or at least that’s what the main idea is behind this LARP.”

“The stations are surrounded by mazes created by shipping crates,” Gond replied. “Expertly decorated to resemble a forest may I add. And dungeon motifs in all five stations, including the one with the big dais in the middle. However, most of areas have gates and doors that are locked tight, not even to be unlocked for emergencies.”

“I’m no magistrate,” Chauntea chimed in. “but that doesn’t sound legal, or safe.”

“Of course, it isn’t,” Matthew replied. If something goes down and the killing starts, and it would, they’ll be panic. Thanks to some creative engineering, they have made sure cell phones won’t work. People would be rushing to find exits that aren’t there, and when they find the ones that are there and that they’re locked...”

“Making sure that the doors and gates can be opened should be our first priority,” Gond said as he placed a couple tin boxes on the table. One side had a magnet, another side had an adhesive, and the rest of the sides consisted of flashing electronics. “I created up these devices to attach to any door lock. They work like a *knock* spell with an electronic trigger. Thanks to the dead-zone, these must be activated by some sort of short-range signal.”

“We’ll pair up going in,” Moradin said. “I’m with Marcie, Delshabra’s with Corellon.”

“Daniel’s with me,” Gond says. “We’ll go around patrolling the outside. Yeshu’s Rod of Seven Parts has a very long range, so Daniel can toss a much needed heal once it’s...”

“People, we’ve got trouble.” Lathander announced, pushing through the door. “There’s a small mob being formed, and they’re getting too close to Wizards of the Coast.”

“What do you mean?” Daniel asked in concern. “Even Antifa has some sort of logic. Why would there be a protest tonight, and that close to Wizards?”

“Well, we might as well check to find out more about it.” Matthew called up a web browser on his computer. “Fortunately, the news helicopters are as vigilant as the cops should be.”

It didn’t take long for the screen to show an aerial view of the mob. Dressed in all black, as the sun was about to set, it looked less like a gathering of people and more like a misshapened mass creeping along the street. A misshapened mass with torches, and behind them a truck loaded with books. Fifth Edition books.

“A book burning?!” Matthew was aghast. “I thought these went away with the last century!”

“I can zoom down to see what they’re going to...Someone’s up front running this...” Matthew said. “I think I see someone who has her...”

Matthew froze. His face was a mix of shock, frustration, and anger.

Daniel was the first to see the person Matthew zoomed into and favored his forehead as if he had a migraine. “It’s her.”

Matthew slowly stood up his eyes closed tight. “I was hoping it wasn’t her, but I can’t imagine what else it would be.”

The shadows of the room started to move, creep out from where they were bound to, and coalesced over Matthew’s body from the legs up.

“Better get down there an’ see if you can do somethin’ about it.” Moradin spoke up. “And I say we all join in.”

The shadows crept up and covered Matthew into a shroud.

“If you don’t mind...” That was Matthew’s voice, but as the darkness cloaked him, he tagged in his other self, letting both his body and his mind switch.

“I’d like to take the lead.”

That was Amaunator’s voice that matched the being that Matthew was when the shadow gave way.

“If there’s anyone who’s going to be the Guardian Angel to Wizards of the Coast, it’s going to be me.”

“You better not pop those wings until you get outside, mister,” Chauntea said.

“Which is exactly where I’m headed, Mama...” Amaunator started for the door when Lathander placed a hand on his shoulder.

The smile the father shown softened the very incensed expression on his son’s face.

“We do this together,” Lathander said as he followed Amaunator. And if you don’t mind, I’ll talk to your mother. She might listen to someone who doesn’t at least look like ‘her boy’.”

It took Amaunator’s neck a while to allow him to nod. “Come on, everyone. We have a Satanic Panic to suppress.” Amaunator wasted no movement heading out and taking to the air, with Lathander behind him.

“Well, judgin’ by how our Morninglord and his shadow just took off,” Moradin replied as the Angel of Light took off in the air after his son, “I think we’d better get goin’ too.”

“We better join in,” Corellon said as he followed the previous two out the mansion. “If they as much as put one match to one page they’ll answer to me.”

Chapter 23

Wizards of the Coast headquarters

5:39 PM, 15:21 Hours before the Eclipse

“This game ends this night!” She bellowed out of her megaphone toward the crowd, who shouted back in unison. A stack of books laid on a pile. It wasn’t just D&D books, DM screens, various modules, and so on, but other games as well: *Pathfinder*, *Vampire: the Masquerade*, *Warhammer*, *Dread*...there was even a Jenga tower in this tower.

“And the game will end with us!” She continued and they parroted. It was pretty much what anyone who was hearing them could make out. “We will stop the violence!” “The Hatred and Toxicity!” “The Racism and Misogyny!” ...and so on and so on as she grabs a torch from one of the thugs. She glared up at the sky, as if looking for someone. She paid good money to have someone follow that Pastor over to this spot, until he vanished in some cloud. That bastard stole *her boy* from her! No, not the pastor. *Those Bastards at Wizards of the Coast* stole *her boy* from her! “Those old and stupid televangelists were right all along.” “D&D cannot leave it’s dark past.” “We will not allow families to be separated!” “Homes to be burnt!” “Lives to be taken!” “Souls to burn!”

“How many more children have they taken away?” She bellowed as she walked up to the books. “How many more families have they torn apart?” “We will draw these demons out to us, and We Will Demand! We! Will! Demand!”

The crowd chanted those three words “We! Will! Demand!”

“We will demand they return My Boy!”

“We! Will! Demand!”

“We will demand that they take their evil back with them!”

“We! Will! Demand!”

“We will drive them out of our world!”

“We! Will! Demand!”

“And then we’ll get back to those Bastard, those Satanists, those fucking fascists...who make this Vileness...We will drive *them* out! We will burn them to the ground!”

“Just like this pile of trash!” She reached back to throw.

The torch flew end over end toward the books, the flames all but chomping at the bit to consume.

Until the flames went out a second before it landed on the pile with an audible *fwoosh* of a strong wind.

It just laid there, producing only soot that fell on the books, for all to see.

She walked up to pick it up, only to find it ice cold. Almost bitterly cold.

“Another torch!” she bellowed.

She grabbed that torch the instant his follower set it on fire. She walked up to the pile and thrust it into the books.

The instant before the flames could touch paper—*fwoosh*—the flames went out, and the torch grew cold. So cold that it went up into her hand.

She pulled back with a cry of pain, her arm near frostbitten. She spun around almost like a rabid beast...

Right into the golden eyes of someone who could only be described by anyone in this mob as a bona fide angel, outstretched wings and all.

“For the record, Samatha Farlight, I am no devil.” The voice was slow and steady, but even the deaf could hear the anger just under the surface. “And neither is the child who’s supposed to be your son.” He turned to one side, gesturing to the black winged, black clad angel standing on the Wizards of the Coast logo. “On my signal, son, unleash the Light.”

Everyone behind Samatha just stood there totally awestruck. There were plenty of gasps, and murmurs. Wizards of the Coast has a guardian angel! A real angel. A real...*really pissed off* angel! And some of them wondered if they really did make the mistake of...

Samantha’s voice hissed like a snake. “I, Samantha Farlight, the true mother of Matthew Christopher, rebuke you in the name of...”

“Stop it!”

Samantha’s voice went quiet in an instant. She felt all of her bravado just stopped in her own mind. She blinked there for a couple seconds, wondering why what she wanted to do to him just rebounded on her.

“That never works, not even by people who are *really* religious.”

She shook her senses back to herself and resparked her anger.

“You...you’re the one who drove my boy from me!”

“I did no such thing, Samatha.” Lathander crossed his arms. “You drove him away yourself. Multiple times, may I add. You demanded him to be for you what he should be doing after he finds his place in the world, finds a home for himself, discovers his true mate, and creates a family of his own. Matthew Christopher is your *Son*, he can’t be your hus...”

“Yes! He *is* my Boy! I gave birth to that little Ingrate!” Samantha steamed, stomping her foot.

“He’s your *son*, you...”

Samatha arm swung to smack Latahnder across the face. “I want that boy to come home!!”

Or would have if Lathander didn’t counter it.

“His name is Matthew Christopher, woman.”

She half screamed, half growled, almost like an animal.

Lathander just sighed. “This is getting nowhere.” He then raised a finger. “Fastball.”

The black winged angel stood up from his perch, producing holding a ball of light in his hand. Raising it upward, it grew brighter as it drew in the light from the setting sun, the streetlamps, the light from the rooms through the windows, headlamps, everything. The ball expanded to a beachball of blinding light.

His eyes looked down toward his white-clad superior but then caught the eye of someone in the crowd looking back up to him, with a middle finger. It was the only thing visible on this otherwise all-black figure save for those eyes of rage, fury, and bloodlust.

“I see your bird,” Amaunator replied, “and raise you mine.” He tapped into his human self’s affinity with throwing baseballs and, still holding the core of the ball of light, he moved his fingers into a textbook four seam fastball.

It flew straight down to the crowd like a laser and connected with the gesturing protester right between the eyes.

On impact, the ball expanded into a pillar of light that expanded outward to envelop the entire parking lot in a soundless, colorless flash.

The smart people turned and ran at full speed to get as far away as they can from the blast. A third of them managed to get clear before the light enveloped the rest.

Lathander remained non-plussed in the presence of The Light. He knows fully well who he is, the path he took, his actions and choices, and he has no regrets in doing so.

Amaunator did have some regrets. Seeing who he was before Lathander found him will always pain him. To think that he was just a hair's thickness from...he didn't want to think about it. Instead of shame and guilt over who he is, however, he had nothing but gratitude over what he has become.

But there was this nagging question: What caused his mother to be this way? What turned her from a loving and caring mother into this curvature of a Wicked Stepmother villainess from a Disney Movie? What in the collective names of all that was holy and righteous that brought her to that point? It wasn't like she didn't had a list:

Did his husband really did smack her around while his back was turned? Was she date raped when she was a teenager? What she picked on and torn down for being...different in one way or another...from the cool kids? Was she spanked too...enthusiastically...by a teacher? Was she...

What he saw in the Light when he turned to where he thought his biological mother was shocked and horrified her to the core.

"Oh, Gods, No," he said as he swooped down to the figure the Light revealed.

As the light faded and the surroundings returned to normal, Lathander found himself face to face with his shadow. Amaunator stood with a little girl in his arms. She was dressed as his mother was before, though her clothes were bloodstained and she shivered in fear.

Lathander didn't have to think much over what the light revealed. He's seen it too many times, even in Toril. "Who did it?"

"Her uncle by her father's side," Amaunator said, his voice trembling. "Once removed."

Lathander shook her head in disgust. "Humans can be so cruel to their own kin. It sickens me."

"Gond told me about what he did to Raimi," Amaunator said. "Sure, it was morally iffy and he'd be the first to admit it, but I keep thinking about his reason why, about doing the right thing." Lathander gestured to the girl. "Giving her a second chance?"

Lathander nodded. "I only wished there was a better option than having to rebuild people from scratch."

"Misguided as that was, I can't let her stay like this." He pulled what became of his mother tighter into his arms. "I have to honor my mother. If there's anyone that I'd like to give a second chance to, it's her."

"And of the others?" Lathander said as he looked behind his son. "What of...them?"

"What of who?" Amaunator wondered what caused that shocked expression in his father's face.

But then he turned around and saw it for himself. "Pardon my French, Papa, but you have got to be shitting me."

"In that sentiment, my son, I will *join* you. How can people live more than fifteen, even twenty years and still be...empty?"

A handful of the angry mob was still present, however they merely stood there, blank faced, empty eyes, arms limp. Without a word on their lips, without a thought in their head, without even a tear in their eyes. They were just...hollow.

Even the other angels who arrived while the light show was going on, couldn't imagine what they saw.

“This is impossible,” Corellon said. “Lathander, your Light usually reveals what these people are truly are, not erase it.”

“No way should ‘ey be reduced t’ mere dolls,” Moradin muttered.

It was Gond that was shocked the most. “Oh sweet Lord, I was afraid about this. I was hoping against hope that what was once Raimi was an isolated thing. That people here are not so focused on their outer identities that they didn’t focus on any inner qualities, their strength of heart, a unique personality, any kind of individuality, what is deep within their souls.”

The six just walked around to see that all of them were the same way, just standing there, staring straight ahead with dead eyes.

“All these youths had to their selves were their labels and identifiers. They were hollow inside. They weren’t even squeezed empty or filled with anything. They were just not filled in the first place.”

Amaunator even had one of them hold the child that his mother became into one of these living statues arms. “Here, hold her, hold her head like that, okay...” He shuddered a bit to see the person just remain where he’s posed. “...okay then.”

“They couldn’t feel like human beings. They didn’t even know how to be human. They were just...dead inside. They were incapable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity.” Gond suppressed a sob. “They were just...hollow.”

“No wonder they consider words as violence,” Amaunator said. “To someone with a soul that small, it’s all that’s needed.” He turned to Corellon. “Compare that with you, who doesn’t give a rusty possum’s fart what pronoun they use.”

“The moment I consider a word of three letters of less a microaggression, young man, is the time I give up my mantle as patron deity to the Elves.”

“What are we going do with them?” Chauntea spoke up. “We can’t just leave them this way.”

“I wonder...” Amaunator mused, as he closed his eyes. “I can’t help but think of that scene from Ezekiel,” Amaunator said, “where he’s standing in front of a valley full of dried over and sun-bleached bones.”

He noted that Matthew would’ve balked if Yeshu would’ve asked him if these dry bones can live again. “Don’t bother me right now, Lord,” he could hear the lad say, “I’m looking for survivors to rebuild your nation with. Let the dead and dry bones lie, I say.”

But then something sparked inside the half-angel. All the memories of what his father had when he created Toril. All the creative spark from Matthew Christopher. All the cosmic knowledge of how to turn elements into matter, to turn energy into force, to turn dust into planets...to create a heaven and a earth. Yeshu did it. Lathander did it. Maybe he...

He tensed his fist, and all of time froze, save for the other five angel-turned-deities.

“I have an idea.” Amaunator spoke up, gesturing to the others. “I want this to happen, all of this, over the space of one second of Earth Time. Whatever I do to these people, I want to put them back where I found them, at this exact place and time. The reasons that will be obvious.”

“And that is?” Lathander asked.

“God and I talked once about creating Penumaria for real. As a buffer between this world and the Realms. Looking at these living dolls here gave me an opportunity to do just that. What I want to do is to create a living, vibrant, and sane world for them,” he pointed at the empty shells, “to live in. They’ll be in what I’d call a ‘time helix’ where they live a complete lifetime. As each of them pass on, they return right to their original bodies and they’re back in this very second. We let them go along their way ever since.”

“A time helix?” Moradin asked.

“A loop in time that begins and ends at the same point of time,” Gond replied, “But travels to separate places.”

Moradin scratched his chin. “What Matthew here wants t’ do is to start n’ end it here, but have every’tin’ else go there.” He blinked. “Whatever ‘there’ is, though.”

“The ‘there,’ Moradin, would be the world I create.” Amaunator paused. “Well, it would be the world Matthew Christopher created. These people will become people in Penumaria.”

“I could see where you’re going with this,” Lathander said. “But I wonder where you’re going to start off with. You need the material to create this world. I don’t see a source for everything you need to...”

There is a source.

That came from the firebird that settled on the shoulder. While Penuma isn’t one to utter a sound out of His mouth, he can nevertheless speak to people’s souls. Or for that matter, Angels.

The demiplane.

“The Twilight Forest?” Lathander asked.

Yes. It was created out of a piece of your home plane. Elysium, is it not? You gathered up all the materials you need to create a planet for this little interdimensional pocket place. The raw materials can be reproduced, replicated, multiplied as much as we can, so that we can expand that demiplane into its own planet.

“Penuma, if you crank up my son’s abilities with your power he’ll...”

I told you that the reasons I created humans were multifaceted and complex, too complex to put into words in its entirety. This is one such facet.

Matthew had only seen baptism of the Holy Spirit on rare occasions, and every time he heard someone speak in tongues, he often wondered how it felt. But he never gathered enough courage, or maybe it was just the pressure to perform being too great for him to just let it happen, to have it happen himself; to have this feeling of being this connected, this in sync, so in tune and united with this divinity.

Behold and Attend, Deities of the Forgotten Relams, and see my ultimate act as Yeshu. The Mantle of the Firebird. All of my essence and power focused in one point, be it a pillar of fire, a piece of wood, or even a single person. As you know, this technique has risks. I can sense your apprehension already, Lathander and Chauntea. This technique has indeed killed angels, as it proved too immense for a celestial to hold. But do not lose heart, my friends, for these is one thing you need to know about the Firebird.

Amaunator’s wings grew from the jet black of a raven to that of feathered flame, his body hovered several inches off the ground as he glowed bright as a sun. His eyes shone so bright that nobody could see the irises.

If the second chapter of Acts will show to you, humans can handle the Firebird much better than angels ever can. And Matthew Christopher, Amaunator Reborn? He is still human.

Amaunator’s voice showed a wisdom and authority far beyond what was capable from the other five combined, even as it was mixed with compassion. “I will need everyone’s help in this one. Creating a realm is intensive enough normally, much more so when I have to cut corners.”

“Agreed,” Corellon said. “It’s best we pool our knowledge. This world must be a complete one. And set in a Solar System that won’t interfere with the rest of the realms.”

“Someth’n tells me that we might need ta copy some parts o’ existin’ worlds to plug in there,” Moradin said. “It’ll be a patchwork at first. We have to do it with such short time.”

“The Calculations would have to be precise,” Gond replied. “And I suggest that we make this universe be a buffer, a realm between Yeshu’s world and ours.”

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking,” Amaunator replied.

“We must recreate a working planet, with all the needed biomes,” Chauntea replied. “The changing seasons and life cycles must be remade by the usual standards.”

“Throw in all of the main peoples too,” Lathander said. “Corellon, you got the Elves and Faries. Moradin, you need to make Dwarves. Chauntea’s got Halflings and Gnomes. Gond, I’ll leave Humans for you. I’ll be setting the solar system in perfect calibration.”

“I have some other groups of people, and even replacing some monsters that I’ve taken out of Penumaria. It will be a full and complete world just waiting for its full-fledged campaign.” He then reached out his hands. “I thank you all for helping me.”

As they did, the angels formed a circle, reaching out their hands and their efforts.

“Let us begin,” Amaunator had a firm hold of the Twilight Forest, represented by a small ball of light in his hands. “Now, push back the border, pull the mist back, all the way back, turn the pocket of land into a world!”

The ball of light transformed into a spinning globe, a beautiful marble of green and blue with white on the top and bottom. He felt land mass rise and fall, plant life spring out, life started with mere bacterial and then progressing along the exact order Yeshu designed when he created his world. He saw Moradin prick a finger and create the dwarves, Corellon doing the same and producing the elves. Both the mercurial true fay and, what the hell, the more stable forest elves to protect the nature and its balance. People rose up, the normal, the expected, and the fantastic, as civilization progressed past the age of people in caves to people in homesteads and small villages. The rapid progression sped along until it finally slowed to its desired form, a world of fantasy and adventure, or magic and monsters, where a life of danger and excitement is there for those who are brave, clever, and daring enough. A perfect world for a campaign.

“Okay, everything set up,” Amaunator said. “I’ve set up the helix. These humans enter the loop as well as this world. At the end of their lives, instead of death, they exit the time loop at the other end, go back to their original bodies, and time resumes for them as normal.”

There was a soft sound of something metallic being bent in a strong wind, and a round tube began to wind around the gathered throng, like a clock spring, making sure it connected with every one of the empty shells before it reached the center of the area. When it did, a tube shot up in an arc the dived into the created world, came out of the other side, and then connecting back to the spiral, from the outside end.

“Okay. World’s created. Land made. Flora built. Fauna set up. Starter village made. Time Helix set. Everybody ready...”

The fire dove shot up from behind the angel, raising up above the rooftops and soaring over the wound spring of time.

“Okay, Penuma. Your time to shine. The helix...starts...now!”

Penuma plunged into the spring like a Peregrine Falcon, creating a blinding flash on impact.

One second, the mob was marching to find something to devour, to burn, to raze, to destroy.

The next, they were just standing there, wondering why in blazes are they here.

They looked around, finding each other, shaking their heads.

“What’s going on?” “Does anyone know what happened?” “Why are we here?” “Come on, let’s go home.” “Yeah, nothing’s happening here anyway.” “Gaaaah! Why is my hair this color?!” “What the fuck? I look like a clown!” “I’m not emo enough to be in black head to toe.” “God, I need a shower.”

One by one, they started to disperse.

“You know, I don’t know what I’m doing with that gender studies course. I’m changing my major to cuisine, I can be a great cook.” “I’m just saying fuck it all, I’m getting into STEM.” “The guys over at Baltimore Knife and Swords are paying my college a visit, maybe I’ll ask them how I can get into sword making.” “I want to figure out how we can ensure that we be more considerate with each other and still have a wide enough free speech space for some much-needed discussion on things.” “OMG, a couple guys from the Intellectual Dark Web are having a seminar, I always wanted to find out what they’re really like.” “Have you seen what happened to that screaming woman trying to bang down a door? That meltdown was childish, what has their parents done to her?” “Yeah, yeah, I know I prefer to wear skirts, but do you want to hear this tune I wrote?”

The mob was changed dramatically when they returned to this normal time at the ending point of the time helix. The once furious throng had quelled somewhat, though the chatter among them turned from confusion and self-awareness into a more jovial, upbeat tone. One by one, they started to disperse.

The only question they will have in their head, which will eventually fade by the 2018 electoral season is, “What the hell happened?”

“Yeah,” Samantha Firelight, an 8-year-old girl, said while waking up in an orphanage in Chronica, a large village nestled in the foot of a mountain where a regal, yet solitary castle, set. “What happened? I could vaguely remember...”

When the memories caught up with her, she realized she ended up in this orphanage when a marauding band of orcs killed her parents. They would’ve sought her out as mere conquest if it weren’t for a black-winged angel sweeping her away. He took her here and gave her to this abbey, to raise as one of their own. It wasn’t perfect, but she was treated with love and acceptance.

She was educated here, taught the healing arts, and was accepted into a medical college in the big city just down the river. She wished to go there and learn to be a doctor so she can go back to her adopted village and help the people there, along with her beloved Bastian.

But as she headed off on her grand adventure, she couldn’t help but have this nagging feeling. That there was another world she was in. A world that didn’t quite treat her right. A world that left her with a rage that she could still taste in her mouth, even though she’s convinced that it was just a dream.

Or was it?

She sat on something when she got in that wagon to take her to town. It was an envelope in, surprisingly, her name. She opened it to find a key, and a letter written in a language she shouldn’t understand...and yet...she could:

All the time I knew you, you wanted to have a better life or yourself, a life where everything turned out right. I hope that this world I’ve set up would be such a better life. I only wish that it didn’t take such a drastic action to give this to you.

I only hope that, in the end, you’d forgive me, just as I forgive you for what you did when I knew you.

Maybe we will see each other again, although I doubt that, if that happens, we will know each other. But just know that, even after all what's happened, I still love you.

When you get to town, you will find a safe deposit box at the bank listed in the margins. This key will open that box. They'll be enough coin for your education and whatever living expenses you'll need there. I only hope that it would be enough.

Take Care, Mom.

Matthew Christopher.

She couldn't for the life of her remember who this Matthew Christopher is, or why did this Matthew call her 'Mom,' or why is she crying in utter gratitude of it all.

She would've just bawled out crying if she didn't suddenly hear the flapping of wings that were too big to be from a bird. She rushed over to the window to see a single black feather on the windowsill, and off in the distance, the Guardian of Village Cronoicla flying off to his castle up the plateau to the north.

She didn't know why she said, "Thank you," but she felt that she had to. At the very least, she should be grateful of him. Whoever this Matthew Christopher is, she could at least let him know he's appreciated.

Chapter 24

The Barony of Chroniela in Penumaria

Mansion in the Twilight Forest

10 PM on Earth time, 10 Hours before the Eclipse

The Twilight Forest didn't change that much. Sure, there was the mist wall in the forest surrounding a clearing where the town house mansion and the small homestead stood. But the forest expanded to fill a much larger area.

Due to the time constraints Amaunator had in creating this world, he had to do what Matthew would call 'Springboarding.' That is, taking several existing campaigns and campaign settings and using that as a foundation to build up from. Because of this, the still forming Penumaria was a patchwork of several other campaign settings. Some Forgotten Realms, some Eberron, some Dragonlance, some Greyhawk, there might even be some Dominaria, Ravinca, Kamigawa, and even Tarkir for good measure. It all got blended into an eclectic melting pot.

If someone who is an avid D&D player would step foot in this immediate area, known to the denizens as the Barony of Chroniela, he would be getting some Ravenloft vibes. Granted, the place doesn't give off any 'Domain of Dread' vibes, and the people talk to this barony's Lord as 'our guardian shadow,' but the layout of the Old Barovian Road and River, the Village of Chroniela, and the brighter colored, lived in, and livelier Castle Chroniela on top of the plateau north of the village had the uncanny influence from *Curse of Strahd*, right down to the room layout and street plans. Tracy and Laura Hickman would be flattered at how Ravenloft got remixed into.

Even though the world was rapidly expanding and becoming a place of its own, the familiar Mansion in the Twilight Forest remained as it had always been. Matthew was laying on the canopied bed, in the master bedroom, unable to move and quite upset about it.

"I think...I overdid it," he moaned as he laid on the bed, his limbs limp and inert and feeling like they weight a ton each. He felt sore all over his body. "Everything hurts... Even parts I didn't know could; Like, why does my *hair* hurt?"

"Relax," Lathander patted him on the head. "Creating something like a planet will take a lot out of you."

"Yeah, even when I had to cut corners."

"True, but if you think about it, didn't everyone's campaign setting start off with something that they know? I can't count how many worlds that pop up that is a collage of all the more traditional worlds. Toril, Eberron, Krynn, Oerth, even...I mean, come on, that castle in that plateau near here, the one Amaunator claimed for himself and remodeled? It was a copy of Castle Ravenloft. I hate to be the Devil Strahd when he finds out that his home's gone."

Matthew had to laugh over that idea, wincing when the laugh triggered another wave of the pain that came from overexertion.

"But all things in account, I have to admit, Matthew. Even though it's just started and there will be some changes as it evolved, but it is a fine creation." Lathander patted Matthew on the shoulder. "I'm proud of you, my son."

He was too fatigued and sore to think about the world he created. "Is there any time for me to recover before we go to the LARP? I don't think I can help you save the world when I can't get out of this bed."

Lathander chuckled as he touched Matthew's head. "It's best you get some rest for now, my son. You've got a full day ahead of you."

Matthew found himself growing sleepier and sleepier with each passing heartbeat. "And I know why God restd...on the...seventh...day." Before he knew it, he was deep into a healing sleep.

“And then we’ll get back with the father, to discuss our final plans.” Lathander smiled. “In addition to any potential contingencies.”

He’s right about me needing that rest on the seventh day. I really don’t envy women and their childbirth.

Lathander looked over at the fire-dove.

I won’t need him until early in the morning, Earth Time. I think he wants to address not just me, but the other heavenly hosts.

The Morninglord nodded. “He wants to make sure everyone’s on board. Just give the time when you can make the meeting.”

The presence of God.

Yeshu stood in the dais in which his throne sat, surrounded by every angel in a general audience, including the ones who became Faerunian deities. Including the one who was in his full Angel of Light regalia, complete with sash, with his own underling standing tall beside him like his shadow.

“How are you feeling, Amaunator?” Yeshu asked to the younger angel. “Last I heard, you were pretty much laid out flat.”

“Let’s just say that I do not envy you one bit.” Amaunator sighed lightly, still feeling somewhat lethargic. “I can’t believe that Lucifer wanted *your* responsibilities, Yahweh. I’ve had your job for six hours, and let me tell you, my Lord and my God; you can keep your flipping job.”

That made all the beings in the area; angels, saints, and spirits alike; break out in uproarious laughter.

“And you, Lathander, what became of Lucifer?” the Lord asked, stroking his beard. “I did notice you two exchanging words.”

“Away, milord,” Lathander said. “I sent him *away*.”

“You need not be so tacit, my son. In fact, an hour ago the Lady of Pain arrived personally and deposited...well, let’s just say that I can verify the *presence* of Lucifer, but not his *existence*. Do you know that she managed to call Jesus Christ ‘Lord?’

Everyone in attendance gaped as one.

Amaunator whistled. “Man oh man, Yeshu, that is *not* supposed to happen. What did she do to him? The only thing I could think of that would break Satan like this is in a comic book?”

“The one where the Joker got godlike powers and killed the Batman over and over again?”

“That’s the one.” Amaunator made a face. “I didn’t think you were a comic book reader.”

“I’m not, but several other angels had that idea. Goodness, what a mess she left.” The almighty’s expression he gave Lathander was a combination of disapproval and schadenfreude. “Are you aware that your stunt has rendered the Left Behind scenario impossible?”

“You don’t need Satan for the End Times, my Lord,” Amaunator quipped with a hand wave. “I know enough about humans since I’m one myself. You know by now that our capacity of evil could provide enough of a Great Tribulation for you.”

He didn’t notice the murmurs from the other angels until the one next to him asked. “Amaunator? You’re a *human*?”

“And that brings me back to what I wanted to say,” Yeshu began. “About the big question I’m often asked: ‘Why I created Humans and the world they live in the way I did?’ is a very elaborate and multi-faceted and complex. More so that I can’t supply an easy answer to you, even today. However, before us here stands one of those interesting lots. I provided any human alive with the potential to achieve greatness, whatever it is of some noble invention, or medical breakthrough, or soul-stirring form of artwork...or creating their own fictional world.” He then turned toward Amaunator and held out his hand. “Step forward and be recognized, my young angel friend.”

“I’ve gotta say that I never expected to do this in my life,” Amaunator said as he walked up to the Almighty and kneeled.

Yeshu patted him on the forehead and whispered to him, “I love it when events provide a pleasant surprise for me as well, Matthew. You’ve come a long way, and you’re only just begun.” He then stood up. “I’ve designed humanity with the capacity to ascend from any form of circumstance or where they came from. To improve themselves, and the world around them. To strive to become the pinnacle of what a living being can become, even to the point of transcending humanity.”

God planted a hand on Amaunator's shoulder.

"Like this young man. Matthew Christopher here had, as I'd see it, his very own Passion Play. Out of an act of kindness," He glanced over to Lathander, "he gave up a portion of himself, risking his life and even his soul, to repay a kindness given to him. It is that kind of devotion to one's fellow man, that I must simply commend."

"Here standing before you are one of the reasons why I created humans: To have one of them join us, to become an angel himself." Yesu led him to the dais and placed His hands on his shoulders, just as any proud parent would to their child who made good. "I salute you, Amaunator Reborn, Angel of Shadows."

"No need for that, Yesu," Amaunator said, feeling the urge to kneel before God if He wasn't grabbing hold on him at that moment. "I'm just an working joe with a job to do, and we need to discuss business matters." the angel in black paused. "But I've gotta ask you something, and you don't have to answer. You know who I was before you've seen what I've become. Were you...like me one time?"

There were plenty of nervous murmurs in the crowd. "Yesu in a time before he was God? What kind of question is *that?*"

"Asked like a true mortal," God said with a smile as he patted Amaunator on the shoulder. "Something a child would ask of me, although not a childish question. However, that is a discussion you and I will have another time. For now, let us discuss some contingencies."

Christopher Perkins' Home
11:02 PM, 8:58 before the Eclipse

“Yeah,” Chris muttered as he touched his black eye. “I deserved it.”

Even though he all but recognized the reason behind Lathander just going off and clocked him one, he still can't help but wonder if that was the only reason the Morninglord was here on earth. It would be a bit too petty for a deity of his caliber to just march into Wizards of the Coast headquarters just to haul off at someone over what he did in a Twitch Stream.

Something nagging at the back of his mind told him to take a break. Nothing too long, as there was a show to do on Tuesday, but something about Lathander's visit told him to make himself scarce when it came to work. Not that he minded the days off. In fact, he wanted some time off from *Dice Camera Action* in order to review the end of the Tomb of Annihilation arc and get to the reason why he put Evelyn into that construct body.

He flopped onto his couch, in front of the TV.

“Why do I get the feeling that I'm in this deeper than I want to?” Chris thought out loud.

“You're in it deeper than you think, surface dweller.”

Chris didn't have time to figure out who said that.

By the time his brain told him that his home just got invaded, he had a hood over his head, felt a pinprick on his neck, and then...unconsciousness.

By the time Milo woke up from the aerosol-delivered sleeping poison, the three drow had already carried Chris Perkins away.

At least they had the common decency to fill up the dog bowl and put out fresh water. Untampered.

Just because they are Drow doesn't mean they are barbarians.

Wizards of the Coast Headquarters, Renton WA
August 21, 2017; 6:20 AM
2 Hours and 40 Minutes before the eclipse

A typical Lathanderite ritual involved greeting the sunrise, getting up before the morning, so they can make their daily prayers as the sun breaks the horizon. Usually that involves some rigorous calisthenics, especially with Paladins.

The ritual isn't lost on Matthew Christopher, even if it only involves sharing coffee with the Morninglord, and a little stretching. Wouldn't do to have a stitch in the middle of saving the world.

"Imagine what's it's going to be like, if I were in Faerun," Matthew pondered, looking into his coffee cup. "Everyone going through what counts as The Lord's Prayer to you, doing all these holy and religious chants and stuff, and here I am saluting the Sun with a cup of joe going "Morning Papa, what mayhem shall we wreck today?"

"Now now, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Lathander smiled, looking out to the rising sun. "Today is a big day. Let us make sure the sun continues to rise on this world."

"You guys getting ready for the big LARP?" came from the doorway, as Raimi greeted them with her own cup of coffee. She wore a version of a casual business outskirt that still sported a twirlable skirt. She was, of course, surrounded by her floating dolls. In fact, two of them were pushing a cart with a coffee carafe, a thermos of cream, and a basket of sweeteners. "I brought cup warmers."

"How is Wizards treating you, Raimi?" Lathander said as one of the dolls filled up her cup.

"They're just gaga over my girls," she said. "Anna couldn't get enough of them. Although I still need to find out more about this Touhou thing. People keep reminding me of it."

Lathander only shrugged. "We've gone through all the preparations. We have four teams: One with Moradin, one with Corellon, Matthew here, and one with Daniel. The Dwarf and the Elf teams will sneak in on different directions, running interference, and placing devices that will unlock doors if things take a dire turn. Daniel will be with Gond, making sure that everyone can get out when the big one hits, and supplying heals. Matthew will simply cause as much mayhem and disruption as he can. Since the place dampens modern wonders, we will make use of Sending Stones to communicate with each other."

"Sounds like a plan." Anna said. "Has anyone seen Chris Perkins?"

Matthew and Lathander looked at each other.

"Mike tried to contact him at home, and he hadn't returned his calls. I think he's still smarting from that punch you gave him."

"If Chris is smart, he's staying at home," Matthew said with a humph. "There's no telling whatever or not he'd make a bad situation worse."

"Agreed," Lathander said as he stretched out his wings. "The last thing I need in this particular session is *him* behind the screen."

"It can be safe to assume that whatever's jamming the cell phones would still be running, sir," Raimi said. "If you wish, I'll be on the Speaking Stones Hub."

Lathander nodded with approval. Be sure you're near a phone just in case, you're going to be the only link we have with the outside world, and even though I hope that it'll never come to that."

"Understood."

Chapter 25

Corner of 217th Avenue S and 83rd Street S, Renton, WA
Monday, August 19th, 2017; 8:50 PM
10 Minutes before the Eclipse

“The game starts in ten minutes,” Matthew said to the others as they hopped off the wagon. “The Eclipse’ll start at the same time, and by that time I might be a little...off.” He wore a remix of his traditional Angel of Light uniform. He kept the white with gold overshirt, but he traded the pants with a black version and he added a black vest over the shirt.

“A bit off?” Daniel asked.

“I could feel the other guy getting antsy,” Matthew replied. “Yeshe warned me that the eclipse will intensify my Angelic nature. I’ll probably end up stuck as Amaunator.” He shrugs. “Can’t be helped, he’s going to be needed anyway.”

“That still makes me worried, Matthew.”

Matthew sighed. “Nothing we can do about it now. I go straight for Blackleaf. Marcie and Moradin get into one party, Corellon and Delshabra into another. Those two parties run interference and getting most of the attention off me.” He patted Daniel on the shoulder. “Is the Rod ready?”

Daniel presented the Rod of Seven Parts. “I got it right here. I have been practicing using it all night. I will do my best to help.”

“Great!”

“What about your parents, Matthew? Where are Lathander and Chauntea?”

“Marshaling the troops. I have a hunch we’re going to need all the help. So Lathander’s stepping back up to his Top Angel position and calling all the angels he can to jump in here when, not if, we deal with Miska.”

“Jeez, Matthew,” Marcie replied. “How many angels do ya...”

“One more, Marcie. In scenarios like these, we always need one more.”

“Since they’re jamming cell phones, we’re relying on these speaking stones.” Delshabra said, showing her own device. “Do we have the lock devices?”

“I think I made enough of them,” Gond said as he pulled out several bags and handed one to each group. “I made more than enough just for insurance. There’s a magnetic side and an adhesive one. Stick it in place and pull a tab to connect the battery in there. Once you do both, let me know where you stick them so that I can keep track of which gate needs one. Once I get the word, I can tell all of them to open the doors with a push of a button.”

“Push of a button?” Matthew asked, “But they’re blocking cell signals, I don’t think you...”

“They’re blocking *cell phone* signals, Matt,” Gond said with a wink as he pulled out what he eventually revealed as a Citizen Band radio. “They’re not blocking radio. You’ll be surprised how small you can make one of those police scanners.”

“...In a moment, the gates will open,” the dark-skinned elf proclaimed over a speaker. “We will allow groups of twelve to fifteen people in at regular intervals. Each of this group will need to reach five different stations and face the challenges that lie within. Once they succeed, they must make their way to the center of the maze and face the grand finale. Those who make it to the end get a share of the big prize. You must always remain in character! You must never contact the outside! Break any rules and you will be instantly disqualified!” The Drow pointed to the main gate. “Once you go through that gate, you best remember that!”

“Whatever you say,” Matthew muttered as he proceeded to move up ahead through the crowd of cosplaying people with toy weapons and light-up magical props. “I just hope that nobody tries to call me while I’m here.”

“Matthew, Matthew! It’s Anna! Can you hear me from this thing?”

That came from his Speaking Stone. He brought it up.

“Ms. Prosser? What’s going on.”

“Matthew, listen to me, something’s just made this worse,” Anna Prosser said as he watched over some computer screens with security videos. “We found out that Chris Perkins got kidnapped.”

“Wait, what?” Matthew nearly dropped that stone. “When did that happen?”

“It happened last night. We got word from it form a neighborhood watch and the police are involved. But I’ve got some images from pictures taken...but since Anna told me that cell phone messages are jammed.”

“Waitasec, there’s a window in that room, can you open it?”

“Sure.”

“There will be a raven coming your way.” Matthew pocketed the stone and closed his eyes. “Let it be.”

His mind jumped back into Slypheed as it was pecking at something in the grass in the Wizards of the Coast building’s front yard. He prompted it to take off and head to a window that was just opened.

He got a bird’s eye view of the room Anna and Raimi was in and flew inside.

Raimi flinched in instinct, but she managed to will her dolls not to attack the bird.

Anna just let held out her hand for the raven to land. “Holly Conrad does this all the time in her home. You can see through his eyes, right?”

“You got it,” squawked the raven as it spun its head toward the computer monitor.

What the Slypheed saw made Matthew’s mouth dry: A quartet of what looked like plain-clothes drow carrying a sleeping Chris Perkins, each grabbing an arm, and carrying them to a car, where a fifth figure is waiting in the car.

“Those are the same kind of drow that I had to deal with all weekend. And before you ask, those aren’t cosplay. They’re real drow. Either Mistress Blackleaf *polymorphed* some people, or she summoned them here.”

“Matthew, if I didn’t hear this from you Saturday, I wouldn’t’ve believed you. But even though...we’re dealing with *drow*!?”

“Yes, ma’am. They’re the ones who’s doing this summoning. I wouldn’t be telling you this if it weren’t the truth, you know me by now. And now they’ve dragged Perkins into the mess? Dammit, I thought he didn’t have to catch any more hell after Lathander clocked him.”

“Do you know where they are?”

“If I know Blackleaf enough, he’s probably in this very LARP, as someone needing to be rescued. Even though my team are the only one who doesn’t imagine quote marks on at last part.”

“Matthew, do you want us to call the police on this?”

“No! That’s the last thing we need. They won’t be able to read our positions with the cell phones jammed, number one. They’d do more harm than good.”

Matthew felt a tap on his shoulder that sent shivers through Slypheed.

“So there’s a Search and Rescue mission included in this quest? Fine by me. I got this. All my team has this. We will save Chris Perkins.”

Matthew could feel Anna nod from the phone.

“Good luck, Matthew...and God Speed.”

Slypheed could see Anna’s expression, and through the raven, Matthew. It was the look one makes when they don’t know if they’d ever see the person they’re talking to again. As she let Slypheed fly out, Matthew jumped back into his own body, as a drow behind him told him to ‘Get going,’ with a tone that was a bit too stern.

“And what are you doing with that thing?!”

Matthew flicked the Drow off as he slipped the stone back into his pocket.

The Drow was about to move up to grab him...

“By the way,” the Drow on the mike said, “The eclipse is about to start. Do refrain from looking up at the sun while you’re in there. Getting yourself blind while you’re in a LARP would really suck.”

As the gate opened, Matthew found himself pushed into the maze with the other ten players in his group. A sudden rush overtook him as the first slivers of moon broke the outer barrier of the sun.

As Matthew expected and feared, as Yesu warned about earlier, he felt his other self take over. This time it was more like he was pulled out of whatever back seat he was in and right up front. *It’s the eclipse. The shadow of the sun. The most powerful of shadows.* Although he was surrounded by a small group of players, they remained oblivious to the towering Amaunator that had taken Matthew’s place.

I don’t know if I’m ready for this, but I do know I’m going in.

Chapter 26

9:00.10 AM

10 seconds into the Eclipse

“Eclipse started,” Daniel told Gond as he checked his watch.

“All the more reason to hurry,” Gond said as he walked up to the first gate, located at the Southwest Corner. He and placed the first device on the gate, peeling up the cover to the magnet and placing the cube-shaped thing to the lock. Once it stuck on, a red light on the front face started flashing for a few seconds, but then turned a steady green. They then started moving clockwise around the perimeter, stopping at each gate or door to stick one to.

“Would you look at that?” Gond patted Daniel on the shoulder to get his attention and pointed to the roof.

Daniel saw what he thought was Matthew climb one of the buildings. “Now there’s a guy who likes to get a bird’s eye view.” He glanced over to Gond. “Is he supposed to do that?”

“If he’s doing it right, I doubt anyone would see him.”

And nobody did as he touched down on the roof.

“It’s not as bad as I thought, Penuma,” Amaunator said to the bird on his shoulder. “But I fear that I’m speaking too soon.”

The bird cooed and shook His feathers as if in a sneeze.

“Is someone talking smack about you?” the angel chuckled.

The morning sun was still shining down on the area. He scampered over to a door shed that he hoped had stairs down, only to be greeted by a locked door. A few twists of the handle gave way to a kick worthy of his old man, which nearly tore the door off its hinges.

9:10.00

3% eclipsed

“Och, I saw him climb up that ladder. He hadta take ta the roof,” Marcie said as the next group, with her and Moradin, got in. “Something tells me these drow ain’t going to like it.”

“They need t’ catch ‘im first, and ta do that, they need ta see him. Keep in mind, we angels c’n keep ourselves hidden until we want t’ be seen,” Moradin said before turning to the others in the group. “But we can beat this game legit, won’t we. Stick together, people. We’re going left, I have a friend in the next group, they’re going right.”

“But does a group have to do all of them themselves,” One of the LARPerS asked. As he did so, Marcie placed a device on the front gate.

Moradin placed a hand on that pretend wizard. “This isn’t me first rodeo, kid. It doesn’t matter if there’s one group in here or everybody. In fact, we’re supposed to work together, all of us. You see.”

“Something tells me there’s more in this LARP than we think,” another one said. He only has a wooden sword and plastic armor.

Marcie made a soft light appear in her fingertips. “We got that handled, laddie. When they start playin’ fer keeps, so will I!”

The instant she said that, a pair of dark elves rounded a corner. They spoke in Elvish, pointing among the crowd. The dark throng slowly drew their swords and daggers, eager to spill some human blood.

“Oh, I don’t like the look of this,” the fledgling wizard said nervously. “Those weapons don’t look look safe.”

“Real or Fake,” Moradin said, “It really doesn’t mean a thing t’ me!” He then proceeded to just stomp his way toward the drow. “Come’on, ye fey bastishes!” he bellowed. “Bring yer pretty face to me hammer.”

Marcie raised her hammer and joined him. “Yeah, yer spider worshipin’ buggars! Come an’ git it!”

“Sounds like live steel going on down there,” Gond said as he heard the clash of steel on steel, hurrying toward the next exit.

“I hope not,” Daniel said as he headed for the corner after the Wonderbringer. “It sounds like they’re not playing around, though.”

“Even though you’re not in the game, I hope your weapon’s ready.”

Daniel heard the siren of the cop car before he saw the black and white speed up toward the warehouse. He ducked behind Gond who raised up a hand.

“Looks like the Eclipse is already bringing out the crazy pepole,” Gond said as he watched the cop speed by to the distance. “The cops are going to be well preoccupied.”

One of the doors behind them opened slowly, as a sickly-looking participant nearly collapsed through it. “Please....go away...”

“Whoever you are,” Daniel said, “Let us help you, we can call...”

“I don’t think we can help him,” Gond said. “Look again.”

It happened over an agonizing moment, as the young man’s body jerked and twitched while his expression went to horrified to maleficent. There came the sickening sounds of bones breaking, the body stretched to alien proportions, and the head expanded to the point that the skull broke away, revealing a membrane over an expanding brain that sloughed off all the hair.

“Oh my God,” Daniel said as he felt his stomach retch.

For a moment, neither Gond nor Daniel knew the source of the combination of anguished scream and roarious growl, until a quartet of tentacles erupted from his mouth.

“Gond, that’s a....that’s a...”

“Mind Flayer!” Gond cried out, reaching for something behind his back. “I should’ve *known!*”

A large hand-and-a-half sword swiftly cleaved the monster into two messy, writhing pieces. Gond was a merciful weaponsmith, but a weaponsmith nonetheless. Practiced in a number of weapons, he slowly wiped his blade, sheathing it behind him once more.

Daniel couldn’t acknowledge what Gond did. His mind was remembering how Mind Flayers reproduce. It’s not like what happens when a boy Mind Flayer and a girl Mind Flayer love each other enough: They stick a tadpole in a victim’s ear, usually a human or human-like organism, and let that tadpole eat that victim’s brain, replacing it with itself, all the while with the victim awake, conscious, and possibly aware of what is happening. In time, the brain is completely consumed, and the body undergoes that transformation he just saw with his own eyes! Did that human *die* during this process? As in, does the victim’s soul leave that body to go into what counts as an afterlife in this realm, or is the soul trapped as part of the new Mind Flayer with only Divine Retribution or a working *Wish* to bring that person back? And in the end of that train of thought...*Can you actually wish for real on Earth?!*

“Oh dear God,” Daniel said as the newly transformed Illithid turned into a newly dead Illithid on the ground. “That was...that was a *real* Mind Flayer.” He turned to Gond. “What is happening here?”

“If we have honest-to-God Mind Flayers here,” Gond’s voice was grim. “I knew it! I harasting *knew it!* This is no ordinary LARP! Those drow really are intending to kill people. Wait, I just thought of something worse.”

“And that is?”

“That was a *brand-new* Mind Flayer. He wasn’t the only one. And who knows what else they brought to Earth with them.”

Like Intellect Devourers. Little brains with legs, and a penchant for jumping into people's heads, eating their brains whole, taking the place in said skull, and using the body as its own puppet. As with ceremorphosis, it is not certain if that person's soul has left the body or is still stuck in there.

At least the 'brain dogs,' as some call them, were still in their natural state when Amaunator found them at the other side of that door.

His arm drew that revolver before his brain registered it. And long before he was aware of what he's saying. "Fucking Illithids!!" He sent three of them to their swift end with a blast of searing sunlight each before he realized that Angels actually can swear. Or at least half-angels. "If you know as much as the Far Realm as I do," he muttered to his partner on his shoulder as he shot at the rest, "you won't blame me for cussing."

He stomped the last one flat with his boot while he reached for his Speaking Stone.

"We have a big problem here, everyone." He reached for his Speaking stone. "We've got Illithids here!"

"Illithids?!" Marice said in shock. "Are you sure?"

"I just ran afoul of half a dozen Intellect Devourers."

What Gond added made a bad situation worse. "Daniel and I just saw someone go through Ceremorphosis."

The gasps and expletives came from everywhere.

"That person *just now* became a Mind Flayer." Amaunator muttered. "He's not the only one. *Someone* had to put that tadpole in his ear."

"That's what I'm thinking, lad, and I'm getting an inkling where all of those homeless disappearances are going to," Gond said. "Good coin says that they've become thralls...and we might be ending up *fighting* them."

"Keep your heads on a swivel, people," Amaunator replied, "you need to get to them before they even think of mindscrewing with you."

"We hear ya, Laddie," Moradin said through the link. "We just got in now. We'll keep an eye out for dem squid-faced blighters!"

"We'll jump in in seven minutes," Corellon added. "The instant we see one of those Illithids around, we'll make sure they can't get their hands on anyone else."

"I know drow, it's best ye run as much interference as ye c'n. They've probably got someone lookin' down on us right now."

"Oh by the way," Corellon added. "If you see spider, any spider. Don't hesitate to smash it. I don't know if Lolth's watching all this."

"We'd better make sure she keeps out of this," Amaunator drew his revolver and flipped it over handle first, to smash the spider.

That's when he heard unsheathing of a short sword. "Don't even think about it."

Even Matthew, from where he was in the back seat, didn't have to look at the person who got the drop on him to know he's a drow. Elves have their own distinct accents, and dark elves are not that different.

"You know," the angel said, "that's one fine cosplay you're wearing."

The Elvish Drow that charged Moradin was real enough to give the others in his LARP team pause. One of the other players found himself with an arrow stuck in his chest. The wound was bad enough, but the poison killed him in less than three seconds, too quick for Marcie to reach him to save him.

“Holy Shit,” one of the LARP wizards said, “This shit is real! Shit Shit Shit!!”

“Keep calm, lads. Ye got fine dwarfs lookin’ after ye,” the dwarf said. “We’ll get ye outta here!”

“We’ve gotta call the cops on this...” he said as he reached for his cell phone.

“No, don’t!” Marcie tried to warn him before he tried to call 911.

“What?! There’s no bars here? Of all th” was all the would-be wizard managed before another arrow pierced his throat, causing him to collapse. Marcie quickly pulled the arrow out, though the poison had done its dirty work in seconds flat.

“It came from the warehouse!” A third LARPer, a late teen woman with a crossbow cried out through her tears. “I can’t believe this is happening, and here I am with rubber bolts! If only I had...”

A case of metal bolts found its way to her lap. She turned to see the dwarf giving her a stern look.

“Thanks!” She opened it up, slid one of the diamond-pointed projectiles in place. Wiping her eyes, she took aim at the movement in one of the windows.

“That was my boyfriend, you son of a...” she cursed, letting the arrow fly. It struck true, causing the drow to fall backward and out of their perch, landing out of sight with a crash.

“I’m sorry about y’r man, lassie, but with a proper kit, y’r a mean shot.” Marcie offered her condolences. She reached for her speaking stone. “Gond, how’s your status?”

“We’ve just got past the north wall and going down east. We’ll let you know when we have a place to hunker down.”

9:17.00

5% eclipsed

Corellon's team entered the field, with Delshabra in tow and five other heroes following. Knowing things had taken more lethal a turn, the God of the Elves converted their simple props to true and fine weaponry. Their group was not the biggest, as Corellon allowed the children and parents of those children to leave. He wanted the bravest and the heartiest of souls to join him, those who He deemed ready to face glory and honor. (And a little treasure to boot.)

They broke right into the direction opposite to Moradin and Marcie's group. Heading north at first so that Corellon's newest elf can place a device on the southeastern door, they snaked around the eastern side of the warehouse, toward the outdoor station there. "We'll work with Moardin's team who's on the other side," Corellon said. "Say what you will about Dwarves, they understand the value of teamwork when they need it, regardless of race. He's got the other station, we then work our way inside, take out the other three, and then go after Blackleaf. We find this treasure together and split it evenly. I'm sure there's plenty for everyone to leave home rich."

"Sounds like a plan," one of the fighters said. "And what should we do if we see any dark elves...well, any dark elves we don't know?" He tilted his head toward the ranger on the team who looked the spitting image to Drizzt Do'urdren

Delshabra turned to that fighter. "As you humans would say, friend," she made a throat slash with her finger, "whack 'im."

"Ah yes, it is a good day for some mayhem!" came from a hulking monster of a man in boots and a loincloth, wielding the largest of the weapons Corellon conjured. "They'll sing tales of us tonight!" he boasted aloud.

"I know it's just late summer," Corellon said, giving in to the temptation to deadpan, "but don't you get cold wearing just something to cover your shame?"

"Worry about the drow fated to fall before Tasmodan the Invincible!" the beefcake said as he swung the sword straight down, imbedding it into the gravel and dirt.

Leaping headlong into the group of Drow that greeted them at the warehouse entrance, the rest of the group followed. Doing their best to support their rampaging berserker, the party made short work of that patrol.

"Is that the best you have for Tasmodan the Invincible?" he bellowed. "Tonight, we shall celebrate a fine victory!"

Corellon just looked over to Delshabra and rolled his eyes. "At least he didn't carry a hamster with him."

Squeek squeak squeak

"Oh Bloody Hells!"

Daniel made sure to keep to the shadows as he crept up to behind a fence by the entrance. “I don’t know how much help I’ll be now,” he said to Gond. “With me outside, I can’t target anyone with a heal. Everyone’s out of my line of sight.”

“We’ll going to be needing all the heals it’s got when the gates open, Daniel.” Gond replied as he headed for the wagon. “There’s certainly going to have injuries then. Just hunker down until then, my friend. I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Will do,” Daniel said as he hunkered down.

Gond sat down in the wagon to power up the citizens band radio. He talked into his Speaking Stone “Devices are in place and I am ready with the button,” he said, “Just give the signal.”

9:22.30 AM
20% Eclipsed

The Northwestern warehouse has a locked basket of badges rigged to an intricate puzzle box with multiple places for levers, dials, slides, and other mini puzzles that combine to form a giant puzzle all around all four of its sides. That gave the players something for them to feel accomplished over while Moradin stood watch.

“I loved these puzzle games,” one of them said. “They can get very elaborate.”

“Ye should see some of the dungeons me brethren make back home,” Moradin laughed. “We always tend to gather more gold than we can use so we constantly need a place to stash the lot. So, there be plenty of folk; Dwarves, Humans, Elves, and especially Gnomes; create elaborate puzzles and traps for guard whatever treasure needs to be stored. I once had a hand ‘n making a death trap dungeon worse than the Tomb of Horrors, just ta lure in an’ trap Acererak. Did him right proper, too”

“Isn’t he the one who did that Death Curse,” someone else, a rogue, asked.

“Ye dinnae havta *remind* me, laddie.” Moradin shrugged.

That rogue continued, “I bet this place is pretty much...excuse my term here...”

“Piss poor?” Moradin said raising an eyebrow. “Well, considerin’ we’re supposed ta be in some game, I’d excuse th’ Varsity effort. Compare this place with what we mountain folk c’n really do, such as this pretty little thing I have here,” He showed him his hammer. “A fine piece’a Dwarven and Gnomish craftsmanship, right down ta th’ label.”

Another one raised an eyebrow, “Label? Like a brand?”

“Aye, y’wanna know who makes a good hammer, take a gander.” He showed her a part of his Warhammer just under the head, where the long handle meets it, and sure enough there were some stamp marks on it. “Bronzebottom clan. Ye keep an eye out for these and others; they’re a true sign of quality. Ye c’n never go wrong with dwarven craftsmanship.”

He was having such a good time, that he hadn’t realized the others had solved the puzzle. Inside was a basket with about three dozen identical badges with a glyph of a broken S on it.

“Like they suggested. Just take three of them,” Marcie said, grabbing one to place on the panel.

When she closed the door with the badges after taking her shape, a mass of whirls and slides reassembled the puzzle box to its original configuration, ready for the next group to step up and solve. The door across the room slid open as well, once the puzzle had returned to its original layout.

“I might need to stay here, sir” one of the warriors said, his hand on Moradin’s shoulder. “If something bad happens, you might need someone to help people escape.”

Moradin nodded and smiled. “Aye, there’s a good lad. Besides, I only fear it gets worse form here. Take this.” He handed him a short sword with a mystic glow to it. He then pointed toward the fence. “Ye see that gate there, just barely hidden by shrubbery?”

The warrior had to squint to see it, but he nodded.

“A friend of me just rigged that gate to open when it’s time fer everyone t’ bail. Once that happens, help as many as ye can outta here.”

“Got it,” the warrior replied. “What about anyone else who comes here to deal with that puzzle box?”

“Give ‘im some clues if they get stuck,” Moradin said with a wink. “But let them solve it themselves. It’s fun that way.”

And with that Moradin led the others in, allowing the door to close by itself behind him.

Chapter 27

9:40:42 AM

Eclipse at 30%

Amaunator found himself at that familiar central warehouse, peering in through some of the dingy windows. His quiet approach was undone as two of Blackleaf's guards spotted him, quickly climbing to the rooftop to engage him. A few searing blasts of sunlight were enough to ensure they wouldn't go reporting him to their master.

Blackleaf was waiting for the prize for her ritual to begin. However, that sudden shot from above her and her elite guard gave away the angel's position; her purple ears flared with arcane might.

Her long-pointed ears twitched as one of the servantboys offended her hearing with his screech. "That was a gunshot, Mistress! Soemone is breaking the rules. It should be no problem for us to-

She only raised a finger and the servantboy fell silent. He even lowered his head, not daring to raise her wrath.

"Gun, yes, but *that* was no bullet," Blackleaf smirked. "Angel boy is back. How fitting he should join us from the rooftop."

She pointed toward the second boy. "Fetch our sacrifice. I might need a human shield. It is time for that Dungeon Master to learn the consequences of his actions."

"As you wish, Mistress," the drow male said, and two others joined in the bow before heading off for a holding cell.

Blackleaf had already captured several others who have either be caught in a trap or breaking the rules. Most of them were rendered inert by sleeping poison or have already been taken to be enthralled by one of her associates, but it was the bald one with the Wizards of the Coast name tag—who just woke up—that they grabbed and dragged out.

“Aye,” Moradin said as he saw the remains of an Intellect Devourer, tossed down from the floors above. “Amaunator has been here all right!”

“I only hope he took out all the archers,” Marcie said as she followed behind the dwarf. “This place is too dangerous already. I just saw a muscle-head in purple body paint get ran through.”

“Did ye get a look at his eyes, tho?” One of the other team members said as he headed down a staircase. “He didn’t look like he be all there. Like something brainwashed him or somethin.”

Marcie looked back. “He definitely had that doll-like stare. At first I thought he was just playing a mindless rage.”

“When ye get as old as me, lassie, ye figure out the difference between berserker’s rage, a touch of madness, and someone who had his head scrubbed clean.”

How perceptive of you, Lightbearer.

They both turned right to peer into the darkness of a side hallway, where some slurping and crunching sound can be heard, accompanied by a gurgling sound.

“Git behind me, Marcie,” Moradin said as he stepped in front, battleaxe in hand. “We’ve found that stinking mind flayer!” He then shouted, using Thaumaturgy to amplify his voice. “I know ye there, squid-face. Come up here before I start yanking her tentacles off!”

Let me save your bacon first. This one was about to cast Power Word Kill.

From around the corner came a purple skinned humanoid—if Marcie would call it that—in a dark purple and red robe, with a head that resembled an octopus, with four tentacles wrapping around the head of a drow in a red robe. The slurping sound was coming from inside that drow’s head as the eyeballs, initially wide open and lifeless, get pulled back from their sockets and up an unseen proboscis.

Everyone in the group was speechless. Save for, of course, Moradin.

“Don’t you even think of...”

“If I wanted to do something to you, it would’ve happened by now.” the mind flayer said as he dropped the drow’s body, hollowed out head and all, onto the ground. *‘I’m just looking for a way out of this crazy planet, before this world’s god knows I’m here.’*

“Yer a wee late ta worry ‘bout that.”

“Mistress Blackleaf gave what I thought as a great deal. She let me arrive to this world where there’s plenty of people I could snatch away without anyone getting wise. People who could disappear and not even be thought over, it’ll be a perfect endless supply for...”

“That may be all th’ homeless Portland has.”

“Yeah, I was practicing here with the roving monsters you were fighting.”

Everyone started to snarl and growl their displeasure.

“You think I’m scared of the lot of you? Why didn’t she tell me about this Yeshu! That deity scares me to death! Did you know that he can enter Sigil!? Do you think I want to cross into a power who could just thumb His nose at the Lady of Pain?! I ask you, good sir, grant me passage off this world, and we shall forget this unpleasantness.”

Moradin thought about it for about five seconds.

“We could jus’ end him fer what he’s done ta the homeless,” Marcie did.

“Aye, but I c’n deal wi’ ‘im later. I just want him out of th’ game.”

He presented the monster a card. “This card’ll cast Planar Portal. It’ll send ye straight t’ the Underdark in Faerun. I’ll give it to ye on one condition.”

“One condition? Speak it.”

“Do ye know of any other of yer tadpoles?”

“Of course.” the mind Flayer presented a clear orb, containing the ‘tadpoles’ of which Moradin spoke. *“These are all the Drow and her minions have.”*

Moradin breathed a sigh of relief. “Kill ‘im all. We dinnae want any Neothlids!”

“As you wish.” The mind flayer summoned a ball of lighting in the hand with that sphere, collapsing it and reducing its contents to foul smelling ash.

Moradin held out the card. “There ye go. Git outta here before I change me mind and remove yers.”

He placed the card against a wall which expanded to form a purple, door-shaped portal. *‘I don’t think I did you any favors. You have my thanks,’* he spoke once more, before passing through the portal.

The portal vanished once the Mind Flayer passed through, leaving no trace of the otherworldly fiend behind.

“I think I’m going to be sick.” one in the group asked, shivering with fright. “Can we go home now?”

“Not yet, lad,” Moradin replied as he spoke into his Speaking Stone. “Ye won th’ bet, Gond. It was a Mind Flayer turnin’ homeless bums inta th’ monsters here. I sent ‘im off.”

Gond’s voice on the other hand was grave. “The damage has already been done. Something tells me that Amaunator’s going to get more monsters in his Penumaria.”

“Well, that drow Squid-Face ate before he left isn’t gonna be one o’ ‘im.”

Corellon couldn't contain the mixture of shock and sorrow over what he saw. He just found out that the six goblins that his team took out—he had the forethought of calling for non-lethal damage—was really six youths just in their teens. Their makeup and costume looked professionally made. They looked almost like they walked out of the Realms. However, it wasn't the makeup or the costume that concerned Corellon.

“You poor things,” the elf said. “Someone just erased every scrap of their minds and replaced in a goblin personality.” His face fell near distraught. “I could sense nothing of who these poor children were!”

Delshabra placed her hand on his side. “At least the Mind Flayer who did it to them is gone now. If I find him, I will slay them.”

“Of that, child, I'll have no doubt.”

“But is there anything you can do for them.” Delshabra dug into the memories of Debbie she still had. There is a trio of spells you can cast to restore their original person...”

One of the goblin stirred awake.

“Are you all right?” Delshabra said. “Do you know who...”

The child just gnashed at her with a growl.

Delshabra gasped. “My god.”

Corellon sent him back to unconsciousness with a *sleep* spell.

“There's nothing we can do with these poor things now. I gotta get them out of the way somehow. I'm sorry, Yeshu.”

Corellon waved a hand over the six prone bodies, and a purple-blue mist that smelled of lavender began to cover them.

“Where're you talking them,” Delshabra asked.

“I'm tossing them back to Penumaria,” Corellon said as the children vanished along with the mist. “Either we can find a way to restore them and bring them back to their homes...”

“Or if you can't?”

Corellon had to pause. And then sigh. “Penumaria needs Goblins I guess.”

Chapter 28

10:04.21 AM

Eclipse at 59%

Mistress Blackleaf looked pretty much what Chris Perkins suspected she'd look like. Gone was the dark elf chic from the tavern; she was in an all-black robe worthy of a Matron Mother. Complete with a whip, which she cracked nearly an inch in front of the bound and gagged bald man. Her eyes nearly glowed with hatred, and her voice dripped menace.

"Looks like every deity of the Forgotten Realms pantheon is here," she said moving her hand among all the pillars surrounding the circle she's in, "along with all of those foolish humans who allied with them. No matter. My servants have already shed enough blood to light up half of these posts." She looked around to see half of these posts glowing with a crimson fire. "Once I they all are lit, A simple sacrifice will summon my creature. She then looked toward the dungeon master being dragged into place. "And since I have a flair for karma, I couldn't think of a better sacrifice for this ritual. Wouldn't you agree, Christopher Perkins?"

She walked up to the still-bound Chris. "You claim innocence, do you? Allow me to bring you up to speed on what two events wrought to this world, one for which you are responsible. The other one I made when I contacted with my friend, Miska. He got this idea to take an opportunity presented by him by the Blood War being thrown into utter chaos. The Blood War is in chaos because of a little thing called the Ashton Chronicles being broken."

Amaunator kept watch from his vantage point, listening intently for any scrap of information.

"You would know all about the Ashton Chronicles, do you? It's an agreement that dictates that the Skizziks and Lorcatha, two families in Sigil, shall never form an alliance of any kind, lest the combined grief shreds the multiverse." She then looked right into Chris's eyes. "You can probably guess where this is going, baldie."

She grabbed Chris Perkins by the collar and, with a strength Matthew knew she didn't have on her own, lifted him off the ground.

"Were you aware that Strix was a Skizzik and Diath a Lorcatha when you did that ritual?"

Chris was still gagged, so he couldn't answer even if he wanted to, but still it didn't help his neck from getting throttled.

"Well?! Did you!!"

That was when they heard a voice from above. "Don't answer that, Christopher Perkins."

Everyone looked up to see who said that, including Chris.

"You don't need to dig yourself a deeper hole than the one you're already in."

And there stood an angel that looked to Chris Perkins like a Goth Lathander. Black outfit, black wings, and silver accents. Oh, this bad day's just getting better and better.

"Amaunator, you naughty angel boy." Blackleaf scolded, waving a finger. "You getting on the roof of the buildings and climbing down from the service doors. I hate to see the clipping shenanigans you do while speedrunning."

"Next time, tell everyone that the roofs were out of bounds?" Amaunator protested, "You might've also considered covering up the ladders to boot. I happened to find one that just screamed out 'Short Cut.' So I went and took it."

While the angel hopped off his perch, floating to the dais on his wings, Chris had to mumble out something through his gag, giving her a shrug.

“Who asked you?” Blackleaf muttered and then turned over to the just landed angel. “I think it’s a little bit late for me to appeal to my humanity, Amaunator.”

Chris’s mind went wide when he heard that name.

“Actually, ma’am, God just wants to apologize to you.”

That made Blackleaf raise an eyebrow.

“Let’s take the wayback machine to the early Ninteen Eighties,” Amaunator said as he walked around Blackleaf. “Gary Gyra was still around, D&D was run by TSR, and the whole Satanic Panic is up in everyone’s business. Parents were driven into an uproar, books were burned, store owners were driven out of town, and many a nerd were dragged away to be ‘saved from the Devil.’ One such group end up into the so-called-care of a well-known televangelist who was well known to exorcise the devil from people and converting them to Christ. There were made to confess their ‘sins,’ burn their books, renounce the very thing, the only thing that got them any amount of happiness, and was forced to do it over and over again until they *say it like they mean it...*” He used a mocking tone for that part. “...and in general beaten into what the exorcists sees as some resemblance of salvation.” He looked over at Blackleaf with crossed arms. “Judging from the expression on your face right now, Lady Blackleaf, you might have known of someone like that. Someone who was forced to become just another convert, another notch in some telepreacher’s pulpit.”

While he was talking, distracting Blackleaf, Chris Perkins could feel something tug at his bounds.

“Of course, he was far from saved. In fact, just the opposite. The ordeal only filled that the poor soul with so much pain, anger, hatred, and resentment with each passing angry word, every smack, every twisted arm, and every time he’s pinned down, until he was driven away from any kind of faith rather than towards. No, worse: He began to hate God and any shred of religion, and I won’t blame him one iota. Would you want to worship a God whose followers cause people that much pain? That much wrong? Before that sad day, Jesus Christ only needed to prick his finger to get enough blood to cover that man’s sins. He can test his blood sugar and get this man saved with the same diabetic lancet. But after that ‘exorcism,’ a dozen Passion Plays wouldn’t be enough.” Amaunator shook his head. “You don’t want to know what happened to that preacher. It’ll give you nightmares.”

Chris felt the ropes loosen, and some of them falling. He would have moved but he saw the angel’s cold eyes glance at him, and his voice in his head: *Don’t you dare move, You stay right where you are.*

That was done from behind Blackleaf’s back so she didn’t notice. “But, alas, the damage is done. The poor soul wandered the world, the pain and resentment stewing in his heart into a nihilistic abyss, just another incident you’d find on the news just waiting for an excuse. He got into the occult. He tried to worship the devil but these modern lifestyles reduce people’s souls so small that not even the Devil would want them. So they just languish there, either imploding in one way or another, or exploding and...you’d know what happens then, I don’t have to tell you that.”

Amaunator stopped in front of Blackleaf, his silver eyes locked on her’s. She showed her best bravado, but he could sense that she was taken aback with what he said. Nobody in the entire West Coast would’ve known what he just said.

“I think I know who I’m talking about. He was someone who wanted to deal with everyone who has earned his ire, and he found a way. He discovered Miska, or rather Miska discovered him, whatever, the Wolf Spider took him in and then sent for you, didn’t he? To extract his revenge. Am I that far off?”

Blackleaf just shook her head, “You’ve just reaffirmed my faith in Celestials,” she then snickered and went for her whip. “Not that it matters, though. I intend to deal with them, their deity, that deity’s abortion of a creation, and everyone with it, including you, in one fell swoop.” Blackleaf cracked her whip for

intimidation, the report of the tip breaking the sound barrier echoed through the halls. “When Miska comes to this world, all those bible-thumping boy-touchers will understand what it means to feel truly powerless.”

“It seems Miska was looking for a place in which to reside after some events that occurred in the Abyss. Perhaps it was the work of Lolth, trying to expand her Demonweb there. I don’t know who’s behind the Wolf Spider’s motivation, but I do know what caused the opportunity he took.” He glanced over at Chris and pulled out his gag with his *mage hand*. “It appears that Episode 52 had more effects than everyone here thought possible. The breaking the Ashtown Concordance is not only wreaking havoc in the Realms, but it’s also spilling over to here, threatening to break another Concordance that would make things even worse. Not that Miska would care though. He just wanted to find an alternate place to call home, and who would come to his rescue but some poor soul in pain and anger, who just wanted to have someone to vent their angry burden to?”

“Wait, Wait,” Chris said as he got up. “This is all caused by what happened...In *Dice Camera Action?*”

Amaunator nodded. “That’s exactly what I’m saying, Chris.”

Chris couldn’t believe his ears. “You mean my plot writing actually influenced the Forgotten Realms?”

“Looks like it.”

Only now did Christopher Perkins felt his mouth run dry and his stomach tighten up. *He* caused all this!

“And so, eventually when Miska found this person, he surrendered himself to the Wolf-Spider. She wrapped him in a cocoon and instilled a portion of her power. It transformed him completely; changing him, body and soul.”

Mistress Blackleaf started to fidget a bit, tightening her grip on her whip.

“You know who I’m talking about, do you? That man died, and a new creation took his place. A new drow matron, a chosen of Miska, with powers and abilities to finally get revenge on this three-decade old wound. A dark elf prophet with the sole purpose to show everyone involved that she wasn’t supposed to be trifled with.” Matthew crossed his arms. “I might be wrong, but I’m looking at what became of that poor unfortunate soul.”

“Now hold on, Amaunator,” Chris said. “I can get behind you reincarnating yourself into a younger and gothic version of yourself. Hell, I won’t blame you at all with that Heresy of the Three-Faced Sun business.” I’m assuming that’s why you’re here...well, *you’re* here, instead of Lathander, right?”

“You can say that,” Amaunator nodded

Chris pointed to the drow priestess. “But you’re also telling me that this person became Blackleaf?” Chris asked. “Like that old comic from the eighties?”

“Enou

Time stopped for everyone except Christopher Perkins and the reincarnated Amaunator.

“Looks like it,” Amaunator said, looking around.

Chris looked like what the player character would’ve looked like when they realized that they were under his own mercy. “I’m in...big trouble...am I?”

Amaunator had a similar expression to what he’d usually had in his original incarnation. “Looks that way. However, I’m not going to just set you up for some divine punishment. You had enough of that when my old man clocked you.”

“Your old man?” Chris stammered. “You’re not talking about this world’s God. You mean...*Lathander?*”

Amaunator raised an eyebrow and showed a bit of a smirk. “You’re right about The Morninglord having harasting enough of the Three Faced Sun. Sure, I *have* returned, but I’m not replacing him. In fact, I’ve given up the whole Light Domain, so he can keep doing what he does best. I’m not just the Morninglord’s top angel, Mister Perkins. I’m Lathander’s son.”

Chris looked him up and down. This version of Amaunator really was different, intentionally so.

“But what I’m about to say to you next, Chris? This indeed is coming from this world’s God.”

Chris gulped. “And that is.”

Amaunator pulled him close and poked him with two fingers. “You caused this mess, it’s up to you to fix it. You have until the end of Episode 100 to restore the Ashton Concordance, and fix it so that Strix and Diath remain together. I don’t care what sort of Patrick Rothfuss Bullshit you have to pull. Just get it far-ick-ing done, Mister. I know you’re planning a major crossover between the Waffle Crew and the C team there, and have it broken up into several parts. Take all the time you need, but if that concordance is *still* broken by the time you finally stop that episode, Yahweh *will* find out, He *will* send for me, I *will* march right into Wizards, I *will* get a hold of you, and when I do...”

The glow from that glare told Chris Perkins that he doesn’t want to find out.

“You understand me, Mister Perkins?”

Chris found himself nodding a bit too much. “Yes...Yes sir.”

“Then we are done here.” Amaunator snapped his fingers to open a silver portal. “You have forty episodes, sir. Start thinking.”

Chris was about to step through the portal, but his bravado got the better to him. He turned back to see the angel. “You really are Amaunator, are you?” He asked. “*The Forgotten Realms’* Amaunator?”

“I don’t consider myself part of any single realm, Chris. And I certainly have no desire to move into the Morninglord’s business.”

Chris actually showed frustration. “Have you *any* idea how many plans you ruined...”

The angel booted the Dungeon Master to the Stars through that portal.

“Chris!!” came a familiar voice, as he landed unceremoniously on the floor, having appeared through a gleaming portal embedded in the far wall.

“Thank God you’re safe,” Mike and Anna picked him up from where he collapsed, looking to see his portal slowly collapse and disappear. “It seems Matthew pulled you out of there.”

“I don’t think that was Matthew,” Chris said, his eyes wide.

“What do you mean?” Anna said. “I knew he was the one who just jumped in there and faced that Blackleaf.”

“You know how we sometimes joke about if the Gods of the Forgotten Realms knew we were doing they’d be pissed off.”

“Well, of course.” Anna responded. “I mean, it’s all in good fun, right?”

“I think we actually succeeded in pissing them off this time. Especially Lathander.”

Anna blinked. “Well yeah, I’ve seen it happen with...”

“*And Amaunator*,” Chris said.

“Lathander...” Anna said, “...*and Amaunator*? As in...they’re two people now?”

Amaunator nodded in approval as the silver light condensed and disappeared and then he restarted time.

“Enough!! Both of...you...”

In Blackleaf’s point of view, she blinked, and Chris Perkins has vanished.

The drow priestess looked around. “Where did Chris go?”

“Back at Wizards,” Amaunator said. “And if he’s smart, he’ll stay there.”

She protested. “How in blazes did you get him out so fast?”

He tapped his forehead and smirked. “Responsible for all time, remember?”

“*Anyway!!* I have enough of this talking about the past,” Blackleaf resumed her interrupted snap, coiling her whip to snap as well. “I have done everything to wipe the slate clean, and I will not let the likes of you stop me!”

Blackleaf clearly saw the angel in front of her as she reeled back for a sweeping flick...

Only to find him teleport...well...he didn’t really teleport. He stopped time, walked casually behind Blackleaf, got a good hold at the by then slower moving bull whip, and resumed time. Either or, she found him behind her, with a firm grip at the other end of that whip, wrapping it around his wrist.

“Now then,” Amaunator said, “To business.”

“Asshole!” Blackleaf said, pulling tight on that whip.

Amaunator pulled tighter with a strength Blackleaf didn’t expected, pulling her to the ground.

“Do you really think that all angels sent from God act in pure and sanctimonious ways?” He leaned down to get closer to Blackleaf, arm still coiled in that leather embrace. “You can’t imagine how hard God takes it, to have to apologize to someone for something done in His name; How many people were driven from the Faith over the most trivial of matters. Those souls lost over something harmless will always weigh heavy on Him.” Matthew shook his head. “God would just grieve over you, Blackleaf.”

He leaned down to get closer to Blackleaf.

“You can’t imagine how hard it hurts God to have to apologize to someone for some shit done in His name. You’ve probably realized it by now; the Third Commandment isn’t about cussing.”

“Tell me about it,” Blackleaf muttered. “Why God didn’t wash your mouth out with soap yet I have no idea.”

“It was against something ten times worse. You can’t imagine how many people got driven from any form of Faith because of a drama over something the Father wouldn’t have noticed otherwise. The sheer number of books that were burned, the families torn apart, the people who ended up fleeing their hometown, and some of them were even killed. Those souls lost to...no, not lost, *driven* from God. It weighs on him like a ton of bricks.” Matthew shook his head. “He might bring the proverbial hammer of wrath down on that asshole who Jim Jones’d you, Blackleaf, but you?” He shook his head. “God would just weep over you.”

The two met at eye level.

“If only things were different with you,” The angel said, with a mournful sigh. “If only someone saw you not as a weird person with strange interest, but as a human being with a unique mind and heart. If that person ever gave you their ear, and listened to you, get you to feel that you’re worth a damn, you wouldn’t go this path. What sort of gifts would you offer to the world if you were just allowed to be let be? What wonders of stories, what campaign settings, what grand adventures denied to us because of someone’s short-sightedness. How many people didn’t make their grand invention, discovered that medial miracle, saw that scientific wonder, or shared that uber dream because they were cast out over something ever so

insignificant? How many souls have lost because of a world that reduces people to just sums of parts and denies them their humanity? What will be lost because too many people are driven to this nihilism?"

Blackleaf couldn't believe her eyes. Was Amaunator feeling sorry for her?

"I don't blame you for seeking salvation elsewhere. To think that person who was kind to you is Miska the Wolf Spider. We've failed you. I speak for all of Heaven. We have failed you."

Blackleaf sat there dumbstruck as he let go of the whip and got up.

"That, ma'am, is the message God wanted to tell you. If you still want us to move on to kicking each other's ass over this ritual, I won't blame you."

He then offered his hand to help Blackleaf up.

The world seemed to pause for the drow. For too long a time. But then she got up on her own power.

"If only someone like you showed up a year ago, all this would've been stopped. But now? I'm sorry, Mister Christopher. You might have my respect, but it's too late for words."

The angel walked back to one side of the dais. "I understand. So you'll be willing to wager your life on this?"

"I do," Blackleaf said as she moved to the other side. "Too many people need to understand the price of failure. If I die today, I will do so with a purpose. I wonder if you could say the same, Matthew Christopher."

"I can say with enough faith that I have."

Blackleaf chuckled. "Really. Even if you were able to defeat me, and stop Miska from arriving, would you ever be thanked by the people around you?"

She raised up her hands and looked around to hear the noise of people arriving into the building. Looks like some of these parties were better at escape rooms and LARPing than she counted on.

"Or would you be declared a heretic? How many Chosen of God found themselves sacrificed by His own followers, anyway? The Bible alone lists hundreds, maybe thousands, of such episodes. Even if a Holy and Just God would approve of what you're about to do, if He tells you 'Well done, Good and Faithful Servant,' would you think that God would even be allowed to let you in?"

"As if I care." Amaunator shrugged. "What I'm doing here, I know I'm doing the right thing. If I end up with those I've saved seeing me as a heretic, I'd have no regrets. If I never see the other side of this, so be it."

Mistress Blackleaf didn't sense a note of concern in Amaunator's face. Either he doesn't give a damn about what would happen to him once the smoke clears, or he's that proficient at bluffing. "However, as with any deaths would go, you could do a lot worse."

"I appreciate the consideration for civility, Mistress Blackleaf, and I shall deal with you and your drow friends likewise. Now then, shall we begin?"

Mistress Blackleaf made a slow and deliberate move behind her. She produced what looked like a long tubular case which she unscrewed the top and produced a staff in two pieces. After she tossed the sleeve aside and connected the two pieces together, she flicked her wrist in a stage magician move, producing a crystal that had a red flame inside it, creating a smoky interior. She screwed the crystal in place at the top of the staff and readied herself.

Even though the magical energies were as right and plentiful as a newborn planet, drawing in aether was like a tug of war. The two could sense the struggle as weave energy struggled to go to either one caster or another.

If the angel was surprised when he found enough energy to feed the *Eldritch Blast* into the revolver, he didn't show it. It must've been his angelic nature but he saw in his mind's eye, he was more powerful than he had even considered. During an eclipse, could he have limitless power?

Blackleaf's hand started to produce a flame.

Amaunator set his hand on his gun.

The both stood there, staring each other down.

Blackleaf charged with a war cry.

Amaunator drew.

Chapter 29

10:15.21 AM

Eclipse at 70%

“I got two of the badges, elf,” Moradin said through the Sending Stone. “Did ya get the other two?”

“I have,” Corellon replied. “Do we have two copies of each?”

“I made sure o’ that. We get together ta trade so we’ll both have all four, then we head to that dais.”

“Wait Moradin, let’s meet elsewhere in this maze so we can do the swap. That way Blackleaf won’t think we cheated.”

“Good thinkin’, Corellon.”

The two groups heard the telltale sound of an *Eldritch Blast* coming out of a Smith & Wesson revolver.

“Although she be too occupied now t’ make any complaints.”

“So ye think that these badges’ll be useful in dealin’ with that ritual?” Marcie asked. “Or maybe they be part of it?”

“How would I know, lassie?” Moradin said. “But I’d rather have ‘em with us in case it might be useful fer somethin’.”

“Do you think that there’ll actually be a prize at the end?” Delshabra asked.

“Oh, there better be,” Corellon muttered.

“Yeah, Corellon,” Marice said, “Or I’ll have her ass.”

It was about time someone in the crew mentioned something that needed to be said. “Once we find Blackleaf, what do we do with her? Leave her for the cops?”

“All this is Blackleaf’s doing,” Corellon said. “She’s the one causing all of this madness, and she’s using all of us to wreck all this havoc. If the authorities here don’t take her to see Justice, we will.”

“You can do that?”

“Something you should know by now. We’re more than just angels.”

For the past seven minutes, Amaunator and Blackleaf fought to a standstill, with each attack parried and each strike countered. Every time either one had a bead on the other with a weapon, it was knocked aside before a trigger was pulled or a cantrip cast. One tried to grab an arm only for the other yank the limb away. There was some progress when Blackleaf tried to make a sweep with her leg, but the angel just flipped over her on the way down.

She got slammed on the ground and had the wind knocked out for a second, recovering in time to see the angel leap up in the air and was about to crash into her. He was hesitating.

“So punching *across* is doable,” Blackleaf snorted, slowly rising to her feet. “but punching *down* is out?”

Amaunator had to shrug. “Sounded like a good idea at the time.”

“Seems like we’re not getting anywhere with this.”

“No we’re not. However, every moment that passes is in my favor.”

“All the more reason to raise the stakes.” Blackleaf snapped her fingers, as numerous drow emerged from the dark corners of the warehouse. “I will not be denied, Angel.”

Both teams converged on the southern side on the main warehouse, a mere hundred feet from the dais and under cover from one of the walls. The two captains, Moradin and Corellon, was swapping badges until they both possessed the complete set. The main door slid open as the badges were placed on the locking mechanism, allowing the group entrance to the final encounter.

“All that’s left is the main stage,” Moradin said as he handed his set to Marcie, for safe keeping.

“Does anyone notice that dere’s nobody else here,” Marcie said. “I think I saw about twelve teams...there’s about six now, and they’re still in the smaller four.”

“Do you think that the others didn’t make it?” Delshabra asked.

“They might yet be entering,” Corellon said, “or at least I hope.”

“It’s not that, Corellon,” Moradin said, cupping an ear. “Ye hear that up ahead of us? Looks like Matt found Blackleaf.”

“Let’s spread out in all directions an’ surround them,” Marcie said. “We c’n at least make this a fair fight.”

“A fair fight’s the best ye can hope for with drow,” Moradin said and turned a sharp left northward.

Even with his short legs, he managed to make significant progress toward the main room. Looking ahead, he brandished his hammer.

“We’ll have none of that!” he bellowed, charging into the crowd of drow with a hammer in full swing. “We’re here ta help, lad!”

“I never doubted you for a second, friend dwarf.” Amaunator said as he pushed another drow off him in time to block another lash of that fiendish whip. “Your timing is impeccable.”

Blackleaf wondered what that angel meant, until she looked around.

She had twelve drow left, and enough blood shed to light up all but one of the pillars. Those twelve drow were slowly encircled by a host of the remaining participants: A dwarf, an elf, and twelve other humans.

The drow turned around to face the invaders, weapons drawn and attitudes haughty. “We’d rather prefer to see *you* arrested, surface dweller, even if we see it in the afterlife!”

The dark elves charged the newcomers, more than willing to sacrifice themselves to bring the humans down.

“So this was your plan all along,” Amaunator said as he ducked behind one of the blood-glowing pillars. “This ritual required bloodshed and putting a LARP around the circle, using real weapons, will guarantee that!”

Blackleaf ducked behind another to avoid *Eldritch Blast* fire. “You got *that* right. And with the LARP, I don’t have to do all the killing. How much bloodshed did *you* contribute to this, Angel?”

“Just the drow, or are you counting the illithids as well?” Amaunator ducked over to another pillar.

“At this point, does it matter?”

The two spun around the pillars, of which all had taken this bloody glow. Amaunator sensed something under his feet. It felt as if the otherwise clay mound was starting to warp under him. He risked a glance up to the sun.

10:23.21 AM
Eclipse at 75%

Amaunator could surmise that the portal would be opened with just one more single sacrifice on this platform.

“It looks like the game is over,” Blackleaf said as she charged toward Matthew, a curved dagger of her own—coated green with poison, of course—and lunged. “I only need one more! One! More!”

Blackleaf lunged, Amaunator parried, he pushed her away, she spun around and slashed. Blocking with the barrel of his revolver, he continued to push her away. One stab, and it would all be over.

A sudden meeting of hands led to the final moment. As they locked arms, a sticky web encased his free hand, and the one holding her dagger.

The angel looked down, seeing the Damascus steel blade pointing right into her chest. He then looked straight up into Blackleaf’s eyes, and he knew what was going to happen.

But still, he tried to talk her out of it. He shook his head and pleaded, “You wouldn’t.”

“As the gospel tract says, Amaunator...You done goofed.”

His silver eyes grew wide.

“Goodbye, Angel. Give my regards to Miska.”

Blackleaf’s free hand grabbed the webbed union, and with a swift lunge, she threw herself onto the blade.

Chapter 30

10:24 AM

Eclipse at Maximum expected level: 80% covered

It was almost like the whole world stopped the instant the blade went hilt-deep into Blackleaf.

Above the quieting melee, there was a slow chuckle from the dark matriarch, followed by a soft chortle, and then by a huge belly laugh that shook Blackleaf's whole being, until she raised up into a rapturous joy.

Her blood, shed by her self-sacrificial stab, flowed from the wound down her leather suit, and onto the dirt dais. It didn't take the angel long to realize what is happening, but if he had any doubts about it, what Blackleaf said next shattered them.

"It's all over, Human." Blackleaf spat, her final words shaking with malice. "Watch your last morning burn to ashes!"

Blackleaf's dead body fell on the dais, the dirt absorbing the corpse slowly.

The ground started rumbling, causing the various combatants to stop in their tracks. Amaunator could see the pedestals set in a circle around them glow into a violet hew, the abyssal runes sparking to life, and a thin layer of purple mist flowing out from those pedestals over the surface of the dirt.

He shouted into his Speaking Stone. "Gond! Pop the knock..."

His voice was cut off sharply by the blindside blow of a towering white spider leg.

Daniel didn't waste any time after he heard the call. He didn't even have to look toward Gond to know what to do.

Gond had already squeezed the lever on the CB radio's receiver and just said, "Now!"

The devices didn't have to recognize the word, just his voiceprint.

With a series of extremely long knocks, all of the devices stuck on the locks, gates, and doors detonated as their programmed in *knock* spell runs. All of the gates and doors sprang out at once.

As Daniel headed to the street to wave everyone out, he saw Amaunator, black wings and all, get sent sailing through out of the roof of the warehouse. It was as if he was punched up in the air with such force that he was being launched into orbit.

And sailing over Wizards of the Coast headquarters in the process.

"Oh god no," Chris Perkins said from his vantage point on the roof, where everyone gathered to watch from what they'd think was a safe spot. In fact, there was a clever intern who had a drone with a radio frequency that wasn't jammed. He bolted over to just outside of the jammer range, launch the drone, have it over the fight, and then relay it to the smart phones back to Headquarters. Everyone was watching that fight. They were cheering, up to when Blackleaf stabbed herself on the black winged angel's sword.

"Oh, my god, he blew it!" Anna said. "She managed to summon him. All we can do now, is hope they have a plan."

"It's going to take an act of God to save us now."

The arrival of the wolf-spider demolished the main warehouse, causing those within to be flung toward the open field around the main gate. Marcie was the first to get her senses back and when she looked back at the warehouse she got thrown out of, she wished she hadn't.

The otherwise immovable steel and cement began to twist and bend at unnatural ways, a dark spherical cover streaked out from the former container. Former square angles bent into haphazard chaos, and tendrils of various unearthly colors stretched out and wind around anything within its reached like so many kudzu.

As tall as a five story building, with a head and chest of a wolf, the back end of a spider, and white-gray legs, Miska had arrived on Earth.

It slowly sprayed down some of the fleeing drow, causing a chaotic symphony of mutation: Bodies melting, arms sprouting tendrils, eyes appearing where they shouldn't. Unhuman sounds coming from mouths where lips are fused together. Limbs that bend in ways they shouldn't and even duplicated or become vestigial. It was as if all sense of order just got switched off, and even any semblance of nature has given away to chaos. A destructive nihilistic chaos. A cancer that just know nothing but to grow.

Not only is the sphere slowly expanding, the creatures—if you could call it those—were breaking out of that sphere and began to shamble out into the streets, careening over everything and everyone. With each foot step, touch, or bump, the chaos grew, as if the eldritch hoard is leaving more of the mutagenic force in its wake.

“Run!” was all Marcie could say.

“NO! Dammit!”

Blackleaf had outplayed him, that much was certain. Amaunator didn't count on the blood needed to open that portal being from the one *doing the ritual*.

He saw the wolf-spider appear from the wound in the earth. The chaos of its presence rising out from its entrance like a boil filling more and more with pus, oozing out to spread beyond its festering bounds. It could possibly expand enough to envelop the world.

Do not lose hope, my angel! We have not lost yet. He heard Penuma settle over him. *He's still over the portal, we can push him back. Together.*

His mind was still reeling and he struggled to comprehend.

It's time for me to unlock your full potential. But I need to make a slight movement.

He looked up to see the moon eclipsing the sun.

You are the Angel of Shadow, Matthew. Of all shadows, the one cast over the sun has the greatest power. It is a combination of the Morninglord's power and your own. And I give it to you now!

It was all he could do not to just sit there stunned. God was recalibrating the moon's orbit around Earth! Just for him.

The time is come for you! The time to overcome and do what is right for the world to see. And from the Ashes of the Dawn, Arise!

And the flash of Bailey's Beads blinded his...

It was up to Marcie, Delshabra, Daniel and their patrons to get people to safety. They did their best to corral the fleeing players in one similar direction, telling people to drop anything that would slow them down. The mass continued to slough outward, slow and deliberate, trying to snatch up whatever living mass it could.

Delshabra quickly cast her *magic missiles*, batting away the mass looking to encroach on one of the younger players who had stumbled on her way. With her elven grace and agility, she swooped in to scoop up the girl and leapt to safety, hurrying the youngster along with the rest of the group.

“Del, behind ye!” Marcie shouted.

A sharp gasp escaped her lips as a wicked spike of bony mass lanced the wood elf through her back with enough force to knock her off her feet. Landing several feet closer to the others, she howled in pain, struggling to reach the others.

Corellon rushed forward to gather her up, with Marcie close by to try to work her healing magic.

Delshabra was trembling, her eyes pleading, fearing at least death but not worse.
“Corellon...Marcie...Help...”

“My spells ain’t doing anything!” Marcie gasped. “Ye have to help her, Corellon!”

“Shhh, be still, my child,” Corellon hushed the dying girl. “Be still, and be brave... I will take care of this.”

“What?” Marcie did her best to hold back the tears.

“If you have anything to say to Delshabra, do it now.”

“...Marcie...” Delshabra said as she grabbed her hand while hers is fading. “...before my Lord takes me away...I just wanted to say good-bye...”

Marcie held Delshabra’s hand.

“...I don’t know...if I’ll return...”

Delshabra squeezed with all her remaining strength.

“...just want to let you know...you’re my best friend...and I’ll always remember you...”

Marcie couldn’t hold back the tears. “I shan’t forget ye either.”

Delshabra nodded, looked up to Corellon, and closed her eyes.

“I’ll be back,” Corellon said as he stood up with the dying elf in his arms, lifted her above him, and in a flash of light and the scent of the forest, they both disappeared.

In a fit of frustration and desperation. Marcie looked up to the skies to see the ecliptic corona...

...of a *total* eclipse

“That canna be,” Marcie said. We be too high north t’ be in the path o’ totality. How can that...who’s that in the middle of that corona?”

Marcie almost didn’t recognize him, and could barely see him with all that black, but the figure did have a soft white glow around him to show his features, accompanied by a brow so furled in concentration that it risked sweating blood.

“Matthew?” She looked up, wondering what she is seeing. She found herself calling out to him.

“Matthew!!”

Marcie, move!

The voice in her head sounded like Matthew’s but it had a hint of maturity in the voice, wiser, nobler.

She immediately knew.

“Amaunator,” Marcie stepped back.

“Amaunator?” Daniel said. “The sun god Lathander used to...”

“Not anymore,” Marcie said. “Did Matthew tell you he now has an angel side.” She pointed to the monochromic figure. “That’s him. He’s probably tagged himself in because of this eclipse.”

“Isn’t Amaunator supposed to be a *sun* deity, Marcie? This guy looks like an Angel of Shadow.”

“He is, Daniel. First thing he did after takin’ up Lathander’s old name giv’n up the Light Domain an takin’ up its opposite.” Marcie looked down. “Look at what he’s doing to Miska!”

They looked down to see shadows, or what appear to be shadows, streaking up from anywhere light wasn’t shining, and wrapping themselves around the demon, pulling the legs back, and trying to tie them all together.

“That’s shadows,” Daniel gasped. “He’s manipulating...*shadows*.”

“That’s his element now,” Correlon said as he reappeared. “It’s why we call him the Angel of Shadows. Come on, he’s buying us time to get away.”

Corellon pushed the two ahead, away from the webbing. But Marcie looked back to see Matthew, no, Amaunator, struggle to hold back Miska.

Manipulating this amount of shadow wasn’t that difficult by now. What took all of his mental strength was constantly wrapping bands of darkness around those spider wings and rolling up those balls of webbing to get everyone enough time to get away. He still hadn’t recovered his hold on time enough to choose who he could and couldn’t freeze on this grand a scale, and he hoped that everyone was able to get clear before the Wolf Spider’s strength pulled back on his umbral bindings until he tore them to pieces.

Chapter 31

The dark tendrils that tried to coral the spider started to fray and with some ethereal tearing sound, the demon was tearing himself free from the bounds. But a strand was waiting to whip around him to replace the one he ripped away.

Amaunator realized a very important thing about himself. Even as an angel, his endurance still had limits. He could only keep up wrapping up Miska for some time before his arms lose all strength and his brow started to sweat blood. In fact, he had to let one arm fall limp to his side and shake the blood back into it. However, when he did that, he found out that everyone has moved back away from those spider legs and the webs, for now.

He took the chance to let his limbs recover, but kept his eyes open, cursing himself for needing to get his stamina back. But at least Miska wasn't in a condition to take advantage of the lull. He had six of his eight limbs out, flailing to shake off the shadow bindings, but it appears that the spider half was a bit too big for the portal. Like an overweight cat trying to squeeze through the animal door. It will take a lot of effort get the rest of him out.

He still need to buy enough time for Papa to return.

Daniel just stood there looking up at what Matthew has become, just hovering up there shrouded by the total eclipse, the corona accompanying the silver outline of his body and wings, like a halo.

Daniel...Daniel!

He felt something trying to shake him back to his senses.

Now is not the time to be gawking.

He felt his grip on the rod grow tighter.

Get ready.

A mad flick of Miska's leg sent a strand of darkness straight at the angel who summoned it.

And it would've hit him if the bolt of light didn't hit it, causing both to vanish as light and darkness balanced each other out.

"Son!" came the sound of Lathander. He approached his son with concern.

"Worst case scenario, Papa."

"I noticed. When Blackleaf gave her own life to finish the ritual, I immediately made the call. I got all the angels I can find coming?"

"How many?" Amaunator asked.

Lathander gave a slight smirk. "*All* of them."

Lathander placed a hand on Amaunator's shoulder. "Let's make sure we have a clear field."

The Morninglord didn't have to tell his son twice, they both dived down in different directions for a final sweep.

Amaunator found Marcie and the others, who gathered around. "Praise God I was able to hold him back enough for you to get outta there."

From this close up, seeing what he became, they couldn't help but show their concern. "Matthew?" Daniel asked, "Is that...you?"

He gave a slight nod, but a glance told them that now's not the time to ask that. "Never mind me. Where's Delshabra?"

Marcie had to break the news to him. "She dinnae make it."

Amaunator swallowed a curse as he glanced up to Corellon.

"She's in Arvandor now," he said. "But that's not important right now. It looks like we're about to get a bad case of the blues."

Several police cruisers swarmed over the nearby intersection, taking up a defensive stance behind their cars, and began firing at the encroaching tentacle. That tentacle only went bigger and started to thrash the cars around.

"If they attack it," Amaunator said, "it'll only get bigger."

And he was right. The black and whites braked and nearly slid into the sidewalk to a stop. The cops got out and got into defensive positions behind car doors and hoods. They didn't know what else to do but open fire.

Lathander tried to stop them from above. "No, stop! It'll make things..."

"The spider just shrugged off the puny bullets and sprayed a web of sticky black ichor all over cop and cop car alike. Upon the most minute of contact, the cops screamed in agony as their bodies painfully transformed and their minds twisted into something grotesque and violent, turning on other police and bystanders, and the chaos just keeps growing.

"As I feared, it feeds on aggression," Amaunator said. "You attack it, it only gets worse. I had to manipulate shadows just to hold it without affecting me."

"We've got to push it back before it gets all of the way out and eats up the planet." Daniel said, "but who would be able to do that?"

Amaunator pointed up. "They would."

That was when everyone began hearing an otherworldly rumbling. A distant rumbling that grew louder. From all directions, the rumbling intensified. More angels than anyone could count descended from the heavens, bearing down on that building-sized monstrosity.

Marcie could just shake her head over seeing it happen. “Ach, this is going to be a train wreck...”

If only train collisions didn’t come with shock waves. The angelic mass attacked all at once, colliding with the beast with shields and spears. When they connected, the force was so much that everyone and everything within a half mile was blown back.

It was all Amaunator could do to guide everyone into one shadow, and out another several miles away. Next thing they knew, they were landing on grass, right in front of Wizards of the Coast headquarters.

“Oi hate ta see th’ repair bill on that,” Marcie managed to say as she looked back at the carnage of broken glass, shaken buildings, and strewn about cars in the wake of that impact.

“Thank God, they’re here.” Amaunator spoke in a relieved tone. “All those angels can corral the beast, but there’s going to need someone to push that beast back in.” He looked at the group. “That’s where I come in.”

Daniel thought about it for a moment, but then gasped. “You mean you’re going to...” He looked into this new angel’s eyes with utmost concern and fear.

The angel didn’t waver his resolution. “Some has to push that beast back in the portal. Miska has to be driven back to the Realms, no matter what happens.”

The angel looked over at Daniel, and Daniel would see in that angel’s eyes the implications running through his head.

“Are you sure about this, Matthew?”

“Does it matter if I’m sure or not?” the angel said. “I’m doing it anyway.”

“You’ll need this, then.” Daniel’s lips trembled a bit. “It’s a weapon of pure order. I’ve already ran out of charges on it, but even empty, I’ve been told that it can seal that rift. I thought I was about to do it but...”

He placed the rod in the angel’s hands.

“It’s up to you. Godspeed.”

Amaunator took the rod in his hands, looked at Daniel, then at Marice, a bit more than he thought he should and smiled. “Until we meet again.”

With one last look to the friends he had met, Amaunator took to the sky.

Marcie just had to wave back at him as he flew. She somehow got this feeling...that it might be a long time before...

Amaunator didn't stop pumping his wings through the air until he was well past Twenty Miles up. Part of him wondered how high an angel can climb, other parts smarted over the strained muscles in his wings, and the rest was thrilled over the view he had. With the last of his strength Amaunator flipped over. The eclipse below him, the planet above.

"Well, Lord, this is it. I only have one shot at this." he said softly to himself, knowing Yeshe could hear him despite the lack of air up there. It wasn't a full on vacuum of space, but there wasn't any sound. "I don't know if you'll ever hear from me again after this, so if you grant me nothing else in my life, Lord, grant me this: Guide me straight and true."

He held the Rod of Seven Parts in his hands and began his descent.

He didn't get a response in words, but in a sense of peace, of reassurance, that the Great Father had faith that his angel, a mere mortal that ascended to a higher form, who gave all that he had and even then some to a pair of beings that did for him that they weren't expected to do. The visitation, the partnership, the adventures, the wedding, the mixture of souls to bolster and rebuild this broken spirit, it was all for this moment.

He pumped his wings again, propelling him faster, adding to the descent caused by...

...no, it wasn't a descent.

This is no fall.

This is a power dive!

At ground level, it took everyone's might just to push the monster back over the portal. Miska continued to thrash and growl, stuck in its half-entered purgatory. The angels fought the monster to a standstill; all it would take was one big push.

But nobody was looking at the angels.

They were looking at the shooting star bearing straight down toward them.

"Oh man, Hells, no!" Daniel said as he pointed at it. "If that's Matthew, he's rushing straight down on top of Miska!"

"That be no fall," Marcie said. "His speed could be measured in Machs! And he's not slowing down." She looked over at Lathander. "Sir, if ye son *misses*..."

"Brace yourself, everyone." Lathander said as he himself looked up, just as tense as the others. "It's all or nothing, now."

"We've gotta keep faith in him," Chauntea replied. "It's all up to him."

"We just need to keep everything in pace for a little bit more." Lathander said. Keep that portal open! If not, he'll collide with Earth. The damage would be catastrophic!"

Amaunator could feel every pore in his body about to burst. It wasn't the blood rushing in his ears, the shoulder muscles finally starting to ache, or the ever-increasing speed, velocity, the clouds smacking his face, the terra firma rushing up to greet him. It was every atom of his body is infused with a fire brighter than the stars. His wings were already orange flame sending a wake of embers and sparks in their path.

He could see the darkness in Miska's eyes.

And he beat his wings one more time to thrust that rod int

“By the Morninglord! Someone just dropped from that...thing!”

“Hold that thing back while I get to him, Evelyn!”

“Evelyn, he’s already in the Deadbook! He crashed into that building and landed hard!”

“My-my-my...**My Cabbages!!**”

“We don’t know if he’s dead yet, Strix!”

“How do we know if he’s a ‘he,’ Omin?”

“We save him first, Strix, *then* we find out what gender he is!”

“We got it at bay, someone send a healer!”

“WHY?! Why is it *always my cabbages?*!”

“Ah got him! Oh mah goodness...He’s dressed like...this star...Oh my sweet Morninglord, did you send him to me?”

A flash of light, a world reappears all around, and the most angelic curly blond-haired face is seen.

“Oh, praise Lathander yoah all right! Good thang ya got ‘im watching over ya!”

“Wubbie wubbie blue eyes wubbie wubbie whole world,”

That made her laugh. It matched her angelic appearance. He felt his head clear a bit and he shook his vision back into focus.

“For a moment, I thought you were an Angel, ma’am,”

“Ah get that every now and then, sunshine. My name’s...”

“You’re Evelyn Marthain. I know you. He couldn’t say enough about ya. My name’s Matthew Christopher...”

Chapter 32

Spires of the Morning, Castle Ward, Waterdeep
Kythorn 18, 1492 DR (Year of Three Ships Sailing)
5:00 PM; Sunset

“I was in a rather dark place at the time, kinda desperate, a good hand’s width away from doing something nobody would regret. I’ll spare you the details...let’s just say that I really needed an Angel to pull me through. I just didn’t count on that angel being Lathander the Morninglord. And you know how he’s like, Evelyn: Shining down upon us all. Making grass grow. Making flowers bloom. Prompting trees to produce oxygen...”

Evelyn had to nod and smile at this part of Matthew’s story.

“I still don’t get half of what this guy’s saying,” Diath muttered.

“Just nod and follow along the best you can,” Paultin added. “It’s clear that Perkins isn’t behind the screen in this isekai, and we’re not the main players.”

“When he told me what’s happening, I was all too eager to help. Lathander was the first person to ever be nice to me, something nobody from my world would bring themselves to do. I would gladly accept the Morninglord as my deity. There’s just one problem.”

“In your world,” Sister Talastin said, “He’s not a deity.”

“Right. I can’t be a follower of him in the traditional sense. We needed a workaround and even got Yeshu involved in the brainstorming. It was Yeshu that suggested Lathander to do something he never considered until that moment.”

“The Warlock pact.” Sister Talastin nodded. “It makes perfect sense now.”

Matthew nodded.

“A barmy dude...” Strix muttered, “from a barmy world...with a barmy power...and a barmier relation to the barmiest deity in Toril. Barmy upon barmy upon barmy...oh, don’t worry, my dearie, he’ll be dead soon, they always end up in the dead book...It’s just a matter of time...then I can see what’s in his book of shadows. It has magic, powerful magic.” She started to lean forward with her hands reaching out for that book. “I wonder what a Lathander-themed Book of Shadows would be...”

WHAAAAAGH!!”

Diath’s gentle tapping on her shoulder was enough to startle her out of her train of thought. Provided she could peel herself of the ceiling.

“You can understand how hesitant I am at telling you this,” Matthew said. “What I’m saying could make the Heresy of the Three Faced Sun almost respectable.”

“Your fears are understandable, but you need not be troubled with them,” Talastin said. “We now know of the circumstances you were in. Also, it there’s anything well known about our deity, your patron; he likes to try out new experiences. Becoming a warlock patron shouldn’t be that much of a stretch, considering the circumstances.”

“I gotta know, Matthew,” Evelyn asked, “What’s he like. Ah mean, *we* worship the Morninglord as our God. Ah’m interested in what yoah relationship is like, with him as a...what’s the word...patron?”

Matthew just smiled. “Well, I might not be the most religious person in the world. But he’s the father I never had and always wanted. I even call him Papa.”

There were some chuckles.

“I hope that’s within most of your sensibilities. If any of you notice that I’m a bit too casual with Lathander, please know that I mean no disrespect. My relationship with the Morninglord’s more Father and Son rather than Deity and Worshipper.”

“I take it that he had to set up what his pact is like out of scratch,” Paultin said. “I don’t think it’s in the books yet.”

“What books, Paultin?” Evelyn said.

“Evelyn, please, I’m rolling.”

“Yeah,” Matthew chuckled. Paultin Seppa really does have zero regard for the fourth wall. How in tarnation does he do it he hopes never to find out. “Papa had a lot of research in how pacts work, but he had a lot of fun designing how own pact. He might still be adjusting it as we go. Good thing we had some time to get me all set up when the eclipse came.” He then leaned forward to finish the main story.

“The ritual required a ton of bloodshed, so it was done under the cover of what’s known as a Live Action Roleplay. ‘Larp’ for short. For those who don’t know, that is what we call a practice adventure with all the monsters, weapons, and spells replaced by proxies so that nobody gets hurt. Everyone who went to this LARP was thought to believe that everything’s fake. It wasn’t.”

“And we almost lost it. The ritual managed to draw that demon halfway into my world. Our team had to pull out all the stops to drive that creature back. The final push came when the Morninglord helped me dive bomb right into that beastie.”

Someone in the room whistled.

“The rest you know. The demon is dispatched, I was scrapped off the cobblestones, and we’re all in this room wondering what to do with this barmiest berk you would ever meet in your life.”

“In that last part, we all agree!” Strix cackled.

He sat there for a long while, shrugging, as silence hung.

“So, you don’t have any way to get back to your home,” Paultin said. “No portal, or key to use, you can’t just tap your boots and go ‘there’s no place like home’?”

“I would if there was anything for me to go back to, I’m afraid,” Matthew said. “When Lathander found me, I was little more than an orphan off the street. Almost no family, very little friends. Not too many people would miss me if I’m never seen again. I wouldn’t be surprised if people there say they’re glad I’m gone...”

Evelyn just grabbed his hands. “Matthew, it doesn’t matter if you’re a cleric, paladin, or warlock; you’re *under the light of the Morninglord*.” That got him some nods. “We take care of each other.”

Everyone agreed.

Matthew sighed in relief. “Thank you. If you don’t mind, I’d like to stay here. In Toril, I mean. Start a new life, settle into a place to stay, find a way to make a living. Maybe after a while I’d write that book about the adventure, I’m sure some would love to read it. Definitely go on a grand quest or two. Maybe even find a ladylove. I just want to start over here in the Realms, if you’d allow me.”

“Why don’t you come with me, Matt?” Omin Dran said. “You’ve got skills and a heart to match, I’m sure to get you a place in Acquisitions...”

“Pike off, Omin!”

“Jeez, Diath. What did I do to you? Besides, my organization just found something that might interest Matt here.”

“What do you mean?” Matthew asked.

Omin stood up. “Acquisitions Incorporated have acquired some things in recent months...that we don’t exactly know what they are. They’re nothing anyone would recognize and aren’t in any Torilian language. Not even *Comprehend Languages* would translate them. I might be guessing, but maybe you can help us out here.”

“Well, Omin, if you’d show me what you’ve found, I can’t guarantee if I’d recognize them, but if I could, I’d let you know.”

“That’s what I want to hear. I think he can rest up here...”

He looked at Sister Talastin who nodded.

“Good. Check into my headquarters sometime tomorrow. I’ll show you what I’ve found.”

Acquisitions Incorporated Multiversal Headquarters.
Castle Ward, Waterdeep
Kythorn 19, 1492 DR
1:30 PM, Thulsun

Matthew was too exhausted by that evening to do anything except take a decent bath, change into anything that resembled local wear (Evelyn found him a commoner's outfit of an oversized tunic and pants, as well as an acolyte robe he can sleep in) and just crash on the bed he was given. He didn't stir until the morning's rays hit his back.

"Morning, Papa," Matthew muttered as he stirred himself awake. "I hope ya don't mind me sleeping in...oh, I almost forgot, there's a dedication ceremony waiting for me."

Evelyn proved graceful enough to set a time a couple hours into harbright to perform the dedication ceremony, officially welcoming Matthew Christopher into the fold. People were looking at him with a tilted head when they heard that he was a *warlock*, but they can't deny the source of his power. He's going to take some getting used to. That was the general opinion on him.

Besides, it was *Evelyn* who vouched for him, and that amounts for something. As much as having it mentioned grates on the sweet and ever chipper paladin, she *is* a saint, after all.

As Evelyn took him to Castle Waterdeep to fill out some needed paperworks and had any necessary fees paid for, Matthew found out not only why they call her a saint, but why she's back to having an organic body. Before he arrived here, Matthew still believed she was a construct.

"You've gotta excuse me, Evie," Matthew said as he entered the castle. "I have to put my jaw back into place. You singlehandedly took care of the Death Curse?!"

Evelyn was blushing. "Ah wouldn't say singlehandedly? Ah had help from Omin. He even raised littl' ol' me back from the dead aftahword. We've been friends ever since. He might have his moments but..."

"Remind me to tell you about something called the Death Star, because right now I'm thinking that you done blew up Toril's version of that."

Evelyn giggled. "I can't wait ta hear about that, sweetie."

After the necessary paperwork and actually meeting Lady Silverhand and Vajra the Blackstaff along the way, the two had lunch and then they headed over to Acquisitions Incorporated headquarters.

It was just as Matthew Christopher expected it to be. The AI logo was everywhere on the building, and some signs were made to magically light up at night. It had a bit of the Vegas Strip vibe to Matt as he walked in. Omin's portrait taking center stage in the hall. Placards of "The Jim Darkmagic Experience" by some corners. There was even a gift shop and a hallway where more Interns then he expected moved in and out, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. It was just like in an amusement park to Matthew: Either they're totally thrilled to be here or they look as though they're in the ninth layer of Hell. Nobody in between.

Someone was actually considering going up to him and talk him out of signing up, but Omin found him first. "There you are, I've just everything collected in a conference room. Come with me."

As the three went up a flight of stairs and turned down a hall, they were joined by a wizard in a purple robe and two wands in holsters. He took one look at Matthew and said. "Now Omin, I know you don't want to talk about your love life, but I wonder if your current choice in ladyloves might not be suitable for you."

"What do you mean Jim?" Omin asked.

"You've only been dating Evelyn for what..."

"I have not been dating Evelyn. She's a pen pal."

“Are you *sure*?” The purple robed magician pointed toward the Lathanderite youth. “This dude looks like what would happen if you and her got busy!”

“Jim please,” Omin said. “I’m not a Casanova like you.”

“Come to think of it though,” an elderly halfling voice from underneath everyone said, “if you squint a bit and match eye and hair color.”

“He’d have pointed ears, Rosie,” Omin protested. “Besides, he’d be considerably taller to boot. No offense, Matt, but you look like a really tall halfling.”

“Oh, of all the things I complain about, Mr. Dran, my height ain’t one of them.” Matthew looked back at the grandmotherly gray haired halfling wrapped up in monk’s arm bands. Even though she was leaning against that quarterstaff that is twice her height, Matthew could just tell that Rosie Beestinger could just spring right up and mop the floor with anyone in an instant. “No offense, but you’re making me feel tall.”

“None taken, sweetie.” Rosie said as she gave her pole an elderly shake. She looked up to Matthew and gave him a sly grin. “It’s an act, kid,” she whispered. “Work with me here.”

“You’ve gotta excuse them,” Omin said as he accompanied Matthew toward one of the conference rooms. “I have a group of people trying to meddle in my social life.”

“I’m just glad it’s not me,” Matthew replied. “I’m just barely getting over puberty.”

“Puberty eh?” Rosie’s voice came from behind. “You need me to teach you about the...”

Both Omin and Matthew shot back a “No!” as Omin opened the door.

The room was empty except for a variety of things of various sorts on the table. Viari was finished setting some of the books there.

Matthew walked around the table, scratching his chin, and let his eyes grow wide on occasion.

“You guessed right about me recognizing them, Omin.”

He picked up one item. “This is a hand-held radio. It can pick up voices and even music transmitted through the air. He moved on to what looked like a black slab, but he opened it like a book. It revealed an odd panel and a board full of buttons. He even tapped a button and the panel came to life, revealing a shape of an apple made of light. “Lathander and I thought up a ritual that’ll keep devices like this in power.” Matthew tapped his book in the satchel. “I’m not going to bore you with all the technical details, and just tell you that you can cram all of Candlekeep in this and recall anything it stores at whim.”

Jim Darkmagic’s eyes went wide. “Omin, I want one.”

“Jim, you’d just break it,” Omin replied.

Matthew folded the device back together. “On the record, this is called a computer, commonplace in my world.” He set it down and ran his hands on the other stuff. “In fact, all of these things came from my world. Even these books and magazines, some of which had some very detailed...” He thumbed through what looked like a thick chapbook printed on shiny paper.

“Thank the Morninglord for Eyes of the Runekeeper,” Matthew said with a finger pointed up. “These are languages in my world, true enough. Check this out!” He showed one page to the others. “This textbook shows you how to create and use electricity. This would advance all life in Faerun by leaps and bounds.”

“Is this electricity,” Viari said, “What is powering all these devices? Is this what magic is your world, Matthew?”

Matthew just smiled. “We have a saying that even the least advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic to the uninitiated. It might be of a shock to you but there’s no magic here.”

Omin scratched his chin as he pulled a couple choice books and magazines. “I smell opportunity here, Matt. Would it be possible to replicate some of these inventions here on Toril? Not only will there be a major boon for civilizations like Waterdeep, I know a possibility for some major high coin to be had.” He looked over at Matthew. “If we could work together, we could both end up swimming in Gold Dragons!”

Matthew mulled over what Omin was saying. “I...I think we can, however, I have to call for a bit of care,” Matthew added. “Sure, I can think of several altruistic purposes. Like means to communicate long distances, or a way to improve cargo transports, means to purify water and improve farming, but there are some items from my world that no planet, not even Earth, is ready for. We’re talking Spellplague-like dangers. We might be able to find a way to send a message from Luskan to Baldur’s Gate in seconds, but the same source also created a weapon that could erase a city the size of Red Larch. Not destroy or level or burn, *erase* from existence.” He lifted one finger. “With just a single attack.”

“Like a *Sphere of Annihilation*?” Omin asked.

Matthew shook his head. “Think of a *Fireball* with the same amount of weave energy used to cast *Karsus’s Folly* behind it.”

“Whoa!” Omin had to step back at that.

“The kid knows his stuff,” Jim replied.

“This is part of the *why* I’m here, I know it. Someone’s gotta find out what’s finding themselves in this world. What else has fallen from my world to yours...”

Off on the corner of his eye, he saw something at the bottom of a stack of books, the image of which hit his brain like an atom bomb.

“Or even worse...*who* else.”

Omin raised an eyebrow. And then saw what he stopped at. “Oh this.”

He reached into the pile and pulled out a black leather book with two words on it. In Earth English: “Holy Bible.”

“I thought about taking this to Candlekeep one day,” Omin said. “It looked like some religious text from another world.”

“It is,” Matthew looked a bit pale.

Omin nodded. “In case you don’t know, the admission into Candlekeep is a book they don’t have yet. I found this off a dead missionary and thought, maybe I can use this.” He looked at Matthew and sighed. “They have six Holy Bibles, three Qurans, and a Book of Mormon. Two of the bibles are translated into Dwarvish and one of them in Infernal.”

“Infernal?!” Matthew’s face showed utter shock. “You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“I wish I was, Matthew. Thinking back on it, I could just stay that I don’t think you’re the first dude from your world to end up here on Toril.”

“I’m not surprised,” Matthew muttered. “Why is it that I’m not surprised?” Matthew looked over to Omin. “You’re going to need someone to focus on finding out what’s finding their way here. Something tells me I’m your man.”

Omin nodded. “I think we both agree with the opportunities behind making Torilian versions of at least some these wonders are just too good for someone like me to pass up. And I’m sure that you could use the coin yourself to get on your feet here.”

Matthew nodded. “Sound like a plan.” He then looked at Omin. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“That we might not have seen the end to this rift between your world and mine?” Omin asked.

Matthew nodded.

Omin sighed. “I hate to say it, but you might be right. Give yourself a couple days...to settle down...get used to being in Waterdeep...then we’ll talk about our partnership. There might be some rope-learning, but I know you’ll be more than a mere intern in the company. In fact, I’m reminded to finalize something.”

Spires of the Morning
Castle Ward, Waterdeep
2:42 PM, Thulsun

“Nice to know Ah’m not the only one who’s concerned ‘bout how Matt’s gonna be received, Sister,” Evelyn said in front of the Drow Head Priestess’ desk.

“Well, just a tenday ago, we all found out that the Morninglord is taking in dark elves, and now he’s got a warlock. Even when you know that Lathander is bullish on trying new things, that would be quite a surprise.”

“Ah’d say. How many other deities in the Realms had to go that route?”

Sister Talastin nodded. “I doubt they had the necessity to. Nevertheless, while he has been welcomed into the Spires, it’ll be safe for me to say that Matthew won’t be so well received all over the known world. You can only stretch people’s tolerances so much. I speak from personal experience.”

“I can guess so,” Evelyn nodded. Even she had to admit to finding it very novel that Lathander would take in a drow, with all the trappings and symbols of a drow, into His fold. She even remembered a spider spinning a web near the Waffle Haus and marveled how the sunshine reflected on the strands.

And now the Morninglord is a Warlock Patron. How many deities in the Realms tried *that*?

“There’s something about Matthew,” Sister Talasin said as she ran her hand over the dice. “Something deep inside him, locked away and well hidden.”

“Well, that would be because o’ that pact, Sister Talasin.”

“I don’t think it’s the pact. He did admit that he omitted a whole lot of his story. He feared that he’s already pushing it with what he told us now.”

“Well, not that I blame him, your grace. I feel that he’ll tell us when he’s ready.”

Sister Talastin nodded, and then turned her head out the window, toward the night sky. “The last thing he wants to do is get branded as a heretic, stirring up trouble much like the Heresy of the Three Faced Sun would do.”

Evelyn nodded. And she looked out the window as well. “Ah never told anyone else about this, but somethang happened t’ me the night after Father Sunbright was killed.”

Sister Talastin didn’t question why she kept it inside her, nor why did she wait till just now to mention it. She just twitched an ebony elven ear and said, in her usual quiet tone, “Go on.”

“Ah just couldn’t sleep that night, after all that gone on. The mentor I looked up like a second father, dead, after all that’s happened, a good friend of mind charged for the murder...Paultin being Paultin...Strix being Strix.”

Even Talastin had to chuckle.

“I was wandering the spires at the dead of night, to stunned to even turn on a lamp. That’s when I found that I wasn’t the only one stewin’ over it all: You know how sometimes the Morninglord visits people in person, much like how he did with Matthew. But this time, it was *I* who stumbled into *him*. He was blowing off some steam. With a sledgehammer. On some of the larger sun symbols. I could tell that the Morninglord was angry over what Sunbright has done.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“Well, for starters, he wanted to chastise Father Sunbright, not have him killed.”

Talastin nodded. “I feel the same way; although I must admit that using Sundeath created quite an appropriate image of Lathander smiting someone.”

Evelyn didn't know what to think about that. "But he also told me how much the Heresy was so much a burr up his craw. He had no desire to return to his former self, but he did get the idea of doing something...kinda drastic to deal with it." She shrugged. "Ah just said somethan' like 'What if ya take Amaunator and make a new bein' outta him, separate from him. Maybe Lathadner would get 'im reborn into his son or something."

Talastin looked at Evelyn, her sightless eyes showing notice.

"Ah thought nothin' of it, but I couldn't help but be reminded of that moment." Evelyn looked at Talastin. "Do ya think it's strange."

Talastin rubbed her chin. "Well, since you told me something you've kept secret, I might as well tell you mine: Just before I offered my sight to Lathander, I was given a vision. My last image in my mind would always be that beautiful sunrise. But when my vision faded to black, I not only heard the beating of angels wings, but saw a glimpse of black feathers before my sight was completely gone."

Evelyn raised an eyebrow. "An angel with *black wings*...from the Morninglord?"

"When in times of trouble," I heard Lathander say, "when the way of the light isn't clear and the true path can't be found, I will send my son to ease you through the storm, and guide you back to me. He will be known as the Angel of Shadows. A holy darkness, a sacred night, a complementing opposite created by my light. When the time is right for him, the time to overcome and do what is right, for the world to see. And from the Ashes of the Dawn, he will arise."

Evelyn tried to piece the two together. It wasn't like Lathander was being replaced, not one bit. Otherwise, she'd notice, but The Morninglord was still there, still shining upon us all, never changed or moved. But the thought that he would do something about that Heresy still tugged at her. And here is the thought about Lathander using *shadows*. Even to those who are bullish for new things, *this* was completely out of any sun-deity worshipper's consideration. "Do ya think our visions are related?"

"I don't know," Talastin nodded. "But I have a hunch that Matthew might know something that would connect the two. But I don't blame him for not telling. This would send shockwaves throughout everyone who prays to the Morninglord."

Evelyn sighed. "Yeah, that's why ah kept quiet. Ah wish Lathander didn't have to do anything drastic."

"Show me any deity who didn't have to do anything drastic," Talastin said.

Evelyn nodded. "Yoah want me to look aftah him?"

"He'll be staying in that apartment in Trollskull Alley. You know the one next to you, the one from that Rakshasa? It's already been purified, and the Spires were holding on the property. I think it'll be perfect for Matthew. He's going to need more space than what we can offer here, and it'll be a more secluded safehouse for when he wants to lie low. He has warmed up to you, not that nobody ever had a problem with that..."

Evelyn blushed.

"...I have a hunch that, he'd want to confine in someone, and you can be that listening ear just find." Talastin gave her a grin. "He can also be of some help with the now four children running around your home. I take it it's been repaired...again?"

"We can't get that orphanage fast enough, your holiness."

"Maybe Matthew can help you out."

Sister Talastin turned away to 'look' out the window.

"Or maybe the power in him as well."

6:42 PM, Gloaming

“An all-Lathanderite Franchise of Acquisitions Incorporated!” Evelyn nearly sang as she swung Matthew around in a wild dance. “And ah’ve already got a teammate!”

The Spires of the Morning is a miniature city in and of itself. It consisted of an immense cathedral, along with smaller churches for more intimate groups, the towers house living quarters, cafeterias, a seminary, and various other places to study, pray, meditate or just quietly contemplate. Some initiates can be born, raised, grow up, live their lives, grow old, and eventually die, get cremated and have the ashes stored in state, and never take a single step outside a single tower.

“While yoah were with Omin, I talked with Sister Talastin,” she told Matthew as the two walked around the courtroom. “She said that it’ll be a good idea that we get an apartment foah ya. It’s near mah place in Trollskull. A Rakshasa used to live there until he ran inta’ me.”

“And you found that tiger man doing something nefarious in there,” Matthew replied. He was twirling a broom.

“Yeah, I had to call some priests here to do some purifyin’, an the Spires had it ever since. Having it be a kip, that’s what Strix call it, would be a good idea.”

“Yeah,” Matthew said. “While I do appreciate the hospitality of the Spires, I hope I don’t offend anyone by saying...”

“yer just not a church person?” Evelyn chuckled. “I could tell with how you are with Lathander.”

“More like I’d like to do more than just warm a pew. But I’d believe it’s best that I have my own place so I won’t wear out anyone’s welcome. Besides, it won’t be like I’m need to scrape for any rent.”

Matthew pulled out a key from a pocket hidden in the robe he’s wearing.

“What’s that key for?” Evelyn asked.

“The Open Lord Laeral Silvehand relayed this key to Omin. It looks like the Sage of Shadowdale kinda expected someone like me showing up. Someone from my world, finding themselves stuck in this world, unprepared, unprovisioned, wondering if their lives are measured in days or seconds. So he set up a series of caches where someone can find and get themselves set up with some needed equipment, some weapons, a starter spell book, and of course just enough coin so that they can get their feet under them. There’s about a dozen along the Sword Coast, about four in Cormyr, several more in the Savage North...I heard there’s even one in Bryn Shander. And this key? It was for a cache stored in the cellars of these Spires.”

“That’s kinda considerate for that wizard to have that set up. Did ya get t’ it.”

“Sure did. I didn’t need all of it, though. There were too many suits of armor and weapons that I won’t be using. I just donate them back to the Spires. Someone else would have a need for them. Besides, this broom here was too tempting to pass up.”

He let the broom fall only to have it hover by his side. He hopped on top of it and it floated.

“A broom of flying. Strix had one o’ those.”

“I needed something to get around with. This broom’s quite a find.”

“You might not know o’ this,” Evelyn said, “But ah’m taking care of a couple kids ovah at the Waffle Haus...”

“Need a babysitter?” Matthew replied.

“Not only that, but Ah think they might like to go on an adventure with ya. Once ya pay us a visit you can meet them.”

“Provided that the place is in one piece when I get there. I heard the place gets blown up every other tunday.”

Evelyn had to roll her eyes.

Apartment formerly known as the Tiger's Eye
Trollskull Alley, North Ward, Waterdeep
7:30 PM, Nightfall

He did keep the chest though. He needed something to carry everything in. He kept a couple more sets of clothes, some maps, a chapbook on survival skills, a six pack of Healing Potions, an Acquisitions Incorporated Documancy kit—Omin was that impressed with his handwriting that he taught him the craft right off the bat—several blank books to start a journal with, some other miscellaneous items he might find useful, and a sack of 250 Gold Dragons. There was also a safe with a thousand more Gold Pieces in the Spires for when he needed it.

It was sent to him as he settled into his apartment in Trollskull Alley. It used to be a detective agency run by someone she discovered to be a Rakshasa before she and Binwin Bronzebottom, Morninglord rests his soul. (Matthew didn't know what was more shocking: A founding member of Acquisitions Incorporated dying to the Xanathar, or the Xanathar himself dying to the hand of Diath Woodlow.) The Spires took over the property and Father Luc Sunbright gave it a proper cleaning and purifying...until he himself was poisoned to death. Evelyn said that it was the drow poison known as Sundeath, but most people just said that Lathander had enough of Sunbright's focus on the Heresy of the Three Faced Sun and smote him. Sister Talastin offered the apartment to Matthew free of charge, at least for now, so that it'll be out of the way so he can lie low for a while. A perfect safehouse, or so Matthew said.

He looked over at some of the books he got from the Spires, a couple books of Lathander's holy scripture.

Matthew felt too tired to read them tonight. It's been a big couple days.

"What a wonderous and glorious predicament I find myself in," Matthew muttered to himself. "In the space of three days I went from playing Dungeons & Dragons to being in it. I can't say that I'm surprised, Papa, I kinda expected this to happen. Heh, I wonder how I'm stat blocked, or what campaign I'll find myself an NPC in..."

That was when he remembered what Lathander himself did when he saw Chris Perkins. Knocked him out with one punch! And here is his first warlock, stuck in the...

"Holy farooking crap! If I'm in a D&D campaign setting, who's the flipping DM?!"

He blinked, and saw Chris Perkins sitting behind the Dungeon Master's screen smiling a bit too wide.

Matthew found himself shivering almost epileptically, as if he just got dumped right in the middle of Icewind Dale in the middle of winter. His stomach couldn't get any tighter, and he thought his heart would just stop in its...

He felt a hand pat his head, and all the nerves that just caught up with him ran screaming out of Waterdeep. A soft comforting warmth covered him like a blanket and seeped into his bones, just like when he first met him. He didn't have to see him to know his presence.

Let not your heart be troubled, my son. I will make sure Chris Perkins leaves you out of his adventures. I can't say the same for Jeremy Crawford of Jerry Holkins, though. There's this Tycho who wants to see you put in the next Waterdeep campaign just to recognize your part in saving the world.

"Glad to hear your voice, Papa." Matthew closed his eyes in relief as his nerves faded into perfect calm. "I didn't expect you to show up at night."

Well, just because the sun's not out doesn't mean I'm out as well. That was quite an adventure, wasn't it?

"I still can't believe that you just turned around and clocked him, Papa."

He could just hear Lathander snort. *So, the Spires has taken you in?*

"Brought on by Evelyn herself. I heard what she did over at Chult with the soul monger. I'm surprised that there's a jungle left."

That would be what happened to that dragon turtle at the bay, I'm afraid.

“And it looks like Perkins made good in fixing the Ashtown Concordance. Strix is a Beestinger now.”

Yes, and that means that the Concordance is no longer broken. We'll still feel the effects for some time now. I have the sneaky feeling that the Blood War might end up spilling into the Material Plane before things get back to normal.

“The Blood War? You mean Demons and Devils duking it out.”

Try not to get involved in that.

“I have no intentions to. Besides, I already have something big on my lap.”

Is that related to both You and Evelyn becoming part of Acquisitions Incorporated? I find that a bit of a stretch.

“I was thinking that myself. I ran into something though: Omin showed me a bunch of stuff from Earth and hinted that there's more than just things. I might not be the only Earthling here.”

He could sense his patron, Lathander the Morninglord, look out and about from where what counted as his vantage point.

You might be right about that. Omin might not be the most trustworthy of souls.

“I'm not trusting Omin Dran with my wallet, Papa, let alone my soul.”

Smart thinking.

“I only told them enough to explain the matters. I really didn't want to mention Yeschu but Omin dropped his name.”

See what I mean, not the most trustworthy.

“Jerry Holkins warned me about him. But most of the stuff I kept mum about, as we intended.”

Good thing about keeping quiet. You should not just dump everything you know onto the people of the Sword Coast all at once. Some of the stuff we went through might do more harm than good.

Matthew nodded. “So it's best we don't mention what happened to Amaunator yet.”

Agreed. By the way, how is your other half?

Matthew closed his eyes, took a couple deep breaths, and looked deep inside himself.

“He's asleep. Or what counts as asleep. I don't think I can wake him.”

Good. He'll wake up when the time is right, and it's not right now.

Matthew nodded, but then he looked up. “I don't know if you know of this but...”

What happened back on Earth, when you pulled off that circus stunt of a power dive right into Miska?

“Yeah. What happened there? Is everyone alright?”

Chapter 33

Corner of 217th Avenue S and 83rd Street S, Renton, WA
Monday, August 19th, 2017; 10:31.45 AM

In the instant Amaunator connected with Miska with that Rod, a thunderous boom shattered the sky. A brilliant flash, like the most tremendous bolt of lightning, struck the beast with tremendous fury. The rumbling of that impact echoed through the surrounding areas, leaving nothing but a massive, charred crater where the warehouse once stood.

The moon was finally moving away from under the sun.

And as the light returned, everyone who found themselves still alive blinked their vision back to see what has become of them. They were alive. The siren wails of the first responders and paramedics were already en route.

The sounds and noises of an inner city resumed as the eclipse passed over: Birds started to chirp, animals roamed around in the abandoned alleys, trees rustled in the breeze, a car rolled past a street. Energy surged through the cables keeping the streetlights on until the sky grew bright enough for the sensors to make them switch them off.

Most of the people who surrounded the circle didn't even know what happened during the time of totality. For all they knew, they were in some LARP that turned into a fight for their lives. Then came a brilliant flash, and then, this. Many wondered if something did happen; Something eldritch, and horrible, of a cosmic horror being driven back by angelic beings. It felt almost like a bad dream. They dismissed it as such and vowed to never do what they thought they've done to promote this experience ever again.

Only Marcie and Daniel realized what really happened. Marcie felt her armor fall away from her, and her body return to that of a human. On the floor in front of her was the pendant, its glow slowly fading away. She felt a pang of regret at the loss of her form.

"Ye can keep that bauble, Marcie." Moradin smiled. "As a memento of our time together."

"Did you see all that, you two!?" Daniel said as he caught up with her. "I've never seen so many angels in my life! Even though nobody else remembered what happened... where's Matt?"

They got the clue once they arrived back at the warehouse and entered. Or rather, what was left of the warehouse. The entire roof and a good part of the walls were just gone. The corners were reduced to just four pillars jutting up from the foundation. The other smaller warehouses didn't fare any better either.

Everything else was gone. The stagecraft, the construction, the mazes, the puzzles, the summoning circles, all of it, gone. All that was left was a raised platform of dirt and, as Marcie led a group up it, a single black feather floated down to the dead center of the circle.

"Did what we saw actually happen?" "Things got a little hazy." "Someone summoned Cthulhu!" "It was those drow." "I knew it was too good to be just a game." "Were they trying to kill us or something." "Someone pushed them back." "They were beaten by someone." "Who did it? Who was the hero? Who won?"

Marcie could only walk up to that black angel feather, and just hold it in her hands. The only thing she thought was left of one of her best friends. "He's gone," she said through sobs. "He's just...gone. He somehow knew...it'll end this way."

"He said that he might not stay on this world," Daniel replied. "He even said that he'll be going with the angels back to the realms...I couldn't imagine that he..."

Marcie almost didn't notice it through the sobbing. "What's this?"

Where the feather fell, there was a latch, half buried in the dirt.

"Daniel, I found something! Help me with this."

The two managed to flip a hatch over inside the dais, and a chest rose up from a mechanism under the floor.

A chest with a lock mechanism consisting of four slots to snap a badge in place.

“Who got all the badges!?! Did anyone get them all?”

Marcie remembered and pulled her complete set from a pocket.

“Who wants to bet that there’s no prize money? After all this crap thrown our way.”

Marcie snapped the badges in place, one by one.

The badges clicked in place into a single shape, and the chest opened.

Marcie reached in to pick up a handful of coins and when she clinked a pair together, it rang out with a light ting.

“That don’t sound like normal coins.” “Marcie...that’s real gold!”

Daniel hugged Marcie from behind. “I think we won!”

“They look like Gold Dragons, from Waterdeep!” “Kinda stylish if you ask me.” “Are they real?”

“They’re real,” Daniel said when he inspected the coins. “They’re real gold!”

Fifty Thousand Gold Dragons. Solid gold coins!

“It must be worth at least *five hundred* thousand US Dollars. Maybe a *million!*”

The crowd just shook Marcie in celebration. “You’ve done it! You’re the winner! You’ve beat the game! You’re the hero!” “Marcie!” “Marcie!!” “Mar...”

“I’m not the Hero!!”

That quieted everyone down.

She looked back at the crowd.

“I’m not the hero. Matthew Christopher. The hero’s Matthew Christopher. He’s the one who fought Blackleaf one on one.”

“That sawed off guy who hung around you?”

“None other.” Daniel nodded. “He must’ve chased the bad guys back to wherever they came from...and followed after them.”

“You mean he’s...” “Whoa!” “Dude went all in.” “Did you see him? I think he had wings or something.” “He was packing some sort of ray gun or something, was that allowed?” “I head he was an Angel.” “An angel with black wings?”

“Wait a minute.” One of the still-in-costume LARPerS said. “If Matthew’s the one who won, he should get all this.” “Where is he?”

Marcie couldn’t saw it for a while. She just held up that single black feather.

The crowd fell silent, realizing that that meant.

“You mean...he’s gone...for good?”

The area was in stunned silence, but then someone started whispering his name.

“Christopher. Christopher. Christopher.”

The others joined in.

“Christopher!” “Christopher!” “Christopher!”

And it spread throughout the crowd.

“Christopher! Christopher! Christopher!”

Even the people from Wizards of the Coast went at it. Especially Chris Perkins, he was chanting the loudest.

“Christopher! Christopher! Christopher!”

The chant started to attract other sounds as well. They just sounded off as if by their own. Cars and Trucks honking. A Church Bell Ringing. Clock Towers sounding off. A mosque’s call to prayer. Someone setting off some spare firecrackers left over from the fourth of July.

It was as if all of Seattle paused for a moment and cheered.

All of this reached the ears of the five angelic beings and one olive-skinned Nazarene who gathered around the alleyway in front of the Mist wall.

Jesus was the one who broke the silence. “He’s done it. I can’t believe he did it. But he’s done it.”

“I just found out what Evelyn Marthain has done, sir.” Lathander said. “Just as she was about to be consumed by the Soul Monger...”

Everyone turned to him in utter shock, realizing what that meant.

“She turned herself into a star. She practically supernovaed herself, taking out that ungodly atropal along with her. I think...that happened at *the exact same time* Amaunator struck Miska.”

Even Jesus had to gasp.

“You mean...” Chauntea said. “She’s...”

“Her soul is in Elysium right now. Omin’s getting about to resurrect her as we speak.”

“But what about Matthew,” Jesus asked. “Do you have him, Lathander?”

Lathander closed his eyes. There was a moment in concentration. “Shouldn’t be too difficult. He has that piece of my soul in him. **Yes,**” he clapped his hands. “I found him. He’s drifting in the Blind Eternities, between universes, in the wake of that demon, but he’s still alive.”

Lathander placed two fingers on his forehead and whispered something. “There. He should be asleep as long as he’s there, but I don’t know how to get him out.”

“If he’s betwixt and between,” Jesus replied. “Then it should be no problem for Yeshu to ferry him there. I think I can ferry him over to Toril by the next total eclipse in that world.”

“That would be a year from today,” Chauntea said. “That would be the next total eclipse. It should be over Waterdeep.”

“Perfect,” Amaunator said. “He’ll be dropped into safe hands in the Spires.”

“Make sure that his Amaunator side is sealed away, Sunshine,” Chauntea said. “I don’t think he wanted to be in Angel Mode in our world.”

“I don’t know if he’ll need to show his other self, but if the need comes, we’ll deal with it then.”

Jesus nodded. “That’s good to hear. If I guess right, the most he’ll need to do in Toril is finish off the beast, as he’d say. The demon should be weakened enough and lost most of its powers by returning to Toril so it can be dispatched easily.”

“After that, he can move on with his life,” Lathander added. “I life I believe he deserves, after all this.”

Jesus nodded. “While you can tell him that he’s more than invited to return to me, I have a hunch that he’ll say that he’s wanted to make a life for himself in your world.”

“Then that’s it, then.” Corellon said. “It’s over. We’re done here.”

“It appears so.” Moradin said. “We hate to bug out of here so quick, Nazarene, but we’ve got a realm to get back ta.”

“Of course, you’re going to make a pit stop somewhere to hoard up on IPA’s, beforehand,” Corellon said. “I know you too well, you daft dwarf!”

“Look who’s talking, Elf, with all of those wine bottles ye carrin’! How many vineyards did ye manage to visit before that Eclipse started?”

They both heard a soft laughter in a Judean accented voice.

“Thank you for helping us, Jeshua,” Corellon said. “We never could’ve done it without you.”

“Quite Welcome, friend,” Jesus replied. “Although you’ve been a great help yourselves. Once you realize what will happen in the next several days. Plenty of people here will have a sigh of relief, especially Christians who play D&D.

“And speaking of Christians who play D&D...” Lathander spotted a familiar car coming into view.

“Guess they wanted to say good-bye to us,” Corellon said. “Would be bad manners to just leave them without doing so.”

“Fer once, elf, we agree.” Moradin said as he saw Daniel and Marcie climb out. “Ye made it, lassie! I hear ye be the one who got the prize.”

“I did!” Marcie nearly dived into Moradin’s hug. “I split it among all of the other players, nice and fair. I might keep a Gold Dragon or two to promote Matthew’s Campaign setting.”

“Sounds like what Matthew would’ve wanted,” Lathander said. “If I can see the coins...”

“I brought the chest with me,” Benjamin said as he opened the trunk.

Moradin inspected the coins. “Waterdevian Gold Dragons! Naughty Naughty little darkie elves! Don’ they know how much this’ll upset the price of Gold in this planet?” He then winked. “It’s real gold. Melt it down and form bars, then ye can sell ‘im fer money.”

“And we’ll use the money to develop Penumaria into a published product, with promotion and everything,” Daniels said. “...Matthew would’ve wanted it that way.”

Lathander nodded, then he paused for a moment. “Matt’s still alive, by the way.”

The humans couldn’t believe their ears. “He is?!”

“He’s in what I’ll call the Twilight Corridor,” Jesus said. “It’s a dimensional passageway set between this world and the Realms. Between all of us,” he pointed with Lathander and the others, “we can make this into a buffer zone between our two realms, as an insurance that what happened here won’t happen again.”

“Matthew will end up in Toril, safe and sound.” Lathander sighed. “I doubt he will be able to come back to Earth, however.”

There was a long pause.

“You ask me,” Marcie said, “I think it’s best that he’s away.”

She then turned to Corellon. “And Debbie?”

“She’s on the way to being incarnated into a fine elven family in Everska,” Corellon said, and then turned to Jesus. “I know it irks you, but it always happens when I’m here.”

Jesus just nodded.

“So...this is it...” Marcie said, “this is good-bye?”

“If only fer the moment,” Moradin said, “Can I see yer pendant?”

Marcie gave him the jewel, and he held it in his hands, summoning a bit of the weave to charge it up. “I’m sure ye have a job to do, with Matthew’s little pride and joy. But I fear that somethin’ bad’s gonna happen here.” He glanced over at Jesus. “S’mthin’ that would make ye wish fer something as sweet an’ fragrant as the Left Behind Scenario. If things get too much fer ye, and ye find yerself with a need t’ get away...” He closed Marcie’s hands over the re-enchanted hammer. “Ye know what to do with this.”

“Thank you.” Marcie hugged Moradin again and gives the others one last look. “Next time you guys visit, give me a call, all right?”

They all smiled and nod at her. “Yes, of course.” “Take care, Marcie.”

“Hey, agreement or not, come over and visit us, Nazarene,” Moradin said. “We’ll be happy to have ya. I look forward to proving that me liver can outlast yers!”

“I suppose if it’s in good fun,” Jesus said with a chuckle, as Corellon and Moradin disappeared into the mists. Corellon giving Jesus a roll of his eyes as he walked in.

As Chauntea and Lathander talked among each other, Gond stepped up.

“Before I go, milord, a word with you.”

“Always.”

“I know you want Matthew in there to keep any future attempts to breach our realms from happening, but there is something else that you might not know.”

Jesus nodded and let Gond continue.

“I have it on good knowledge that Matthew Christopher isn’t be the first to end up in Toril. Your father noticed that some missing people were never found, especially the ones who just vanished. Well, I can say that there are about three dozen people from this world,” he points down to the earth, “and that’s not counting the other things that end up here that adventurers find. I’m sure that you’d like to have someone there to make sure that some of the stuff made here...doesn’t fall into the wrong hands.”

“I’m very aware of it, Gond. It’s part of my plan with Matthew.”

Gond nodded. “Also, even though Yesu can’t present yourself in our world, I know you can assume the same form you had during the time you were in Gospels time and pay us a visit. I’m sure that we’ll let you get in touch with Matt.”

“If it comes to it, I will do what I can.” Jesus nodded.

Gond gave Jesus a nod and a salute. “Until you do, we’ll keep a good eye on your boy, Yesu. I promise you. Until we meet again, Nazarene.”

And with that, Gond vanished, leaving Lathander and Chauntea, who both gave Jesus a big hug. There were no words during the exchange, just gratitude and relief over the ordeal being over.

“I hope our next visit would be less dramatic,” Lathander said.

“And on better terms,” Chauntea said.

“I hope so too.” Jesus replied, as he watched the couple approach the mists.

“Oh, before I go,” Lathander said. “Do you want anything to relay me to him?”

“Yes,” Jesus replied. “Tell him ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’”

Lathander gave a nod as he and Chauntea disappeared into the mists.

“Well done to you two as well,” He said. “We can all breathe a sigh of relief knowing *that* is out of our hair.”

“We’ll appreciate that,” Daniel said.

“I don’t suppose that the End Time’s gonna happen anytime soon,” Marcie asked. “Guess you’re getting back into where you were before this mess happened?”

Jesus nodded. “Afraid so. This world was pulled back from the brink, but the world’s still facing it.”

“Do you think that something like this would happen again?” Marcie asked.

Jesus looked back to the Mist. “I would like to believe that it won’t, but I don’t know everything that goes on in the realms. Penumaria will be a vantage point, and once Matthew had that full and happy life, and sees it to the end, I might give him the option to watch the Realms from there, in my name. But I want him to have a happy life first.” He turned to Marcie. “He deserved it.”

There was no need for goodbye. They knew that Jesus wasn’t going anywhere as his physical form vanished into the mist, followed by the mist itself.

Chapter 34

“The authorities couldn’t find your’s or Blackleaf’s body. They eventually filed a Missing Person’s report, but most people severely doubt that you’ll ever be found. You were declared Dead by Thursday.”

“I think that would be for the best,” Matthew replied.

‘Wizards made a report of what happened the following day. They said that there was a group of occultist ritual killer that somehow made their way to Seattle to hold a LARP that would be a mass sacrificial rite. As they condemned the act, they also reported that they personally sent a group of their employees to stop the ritual from inside the LARP, lead by you. They said that you were successful in driving them back to whence they came, but not without disappearing along with them. Pastor Daniel held a memorial service in your honor on the grounds of Wizards Headquarters, holding you up as a hero who valued the game so much that he wanted to bridge the chasm caused by the Satanic Panic, and that any calls for a second such drama would not just be a sin, but a besmirch upon you. By now you’ve got a small army of bloggers defending you on social media. Some people were already calling you a saint.’

“You’ve gotta excuse me of saying I’ll believe that last part when I see it, Papa.”

Lathander continued. *‘They got a coffin to bury you in effigy and bought the lot where the LARP was to put it into a memorial for the battle. They must’ve been serious over hailing you as a hero, because they gave you honors usually reserved for the military. Don’t ask me how they managed to give you a twenty-one firebolt salute by cosplayers, but they did that. They even took their name tags and punched them into the coffin lid.’*

That made Matthew snort out a laugh. “Like I’m some Navy Seal?”

‘They hold what you did in that high regard. It was Chris Perkins who did it first.’

He chuckled again, but then he paused for a couple breaths. “What about Marcie? How’s she doing?”

‘Marcie took up Penumaria, the campaign setting, from where you left off. She’s setting up a game stream over at Twitch and has even developed a Role Playing Game version of a Vacation Bible School. She keeps your name alongside her’s as the authors, of course.’

Matthew sighed and smiled. “That’s what I wanted, after all. I think it’s best for everyone there to think I’m dead. Only those who need to know should know the truth.”

‘Agreed. So what are your plans, at least for the next few tendays.’

“Well, not only am I looking to find the first invention to work with over at Acq Inc, the Spires suggested that I take up a business with my penmanship. Making proclamations, writing letters, designing sheepskin awards, and so on.”

‘Your penmanship is near immaculate, so I am sure you’ll get a lot of business. You might even look into the printing press here. Gond managed to have one invented and they’re now designing movable type.’

“I’ll pencil into looking into that. I wanted to spend some time settling in here before I go on some big quest.”

‘No need to rush things, right?’

“You got it, and besides, I just got here a coupon for a free pie over at the Waffle Haus.”

‘Strix does make the best pies in town.’

The Waffle Haus in Trollskull Alley
The North Ward, Waterdeep
7:50 PM, Nightfall

“In another timeline, in another universe, in another Toril,” Paultin Seppa exclaimed. “Evelyn Avalona Helvig Marthain and Ominifis Hereward Dran fell in love.”

“Paultin!!” Evelyn’s response was as expected.

“And they have a child...”

“Paultin, stop!” cried out Strix. “Diath looks like he’s about to have a stroke!”

“and no thanks to Perkins, this Isekai kid fell into our laps. What evil does that Dungeon Master have planned for that poor unfortunate child of...”

“Does this mean I have a long-lost brother?” said a jester boy with a chipper as ever grin.

“Don’t encourage him, Simon!” Evelyn said.

“Let Paultin have his paternity fantasy, Evelyn,” Diath said, trying to push the pulsing vein back into his forehead. “Maybe Matthew would catch wise to Omin’s shenanigans and shove one of those Celestial *Eldritch Blasts* up his...”

“Just another reason why I don’t want him here,” Strix interrupted. “Not moving into the Waffle Haus, that is. We’re overcrowded enough as it is, with three kids, an owlbear, my coven, Warrington, and now Simon!”

“He’s not movin’ int’ the Waffle House, people,” Evelyn replied. “Remember that apartment where me an’ Binwin took out that tiger man? He’s moving in thair.”

There was the ringing of the bell caused by the opening of the main door to the tap room where Strix is selling her pies, accompanied by a series of sneezes. “All right, I know there’s not that much pollen in town tonight, so who’s talking smack about me? Is it you, Ding Dong?”

Everyone turned to see Matthew enter the tap room. Diath had a glare in his eyes.

“Ack! Here comes Trouble!” Strix said in her usual cackling greeting. “You haven’t been killed yet. That’s a good sign. You want a pie?!”

“I heard that this place’s got the best pies in the whole Sword Coast,” Matthew replied. “Provided that we can keep the place from blowing up every other tenday?”

“That ain’t our fault!!”

“Whatever. Got any Apple?”

“We’ve got one in the oven now, don’t we Purloque?”

There was the sound of someone blowing a horn, or at least it sounded like a horn in Matthew’s ears.

“It’ll be ready in twenty minutes.”

“Appreciate it,” Matthew said, and tossed a Taol to Strix, who just cradles it as if she was given a diamond big enough for *True Resurrection*.

Matthew just smiled when he saw that, and then turned around, bumping into a grey wall with too many war medals pinned to it.

That was when it finally hit him that he’s in a D&D world, because of who he just ran into.

“OH, SORRY THERE, MY GOOD MAN, I DIDN’T SEE YOU THERE!” The voice wasn’t loud, but it did had size, and an accent that just reeks of a stuffy, pompous man.

“Don’t move,” Matthew said as he looked up to see a Hippo-like face. “Don’t move, Matthew, Giffs can only see movement.”

“HA!” Warrington Munt just chortled. “THAT WAS JUST A RUMOR PUT ON BY THE CRYSTAL MINERS AT ROCKABRAL! I CAN SEE YOU JUST FINE, MATTHIAS, ISN’T IT? BUT YOU MUST EXCUSE ME FOR BEING A BIT DEAF.” He then crooked his head to see what was hanging off the short human’s hip. “EVELYN TOLD ME THAT YOU CAN SHOOT MAGIC FROM THAT GUN OF YOURS.”

Matthew pulled the revolver out to twirl it a couple times. “Yeah, I might not be using smokepowder, but I don’t have to worry about running out of ammo.”

“THIS IS WHAT I LIKE ABOUT THIS WORLD, ALL THESE STRANGE AND INTERESTING CREATURES. FIRST PURLOQUE, THE ELEPHANT MAN AND NOW...”

Matthew’s mind faded away for a second or two. *Elephant man? Did he mean Loxodons? I don’t think there’s a realm with those people...unless*

“I SHALL RETIRE TO MY QUARTERS, MY FRIENDS. CARRY ON!”

And with that, Commodore Warrington Munt waddled up the spiral staircase and threatened to fall through the upper floor with all the creaking.

Matthew just found a chair by a table and sat down. Against his better judgement and noticing that the bard in the room is too blitzed to play anything, he pulled out his cell phone. He left the solar charger by the ledge of the apartment for most of the afternoon, so he has a full charge.

As he expected, there were zero bars. No connections at all. But the cell phone is hardly useless. He’s got more than twenty five hundred songs in its memory chips, categorized by genre. He put some headphones on and pressed shuffle. He then leaned back and...noticed someone approached him.

He turned to see a young girl, barely in her pre-teens, with long black hair that went down her back. She was looking at his cell phone with wild eyes.

“Hi,” Matthew said.

The girl didn’t speak, she just looked between the device and this stranger. She pointed to it and said, ‘What is that?’ in a unspoken voice that could only come from someone who’s hearing impaired.

“Well, I could either go on a long and eloquent screed on where I come from,” he said, “or I can just call it a ‘Magic Slate’ and be done with it. Take your pick.”

He noticed that the girl was focused on his mouth, as if she’s reading your lips.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were deaf, my apologies.”

She just smiled and waved her hands as if to sign ‘Oh, it’s okay,’ while he heard another child’s voice.

“Whoa, check it out, Simon. Is that the guy your Mom told you about, right?”

Matthew saw three other boys show up from behind. A stocky one with dark skin and wizard’s robes, a lanky red-skinned tiefling, and a brown-haired Jester in a full motley.

“Whoa, dude!” The tiefling said. “Mom told me that you fell from the sky. Probably hit your head when you landed because she keeps calling you Trouble!”

“That’s what you get when you had to use a monstrous spider’s leg to break your fall,” Matthew said.

“You’d think that interdimensional travel would come with,” he then looked up as if calling on Lathander.

“...parachutes!?”

That got a wisecrack from the other Lathanderite in the building. “Didn’t the Morninglord told you they’d be days like this?!”

“Did that tiefling call me Mom again?!” said a panicked tiefling sorcerer.

“You must be the kids Evelyn told me about,” Matthew said.

The girl stood up and gave a heroic pose.

“She’s Nat,” the Jester said, “the wizard’s Jenks, the devil kid’s Swiggley, and I’m Simon. Pleased to meet cha, Matthew.”

“Simon?” Matthew had to rub his eyes. “Last time I heard of you, you were a wooden boy.”

Simon just nodded. “Someone decided that casting *True Polymorph* on me was a good idea.”

“Like I should judge someone for that,” Matthew said as he tapped on the cell phone. “Here I am with my ‘Magic Slate’ in my hand, just holding it out for everyone in all Faerun to see. You’ll be surprised at what I can do with this thing,” he said, trying to make sure Natt can see him speak. “Sure, some would say that I shouldn’t just show this off, but it’s got so many uses I can’t imagine life without it. Name’s Matthew Christopher, I’ll be living just down the street here.” He also showed the cell phone’s screen toward Natt, showing his name written by hand in Common.

She mouthed it out. “Ma..thew...Chri...stop...er...” She smiled, nodded, and half spoke half signed, “I’m Nat. You must be a great adventurer!”

“Well, I’m just starting out, Much like you.” Matthew made sure that he slowed down when he said that so that Nat can follow along. “In fact, I bet the four of you would want to know what brought me here, since I get the feeling that we’re going to be together for some time. Pull up a chair folks. You’re in for one heck of a ride.”