

DAWNING OF DARKNESS

THE FALL OF GODS AND KINGS

Book Zero in the Next Life Series

**A NOVELLA BY
JAMES G. ROBERTSON**

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PROLOGUE

Above an ancient world, beyond the many galaxies, three spheres occupied the edge of our ever-expanding universe. Though these ancient orbs were only the size and brilliance of the Earth's moon, the gods imbued them with a tremendous energy that dwarfs even a quadrillion of its sun. As they swirled in the empty void like fiery welder's tacks blazing upon a dark canvas, their comforting glow flowed to the world below, nurturing those within it; though, that is true only for the top half.

On the opposite side of the isolated planet that rotates horizontally, not a single moon or satellite planet has existed for many light-years. It is a realm with no illumination in its immediate domain, and its only source of luminosity comes from the engulfing spectacle of the cosmos beyond. Though not much, the twinkle of radiation released by these seemingly endless flickers has been enough for its vegetation to thrive. It was in this faded darkness, in a castle surrounded by deep plum-colored vines with sharp magenta thorns, that the gods who inhabited this universe met with another—one who came from beyond this dimension.

Broken and bruised, he hoped to gain their favor during the conclave. Though his goal was not so different from their own, his execution of the matter and his response brought forth another great struggle within this realm. We will save the finer details of

this meeting for another day, dearest reader. For now, I can tell you that this being brought a great darkness with him; a plague that ravaged this universe—the eradication and corruption of human souls.

The events you will learn about in these books are the hidden chronicles of your universe; the records of its wars from the views of your world's heroes, its villains, the gods, and those beyond—those deemed important enough to remember. You should know it wasn't through malice that your gods made your lives on Earth so hard. If you believe they have mistreated you, then perhaps these stories can provide an explanation, an apology for why it had to be that way. They did not make your lives hell for the childish notion of testing your faith, and as much as it pained them to make that decision, perhaps that experience will end up being useful to you and your kin in the world after.

Could you call this tough love? Perhaps. Unfair? Almost definitely. But this is how it had to be in order to give you and those you love the greatest chance to pull through the coming battles.

Chance is a cruel word, and not all of us are destined to live through the struggles ahead. I hope that if you are one of the lucky few who survive the dark forces that lurk within and beyond our universe, that these words will bring you comfort. Some of these decisions have already led to the tragedy of many, but perhaps for you, it will be different. We don't always know what the right decision will be at the time of choosing, myself included, nor do we always discover the facts before it's too late. Seldom is anything straightforward in this cruel existence of ours, but I hope you will keep an open mind as you read through these tales, this history, and that they give you a better chance to outlast the carnage ahead.

Be well, children of Fate and Destiny, and may the vigorous light forever shine brightest throughout us all.

CHAPTER 1

THE KING OF THE COBALT MOUNTAINS

Long ago, on a planet that guards the edge of our universe, three moons filled with vigorous white light gleamed down from the dark skies above. On the world's surface, covered by plentiful hills and valleys of blossoming flowers that shimmered brightly with dew—deer, mice, rabbits, and other animals roamed the fields. Here, as with anywhere else, the creatures of the world followed the instinct of their evolutionary wisdom, the knowledge that has taken root in the core of their being from the struggles of their ancestors.

In the nearby mountain range, on the edge of an extensive forest where the fae lurk, the human kingdom within the Cobalt Mountains rests on its snowy perch. Men and women throughout the rocky territory wear solemn faces. Here, there are no children, little joy, and only a single infant. No one else—other than the newborn—is younger than the age of 16, according to the previous census conducted by the castle guards. Other than being in the mountains, the kingdom has one other unique feature: it surrounds an enormous volcano that rests peacefully at its center, with a towering gray stone castle nestled against it. Everyone that had seen this brilliant structure found it hard to

distinguish where the stoic castle ended, and where the natural rock of the volcano began.

Hidden away from the castle and the land it safeguards, a soothing magma flows beneath the world's crust, providing heat for the nearby hot springs to flourish. It is here, these many years ago, that a certain man bathed in the comforting waters of the castle's encampment. The man, who looked to be well into his forties, had jet black hair and burn scars along the entirety of his naked body. While moving his hand across the water's surface, his stark blue eyes seemed to sparkle in the reflection.

Out of the springs, but still within his reach, a large blade, clean and sharp with a black diamond shimmer, leaned against the wooden enclosure. The sturdy blade, nearly half the width and length of his body, would be impractical for any living human to wield. But this place is not where those of the living dwell; this is a domain for spirits and their kindred. This realm, designated as Afterworld, is the world humans escape to after death.

Peaceful as it may seem, with birds chirping in the nearby woodlands, the man in the hot spring wore a defined look of worry upon his restless face. Tears filled his eyes as he sipped a fine sake while looking at the cloudy sky. After a moment, he sat his cup down and struck the surrounding rocks in the water. Removing his hand from the wall to rub his calloused skin, he noticed his fist had left a charred point upon the stone under the waters.

He sighed, unaware that someone had approached from behind.

"May I join you, Dobrynya?" the man asked.

Startled, he grabbed his blade and spun around, stopping only when recognition stayed his hand. He splashed water on his face with his free hand before placing the blade back down and facing the man. He was dark-skinned, with short, tangled hair. The tips on his scalp were powdery white, and over his broad shoulders he wore a snow leopard's pelt.

"Shouldn't you be with Riza?" Dobrynya asked in his deep Kievan Rus accent.

"Riza is sleeping. I'm afraid she's still tired from birthing Raven. Arthur's Lady Guenevere and her protector, Galahad, have allowed me this visit by watching over them while I'm out," he answered. The surrounding air fogged with a cold vapor as he spoke.

"I see. I expect any man would need some rest himself after the long birthing of your boy. Come, join me, Clayven."

Clayven removed the elegant pelt he wore, followed by the rest of his clothes. Underneath was a toned and damaged body, but it was considerably less scarred than Dobrynya's. As he entered the waters, Dobrynya squeezed his fist, creating a heat that caused the water's steam to thicken.

Clayven moved his arms through the opaque mist and looked at Dobrynya; the first thing he noticed were the king's slumped shoulders and bloodshot eyes. He knew he'd been struggling to deal with current circumstances, but he didn't realize how bad it had gotten. It wasn't a sight that many would expect to see from the man, and it caused Clayven to hesitate before speaking.

"...I heard what happened at the outer blockade. I know you think it's your fault for what took place, but Dob—"

"It *is* my fault, Clayven. I let him go beyond the blockade and into the Dark Territory alone. Valentine was never a perfect man, but he was someone I looked after—someone I cared about and considered a brother. I didn't know him for as long as I've known Ragnar, and not much longer than I've known you, but I still..." He paused, taking a deep breath. "You know, he told me stories of his time in Kievan Rus, what he called the Soviet Union. He informed me of how the leaders there treated the ancestors of my countrymen. He told me of this, and how he and his family struggled, living in a constant state of fear. Being on the inside, he saw a lot of injustice, and there wasn't a lot he could do about it without the fear of retaliation. After what happened to me on

Earth, and what happened to my family both there and here... I bonded with him. I don't know what could have happened between then and when he returned, but I thought he was one of us! I thought... well, it matters not what I thought. He betrayed us all. Valentine deserted us and our gods; there's no redemption. It's done."

"You can't blame yourself for him abandoning us. Whatever happened in the Dark Territory isn't on you. Very few have crossed the dark gods and survived. The reality is we don't know what happened."

"We may not know what happened there, but he was there on my orders! I thought him being an Alpha would be enough for him to come back with some solid intel. How blind I was! How many deaths of our friends and family has this error in judgment caused? Our numbers were already declining. The alliance of man has slowed down the eclipsing darkness, but at this rate... We have to be realistic. Humanity is running out of fighters that can challenge the Godly Guardians, let alone the dark gods themselves. A few millennia ago, this kingdom alone held close to 20 million citizens, but now? Now it's dwindled to under two million. The rate at which souls come to this place versus how many are stolen is at a great disparity. What will happen now that the pillars and the veil supporting the blockade have collapsed?"

"Collapsed? Listen to what I say, Dobrynya. Was it not him who destroyed the pillars upon his return from the Dark Territory, causing the veil at the outer blockade to fall and allow Flat-Face and his legions through? There's no defending him. Whatever the case may be, he chose this path! The realm of light is in danger more than ever because of his actions. It's hard to accept what has happened, but as you said, it's done. Valentine and those under him have proudly donned the Dark Creator's twisted insignia; it's a disgrace.

"Their forces are breaking through our combined defenses and approaching Three Moons' Harbor as we speak. There's not

much we can do now but wait for the gods' command. The minotaurs in the Divine Mountains await as a final safeguard, should Flat-Face's hordes overwhelm those resisting. Even the hidden faeries of the forest have left their sacred lands and entered the fray, lending their magic to our cause and healing warriors as much as they're able. Their cousins, the pixies, have been trying to mend the minds of those granted respite by the gods, those strong enough, lucky enough to survive the war as we have. Sometimes even that's not enough and we, as humans, break."

Dobrynya frowned and touched the top of his own shoulder, feeling the start of the thick scarred flesh that covered most of the skin on his back.

"May I?" Clayven asked, pointing to the cup of sake that was half full.

Dobrynya nodded and passed his friend the cup.

Clayven downed the remainder and sat it to the side before continuing.

"It's true that our bodies are a great deal more durable than before, but surely this wasn't how it was to be? We're tired, bruised, scarred mentally and physically. We're in a state of being where our bodies are meant to be free from defects, but we're still marked up and down with scars from this timeless war; yours more than most, Dobrynya. The gods blessed us so that we have no hunger while we fight, but just how many days did you fight without treatment by burning your flesh to keep going? Months? Years of continuous combat?"

"I can't recall. When you've lived as long as I have in this world, time seems to blend."

"This is what I mean! You can't blame yourself for what Valentine did, nor what we or the gods must do about it."

"You may be right, but if it comes to it, I'm unsure if I'll be able to kill Valentine myself. I will do what I can to protect you and the

rest of our people, but this is something that has been weighing on me.”

“Dobrynya, enough. You’ve been a harsh teacher, but one hell of a mentor, and damn well beyond a righteous king by saving many of us here. Be strong. If it wasn’t for you and Riza, and now my son, I’m not sure I could take this. You’ve gone through great strives to teach me the way of the sword and I’m sincerely thankful for that, but don’t forget that I’m more than just your student or a member of your kingdom. I will forever be your friend. You’ve done more than enough. Don’t think you must carry these burdens alone. I and countless others are here for you.”

Dobrynya smiled. It was soft, but honest.

“You’re a veracious man, Clayven. I’m lucky to have someone like you to be honest with me. You’re right, I must not let my heart waiver because of the flawed actions of a few. There are still others that I care for and must watch over; we’re not defeated completely. There has been little reason to celebrate these past few centuries, but there are times when we must show spirit despite tribulations. We have more than enough food in our stockpiles because of the gods’ battlefield blessing. I’m sure those here are getting at least a little hungry. Let us have a banquet to show we are still human and hopefully it’ll ease the minds of us sorry souls.”

Clayven smiled, and Dobrynya looked towards the archway entrance. Two flags waved in the light breeze. They had the symbol of a volcano and iron castle upon them.

“Captain!” Dobrynya yelled, and a man approached from the archway entrance. He wore the same insignia as the flags on his chest plate.

“My king?”

“Rally the cooks. Have them gather enough stag meat and crops from the hunters’ storage for 10,000 platoons. Pay no mind to the hells afar. Tonight, we feast!”

CHAPTER 11

ENCROACHING TURMOIL

War: the unavoidable hellscape that plagues the realms has reached its breaking point on Afterworld. War is a tricky beast. It can emerge not only from a minor disagreement, but from a place of hate, or the presumption of superiority fueled by misconceptions. There are degrees to war, as with anything else. Some wars are minor battles, scrimmages really. Others? Well, others can make the greatest conflict in your memory seem so small it's barely mentioned again outside the dust jackets of your history books.

In an unnamed valley located roughly 45,000 miles northwest of where the cooks assembled the grand feast in the Cobalt Mountains, a clash of man, gods, and monsters was afoot. Legions composed of brutish eight-foot-long creatures charged at the final blockade. The nameless, neckless monstrosities with their thick albino skin stampeded through the armies of men, breaking through their shields and defenses. One moment, a man was on his knees, crying to the gods for salvation. The next, a creature swiped him from the ground like a rag doll. Its beady, pitch-black spiderling eyes twisted and contorted as it peered at him before tearing his head from his body. Others joined in, ripping his limbs apart before digging into his torso—guts, blood, and residual calcic bones smearing their terrifying grins.

As much as these creatures enjoyed devouring the body, they seemed to enjoy the man's spiritual essence more. Their mouths watered in anticipation, waiting for the man's soul to arise from his contorted remains. There was no hesitation. As soon as the soul appeared, one creature took a deep, rippling breath, sucking the man's spirit from him. Others immediately joined in. The man's ethereal light stretched and snapped apart like jerky. Its soft glow tore in different directions, entering each of them as their teeth chattered with a terrible high pitched scratching sound. They made a hideous scream of excited pleasure as the mark on his severed right arm vanished, and the soul along with it.

They looked around, still hungry, gluttonous for their next meal. They'd have turned on the traitorous humans that fought alongside them, but as hungry as they may be, they didn't dare. Each human that fought by their side wore a distinct mark burned into their flesh; a mark radiating the energy of the creature's master—the Dark Creator. And so, they charged forward once again, as some humans in front of them retreated. But not all of humanity broke so easily. Not everyone had lost hope.

Two deceased legends stormed ahead to meet the creatures. The first's name? Joan d'Arc. This timeless hero wore charcoal, light-plated armor with a helmet that covered down to their forehead's center. Their body was muscular, with lustrous brown eyes, and as they moved sweat fell from their black shoulder length hair, glistening in the smoky air. Joan jumped forward, spinning in the dirt as their blade glowed a brilliant white. With a flawless slash, they cut the head off one monster.

Even after coming to Afterworld, Joan remained as honorable as they had been on Earth, a saint fighting to protect the souls of all. There was no authority here that dictated their every choice. No church that demanded they act ladylike, and who ordered their death—sentencing them to be burned at the stake for the

sins of cross dressing, and of heresy, obeying the command of a stranger's voice. Though life here was a constant struggle, they took pleasure knowing they were free to be themselves; not only were they free, but they were fearsome.

Alongside Joan, one of the few remaining dragon slayers from Earth charged forward. Sigurd, the man who had slew the fire-breathing dragon Fafnir, wore a rough brown leather armor with thick white fur stained by a dark purple residue. He was slightly taller than Joan and his eyes were blue, like the color of the ocean when reflecting the hazy moonlight. Upon reaching the monster ahead, Sigurd rammed his sword through one of its eye sockets. More juices splattered across his body, and the beast screamed in pain. Before it could do much else, flames emanated from the hilt of his blade, and he cut through the creature as the blaze flowed from the sword and spread throughout its body. The beast's cry faltered, and its burned corpse fell with a thud.

As the war raged and its deathly cinders floated into the dusky sky, the pair danced forward in a flurry of embers composed of their inferno. The two warriors had both tamed their conquests; learned how to control and summon flames—the power granted to them by their essence after being reborn into this world. Their blades seared the flesh of the horrors ahead by weaving a firestorm of vibrant, radiant colors that crashed through the hordes like a conductor's musical symphony. The creatures scrambled, trying to dodge. Their fear showed briefly, but the hunger was so much greater, and with little more thought, they pushed on.

The legends advanced, cutting through the group by slashing their internal organs. Additional explosions erupted on the battlefield as the flames ignited the innards of the monsters' combustible dark energy. They continued without rest, burning and slashing through enemies in this war zone filled with traitorous humans and devilish beings alike. Neither had any remorse for the turncoats that fought alongside the creatures,

and they smiled as they cut them down, absorbing the souls of those who wore the insignia of a rose blooming from the center of a human skull. There was a sense of pride in destroying the defectors—in fulfilling their duty while protecting those besides them, and those who remained in the kingdoms behind what remained of the blockade. Even in the hells of war, the strongest among the fodder must learn to keep their pride.

Sigurd jumped high, propelled by flames he created. A hellish cry from a nearby creature cut through the battle like nails on a chalkboard. He sped towards it in a downward spiral, sinking his thick-edged broadsword through its throat. They locked eyes, and he smiled as he withdrew his blade, causing a gunky-purple fluid to shoot from the wound. The creature gargled until the faint spark in its obsidian eyes vanished.

There was no time to admire it.

The monstrosity had alerted others with its defiant roar, and an overwhelming number of its kin heeded the call that informed them, "Dinner's here!"

Joan cut down the first from the swarm, and then brought down two more, but not before being nicked on their top right collarbone. The creatures caught Sigurd in a more precarious position after his fancy landing. He slashed the air ahead and a wave of fire shot from his sword, scorching two and completely dusting another. But he couldn't react in time as two others were already swinging at him and Joan.

He didn't need to. Two men had noticed the situation after hearing the roar and went on the offensive.

"I have your right!" the first cried out, charging in and slashing the arm from the creature to Sigurd's right. The monster shrieked in agony as its dismembered limb spun through the air, letting loose a plum-colored mist that sprayed them both. The man who had severed it wore a full set of plated armor, and the parts that weren't sprayed with blood or ooze shined with a silver polish. On his back, he had a tattered white cape attached, with the symbol

of a red sword piercing the center space of a crown. It was the same insignia Joan had on their armor's backplate.

"I got ye left!" the other hollered. From his direction, a hatchet whistled by Joan and split the other beast's head open like a cabbage. The creature barely made a whisper as the hatchet hit its feeble-minded brain stem. It fell backward with a thud, and that was the last of its interactions upon this world or any other.

The man who threw the hatchet was short, with foggy gray eyes and thick, dirty blonde hair. Around his lips were burn scars that prevented parts of his blood-matted beard from growing in. He wore dark-leather armor with a light chain mail vest over it. Upon his back there was a symbol of an enormous, yellow-eyed serpent spewing green venom. It was the same mark that Sigurd had upon the front of his vest.

Both Joan and Sigurd sighed with relief.

"Be more careful. The two of you may be strong, but neither of you are alphas. You're only Gamma I, Joan, you can't get ahead of yourself like that," the man in the plated armor said.

"Gamma II now, sir," Joan said, panting. They pulled a gel from their right pocket and as they rubbed it onto the wound on their collarbone, their right forearm showed the Greek and Roman symbols for Gamma "Γ II".

The man lifted his visor. His face was thin, and his expression vexed as his lips slanted while his brows teetered towards the arch of his nose. The defined structure of his bones made him quite attractive, and the stark shade of blue in his eyes only added to that. A sweaty lock of light blonde hair stuck to his forehead.

"Gamma I or II, it doesn't matter," the man said, glowering. "Even Alpha's can become overwhelmed, Joan. We've lost plenty of people stronger than you for getting in over their head. The point is, you *both* need to be more careful. You may be a high Gamma Sigurd, and nearly a Beta, but even a brilliant strategist needs to learn how to focus more when you're in the

heat of battle. We can't afford to lose either of you in such an irresponsible manner."

Joan's reply was on the tip of their tongue, but the other man beat them to it.

"Arthur is right," he said, before tossing a couple of small hatchets at two other creatures. He hit them dead center, causing them to crash to the ground. Bending down, he pulled the one he tossed earlier from a nearby corpse. "We can't afford to lose ye or Sigurd over some irresponsible mishap. New Camelot, along with the outer blockade and veil, has fallen because of Valentine's betrayal. We now fight on the crest of moonlight and the light of distant galaxies. My kingdom of Kattegat is all that remains between here and Three Moons' Harbor. This is the final blockade and ye both need to learn how to fight smarter so that it remains."

"Sorry, Ragnarr," Sigurd said after a pause. "I get irritated when I'm unable to save those in front of me. I think to myself 'if only I were stronger', or 'if only I hadn't held back earlier, this may not have happened.'"

"It's hard, Sigurd. I understand that. But is it necessary to use ye abilities as much as ye've been, while tiring yerself out on these grunts that I'm able to end with a small hatchet? I think not. Ye're both more skilled than that. Save it fer when it matters. Hold out until we're fighting the dark gods and their guardians. That's the time to let loose. Going face to face with a god requires everything a person has, and many times that's not enough. If ye're worn out before the true fight begins, it'll be over before the first word. Think of that possibility, and the possibility of oblivion. If ye're gone, ye will protect no one. It's a twisted reality we've had to come to terms with after losing so many. I don't want to lose some of my closest friends to something that's preventable, ye hear?"

A shiver ran down the combatants' spines when they felt a vibration in the air. Everyone, the millions who were in

attendance, felt it. Two faerie folk flew past the small group in a hurry, gathering storm clouds in their wake. Their wings quivered, and the storm grew more fierce, but they fell, choking. A man jumped from the side of the valley and flew down, cutting the faeries' heads clean from their bodies. The storm clouds dissipated, and the man sheathed his sword as he landed. The war zone hadn't known silence for a long time, but in that moment, those within earshot heard the faeries bodies fall from the sky and tumble onto the fields of rotting corpses.

The man looked up and smiled at the kings ahead of him. He wore a dark magenta suit with crimson furls, along with a blood-red cape etched with the Dark Creator's mark: a skull wearing a crown of roses lifted by a dark hand.

"Protect?" he asked.

A couple of soldiers charged him.

"Stop!" Arthur yelled, but it was too late.

An invisible force gripped them. They grabbed at their throats, trying to breathe, but only coughed up blood. There was no saving them. They fell to the ground with their faces swelled like scarlet balloons. They laid dead, blood dripping from their bulged eyes. Even protecting their souls wasn't an option. Before anyone from the group could move, those same hungry beasts were upon them, devouring their bodies and essence like vultures.

"Valentine!" Ragnarr roared.

"See where holding a grudge gets you? It blinds you with rage. That's two less of the Cobalt Kingdom's men I'll have to deal with. This will surely bring delight to Dobrynya once he hears about it," he said with a devious smile. "Now, I'll ask again. What is it you think any of them will protect, Ragnarr? Sigurd and Joan won't be protecting a god's damn thing! None of you will. The time for choosing has arrived for us all. Join me under the blooming skull's banner, Ragnarr, Arthur. Your people can accompany us, and he will grant them mercy. The rose represents humanity's hope! Relinquish your past life, your loyalties to the gods who have

never been loyal to anyone but themselves, and join me. The Dark Creator's hand lifts us from death so that we may live once more. So that we may be reborn—reborn pure and as beautiful as red thorn laced roses."

"Joan, Sigurd, stay back," Arthur commanded. "Let's end this, Ragnarr, so that Dobrynya doesn't have to be a part of it."

Ragnarr nodded.

Arthur charged in, clenching his sword with two hands. Ragnarr followed, mirroring him by pulling a larger ax from his back.

"If we must, then so be it," Valentine said and redrew his sword.

Arthur jumped at him, and Ragnarr did the same, ready to split Valentine in half like a thick tinder block.

A powerful presence fell upon them, and the nearby men and women dropped as the pair charged. Joan and Sigurd stumbled, taking refuge against a large boulder. The kings knew what was going on, but even as the legions took their opportunity to pounce on those unable to move, they chose not to pause their assault. This was the time to let loose. If they could kill this man, perhaps a lot more would think twice about switching sides.

They continued ahead until they were only an arm's length away. Ragnarr put his whole might into a side swing, his veins and muscles full of blood and oxygen. Valentine smiled, and Ragnarr tripped. Valentine's power had gripped him, though not to the extent it did to those before him. He coughed blood, but steadied himself enough for one good swing. Before Ragnarr could finish, a force like a freight train hit him and sent him tumbling backward.

Unfazed by Valentine's conquest, Arthur ignored what happened to his companion and set his sights on the man's head. He was within reach and swung, but something grabbed his ankle from behind, pulling him back. His blade lost its reach and only cut a single strand of Valentine's hair that swayed in the breeze. The being that grabbed him swung him around and released, sending him flying.

As the two men tumbled backward, almost crashing into one another, Ragnarr regained his balance and slid in reverse. He caught Arthur's arm spinning him around, and throwing him back.

Arthur flew even faster, this time his attention fixed on the foe that had appeared between him and Valentine. With his blade held forward, Arthur jolted ahead. The challenger smiled and let out a nasally laugh while blocking Arthur's assault with its hand. The force made it slide a few steps backward.

Arthur retreated, swinging his body and landing a few paces away. Ragnarr had now caught up, and together they stared at the strange-looking god from the Dark Universe. It was a pale albino white, with slick amphibian skin. It had no hair, wore no clothes, and the only accessories it had were human eyes—hooked to it like deranged piercings. Its pale face that caved in the center, split vertically as it spoke.

"So these are alphas," it said, almost hissing with its nasally voice. "I like these kings. This will be fun."

Valentine clapped twice, and a cabal of sinister creatures materialized, as though they walked through the facade of reality itself. They stood about eight feet tall and bipedal, their demeanor composed, intelligent. Quite the difference from the others that crawled around searching desperately for their next meal. The barbaric creatures puffed their muscular necks while the rotting, festering flesh surrounding their eyes pulsated. The eyes turned in different directions and looked like grotesque figure eights as they glowed bright white. Their teeth, as dark as the blackened smoke-filled sky, shimmered with an otherworldly glow while making a high-pitched noise like excited male cicadas.

"Godly Guardians. A gift from the Dark Creator himself," Valentine said, and smirked.

"Sigurd!" Joan screamed harshly. Something muffled their words, and it sounded as if they were struggling to breathe.

The pair of kings looked back and saw that one creature had appeared behind them. It had hoisted Sigurd, piercing his stomach with its hand while the other gripped Joan's face in its mighty eight-fingered grasp. Even though he was barely alive, Sigurd let out a deafening scream of agony. His eyes burned with radiant light as the Godly Guardian breathed in a glow from his conquest mark. As the bright wave of energy ceased, the Gamma IX symbol vanished from his arm. Sigurd's eyes dissolved along with it. Smoke rose from his sockets and a sound like a smoldering fire came from his body before it turned to ash; his contorted features floated into the windy field.

The creature smiled and looked at the kings. Its tongue slithered as it licked the innards remaining on its hand.

They grimaced. Most of the kingdoms' armies froze within a 20-yard radius because of the god's presence. Almost all those remaining struggled to move, with vertigo taking hold of them.

"I gave you both a chance to end this without bloodshed. *We* gave you a chance," Valentine said.

"I'll give you another," Flat-Face said. "You're free to escape, and I'll release the hold I've put on your soldiers as long as—" he paused and smiled, looking over at Joan. "Forget it. Condition met. Bulwark's come of his own accord. Run along little meat sacks."

"If you see Dobrynya, tell him hi, and that I'll be seeing him soon," Valentine said, still smirking.

Those around regained composure and the guardian holding Joan burst in half after a blazing energy blasted through it. The severed hand fell away from Joan as a Bulwark zoomed by, wearing golden plated armor with pure white lacing. The heavysset god bellowed with anger past the two kings and towards Flat-Face while his armor clinked. Arthur and Ragnarr tried following, but the Godly Guardians met them. Ragnarr tossed a smaller hatchet at one and it bounced off like a rock hitting a concrete wall. Two guardians charged in after pulling

their black blades from behind the facade and swung. Arthur jumped in front and parried the first with his superior swordplay, but with the other blade coming fast, it forced him to defend. His silver blade shattered, and he barely evaded the strike. The edge of Ragnarr's ax, which he licked as Arthur guarded him, deteriorated as he jumped in with a heavy slash. As the ax connected with the neck of one guardian, the corroding venom broke through its hard shell and its head tumbled away with a repeating thud.

He went to strike the other guardian as Valentine approached with more, but Bulwark pushed them away. Not physically, but by thought. The god tasked with guarding this territory pushed against every human in the valley. The faeries that had accompanied them retreated as well, floating away and out of reach of their enemies.

"Ragnarr, Arthur, this will be the last time we see each other. I'm sending you two along with Joan to meet Dobrynya," Bulwark told them telepathically. *"Once gathered, go with everyone and meet with the faerie king. After the meeting, go to the Divine Mountains. That is where I'm sending those here. This blockade and the one watched by my sister Buttress are both lost. We will hold them off for as long as we can, but this will probably be the end of us both. We will give you time, but I can't divine how much it will be like my sister Fate. Do your best and fight with everything you have, and perhaps you, our children, can salvage this. It is up to you and Fate now."*

As they flew backward, they watched as Bulwark's hands locked with Flat-Face's. The dark god's pitted head split and curved both left and right, like two smiles as the hordes encompassed them. Thereafter, the image of the two gods meeting, along with the surrounding hellscape, vanished like a bad dream.