

AFTERWORLD

THE HAUNTED REALM BEYOND OUR STARS

Book One in the Next Life Series

**A NOVEL BY
JAMES G. ROBERTSON**

 **Next Life Universe**

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PREFACE

This is not a new book. I repeat, this is not a new book! If you've read *Afterworld* before, this is going to feel very similar, but there have been quite a few changes. I've expanded and changed the dialogue and there have been minor plot changes. The major differences you may see in this version vs. prior versions are more in-depth details surrounding the events of the war. There is also no more abrupt mind jumping, which goes a long way in helping this version of the book shine. Now you lose a small amount of insight from the other characters in some situations, but I still prefer this version and I think most of you will enjoy the much more fluid reading that you get with this edition.

So why did I go back through this *again*? There are two main reasons. The first is I think I've become a much stronger writer in these past three years. The POV jumping that was in the story before was confusing, and the amount of passive voice and switching from omniscient narrator back to character narrator was a little much. That's not to say I left it out completely as there is a reason for leaving it in sometimes, but I've trimmed it down a lot.

The main reason I went back through this was because I'm working on getting this audiobook ready. The amount of money that it costs to produce an audiobook is in the thousands for a full cast. I didn't want to put out something great in audio

quality, awesome in story, but lacking in prose. I hope the new reading experience reflects the month and a half I spent on this rewrite/edit. Throughout the pages, I've added a few more details that will allow you to become more immersed in your reading, and taken out a lot of repeats and junk that would slow you down. If you're wondering if this is the final copy, I wouldn't say so, but don't expect substantial additions in the coming years, (I mean it this time!)

As the great Stephen King put it:

"Until a writer either retires or dies, the work is not finished; it can always use another polish and a few more revisions.... How glad I am, Constant Reader, that we're both still here. Cool, isn't it?"

Well, at the very least, my story is still here. Maybe you're not a constant reader of mine, but a new reader, which the new cover and edit have both helped to grab your attention. If so, welcome. Enjoy the journey, the action, the sorrows—enjoy a look into the Next Life.

J.G.R 3/13/2023

In loving memory of J.R.D. A simple farmer and grandfather who always believed in me and whose work ethic inspired me to work to complete this book, knowing that I could do whatever I put my mind to so long as I was willing to work to see it through.

This book is written for the dreamers who question the world around them. For those that seek answers to the unknown. For those that yearn for a time when humanity will work towards reconciling its differences; and for those that just want to escape the mundane world around them.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any references to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales should not be taken as fact.

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PROLOGUE

I was like you once—oblivious to how the world works. What I'm going to tell those of you who listen is the truth about our universe, the real truth. Stories of gods have been repeated throughout human history, and while you've probably heard of a few of them, do you believe that those are all that have existed? Surely, there must be other deities out there that you're unfamiliar with. But let's imagine for a moment that you're a scholar, and you know of the gods from the more obscure religions, such as the Aztecs, Incas, or Mayans. Let's go even further and assume you know each from the Native American tribes.

Now ask yourself this question: did only one of these beings create the world? The universe? Or is there a more in-depth story here? What if I told you there's a verity that the prophets of our world have buried at their rulers' behest? But now you're wondering, what is it?

The fact of the matter is that although each doctrine seems separate, that's a fallacy. While each tale might appear dissimilar on the surface, they share a singular purpose that differs from anything that our deities led us to believe. The real justification for these religions has been to prepare us for what is ahead, while the true gods have defended our universe, fighting together to keep it safe.

“Safe from what?” you ask, “These are gods we’re talking about.”

Indeed, they are. But there are others, those that come from beyond worlds. I don’t mean that they come from galaxies, such as the Milky Way or Andromeda, but from a cosmos independent of our own. This place they come from is somewhere that we cannot see or reach, no matter how far we travel; another dimension, if you will. This isn’t a time paradox of multiple Earths or various reflections of our universe. No, these other universes are whole and complete in their own right and complexity, and these beings formed their own worlds in how they saw fit, as ours had done.

Those other gods, however, are not as forgiving or as merciful as our own. That statement holds much truer now that they’ve directed their sights at our universe. Sure, our creators may have established a timeless conflict and abandoned our world, but at the end of it all, it appears most of them have cared for us in doing so. This may be a confusing statement, and you may rebuke that by looking at the violence that religion causes, and of the countless tragedies that are still taking place upon our world; for this, I couldn’t blame you.

So why then? For what purpose was this dissension created through different yet very similar religions? Numerous of these religions share several prophets, and arguably worship the same god—yet their followers fight for the same land; why is this? One cannot help but contemplate this enigmatic debacle. And if one dares to call the other fake, they may as well be declaring that of their own. Many have and still continue to make this critical error.

So, what is the solution to this conundrum? The answer, while complicated, is straightforward. It is all to prepare humanity for what’s ahead. While the gods wished for us to live peaceful lives, they also needed to breed warriors. The universe, *our universe*, needs soldiers and fighters. The ongoing struggle hasn’t been a

fight for life on Earth, but a battle for our very existence. For these other deities desire nothing more than to make all bow down to them. This includes our gods and their creations. This, includes you.

PART ONE

AFTERWORLD



CHAPTER I

BEGINNING OF THE END

Drifting—falling through the sky—a young man opened his eyes to what seemed to be nothing more than a dream. The man had often dreamed lucidly. Sometimes, it was more vivid than others, but he always understood who he was and felt that once again, his mind was making up stories. Looking straight up at the moonlit clouds, he smiled as the cool breeze brushed upon his body, causing his hair to flutter.

This is some dream, the man thought.

Then he contemplated it some more. While he had lucid dreams, this was different. Even if he had experienced severe pain, absolute pleasure, and tasted the most divine dishes one could ask for in his fantasies, there was always a slight blur to them; some aspect that looked or... felt cloudy. Something he couldn't quite comprehend, and he'd usually awake from it with little difficulty. But that wasn't the case this time.

It is a dream, isn't it?

As his daze wore off, the man became more aware of his surroundings and started slapping his cheeks in order to wake himself. To his dismay, the pain was immediate, sharp. He then pinched his arms, but only felt the genuine sensation of doing so.

Wha... what the hell! What's going on? Why am I falling through the damn sky?

The man rolled over and looked down. The wind blasted his eyes. His heart hammered as the fear took hold with its withering grip. It was almost impossible for him to see anything at all.

Quick gasps; panicked breaths. Each time he inhaled, oxygen-rich air filled his lungs.

He squinted as his eyes dried from the cool, salty gale. By forcing them to stay open, he could discern the surroundings below. In the closing distance to his north, he saw a large forest, and a nearby shoreline partially covered with snow. Underneath him, he was falling towards a substantial body of water. He had no clue where he was. The terrain was unrecognizable, and what he was seeing and feeling didn't match up. The tepid air full of oxygen confused him; he knew the air at this height wasn't supposed to be like this.

He couldn't give it much thought, for as he darted towards the ground, there was one factor that remained evident: wherever he was, gravity was still in control.

I need to figure something out, fast. Which should I shoot for? Will the snow be deep enough? Can the trees break my fall without breaking me in the process? I'm closer to the water, and it's the easier target. Hell, at this rate, I can't be sure I'd make the forest or the snow. Think. Damn it!

It was a tough decision, and the only experience he had for skydiving was a short video he had seen online. He thought back to it, trying to remember something—anything.

"... If your parachute fails and somehow the backup fails, there is a slim, but possible chance you will survive. If you want proof, look no further than Vesna Vulovic, who survived falling over 33,000 feet. What you want to do is aim for the softest thing you can locate and relax your body as much as possible. This is so you can avoid as much damage to your internal organs as you can. Remember that tensing your body is likely to cause more stress and lead to further injuries. There isn't any guarantee you will walk away if that happens, but let's hope it never comes to that."

That asshole, smirking of all things while explaining that? Well, ok. This is crazy, but I don't have time to debate with myself. I'll have to take my chances; screw it, the water it is. I'll need to make a slight

bend at the knees. If I'm able to go in feet first (that's a big if), I may negate enough of the impact so that my spleen doesn't rupture, and hopefully, I'll be able to move afterward. Likely this is all a frivolous endeavor, but what else am I supposed to do?

With the water closing in on him fast, he let out a controlled breath. The wind now seemed to pound his face even harder, and his arms shook from the stress. As he approached ground level, he took one final deep breath in. His stomach knotted as the fresh air entered, knowing it could very well be the last; it was crash or swim.

Impact. There was a big splash, and everything faded to black.



By now you're probably asking yourself how the man ended up falling from the sky, or better yet, who he is? His name is Leon D. Michaels, an average twenty-four-year-old college student living at home with his dad. Leon had a job at a delivery service while attending college and working towards his bachelor's degree. His life was ordinary, not much different from yours really, until an average day turned out to be one that would start him down a road to an unknown destination.

Spring break, 2020. Why did that damn COVID virus have to show up and ruin my plans? Leon thought as he drove through the rocky country road of NW 30th Ave, west of a little town called Iuka, Kansas. *Well, at least this gives me a chance to do some camping and a little fishing. It seems like it's been ages since I visited grandpa's spot, our secret little get away. Isn't that what he always called it? I'll have to go visit my friends down in Laredo next year. South Padre can wait a year for us, and then we can go wild.*

His grandparents' place was a little less than an hour's drive from where he lived. After driving for about 45 minutes, he pulled

over near a small gate. Opening the truck's door, the dry Kansas air dusted his face.

Best state? My ass. Whoever in my elementary school changed the lyrics of Fifty Nifty United States to make it say Kansas is the best of the 50 states clearly hasn't done much traveling. But you know what? I'm actually excited about this little trip down memory lane.

Leon approached the gate and grabbed the lock. The rough texture of a dirt-coated metal greeted his finger tips. A metallic ring rang in his ears as he struck the lock against the fence, causing dirt to fall from the keyhole. Rummaging through his pocket, he found the old key, inserted it, and then turned.

Click.

He removed the lock and opened the gate. The name "Michaels" broke away in two parts as he opened it.

Your buddy boy has made it, grandpa, he said, smiling.

He hopped back in his little black GMC Sonoma and drove through the gate's entrance before parking near an old oak tree. Dry air greeted his lungs as he took another deep breath after exiting the truck's cabin a final time.

Still the same. Not sure why I expected anything different. I only wish dad could have joined me, but with his hip still healing, there's no way he could have made the hike. I guess I'll try to catch enough for the both of us.

He moved to the back of the truck and pulled his pack, pole, and the fishing bait from within it.

Everything's still packed tightly. Now it's time for the hike to our secret spot.

With a single step forward, the dry dirt crunched under his hiking boots. It was the first of many, and Leon knew he would have to hike a few miles to reach the location he and his grandpa used to camp at. He had left early enough so that he could enjoy the morning temps. It was still dark out, and only a thin light from the horizon brightened the morning sky with a purple radiance.

Along the way, he came across certain bushes he and his grandpa had always used as location markers. Leon thought it was neat when he was little, and his grandpa hoped it would be useful. His plan was that if they got separated, he could meet him at one of the safe spots. It wasn't as if the trek was necessarily perilous; it was pretty straightforward and primarily flat, being in Kansas. The most significant danger was the coyotes who would usually only come out in the dead of night, and he knew they were ordinarily more afraid of you than you'd be of them. Monitoring his surroundings was just something his grandfather had taught him.

"Always take care and be safe rather than sorry. Create mental markers and be aware of your surroundings; utilize them when you need to. Not everywhere is going to be as tranquil and safe as home," he would tell Leon.

About thirty minutes after starting his hike, he reached their old spot. A soft morning light bounced from the pond's ripples as they danced in the gentle breeze. It was as he remembered it: beautiful and, most of all, relaxing. The melodic sound from the stunning tree line soothed him as their branches creaked like teeter totters. Even as the sun steadily rose, the nearby frogs continued to croak absentmindedly. Leon walked over to the nearby patch of honeysuckles that remained and plucked a few small stems from the bush. He put them between his teeth, sucking on them while unpacking.

The sweet nectar hitting his tongue reminded him of a house he had lived in when he was little. There was a honeysuckle bush right by the porch.

It was like today's weather. The wind was blowing, which made the honeysuckle bush scrape the siding, and then those crazy horny toads peered from underneath it! Strange little guys. The one with the orange and gray colors even let me rub its head. It almost fell asleep on me, blinking in a daze from the sensation.

Leon continued thinking back on it. He had only stopped petting the horny toad for a moment before it scurried off out of sight. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen one of them in the wild. Kansas used to be filled with horny toads, but now they were scarce.

Probably another consequence of our actions in this world.

He put the memory in the back of his mind as he finished setting up his tent. The red and white material sparkled in the morning sun as he hammered in the last stake. After admiring his work, he grabbed his fishing pole from nearby, hooked a worm, and cast the line.

It really is a wonderful morning, he thought, stretching out by the pond. A cool mist-filled breeze off the pond's water danced as it greeted Leon's dry face while the sun's steady ascent warmed him to the core. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt so relaxed. It seemed like everything was perfect for today.

His grandpa loved to fish, but they never spent much time together when Leon was growing up. Living out of state for most of his life was hard on their relationship. It meant the only time Leon ever got to see his grandpa was during the holidays. Now that he was back living in that small Kansas town, he decided he wanted to try to enjoy the simple things more. The most exciting thing that would ever happen there would be the local crazy guy trying to mow your lawn. Most people didn't complain, as he was usually careful, and smiled while he pushed the mower from one yard to the next.

Thinking on it, he remembered a phrase his grandpa would say on those rare occasions he would get to spend time with him:

"The sun burns bright, makes a man just right."

It was his grandfather's mantra, and he would always repeat it when they were out on a beautiful day, doing chores or just relaxing in the shade. Though they didn't get to do much relaxing, as his grandfather was an extremely hard worker and was almost always busy.

I miss you, gramps. It's been rough without ya.

A cool breeze sent a shiver across Leon's spine and he looked up, greeted by droplets of rain. His heart raced as he saw the sky above.



Still a few miles away from his grandparents' old cabin, Leon watched the clouds gather and darken. The wind howled, and the heavens cracked with a thunderous roar from above. He quickly double-checked his tent stakes, making sure they were hooked tight, and then rushed inside the tent. The light droplets from before turned into a savage flurry.

Best I stay here and try to ride it out. The cabin's far, and the trucks further; at least here I have some shelter.

Leon heard something slam into the side of his tent, and he peeked outside. He had forgotten to pack up his fishing pole during the commotion, and the intense Kansas wind had thrown it. The barb on the end caught on the tent lining and it was whirling all around, pounding against the ground. The little worm that was hooked on to it slipped off, blowing away as the storm's gusts continued to fling the pole in every direction.

The line snapped, and the pole flew away—slamming into a nearby tree where he heard it shatter to pieces.

Damn it! I just bought that pole.

He looked ahead. The pond had flooded and the toads from before darted to higher ground. Overhead in the skies above his small shelter, the clouds were rotating; his heart thrashed against his chest. He knew the way the clouds were spinning was a terrible sign, but this was even worse in the tornado-prone state of Kansas.

I've got to move. There's no getting around it. I've got to go now!

A barrage of raindrops pelted him as soon as he stepped out to run towards the far-off cabin.

First COVID ruins my trip, and now this? What a great time to go on vacation!

The rainstorm continued to turn even more disastrous as Leon strained to even see a few feet ahead. In terms of visibility, it was now equivalent to a whiteout blizzard. Water seeped into his pants from where he ran through puddles. The cold and merciless rain from above continued beating Leon and anything it encountered. He ran his hardest, trying to get to his grandparents' cottage. He was out of breath and shivering within minutes, soaked from head to shin, thankful for his waterproof boots.

He stumbled forward, barely recovering from a powerful gust that blasted him from the north. The rain that hit him felt like tiny glass shards, cutting small layers of his skin away. The meadows ahead had become like a shallow swamp, but he couldn't turn back. Submerging his shoes, he sloshed through the trenched area.

All Leon could think about was that old Bruce Lee quote:

"You must be shapeless, formless, like water. When you pour water in a cup, it becomes the cup. When you pour water in a bottle, it becomes the bottle. When you pour water in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can drip, and it can crash. Become like water, my friend."

His teeth chattered with a smile as he ran forward.

I'm not sure about becoming water, but it sure feels like it's becoming a part of me.

In a cold, numbing distance, he could see it. The hazy facade of his grandparents' raggedy old cottage was just ahead. He continued onward, feeling not only a numb sensation but also a strange tingling throughout his body.

I should be there in two minutes, maybe fewer than that. Hopefully, things settle down, and I can get in there, start the fire up, and

prevent myself from getting in a bad spot. This numb-tingly sensation isn't my idea of a good time.

His body began feeling as though small daggers were penetrating it.

Am I getting hypothermia? What the hell is going on?

As the question crossed his mind, the aberration surged through his body. As soon as it was there, it was gone, and so was he.



Leon opened his eyes. Immediately, they stung from the dark, salty depths. He pushed down with his arms, hoping what he was swimming towards was the surface, but then paused.

This is something I can control. Don't rush, be smart. What were those diving classes in college for if you're just going to panic in the water?

After composing himself, he puckered his lips and sent air out. Sure enough, he felt little air bubbles go in the same direction he was swimming, and he knew he was moving towards the surface.

His lungs sweltered as he began swimming again, blowing out what little air remained as he rose to avoid decompression sickness. Even as his lungs burned like the sun, he knew he couldn't stop. Above, the sound of waves swishing back and forth intensified.

Almost there. You can do this. A few more strokes and...

At last, he broke through the warm salty reaches of the abyss. He coughed hard, choking as water escaped his lungs while gasping to replace it with air. Steadily, he moved his hands and legs in unison, treading water to recover. After his lungs were clear, he took his time to look around and get his bearings.

It looks like I'm about half a mile off the shoreline. That's not too bad for some improbable last-minute preparation from someone

who's never skydived. It also seems that somehow, I'm in one piece, which is pretty impressive, all things considered.

He wasn't completely sure if he was alright, but he was conscious and able to move, which was good enough for him. He knew there was little chance he would get out of this situation scot-free, and so he moved ahead.

I need to hurry and reach the coast before something goes wrong. I'm sure I'll be feeling pain from the impact of the landing. If you can call whatever that was a landing. It's a miracle I'm in as good of shape as I am, though a lot of it is probably the adrenaline.

As he swam towards the coast, he felt the water cool ever so slightly. Upon reaching the shore's waters, his breath was visible. It felt as if he was swimming through the arctic.

"Fi...nn...nally, land!"

Leon shivered, crawling ashore. His teeth continued to chatter as he glanced around. Fresh snowfall crunched under his weight as he stood. Peering around, he saw nothing useful. It was as he had seen from the sky—a substantial forest next to a snow-covered shoreline, connected to what seemed to be an endless ocean. He had to decide what to do.

Which do I go with? When I was falling, I saw nothing significant on the shoreline; no villages, buildings, nothing at all for miles. Then again, I couldn't see much in the forest either.

Leon considered.

It's a gamble, but I guess I'll take my chances with the forest. There's more likely to be something useful there—a stream, or some sort of food. It's a risk, but it's one I'll have to take.

Leon took a deep frigid breath of air and headed towards the immense dark forest ahead. As he first entered, the tall dark trees reminded him of Lemon Park's nature trail in Pratt, Kansas. Leon and his friends from high school would walk the paths there at night—on the hunt for the rumored cults that fancied it for their sacrifices, or if they couldn't find them, they were more than willing to settle for a ghost or two. During this, he would often

sing them the Ghostbusters! theme song. He smiled, but keeping his condition in mind, he hurried as fast as he was able through the dark woods.

Dirt and leaves crunched under his shoes as he moved ahead, and oddly enough, he noticed the further he moved away from the snow on the shoreline, the warmer it got. After traveling a respectful distance, he heard the gentle rain and the croaking of ravens up ahead. Continuing forward, the light rain pelted his shoulders, and a sudden movement to his left caused Leon to jump. Listening, he heard an owl pass close by overhead.

“Watch it!” he yelled after it.

The outburst caused him to pant, and he was starting to feel the effects of the fall.

With his body feeling more exhausted, he paused to catch his breath. Looking around, the darkness lingered, but a small clearing in the trees lit the space ahead of him. Broken branches littered the area, and some sort of crater nearby caught his gaze; everything around him was a mess. With a clearing in the trees, he looked up. The clouds had cleared, and he noticed the moon... or was it moons?

Two moons? What the hell is going on?

The two moons entranced him, lighting the sky with their white spectacle. Oddly enough, Leon couldn't see any stars and... his heart sank as he backed away. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something he wished he hadn't—a corpse. A tree branch had punctured the body belonging to a young Caucasian man and was holding him high in the treetops. They had an etched symbol of a sword piercing the center of a crown on their right sleeve. The body had recently rotted, and both of the man's eyes were missing as dried blood stuck to his cheeks. As Leon continued his gaze, a raven swooped down and joined another in picking the flesh clean.

Gagging, Leon clenched his mouth shut. Without knowing where he was or when his next meal would be, he forced the vomit back down with a rancid swallow.

Would this have been my fate had I tried for the trees? I guess I'm the lucky one.

The adjacent rustling of leaves put him on edge. After seeing the dead man in the tree, he didn't dare wait around to find out what the mysterious sound was. He turned and ran—running until his body was numb. Tired, exhausted, soaked, and likely in shock, he tried to recall how he got here and why?

What exactly happened to me? I was... camping? Then a storm broke out. None of this makes any damn sense!

It was all still fuzzy to him. Unable to see much in front of him, a wet tree root caught his foot, and Leon tripped across another small crater. He felt a sharp pain and the world around him spun. With his body no longer able to handle the stress it was enduring, he drifted into a state of unconsciousness.



"H... c... hear... ok?"

Disoriented, Leon smelled something wonderful. It was a sweet aroma, the scent of roses.

"Can you hear me? Are you ok?" a tender voice asked.

He opened his eyes. The face of a cute girl appeared directly over him, lit by candlelight, peering down. Her eyes were nearly the color of emeralds. After opening his eyes, an expression of genuine relief crossed her face. Leon guessed the girl was around his age; perhaps two or three years younger at most. Her strawberry blonde hair hung past her shoulders and tickled his nose. She blinked while staring at him. He stared back at her, enchanted, but then sat up to sneeze.

The sensation faded after sitting up, and he looked around while scratching his nose. The first thing he noticed was that they were in some sort of old cabin with a single door. Inside the dilapidated one-room shelter there was rust on the metal sink, and termite damage on the window lining. The single window's glass panel had cracked, and outside, all he could see were the dark trees of the forest.

After searching behind him, he noticed they weren't alone. An older man who appeared to be in his late forties to early fifties was on the other side of the room near an empty, cobweb-dusted bookshelf.

Where am I, really? And who are these people? I wake up on some gorgeous girl's lap, and then nearby I've got mister salt and pepper built like a linebacker. Maybe father and daughter? He looks like he's been through a war or something with all those scars, and then there's this.

Leon reached for the intravenous line running from his arm to the girl that was watching over him. The young woman grabbed his hand and stopped him.

"Wait, you shouldn't pull that out. Not just yet," she told him.

He pulled back.

"What's going on? What is this place?" Leon asked her.

"It's as we expected, Vance. He's a fresh arrival."

The man looked back at the girl with a mixture of annoyance and regret on his face.

"What's your name, kid?" he asked, approaching Leon.

"It's Leon."

"Well, Leon, I'm Vance."

The grim look adorning his face made Leon feel something was wrong. But when it came down to it, he knew even if he asked, there would be no answer.

"And the one you've got to thank for saving your life, well, that would be Krysta."

Saved my life? What the hell is this guy talking about?

"What do you mean saved my life? And why are you giving me a blood transfusion? How could you possibly know my blood type? There's no medical equipment here, and no offense, but this place is less than adequate for anything of the sort."

"Damn freshie," Vance said with a repressed smile. "You should count your blessings little miss Krysta and I found you. We found you passed out with a temperature well above a hundred, and you had three cracked ribs to boot. Gods know what else was wrong with you."

Leon scrunched his brows, confused. If he had been in shock with adrenaline in his system, then perhaps he could have overlooked the issues with his body. Still, he knew well enough that a simple blood transfusion wouldn't be enough to fix those issues.

"Bullshit! I don't have a fever, and I certainly don't have any damn pain or broken ribs."

"Freshies," Vance clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Always the same," he stared at Leon the same way someone would look at an ignorant child. "Do you know where you are, kid? Do you even know the country we're in?"

Before Leon could answer, Vance spoke again.

"No, you don't, and do you know why that is? It's because we're not even on Earth anymore!"

Leon stared blankly. He sat there, shaking his leg, distressed.

"Look, I don't mean to scare you. Let me just explain a few things, kid. This place, well, it doesn't have any official name. You can call it Earth Two for all I care. Whatever makes you feel at ease. Second, this place is where spirits go after they've bitten it on old blue. The spirits sent to this realm are imprinted with what they had done before they died, including the circumstances of their death. Finally, the third... it's basically the same point as the second, but the most important part of it is that if you're here, you're dead."

Dead? I'm... dead? Leon thought, still foggy about what had happened on his grandparent's property. It wasn't the strangest

thing he had heard, and after falling from the sky in another world, it was at least a somewhat plausible explanation, if you wanted to call that plausible.

"If I am dead, then... where are we, really?"

Vance looked at him, discouraged. "Listen, you're ok now, but there are things I need to explain to you and not a lot of time to do it. So please, just listen."

Leon nodded, as Krysta removed the IV. He was expecting an exit wound, but there was no wound or blood drip at all.

"Here's the deal," Vance said in an even more serious tone. "This world is like Earth in a lot of ways, but in many others, it's not. First, let me explain how Krysta saved you. When she was alive, doctors diagnosed her with cancer that later killed her. Long story short, because it was cancer that killed her, and cancer is a disease that manipulates your cells and body malevolently, she can now heal people. Though, in her case, her aptitude for it isn't enough to do it without her blood being in direct contact with someone.

"To put it simply, she has learned to control what killed her, conquered it if you will, and thus gained the ability to heal. From our knowledge, there is nothing to be done about what power you first receive. It all depends on the circumstances of your life and of your death."

That's simple? Leon thought, eyes wide in disbelief. Yet, he allowed Vance to continue.

"There are multiple conquests out there of different varieties. Say you died from old age. You could come to this world with your youth renewed in your prime. You could also get super-like strength, agility, and endurance from being killed in such a way because of the fragility of old age. Not everyone gets that lucky, of course. Some are considerably more normal and have relatively useless attributes carved into their spirit. For example, many have died from heart attacks of different sorts. Say, for example, someone ate too much junk food and died from heart disease,

then most would get nothing significant for it. But everyone's body here, regardless of what killed them, is more durable than on Earth."

Leon was even more confused.

"Mostly, a person's death seems to affect people much more than a person's life. Though, on rare occasions, it's the other way around from which they get their conquest. Think of posthumous military promotion for how conquests work. Soldiers struggle to gain rank while in the military. Still, if they die doing something heroic or impactful, the military may give them a few ranks in death that they were seeking in life.

"As for myself? I died from a heart attack, but of a different kind. I had come from a family with hereditary heart disease, but like hell I was going to let that stop me from doing what I enjoyed. So, one day, I was out snowboarding alone, and then, well... maybe I should have paid more attention to my doc. There are consequences for every action; I had a heart attack, and that's how I ended up here. Usually, this wouldn't mean much, however, I worked with what my spirit granted me and trained my ass off. I can now increase my heart rate and blood flow. Since I also died while under the effects of adrenaline, I can now release it whenever needed and feel no adverse effects. This allows me to not get worn out as quickly as most people because of the rate at which oxygen travels throughout my body. It also gives me a pretty significant strength boost."

Leon had enough.

"You're kidding me, right?" he looked at Vance as if he was clearly out of his mind after taking one too many magic mushrooms.

Vance, noticing this look, smirked and moved over to an old metal wood-burning stove in the cottage. "Come over here, kid."

Leon hesitantly stood up and walked over to him.

"Lift it," Vance told him, pointing at the stove.

Leon looked at the man as if he was crazy but indulged him in his request. He put his hands under the metal stove and tried with all his might to lift it, but only got it a few centimeters off the ground.

"Heavy, ain't she?" the man smirked. He motioned for Leon to move to the side and then lifted the stove over his head with ease. After a moment of holding it, the man sat it back down as if it was a small office chair.

Leon looked at Vance, awestruck. He wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't witnessed it firsthand.

"Now, not everyone is like this. In fact, most people are normal. So kid, tell me, how did you make it here? And what led you to be in that awful state we found you in?"

"Well... I'm not completely sure how I came to be in this position. I woke up falling from the sky and, well..."

"From the sky?" Krysta asked, amazed.

"The hell? How did that happen? Did you have a heart attack while on a plane or something? No wonder you were in that rough of shape," Vance said.

"So that's not what happened to you and Krysta?"

"No, we were just—" Vance paused. The sound of movement came from the woods outside. "This way, quickly," he snapped in a whisper.

Leon, bewildered, rushed after Vance and Krysta as they approached the decrepit bookshelf. Vance pulled it towards him, revealing an opening in the wall and then blew out the candles in the room.

"Hurry, come on," Krysta urged. Leon followed her into the opening. Vance pulled the bookshelf back into place before turning to face Leon.

"Let's go," Vance said. "Do you remember when I told you to be glad we found you? It's because there are a lot less friendly people out there."



Hurrying, the small group traversed down the damp, rocky tunnel lit by strange yellow lights flickering between the cracks of the surrounding rock. The moist ground beneath their feet echoed throughout the passage as they moved along. Leon looked at the clumps of moss hanging sporadically throughout the stony walls. The plethora of different colors amazed him. Turquoise, scarlet red, there were so many varieties.

For a while, the group said nothing as they progressed, until Leon broke the silence with a question.

"So, you said there are less friendly people; what exactly did you mean?"

"Well," Vance said. "I'll start by explaining a few more crucial details you probably haven't noticed. Check under your right forearm."

Leon turned his arm over. A black tattoo of a question mark stared back.

"What does it mean?" Krysta asked. "I've never seen one like this before."

"A question, huh? That's odd," Vance said. "Usually, there would be another symbol there. Greek and Roman symbols are the most common for whatever reason. Do you remember what happened that brought you here?"

Leon tried to remember, but all he could see was white. That didn't comfort him, as he knew more than likely it was his neurons firing off one last time before he bit the dust.

"I don't really know."

"Makes sense, I guess," Vance continued. "Since conquest ranks are usually based on overcoming your death, to not know what killed you is to not know your new self."

Leon stumbled forward as a loud boom came from behind, startling him and the group. Vance caught him and motioned for them to move quicker.

"We should speed things up," Vance said.

"What was that?" Leon asked.

"That was the not-so-nice people," Krysta said.

"We should assume they have found the entrance to this little shortcut of ours and proceed with haste," Vance said.

"What do they want?" Leon asked nervously as they jogged forward.

"They're probably looking for slaves. The world isn't all butterflies and roses, I'm afraid," Vance said. "Now, do you want to know about your tattoo and conquests or not?"

Leon nodded.

"Well, ok then. As I said before, Krysta has a healing conquest, which is also a passive conquest and cannot change. Look at her arm."

Krysta, who was wearing a pink and black striped hoodie, rolled up the tattered sleeve on her right arm. Underneath, there was the Ω symbol.

"What does that mean?" Leon asked, examining her tattoo.

"This is the symbol for Omega," Krysta replied. "Omega represents the lowest level conquest, and since there's no number after it, we must assume it to be zero. It means my rank will never increase, no matter what I do."

"So it is what it is, basically? Nothing more, nothing less?"

"That would be correct," Krysta replied. Her voice and the grim expression on her face showed either fear or annoyance. Leon couldn't tell which.

After moving through different tunnels that split in varying directions, they reached an ending with a door. It glowed with an aquatic turquoise-gold shimmer.

"What is this?" Leon asked.

"You sure ask a lot of questions," Vance replied with a brief smile. "This is what's known as impervious rock. Though being more accurate, impervious metal would be a better name. One of the greatest scientific minds in this world developed it. That mind, combined with all the raw materials of this world, it's easy to see how something like this could exist."

Vance picked up a nearby rock and threw it towards the metal structure. The rock bounced off the wall and shook, until it dissolved.

"It's called impervious for a reason," Vance smirked. "Lucky for us, we have a lookout on the other side." He pushed a small button on the control pad near the door.

"Who is it? State your business," a scratchy voice said from a nearby speaker. As soon as he asked, the speaker started floating. An attached camera with a wide lens and copper frame roamed over the group. "Vance and Krysta, eh? And who is the kid?"

"The kid's a guest of mine. I found him in the abandoned forest," Vance replied.

"Ok, ok, clearance granted. Though I have to say the king is not too happy with how late you are."

Leon was wondering what he meant by the abandoned forest, and who this king was, but before he could ask, the impervious rock shook. The door turned a translucent golden color, and Krysta walked through. He could still see her silhouette on the other side, but the shimmering fluid distorted it in a way like that of a shower door.

"Walk through it," Vance said, motioning Leon forward.

After a moment's hesitation, Leon approached the door. His hand shook as it got close to the strange material. Vance pushed him through to the other side, and he felt a strange, almost gel-like fluid move over his body as he passed through. Vance followed Leon, and the door behind them turned back to its original aquatic state.

The other side was far different from what he was expecting. Scorched earth, lava pits, and even a snowy mountain range filled his vision. One mountain near the center of the encampment looked like a volcano with a castle connected to it, but where it connected, Leon couldn't tell.

"Welcome to Hell," Vance told Leon, as that grim look returned to his face.

Leon gave him a half-smile before a sharp pain radiated from the back of his head. His vision clouded, and then, there was nothing.

CHAPTER II

THE RUSE

Leon opened his eyes to what felt like Déjà vu. Lying on the ground, the earth beneath him warmed his dusty face; its comforting embrace felt like a heated blanket against his bare skin. After a moment's rest, he sat up and began wiping what looked like a mixture of dirt and ash from his body. Looking around, he saw that he was contained within a large cage. Strange bars ran up, down, and across, like that of checkerboard fencing; it looked to be constructed of the same material he had walked through earlier.

Only a short time had passed since he'd been in this strange world, and he was already a prisoner; trapped alongside a few others like an animal inside this strange enclosure near a town-like camp with boiling lava pits. There were more cages filled with people in the middle of the camp, and the one thing that Leon noticed they all had in common was that the captives were frail and looked dispirited.

He continued by wiping his face, and then moved his hand to the back of his head.

"Ouch!" he moaned, jerking his hand away. After touching the back of his head, pain shot from a tender spot near the base of his skull.

"Are you ok, son?" an old man asked with a tender voice, approaching him and helping him up.

"What the hell's going on?"

"Well, where to begin?" the old man pondered.

"Anywhere you'd like is fine by me. I don't think we're going anywhere fast."

"Well, you see, you've been captured by a pair of hunters."

"A pair of what?"

"Hunters," the old man said again. "They're a group of people who collect weaker targets and bring them back here. New arrivals, such as yourself by the looks of your clothes, are the easiest prey. No one wears clothes like that here without some sort of insignia on them. Similar, yes, but it's not like they're wearing designer brands or anything that spectacular."

"Well, what do people here wear then?"

"Usually someone will wear clothing to associate them with which domain they are a part of. So freshies, or fresh arrivals, are easy to spot and easy targets," the old man finished.

Vance and Krysta had regular clothes on, but if what this old man is saying is true, it must have been a ruse to blend in and avoid being asked questions. Damn it! How could I have been so stupid? Pretty girl, and a stern old man. Is that all it takes?

Leon looked at the cage again.

Impervious rock, was it?

Moving his hand around through the ash and dirt, he felt a small pebble. He picked it up and tossed it at the bars. The results were the same as before: it bounced off and dissolved.

"What are they going to do with us?"

The old man looked at him. "Well, it all depends on who's paying for you and what you have to offer."

"What I have to offer? What are you talking about?"

"How long have you been here?"

Leon looked around. He couldn't tell if it was still the same night or how long he'd been knocked out, or even if there was a day and night system in this world.

"Only a day, I figure."

"I see. Well, I'm sorry you're in this position. At least in my experience, it doesn't get much better for us any way you cut it.

There are also a lot worse places than this that you could have ended up in."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you see—" the old man began, but was cut off as a section of the bars turned into the golden material that Leon had walked through before.

Two men entered, wearing identical uniforms with the symbol of a prestigious-looking snow leopard standing above a volcano. One of them was Vance.

"Your time is up, Trytho," the unknown man said. "Someone paid a hefty amount for your conquest. Which one is Trytho again?"

"That one there," Vance said, pointing to the old man.

The other man grabbed Trytho. At first, the old man struggled, but soon stopped when he realized he couldn't break free of the guard's grasp. The second guard handed Trytho to Vance, who then led him outside.

Leon tried to follow, but the other guard grabbed him and launched him back with what seemed like immeasurable strength.

"Vance, what's going on? What are you doing?" Leon asked, almost desperately.

The other guard laughed. "Settle on down, freshie. You're such a fool if you haven't figured it out by now. I hope you had an enjoyable life because your fate was sealed from the moment you came into this world. The king has ordered us not to kill our precious merchandise, but if you won't behave, well..." he licked his lips and smiled. Only the man's green rotting teeth could be seen through his helmet, but radiated such pleasure. "I don't think they would miss a few pieces of you here and there."

"That's enough, Enzo. Let's go," Vance said.

Enzo continued to grin while backing out of the cage.

"Remember, freshie, keep quiet or your little bits are all mine."

As the bars turned back to their aquatic state, he took his right hand and made a scissoring motion over the index finger of his left.

What the hell am I gonna do?

Leon watched in dismay as the two guards hauled their captive towards a colossal front gate that moaned as it opened. Another man walked into the kingdom's inner territory and moved to meet with the group. This newcomer wasn't wearing the same type of uniform as Vance and Enzo. He had a somewhat similar attire, but the symbol Leon could just make out was a dark hand holding up a skull with a rose blooming from the top.

"This is what you've paid for," Vance told the man. "It's an Upsilon three user with a fortifying conquest. Would you like to have him transported or—"

"I thought we agreed upon a Sigma five? You're telling me I traveled all this way for an Upsilon three?"

"It's what we could get on such short notice. Do you want it or not?" Vance asked.

The man contemplated with a moment's pause.

"Very well, it will have to do. You need to at least prove the conquest is the same as promised."

Vance stepped over to the man and pulled out what had looked like a small knife made of solid gold. He plunged it into his own leg and then pulled it out, keeping a straight face and showing it to the outsider.

"The blade is good, yes?" he asked as his blood dripped from it.

The man, looking shocked, nodded.

Vance then lunged toward Trytho's head with the blade.

"Trytho!" Leon yelled, gripping the cage. It burned his hand, and he pulled away. Ignoring the pain, he watched in surprise as the blade shattered against the old man's head.

"Excellent! Yes, this will work out fine," the buyer said, aiming a greedy smirk at Trytho. "It's a shame you've wasted such a valuable conquest all these years."

The man turned towards Enzo.

"Is it ok if I drain him here? I've been searching for this kind of conquest for a long time. I'll pay you a disposal fee if it's going to be a problem."

"Go ahead; that won't be necessary," Enzo told him.

The man pulled out a Colt M1911 and moved forward. "A memento from the days of my criminal empire on Earth."

"Don't worry, kid," Trytho yelled to Leon. "You may get lucky and end up with a useful conquest or a mediocre one and only be bought for slavery instead of—"

Leon froze. Trytho's words were cut off as the man stuffed the gun into his mouth. In an instant, the mysterious man pulled the trigger. The bullet seemed to work as intended. Parts of the old man's brain mixed with fluids fell from his mouth and seeped from his eyes, but the bullet didn't penetrate the outer skin. Leon gagged in the cage. This time, he couldn't hold it back and threw up.

As disgusted as he was, he couldn't turn away from what happened next. The man grabbed Trytho's arm and whispered something under his breath. The symbol on the man's right forearm dissipated, and a translucent light shot from Trytho's arm to his. In an instant burning manner, the Upsilon III that had been on Trytho's arm seared onto the other man.

"You sick fucks! What the hell did you do?" Leon yelled.

"Do? Didn't you see it for yourself? He had what I wanted, so I killed him!" the buyer said with an almost euphoric look. "And do you know why?" he pulled the gun out once more and shot himself in the head. The bullet bounced off and rolled over towards the cage. It looked as though it had been crushed.

"Isn't it marvelous? Someone will do the same to you soon, but don't worry, it shouldn't hurt too much. You have witnessed how fast it can be," he said, laughing.

He replaced the gun before turning to the two guards. "I'll be on my way, gentlemen. It was a pleasure doing business with you. I may be back soon to purchase sacrifices to nurture this excellent conquest. I will let the others from my kingdom know of your customer *satisfaction*."

He laughed again as he took his leave through the gate.

Is this what's going to happen to me? And for what purpose?

Trytho's corpse remained untouched until the man left, and then a few guards carried it off, leaving Leon to contemplate what was going to take place next.

After what seemed to be an hour later, a couple of men brought food to the prisoners; they each got their own helping of some mucky stew, bread, and water. Not having eaten for what felt like an eternity, Leon didn't question it and devoured every bite. After he finished, he lied on the warm ashen floor of his cell.

Tired, he drifted off to the comfort of his sleep.

CHAPTER III

THE SNOW LEOPARD'S TALE

There once was a man who loved to climb. His one dream in the world was to reach every mountain's sky. One day, he and his companions prepared to climb the treacherous mountain known as K2, the *Godwin-Austen*. Many had done so before, and many had succeeded, but others had failed. He was nervous about the climb, knowing the risks involved, but they wanted to accomplish this last mountain before calling it quits. The man knew full well that one in five people died attempting the climb, but he and his friends still decided they wanted to make history one last time.

About a quarter way through their climb, a fierce wind hit them with a coldness they felt down to the bone. A whiteout storm followed, blasting the tundra. Its winds slammed them left and right, tossing the group like rag dolls. The frosted snow it brought left them covered up to their waist. There was no turning back, and with the winds this intense, they couldn't set up camp.

Persevering onward with the light fading and their fate all but sealed, the man leading his brethren found a haven embedded in the mountain's hill.

A cave? he thought to himself. *What are the chances?*

Unquestioning, he pushed forward, leading them to what he believed would be their salvation. Upon the first man reaching the cave, a rumble echoed in earshot. His heart dropped and he called out to his friends:

"Avalanche!"

His first companion entered behind him while the two behind sped forward as fast as they could. The two inside heaved on the rope that connected them. The third man was only fifteen feet behind them.

“Kevin! Yang! Hurry your asses!” the man yelled.

He and his friend heaved on the rope that connected them to their friends. The rumbling outside grew and grew. With the third man only a few steps away, the white demon came roaring. In a flash, the nylon rope that held them together snapped like a piece of loose threading, taking the other two climbers in its frozen embrace. They were gone—there would be no happy ending. The man and his remaining friend were alone, secluded in the frozen hollow, left mourning.



Trying to dig through the snow, the men found themselves trapped by the cave’s rocks. After taking a breather, they walked deeper into the cave, checking each passage. It seemed endless until it broke into two separate tunnels.

“I’ll check the left, you take the right?” the man’s friend asked.

“Ok, but be safe, John. Holler if you find anything.”

The man nodded, and they parted ways, in search of an elusive escape.



About five minutes after the men separated, the first had heard what sounded like his companion’s screams in the distance.

“Are you ok?” he called out. “John!”

John didn’t respond.

The only response to come was his own echo. He pulled out the knife he had sheathed on his ankle and backtracked to where they had split up.

“John!” he cried again, still no answer.

The man proceeded down the other path of the cave until he heard chewing sounds. As he kept going, the sound grew louder, and he overheard purring. The man thought he was delusional; either that or John was playing a joke on him as he was prone to do.

“John!” he cried out one last time.

The man’s chilled glands released what felt like a frosted sweat as he ran forward. Rounding the corner, icy blue eyes met his, and two full grown snow leopards stared at him; the white and gray fur surrounding their mouth was stained red with blood. Fluids dripped from their fangs back onto the body of his dear friend, who was coughing and wheezing.

The sight stunned the man for a moment, and one leopard pounced. He evaded in the nick of time, and, with his knife in hand, gutted the animal. Seconds later, the other jumped. This time, he couldn’t dodge, but he turned to his side, protecting his vital organs. It sliced his left arm, but with that sacrifice, he finished the leopard off.

Three small cubs entered from around the corner, crying over their now-dead parents. The man had seen no purpose in slaying them. They were no threat to him. Instead, he slumped down, cold and shaken. His tears froze over as he looked toward his friend, who was slipping away.

“Rest easy, John,” the man said with icy, tear-filled eyes. He plunged his knife into John’s heart and closed his friend’s eyes. From there, the man bandaged his arm. Now alone in a wintry hell with no salvation, he was trapped in the icy grasp of K2’s mountains.

CHAPTER IV

THE WORLD'S HIERARCHY

From a strange dream on a mountaintop, to the wind howling over a wheat field as the heavens roared—this is what Leon looked at in such vividity. As he strolled ahead, the soft wheat stalks rocking in the calming breeze grazed his shoulders. The smooth, sticky texture reminded him of all those times he'd helped on the farm.

Looking further in the distance, he saw his grandparents' cabin shining near a stone pillar. No matter how much he struggled, or how fast he went towards it, it remained the same distance away.

Leon gave up and looked ahead, attempting to process what his subconscious was trying to tell him. He looked around; in the dark sky, above a bald eagle radiating white light shed a single feather from its coat. The feather floated down in front of him. The gentle light warmed his face as it passed in front of his eyes, and as soon as it did, a girl with long black hair and tattoos appeared beyond it, smiling at him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Everything faded at once as a freezing sensation woke him.

The musky scent of mildew crept into Leon's nostrils as he opened his eyes. The cage from before was gone, and his wrists and ankles stung from the frozen cuffs encasing them—holding him against a rock wall near a cliff within a vast, gloomy chamber. Above, in the center of the room, candles hung from an old chandelier covered in cobwebs, with spiders dancing across their threads. Nearby, an empty cradle rested near a bed with

matching dark satin linen. The sound of water dripping from a far wall caught his attention, and when he looked over, he saw a black fungus growing from the dampened stone.

In the adjacent ill-lit shadows, a dark-skinned man with broad shoulders and a medium stature stood. The man wore a fur coat, but it wasn't any fur coat; it was a coat made from the pelt of snow leopards.

"Awake at last, are we?" the man asked, smiling.

Leon had never seen the man in front of him before, but the complexion and voice matched what he had witnessed in his dream.

"It's you, you're..." he realized he didn't know the man's name.

"You don't have to know my name, as it doesn't concern you. You may refer to me as anything you wish. The most popular title I've gathered is the Frozen King. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that I have a quota to keep like most other kings remaining in this world—I have people I need to protect, you not being one of them. Therefore, I need you to remember what happened to you upon your death so I can decide what to do with you. Wasting my precious resources on a worthless drainer isn't in my interests," the king said as he paced back and forth before sitting in a nearby chair.

"What could you be so afraid of that you're willing to kill innocent people for?"

"People? Ah yes," the Frozen King responded with a sullen smile. "You mean the drainers? They are nothing more than resources. It's the same as in your past life when man hunted deer and quail—the drainers are the same to me and mine. Long ago, I saw them as you are seeing them now. But, well, as they say, that's a story that has come and gone. The light of humanity has been extinguished, and the gods... Well, never mind. It matters not. What's the best way to explain this to you?" he thought for a moment and then stood up, walking closer to Leon as a wicked expression came across his face.

“Say, did you like your stew? I bet you loved it; the texture is quite nice, isn’t it? Have you ever had a dish so delectable? Perhaps it reminded you of a tender ham? Yes, it’s quite close to that except for the meat being more mature, a few decades older, in fact.”

The king smiled, but to Leon, it seemed as if he was crestfallen. Almost as if he was suffering from an internal struggle, one which Leon couldn’t understand.

“You know I would have never tried it, but then I was forced to, if only to stay alive for a bit longer. I had Dane leave a bit out from the dream he showed you. The dream was a memory of mine. You remember it all, yes? The mountain and the leopards?”

Reluctantly, Leon nodded.

“And what do you think happened after I found no way out, Leon?”

“I don’t kn—”

“I still had a bit of my supplies left. Not much, mind you, but a bit. When I ran out of food, the first thing I tried eating was the leopards. That sustained me for a time, but it was making me sick. The leopards were diseased. With what, I do not know. I didn’t have firewood, so I started burning what supplies I had to keep warm. I was starving and freezing, so with only one option left to me, I ate him.”

“You ate him?”

The king looked into Leon’s eyes and smiled. And then it dawned on him. Leon realized what was in the stew. They filled it with human remains, likely those belonging to Trytho.

Leon gagged.

“Yes, I ate John to preserve my being; hoping to last even a short time longer until rescue came. No one ever did. I eventually ran out of stuff to burn to keep warm. Next, I ran out of gas for the little stove I had packed and could no longer cook. His body became frozen, and after my desperate struggle to survive, I froze to death and ended up here.”

"Are you kidding me?" Leon gasped. "I can understand to some extent, given the situation you were in, but even now?"

"Silence!" the king yelled and slapped Leon's face.

Leon looked at him in awe as the surrounding air became a bone-chilling frost.

"You know nothing about this world, boy. Do you think it's just us? We do what we must in order to survive this realm."

"My king," a man Leon hadn't noticed uttered from a darkened corner. "It's ill luck to speak of such things. We all know what you and your people have been through. Do not let this man tamper with your resolve."

The king hesitated for a moment and steadied his hand. "You're quite right. Perform the memory reclamation immediately," he said before taking his leave.

Leon tried to break free; however, his cuffs would not budge, no matter how much force he applied.

"Do not worry," the mysterious man told him. His face was wrapped in cloth, and he wore clothes that made him look like a desert nomad. "It will all be over soon."

The man unwrapped his hand. Scarred and mangled, he brought it towards Leon and placed it across his face.

All Leon saw was a bright light.



Fleeting images crossed Leon's mind like a violent tsunami. A laughing madman filled with fire, a kid younger than himself shooting ethereal creatures with a revolver, and then everything stopped. Everything rushed back to him in an instant. He remembered the feeling before he fell from the sky, the sensation of his death. Everything made sense to him now. The numbness he felt wasn't from being tired or sick; it was from being shocked, or in

this case, electrocuted by a bolt of lightning. Afterward, he fell over, blacked out, and died in that stormy, flooded trench.

Leon's eyes opened as the man with the scarred hand removed it from his face.

"It's done, my king," the man declared.

"Excellent," he replied.

What had seemed like an instant to Leon had to have been much longer. How much longer, he didn't know, but the Frozen King was much further away this time, and he was holding a toddler.

The scarred man walked away, and the Frozen King approached Leon with the child in tow.

"So, do you remember what killed you now?"

Leon didn't reply. He simply stared at the man in both pity and disgust.

"No matter. Dane will tell me everything. What's important is what your conquest rank is."

Still holding the child, the frozen cuff around Leon's right arm loosened, tearing a small layer of flesh away as the king used his free hand to grip and twist his forearm.

Leon winced, gritting his teeth from the pain and the icy palm grasping him.

As the king turned Leon's arm, there was a moment the king's conquest was revealed to him. He saw the symbols for Lambda five, ΛV .

The cuff tightened once more, and Leon's conquest rank was positioned in plain sight.

"My, my," the king said. "It seems you're a rare case, my young drainer. Dane, come here," he said and turned to the scarred man. "What did you see? What killed this young man?"

"Well, it seems lightning struck our young guest."

"Mmm, interesting. He must have a strong conquest affinity to be starting at this rank. Rare indeed."

"Rare?" Leon repeated, looking between the two in puzzlement.

At that moment, Krysta appeared around the corner.

"Hello, my child," the king said.

"I couldn't help but overhear you, papa," Krysta replied. "You told me that if I helped bring in another good conquest bearer that I could have it for myself."

"I did say that, my dear Krysta. But I cannot give you this one. This one, well, Leon, he has to be turned over, and he will gain us a reprieve from our quota for at least a few years."

The cheerful look on Krysta's face turned to pure malevolence. It startled Leon enough to make him wonder if this was the same girl he had stared up at in that cabin.

"You told me I could have the next one! You told me it was mine! So let me gut this worthless drainer and add his body to the pile of dead, rotting corpses we use for food!"

The young child cried as the surrounding air became frosted. Nay, the atmosphere itself changed. Leon looked up as snow fell. He considered the peculiarity of snow falling above the boiling lava pits near the room. His only thought was that it looked like volcanic ash falling from the sky after a violent eruption.

The Frozen King gestured toward the girl and roared. "Know your place and leave!"

The girl's expression changed from malevolence to fear. She backed away, bowed, and left without another word.

"There, there, it'll be ok," the king said, comforting the young child. "You're going to become strong like daddy, aren't you? Maybe even stronger still."

The skies cleared, and the young boy stopped crying and smiled.

"Dane, alert the guards and contact a collector. It seems our young drainer is ranked Theta one."



Two guards entered and pulled Leon from the side of the jagged volcanic mountain as the king removed his icy cuffs. He groaned from the maltreatment, and as soon as they removed him, they placed him in impervious manacles.

"You could be gentler."

"Shut your trap and move it!" one guard said, shoving him.

He stumbled ahead as they led him out of the chamber and ushered him through a magnificent hall. It looked abandoned. Leon coughed from the dusty furniture and shredded drapes. Even their footsteps kicked up dust as they moved across the maroon carpet.

They escorted him outside and through a courtyard of smaller buildings. The dwellings for the people who lived there seemed lifeless; there was no joy to be found, and no children anywhere in sight.

What quota was the king talking about? Who is he paying, and for what? They seem almost as miserable as the prisoners.

After traversing a short distance further, the cell where he had met Trytho opened, and the guards tossed him inside. He tumbled face first. The warm ground dusted his face as he slid across it. He stopped upon hitting a boulder that was being used as a makeshift bench.

Dicks.

He was now locked back inside of that same cell where he had met Trytho. The others were still there, but without him, it was silent. Curious about what the king was talking about, Leon tried to ask them about it.

"Does anyone know what a collector is?"

None of them answered him.

After a long pause, he got his answer; however, the answer came from Vance, who was guarding the cell.

He said one word in a stoic tone: "Death."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He walked away without answering him. As Leon waited for what was to come, someone delivered another serving of stew. This time, he dared not eat it, but he couldn't bring himself to tell the other prisoners. Most of them looked to be on the verge of starvation. Many of their ribs showed through their ragged shirts. He pushed it to the side and ate the bread and drank the water that came with it. It wasn't much, but at least it was something.

More time passed, and Vance went to talk with a few other guards, along with the Frozen King; he at last came back and spoke with Leon.

"Listen, Leon," it was the first time Vance had called him by his name since their introduction. "What you're going to see, what you're going to experience, well... I'm sorry it has to be this way."

Those words confused Leon.

If Vance is sorry, then why is he doing this? What's making him do this? What's happening in this world?

"If you're sorry, help us escape," Leon said.

Vance looked at him with a somber expression. "I can't kid. My responsibility is to look out for the people here. There are things out of my control—hell, they're out of humanity's control. You'll understand soon enough, even if it breaks you," he said and walked away.

"What do you mean, Vance? Vance!"



From what Leon could tell, a few nights passed by and still no one gave him any further answers. He had slept multiple times, but the sun had never risen. They had left him alone as he watched

the two moons spin in the otherwise empty, distant sky. He jumped from his trance as a loud horn blew from the watchtower of the gate. There was a great commotion in the kingdom as everyone gathered near it. Leon watched both the Frozen King and the man who seemed to be his greatest confidant, Dane, approach the gate together. After getting close to the entrance, the pair and everyone else fell, kneeling before whoever was coming through.

Why is the king kneeling? Leon wondered, standing to get as close to the entrance as he could without touching the cage.

The answer to his question stepped through the entrance a moment later. This time, it was not a man; it wasn't even human at all. What came through was as Vance had described, who was on his knees in front of the cage. What came through the gate was Death.



Leon dropped to his knees. Not to please what he saw ahead, but because his fear overwhelmed him. The being that entered the kingdom was nothing like he had ever imagined, even in his wildest nightmares.

What the hell am I looking at? What is that thing?

It was enormous, at least eight feet tall, and wearing what seemed to be some kind of purple robe concealing most of its body. It had eyes alright, but each eye socket had not one but two eyeballs. Its irises were pitch-black and the pupils themselves were glowing with a dark purplish tint that complemented its mantle. The behemoth's orbs stacked like a figure eight, but they twisted to give the creature its desired point of view. There were four sockets in total. Two were on the side, similar to a goat. The others were closer to the center of its head, like that of a human or ape, only these were about three times as big. The sclera in

each socket disgusted Leon. It wrapped around the eyes and looked like a pestilent flesh that was rotting further—spewing puss as the eyes moved about.

Beyond the eyes, things were even more strange. The being had no nose. In its place was a protruding section with scaly, slick skin. The worst part was its mouth, which took up the bottom half of the face. When it opened, it looked like a bottomless pit of death, an eternal black hole. Different layers of daggered teeth littered the mouth's entrance, similar to a sharks. The teeth didn't seem to be made of bone or enamel; instead, when looking into the depths of the creature's mouth, it looked as if they were composed of pure energy or matter from a distant star.

The only part of the being's body other than its head that wasn't hidden under the robe was its hands. They contained thirteen fingers each. Each arm had scaly five-fingered hands made of the same-looking material as on its face, but they also had a more durable hand on top of it that was larger with eight additional fingers.

Leon watched as the creature's face showed great pleasure while looking at the terrified subjects on their knees. After it seemed satisfied, it approached the Frozen King.

"Stannnnnd," it said with an almost growling tone. The protruding section on its face pulsated as it spoke. "Why have thous summoned me?"

The Frozen King and his subjects stood, while Leon remained on his knees.

The king spoke in a respectful tone, "Oh great being, I have summoned you here today so that you may grant my people a reprieve."

"Annnnd, what has thous to give inn returnn? If you have summoned me here with nno inntentionnn of providinnng a sufficiennt trade, I shall take whomever I deem nnnecessary."

"My subjects came across a high-quality conquest. With your benevolence, I would only ask you for five years of reprieve," the king said with his head still bowed.

"I see, and this person with the conquest, where are they now?"

The Frozen King, who now seemed much more like a frozen commoner, pointed towards Leon. The being did not scare the king to the point of shaking, but he still seemed wary of offending the creature.

In an instant, the monstrosity sped towards the cage, stopping in front of the bars.

"This one. I see, no, no, I feel it. You will have your reprieve. Two years, not five!" it wheezed.

All the while, it continued to look at Leon with delight.

"My king, that's not..." Dane said, arguing, but the Frozen King cut him off with a cold, solemn glare.

"Thank you," the king said. "Thank you for your generosity. Vance, get the boy out."

Vance, who Leon thought was a bulky man, looked almost minuscule next to the creature. He opened the gate and moved to grab Leon.

"Sorry, kid," Vance whispered.

"Bring him this way."

Vance grabbed Leon, helping him up before leading him to the gate.

"Let's go, kid," Vance continued whispering. "You saw how fast it can move. Don't make this any worse than it has to be."

"Why don't you fight back?" Leon asked Vance, with the creature now a few meters ahead. "With everyone here, you guys could take it down. I've felt the aura of the Frozen King's power, and I've seen your strength firsthand. So why not fight together and avoid this subservient way of living?"

Vance said nothing, only offering a somber expression.

Arriving at the gate where the being's carriage awaited, Leon stared in horror. It wasn't horses or even oxen that pulled it, but humans.

"Put him innn there," the creature growled.

Vance led Leon inside the back of the carriage while the creature went over to speak with the Frozen King. Leon looked at Vance with despair in his eyes as he chained him down beside a barred window.

"You don't understand, kid, you just got here. This fight hasn't been going on for a few years, not even a few centuries. It's been happening for more than a few *millennia*. We could take this guy down, sure. I might even be able to take him on my own, not without difficulty, but it might be feasible. Hell, humanity could even fight if it was only them. The problem is they're not at the top of the food chain, kid. The problem is their gods. Ours did their best to protect our universe, but in the end, they failed. Few of our divine may still be out there, but why do you think this place is such a shit hole? Our gods, our protectors, they lost, kid; our universe lost."

Leon looked more confused. "Our universe?"

"Listen, kid, every person with a high conquest is a subject like the Frozen King trying to protect those close to them, or they're hunted down. They left Earth on its own for a couple of reasons. First, our gods hid and protected the entrance well. I heard that even after some witches were tortured for centuries, they wouldn't give up the location of Earth's portal. Second, the deities from the dark universe don't see any threat leaving it how it is. Earth still functions to produce conquest users for the pleasure of those belonging to the dark universe. They don't have an invested interest in finding the entrance, for now, but that only continues to be true if we keep them happy. People in this world are traded and sold even between humans, as you saw with Trytho earlier. They... no, *we* trade people as resources to

benefit our own. It's hell, kid, but it allows some of us to survive in a world where that wouldn't otherwise be achievable."

Witches? Other universes and gods? Ours were defeated?

As Leon contemplated what he was told, he and Vance heard a shriek from Krysta. Then a noise came that would change Leon's fate once more: the sound of a crying child.



While Vance was talking to Leon in the carriage, a discussion had occurred. By asking a single question, the Frozen King had made a terrible misjudgment. One that would lead to a different outcome than the king had initially planned for.

"Is there anything I can do for you before you leave?" the king asked.

The creature pondered for a moment before realizing it wanted something for the road ahead. "There is something you can do. You can bring me something to eat."

The king knew what this meant. These creatures were born for a purpose. That purpose was to help take over our universe; the Hydronic Universe, he had heard them call it. The gods knew the weakness of all creatures, and that weakness was sustenance. Most living beings would do almost anything to get their next meal. These oversized horrors were no exception. What better army could you create than one full of soldiers that feed on the living of your enemies?

"Certainly. We have many selections. Take your pick."

The unearthly monstrosity went over to the cages and gazed through the holding cells. The selections given didn't satisfy the beast at all.

"These are not suitable meals. These are frail, pathetic souls, and most of them are ragged."

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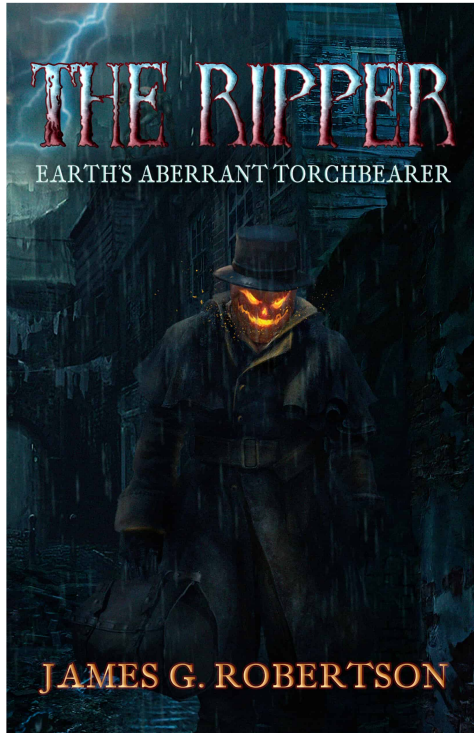
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1

Did you enjoy *Afterworld* by James G. Robertson?
Then you should read *The Ripper*¹ !



John Pepo, an Irishman who emigrated with his family into England, lived an ordinary life with ordinary dreams; but then, everything changed. Shortly before the tragic death of his family, John began having other dreams. He dreamed of a young man covered in lightning, a girl with tattoos, and of a man marked with VI from another world. However, what John dreamed about most of all was of fire, and of laughter.

After being summoned to London, John finds himself in Whitechapel. There, in the impoverished district known for its whores and beggars, he's met by a strange being in a dark alley who declares himself to be Jack the Ripper. Jack tells him he's

1. <https://nextlifeuniverse.com/the-ripper>

been watching him; that he's been waiting for this day, a day foretold by the gods so that together they can fix a great aberration blighting the city.

Thus begins the riveting quest of the infamous Jack the Ripper and his most beloved friend John. As the devilish Jack haunts the streets like a spectre while mutilating his victims, the tales of those they damned and those they saved come to light. This is a story of loss, demons, witches, and the torment of one man by the puppeteering hands of a very stingy individual named Old Nick.

About the Author



Born in 1990, James G. Robertson grew up in the small town of Pratt, Kansas. He's also lived in Texas, Missouri, and in New York where he graduated from SUNY Oswego in 2019, obtaining his bachelor's degree in political science with a theatre minor. James began writing his first book, *Afterworld*, in 2010. After a long hiatus, he finished *Afterworld* and had it published April 14th, 2020.

James plans to continue writing while working in education. He has big ambitions and plans for his series to end with over 30 publications.