

MIDNIGHT SONS

M2K Special Edition Cyberback

Collecting Midnight Sons #1-4 by Bowie Sessions
Plus an alternate #4 by Meriades Rai

FEATURING



Blade



Frank Drake



Elsa Bloodstone



Jack Russell



Red Wolf



Jennifer Kale



Valkyrie



Victoria Montesi



Topaz



Mr. Immortal



Juggernaut



The Gargoyle



Satana



Dusk

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"HELL AND BACK"

Part One: The Flop

Written by Bowie Sessions

Pray, v.: To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy.
Ambrose Bierce

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

The Darkhold – *the veritable Pandora's Box, an ancient book of arcane evils, root of vampire and werewolf among man's world.*

Erebus – *Vampire God, prisoner of Blade.*

Doctor Strange – *the Sorcerer Supreme*

Blade – *vampire hybrid 'day-walker', banished to Hell.*

Frank Drake – *descendant of Dracula, veteran monster-hunter*

Jack Russell / Werewolf – *cursed as a werewolf, and has mastered it as a weapon against darkness.*

Will Talltrees / Red Wolf – *bears a Native American Wolf Spirit, superb tracker, protector of the abandoned.*

Elsa Bloodstone – *a superhumanly able monster-hunter, daughter of famed immortal Ulysses Bloodstone.*

Jennifer Kale – *a powerful sorceress of Atlantean magic.*

Samantha / The Valkyrie – *a powerful Ancient Nordic warrior woman*

Victoria Montesi – *a chronicler of the Darkhold and solely able to bear it without taint.*

Topaz – *able sorceress and friend of Jennifer Kale.*

Hellspawn of many stripes.

Scenes – Places around Arizona, Places around Washington D.C., Sanctum Sanctorum, the Bowels of Hell

|A PLACE AROUND ARIZONA|

Elsa blinked her eyes twice and sat up, slowly, her bed sheet silhouetting the attractive blonde girl's curves. Staring at the twin bed opposite her to the comatose form of her mentor Frank Drake, the young blonde moved to pull a discarded shirt up from the carpet. There was a strange scratching she heard at the door. Elsa decided not to wake Frank, and instead dragged herself to consciousness.

She pulled on a pair of pants lain crumpled by her bed, slid on two tennis shoes, comfortably rubbed the glowing crimson jewel at her neck, lifted a massive axe from underneath her pillow and slung it low in her grip as she wandered towards the door. Extending her hand, the door

seemed to disappear further and further into the distance. Her hand grasped out for the knob, which continued to vex her, until he lunged drastically forward. The door swung open before her and she couldn't remember if she opened it. She stood back up, having fallen from the loss of balance. Her eyes slowly absorbed what lay before her.

There was a page at the doorstep. It flew into the air by a breeze she could not feel. Her eyes followed it and watched it sail toward a cave that sat across the parking lot from her. The cave hid itself behind a bluff of stone, but she could see through it to the cave beyond, its gaping maw leading down.

A hand captured the page before it entered the cave. She saw his face. Her father Ulysses smiled to her. "What's wrong, Elsa?"

Elsa shot awake, staring out the window of the passenger seat. She saw her own reflection, her head turning back to see the driver, Frank, with his short red hair, driving his large 1984 Chevy Van across the country despite its age and decay. Frank had a soft spot for things better left dead. "What? I was – I was ... having a dream."

"You're not one for being scared of dreams, Elsa," Frank suggests as his eyes stare into the distance of the pitch-black road. He allowed her the time she needed to recover from whatever startled her, but she saw suspicion clearly etched on his face. He turned up the radio as a dismissal to the awkward silence she offered.

She knew she wanted to tell him, and so tried to play the game of making louder and louder sighs of distress, to no effect. They'd played this game before; she knew when he gave you space, he meant it. It frustrated her to no end that she couldn't do those little manipulations everyone else took. She surrendered to her own irritations. Frank smiled knowingly – he was as good at his game as she was at hers. Better, he'd say.

She lurched forward in her seat to turn down the music, and the sound of *Dandy Warhols* filtered through the radio dissipated as she spoke. "I saw my father... in my dream, I saw my father. The page we found was ... right in front of us, an' then it flew away before I could ... get it. It was flying to a cave and then ... my da snatched it up."

Frank did distract himself from driving for that concept she dropped into his lap. "You had a dream about the Orpheus page," his dry voice slowly stated.

"Well, yeh, but what's – it doesn't mean anything, really, Frank—" she tried to defend, but the conversation had quickly become as crucial as it could be, if one judged by Frank's stone-drawn expression.

He slammed on the brake. She screamed as she grasped for the dashboard desperately, while the massive van swerved side to side. It lifted briefly onto two wheels before it set itself down, leaving itself to putter in its muted state. Frank's hands had wrung the wheel firmly, before his eyes turned to take in the attractive and lithe blonde sitting across him. "You only *found* me from

your dreams, Elsa. You *foresaw* the banshee in Ireland. In your ‘nightmares’ it showed you Blade’s pain in Hell – a man you had *never met...*”

She shrank into her seat further and further as his diatribe continued. “Sometimes dreams really are just dreams, genius!” she defended angrily, crossing her arms and looking out the window past him into the dark of the night they had driven amidst furiously. Her eyes widen sharply and she lurched forward again, ignoring him entirely.

“*Every time*, you tell me *it’s probably just a dream...* you’re having *visions*, Elsa! Not—”

She shushed him and pointed out the window at the hills at the side of the road. He stared at her in confusion, rather than look out the window behind him. She sensed he was about to reprimand her again, and so she finished the argument for them promptly. “You’re right,” she allowed.

He raised his hand in puzzlement when she had willingly lost the argument for once. Her arm pointed with much further impatience, and he finally turned to look. It was just another hill line. “It’s ... a hill. We’re in Arizona, Elsa.”

“It’s *the* hill,” she specifies.

“What *the* hill? You never mentioned a hill.”

“Well, I’m mentioning a hill now! And that’s it. Over that hill, there’s this cave that drops down. It’s where the paper went!”

“In ... your dream,” he corrected, turning her own words at her, even as he unstrapped his seatbelt and pulled them off to the side of the road. Frank put the van in park and walked into the back, where he opened a long duffel bag filled with guns and weapons. He pulled a single, unique, rifle out. The item, ‘Emily’, was a possession unlike any others. Its name was a quiet nod to the destruction of his former assistant, ‘Linda’.

“In my vision,” she clarified under her breath bitterly. “Gimme the axe.”

[OVER THE HILL. SOMEWHERE IN ARIZONA]

“It’s in that hole,” Elsa pointed vaguely at a gaping hole in the Earth just over the Hill they had seen from the side of the road.

Frank looked to the pit and back to his assistant. After a moment of thought, he clicked on the flashlight at the fore of his rifle. It showed nothing but blackness inside. It looked like a drop. “That better go somewhere,” he grunted, clearly hesitant. “Ladies first.”

She turned to shoot him a rather offended expression. She stared after the light his rifle offered and back to the face of her mentor. She found a smirk on his face that she knew too well. With a

sigh of resignation, she reached into her belt-line and unclipped a small button-light. She held it before her and then leapt down into the tunnel. After she grunted and groaned several times from impacts, a dust cloud rose from the pit of the hole to greet Drake. There was a long pause where he stood there awaiting word.

“All clear,” she chimed upward as she continued her march through the dark chasm she had entered. Into dark corners, Elsa scanned her flashlight. The distinct odor of death permeated the chamber, a clever mingling of coagulated blood and excrement. Bodies had retired here. Dozens of them. She held a handkerchief to her face as if it might somehow abate the scent. With cautious steps she forced herself towards the pungent scent.

She heard a muted *whumpf* sound behind her and turned, startled, the axe in her hand hefted high in preparation to strike. She saw Frank there, whose hands came up drastically, holding the rifle to deaden the impact of the expected blow. None came. “Sorry. Startled me. What took yeh?”

“It was a long slide. What’s that sm– oh GOD. Who died?”

She gripped his rifle and pointed it down a corridor. There was a small pile of bodies. There were two other corridors, not including the one that had obviously become a closet for corpses. “Them,” she commented coldly, Frank looking sadder than anything else.

They had begun to wander through the caves when they heard voices. It took little coordination for them to charge towards the voices, summoning what stealth they had to avoid detection. There was candlelight, which laid slowly dancing shadows along the cavernous walls before they ever arrived. Their voices seemed haunting and frenzied. Frank’s eyes first found their confidence to peek around the corner of the rock face into the lit room beyond them. His vision became crystal clear and he slid back against the rock face, his head turned to address his junior partner.

“There’s twelve of them,” he told her blankly.

“Twelve of...?” her voice dragged out quietly.

He rolled his eyes and double-checked that his rifle was loaded with its Necrotech payload. “They’re wearing t-shirts made of skin. I didn’t bother to ask them to divulge their life stories, exchange friendship bracelets and talk about the most recent episode of *Lost*.”

She didn’t say anything else, aware of the losing battle of talking to a barely sociable brick wall. She went first and leapt around the wall, axe held in hand, as she came to a full standing position. She saw no firearms in their hands, and a dozen ... human-looking things. They seemed maddened, some were horrifically mutilated – and it looked self-inflicted. One of them wore a shirt made of flesh. Despite all she’d seen, it took her significant effort to refrain from purging the contents of her lunch.

“You’ve got somethin’ we’re looking for. Now, be polite and don’t be stingy. There’s this paper—” Elsa began in earnest, she tried her very best to reason with the maniacs before her.

The man in the skin shirt stood staring while the rest rushed her and screamed their many and assorted blasphemies.

Frank heard the cries and spun from around the corner, primed Emily and leveled her at the crowd. “Go back to Hell,” he ordered as he pulled the trigger a first time. A mighty streak of incandescent cyan light surrounded the slug fire from his supernaturally empowered shotgun. It struck the first man who had made it to Elsa. His body incinerated instantly. The mist that remained in the air after the mystical blast cleaved in two when Elsa pierced it with her mighty axe and sent the heavy blade into the first horror that chased its friend to its sudden death.

“I asked *nicely*,” she calmly complained as she back-handsprung with the axe to the floor and catapulted herself high into the air to allow Frank a clear shot with Emily again, sending a sudden incineration of a third and fourth target before gravity claimed her again. She landed in a crouch and rushed forward while their enemies rushed for her. She felt uncomfortable from the demonic men before her, especially with how little different they looked from any man or woman ... but their wickedness and desire to see her dead allowed her the resolve to put her axe inside of their stomachs.

To the first upon her, it struck her in the face with an inhumanly powerful wallop. She managed not to let it faze her as she brought the axe up into its gut. The thing gasped; she whipped back and spun around. The axe’s blade took the demon’s head clean off. She stepped forward as Frank created a mist to her right. Still traveling her momentum from the last thrust, the axe came down into the next one’s shoulder and cleaved it in two.

“Elsa!” Frank cried out quickly to his de facto apprentice, her only warning as she found herself besieged. They swarmed her now. One clawed her face and left two streaks of blood down her cheek while another tackled her from the side. They took her to ground, while Frank desperately shot into the crowd of those that rushed forward. He wouldn’t take a shot and risk a stray bolt killing her. With a very mighty thrust that she forced her axe haft into the body of the man on top of her and tossed him free behind her. Freed of her first assailant, Elsa leapt to her feet from her prone position without a moment of preparation.

“I’m fine,” she groaned out with certainty a moment before spinning in a sharp circle. Her axe had extended far enough that it tore through first one, then the other of her assailants. Blood arced through the air and left a trail over her face and shirt. Both fell to the ground, twitched briefly, and stopped their motions completely.

Her eyes sharply turned to the dark man who stood behind the throng of corpses, wearing the shirt of flesh. Frank cocked his weapon again. “Like the lady said. You’ve got something we want. How about we all come to a deal. It’s obvious you’ve already used the page—”

“Not true, sir,” the killer intoned, his smile wide as a knife and his slow and deliberate steps pulled him clearer into the dim light.

“My *brother* used the page,” he specified, as he stared down at the shirt he wore. “He was always a useful chap. But he’s still very close to my heart,” he displayed to them a devilish smile as he raised his head to them while patting the mutilated face that rested on his chest.

“Welp, that’s good enough for me,” Frank told Elsa firmly, as he readied his rifle. The man extended his arms wide, head thrown back with expectancy. Elsa lowered her axe as she faced this demon that looked like a man. She couldn’t kill in cold blood, despite how the situation rather clearly demanded it.

Frank continued, gesturing to the scroll clutched in the undead’s hand with his rifle. “Question,” Frank inquired of the reanimated corpse. “That’s the page which will bring a creature from Hell. What did it cost you?”

“I think it turns the user into a shirt,” Elsa suggested, before the Demon had its turn.

“...actually, I did that. But it did cost. It cost him a single human life,” the corpse answered with its teeth all showing. “Send me home,” the corpse whispered with a bright smile, throwing the paper into the sky. Frank hesitated not one bit, with the page clear, and pulled the trigger. The body incinerated from the necrotech slug that entered him. Vapors and cloth was all that remained as the page floated down amidst the mist that was once its bearer. Elsa reached forward and grasped it, then rolled it up tight in her hand.

Elsa bothered to stare at the destruction laid before them before she turned her attention to her mentor in arms. She found her voice and asked the only question she could find. “Now where?”

He disarmed his rifle and slung it back over his shoulder. “You know where. The only person who can touch these pages without sinning,” Frank told her over his shoulder as he turned and headed back for the mouth of the cave. That’d be one heck of a climb, he decided, and rushed for the stone face.

“We have to find Montesi!”

[A LIBRARY SOMEWHERE ELSE IN ARIZONA]

The screen in front of Frank Drake showed the words ‘Victoria Montesi’ typed into the Search bar of *Google*. He struck enter and began to tap the *Page Down* key to take him through the small list.

“You’re such a drama queen,” Elsa complained quietly as she stood with her arms crossed, her back presented to him. Her eyes traveled around the confines of the public library. The earthy smell of page and ink which permeated most institutions was present but masked by the distinct pungent aroma of *Pinesol*, which granted a too-clean smell to the area.

Elsa deepened her voice in mockery of Frank and tried to match the tone as closely as possible for her verbal caricature. “*We have to find Montesi!* Where are yeh looking, Frank? On MySpace? Goin’ ta send her a text, maybe?”

Frank’s head snapped to look at her from the computer. “Would you just shut up for *one freaking second?* We’re in the library. Be respectful.”

Elsa stewed quietly and picked up a magazine left carelessly on the reading table by another visitor. She perched at the edge of the table and glanced into the distance intermittently as she brought herself up to date on the latest *Tech News* according to the cover of the title she read so disinterestedly. The constant clicking sounded behind her as Frank tried to send some kind of message through Yahoo!, while she waited and read. To a girl barely college age, it was murder.

“Excuse me, that necklace - the Bloodstone?”

Elsa looked up from her book and Frank turned from his seat to stare at the company they’ve received. A tall, compact Native American man stood before them, with shoulder-length black hair pulled up into a ponytail. He wore a tan tank top that was too snug, revealing perfectly chiseled muscle of his bared arms and of his covered chest, as well as showing his extensive tribal tattoos. The singular piece which broke convention of tribal work were the flags of Kuwait and the US crossed by M-16s and a stylized Eagle, with the titling *THESE COLORS DON’T FADE* at top and *’90-’91* scribed at its base. He wore a bone necklace with a stylized Red Wolf as its pendant, blue jeans and light Nikes, which were clearly a new set of running shoes. Most notably, he came with a bit of a smirk on his face. Over his shoulder, he slung a small gym bag.

“Are you...?” He asked again, impatiently, as Frank Drake stood and approached him imperiously. Elsa extended her hand to stop Frank from getting any closer to the stranger.

“Let me be polite. The name’s Will. Are you carrying the Bloodstone?” Will smiled wearily and collected himself, apparently aware of the awkwardness of the situation entirely.

“Who’s asking—” Frank began, but Elsa elbowed him meaningfully.

Elsa rubbed at the gleaming red stone in the centerpiece of her choker, staring at the Native American. She decided to give the situation the benefit of the doubt and trust him. “Yes. My name is Elsa... Elsa Bloodstone, and this is my ... friend, Frank Drake.”

Will smiled brightly, and took Elsa’s hand, shaking it with force and certainty. “Yeah, I’ve heard of you, Frank, but you, Elsa? Only whispers. The daughter of Ulysses? He was a good guy. There was a demon beast which rose from the—”

“Excuse me, why are you here again?” Frank reminded them, bringing the subject once more to the forefront. Will seemed to shrink back, and nodded his understanding.

“Sorry. I know I’m unexpected. I’m called *Red Wolf*. You’re within my ... domain. The Wolf Spirit guided me to the bearer of the Bloodstone, who it says would reforge The Order of Nine. I was to ferry you to your dark-haired master.”

“Vicki is NOT my Master!” Frank rebuked loudly and received more than a bare handful of firm stares from the library staff.

“Ah,” Red Wolf defused, looking between the two as he clearly considered how to progress. His eyes fell to the computer screen, the text *Victoria Montesi*. It did not take much deduction for him to consider whom they might pursue. “My maiyunahu’ta tells me we should do this sooner than later.”

Elsa found herself circumvented as Frank exerted himself as the Alpha of this situation the best he could. “And why does ... this ... mayanoo tell you *that*?” Frank asked firmly, confronting him again. Despite the fortunate series of events – more likely *due* to the fortunate series of events – Frank had not yet decided to trust this stranger.

“My maiyu—my guardian spirit. The Owayodota—it’s a Wolf Spirit—said you’ve got the Darkhold. It’ll make this worse. Look, I want to hurry. Lobo is thirsty outside in the summer heat, and Ow—my spirit said that the longer you bear that page, the more it’ll burn you to use it. I know of the Book. I know you have a page of it.” As Red Wolf spoke, Elsa reached into her pocket, where she’d folded that indestructible darkness inked on parchment very neatly indeed. She felt her blood rise to touch it. She thought of her father, Ulysses. Of seeing him for once – and she knew, then, that he was right. The Page *wanted* to be used.

Sensing their silence and consideration, Red Wolf pursued the topic. “Give me something she or her bloodline has touched, and we’ll find her. I swear to any God you want me to, guys. I’m here to make sure this goes smoothly.”

Elsa and Frank looked between each other for a long moment. “I trust him,” Elsa said firmly. “I’d know. My lamp-sense is not tinglin’. Besides. We’re short on options, righ’?”

Frank looked less than thrilled. He felt painted into a corner, and he did not like to be in that position. He felt the urge to fight out of it, and he felt left with nothing to punch. “Don’t do it, Elsa,” Frank warned.

“I’m scared what will happen if we *don’t*,” she told him in turn, pulled the folded paper from her pocket and gave it to Red Wolf. He gripped it and his fist formed around it. His eyes drifted into the distance as his nose flared. Red Wolf whispered into the Nevernever...

“Its east. In the Throne of our Leader. I’m ... guessing Washington, D.C.”

“Then that’s where we need to go?” Elsa asked as she leaded them outside. Red Wolf looked puzzled, but Frank patted him on the back to get him moving. They exited the public library to the bright Arizona sky outside. A small red wolf leapt up at the sight of Red Wolf, who buckled

to his knees to greet the large beast, which greeted him with several licks. Red Wolf ruffled his massive wolf-pet's fur, before he took a treat from his pocket and fed it to his wolf.

"Come on, Lobo," he insisted to his pet as they followed Elsa and Frank to their van in the parking lot. As he opened the door to get in, presuming a long road trip, Elsa was producing a large lamp, which glowed faintly as Red Wolf approached. It glowed brighter, all of a sudden, while Frank shoved Emily into a guitar case and held it in hand.

"I wish we were in Washington, D.C.," Elsa spoke as she rubbed the lamp. Red Wolf looked puzzled, but couldn't find much of a chance to respond as light encompassed the four of them.

[NOT IN ARIZONA ANYMORE, PROBABLY. WASHINGTON D.C.?]

The lamp's light receded and Elsa slid the object back into her backpack. She zipped it up and slid the pack onto her again. Red Wolf seemed a little taken off-guard by the sudden transport, but shook his head clear. Lobo barked loudly at the sky, but Red Wolf hissed something to the wolf in his native language *Tsisinstsistots*. Frank and Elsa, though surprised at the Cheyenne language, seemed more than a little used to the trip. "What was *that*?" Red Wolf asked, startled, once he had settled down his wolf companion.

"It's this lamp my father gave me. It has this genie in it, and it can transport us wherever we—"

Frank cut off Elsa's explanation sharply. "Yes, well, I would've preferred to take the van. Next time let's have a *vote*."

Red Wolf looked rather puzzled. "Then, I ... would've voted for the lamp," Red Wolf allowed, made aware of their destination two thousand miles from their origin. He had bent to a knee and pulled out a dog collar from his gym bag, looking extremely apologetic at his companion Lobo, who whined while he spoke condolences in his native language again as Red Wolf placed it on him and took the leash.

"You're not voting! You're not on this 'team', shaman."

Elsa looked at Frank with suspicion. "Then it's what, you and me? What happens if we disagree? Like now?"

"Then I break the tie. Because I'm in charge. And I would have preferred to take the van."

"Bollocks," Elsa muttered as they looked back to see that Red Wolf had already started walking down the street. His nose lifted into the air as if he followed a scent, he kept a sharp pace that forced them to race after him to equal. They kept quiet now as they kept in lockstep behind him. Their eyes took in the sudden departure of barren Midwest to the hustle of a large city, filled with massive towers and well-kept sidewalks. The city seemed filled with life and action, a

vibrant city of sharp buildings and massive traffic. The stink of pollution was enough to disgust the highly sensitive nose of Red Wolf, who purposefully kept to remote towns.

“It’s not far,” Red Wolf told them helpfully while he trotted quickly down a street, which presented the name *M Street NW*. Lobo very much took point, shaking his neck constantly in frustration of the collar containing him.

“You knew my father?” Elsa inserted her question quickly, keeping up with the Native American as she stared at the folded paper he held in his hand. There was hunger in her gaze that both men could see, though neither seemed too willing to comment. Red Wolf managed to find a grin, and looked to Elsa even as they hustled down the street to follow the instincts the page sent him on.

“Yes. We’ve a minute. Let me tell you a story about this time I met Ulysses in a battle with the Mistai...”

[SOMEWHERE ELSE, MYSTERIOUSLY]

A figure spanned his hands over a large orb filled with a smoky mist that seemed almost *restless*, pushing at the boundaries of the glass globe. As his fingers clasped the surface, images suddenly revealed themselves before his eyes. Fire grew where the smoke cleared to present a vision of a man, clearly Frank Drake, reading from a parchment amidst the stones of Hell. A man concealed from his vision in shadowy black thrust a sword through the chest of a man who screamed his horror and pain.

“The path is laid before them,” the figure spoke quietly.

[SOME SEEDY STRIP CLUB IN WASHINGTON, D.C.]

The lights focused only on the stages. This allowed the seats some manner of privacy, for the viewers to act without discretion; or if they paid the dancers well... then for an unstated service under the veil of shadow. Two large doors swung open to allow admittance into the establishment, where an overly large black man in a muscle shirt greeted three new arrivals. Frank led the charge, with Elsa at the rear. While she examined the glow-in-the-dark painted *X* on the back of each of her hands, Red Wolf lurched forward into the club, nose wide... until he smelt some of the ambient scents. He opted to use just his eyes to find her. “She’s here somewhere,” Red Wolf informed them.

“Quickly. I don’t want Lobo getting in any trouble outside,” Red Wolf began when suddenly his Spirit whispered within his mind. His eyes snapped just as the others began to meander through the club. Frank apparently decided it was worth checking to make sure none of the dancers happened to be Vicki Montesi, while Elsa seemed understandably distressed.

“You both can get knotted. I can’t believe you dragged me to a nuddy club,” she muttered discontentedly. Frank saw a hand-signal from Red Wolf, and moved quickly. Red Wolf looked to him and nodded to the raven-haired woman he saw standing with an average-sized brown-haired man. She was dressed in sensible black slacks and an unrevealing navy blue tank top with a simple black zippable leather jacket. Her associate wore rugged clothing on the other hand; a taut stained light blue T-shirt, thrown on button-up shirt hanging open over it and extremely worn in jean pants. Holes had opened at various sites and otherwise it seemed quite whitewashed, though that obviously seemed to be wear and not fashion. Red Wolf sensed something deeply primal of the man.

Frank nodded a simple affirmative and gave a brief flick of his hand to issue Red Wolf to follow him. He kept in step behind Drake, and Elsa seemed completely oblivious to the event as she stared at the dancing girls with a mixture of pity and amazement. She doubted even her agility could allow her to do *that* with a pole.

“Montesi,” Frank greeted as he closed the distance. Frank had to ditch his guitar case – just as he had to his gym bag and Elsa her backpack. Red Wolf had offered to take care of it, but Elsa made it a point to – and vaulted onto the roof, where she deposited the bags before they entered. The raven-haired woman, obviously Montesi, turned when addressed. However, before she could respond to him, her companion stepped in front of her and his eyes set tight together. He stared down Frank as fiercely as he could, who just smiled up to him.

“It’s been a very long time, Jack... funny running into you again. So, Jack, Vicki, meet Red Wolf and Elsa Bloodstone.” He paused to look behind him, and in the distance, he gestured to Elsa who continued to be unaware of their meeting. Red Wolf walked up closer, and found himself examining Jack. His skin seemed to bristle, and nostrils flared in interest.

“Will, page.” Red Wolf snapped clear of it for a moment, and handed a page from his clenched fist to Frank, who unfolded it.

“You’re still a dick, Frank. I’d heard you were dead,” Jack muttered.

Frank smiled all too sweetly. “Rumors, exaggerated. Me, I’d figured you’d’ve had the guts to kill yourself by now.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed and he went quiet when Vicki prodded him in the side. Jack turned his attention to Frank’s companion and he found to his surprise he had to fight back the urge to snap at Red Wolf. Instincts rose in him that he had well kept under wraps. Red Wolf and he kept gazed tightly with each other. Neither of them wanted to break the eye contact. “Oh, fun fact. Jack’s a Werewolf. Red Wolf’s got some kind of animal spirit. You two talk.”

Jack’s eyes broke then, as Frank revealed his secret to a stranger. Their intensity turned on Frank, but he did not have the time to rebuke him. Frank finished unfolding the page and once he did, Vicki stumbled and collapsed against the wall. Her eyes released a shock of light and she nearly collapsed. Jack had broken eye contact first, and despite the situation, a primal motivation within found Red Wolf preening against his best efforts. The werewolf rushed to grasp Vicki and

help her up. He whispered to her, but she pushed him away, coming to stand on her own two feet. The darkness allowed for a modicum of anonymity, and she meant to keep what pride she still had after the collapse. “Why would you bring that here?” Vicki finally spoke, while she made a gesture and hushed Jack.

“It’s how we found you. And ... I have a ... plan. When Blade ... sacrificed himself, and sealed himself within Hell with the Vampire God Erebus ... the Montesi formula had been growing weak, but the new vampires’ population – it’s *exploded* since Blade has left, Vicki. I have to assume the root is the weakened barrier from Erebus. I have a plan and it ... involves taking him out.”

“Excuse me? You want to take on a God?”

“Well, it’s more of a title than his actual position,” Frank clarified.

“No. You know what? *Hell no*,” Vicki specified, her jaw firmly set as she spoke in hushed tones with a harsh edge to her words. “We’re not going to Hell just to rescue your best friend, who *killed us all* once.”

“Or don’t you remember?” Jack insisted with a meaningful glance to the Monster Hunter, who stepped around the question entirely.

Frank sighed deeply and ran a hand through his curling red hair, in frustration. “Listen, Montesi – do you think I’m excited about asking you for help? You’re the only one the Darkhold can’t touch, and the only way I have to save my friend. But this is more than him... this is a plague on Earth. Since he’s left, I’ve worked with dozens of hunters – even this group Silvereye - and seen dozens die to untold legions of the Undead. This is only going to get *worse* unless we help cut it off at the source. His power feeds theirs. Vicki. Please. I – the world needs this.”

Her silence palpable, Jack gripped her shoulder supportively. “I don’t think she’s interested,” Jack insisted, darkly. “Not in helping your suicide, anyway.”

Frank clenched his fist tight and seemed willing to raise it to the aggressor. Victoria couldn’t meet his gaze as she considered matters, but Frank was unwilling to endure patience. He turned to leave, storming off ... until Red Wolf hissed firmly at the three of them. “Can we talk? Civilly? Frank, Jack, obviously you two had a feud; that’s wonderful. Mr. Drake and I are far from on the right foot. But I believe in his cause. The spirits guided me to you, Montesi. They guided *him* to you. There is a purpose and it is just. If he were to walk free, I tell you, things would be dire.

“I know *nothing* of what’s going on. I don’t know of ... Erebus ... or of these deaths at Blade’s hand. I know that the Undead trouble even my lands. I know that his fury, though misguided, is truth. I know you seek to make the world right – and I know you will endure, Montesi. You live through what his task brings you.”

The three found themselves silenced by Red Wolf, and Victoria puzzled at the strange Native American newcomer to this circle. “Who *are* you?”

“Red Wolf. Or you can call me Will, if it makes you more comfortable. I’m a Spirit Warrior. I embody the Wolf Spirit of my dead tribe. The Wolf Spirit put me on this path. I have no idea what’s going on, but I know we win.”

She looked pained at the idea and shook her head rather frantically. “I can’t do that, Frank. It’s – too big. I get that it hurts. I’d do anything to have ... to have a *lot* of people back. But you’re ... asking me to do something just ... insane. And your – friend here, I don’t – I don’t even know him. How can I ...” Vicki fell into silence with her head turned away from the pair.

Jack filled in for her and stood in their way one more time. It was a silent and very effective threat. “Go home, Frank.”

Red Wolf and Drake exchanged a glance, and Frank smiled slightly. He wouldn’t say *thank you* if his life depended on it, but he clapped him on the back as he headed out of the establishment, though he made a point to look around as much as he could on his way free of it. Their eyes, though admiring of the view of the many flaunting bodies, scanned the crowd for where Elsa had gone. After a minute, they asked the bartender. A gesture pointed them out the door. Outside, Elsa stood, arms crossed, staring into the afternoon sky of D.C.

“Where’d you disappear to in there?”

“It smelled like cigarettes and Vaseline,” she told Frank at his insistence. “Did you find her?”

“And her pet werewolf,” Frank responded, lighting up his own cigarette to, which left Elsa curling her nose and Red Wolf stepping farther away, where he knelt to untie an *extremely* displeased wolf from a handrail. He whispered apologies to the undeserving canine while they continued their discourse.

“Any luck?” Elsa asked, her eyes glancing into the distance to watch Red Wolf dote on his beast of a companion.

Frank shook his head. “We’re on our own. Let’s ... find somewhere to stay. It’s been a long day.” Red Wolf walked over, leash in hand, and thrust it into Frank’s surprised hand. Frank stared at him and Lobo growled angrily at Frank, who found himself stumbling away from the very animal he held tight by the leash.

“I’ll get our bags,” Red Wolf explained and leapt onto the ceiling without any of the twists or vaults which Elsa required a half hour ago. He simply crouched down then sprang skyward, sailed arms-first, and caught the roof’s ledge. Red Wolf flipped himself up by his hands, spun twice in the air and landed in a three-point crouch, two knees and one hand. He stood up, walked forward, threw the gym bag and backpack on himself, then grasped the guitar case by its carrying handle.

It was effortless as he leapt from the roof. He landed with only the balls of his feet, heels skyward, before he placed them firmly on the concrete and handed off their respective bags. He walked away, while his two companions looked distinctly puzzled. Elsa whispered to Frank her surprise, particularly. “Has he always been able to do that?”

“I’ve not the faintest clue,” Frank answered with a shrug as they followed their guide.

[EARLY MORNING - A MOTEL IN WASHINGTON, D.C. |

There’s a firm knocking on the first floor motel door. Elsa blinked her eyes twice and slowly sat up, her bed sheet silhouetting the attractive blonde girl’s curves. A sense of déjà vu overtook her, and she glanced at the twin bed opposite her ... and the illusion shattered. In her dream, he would've been asleep; yet there he was, brushing his teeth in the bathroom.

“I’ll get the door,” Red Wolf interrupted her psychotic musings, as he rose from his position curled on the carpet next to his wild companion. He grasped a shirt and pulled it on over his head again. Elsa made a move to look away as he pulled on pants, but she guiltily decided to watch. Red Wolf walked to the door and opened it. Behind it stood two figures, both of the acquaintances from the day before – Victoria Montesi and Jack ‘the Wolf’.

“Ah, I expected you later,” Red Wolf casually greeted. Frank turned from the bathroom and rushed over in just his towel. Victoria Montesi stood just outside their door.

“This is them?” Elsa asked, moving from her bed while Frank calmly walked past Red Wolf and with a blank expression confronted Montesi in the doorway, shaving cream still patched along his face.

“This is them, Elsa. How did you find us, Vicki?” His paranoia came before all his hope and common sense. Magic was not a substance of which Frank was fond of, though he had come to realize that some magic could stop the worst of it. An idea that was not unlike slowly increased poison tolerance.

“Their wolf followed us back last night, though he thought I didn’t see him,” Red Wolf explained, nobly paying no attention to the extremely underdressed Drake. Jack confirmed this with an assenting nod and a bit of a smile. Drake shot daggers at Red Wolf, who seemed completely unaffected by the man’s venomous glare. Frank debated for a minute before he stood back and gestured them all inside. He firmly locked the door behind them as he moved back to the bathroom to wash off his face.

“...I decided to help you... once you put on some pants,” Vicki explained, finally, but went on in spite of her joke. “I want to know everything about the page you found. I want to know your plan. And we’re going to Doctor Strange. He’s the only person who could stop this before you get yourself killed. With him, we might be able to do what Blade couldn’t. And kill this thing.”

Frank dabbed at his face with another towel to remove what is left of the shaving cream, his face splotched with patches of day-old shadow. Frank pulled on his button-up shirt and a pair of slacks. Tossing the towel off once his pants were on, he tucked the shirt in, buttoned it up and latched his pants before he tightened his belt down. Frank sat on the edge of his bed and pulled on a pair of socks, setting his shoes in front of him but not putting them on. “So when do we go to the Sanctum?”

“I was thinking right now,” Victoria told them, while Jack found his eyes trail over the young blonde who hid beneath her covers, obviously in some state of undress.

“I can only lamp three people... an’ a wolf. Tops. We need an alternate way to get – wherever this is,” Elsa explained, as she modestly fished her pants off the ground next to her and pulled them under her covers so to awkwardly dress outside of the view of everyone else. Everyone seemed to be packing things up, plan half-cocked or not.

“Lamped?” Jack asked, but digressed. “We’ve got my Suburban outside. More than enough space. Let’s just get downstairs. He’s in New York. Not too far.”

“A Chevy fan?” Frank asked, with the slightest sense of admiration in his voice.

Jack’s head snapped to look sharply in his direction, and spoke through clenched teeth. “I’m really not wanting to talk to you, Frank. About anything. *Ever*, you psychopath. It’s just a car.”

Frank shook his head in irritation and shoved the last of his few goods as padding around the massive *Emily* stowed inside of his guitar case. Victoria and Jack stood awkwardly by the door, glancing at their watches. It was with a canny eye that she spotted a folded piece of paper on the entrance desk, by the television. She grasped it in hand and knew, instantly, it was the page. She slid it into her pocket only a moment before Frank looked back to her with a question. “So. I’ve just one question. Why were you ... at a strip club? I know you’re into girls, but that’s...”

All sense of chivalry and assistance turned into a ball of fury in the span of a sentence, fire clear in her voice. “Go to Hell,” she barked at the de facto leader of the Nightstalkers.

Frank could do nothing but smile. “That’s the idea.”

Jack chuckled a little, and whether it was at Frank’s comment or Victoria’s vicious strike wasn’t clear. He moved to kneel and beckon Lobo over, who rushed to the hand of the stranger. Jack scratched the wolf behind its ear as he spoke. “Heh. I’ve been helping Montesi collect the pages recently, and – and I’d heard that my sister was ... working there...” his voice slowly withered into shame as he finished the explanation.

Red Wolf took note. He had been coming close to handle Lobo when he saw the wolf react to Jack, with some surprise. Few had received such affection from the animal, and Red Wolf stood back to allow it while he beckoned more from Jack’s story. “Was she?”

“Not for the last few months. She’s gone again,” Jack went on, gave the wolf one more scratch behind the ear and stood again. He saw that the crew had nearly finished packing and headed to the door, opening it for them.

Hearing the sadness in Jack’s voice, Red Wolf felt his own heart pull at the loss of family. “I am sorry to hear it, Jack.”

Vicki, meanwhile, felt that other matters were of far more importance. “I can’t believe you thought we went there like perverts.”

“What’s wrong with naked women?” Frank asked, apparently puzzled.

Vicki opened her mouth to speak, but the packed Elsa apparently already answered for her. “You’re a pig.”

[THE SANCTUM SANCTORUM]

“No,” Dr. Strange told them firmly.

They had found the Sanctum with surprising ease; the place could not be found by someone who did not know to look for it. Further barring admittance, it couldn’t be found by anyone that Doctor Strange did not wish to. It left those of the party – Jack, Victoria and Frank – feeling very optimistic of their chances. They parked the Suburban in the expansive driveway of the ancient Victorian home and took Lobo off his leash. The five of them – six, Red Wolf would insist – were very warmly welcomed by Wong and told that Master Strange had been expecting them.

This led them to quite the feeling of surprise when he so quickly denied them once he heard their plan explained length. Montesi even made a show of pleading for his assistance, stating that otherwise they would surely perish in the fires of Hell were they to try it.

“Absolutely not,” Doctor Strange continued. “I will not have you recklessly endangering yourself and your compatriots. If I were to assist – at such your threat – I would be *endorsing* this course of action. My presence would not guarantee success, and your presence at all would create grave promises of your deaths.”

Valkyrie spoke up, her identity known to most in the room and familiar from her large physique and golden locks despite her current drab dress of a slogan t-shirt that read *Avast!*. Until now, she had watched the discussion from the wings of the doorway. Suddenly, she seemed incensed enough to speak her own piece. “That is *absurd*,” she declared, her voice full of anger. “Not a year ago we traveled to Hell to rescue our own! Let us once more summon the Defenders, and we’ll simply let this Erebus know what the price is for claiming a hero as ‘his’.”

Dr. Strange narrowed his eyes to respond. Most of those gathered seemed a little out of the loop, and exchanged looks for comprehension; only a few had any idea what the topic of conversation

was. “Those were extenuating circumstances. We've also proven that my powers are weakened in Hell. I can not condone, nor assist, in this. Blade sacrificed himself to keep this seal formed. I will not make his sacrifice meaningless by opening this scab.”

“Doctor – STEPHEN – how dare you just *brush us off* like this. Red Wolf, tell him about your Spirit,” Frank desperately grasped at what straws he could find, unable to sit on the couch that Doctor Strange had originally offered them. He pointed his finger and made an aggressive posture just to speak, which to its credit did make him feel better.

“He’s probably aware, Drake. And he still said No,” Red Wolf somberly explained, and shook his head negative, firmly. He stood up, brushing Lobo behind the ear on his way upright. Patting his leg, he bid Lobo to follow him as he made for the doorway. Strange stopped him from his exit and gestured him to halt.

“You’re welcome to my home for the night. Enjoy supper. We do not discuss this further. My decision is final. If I discover you continue down this path, I will do what I can to stop you; you will not seal your deaths.”

Victoria shrugged her shoulders in defeat, and Jack decided to join Frank in fury. He stood and gesticulated firmly, about to speak when Doctor Strange arranged for their rooms. “Topaz, show these men to the guest rooms,” he spoke calmly.

All of Jack’s bluster disappeared in a moment’s notice and his head snapped to take in the sight of his Indian former love. There was silence between the two, and confused murmuring from the rest of the troupe. Elsa seemed particularly puzzled. “Topaz and Jack, they used to be an item. I met him fighting Dracula... I told you about the thing with the diary. It was theirs,” Frank explained.

“Hi,” Jack greeted, awkwardly, apparently remanded to the emotional breadth of a teenager in the face of his former love. She smiled wearily, but managed to nod them along.

“It’s this way to your rooms,” Topaz explained, speaking not to Jack but to the group, leading them up the stairs. Jack fell into silence and stood at the back of the group, deeply lost in his frustration. He refused to let his eyes again to meet the woman he once called ‘mine’. Their trip, however, came to an abrupt and complete stop when one of the doors opened from within. Standing there was a long, blond-haired woman dressed in casual clothes that struck familiar to all but Elsa.

“What is it, Jenn?” Topaz asked, puzzled at the appearance of her fellow student and fellow witch, Jennifer Kale.

Jennifer stood in the hallway and gestured her hands quickly, the motion ended with one hand pointed into a V of her pointer and middle with the other an inversed L of her thumb and all fingers but her pointer. A sheen of light emitted across the hallway and bathed them in a blue luminescence. “We have moments before Stephen comes to inspect the spell I cast, we are in private. Topaz, Valkyrie – I beg you not to tell him, but ... Drake... I understand what you’re

doing. I heard your every word. Man-Thing spoke of the last time he issued Valkyrie and Strange into Hell, for their friend ... and I'm willing to ask my friend to allow us to again. He may not be with you – but I will be. We must leave tomorrow, and be gone before he checks our presence. Time is *crucial*. Strange is not a man fooled for long. But I can keep us masked from him... for a time. He's taught me well."

Drake seemed taken aback by the sudden appearance – and beneficence – of one of Strange's disciples, who he probably knew better as 'Johnny Blaze's cousin'. "Excuse me?"

"Tomorrow morning. We wake up at four in the morning. You hoof it and meet us at – I don't know – the Denny's due west of here. Make our plans from there. He's coming upstairs as we speak. Not a word of this. Just trust me." Her hands flicked again, and the light disappeared. She went into her room and closed the door. Topaz, shocked, heard Strange's approach and quickly gestured. A wave of her hands opened all five doors down the hall set aside for them.

"You've all a room. Choose one, quickly, and ready for supper. It should be on shortly."

Elsa, Jack, Drake, Vicki, Red Wolf (and he would insist 'Lobo' be added to the roster) all chose rooms quickly, and stowed what gear they had brought with them. Frank his 'guitar', Elsa her backpack, Jack – though taking the longest for the forlorn expression he bore at their host Topaz - his backpacking ruck, Red Wolf his gym bag and Vicki her suitcase. They freshened up and readied for the evening. A night of silence to plans which will be unseen until the next morning.

None of them could wait to start the day, despite the horrors that might await them.

[THE BOWELS OF HELL. KIND OF.]

A man – perhaps a man – hung from a craggy rock face, arms torn from its sockets connected to chains. Stumps remained on his shoulders, as if they'd seen something torn from them. His fingers had been, each and all, plucked from his hands. His legs were lost, nothing but gaping wounds appeared from his hips. Empty sockets gazed into the fiery pits that surrounded him. Screams were heard everywhere, the screams of the sinners and the guilty, those who had found their way to the ultimate punishment.

He was weathered. Scars traversed his form and his skin was fresh, regrown, in countless places. The man seemed starved, barely skin hanging along bone.

Yet he just grunted, quietly. His flesh torn free of his muscles, brown skin flushed with blood as it peeled free of his torso. Veins tore and muscles shifted visibly with the exposure to air. The torturer lifted the skin above victim's head and squeezed like a sponge, to drain its blood into his mouth. The victim swallowed it gladly, for any sign of sustenance. The sadist then dropped the dried flesh, to allow its owner to swallow it in a fit of ravenous hunger while his torturer seemed to do nothing but laugh.

The towering demon, his lower jaw nearly unhinged, laughed gleefully at the horror he inflicted upon his captive, each of his long, razored teeth gleaming in the fires of the Pit, its only light. His nude, genderless body triumphantly forced its spindly claws into the flesh of his captive, leaning forward on his lizard-like feet. His toe-claws flashed to and from with excitement, tail flagging in its pleasure.

“BLADE, IF IT TAKES A THOUSAND YEARS. YOU WILL SCREAM.” the demon issued tauntingly at the form that stood nearly a dozen feet his lesser.

The former vampire hunter looked up with his empty eye sockets filled with blood, hanging limply from chains that fix him to a massive cliff, dislocated arms holding him off the ground below. He made as if to stare directly into the face of the mountainous demon before him. “I’m going to be the one to kill you, Erebus.”

Erebus laughed a great and throaty laugh.

[PRESUMABLY THE SANCTUM SANCTORUM]

“AAAAAHHH!” she screamed, and sat up instantly in her bed. Elsa looked around suddenly, and breathed deeply. “Frank?” she asked, desperately and terror filled her voice. He was nowhere to be seen – she remembered she had her own room. She remembered where she was, and stood up. She pulled on a shirt and a pair of shorts over the panties she had slept in, and exited the room to cross the hallway. To her surprise, someone stopped her.

“You shouldn’t tell him,” Jennifer told her, appearing from the shadow. Elsa looked nothing but puzzled.

“Frank is bearing a deep weight, Elsa. He wouldn’t be like this if his family was ... okay. Blade is one of the few things he feels can fix his problems, whether he wants to admit it or not. The thought of Blade to him is the thought of an unstoppable hero. It’s his strength. Do you realize this? None of us are human. We’re all ... special in our way. Even Montesi, to a degree. Frank is a man born of purpose. His purpose now ... is to fix the world and Blade is his answer.” She smiled weakly, and ran a hand through her long blonde hair, leaning against the wall to address the demon huntress.

“Blade won’t fix this. Blade isn’t the answer. But it’s what he needs. He can’t know his friend’s pain... his friend’s failure. That sacrifice... it’s pure for him.”

Elsa was stunned into silence by the sorceress. “...you saw my dreams?”

“No,” Kale explained, quietly, a rueful expression worn on her face. An expression instantly showed that this young woman had seen horrors far beyond her. “But my magic was sensitive enough to see your *visions*. You should ... just go back to bed. We’ll speak in the morning.”

The demon huntress lost her voice entirely. Not knowing what else to say, she just nodded. “Thank you.” She didn’t know, precisely, what she thanked Kale for, but she left it there as she returned to her room until the morning. Frank might feel shaken by this news, she decided, but it only made her more desperate to save him... and to kill that monster.

[DENNY’S, I GUESS WASHINGTON D.C.]

“—the place?” Vicki asked as they walked inside of the establishment, the door jingling as they entered.

An employee greeted them eagerly. “Seat wherever you like,” she said, and they intended to do just that. Jack gestured with his thumb to a corner booth where he saw two blonde women – one rather built, one slender. The group in tow, they navigate their way to the booth where Valkyrie and Kale had already claimed a spot. Frank glanced at his watch, which read *4:05 AM*, and seemed slightly put off by all of this. He had the distinct expression on his face of a man who has not yet had his first cup of coffee.

“I expected you all sooner,” Valkyrie greeted them brusquely, as they all found their seats awkwardly enough. Only two of them, aside from their hosts, seemed terribly perky. Both of the wolves – Jack and Red Wolf – seemed to be fully ready to make mission happen. Their attention was sharp and they seemed rested. Vicki had an appearance of expectant dread, with Drake merely tired and Elsa somehow shaken.

“Well, we didn’t have a magical *teleporting witch* with us,” Frank hissed out sharply.

“Mind your racism, *human*,” Jack rubbed in, sharply. Victoria shot him a glare and Jack seemed almost offended.

“Let’s just focus on the job at hand,” Vicki ordered, sharply, and Jack seemed frustrated. More to him than the rest, however, as Victoria – and most of the others – knew well that Jack’s sole desire was to live a normal life once more.

There was a slight pause as Jennifer scanned the faces of the tired, shaken and bitter, waiting for testosterone to once more lower to an acceptable level. After this minor refrain, she gathered herself and introduced the deal. “Valkyrie is coming with us. She has some ... vengeance she wants to visit, and we could use the muscle. We can expect some level of anonymity, as Topaz is going to run interference.

“So, our main thing is this – I’ve got Man-Thing as a fallback to *Going to Hell*. We’ve got our travel plan covered, and I can get us to Louisiana. What we need to discuss is any sort of plan we might have.”

Jack looked at Vicki. Vicki shrugged a little bit and looked over at Frank Drake. Elsa looked at Frank, as well. Frank, however, looked at Red Wolf for some manner of assistance. Red Wolf

just smiled cheerfully at Frank's groggy face and acts as if he's about to speak – until the waitress appears.

“Do we know what we want, dears?” she asked, clearly forcing cheer into her voice.

“My friend Frank would like a large black coffee, I would like two hash browns, three eggs scrambled, two slices of toast and bacon. As well as an additional bag set aside with ten sausage links,” Red Wolf explained his desires, with that same knowing smile. The rest of them ordered their food in turn, before returning to silence. Jack broke it.

“Hey, Valkyrie, I'm dying to know. So... what happened to Ye Olde Speeche? That whole Thor syntax?” Jack destroyed all topic of cohesion in discussion, as Valkyrie inhaled and began to explain her event.

“Nearly four months ago, I was in battle with the Enchantress. My form was sundered from my spirit – and to survive, I had no choice but to bond with a sympathetic being. My prior host, Samantha Parrington, gave way to my entrance, despite some desire at the time. We have since ... become just an ‘I’. There are ... interesting results. Such as my language.”

“I thought you looked a little different. Thought you maybe lost weight,” he casually responded.

“How about the *issue at hand*? We're going to be tits up without a plan! We have a man damned in Hell and vampires plaguing the Earth! I know I'm not one as the picture of sensibility, but let's focus a little bit. We've to outrun a power-mad Sorcerer Supreme!”

Everyone looked taken back from the outburst of Elsa, who had suddenly voiced her irritations from a sleepless night to the crowd. At a volume quite loud enough to draw a number of stares from nearby tables, were the seven of them not already strange enough.

“We do need to move before we're stopped,” Montesi agrees, but her eyes seemed unsure.

“What if he's right? What if we're just going there to die? There are other ways to this, people.”

The gathered met her with awkward stares and their faces around the table whispered to themselves their doubts under their breath. Of those without doubt, only one spoke.

“...I had a thought,” Kale went on, once she was sure there were no further outbursts from the blonde demon huntress.

“There are seven of us. Seven is often thought to be a good number. But there are better numbers,” she began to explain, her eyes drifted to Victoria and Frank in turn, and to Werewolf a moment later. The three of them were fully aware of her meaning, having all previously been involved in such an ordeal that she might be bringing up. “Nine. Nine is a *really* good number.”

Vicki was the first to speak. “There was a ... bond. The sum of the whole, parts, all of that. I noticed it's been ... broken.”

“By death, the Nine are no longer – they are a scattered few, the spell ended with the loss of its Number. God do I sound like a fortune teller. I mean, I am, but I sound like one.” Jennifer smiled weakly and looked up as the waitress brought them their drinks quite quickly. The tea set in front of Jenn, coffee in front of most of the rest. Red Wolf had water. Jennifer whispered words of a dead language and in its wake, tea leaves appeared within her cup. She then poured her hot water into her cup and stirred.

“Did you get this from Red Wolf?” Frank implored her, suspiciously. “He mentioned this.” His eyes glanced to Red Wolf, as well, in surprise. Elsa had much the same expression, though far more lost – she felt left out of this conversation completely.

At Kale’s clueless expression, he went on unabated with his hesitations. “You want us to recruit two more people? To form the Order of Nine? That’s – ridiculous. Sure, it’s – proven, but – I mean, even *saying* we did this. Where would we find them before Strange found us?” He quickly drank his coffee, as those around the table enjoyed their morning lifts. Jennifer drank long, and deeply, emptying her cup.

“That’s easy enough. We look into fate to see what would guarantee us our victory. We simply concentrate upon our question as we divine, and then see it laid before us...” Jennifer explained, and slowly craned her neck down to the teacup in her hand, its tea leaves plastered to the sides in a strange and seemingly random pattern. Her face registered some kind of amused shock. She had to lift her hand to her mouth to stop the laughter, a strange and stilted sound.

“What? What is it?” Valkyrie asked her friend, trying to see into the cup as if she could understand the same meaning. It only looked like scattered tea leaves to her.

“Well... it’s ... unexpected, is all,” Jennifer said with a smile. Everyone leaned forward, the tension uncomfortably palpable. She held off on letting them know, to build it up just a little bit more. She thought of how to word it and got a vicious stare from Frank Drake across from her, as their breakfast began to waft its scent to them from the kitchen.

"The fates divine us our first...a fate worse than Hell...we need to go to Wisconsin."

Author’s Corner

This story grew from a deep love of several of these characters and a single night’s inspiration of how to use them, thanks to the story of Dino’s – and my wondering, *how does one get Blade out of Hell?*

Certain thematic inspirations for this book largely include “*Good Omens: the Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*” by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett, and DC’s “*Days of Vengeance*” event. So, props to them.

I've wanted to tell a tale of Heroes On A Mission to Hell for some time, and I'm taking that chance now and expanding the world of M2K's supernatural presence. I hope you enjoy these characters, where I've decided to go with them all, and the tales before you. Enjoy.

- *Bowie, who loves Red Wolf like a son.*



"HELL AND BACK"

Part Two: The Turn

Written by Bowie Sessions

Barometer, n.: An ingenious instrument which indicates what kind of weather we are having.

Ambrose Bierce

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

The Darkhold – *the veritable Pandora's Box, an ancient book of arcane evils, root of vampire and werewolf among man's world.*

Satan, Lucifer and the Devil – *the Triumvirate rulers of Hell.*

Erebus – *Vampire God, prisoner of Blade.*

Man-Thing – *monstrous Gatekeeper of the Nexus of all Realities.*

Satana – *Daughter of Satan, dissident of Hell.*

Doctor Strange – *the Sorcerer Supreme*

Blade – *vampire hybrid 'day-walker', banished to Hell.*

Cain Marko / The Juggernaut – *super-strong supervillainous inheritor of magical bands.*

Craig Hollis / Mr. Immortal – *over-excitabile and suicidal would-be hero cursed to live forever.*

Frank Drake – *descendant of Dracula, veteran monster-hunter*

Jack Russell / Werewolf – *cursed as a werewolf, and has mastered it as a weapon against darkness.*

Will Talltrees / Red Wolf – *bears a Native American Wolf Spirit, superb tracker, protector of the abandoned.*

Cassie St. Commons / Dusk – *a living dead girl empowered with many abilities by unknown sources.*

Elsa Bloodstone – *a superhumanly able monster-hunter, daughter of famed immortal Ulysses Bloodstone.*

Jennifer Kale – *a powerful sorceress of Atlantean magic.*

Samantha / The Valkyrie – *a powerful Ancient Nordic warrior woman*

Victoria Montesi – *a chronicler of the Darkhold and solely able to bear it without taint.*

Topaz – *able sorceress and friend of Jennifer Kale.*

Hellspawn of many stripes.

Scenes – One Place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Two Places in Juarez, Mexico; Places around Citrusville, Florida; Sanctum Sanctorum; Places around Hell

[AN APARTMENT IN MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN]

The dim glow of a television filled a dark room and the clock in the distance blinked its steady 4:28AM, where from its speakers the television set boomed the infomercial presented overly cheerfully during the channel's Paid Advertisement time-share. "Sweat away tension and stress with Velform Sauna Belt. Target waist, hips, back or thighs with the easy to attach Sauna Belt!"

A surprisingly handsome man with a stylish mop of blond hair, allowed to lie loosely, sat in a reclining chair, his eyes barely opened. His hand strained down to his crotch and he scratched it through the Ren & Stimpy boxers he wore prominently, without anything else worn ... except perhaps the bottle of beer clasped tightly in his hand and the shotgun, which rested against his leg from its base on the floor. He slumped in the chair, a leg raised to rest on the coffee table covered with beer cans and bloody knives. Many parts of his body looked caked in dry blood, without a mark on him. The sofa and the wall behind him seemed similarly marked; they prominently featured what looked like brain matter.

"Now you won't need to leave the house to work up a sweat, with Sauna Belt you can just relax in the comfort of your own home!" it proclaimed proudly, even as a shadowy figure sat on the arm rest and stared down at him.

"Can't sleep? What's wrong? Life got you down? Maybe I should go ask your wife to come over and tell you how she didn't think you were worth living for. Would that make you feel better?"

The man threw the remote violently at the shadowy figure. It went through him and impacted the wall behind him, which resulted only in the lid popping off and the batteries being scattered amongst the carpet. The shadow laughed at him, deeply and hauntingly. *"Oh, please, go ahead, threaten me. We all know how well that turns out. There you are. Sit down. Stew in your cowardly impotence. Haha! You're so predictable. What? You're going to cry? Oh, say it's not so! You're going to drown yourself in alcohol?! Maybe alcohol poisoning will kill you, since bullets don't! Ha ha!"*

He lifted the beer and threw it back, swallowing the contents. The man popped another one open, already set at his side in preparation and he began to guzzle it back. As if when he consumed enough of the alcohol, the phantom might disappear. Apparently, this had the opposite effect – as a great flash of light through his room heralded the appearance of seven (Red Wolf would insist eight) travelers. Three blonde women, one in firm leathers with a glowing red choker, and another strapped with a sword to her hip, the last clad in simple jeans and jacket. A redheaded man in fine silks that carried a guitar case and a raven-haired woman tightly zipped up in her leather jacket beside him. Lastly, two feral-seeming men, one Native American and one Russian, both with shoulder-length hair round out the group (Red Wolf would insistently make mention of a wolf at his heels as the last member.)

The un-flashily attired blonde lowered her hands, the ambient light withdrawing into her as its obvious source. They find themselves faced with a well-toned blond-haired man in Ren and Stimpy Boxers and decorated heavily with dry blood. "He smells like blood," Jack – the brown-haired white-skinned wolf man – states, carefully, as if he were studying a subject.

"And brain, but we've more important matters than his hygiene," Red Wolf – the Native American one so defensive of his companion wolf – amended and prioritized. Lobo, Red Wolf's impertinent wolf, rushed for the blond man without reservation. He yelled in terror and backed up, but the wolf tackled the drunk to the ground and started lapping at his arm, covered in blood. Everyone stared at the spectacle of the hungry wolf and decided not to question what exactly he was licking up.

"WHAT! Are you doing – in my HOUSE?!" the man yelled, defensively, as he shoved the wolf off angrily. Lobo snarled, but Red Wolf muttered something in a language none understood and the wolf backed off from him. The privacy-invaded victim stands back, half-naked, and stared around the now-full room at the group that coalesced seemingly from thin air.

"*Maybe you're just drunk,*" the dark figure that loomed about our newest protagonist stated chidingly.

Victoria Montesi, the raven-haired woman accompanying the dilettante with the guitar-case, stared with a mixture of horror. Her eyes trailed over the walls and over their target, who seemed anything but the Chosen One they were somehow supposed to expect. "This is him? He doesn't look very chock full of destiny," she cited, a brow rose quizzically.

"SOMEONE ANSWER ME!" he yelled, and everyone seemed a little uneasy.

"This is ... Mr. Immortal..." Valkyrie – the sword-sheathed buxom Asgardian warrior amongst the other two blondes – whispered not with reverence but shock. She laughed after a moment's pause. Jack laughed with her. They knew instantly who this was.

"We're recruiting the Great Lakes Avengers to save the world?" Jack asked, with merriment in his voice.

Valkyrie seemed no less chiding. "The destiny of the world falls on the laurels of a fool. I feel so very safe now! How I must compliment your tea, Jennifer."

This victim, Mr. Immortal, rushed forward and kicked the edge of his table with his barefoot. Surprisingly, the weak structure launched skyward and two of the knives gained air. He somersaulted forward, grasping them out of the air as he flipped, and landed on the opposite end with both his elbows firmly planted. His body rose up, legs snapping skyward and he thumped Frank Drake – the dilettante in the silk shirt – in the chest. This sent him flying into the wall shortly behind him with an uncomfortable grunt.

Everyone was suddenly in motion. Elsa – the blonde, choker-wearing demon-huntress sidekick (though never admittedly) of Frank Drake – pulled free a gun and Jennifer Kale – the sorceress who brought them there – slapped it down before anything would happen that'd escalate this further.

He leapt from the table where he'd suspended himself by his elbows and then tackled Frank Drake, then immediately pushed the tips of both knives against the throat of the demon hunter. There was a sudden, quiet silence amongst the crowd of the other six. Apparently, what laughter had risen at his existence had died at the severity of his actions now.

Jennifer, who had used the tea to divine those two they'd need to form The Circle of Nine – a sanctified order of mystical warriors dedicated to safeguarding the entire Dimension –

known as The Midnight Sons, seemed frustrated and about to respond. When Mr. Immortal, whose blades had caused pinpricks of blood from the guitar-wielding demon hunter Frank Drake's neck, interrupted. "Wait, I'm being recruited?" he asked, with no sense of offense in his voice for the mockery he'd received just moments ago.

Valkyrie, who contained her laughter, managed to right herself at Jennifer's stern gaze. "We are in need of two warriors that will ensure our success in a battle through Hell to right the threat of demonic presence here above."

"You're one of them," Frank added, then gripped Mr. Immortal's wrists and tried to push the man's arms back, wheezing slightly from the pressure of his attacker's weight upon his chest.

"Just – please. Put ... down the kitchen knives," Jennifer begged, her hands spanned out defensively. She whispered the beginnings of a spell, to separate the two. The sure, oversized, furred hand of what Jack became stopped her. In the span of moments, his clothes had torn to allow way for the towering canine beast to spring free from what had been. The room seemed filled with the beast that hunched down to clear the ceiling. He pressed Jennifer away as he stepped forward just once, a loud snarl in his voice.

Mr. Immortal turned to look – most of them stared in horror and expectancy at the site of the sudden transformation – and the massive hand that rushed straight for him, clawed and spanning half the size of his chest, surprised him. It slammed into his back and lifted him up and off Drake. Jack pushed forward and forced the nearly naked Great Lake Avenger into the far wall. Bones nearly shattered as he slammed the blond hero into and through the dry wall of his own apartment.

Jack stepped back, and brushed his hands off, reverting to his human form while Mr. Immortal crumbled to the floor. "Thanks—" Frank began.

"I don't want to hear it, Drake," Jack snarled to him, re-affixing his sweatpants that expanded to allow the truly massive size, though extremely worn wide at the waist. Jennifer Kale spared a glance at the bare-skinned werewolf. Red Wolf slid his sweater off over his head and returned to just his undershirt and tossed it to Jack, who slid it on carefully. He suddenly looked like he felt quite awkward, in jogging pants and a sweater, but kept his attention to the matter at hand.

Elsa seemed furious. Valkyrie was physically restraining her, her arms pulled behind her back and her gun already knocked out of her hand. She seemed rather intensely set on the man that had attacked her partner, Frank Drake. She was gibbering uncontrollably in cockney, an affliction none of those present were equipped with the ability to handle.

"Are you okay?" Victoria asked, returning herself to the role of her doctoral studies. She was assessing Mr. Immortal, who seemed more than a little disoriented. He nodded his compliance, and answered correctly when she held up several fingers. She began to explore his body, pressing firmly at the edges of possible injury to assess the damage. Victoria was immediately able to tell his ribs were broken.

"We need to get you patched up, you're—" Victoria was trying to rationalize, but Mr. Immortal wasn't going to have any of it.

"I'm called Mr. Immortal. I'll be fine," he grunted and sat up. Tears welled at the pain he received, but he endured. Pain was something Mr. Immortal was intimately familiar with, on a level no one else could comprehend.

The tension stiffly filled the room. Frank picked up the knives that had cut him and tossed them aside. Valkyrie asked Elsa's for compliance, which when grudgingly given, she allowed Elsa free. The two of them stood silently, watching the young man recover from the savage werewolf's attack. Jennifer calmly broke the silence and stood beside Victoria, who was trying to tend medically to the young hero. "We're forming a group known as The Midnight Sons. A circle of Nine destined to hold back the tide of dark magics and supernatural evils. We divined the fates, and ... we need you, Mr. Imm - I'm sorry, do you have a name I can use? I feel like a complete idiot calling you Mr. Immortal ever ten seconds."

"Craig," Mr. Immortal - I mean Craig - offered, limply, his voice muted while his eyes lit up with splendor at the diatribe she offered him. He looked like a child on Christmas.

"Craig. Okay, Craig. We were sent here by the fates to find you. We're going to Hell to stop the spread of vampirism from—"

"I'm in," he cuts Jennifer off without consideration.

Kale seemed taken aback. Most of the group seemed less than perfectly coordinated, and many grudging at best - spiteful of one another, selfish and pre-occupied. He took her by surprise. "Don't you want to hear what's going on...?"

"No, you need me to help save the world. I'm cool with that. We're going to Hell? Awesome. Let me get my costume! We'll take on Satan himself! The fates call for me, and well, who am I not to pick up the phone?" Craig offered with absolute glee seeming to paint his features. He didn't seem too shaken up by the concept, to her continued surprise. He hurried off to his room to get some clothes and his costume.

"I'd really rather you left the spandex here, Craig," Frank insisted loudly after him, as he dusted himself off and stood back up, fixing his silk shirt and running a hand through his hair to correct it. He picked up his guitar case and stood there, considering the man, and looking around his room.

"So, um, whose brain is on that wall?" Victoria asked, still trying to ascertain exactly what was going on. She surely felt more out of her element than anyone else did; ironic she was the one 'desperately needed'. She reminded herself to take that up with Frank later.

"He can't die," Valkyrie explained simply.

Outside the window, there was a woman contained within black shadows, which clung to her in such a way that some might consider them clothes. They once might have been, before darkness swept her world. It was too early in the morning for the sun to rise. The darkness eclipsed her and she seemed to weightlessly rest on the windowsill, perched with her gaze reaching inward. She watched with rapt study of the goings and actions of the eight eclectic heroes within. Red Wolf turned to stare out the window and saw nothing.

"I was ... experimenting," Craig explained, tugging on his last shoe. He picked at his t-shirt and jeans uncomfortably and seemed slightly out of place with the ability to put a wallet

and keys into pockets. Straightening up, he did his very best to feel professional and ready. Craig suffered dearly from spandex separation pains, already.

"Most empirical research isn't done with shotguns, is it?" Elsa inquired, her morbid fascination very evident in her voice.

Jennifer, enjoying the discussion or not, brings up her hands and quickly began a new incantation. Once more, light encompassed the group – of now eight (Red Wolf would insist nine). The light permeated the room and lit up the night, casting long shadows and illuminating the street below. This brilliant luminescence seemed to beam from every one of their pores, and in seconds it became too bright to see even the faintest outline of the group. This glow suddenly retreated into nothingness. Only the black of night remained and the continuing thrum of late-night infomercial.

The shadow, who had clung to the wall above the window, suddenly pulled herself within her own darkness. A soft sound emitted, as if wind sucked through a vacuum, and she, too, was gone.

"Order Now! And beware of the Sauna Belt imitators!"

[THE HIGH THRONES OF HELL]

The landscape was a seeming plateau of nothingness, filled with fire and desiccated rock face. The hues of the land were dark red and black, as the burnt and the burning; its heat seemed to burn with the sin of its tenants. The faint melody of suffering was a dissonance that rose from the thousands who cried their agony across its vast and terrible infinity. Souls of the Damned cried in futile pain as above them an orange, winged beast flew into a small outcropping of stone at the center of a massive Keep that formed from the damned stone of the realm.

When he flew close enough to see the red-hued face of his master, the massive figure stared up at him from his throne to take in the airborne figure with a disdain-filled regard. "Father, it's your pet beast," explained a young-seeming and vivacious woman who sat to the side of this demon's Master, clinging to where he sat in his throne. Her father shrugged her off and turned to his accompaniment in his court. He settled himself and flicked his hand; the dozens of harpies and succubae who had flocked to him scattered at his bidding, while he casually took up a goblet filled with a crimson fluid. This throned Lord supped at the drink casually as he awaited word.

"Milord," the craggy stone-skinned beast squawked to his lustrously red-haired and horned Lord. The winged stone beast flapped its wings as it settled before him at his throne and greeted him most subserviently, took a knee and bowed before him in servile worship.

"Lord Satan, I would have a word with you," he bid to his Lordship Satan.

The flame-haired, fire-touched demon Lord stared imperiously down upon his subject. There was a grim smile, which spread over the weathered, cracked lips of the scar-faced demon. He gestured with a hand for the demon to go on, and quickly the rock-faced beast explained itself. "Lord Satan, enemies pervade our shores. I bid you to warn Erebus of his fate – allies

rally even now to roust him from his keep and free his prisoner," it fervently warned, sweat beaded down its brow – a trait which even the fires of Hell are incapable of bringing. The Gargoyle knew for one reason, and Satan smiled, aware of it. Satan was clearly aware that The Gargoyle knew only by his unholy and fervently watchful eye into the mortal realm upon one of his past conquests – The Valkyrie.

Satan smiled wider yet, and with a wave of his hand fires erupted from mere flickering glows that rose from the cracks of stone in his keep. A triangle with two spits of flame and his throne as its corners each summoned a face that appeared from their respective pyre. "Sirs," Satan greeted pleasantly to the other two faces, his voice a deep grain of the grave. It was somehow cold amongst a world of flame.

"Satan," barked the flames from which the visage of a bull-faced beast appeared. His voice was the sound of nails on a chalkboard. It deafened others to hear it. His voice rang with the screams of those tormented; it was a multifaceted semblance of horror. His breaths were that of fire, and his voice the very personification of torture and terror.

In turn, the last face regarded them both with a bit of imperious disinterest. His face honeyed and voice similarly silken. If anything, he seemed annoyed by the presence of the other two. "Oh, *The Devil, Satan*, dear me," he allowed in the same dramatic flare as The Devil suggested a moment before him. He laughed, lightly, to himself, at the absurdity of their self-importance.

"Prideful worm!" The Devil snarled, fiercely.

"Lucifer, this is a matter of quite some import – for you. Erebus' Keep lies within your realm. Be aware, that the Heroes of Man send to you a team, which means to humiliate you by destroying him and freeing their champion, Blade. Be warned of their meddling," Satan explained with some severity, his fiery gaze stared into the flame-born face of Lucifer with considerable distaste.

"I'm terrified. Very well. Get thee behind me, Satan– I will somehow find a way to manage this, God forbid," he placated with a wily smirk. Satan did not look the least bit enthused by his mockery.

Satan scratched his hand along his rocky throne, and tore great grooves in it with his claw-like nails. "I'm sending my vassal," he amended, with distrust in his voice. Gargoyle looked shocked, but bowed his head in understand. He fluttered into the sky, wings spanned wide and traveled without pause.

"Just to ... make sure you manage, Lucifer," Satan smiled wickedly, and Lucifer looked chiding as the flames receded from the throne room of the lone Lord of his Realm of Hell, Satan. The Triumvirate Lords of Hell recede to their own homes now, as the flames died.

Satana, the Lordship's offspring, bid to leave long before this moment, did not listen. She stared on at her father from in shadow, who schemed... and in a mist of fire, she was gone.

[A SMALL CANTINA IN JUAREZ, MEXICO]

There was a familiar flash of light, two hands positioned in a wide span of practiced expression. Jennifer Kale lowered her hands, as along the wide street dozens of people stopped everything they were doing to stare in rapt wonder at the newly appeared. The eight of them (nine, Red Wolf won't stop insisting) emerged from the ether, to the sound of surprised and manic Spanish being screamed about them with fingers pointing dramatically. Not just at them – but at the bar behind them. Red Wolf listened attentively to their cries, and his head snapped to stare at the sorceress who brought them to this seedy Mexican neighborhood. “You’re NOT serious! He murdered half of Washington!” Red Wolf cried out in anger and rushed for her, his hands clenched into fists. Lobo rushed at his feet behind him, barking his undying support.

“Whom are we discussing?” Valkyrie interjected, her voice tense, as she stepped forward and positioned herself between the Native American and her friend, Jennifer Kale. Her hands rose, pushing them both back. Red Wolf seemed furious, obviously having understood the Spanish when no one else did, or at least hadn't understood its implications.

There was only one person who occurred to Craig – and a few others – that had decimated half the populace of Washington DC, even if it's an over-exaggeration. “The Juggernaut?” Craig asked, putting together the blanks and stating it first. Others, however, had already clearly connected the dots, their eyes intent on their sorceress for an explanation.

“Cain Marko... the Juggernaut... is our next target,” Kale slowly explained, looking more than a little defensive.

“I didn't choose those damn leaves! I asked the teacup what two people will make it possible to pull all this off. And it said *these two*. This is destiny, and – I'm sorry, okay?” She winced and looked away, crossing her arms and pulling away from the group. Jack moved from beside Victoria to see to Kale, who he took by the arm supportively and walked away from the group with her. They talked, quietly, as the other five ... or six, depending on whom you asked ... considered their options amongst one another.

“The spirits say we need him...” Red Wolf intoned bitterly, shaking his head and removing himself from the group to commune with his own spirit, argument clear in his poise.

Frank scratched the back of his neck and looked amongst “Who feels up to that conversation with a genocidal weapon of mass destruction?” With Jack, Red Wolf and Kale having walked away, only Victoria, Frank and Elsa remained, to look at the biggest hero amongst them – The Valkyrie. All of them were fully aware she couldn't manage to stop him if it came to it, but that fear gripped them.

“Were you expecting me to volunteer...?” Valkyrie asked, diffidently. “I would never shirk from danger, but it would be foolhardy to—”

“I'll do it,” Craig offered, even though none of them had even bothered to look at him. They all turned to stare at him in utter shock. Especially Valkyrie, who was fully aware of his resume to a degree the others couldn't completely comprehend. She even laughed at his commentary, but Elsa seemed strangely intrigued.

She cleared her throat to speak. “This ... is the man who walked through yer Army as if it were an ant-hill on ‘is way to the White House, yeh?” Elsa whispered this, as she stepped closer to the t-shirt and jeans-clad blond hero, who seemed willing to face the Juggernaut alone.

“What’s the worst he can do? Kill me?” Craig smirked broadly and cracked his neck side to side. He walked forward to the door of the tavern, with shock and silence issued from his newly minted teammates behind him. He pulled the door open, closed it behind them, and disappeared from their view. The seconds lengthened into eternity, it seemed for them, as they edged closer and backed off almost simultaneously. The presence within the bar terrified them, even the most stalwart of them, against their better presentations. Valkyrie and Frank would never admit to fear.

“Y’think he’ll be alrigh’ in there?” Elsa asked, quietly, her voice filled with concern over their newest partner.

Valkyrie took far too long to answer, as she watched attentively for the screaming to begin. “Well ... he can’t die ... but I imagine he can suffer ...,” she whispered with some concern. Elsa fell silent to watch, as well.

Inside, Craig made his slow and deliberate steps towards the table in the center, where the bulking form of Cain Marko rested. He wasn’t wearing anything clearly defined as those Bands of Cytorrak, but their mutations on his now-titanic body were clear. The man towered above his lessers, and eclipsed the chair in which he sat. A hundred beers rested in front of him, it’d seem, by the sea of tinted glass placed on his table. Craig stepped to his table, and stared straight into the eyes of the titan known better as The Juggernaut. Clearing his throat, he spoke just as soon as he pulled out a chair to sit in.

“My name’s Craig,” he began, tentatively, introducing himself to the large man who just stared across the table at him as if he was insane. Cain Marko’s veins seemed to throb in his temples, his teeth ground together and lips twisted up in a growing anger. Craig seemed aware of it, but pressed on, with a slight smile. He offered him a hand.

“I’m a superhero, and I wanted to offer you the chance for redemption.” Cain laughed. He laughed for what seemed like minutes, the deep bass of his laughter shaking the wood of the bar. The very few who had dared to be inside while he was – the bar in a state of repair which made it clear he was an unwanted regular – shuddered and lurched away from him more, eyes focused in morbid fascination for what might come next.

“Son, you just might want to re-examine what you’re askin’ me, ‘fore I get in the mood to convince you to leave,” he laughed again, and stood up. Picking up the table casually, he set it down as if it weighed no more than a deck of cards. Cain stepped across the distance between them and stared down at the seated form of Craig Hollis, the man known as Mr. Immortal.

Craig doesn’t back down. He stood up, to face the Juggernaut, and found himself overshadowed by several feet in height. “I’m not scared of you, Cain. In fact, I think you’re more scared of me

than I am of you. I'm offering you a chance. You're in Mexico because you're scared of some heroes rushing in to find you and stop you and bring you to justice.

"Well, I'm here to tell you – we're on a mission to save the very fabric of reality, and we need your help. We're going to Hell to fight the Devil, and you're the only one who can help us."

Cain stopped laughing. He also stopped smiling. He grabbed the table he set aside, and brought it back; but this time he used it like a flyswatter and smashed it through the frail form of Craig Hollis. He cried out in agony and surprise as it crushed him and sent him into the floor with a vicious force. Not dead, but battered, he coughed and spit up blood. Craig could feel his lungs filling with blood, and wheezed deeply as he forced himself to stand in his broken body. Ribs punctured inside, he knew it. Not long to live, he realized, as he forced one foot before the other despite the agony. "You hit like a girl. Are you that scared to be accepted? Told that you're forgiven? Do you actually want to live your life afraid, Cain?"

This time, Cain seemed much less forgiving and struck him again, this time with his fist. The punch crushed much of his bones and broke some of the floorboards below him. For a moment, Craig didn't seem to be moving. Cain crept closer, as the people in the establishment skirted away as quickly as possible. "What's wrong?" Craig asked, his eyes opening slightly to take in the sight of the massive lummo. He was bloodied and bruised, but he wasn't beaten. He started to force himself up and Cain grabbed him by his throat and hefted him skyward.

"I killed you..." Cain said with some concern in his voice. "I figured you were a superhero, then you – weren't movin'. Figured I— HEY! I don't gotta 'splain nothin' to you, dough-boy!" he accused, defensively.

Craig forced himself up to a sitting position, and stared skyward at the towering body of the titan high above him. He breathed in, and prepared himself for the worst. "Sure. But why is it you don't feel like killing me? You had a blast with it just a couple months back... lost the taste for it? Aw, you're just a big cream-puff now!"

Cain's eyes seemed to glow with his fury and he raised his hand again, ready to let it drop. "Do you have a death wish?!" he roared, shaking the walls with his rage.

"I don't know. Can you stop punching like a girl?" Craig asked with nothing but smiles as he came to stand up fully.

Outside, Valkyrie and Elsa edged towards the Cantina while Frank explained to the returned Kale, Jack and Red Wolf what had happened. They shouted their incredulous shock at the brashness of the former Mr. Immortal. At how delicate a situation this had to be. Their fury was clear, even as Elsa reached towards the door of the bar to check on how Craig was holding up. The sounds inside worried them both, as well as a dark shadow which perched on the roof above the shaking establishment.

They didn't make it that far. Craig sailed through the tinted glass window of the bar, shattering it as he flew out and ultimately collided with the soil outside in a crumpled heap. "You see what

you made me do?!” Cain called out furiously as he stepped through the gaping hole in the side of the establishment now, ducking his head under the window sill as he appeared, stalking toward the injured hero. Elsa quickly pulled free two long knives from tucked on her back and whipped them out. Valkyrie unsheathed her sword and they rushed the towering Juggernaut.

“Wait!” Craig called out as he came to stand up. Jack had already been pulling off his sweater, in preparation to transform. Kale’s hands had come up defensively; a misty blue light coalesced around them. Red Wolf had summoned a long staff into his hands from the apparent ether, to the surprise of those who noticed it. Frank was kneeling to open his guitar-case, and Victoria was backing away worriedly. They all stopped at the bidding of their newest member, staring in surprise at how untouched he looked.

“Cain. Don’t you see?” he asked, plaintively. “You don’t want to kill. You mowed through those people like nothing – I saw it. The world saw it. It wasn’t you, was it?”

Cain’s face was shamed, and turned away in a quiet thought. He seemed like those words had caught him off-guard. His hackles lowered, and the entire group seized up, unsure if a dramatic fight scene was about to happen or not. “Felt like someone was controllin’ me... I don’t like being toyed with...” Cain began with his voice forced and terse.

“We can help you, Marko, if you’ll just help us,” Frank offered, standing up and daring to walk closer, his hand extended in something like friendship. Cain looked at him warily and seemed less than convinced.

“What did I JUST TELL YOU about being toyed with?! It’s always what you can get outta me, ainnit? ALWAYS about that!” He rushed forward – when screams filled the pre-dawn light. They stopped, even the Unstoppable Juggernaut found himself faltered, their attention split into the distance. There was laughter in the distance, dark cackling madness that shuddered across the distance. The sound seemed to split the air in half, leaving those arrayed confused and hesitating.

Red Wolf was already moving. Gone was the staff that he’d summoned to his hand before, replaced now before their eyes in the form of swirling mist that soon coalesced into matching tomahawks. His clothes shuddered into nothingness, replaced by loincloth, fur chaps and the headdress of a wolf that shadowed his face. “Will!” Jack yelled out, some kind of brotherly affection for the fellow wolf and he launched himself after him. Mid-step he transformed into a slaving beast, half-man, half-wolf, racing through the dusty street while its pedestrians sprinted in the opposite direction.

On the horizon, a large pack of fiery beasts approached with a ravenous intensity. The screams of the dying reached their ears quickly, but not nearly as quickly as those that already left, their acute senses obviously giving them far superior warning. “I take it they heard something?” Craig asked rhetorically. The silhouettes of the two wolf-born warriors seemed eclipsed in number by the sheer horde of creatures that approached their street.

“No time to joke,” Frank explained, and Elsa kept her blades unsheathed as they started sprinting the distance. Elsa easily outpaced Frank, as the guitar case fell behind them. Out came his most

trusted ally – Emily, a massive machine-gun sized monstrosity that glowed with sickly green and red eldritch runes etched along its length. Necrotech, he called it, a weapon capable of dissolving that that bore mystical taint. Around this group, it was a sensitive tool.

”Good luck,” Victoria told them as they started off, and scratched her neck. She stepped back, and pulled out her gun defensively. “I’m not really seeing me doing much...,” she explained, mostly to herself, as the rest rushed off.

Jennifer Kale looked at her askance, somewhat disappointed, but then breathed in deeply. “It’s beginning,” she warned Valkyrie and the two once-scuffling super-humans, as that light once more bloomed and receded within her. She sent herself traveling far past the battlefield, where already the blood of allies found itself spilled onto the cement of the popular Mexican city streets.

Left in the wake of the rushing heroes were the two who they’d come for. Mr. Immortal stared at the Juggernaut, and he returned the look. “This is about as crazy as crazy gets,” Juggernaut explained, his eyes fixed on the invincible hero that had taunted him into such chaos a moment ago. They surrendered hostilities due to the chaos of the moment; five seconds had passed and the entire scene became turned on its ear. They both seemed very uncomfortable suddenly.

“Listen, Cain,” Craig argued, for a moment, “Those are – I’m pretty sure that’s really evil stuff over there. They are risking their lives right now to protect the place you came to call home while hiding like a coward. You want to be constructive with your emo pain? Do what I do when I feel like crawling into a hole and dying – fight some bad guys. I bet you’re spoiling for a fight.”

Cain hesitated; listening to the diatribe this time seemed almost to make sense. Rage crossed his face and his words rankled Cain into a hunger for a fight; and one was just over there. He stared into the distance before he shrugged his shoulders. “What the hell,” he began as he started to barrel himself toward the unholy laughter and blood-curdled screams.

“Hey! You’re leaving me?” Craig asked, biting. The Juggernaut stopped ... and turned around. He grabbed Craig up by the torso and threw him over his shoulder, eyes focused and he muttering darkly.

“Not another word, shrimp, or I’ll kill you.”

Craig scoffed diffidently, as he hung onto the towering titan. Cain’s boots slammed through the dirt, and sent up gasps of dust and cement in his wake, the street shaking as he rushed forward. His momentum increased, and he easily passed the rushing heroes of Frank, Elsa and Valkyrie. Craig, though, still seemed unimpressed. “Oh, you’re about as threatening as a bag of kittens, Cain.”

When they arrived at the scene, the ground quaking as they approached, and the horror was already evident. A flurry of demons had arrived from out of nowhere and begun laying waist to the local street without mercy. Werewolf and Red Wolf were fully embroiled within the war that had already counted dozens of pedestrian casualties. Bodies lay strewn through the road, cars

burned like candles and even storefronts destroyed, some with bodies that hung over broken glass.

Werewolf moved like a force of nature. His claws sundered into small fire-burnt creatures, shearing their bodies into pieces. Dozens of the creatures clung to him and tore through some of his flesh, his hair burnt from their body-encompassed flames as they ripped coppery ichor from below his skin. His snout parted wide to issue out dark howls of his agony and fury, his mind losing itself to the battle as he tore through as many of the creatures as dared approach him. Soon, they crawled over one another to cover him further, swarmed and outnumbered in the extreme.

To their shock, the human in wolf furs and his companion wolf seemed to hold his own with much greater ease. While his ally howled and roared his fury, huffed and panted in his exertions, Red Wolf and his companion moved as if they were possessed. His eyes narrow slits and mouth sealed in complete silence, Red Wolf seemed to nearly dance. His tomahawks tore gaping holes through their chests, removed their heads from their necks and sundered free their clawing hands from their wrists. Lobo tore through legs and throats, spilling acidic blood upon the pavement. Red Wolf's elbows rose in time to meet their biting mouths with force and he vaulted them; with an axe cleaved into the back of a massive charcoal-fleshed monstrosity, he used its own weight as a launching point and whipped his way skyward. The dog's teeth sundered bone, even, and pulled free intestines. One tomahawk left in the thing's body, Red Wolf hurled the other one to a leaping, small-winged beast and sheared through its skull as he flipped sideways through the air over their deformed heads. In a clearing left in the wake of Werewolf, he landed on both feet in complete silence. He extended his arms and simply focused; the hand axes both returned to his hands with only a moment's pause, managing to break through all things that barred his access. Such as the bodies that laid in the way. Lobo growled in his resolute fury.

Jennifer Kale had arrived before them in her shudder of light, and a sphere of blue had encompassed her, which they viciously struck with all their energy. She could barely focus enough to manage a spell as the beasts assaulted her on every side, demanding her utmost attention. The sphere of magical energy seemed to shudder and pulse under the stresses, but she forced herself to keep attention. Atlantean words whispered through her lips as she concentrated darkly, and those that touched her dome of force incinerated from a crackle of blue flame that seemed to rush over its surface, leaving a wide arc of the creatures turned to nothingness. It allowed her a moment to focus herself and prepare to banish them. "I need some cover!" she cried out quickly, as she hunkered down to begin her spell.

There were easily a hundred of them, and they didn't seem too slowed by the deaths of their fellows. Their hideous laughter only grew quieter by attrition, not by the shaking of their motivation.

They arrived to see this, and the Juggernaut did not stop. He aimed himself forward and managed what Werewolf could not; he tore through them as a train might. Mr. Immortal released himself from the titan's back and landed on both his sneaker-worn feet, with only slightly less grace than Red Wolf. He looked around for a moment and considered to himself, "I should have brought a weapon," promptly before six of the beasts in the wake of Juggernaut's razing stampede lunged

forward to find their revenge upon him. He screamed briefly as they tore into him, against all his efforts. Blood spilled and flesh became torn from his body, while the Juggernaut marched on.

Juggernaut, however, found himself a place to stop. He stood directly over the bowing Jennifer Kale and smiled down to her. “Don’t worry, darlin’, I’ll keep the bad men away,” he promised. No sooner did he make this pledge than the swarms clung to him with murderous intent. He simply hulked down around her, and presented as much of a barrier as he could from all those things around her, cradling her in his mass. They crawled over him, blanketed his body, as surely as they had the Werewolf. He soon disappeared from sight.

This continued as the standard; the hordes swarmed over the two heroes who battled, while Juggernaut simply kept Kale safe for the moments she needed and Craig became unendingly devoured by the cannibalistic evil that these demons of the pit personified. The seconds ticked on as the other three rushed desperately forward. The incredible blasts of Frank’s rifle preceded both of his allies, screaming prattle of the demonspawn issued forth as the fast-approaching Frank Drake incinerated their bodies with Emily’s blasts.

Elsa and Valkyrie came in almost immediately after the first flurry of his blasts. Elsa rushed toward the screams of none other than Craig Hollis, the man known as Mr. Immortal. She rushed in to cut free the beasts that were tearing his skin from him as vultures fed. Her blades tore through them and sweat glistened from her brow as she engaged beings coated with flames by hand, tearing open their chests and necks to send them gasping lifeless to the floor. She crouched down, to help the lifeless body of Craig up... only to have him awaken again, seemingly untouched. As he lurched forward in her strong arms, they held a strange moment as he stared up at her with shock and concern in her eyes. “You’re alright’, then?” she asked, as she looked down to him and set him back down on the ground. He stood up and she stepped back awkwardly as battle waged in all directions around them. Valkyrie’s sword tore through countless of their enemies, moving toward the Werewolf, who only dodged Immortal’s fate by his tough skin as they brought him to his knees like a moose by a swarm of wolves.

“I think I’ll be fine,” Craig offered with a bit of a smile and he saw it in the distance – Juggernaut threw himself back, and reached back at his neck where one had been cloying and refused to be dislodged. He tore it apart in his hands, its intestines snapping like a rubber band. His massive fists crushed the bodies of those that scattered back, as one might crush an ant. Meanwhile, the sorceress he protected had finished; and her words finished with a sudden scream. The sound in her voice deafened us all for a moment as her bright light rushed across what felt like the whole city; its light illuminated block after block and incinerated those hell-borne beasts, ridding all signs of their presence. The entire horde was gone within moments, and she collapsed to her knees, gasping, before her body splayed across the bloodstained pavement. Juggernaut hefted her up in his massive arms, and looked appropriately out of place.

“A bag of extremely violent, super-strong, dismembering kittens,” Craig amended himself, to Elsa’s visible confusion.

Frank de-activated his weapon and looked about the hideous battlefield. “We need to leave. And it’s apparently on foot. Let’s move,” he ordered the group, who apparently had little argument, as

they sheathed their swords and returned to the forms of men. Their eyes purposefully averted the greatest horrors of the dead on the street, who had not managed their various abilities to protect them from the unholy swarm.

They moved, with haste, and Victoria – who had arrived only in time to see the problem solved – found herself asking on behalf of the destiny-bound sorceress the Juggernaut carried, “So... you going to help us, here, then, Marko?” she asked, doubt in her voice.

“Why not? Real demons, right? Cockroach Boy weren’t wrong. It’s promisin’ to be a fun fight,” Cain offered gruffly, cradling Kale gingerly as they rushed out of sight as quickly as their feet could carry them.

“Isn’t he precious?” Craig asked, to the snarl of the titan at his side.

[THE BOWELS OF HELL, THE PATH TO EREBUS' KEEP]

A chariot burned across the fiery black sky that bore in its open seats the delicate form of a well-tailored man with skin as blond as his hair. His hand trailed casually across the edge of his elegant ride, carved with the screaming faces of the Damned and images of the war between Heaven and Hell that predated this Age of Man. That which led the chariot were two stallions born of pure flame, with massive bat-like wings that ushered him forward.

At his side flew another winged beast, this one orange and craggy skinned, the loyal servant of the Pit, Gargoyle. “We approach the fields of Erebus, Lord Lucifer!” his voice cried out loudly as he spied the walls of Erebus’ Keep upon the horizon. They had warned Erebus of the Midnight Sons’ approach, who would seek to do him ill, and it was evident; there were thousands upon thousands of demons and undead that now gathered in ranks and in legion arranged outside of Erebus’ domain.

The chariot passed over its tall walls, while the thousands stared on and gestured at the notable passing above them of their Lord Lucifer. It settled into the barren courtyard of this Duke of Hell, Master Erebus, God-King of Vampires. A name and destiny which long predated even ancient Varnae, first cursed of the Darkhold. The horses of flame stomp their blazing hooves and with a dismissive flick of Lucifer’s hand, they dissipate, leaving the carriage abandoned of its steeds. He stood at the edge of the chariot and stared down at Gargoyle, expectantly. With haste, Gargoyle rushed over and extended a hand by which to aid the Lord of Hell to the stone. Lucifer accepted his grip and stepped free the chariot, giving no sign of appreciation before he began to walk to the front gates of Erebus’ Keep inner walls.

Lucifer, the First of the Fallen, the Morningstar, removed his coat and shucked it off his shoulders, which allowed Gargoyle to hustle behind him to catch it before it struck the earth. While taking off a single white glove, Lucifer spoke to the guards who stood watch at the main entrance and shook from their fear. “Bear this news, peasants. The Master of this domicile has

business with me most urgent, and I am terribly violent when left idle. Make haste in fetching him”

He removed his other porcelain-toned glove and pitched the two behind him; once more trusting Gargoyle caught them. He stood there, impatiently. His eyes began to burn with the flames of Hell, and he flicked his hand to create a sand-filled hourglass, which with a twist of his fingers righted itself so as to begin its steady spill. It seemed to calm him and he waited, his breath sighing and exasperated.

His wait was not long, in fact. Soon, through the massive double doors a part formed – and when the doors swung open in full, out stepped the reptilian-footed creature that towered a dozen feet above his Lord Lucifer. He strode forward two paces, long tendrils of hair hanging about his gaunt snake-like face. This Master, Erebus, fell to his knees and bowed before Lucifer, his bat-like wings pulled in taut to the floor in total submission. “MY LORD, I AM AT YOUR LEAVE.”

“It comes to my attention,” Lucifer began, as he stalked in a slow circle around his subservient Vampire God, his shoulders coming up to the height of the bowed demon’s back, “that you’ve a serious problem quickly coming this way. And that you attempted to rout it?”

“YES, LORD LUCIFER. I AWAIT WORD OF THEIR SUCCESS. AT YOUR BIDDING, THE ARMIES OF YOUR REALM NOW STAND READY IN CASE THEY SOMEHOW FALL. OUR VICTORY IS ASSURED.”

Lucifer stopped and smiled, his perfect teeth nearly blinded the gathered demons and undead, including Gargoyle, their shattering white starkly contrasted against the milieu of blacks and infernal reds. The arms behind his back slowly spanned forward, and he grazed his alabaster touch over one of Erebus’s pointed and lengthy ears. “Ah, yes, of our victory. Your men failed. Your ... little war party. It was an abysmal failure. Against a scattered and faltering nine – I apologize, ten – foes, your hundred demons met only death. To the last. This level of incompetence concerns me, deeply...”

“LORD LUCIFER, I KNEW NOT! I BEG YOUR—” Fear seized Erebus, but his deep baritone was silenced by the much quieter, smoother tones of his liege.

“Do not dare to interrupt me when I am in a monologue! Where was I? Oh, yes. Your failures. Where can I begin. You failed to storm the realm above by way of your *ever so* loyal subjects and that *prophecy* you spoke of. Now you fail to halt their progress at storming *mine* – not yours, let us be clear – mine. I fear I must install a man who has *managed* to rout them as your Lieutenant. Surely he might be able to aid you?” As always, Lucifer’s smile was pleasant and blindingly bright – two traits which all demons considered unbearable.

Erebus looked up, in confusion, and Lucifer snarled in response. He slashed his hand viciously along Erebus’ face, leaving massive gouges that bled a black ichor freely. Erebus dared not raise his head again to see Lucifer, uninvited. Instead, Gargoyle was the one to speak. “Sir, is this punishment?”

“How would you think that, my loyal slave?” Lucifer asked, with a coo in his voice, patting the demon once named Isaac on the head with a wicked smile on his lips that seemed unable to diminish.

“It would seem this is an assignment to my death, with my former enemy bringing such powerful allies,” Gargoyle explained, his voice full of trepidation – but his fear somehow allowed him to overcome his respect, beseeching the Lord of Hell as if they were equals. Lucifer expressed his distaste for this with the baleful gaze he leveled upon the demon.

“This is why I place you here. You have vested interest in survival. Therefore, this Army must not make it to Erebus’ domain. If he dies and you do not, your life is forfeit. You serve me, and you obey. I will be watching,” Lucifer threatened, then flicked his hand once and fire surrounded him. “Ta.”

The fire went out, and all that was left in its wake... was the uncomfortable silence shared between Gargoyle and the freshly mutilated Vampire God.

[A MESA IN JUAREZ, MEXICO]

A circle of eight surrounded a single blond woman, who wore only a bra and underwear, her bare arms covered in sigils and signs that long predated written language. The iconic figures that showed some manner of ancient meaning burned with a sheer white light. Cain clad in boxers was painted much the same, held hands with Victoria Montesi dressed as Kale and Valkyrie. Frank Drake took her hand and his own gripped Red Wolf’s who was bare but his loincloth. All those heroes so summoned gripped hands firmly, as their central figure spoke in a way that drew the winds into a gale and struck lightning into the sands, fusing glass. A storm raged around them, but did not touch one of them. The ground shook, the world shuddered and rain splashed each patch of ground ... except for the circle that these warriors form.

To little surprise, the spell of the Order of the Midnight Son – the Mystic Nine – or at times referred to simply as *The Blood*, a Brotherhood which predated the rise of Atlantis, was not bound within the ancient book Jennifer Kale bore – a book of white magic of the Atlantean ancients. Instead, this spell scribed within the Vishanti, a book that Kale studied and at times transcribed from its pages. Her words predated all known language, all known thought. Words that in some insane way predated Mankind’s first spoken word; a primal flow spilled from her lips and this flow ensorcelled the nine of them, a gleaming light brought back upon her. It surrounded her and suffused her with its holy light. From her hands burnt a flaming sigil from her palm, a sigil of the fabled Medallion of Power.

“Now bow your head in service, and present yourself before the brand I bear,” Jennifer Kale issued these English words quietly and stood, slowly, arms spread wide nearly to touch those that surrounded her on each side.

They passed to her, one by one. She gripped their shoulders as they passed – Jack, Craig and Vicki all one by one stepped past and she pressed her burning palms against their

shoulders. Each one grunted or cried in their shock of pain that the searing light left. Those with sin burned at its touch, and all of them burned white and blistered from her touch.

Red Wolf was the first to think of another location, he took her wrist next and pressed it to his chest, taking the sigil where it laid without a single shudder. To a wary eye, they might notice the same brand burned into Lobo's skin beneath the tuft of his fur, without any touch. Valkyrie approached, and stopped, to speak politely to her inspired and enchanted friend. "I would wish it a brand as a warrior might," she explained and presented her forearm.

Cain stood beside her and shrugged. "Ditto, sure, whatever gets you all off," he dismissively allowed, presenting his own arm. Both of them burnt with its holy fire; Valkyrie silent, while Cain shouted suddenly at the pain; he wasn't terribly used to the sensation.

"We can choose?" Elsa asked and seemed a little surprised.

"I ... well; I guess so, yes, why?" Kale asked, speaking for the first time since she invited them up. She looked wary.

Elsa turned around and pulled up the back of her shirt and down the back band of her jeans. She looked over her shoulder at Kale. "It looks pretty nifty. I could get it as a starter. Could y'put it righ' there?" she asked with a smile. "I been thinking about getting, oh, a stake or somefin'..."

"Y'mean y'want a *tramp stamp*?" Cain asked with a deep guffaw. She shot him a glare, viciously, and pulled free her knife in an empty threat that Cain looked barely askance at. He laughed again at her threat, and walked away. Elsa looked back to Kale and smiled her affirmative. Kale sighed with a deep annoyance, pressed her palm there hesitantly and Elsa huffed at the pain where it seared into her.

Frank Drake was last, and he walked slowly to her, his eyes steady and expression thoughtful. He spent much of the moments preceding this in thought, and finally came to her, his hand extended and shook her hand with his. He groaned as it burnt into his palm, leaving the icon of the Medallion emblazoned in his grip, and a bitter smile wore his lips. "That's it, then?" he asked, seeming inspired. "So, there's just one more thing to do. Let's go to Hell."

"Not yet, Frank. Not yet," Victoria insisted, suddenly. "We need a plan better than 'get him'."

Kale smiled lightly, and bowed her head, light once more suffusing from her hands, both of them burnt on palm and back with the Medallion. "So it shall be. Let's group together for a nice portal. We'll leave for Hell tomorrow – and tonight we'll plan. Our fate is sealed – we just need to go through the motions now."

"Great. More hoo-joo voo-doo and talking..." Cain muttered darkly as light surrounded them all. In a flash of light, they were gone. They left the mesa, signs gone with them as if nothing had ever happened.

A single dark figure pulled free her mask. Purple and black hair shook free of her lost hood, swirls printed upon her cheeks and pierced lobes and nose marking her for the distinct

visage of Cassie St. Commons. "Well, this is finally getting interesting..." her voice shuddered with an inhuman resonance, as if hollow. Her mask at her side, shadows enveloped her and the sound of wind sucked through a vacuum issued through the night – and she was gone.

Author's Corner

Woo! Issue Two done! This is going to be longer than expected, so the 'three' is turned to four. I hope you all find this as exciting as the last issue. I found myself much comfier this time around, and I'm very much looking forward to seeing what you all think of how I'm treating these second-stringers and long-abandoned powerhouses.

-Bowie



"HELL AND BACK"

Part Three: The River

Written by Bowie Sessions

Circus, n. A place where horses, ponies and elephants are permitted to see men, women and children acting the fool.

Ambrose Bierce

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

The Darkhold – the veritable Pandora’s Box, an ancient book of arcane evils, root of vampire and werewolf among man’s world.

Satan, Lucifer and the Devil – the Triumvirate rulers of Hell.

Erebus – Vampire God, prisoner of Blade.

Man-Thing – monstrous Gatekeeper of the Nexus of all Realities.

Satana – Daughter of Satan, dissident of Hell.

Doctor Strange – the Sorcerer Supreme.

Blade – vampire hybrid ‘day-walker’, banished to Hell.

Cain Marko / The Juggernaut – super-strong super villainous inheritor of magical bands.

Craig Hollis / Mr. Immortal – over-excitable and suicidal would-be hero cursed to live forever.

Frank Drake – descendant of Dracula, veteran monster-hunter

Jack Russell / Werewolf – cursed as a werewolf, and has mastered it as a weapon against darkness.

Will Talltrees / Red Wolf – bears a Native American Wolf Spirit, superb tracker, protector of the abandoned.

Cassie St. Commons / Dusk – a living dead girl empowered with many abilities by unknown sources.

Elsa Bloodstone – a superhumanly able monster-hunter, daughter of famed immortal Ulysses Bloodstone.

Jennifer Kale – a powerful sorceress of Atlantean magic.

Samantha / The Valkyrie – a powerful Ancient Nordic warrior woman

Victoria Montesi – a chronicler of the Darkhold and solely able to bear it without taint.

Topaz – able sorceress and friend of Jennifer Kale.

Hellspawn of many stripes.

Scenes – Places around Citrusville, Florida; Sanctum Sanctorum; Places around Hell

[MOTEL 6, CITRUSVILLE, FLORIDA]

A flash of light in the parking lot welcomed patrons to the large motel, featuring a bright lighted sign visible for miles that read clearly Free HBO. Five men and four women looked amongst one another as they settled. Cain, the largest of them all at nearing seven feet, brushed off his sleeves as if the magical transportation left some kind of fairy dust all over him.

“I’ve got it,” Frank offered. The group had managed to clean themselves from their deeply mystical experience in the desert some half the country away, before dressing and appearing in the very place they’d launch their battle into Hell from. With his guitar case slung over his shoulder, Frank walked towards the bright Welcome sign that hovered over the reception office. Reaching the door, it jingled as he entered, causing the older woman behind the desk to look up with a kind of bitter disdain. She lowered her National Enquirer and put on a smile.

“How can I help you, sir?” she asked, trying her very best to appear friendly and welcoming to the prospect of business.

“I’d like a few rooms,” Frank suggested as he pulled out his wallet. The teller watched him with some consideration and glanced out the window behind him, to see three blondes and a black-haired woman in the prime of their lives hanging around a few weathered looking men. She stared unknowingly into the organization of the world’s blood-sworn Order, posed to balance the dangerous forces of the Mystic throughout the world, each possessing power or knowledge far beyond man. To her, it looked like they were about to destroy her hotel, and it was her only true concern.

“How many?” she asked, her wiry rat-nest of hair hung haphazardly and groggily over her undernourished skin, framing her gaunt and aged features. The nameplate she wore, which read ‘Myrtle’, spoke of the precise manner of woman she was - forgotten and unloved. Despite her age, no ring graced her finger, and bitterness seeped into her voice against all her efforts to quiet it.

“Nine,” he said, clearly. They made the decision en route – they all deserved one good night, undisturbed, to sleep. They would sleep tonight, because tomorrow, they were fully prepared to die. Well, most of them; Craig and Juggernaut were unconcerned. Elsa had supplied the funds her wealthy family possessed into Frank’s bankrupted hands, and he paid each of the rates for their rooms. Myrtle processed the order meticulously and without hurry, causing the others gathered outside to shiver in the cold.

The mop of a near-platinum blonde girl, Elsa Bloodstone, opened the door and stepped in, rubbing her arms up and down to gain some much needed circulation. “Frank, hurry up, we’ve got things t’ discuss ‘fore our heads hit th’ pillows. Vicki and Cain’s gettin’ a bit res’less ou’ there, an’ the wolves’re ‘bout t’ start comparin’ battle stories ‘gain. Which, I don’t need t’ tell y’, is a bit of a yawn.” By her impatience and blathering, her face obviously told the truth – the word teen still affixed itself to the end of her age.

“Done now, sir,” Myrtle cut in before Frank, who stood glowering to the face of his former apprentice, could say anything to demean the young warrior. He turned back to Myrtle and took the nine pass keys and nodded his head in appreciation. Turning to leave, she interrupted him and drew his attention back. “Enjoy your party.”

“Oh, no. It’s really more of a job conference,” Frank explained with a small smile as the door jingled on his departure from the renting office.

“...what all you boys got business with?” she asked, her curiosity slowly piqued by their increasingly vague sense of mystery. Frank loved his drama, and paused as he held the door open, to look back to her with that growing smile on his lips. He enjoyed the showboating the most of all.

“Oh, right. We’re going to storm Hell to kill a Vampire Lord and fight Satan for the soul of my late best friend. Say, is there a mini-bar?” She shook her head no, and her curiosity was instantly replaced with disgust for the man pulling her leg. Burying herself once more into her tabloid, Myrtle listened to the door close behind the Midnight Son and scoffed darkly.

“Damned smart-ass son of a bitch....”

[SANCTUM SANCTORUM]

Wong stepped into the dining hall to address the tenants within – Topaz and Doctor Stephen Strange. He looked slightly confused, but bowed on entrance and began his explanation with the utmost of tact. “I believe they fled in the night,” Wong managed in his subtlest way, his eyes turned towards Topaz, before he glanced back to Strange. “Obviously, Valkyrie and Kale are complicit. They likely are going to go to Hell to fight these things. I will return with both your meals.”

Wong bowed and left, calmly, while Strange simply sat there, soaking it in, his eyes widened and fingers gripping the table tightly. His knuckles went white with their pressure, and he inhaled with calculated breaths, his eyes refusing to meet Topaz’ just yet. She shrunk into her seat, her hand found firmly in the cookie jar.

“I imagine they have a considerable head-start then. They have at least a few hours on us, with a sorceress of incredible power and a large band of would-be heroes. Do you know what you’ve done to them, Topaz?” the Sorcerer Supreme asked, his voice filled with a silent kind of ire, a chilling cool to his tone that he doesn’t appreciate using before breakfast is even made. His head finally turned to regard the Indian sorceress, his eyes narrowed into pointed slits that regarded her with apparent contempt.

“Jennifer is a capable woman, as are her companions. Many of them have even been Midnight Sons before.” Her words slipped out before she could manage to contain them, and Doctor Strange’s eyes widened drastically at her accidental confession.

“They’ve reforged the Midnight Sons? How did you simply let this escape my Sanctum, Topaz? This goes specifically against my mandates! This danger is far beyond them, and Blade is a cause well lost. Hell has been strengthened since last the Defenders rallied within it for our lost ally, Hellcat.” Anger rose in his voice and his ruined hand pounded the table with their frustration. Topaz halted her shrinking, and grew, her shoulders straightened and back righted in her own defense.

She spat his own words and destiny back in his face. “We had no choice! A true threat was posed against the Light. They go to their deaths, now, because you were too afraid to make the choice first! They will succeed, live or die, and it is a worthwhile sacrifice, to beat back this darkness. You despised Blade – if he looked as pretty as your sweet, flirty Patsy, would you have been so quick to leave him to his death? You have no idea how this pains me.” Topaz stood and pushed in her chair, only to turn and leave the room in a huff. She passed Wong as he returned with two plates for breakfast, and he sighed in defeat.

Wong walked forward and placed the single plate in front of the Sorcerer Supreme. “So it is only you this morning, then.”

“Do you agree with them, Wong?” Dr. Strange asked, both his face formed and voice uttered placidly, without emotion apparent to taint them.

“No, sir. I only helped them evade your wardings. You obviously desired for them to go alone; otherwise you would never have forbidden them.” Wong bowed to the Sorcerer, and walked out of the room crisply. Dr. Strange’s lips turned into a broad smile at his assistant’s words, and shook his head in the amusement. Taking a bite of his omelet, he paused briefly to let out a soft, bemused laugh.

[VICKI’S ROOM, MOTEL 6, CITRUSVILLE, FLORIDA]

The eclectic group of would-be-heroes gathered in the small motel room, which bulged with the overflow of its visitors. They sat wherever they could space – on counters and desks, on the beds or leaned against walls for support while the center floor found the red-haired Frank Drake looking over his fellow hopeless and destined heroes. An uncomfortable silence settled for far too long as Frank gathered his thoughts on the day ahead of them.

“Any time now,” Cain insisted with an impatient scowl, his head peeked up from over the mini-fridge, where he rooted around inside it for the miniaturized bottles of whiskeys and vodkas, uncapping them in his massive hands and throwing them back as if they’d even manage to intoxicate them. This found the quiet Red Wolf, sitting on the sink’s countertop patiently, shaking his head in disapproval of the brutish nature of the red-clad man that seemed to barely fit within the confines of the modest hotel room’s space – after all, how many places accommodate men that crest seven feet?

While Frank obviously struggled to find the words he knew they expected, Victoria scratched behind her neck where she rested against the wall, before she stepped forward and opened her lips to speak, dark eyes scanning the room for support as she dared to go first. “Okay, here’s the thing,” she ventured forward, “We’re going into Hell. The doubled up H – E - hockey sticks, right, well, so what. We have no idea what to expect from where this guy sends us through, correct? So we stick tight together, and let the Mystic Nine thing guide us a little – the resistance forces should point the way to Erebus.”

A collection of confused glances made their rounds, to which Victoria shuffled slightly, awkwardly. Frank cleared his throat and stole the attention from the nervous shifting in the group. Elsa shuffled on the bed, her awkward mannerisms picked up on by Craig, who offered a weak smile to her when her eyes glanced his way. The British monster-hunter hazarded a weak curve of her lips in response, and settled slightly once Red Wolf, apparently out of nowhere, stepped forward from his place on the counter.

“May I?” he asked, curiously, and Frank gave him a confused nod.

“Good. I have a thought, then. Vicki’s right. The magic of the Circle of Nine gives us a certain synergy. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts; we’re stronger, faster, better in the company of each other. So she’s right – to a degree – we need to stick together.” Clearly on a roll, Will Talltrees commanded their attention and even Cain ceased his endless sidebar commentary.

“More accurately, we need to fight together. Coordinated. To that, we need to accept we’re weapons – tools – of a mission. And sorry to say this – no one is more hateful of this than me – but we can’t be just people. Some of you have never been part of a proper ‘strike force’. Some of us have. I’m one of them. We don’t have time, unfortunately, to train. But we do, to discuss,” he paused in his explanation to answer the objecting expressions painted on the faces of those gathered in the cramped room, especially with Cain’s mass. Frank Drake’s mixture of confusion and hurt pride at being upstaged showed, but Will persevered.

Lobo’s head stretched upward to William Talltrees from where it sat to receive its appreciated scratches right behind its left ear in its favorite spot. “As stereotypical as it is – I know I don’t want to be called someone’s ‘tool’.”

Groaning loudly, Cain offered his peanuts to the gallery yet again, “Oh, don’t make this a ‘the poor Indians’ thing, Tonto. We get what you’re sayin’ – we got strengths. Play ‘em.” As Will glowered at the titan, Cain offered him his middle finger for consideration. “Down, boy. Now get with the St. Crispin’s Day speech already.”

As even Jack rose up, hairs raised in growing anger in defense of his lupine teammate, Kale steadied his arm. “Shh, Jack,” she whispered, pleadingly. “Settle down, everyone. I know we’re scared.” She let the air hang for everyone to accept the term, their faces turned in denial. “We are. We’re all scared, or – well, we at least should be. But we can’t let that stop us – or tear each other apart. We’re the Nine now. The Midnight Sons.” She glanced over at their impromptu

leader again. “William,” she bid him and removed her hand from a calmed werewolf, and relaxed back onto the bed.

“...thanks, Kale,” the Southwest’s Protector started anew, “We have a basic need for strategy; a thing we can default to in times of duress, something simple and efficient, so we can make the most of our journeys below. Kale, you are very simply the most powerful of all of us. We need you to drop an opening volley on any engaging force; if you can take them out, great. If not, don’t worry – it’ll be too involved very quickly. At that point, we need you to focus on the primary threats. Frank Drake – and your gun, what is it? Emily? – will be watching everyone’s back, and picking off imminent threats, when not coordinating strikes. I’ll be busy as scout, so you’re the point man, Frank.” There’s a nodding of understanding from Kale, and expectation printed on the faces of the rest, before he continued. Drake seemed annoyed, but smiled at being denoted the obvious field commander of the group.

“Werewolf and Juggernaut, land-bound as they are, will present the primary crowd control; Valkyrie will be our forward. Your job is to take out the obstacles precluding us from engaging primary targets. These primary targets will be intercepted by Kale, as previously mentioned and by Bloodstone, unless it requires a brutish approach – in which case the tanks redirect from crowd control and Frank should take up the cover fire technique to pick up their slack. It’s your job, Kale, to transport them to the needed location in this instance.”

Before he could continue his long diatribe, Craig interrupted. “Right. Frank’s got the great super-gun, Elsa’s the Vampire Slayer, but Vicky and me... you a little too... we’re not especially suited for devil-warfare.”

“Which is why you and I will have our single most critical task: make sure Victoria does not die. She’s the key to our success, and not especially robust. No offense, Victoria. Neither are we, or Frank for that matter, but he’s got a nice gun and I’m not particularly crucial to the plan, so we can all die with little effect.”

Victoria responded with daggers in her eyes for Will’s assessment of her abilities, but offered nothing, coldly, as they continued the planning.

“We get to the mission site. The spell is cast. This is the basic plan. But all plans, inevitably, fall apart upon first encountering the enemy. We don’t know what’s going to happen out there. We just need to trust each other to do these things, to the best of our abilities. Stick together. Fight for each other. Or we won’t make it out alive – none of us,” he finished simply, eyes heavy with their intensity. He stiffened in the silence of consideration, and glanced to Cain with an expectance of mockery, to which the mammoth of a man shrugged disinterestedly and offered a dismissive thumbs-up.

“No such deal for a damned soul is ever so free as you seem to expect it – spell or no spell,” Valkyrie asserted finally, her arms crossed and jaw set as she addressed the Nightstalker. “In the end of all this – if he requires such a sacrifice – are you prepared for that, Franklin?” she asked, threateningly, head turning to the descendent of Dracula. An uncomfortable silence settled again

over the crowd, with Victoria seeming to appear lost yet again in thought. Drake seemed prepared to open his mouth when Craig interrupted yet again.

Craig looked up from his lap to pipe up in the gap of breath after Valkyrie's guilt trip, and spoke clearly. "I'll do it. They might actually be able to remove my curse. It's no big deal," he promised. Shock resonated around the room at the Great Lake Avenger's continued bouts of suicidal heroics.

"...your curse?" Kale asked, completely puzzled at the logic he offered.

"The one that keeps me from dying, shuffling off into the afterlife or whathaveyou," the Immortal kicked back to them dismissively. Elsa reached across the bed to squeeze his hand firmly in hers, and he smiled gently at her caring contact.

Drake just watched the supposed spandexed hero in perplexion, and Red Wolf offered his words for him. "You're mad, Hollis." Will shook his head and looked away from the group in the midst of their planning, quietly acquiescent.

"I disagree," Jack finally spoke. "Let the man die. Some things are not worth the suffering. And if he wants to make this call, who the hell are you to stop him, Talltrees? If I had the courage, I would have saved the world a deep pool of the innocent blood on my hands. Who knows his demons. Do not judge him." The werewolf stood and walked for the door, and allowed it to slam to note his exit. The rest of the Midnight Sons looked amongst each other and Montesi ended it for them.

"We covered what we're going to be able to. Get some sleep. We have a very busy day tomorrow. This might be our last night alive. You deserve some rest, and whatever time you need to say your prayers and make your phone calls. Goodnight." She gestured to her door. "Me included. You don't have to go home. But you can't stay here."

[LATER]

[FRANK'S ROOM, MOTEL 6, CITRUSVILLE, FLORIDA]

When he retired to his room, Frank sat quietly on his bed. It was a long, awkward silence that lasted as he stared longingly at his bedside table. In his sterilized pre-fabricated bedroom, his room was furnished with two twin beds. Across the way from the bed he sat on the edge of awkwardly was another bed. His face fell as he reached into his pocket and pulled free his wallet, which bore in its plastic sleeves the images of his long forgotten family. Frank's fingers slowly slid over the plastic sheet, until he found its seam, and hesitated at pulling it out.

His hand fell, slightly, his wallet hanging limply from his grip as his eyes came back up to the sight of the off-white phone, as it sat serenely on that damned bedside table, above the empty drawer that no doubt possessed a Gideon bible and a phonebook. His hand reached for the phone,

and lifted it from its post, slowly, hesitantly to his ear. With a heavy, deep breath, he began to dial. Distantly, a phone rang on the other end.

“Hello...?” a voice asked on the other side, a woman’s voice, curious and unassuming.

Frank choked slightly at the sound of his estranged wife. “Hey, Marlene... it’s me.”

The other side was quiet for a long time. “I told you not to call me unless it was over. Is it over?” her voice was harsh now, and pessimistic.

With a deep sigh, Frank hunched forward, holding his forehead in his hand to steady himself. This hurt him to do, to call her; much less to tell her what he was planning to say. His face was scarred with a frown, one that curled his skin downward from his lips all the way to his forehead, worried with sadness. “It will be over soon.”

Marlene, for her own sake, was far from inexperienced in Frank’s world. She knew what that kind of sound meant, and he heard her fight back tears. “Do you want to talk to your daughter?”

“Rachel doesn’t talk yet, Marlene.”

A much longer silence was held between them. Neither of them wanted to speak, or wanted to breathe loudly, because despite their hurt feelings ... they both knew this might be their last call. “Marlene, I love you,” he whispered to her.

Tears could be heard through the phone shattering their slight silence, and she screamed at him in fury over the line. “Don’t you fucking say that, Frank! I know what that is! Don’t tell me goodbye! Don’t you say goodbye!” her words were barely audible over the wracking sobs that shook her voice.

With a heavy heart, Frank managed to control his own tears, and whispered quietly what he had to say. “If I don’t get to, you tell our baby I was ... make something better up than this life I led, okay? And let her know I loved her and...”

She was already denying his words, and he forced his voice over her own complaints and refusals, so filled with emotion and crushing despair. “Goodbye, Marlene.”

Setting the phone down with a shaking hand, Frank’s face collapsed into his spread fingers, holding himself as he quietly let go; on the eve of what he knew might be his last ride – every night may, but he never got to see it coming. Never had the time to make the phone calls and say his goodbyes. He had the time tonight... and he was worried it might destroy him with fear.

He wished he didn’t have time to think about it.

That always made it easier to throw his life away.

|CRAIG'S ROOM, MOTEL 6, CITRUSVILLE, FLORIDA|

The man that to circles of heroes received a terribly pitiful reputation, laughter having always accompanied his name, 'Mr. Immortal', sat alone in his room, perhaps to contemplate the mockery that his life had become. Perhaps he sat to debate his own death for the thousandth futile time. Perhaps he just couldn't handle the stress. None of these were true; tears caressed his cheek while he held a weathered photograph cradled in his hand, eyes focused on a crinkled and aged picture of him with a beautiful blonde girl draped off his side, freckled and smiling. Imagining the day in his mind, he saw a face so much younger than his in the worn image, untouched by pain. His lips curved up in a smile that seemed bittersweet as it crowded its edges into his cheeks. Sliding the picture back into his jacket that lay across the back of the chair before him, Craig breathed slowly, focusing for that which stood directly in front of him.

He focused for clear reason; beside him a phantom of shadow stood and howled darkly to him. "Do you really think you'll be any help to them?" the tenebrous demon whispered to his eternal victim, who finally paid attention, lost in the reverie of a long buried love, his tormenter's tone richly filled with a malicious mirth. "I'm terrified of what you'd contribute. After all, your only marketable skill is ... what again? Getting yourself killed? Gosh. How handy. Perhaps you can be a kind of guide – get them all killed, too. Just like your girlfriends. Just like those close calls with your team.

"Look at you. Who the hell do you think you are? Going to fight demons? Going to fight demons in HELL? YOU? Mister Immortal?"

Craig whispered gently, "I'm not listening to you," his eyes sealed shut in denial of the haunting devil that hounded his every moment and every thought. His hands rose and gripped his ears, sealing away the tormenter's voice as best he could. Even so muffled, however, he thought he heard a knock. Glancing up, the specter had left him – it had momentarily surrendered its assault, but he heard the knock again.

Clambering up to his feet, Craig crossed the distance and opened the door to his cheap motel room, both cautious and curious. Unafraid of much of anything personally, he opted to grab a knife, but he didn't bother to stop and look through the peephole first; the door parted to reveal the demon huntress and newly minted understudy to Frank Drake, Elsa Bloodstone. She smiled and nodded to him, awkwardly. "Ello," she began, sheepishly. "I... I'm a little nervous. I thought y'maybe could answer.... answer somethin' for me," she managed to ask, one arm cradling the other cagily. Craig looked befuddled, but ultimately shrugged his shoulders, gesturing for her to come in, admiring the young beauty obviously and overtly as she entered.

She acted like she didn't notice, and he wasn't sure whether she did or not, but she sat down on the bed impetuously, leaving him to close the door and walk over to her, where he stood and crossed his arms. Inclining his head, he looked very curious. "What's up, Elsa?" he asked, helpfully, a smile rising on his face which belied the terror still in him, praying she couldn't see the burning salt of tears.

“So, I was ... thinking ... ‘bout tomorrow,” she treaded the water verbally, then apparently sank, unable to continue. He waited a moment for her to go on, but when she didn’t, he prompted her for more. Rolling his hand in a permissive gesture, he watched her from where he stood.

She grinned warily, and nodded her head, moving to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. If he didn’t know better, he’d suspect she was just any other girl ... instead of the demon-slaying mystical heroine she was. “What happens when y’ die?” she whispered, frightened. Looking up to him, she saw his face collapse in shared sorrow and he moved to sit beside her on the bed, running a hand over her shoulder, and pulling her close.

“Shhh,” he whispered to her quietly. “You’re not going to die, Elsa,” he promised the British slayer.

“You don’t know that,” she responded in a hush.

With a shrug, he admitted as much, “True,” nodding his head slowly.

There was a long silence between them, and she rested her head against his shoulder for several minutes as they stood there in silence. He took a deep breath, and took in the smell of her hair and found it pleasant, especially when he was so lonely. “What’s it like?” she asked again, finally. This caused him to wince, and he hesitated. She nudged him with her elbow to speak.

“It hurts a lot. But then it’s over, and there’s this ... there’s this calm as you kind of just ... but that’s all I know. I don’t make the full trip. I always get off the ride early, and it kinda makes me angry, heh. Don’t think this time’ll be much different for me... but I don’t know what’s past the calm for you.” Glancing over at her, he hoped he provided some comfort – but he already could tell he had done a terrible job of answering her.

She frowned, and ducked into him disappointedly. “Y’ could’f told me what I wanted t’hear, with th’ symphonies and all th’ pretty lights... I’m scared, and it’s cuz we could... die tomorrow. But I

With this, he turned suddenly to face her, lifting her off his shoulder in the process. Taking a grip of her upper arm, the other moved to cup her chin, to bring her gaze to meet his, showing her blue eyes that glistened with barely formed tears. “Dying isn’t as cool as people think,” he told her, firmly. She leaned in slightly, expectantly, with how he held her... and then he pulled away to stand. “Do you want something to drink?” he asked, apparently unaware.

She just blinked in shock. “Aren’t you ... aren’t I attractive?”

“Excuse me?” he asked, turned back to her in shock, his voice completely puzzled.

“I’m ... really vulnerable righ’ now. There was th’ whole talk an’ – y’ were... why didn’t you kiss me?”

“I was supposed to kiss you?”

“Well, y’were supposed t’make some kind of move!”

This gave him a long, confused pause. “Oh,” he whispered, disappointed. “I screwed that up, huh? Because I – uh – I didn’t know.”

Tucking her hair behind her ear again, she stood up and closed the distance, reaching for his hand that rested by his side. “...you still can, if you want,” she said, with a small grin, and made her move instead.

Outside the room, two red eyes stared curiously through the slightly parted window. As the two collapsed into the sheets, her eyes closed. A sound, as if wind sucked through a vacuum, was the only hint of her disappearance as the cloaked woman in black disappeared from her place at the windowsill.

[ELSEWHERE]

The smoky mist parted in a clear orb once more, revealing the faces of Hell; Erebus sharpened his claws on the stones of his keep, as what appeared to be thousands of spawns of the pit itself cloyed excitedly at its walls, desperate to be thrust into battle and feel the blood of mortals sweep over their flesh. At the back of the Vampire God – the conqueror of the station of Varnae – stood a ruddy orange-skinned monstrosity with bat-wings and spiked features known as the Defenders’ traitorous subhuman The Gargoyle. He sneered irritably, beady gold eyes focusing intently on the Hell Duke before him with suspicion and ire.

A sudden rushing sound of wind distracted the man that oversaw this infernal progress curiously, his head jerking to focus on the noise as breeze appeared from nowhere, rustling ritual leaves and arcane pages, the crystal ball returning to mists. “Who is there?” the man asked, still draped in shadow. An eye that hung at his chest opened suddenly, and awareness dawned upon him as Dusk stood before him.

“Why are you here, Undead?” he insisted, stepping forward to face her. She studied him, curiously, as he studied her in turn. The sorcerer’s hands rose, and he directed his hands forward to her, arcane runes carving in the air as he presented a defensive shield before him, in preparation.

She pulled free her black hood, revealing her red-hued eyes and intricate facial designs, tattoos that turned and rolled in on themselves, painted on pale skin and framed by black hair. Dusk’s ire was clear, her voice rumbling with the darkness of the Pit from which she returned, and was forever cursed by. Suicides do not go to Heaven, she learned, long ago. “You can’t send them on this path! They’re expected! They’ll be killed! Their deaths will be on your hands, you lying son of a bitch!”

“This is all necessary,” he responded to her placidly, even as she advanced on him, a shield formed of blue light and marked by glowing runes protecting him from any of her dark intents that he imagined she might fling. “You cannot possibly comprehend the true intentions – the absolute necessity of their act. My power does not extend so strongly into those realms... but they will learn that theirs will.”

This hardly seemed to abate her, and she strode forward, until her black-gloved hands found the impenetrable mystic barrier. She struck it angrily, her hand impotently rebounding off of the magical force between them. “You’re a monster. You know they’ll die!”

“Their sacrifice is worthy, Miss St. Commons,” he responded casually, moving to place a small black shawl over the still-swirling orb that he had moments ago seen through clearly to another realm.

“...if only they knew you forced their hand into this... that you could have stopped it...”

“They will. You’re going to tell them. But you will be too late to stop them. Their path had been set long before you became aware of its steps. Even now they march to this fate.”

Staring at him in horror, she closed her eyes. The room seemed to take a deep breath in, as the air retracted suddenly, leaving a void for the windows to slide open and wind to blast inward. Light inverted into black and she was gone in the swirl of her cloak.

Moments later, there was a knock. His head perked, and he looked towards the hard wood beyond. “Yes, come in,” he obliged gently, and turned to see his age-old friend and ward step through the door, bringing with him a tea-pot and fine china.

“Your tea, sir,” he offered politely, as he prepared it presumptively without awaiting a response.

“Thank you, Wong.”

Handing his master and friend the drink, his eyes peered quizzically into him. “You are making enemies again, sir.”

Dr. Strange smiled back. “The Sorcerer Supreme must simply be in the right. It is not required that he be liked.”

[THE REST IN BRIEF, MOTEL 6, CITRUSVILLE, FLORIDA]

Red Wolf opened his door before Jack even bothered to knock. Jack stood there in nothing but a pair of sweatpants and flip-flops, scratching the back of his head. “Hey,” he started, eyeing around awkwardly past where Red Wolf stood, still in his clothes from that night.

“So, Will,” Jack continued. “This might sound like a weird ... thing to ask ... but um... I was ... over there, in my room, and thinking to myself. Of my options here... what’s the one thing I’d like to do? In case I’m not alive tomorrow?”

Will Talltrees just watched, while his brow rose at the werewolf in front of him, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The werewolf looked exceptionally uncomfortable, continuously dropping into long pauses as he tries to word it right, confidence slipping in the face of the oddity of the situation. “Do you and Lobo want to ... you know. Go for a run? There’s a decent woods out there. Just ... y’know. Just go.”

The spirit warrior can’t help but smile, and slowly nodded his head. “Sure,” he said, and whistled for his wolf companion.

Elsewhere, Valkyrie kneeled with her sword planted into the carpet in front of her, leaning on its handle as Dragonfang supported her. She whispered fervent Nordic, praising to the Gods she knew as family, knowing they would welcome her into their home beyond were she to fall – she kneeled there, praying quietly for a glorious death.

Meanwhile, in each of their own rooms, Jennifer and Victoria both went to bed early. Knowing how desperately she needed her rest, Jennifer had enchanted herself with a charm of Sleep, while Victoria – with no such respite – found herself unable to rest. She flipped pointlessly through the basic cable options for the first hour, before she finally tired of it and grabbed her jacket and dressed briskly. Tying her hair into a ponytail, she went to see her closest friend here – Jack. But no one answered his door.

Without any other options occurring to her, she saw a bar across the street and took a deep breath before she ventured to go get herself a nice drink and prayed it would help settle her mind.

When he entered, she found a familiar sight – a hulking redheaded man sat at the bar, a wide array of drinks set before him. Slowly, the raven-haired Darkhold specialist ambled to the seat next to him and ordered herself a drink as well. “Cain,” she greeted amiably, as she took her beer and sipped at it, letting it linger.

“Vicki,” the booming voice of the titanic man responded, nodding to her. “S’on me,” he offered, placing another few dollars on the table. She nodded her thanks, as they both drank, quietly, neither looking at the either for minutes. Neither of them figured there was much to really say, and so sat in silence.

“Wanna go screw?” Cain finally asked, breaking the silence.

“Oh god yes,” Vicki responded, taking a long swig. Cain glanced over, his head practically snapping from how fast his gaze affixed on the lovely woman to his right. “But I don’t think any of the girls on our team swing my way.”

With a steady stare, her words slowly occurred to Cain and he sighed in irritation. “Bitch,” he muttered as he sipped his beer again.

“Oh god yes,” she echoed, smirking broadly as she finished her beer.

[THE NEXT MORNING]

[EVERGLADES OF CITRUSVILLE, FLORIDA]

Kale walked ahead of them all through the marshland, with Russell at her back, Red Wolf’s wolf Lobo and Valkyrie’s summoned Pegasus Aragorn milling at the edges, their eyes alight and heads flickering with seemingly jangled nerves. The weather was humid and oppressive, sweat beading on the faces of all but the spirit-possessed Red Wolf, who seemed uncaring of the heat. All others, however, seemed ready to collapse simply from their short trip in that early morning, the sun presenting itself as their growing enemy quickly. “Christ almighty, how far damn out is this idiot? This is ridiculous!” Cain complained audibly, wiping sweat from his monstrous brow as they marched on impervious and insensible to most pain but apparently not to Florida’s swampy heat.

Victoria found herself agreeing in frustration, dabbing at her eyes with her shirt sleeve, blinded by her own sweat as it burned into her eyes. “Seriously, this is...” she confessed, her words disappearing into the ether as the heat seemed to steal her breath. The others suffered similarly, but silently, whether it was from self-control or from conserving their strength.

The animals stopped in their tracks several paces beforehand, and gave both Valkyrie and Red Wolf pause.

“We’re there,” Kale whispered as she came to a stop, with one more branch swept out of the way to reveal what lay ahead. The rest gathered behind her, one after another, staring forward at the obscene sight that rested before them. There, in an abysmally small ‘clearing’, stood an affront to even the chaotic nature of the bog. An abomination of moss and misshapen growth stood rooted in the midst of the swamp’s damp wastes. This otherworldly creation, perhaps mistaken for a horrible tree hidden amongst its similarly malformed brothers in the desolate landscape of the Floridian wetland, seemed almost to sway despite the lack of any wind kissing their cheeks.

The brave sorceress Jennifer Kale wandered forward to the massive growth, a thing that rose above even the tallest of them, the towering Cain. The creation looked as if it was birthed, appropriately, from the very swamps of this underprivileged town. The creature stood, undisturbed by their arrival, until their sorceress strode forward to place a hand upon the massive trunk that, upon closer inspection, seemed almost like a leg. Suddenly, the creature shifted and groaned, a mouth forming from the mossy wreath around its highest peak that clearly became a face once they paused to look upon it. Its head craned down to the young Kale, and a limb – its arm – swept down to place a hand upon her shoulder, while it said nothing.

The Nine seemed surprised, at least many of them, as the creature roused from its slumber. What appeared to be nothing but an incredible growth of tree and swamp had come to life, lurching forward. Without hesitation, their sorceress Kale spoke to the creature as if it was an old friend. If anyone was its friend, it was her. “We need your help. We need you to overcome the magics of the Nine Levels of Hell; we need you to open the doorway for us, to Erebus’ realm. Can you do that for us? I’d really appreciate it,” she asked, hopefully, eyes fixed on the strange glowing orbs of the Man-Thing that impassively regarded her.

It did not speak. It simply dropped its arm from her shoulder, and looked away. “We need – please. A whole lot of the world is in danger, and a friend is trapped... and we’re just trying to help,” Jennifer pleaded. “We need to go near a place in Hell – Erebus’ Keep, within Lucifer’s realm. I know with the changes in the landscapes of Hell, it might be hard, but... we need your help...”

“Let’s just make ‘em listen,” Cain whispered ominously to the throng that stood far back from the creature apprehensively, bowing up in preparation, the crimson bands that covered his body somehow flexing with his obscene musculature as he competitively eyeballed the Man-Thing, weighing his chances favorably for himself. Mr. Immortal nodded along to this suggestion, supportive of the impatient method, but they were met by short laughter on the part of Werewolf, Valkyrie and Red Wolf.

Smirking in amusement, Red Wolf entertained Cain’s delusion tauntingly. “You’re welcome to try, Avatar,” he mocked the giant, gesturing him forward towards the epic creature of myth and legend that stood across from them, inviting him threateningly.

Leaning down, Cain whispered to Valkyrie, the tall blonde warrior to his side, conspiratorially. “What’s that s’posed to mean?” he asked, quizzically. She looked up to the mountain of a man, then back to the looming creature, and finally once more to the Avatar of Cytorrak to her right.

“I doubt you would win,” she promised casually, simply and uninformatively, then absentmindedly stroked the long mane of the glorious white steed that flexed its wings apprehensively, waiting for Kale to seal the deal, while Cain muttered obscenity and seemed even more interested in testing that challenge out than before, his beady eyes tightened in appraisal of the massive creature in an one-sided stand-off, waiting for a threatening move from the creature

Meanwhile, Jennifer had plenty of coaxing to do. “Please,” she inquired again, pleading with the Man-Thing. “Ted,” she whispered, hoping, to which she saw a sudden motion of its head, inclined to her, its thick tendrils swinging with its maw as the creature she called friend lowered its ruby gaze to hers.

“You owe me, Ted,” she urged, desperately. The creature lurched, slowly, before it turned. The massive trunks of its arms seemed to slowly rise through the air, and as his hand lowered, a small gleaming line appeared to be carved in the air. He slowly moved back, and as he stepped free, the air seemed to tear open; a rift that lead to a black morass appearing in the midst of the

clearing. Slowly, but surely, this rift increased to the size of the largest of doors – large enough even for the epic Man-Thing to trespass.

Jennifer mouthed ‘thank you’ to her old friend, and stared at the portal with some concern. The rest stood with baited breath, and it was clear they spent these minutes trying to remember the instance of their loose plan. No one spoke, for a seeming fear that it meant they’d be forced to commit to the reality of this situation.

They were storming Hell to take back a friend and put a God into the grave. Understandably, they kept reservedly quiet for a few minutes.

“So. Um,” Craig began, awkwardly, without any true goal to his words, searching their faces, and stopping on Frank’s, who was the apparent picture of resolution. The man didn’t speak to any of them as he cocked his arcane weapon and then stepped forward through the mass of black, disappearing into the seeming ether. The rest looked slightly less motivated. With a heavy sigh, Jack stepped forward next, followed briskly by Jenni, Valkyrie with Aragorn, and Elsa. Craig’s eyes followed Elsa, but she didn’t even bother a glance, and left him feeling quite awkward.

Bowing to a knee beside his faithful wolf, Will gripped it behind its ears and rubbed tenderly at the hair there, smiling into its dutiful face. “^I have to go,^” he began, speaking in Tséhesenéstsestotse, the Cheyenne language, to his loyal companion. “^Where I go, only a promised Nine may; you are a Tenth. You give me strength, Spirit of Owayodata. But your death within is promised; mine is merely likely. Stay with this creature; safeguard him, as he is our way home. And if I fall ... find another to carry my mantle.^” With this, slowly, Red Wolf pulled off his satchel and laid it at his wolf’s feet. It contained many things; the ceremonial garb the most of it. He stood tall, and with a flick of his hand, a coup appeared in his hand, and a tomahawk in the other, where he turned and ventured forward into the swirling portal.

It left only three, who stood quietly in the marsh for a few silent moments.

“...whatch’ waiting for?” Cain nervously asked the remaining Immortal, Craig, once even Victoria stepped forward into the gate.

This surprised Craig, who seemed unaware Juggernaut was even still there. “Just ... kind of making peace. If all goes well, this is the last time I’ll ever see Earth.” He smiled oddly, and then stepped forward, leaving the massive titan of a man by himself, to contemplate his own answer to the question he had poised. With a heavy, beleaguered sigh, the hulking mystical Avatar of Cytorrak, swathed in red mystically alloyed bands, Cain began to step forward.

“I was hopin’ I wasn’t the only one a little scared,” he admitted to the impassive Man-Thing as he too entered possible oblivion with a great deal of hesitation.

|BEYOND THE GATE TO HELL|

Cain entered last, and saw it last; it was a fiery landscape that seemed to erupt with copper hues, shadows cast farther than they've any right – blackness cast that is again swallowed by the light beyond. Thousands of lights extinguished by the darkness of the suffering; a thousand such shadows cast by each flickering, waving luminescence. Their chests were tight as the lummoX and sometimes bane of Xavier arrived latest of them all, to take in a sight he had never wished to see; images of similar worlds floated through his mind, cast there by the embodying spirit of Cytorrak, but he still was not ready for such a vision.

“Wow,” the gigantic man offered, to the quiet appreciation of his teammates.

They all had their own unique looks; Cain's a mixture of awe and rarely seen fear, Victoria a resignation that speaks of familiarity, Valkyrie a furious rage that promised she had more reasons to be here than merely saving the world, Craig a look of sadness and expectation; Red Wolf, Frank Drake, the Werewolf, and Kale all bore a stony stoicism.

Elsa, however, looked almost excited, while floored by what laid out before them. “So this is Hell? Well. Guess we're 'ere, then,” she offered and stepped forward. The world laid out before them was a wasteland of fire; and there seemed to be blackness before them. Craggy rock faces awaited them, and guided them towards a seeming road of uneven rows of rocks that felt sticky to their step; and upon inspection, it was redder than most rocks, and as they looked even closer, it was not rock at all. The road through Hell was stained with blood and paved with bone. Elsa had little time to let her nausea take hold, when Red Wolf broke the silence of their slow walk.

The blackness that seemed to snake in the distance became clear to his enhanced vision, and his eyes widened. He ordered a halt silently, holding a fist up as he had advanced ahead of them all, scouting forward. The rest stopped in their tracks, and he doubled back to the group at his back, letting his knowledge calm in his mind before he spoke, with deep severity. “Thousands march on us. I suspect we are nearer to the Keep than we thought. Countless demons step forward, and fly on their deformed wings... we're nine against infinity,” he informed them, carefully, his stomach tied in a knot of anticipation.

“Right,” Frank said, as he readied his shotgun. “So they know we're coming. On the plus side – we won't have to explain what we're doing here,” he smiled caustically and aimed his rifle in the distance, sizing up the competition. They looked like specks from here – and he knew they'd look a lot bigger soon.

“Time for your formations, there, Geronimo?” Cain asked as he cracked his knuckles. The smell of impossible battles seemed to put Cain's mind at ease; it's when he had time to think that he worried.

Valkyrie's sword did not remain in its sheath and she hurled herself upon the saddle of her flying steed, and then flew skyward, ignoring their prattling. Just as the mission plan promised, it seemed – she would be the point-woman, following the initial volley set by Kale, who herself cast a spell to send the witch soaring high, wrapped in a sheath of glowing arcane magics,

Atlantean spells wrapping her protectively, glinting runes that none gathered among them could understand marking her in a floating, swirling pattern.

The rest did something pretty straightforward, on the other hand. They sprinted forward. Elsa pulled free her sword, Craig unsheathing two massive knives and Red Wolf holding tight to his fighting staff. Victoria ran between them, clutching the page she bore and holding tight to the rifle she carried, while Frank led their little charge, Emily pointed forward. From behind them all, Russell launched himself forward, gaining speed and distance with each powerful step forward, as he mutated savagely into his most bestial form, shredding clear his clothes with his inhuman transformation. He roared loudly, letting his monstrous power flow through him in anticipation.

The black dots that lay before them slowly became more visible. They were clear, now, to even the most short-sighted of them. Gaping maws of impossible creations of the most deviant of minds and purest of evils opened as if to devour the heroes that still stood across a vast field; glowing eyes burned with the sins of Hell, fire raging in their ireful stares. Claws like bloodied, malformed knives hung from their over-stretched fingers, knotted with rough leathery hide that bound itself to their muscled and sinewy arms. The malformed beasts, of perverted flesh and damned soul, rushed forward unbound.

And their leader, he flew amongst the throng; the countless winged devils masked him amongst the crowd. Their leathered wings, in deep reds and pure blacks, extinguished what light the flames of Hell brought them; the creatures blotted out all of the underworld's sky. They had one advantage; it was a narrow path. Excepting flyers, there was no way for more than a few dozen to face the heroes on the path at once.

Considering the impossible numbers aligned against them, though, this was small consolation.

Valkyrie saw this man and cried, "Forward, to battle!" to those below, as rage consumed her. She gave it little thought, and gave her allies even less time to respond. She had seen her enemy, the single golden yellow wings, however sullied by the blood that has met its clawed and grasping fingers. Its colors shone clear through the fog of enemies like a banner, and she urged to meet it, breaking rank and the Pegasus' wings battering the air as she rode on.

It was all that Kale could do to cast a spell to buffet those that lay between them. Eldritch words that lay unspoken from all but her lips and those of her mentor, Dakimh, for thousands of years now ushered forth unbidden. Her fingers splayed outward in as fanciful and critical a dance as her beautiful, whispered chant. With the components of verbal chant and somatic performance, her magic was cast free; beautiful blue hues illuminated the craggy rock faces, the bodies of the dead and the transparent souls of the damned; it cast upon the flesh of the demons beyond, and combated with the rolling blacks and reds of the unholy fire that raged around them. A massive string of indecipherable runes trailed through the air as if a shock of lightning, and struck the ground at the front ranks of those demons arrayed before them.

An explosion rocked the cavern, lit with crackles of blue fire.

Of those first of the legion, whether they survived the blast or were rendered to death instantly, were sent hurtling skyward; bones, rock and bodies soared into the air and crashed into the winged forwards, crashing into the high ceiling of the cavernous dimension they'd been placed within. Unholy screams sounded at their pain, but Valkyrie pressed forward; bodies crashed around her and buffeted her body as she flew through the heart of the created carnage, knowing it would not be enough. Not enough to stop her – and not enough to stop the Gargoyle.

Juggernaut and the Werewolf rushed forward over the bodies of the fallen, crashing into the opposing line as Drake began to release vicious bolts of mystically destructive energy from his shotgun, decimating what demons he could find as they charged, the attacking men screaming the primal cries of fear, of pain and of anger that lay hidden within them. They let the horror of battle overcome their trepidations and hesitations, as they faced down unspeakable horror. It was those long moments as their claws glistened, fists clenched and wild shots were fired into the fray that their stomachs bound tight into a knot.

With a mighty crash of hair, metal, muscle and claw, blood splashed across the ground in waves. Juggernaut crushed a wave of demons into the near wall, letting their lifeless husks collapse below him. Crimson stained the Werewolf's deep sienna tufts of hair as his massive claws tore through those that opposed him, as Mr. Immortal cheered on, "There goes the nine foot chainsaw!" in excitement as he they ushered forward from behind.

Red Wolf and Mr. Immortal progressed slowly, on either side of Montesi, and they each bore gleaming weapons; Wolf's tomahawk was not yet stained with the hissing blood of Hell's children, and Mr. Immortal's two massive knives had yet to cut into even one opponent. The rush of those ahead of them ensured that delay... but they made no progress. It was obvious – they weren't advancing. They were a rock, and those bodies were the crashing waves, wearing down the rock slowly over time.

And it was just a matter of time, in the end. Even as bodies tore in half, were bitten headless, crushed into dust, they surged forward into every crack they could find in the defenses left open upon the walkway, threatening to overload the two titans they focused their forces upon. Perhaps they'd be directed for a mad rush past, to capture Montesi – but their leader was otherwise occupied, and the savage nature in them challenged the massive monstrosities placed as an unspoken and bloodied barrier between them and the end of this bone-wrought road.

"No! Don't - wait for us!" cried out the sorceress as she fought to maintain crowd control at the first maw of this writhing creature, this beast formed of thousands of lesser ones, able to merely watch as the immortal vanguard rushed forward, her mighty Dragonfang tearing through the mass ahead of her to make way – she knew for where and for what Valkyrie rushed, and she knew just what it meant.

The sky was alight with colors; Kale, not tied to this or any realm, found her magics worked surprisingly well given Strange's tales of his last adventures within it – and made the absolute most of the situation. Fire that glowed white, blues and greens, not reds and blacks, crashed along the landscape in explosive, glowing pyres of light. The screams of the damned echoed from their absolute destruction. Massive holes were formed in the tight corridors by the flying

sorceress, who stared stunned at how long this road passed in front of them – the further she looked, the further it seemed to run, with a steady stream of the cursed placed ahead of them.

Between the surge of enemies, and her uselessness to help Valkyrie, she felt like she was trying to empty a sinking ship of its overflow with a leaky bucket.

The Viking heroine's face was contorted in a passionate fury; she had seen her target, and she would seek it without hesitation. As she moved through the battlefield, her eyes never wavered and her Pegasus passed through the wake of the scattered sky of flying beasts unhesitatingly; bodies obscured the Gargoyle's view from her and her massive sword cleaved through them, revealing him again in glimpses and she pressed forward still. Never once did their eyes meet, and this made her smile – she did not want him to know she was coming until it was far too late. The Chooser of the Slain cut a swath of blood with single-minded determination, one hand on the scruff of the Pegasus' neck, and the other swinging with almost disinterested perfection her enchanted blade. Wings tore free of bodies, dropped others into halves, and maimed others, forming a path wherever the Pegasus' massive, powerful wings ushered them toward.

After what seemed like eternity, the nearer figure of the gnarled and deformed body of the Gargoyle turned amidst a snarled order, and his beaded red eyes expanded incredulously. He had seen the Chooser of the Slain, and knew that she had come now for him. "Not now, not ever," he muttered darkly, and his hands formed together to create a massive ball of energy, his biomysticism long having become something darker. His hands erupted forward with fire, which washed in a wave over Valkyrie, who screamed as she passed even through the flame and rushed her blade forward to her most hated of enemies.

Above the swirling masses of winged enemies buffeting them at their sides they climbed, as the Gargoyle raced towards the highest peak of the cavernous Pit. The Pegasus pursued him fiercely, its mane bristling in the speed of ascent as the orange-winged demon gave flight. The creature that was once named Isaac hurled massive bolts of fire and magic that far surpassed what once the creature was capable. With only the deftest of reaction for Aragorn her steed, and the most skilled of riding on her part, did the blasts seem to soar just inches from them, singing their hair and leaving burns along their flesh. "Know that this is your final day, Gargoyle! Your betrayal will be met with a long death, denying you the glories of battle!" she boasted, in ire, refusing to allow him the honorable death that the traitor did not deserve. He laughed once more and turned to face her.

"Not now, and not ever," the Gargoyle repeated himself darkly, and again his hands swirled to life with energy.

"You will suffer," she sneered darkly, and rushed forward, her blade searing with light as the two airborne combatants met far above the impossible battle below.

|STEPPE OF EREBUS' BARONY|

The long, willowy limbs of the dark, elder Vampire God stared out over his highest walls at the distant battle. A long, bone-laid road winded far away, and upon its distant horizon he could make out a wide array of beings; unable to see their faces or much of them, he could smell the blood from these many miles with ease and knew the scent of spilt blood of demonkin and the mere tinge of human and otherwise. Still he laid confident, as a smile creased his black face, the tendrils of his hair flickering excitedly, his long tail scraping over the rough texture of the stone blocks that made the wall's precipice he stood so proudly upon.

His expansive grip with its spindly fingers gripped over the wall, scraping deep furrows of anticipation in its sides. A slow hiss whispered from his throat as he stood alone in his castle, his every force committed forward. Behind him, a laughter rumbled slowly, choking and sputtering as it was.

The creature dropped suddenly from its perch and a blur followed its motion as it found its way within a second to find the blood-covered stump of a man that laid nailed to his wall as a testament to his fury. "YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY, BLADE?" the demon's rumbling voice inquired imperiously of his 'guest', who only spluttered in response, however quietly. His tongue having been long ripped free of his mouth, the vampire hunter was still able to communicate his meaning.

Erebus clambered closer, and leaned in, to better make out Blade's words. The imprisoned and tortured once-hero then spit a mouthful of blood on the face of the God-King of Vampires, who reeled back and slapped Blade across the face, leaving three massive clawed scars to even further maul his now-limbleless victim. "YOUR FRIENDS WILL NOT SAVE YOU. THEY WILL ARRIVE TO ME SOLELY TO JOIN YOU. I HAVE SAVED YOUR EYES; I HAVE SAVED YOUR EARS. I WISH FOR YOU TO HEAR THEIR SCREAMS, BLADE. I PLAN FOR YOU TO SEE THEM BEG FOR THEIR DEATHS."

His claws turn and rake painfully down Blade's bare chest. "YOU WILL SEE AND HEAR AS I GRANT THEIR WISH." Then, a mighty blow, and Blade's ruined body slumped into his bonds.

TO BE CONTINUED...

WRITER'S NOTE:

Holy crap this took forever, and I can barely express how sorry I am. I got rather busy up here in Iraq, bla bla bla, excuses excuses – but it's been a year since the last issue – more! And I feel terrible about it. Still, I spent even more time working on getting back to it, to make sure it didn't suffer from 'delayed writing' by making sure I was still in the mind for it, and making sure it had a feeling of continuity. So, here it is, issue Three.

My big regret so far, I'll admit, is that a title with this many people ... it's really hard to focus on some. I did my best to give everyone a voice, and kind of a 'turn', but I know I dropped the ball on some, and will continue to do so. This being said, I hope you're enjoying the ride and I'll do my best to close out the chronicle in short notice. One more story to go, and it should be carnage.

Thank you all for your support. The editors, Barry, Chris, they've all been greatly supportive and I thank you. Here's to getting Midnight Sons off the Inactive list, and shortly to the Completed section

The next issue, hopefully within two months, me with a guest stint on AVENGERS IMMORTAL lined up, will be the final chapter in this miniseries, and we will see wild transformations of characters featured in this arc, Lucifer compounding our heroes – and someone dies.

Let the festivities begin.

-Bowie, co-manning the Mission To Make Mr. Immortal Interesting. Word up to the Munn



"HELL AND BACK"

Part Four: The Showdown

Conclusion

Written by Bowie Sessions

Perseverance, n: A lowly virtue whereby mediocrity achieves an inglorious success.
Ambrose Bierce

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

The Darkhold – the veritable Pandora’s Box, an ancient book of arcane evils, root of vampire and werewolf among man’s world.

Lucifer – one of the Triumvirate rulers of Hell.

Erebus – Vampire God, prisoner of Blade.

Satana – Daughter of Satan, dissident of Hell.

Doctor Strange – the Sorcerer Supreme.

Blade – vampire hybrid ‘day-walker’, banished to Hell.

Cain Marko / The Juggernaut – super-strong supervillainous inheritor of magical bands.

Craig Hollis / Mr. Immortal – over-excitabile and suicidal would-be hero cursed to live forever.

Frank Drake – descendant of Dracula, veteran monster-hunter

Jack Russell / Werewolf – cursed as a werewolf, and has mastered it as a weapon against darkness.

Will Talltrees / Red Wolf – bears a Native American Wolf Spirit, superb tracker, protector of the abandoned.

Cassie St. Commons / Dusk – a living dead girl empowered with many abilities by unknown sources.

Elsa Bloodstone – a superhumanly able monster-hunter, daughter of famed immortal Ulysses Bloodstone.

Jennifer Kale – a powerful sorceress of Atlantean magic.

Samantha / The Valkyrie – a powerful Ancient Nordic warrior woman

Victoria Montesi – a chronicler of the Darkhold and solely able to bear it without taint. Hellspawn of many stripes.

Scenes – Places around Hell, New York City rooftop, Sanctum Sanctorum

|HELL|

She looked on to the battle that waged on the craggy, red-rocked, fire-blasted expanse laid out before them to see. The divining fire that allowed them distant sight seemed no less painted in the fire-licked hues of the inferno, and the frustration was evident on the face of the young, beautiful, terrible face of the small-horned first-born whore of Hell, Satan's whelp, Satana. She watched with a fervent interest, focused on the ball of flame in her hand while she paced before his throne. In scale was the war that waged beyond, a distance that could have been twenty feet or five thousand years. "Is this truly necessary?" she asked, furiously, of her father in his so-called infinite wisdom, severity in her vicious eyes.

"It serves our purpose," he responded, feeling rather bored of the matter, his long fingers slowly sliding over his throne's right arm, while his left hand splayed against his forehead, moving to stroke his temple out of a growing irritation with the prattling that continued before him, his impudent and ignorant daughter.

"This is an affront, " she argued, as her eyes left from the flames to her father, "This is cowardice, we should strike like a hammer, if your conviction cries for such blood!" she crowed out in rebuke to her stubborn and immovable father, who regarded her as one might a petulant child; and he did.

"This is law," he commanded, his voice bored and disinterested yet seeming to thunder to the Heavens, if it perhaps dared. "Besides. Divine mandate. I can do nothing to intercede. What would you have me do?" he asked, with a growing little smile as she snarled, understanding the unsubtle tease of his words.

Looking into the fire, she watched as a pair of wings, one feathered, one leathery, struck in the stony heights of Hell, a tapestry of violence painted in flame. "Then you can not stop me from ruining your plans, can you, Father? Impotent in all ways," she sneered, before the fire in her hand erupted, and engulfed her in entirety. Left behind, however, was not a fury or a passion on the face of Satan. Where she expected him to react quickly, to see if he could outrace her impatience, he merely sat with a pleased smile on his lips, eyes closing as if to savor the moment.

|ELSEWHERE IN HELL|

Saga is from the Icelandic, söga, a word that in the ancient Scandinavian tongues meant 'what is said'. Paralleled to the word 'say' in English cognate. It did not mean story, or tale, or legend, so much as it meant history – accountings of facts. Accountings of facts disputed to this very day. Of course, in a world where Gods walk amongst men once more, the disputing of accounts has grown significantly less stringent when one can simply ask Thor what he recalled of the history of Hervarar.

Even so, in the ages where Valkyrie called Earth 'home' last, the word for the day was Söguöld, Icelandic for the Age of Sagas, an entire era of time known for the glory of battle, epic heroism, and grand tragedy. The time may have passed, but she had not. Reborn into a vessel willing to accept her divine power, she is a face known well to those Sagas, but

with only one of her own. In the Volsung and Nibelungenlied Saga, she was the mighty lover of the nigh immortal Siegfried. One less common, but no less grand, Helreið Brynhildar, speaks of her ride to Hel, wherein she comes to final blows with a giant.

Now, looking across the battlefield, as she screams an unholy bloodlust, her winged horse flying fearlessly forward towards the demonic visage of her once-friend with his orange hide and gnarled visage, one could clearly understand why she managed to ride back out of Hel. Her steel armor stained with the blood of lesser demon, her skin burnt with the ichor of their spilt veins, she roars as fire engulfs her. It burns free blood; it singes her hair, and purifies her, as she comes through its other side to meet her blood-sworn foe.

Gargoyle was once a man named Isaac Christians. A World War II soldier, he yearned for the safety of his people, a small town named for his family in Virginia. A deal for which he sold his soul. As the stories are wont to go with such a shortsighted transgression, he was swindled; they never ask for what one thinks they do. Allowed to become nestled dearly within the ranks of heroes, they monitored him while he exalted himself. Eventually, however, his dues were called in – and no more was Isaac a friend to Valkyrie and the once-Defenders. No more was Isaac a man of pride and virtue and values. Isaac, now, was a slaved defiler, a monster, who sowed discord, raped his friend Valkyrie, killed friends who entered Hell to oppose him, and now was a general on high of Hell.

Now, looking across the battlefield, as his beaded red eyes narrowed yet further in the recessed brow of his horned face, it was impossible to mistake the demon, no matter how self-aware, for the man he once was. No veneer of age or mortality remained, as the sculpted and deformed monster flew under his own power, his leathered bat-wings crashing against the air to keep him suspended as a mighty Pegasus rushed for him, with its owner, the Queen of Valkyries, astride its back. No sign of mercy remained in this hero, as his hands converged to release a mighty torrent of fire, to wash over the body of his former teammate and victim. She snarled as she emerged from the other side of its flames unmarred.

Below them, the battle waged on; two wolves, two men and two women, a witch and a juggernaut went to war. The path was carved in slaughter upon a road of bones leading to a dread Keep. Yet all that was but a pale reflection of what took the endless cave's sky in challenge. The winged steed navigated in a whirl around the fired blasts of mystical flames that scoured the air, unleashed from the clawed hands of the orange-skinned Gargoyle, letting only a few feathers get scorched in its quick steps. It maneuvered as quick and ably as it could, but the Gargoyle kept himself free in the air, out of the bounds of the Valkyrie's blades, while laying damnation to the sky to ensure his safety.

She screamed in impotent fury, challenging him from his safe postures. "COWARD! You find it easy to impale a woman, yet fear the chance she may do the same!" she taunted, with a furious sneer, as she took up the reins of Aragorn, her winged horse. The two hung there both, wings beating the air violently as the Gargoyle and the Valkyrie considered each other, calculating. She was mere paces away, and he stood there expectant, flames licking his fingers. Her finger slid through the grips of the sword, testing its weight, as both their eyes met. Neither of them could bear to look away, eyes shifting to stay constant as the heights of their ascents changed with each strike of feather and leather.

"Let it come," the Gargoyle taunted, and she shrieked aloud, a woman driven mad by her vengeance. A loud kyah! was sounded to alert her horse, and Aragorn surged forward. The wind rushed around them. His wings struck air time and again, and they gained speed

enough to cover the distance in the blink of an eye. As if in slow motion, she rushed forward, and his hands rose, claws tipped forward, fury driving her and survival driving him. Their yearnings were near equal.

Only near.

His claws caught the face of the horse as it impacted him, and the fire released consumed the beast before it had a chance to whinny out its death cry. The winged steed's wings beat one last, and stilled, as he pushed himself free while a sword rushed down to meet him in the sudden crash of flesh. Dragonfang, the blessed sword of the Valkyrie, raced through the demon's arm as if paper, and tore it free of his body. His wings racing in panic, he pushed free and she leaped desperately from the back of her friend, the dead Pegasus, her sword clamped tight in her hands and poised forward, back arched, her form perfect.

The sword led her aim, her face knotted in graceless rage, but her ride through the air could not have been more graceful if she were an angel. The massive longsword bore true, and it sunk through the demon's chest and tore down as she ripped him from the sky. They dropped to the Earth, his wings striking the wind uselessly as gravity took its sacrifices even in this realm outside of the world. The bodies below were not even considered as she screamed, and rended her sword through the form before her, tears burning her cheeks as she tore through him even as the life clearly left the demonspawn. Consumed with her vengeance, all she knew was this moment as the wind raced against her, her hair trailing above her as she gutted the bastard during those seemingly unlimited years suspended.

The time was not measured in years, however, but seconds, and demons below them barely slowed their incredible sky-fall, much less broke it, as with a sudden and sickening thump both of them came to rest on the Earth, the Gargoyle skewered and a shower of blood and horror. There was a long silence, amongst the battlefield, as they examined the bodies newly grounded.

Limp at first, the Valkyrie, seeming sore with her motions, picked herself back up from the bone-scattered floor and reached out to Dragonfang, hefting it as if it weighed what it obviously did, instead of the seemingly weightless nature she usually gave it. As the denizens of Hell looked upon her, her body was clearly painted in the life of the man that was once her friend, once her defiler, and now no more.

Those of Hell had paused its attacks, as on one side of her stood the veritable armies of the Abyss and on the other were the small team chosen to face them. Her face tensed, her hand clenching on the sword, and raising it in her bruised and tired arms, looking prepared for that final curtain to finally fall and the battle to resume. Their General had been slain; picked solely from the detritus, Gargoyle had fallen and left the forces leaderless. They hesitated, and for the length needed.

The sky erupted with fire. In its absence, as it receded again, the silk-robed Satana, Daughter of the Devil, appeared before them all. The hackles were raised on all sides; an armored villain redeemed in the bowels of Hell clenched his fist. A domesticated man unleashed into the primal wolf sharpened his claws on the rocks below. A tribal leader far askance from his tribe readied the staff in his hand, wringing it under his fingers. A demonslayer, in her element, took in one sharp breath as she readied for the challenges to stack yet higher. A mystic felt words fall on her lips in preparation, and two true mortals found themselves forced to hesitate.

They prepared for her assault, and she turned instead to those that they faced, her back exposed to her enemies. Satan's spawn addressed another Lord's armies, and they wondered for a moment, if they would have preferred her to simply strike.

"Your Army has a General, hellspawn; his name? Erebus. Erebus forfeited you, Army Most Damned, upon the trust of another," she spoke, and looked once to Valkyrie, who took a step back, and she reached down for the mangled body of Gargoyle, tearing free his skull with her hand, to raise it up for them all to see. "He, who was only ally, not servant; by law, having served as the Gargoyle's claw, you are indebted now as his army, and defaulted to his masters. By law, you are no longer Lucifer's chosen but the Master of your newest and dead Master; you are Satan's. I am Satana. I speak for my father Satan, and command him to deny this claim if he does not." The demonspawn glanced about, unsure, waiting for the crack of thunder or boom of destruction or screams of angels to sound the presence of the Great Defiler. No sound came.

Smiling, as if she expected no response and knew with determination her own words, the Daughter of Lies continued her orders to the confused and deformed masses. "You will come with me. You have no further claim to this land. Return to the pit. Travel to my father's circles and find your further eternal torments there," she declared, her voice sundering over the walls, which ascended to the very height of human misery. They murmured in tongues best not understood, and she created fires before them, which they began to pore through, disappearing in eruptions of smoke.

Looking back to the crowd behind her, with a snide little smirk, she was taken rather by surprise as she found a shotgun placed suddenly at her throat. Frank Drake at the other end of it had his finger readied at the trigger, and she felt the cold burn of the necro-magic within it, and felt fear for the first moment in many years. "I'm... saving your lives," she whispered, as the demons disappeared by scores within the fires that reached so high none could see this sudden difference. Her stolen army continued to dissolve behind her, as she suddenly found the temperature of Hell worth sweating, and considered her options again.

Seeing the panic in her eyes, Frank knew two things, and was willing to tell her just that. "I believe you," he said, and his arm slacked. He could hear the relief as she released a sigh; for a creature not wholly human, it was an unnecessary breath. It would be her last.

His eyes snapped back to her, and his muscles tightened back up. "But I've made enough deals with the devil for one lifetime." With the simplest application of force, the trigger was squeezed, and she screamed for help, only to find none existed behind her. Her army gone, tricked by her chicanery into departing the very grounds where she now found her rest, her body collapsed, her beautiful face decimated by the demon-rending flames of the weapon he called Emily. There was a haunting sound of howling winds, which ushered in to fill the void left by the discharging of his well-cared weapon.

As her body lay smoking, her fires die down and reveal to the entirety of the Midnight Sons, worn down and bloodied in their own and the hellspawn's blood, an empty road where once it ran to overflowing. An empty road built of bones, leading one step at a time slowly to a now quiet keep, owned by a demon named Erebus, a Vampire God, where the tortured soul of a hero laid in torment.

"Long walk," Frank whispered quietly, and no one spoke a word to him as he started forward.

|EREBUS' KEEP|

There was not silence in the Keep of the demonic Vampire Lord, despite what the Sons might have thought; but what remained was as near as it could be. The captured and tortured wreck of a man, the half-blood, the Day Walker, hung in the irons that had him fixed to the wall. His arms removed at the elbow, his legs removed at the knee, his tongue torn from his mouth, he spattered wet and dried blood into the air as he laughed as hard as he could, his throat nearly unable to make noise over the trauma he had endured. It was clear, however, in the shake of his ruined body. It was evident in the mirth on his usually stoic face. The vampire slayer, Blade, tortured for so long for the affront of his existence, could not stop laughing, to the frustration of the pacing Lord of the Domain.

There was a snarled out fury from the twisted face of the high-ranked demon, the forbearer of Varnae turning to stalk directly for the mangled form of his hated prisoner. His long tail lashed against the ground behind his heavy steps, mottled skin flexing over an obscene musculature. Furious, and now tormented by his own prisoner, his clawed hand raced forward to clasp Blade's neck within it. Blade, unthreatened, met Erebus with the only challenge he was allowed to retain – he stared down Erebus hatefully, a smile covering his torn lips, explaining the comfort that he had found that he could not vocalize anymore... and had no need to.

"YOU THINK YOUR VICTORY AT HAND, BLADE? THINK AGAIN. THEY RAIL FOR NAUGHT. DO YOU TRULY THINK ME UNDEFENDED, SOLELY FOR THE ABSENCE OF THOSE DREGS ONCE CALLED MY INFERNAL ARMY?" The Demon Lord laughed, his voice echoing the cold of the abyss, the hunger for life. Blood yearned for him at his voice, Blade's very veins singing back to the darkened gravel of its enemy's words. "THEY COME FOR DEATH – BUT THEY COME FOR NAUGHT. WHO AMONGST THEM STAND ABLE TO BREAK DOWN THE DOORS TO HELL?"

Blade's eyes did not flinch. There was no hesitation as this demon seethed and snarled, and if anything, his ruined face only smiled brighter. It was clear to Blade, and that clarity reflected in his eyes; Erebus saw it, understood, and the ancient horror grew only angrier. The prisoner was laughing at him. The prisoner grew complacent, suspecting the more Erebus roared his own greatness, the more that it was clear his greatness was not all he anticipated. The demon saw this and roared; the sound shook the firmament of Hell, and he tore Blade from his bounds, the Day Walker struggling not to show his pain as his limbs tore free from the iron shackles, bones breaking under the force. Erebus dangled his prisoner before him, his other hand poised to rip the very face off his wasted foe.

"ENJOY THIS MOMENT OF MIRTH, CHILD. I WILL FORCE YOU TO FEED FROM THE BLOOD OF THE LINE DRACUL. WHY, BLADE, DO YOU REALLY THINK I HELD YOU ALIVE SO LONG? YOU WILL BY HIGH LORD IN THE EARTHLY REALM BY THIS NIGHT'S FALL," The creature possessed no clear features, and its eyes were an impossible black – there should be, by all perception, no way to know what it was. However, the beast, clear now to Blade ... was smiling. The Day Walker, the only vampire who could feel the warmth of the sun, now grew cold. "WE HAVE TIME, DAY WALKER. LET ME TELL YOU OF YOUR TRUE DESTINY."

[OUTSIDE; THE GATES OF EREBUS' KEEP]

The walk was long, and slow going enough to make it seem yet longer. This path of bones, treacherous, seemed easier to pass over in the fog of battle. Now, with not even the bodies of the slain covering the battlefield, it was the difficult stepping through bone and detritus along the ivory-toned trail to the base of the gates. Gates which stood hundreds of feet high; they formed to the desire of their owner, shaped of torment and force of will, and it stood as imposing as the challenge they knew they faced ahead. Mutely, they stood for a long minute, staring at the immense gateway, considering their options.

"Do you think it's older than the Ishtar Gate?" Craig asked, randomly, the first to say a word. His words, by the expression on those around him, were rather puzzling.

Their de facto leader, Frank, stared at him suddenly, his brows furrowed. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he snarled out, pressure clear on him, and confusion even more so.

"The entry to Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar the Second built it in honor of the God Ishtar in 575 BC. Saddam was building a reproduction of it in Iraq, but obviously that's not going so well for him... you know... the oldest city gate ever... you think this one's older, I was just asking..." Craig protested, as if to explain the position. They stood poised to battle for their lives, and Mr. Immortal found it incredibly important, apparently, to cite to them trivialities.

Nervous and overcome by the moment, she actually started laughing, weakly, a nervous and terrified laughter, the first betrayal she has made of the gravitas of their situation since they left the bogs of Florida for the craggy, blood red panorama of Hell. "What – how do you even know this kind of thing?" she asked, puzzled, "and what does it have to do with any of this?"

Scratching his neck, the immortal shrugged. "A lot of Discovery Channel," he defended idly. "I talk when I'm nervous."

Dismissing him, the group once again addressed the door. "We're going to need in," Frank said clearly, and he looked behind him, pointedly towards Jennifer Kale, who shook her head quickly and suddenly, dismissing the notion that she'd be of any use whatsoever. The blonde, Atlantean-studied magi seemed adamant and saddened in her way.

"I can't do it anymore," she said plainly, feeling her throat drier than she would like. "The longer I've been in Hell, the more my power seems denied me. My power, it's a power of Light, not ... not this. It's like a battery in a place like this, and there's only so much charge. After holding back the tide on the path there, it ... I don't know if I'm going to be of any use to us at all, inside. But I ... I know I definitely can't break in." She bit her lip for a second, and ran her hand through her soot-stained hair, letting it fall down her shoulders, before she moved to re-adjust her ponytail, re-setting the hair-band around it as if this was a mundane moment. "I'm really sorry, Frank."

Snapping his fingers, Craig was clearly about to throw some new tidbit out; there was an audible groan from Drake, who almost began to swear. "You want to tell us about some stupid Animal Planet crap and I swear I will--" Even Frank, who was interrupting Hollis, was himself suddenly interrupted as a woman dressed in all black appeared from the ether, an

audible BLEENK heard in her summons. Shadows fell around her as she manifested, and she didn't have time to react before Emily was placed against her chest and the trigger pulled.

Entropic energy scoured the air and surged through the intruder, her pale white skin unmarred by the terrible blast. It traveled through her as if she was a figment of imagination, and it clarified the issue for Frank, who lowered his weapon. It destroyed demons; it had no effect, now, on those who were not of an infernal nature inherently. It seemed the woman before them was clean, and he seemed relieved some, even if she seemed absolutely horrified. "Your name. Right now. Because I promise you, we are not patient."

She looked to Hollis, who seemed to have his own quizzical expression. Looking to Juggernaut, Craig whispered something to the oaf of a man. "I think I recognize her from somewhere," he informed the towering giant.

"Yeah, I got you, all them goths look alike. It's all mascara and cloves with those freaks," Cain admitted, "but the girls, some'a them do like a challenge, know what I mean?" The Juggernaut smirked down to his teammate, who looked completely unsurprised by the commentary, even if Montesi bit down her temper as she heard it behind her, while she focused on the actual meeting ahead. Despite Frank's leadership, she clearly took responsibility for this.

After all, it was her Formula that was defiled here.

The black-garbed shade of a woman seemed to relax a little from the horror that had passed her face at being shot, even if there was no damage – the fear was still the same, even in a living dead girl. Old habits die hard, and she remembers New York muggings clearly. "Dusk. My name is Dusk. You're all making a terrible mistake. I just talked to Dr. Strange. He's watching you. He's watching this. He planned this. He knows some of you will die, it's why he didn't join – he didn't want it him. He's manipulating you. This is a trick!" she cried out, desperate for them to listen. She was looking, however, straight at Craig, across the distance.

This had immediate reactions. The cries of fowl were raised instantly, a cacophony of anger mounted amongst them. Red Wolf, alone amongst them, seemed to remain impassive. He had parted from their group and had begun to scout around, glancing at the wall's heights and all its smaller details. His eyes were analyzing and careful, while the rest were preoccupied even in the midst of war, by the sudden revelation – no matter how questionable its revealer.

None were louder, however, than Jack, who had for a brief moment returned to his human form, wearing the tattered remainder of the jogging sweatpants he had decked himself out in before their journey to the Underworld. "That son of a bitch," the bestial man sneered loudly, and pounded his fist on the wall angrily, which did not even resound from his weak strike. "Again and again I've trusted him, and again and again he's manipulated me. Used me. This is bull. He could have stopped this himself! But he just sits there and watches us. Why? Why?" he questioned loudly, and definitely did not expect anyone amongst them to have an answer.

Valkyrie was infuriated, clearly, the blood-soaked warrior, still charged from the battle she warred, was conflicted – this moment had brought her the purity and glory she demanded of herself, but it was clear now – she was betrayed by her friend. Her ally. Her leader. He

had sent her to the Hell she was too broken to attend when last Strange attended it. "Before Hell was reformed in this image," she whispered darkly, "Strange led the Defenders to this place. I ... was ... ill-fit for the journey then. But I recall ... his mentioning the weakness of his power here. So, too, is it the weakness of his character. He sends us to die. So that he will not." Her face was taut with disgust, and she shook her head, as she tried to retain her presence for battle, as they stalked just yards from death given form.

"And yet I can't bring myself to give two damns," Elsa spoke finally, as she looked down to her blades, both broken stubs of swords, shattered during the battle, and tossed them aside, pulling free a pair of knives strapped to her thighs. "We came here to free the greatest vampire slayer; we came here to destroy the Eldest Vampire. We came to Hell to finish this. Don't give a damn who set us up to die; we knew it might happen. Get your heads in this game – we need you on this battle. We need all of you. If all of us fight, forgetting this nonsense, like we might not live til tomorrow – then I promise you, the most of us that will live til tomorrow... they will. I don't plan to live through this. But I plan to take him with me. So stuff it, if you've issues. Eat it, if you've pride. Man up, for Christ's sake. And I mean that, perhaps – for Christ's sake. This is Heaven and Hell, people; and we're storming the bad one's house tonight."

"NO!" Dusk screamed out, tears streaking her cheeks. "I know you plan to truly sacrifice Craig, but this is – this is death. Just go back home. Please. I can't ... I can't watch him die again. Not for ... not for good. Please, you have to go back. I'll take you. I'll take you all home," she pleaded, desperately, spreading her cloak, which seemed ready to envelop them all. But Victoria shook her head, and Craig crossed his arms, both confused and showing his solidarity in the same motion.

The once-mother of Chthon shook her head. "We're not going anywhere, girl. But if you can get us from here to Earth in one go, I'm sure you could get us inside. Please. We could use your talents, you could make a huge difference for our side. He wouldn't see it coming. He'd be surprised. We could take him down before he knew to stop us. Please."

Dusk, however, was not swayed by this. Her arms wrapped around herself, and she shook her head, desperately. "No. I'm not going to help you. No. Not with this. Not with this. Please," she said again, and looked to Craig, "Please. I understand what it is you ... please come with me," she begged, walking to the strange hero-of-circumstance. Craig shook his head, and he began to speak, but she did not allow him. Rushing forward, in a burst of darkness, she was before him. Her hands raced to his cheeks, and she moved in to kiss him. It was brief, but it was firm and very sincere. She pulled away, and he could feel her tears stain his cheeks.

With a burst of darkness, she consumed herself within her own shadows and was gone just as she had left. Craig was left standing, confused, blinking slightly. "Does anyone know who that was?" he asked, to a puzzled silence.

With a soft thud, the dusky ex-Army Sergeant, and hero of the Midwest landed before them, finishing his scampers up the wall. "The task," Red Wolf reminded them as he came to stand from his crouch, "Is to get inside these gates. I just clambered up the wall. No way in. There's some sort of mystical shield above its walls. So we can't go over. As far as I can tell, it's just this door. Without Kale's abilities, we have to consider the only other alternative we have for entry tactics," he continued, having seemed to have lost the pseudo-mystical nature of the Red Wolf persona. Now, it was clear, it was much more important that former Army Staff Sergeant William Talltrees was far more important for this kind of an event.

"That is?" Frank asked, the alpha male challenge showing in his posture and voice, trying to undermine the other 'lead' male despite his own interests in just getting this job done. Feeling undercut, he did his best to undercut Will, and it was a clear tactic to Red Wolf, who ignored his tone and his posture as he answered him honestly. There wasn't a world. It was just a pointed finger.

"Me?" Cain asked, his mouth somewhat full, the beef jerky in his hand suddenly feeling awkward. He put it back into his pocket, and swallowed the rest of what was in his mouth. Looking to the door, and looking back to the Midnight Sons, he shrugged his shoulders. "Sure. Always up for beating down inanimate objects. Or, y'know, animate ones," the brute idly mentioned, and wandered towards the gate himself, cracking his oversized knuckles, his hand laced with the mystic bands of Cytorrak.

His hand rose, before it slammed suddenly down into the door. This time, unlike when Jack's human fist struck it, there was a mighty thunder. The wood clearly resounded with the impact, challenged by his strike. "Heh," Cain murmured, and everyone stood back. They realized it might just be possible. Their own battering ram went to work, and meanwhile they all prepared for the hopeful eventuality. Returning to his bestial form, Jack was once more the slaving Werewolf, Frank's hands taut on his shotgun, Valkyrie's sword tight in her fist and her shield readied. Elsa's fingers flexed calmly over her daggers, Red Wolf readied his staff, Jennifer let verses of ancient texts fall familiarly over her lips, Craig holding his own set of daggers gifted on the night they adopted him into their circle of nine, and Victoria holding onto a scroll case like it might somehow protect her, while standing in the midst of them, hoping upon hope for the best.

Repeatedly his fist struck against its bloodstained, hell-forged metal. The thick door shook and sounded with each of his impossible strikes. Each strike seemed to shudder for longer, and soon, a creak was heard. In its next strike, a crack appeared down its center, the impenetrable gate shown to be anything but. "Tonight!" he crowed out loudly, his voice booming near as loud as his fists, as he sent one after another into the gate, willing it to bend to his rage. "We dine," he continued, and the metal began to give way, the gate buckling forward with his most recent strike, "in HELL!" A smile appeared on his face, the sort you'd see on a young boy having swung a line drive in tee ball, and with a final and mighty effort, he slammed his shoulder forward with all his force, his head bowed down to let it drive with the impact. With a mighty crash, the gate collapsed forward, and Juggernaut stormed through into the courtyard, where his eyes first managed to see that which stood before them.

"Bigger than I expected," he whispered, his neck craning and his eyes taking it in.

After that, no one could be bothered to care about his stupid movie reference.

|SANCTUM SANCTORUM, EARTH| |HELL, REALM OF SATAN|

Two men, both grand in power and majesty, stood before their divining pools. One a bed of fire and blood, the other's something nobler; a summoned ball of luminescent light. Through both their scrying tools, the Sorcerer Supreme and a Triumvirate Lord of Hell viewed the same events, gifted by their magic an insight into the trials set before the Midnight Sons. They watched the scene before them as five men and four women stepped forward onto the field of battle, meeting a giant of a creature. The demonic beast, this Erebus, the so-called

Vampire God and secret progenitor of Varnae, the Earthly Lord of Vampires who begat in turn Dracula as his own descendant stood high. He grew before all their eyes, growing from his massive twelve feet over double it, slowly, his muscles shuddering as he was spanned larger and larger.

Thirty feet tall, he towered within his massive keep, and looked down upon those who entered as if they were toys, or perhaps insects. Both men watched not only with interest, but also with a sort of excited apprehension. They were both certain, they were both concerned, they were both pained by that which had been lost already. To one, they had lost a long time friend and to the other, their daughter. Yet, both of these men had one thing most dearly in common... they thought they were the only one behind the curtain.

Then, whispered from both their mouths, for no one but themselves to hear, were the very same words. "Everything's going just like I planned."

[EREBUS' KEEP]

The High Lord of Vampires looked upon them as they poured through the gate. Within his walls remained only two before their entrance; the Demon itself, and the limp body of Blade which it held in its hand casually, his fangs deep within Blade, draining what was left of the Day Walker's veins, it might seem. As they stepped within, he dropped the limbless mass that once was Blade, letting it strike the ground with a sick and blood-marked thump. A strange look crossed the beast as they entered, and he began to advance upon them. As he did, so too did he grow in size, growing half as tall, and again and again, until he towered over those before him. They stood there, for a moment, waiting for the first move, his tail thrashing back and forth across the ground behind him. "SURRENDER NOW. I PROMISE TO MAKE YOU THE DUKES OF MY ARMY, THE GRAND SCOURGE OF ALL HUMANITY. WHEN I FREE MYSELF OF THIS WORLD, AND RISE AGAIN, EACH OF YOU WILL BE GRANTED YOUR DOMINIONS. ALL I ASK IS HIS HEAD, THE SON OF DRAKE," the beast commanded, pointing his finger for Frank, "WHAT FATE DO YOU CHOOSE?"

"Nuts," Craig spat out, as he lunged forward, first into the fray. Leaping bodily into the air, he knew exactly what purpose he was serving now, and later. He was the bargaining chip later; he was the sacrificial lamb right now, the one who was going to buy them a few seconds. Instantly, he was sent flying, a single swipe of the monster's backhand flinging Mr. Immortal as if he were weightless. Striking the far wall with a violent force, he collapsed in a heap. Satisfied, the fiend looked back to his allies to see them already positioned.

The next man to strike was the first man in. Juggernaut sent his titanic first hurtling for the leathery hide of the tendril-headed, fanged beast. It struck the monstrous thing and sent it hurtling backwards. The creature slammed into its own rocky tower, and caved in part of its wall, before it surged back forward, an inhuman roar ushering from its lips as a response to their clear decision in regards to their fate. Massive claws raked down the front of Cain's form, and left no signs of damage whatsoever. Cain would have smirked if he had not noticed that there didn't even seem to be a bruise left behind on the thing, from his hardest hit. "Nuts," Cain echoed.

"Keep on him," Frank barked orders, "Jenny, I need you to weaken his defenses now! Give us something we can hit!" His head jerked about, as he held the gun, and he leveled it, firing just as the massive tail whipped out for him, to stop him from managing such a

succinct victory over the beast. He flipped suddenly and crashed into the floor below, his gun snapping its barrel as it took the brunt of the impact, followed in quick succession by his face, guarded only moments soon enough by his arm. The sound of a crack was not solely in the gun, and Frank cried out in his shock of pain, before the tail twisted around his ankle and sent him flying. His voice grew distant as Erebus discarded him.

"WHO BRINGS THE PAGE?" Erebus queried them, his eyes casting about the assembled group, fearlessly, his hands racing to intercept the Juggernaut's, ducking and blocking his blows, to the frustration of the giant, who found himself suddenly helpless against another – a concept he was not familiar with. Nothing could stop him, and yet he could not find ground.

Then, Erebus' head snapped to focus, and looked through a mass of bodies. "YOU HAVE IT. GIVE IT NOW," the demon beckoned, leapt over the obstacle before him, and lunged for those who protected her. As always, Red Wolf was on the detail of protecting her at all costs. Frank ostensibly was, as was Mr. Immortal. With both of them sent awry, he growled and clutched tight on his staff, and held it in position, readying for his defense. The demon only laughed.

They all moved for her as quickly as they could, and time seemed to stand still. Werewolf by Night, Vicki's constant protector over this last year, raced across the expanse, his bestial legs sending him faster and faster with each pump of his strong legs; he saw red as his own beast answered him. Protect her, it thought, clear and instinctive. It was pure, animal instinct but he still was not fast enough to save them both, and he knew it, as he watched his newfound brother leap forward to reach his enemy.

Striking Erebus' massive wrist with the staff with all the force he could muster, it did nothing, but the spirit-staff did not break. The creature's hand raced to meet her protector, but the Red Wolf ducked it, time and again, as the creature sought to land its blow upon the agile and quick hero. Unable to pass him, as he seemed everywhere at once, leaping and bounding and striking, Erebus was growing frustrated quickly in those seconds that the battle stretched into apparent hours. All too soon, it ended, when Red Wolf sent a kick into the beast's chest and pushed off, backflipping free; in the air, he had no special speed over another, and Erebus struck like a mantis. His hand raced forward to catch the spirit staff and, with it, Red Wolf's arm. "Die," he growled out, and flung the Red Wolf like a toy – but Red Wolf's weapon, and arm, stayed with the monstrous thing, who dropped the bleeding stump and the weapon it bore to the ground. "NOW," he commanded, "THE PAGE."

He leaned back and rushed to drop his leg upon Vicki, whose eyes grew large in anticipation of the end, just as the Werewolf surged forward to intercept her. He shoved her violently out of the way, and in her stead received the mighty demon's full fury, the impact shattering bone and crumbling him deep into the cobblestones that made up the Keep. Vicki gasped as she collapsed against the ground, rolling to a stop, before she looked up, her hand still gripping the page, to see that her rescue had come just soon enough.

The thing's mighty tail suddenly lifted up, Cain's hands gripped firm around the thing, and he put his shoulders into it as he spun the monster with what looked like a serious effort. A struggle to lift it, but he did, and twisted the thing around; he took it through his own tower, which he allowed to collapse upon the creature, as he stepped back, and cracked his knuckles, waiting for the next show of force. Waiting, it seemed quiet for a moment, and Juggernaut lurched forward... before there was a sudden shifting in the ruins of the massive tower, which had come to rest in a destructive torrent upon him.

With an explosive amount of force, the stones were sent flying like shrapnel, brushed off from him with titanic force. They soared through the air, and Juggernaut turned, spreading his massive arms out, trying to use himself as a shield for those who were left behind him. The rubble crashed against him, buffeting him, and the monster stood free in time to meet the only one amongst them who was not broken or seeking desperate shelter from his destructive tide. "FALL," the Demon ordered her.

Her sword borne high in her grip, her face became a stony figment as she raced forward to meet the titan. "I SAY THEE NAY!" she crowed, Valkyrie surging forward. Her sword came to meet him, and he moved his arm to deflect the blade, only to cry out in his own horrible pain, a sound that burnt their very minds, as half his hand was cleaved free from his palm, the useless flesh collapsing suddenly to the ground. Reeling back, Valkyrie raced forward, and left a mighty slash after another, landing incredible blows of righteous fury, gaping wounds appearing upon his flesh. Horrified, confused, he looked forward, to see that one other still stood, uncovered by rubble – the woman that Juggernaut stood in front of, as a wall to protect her from his fury. Jennifer Kale. Her words left him weak.

Valkyrie prepared to plunge the sword within him, and he reached out to catch her. He caught her wrists as they bore the sword, and leaned forward while he did, pinning her beneath his foot and shattering the bones in her wrists. She was forced to drop the sword. Then, with her pinned still beneath his foot, he shrank nearer to her size, and his fist came to find the pommel of the blade. Twisting it about in his hand, he looked down to her and prepared to plunge it into her chest, his fangs bared free with a look of sadistic glee as he saw the want to run her bodily through with her own blade.

She looked up into his eyes with a look of satisfaction, and merely laughed as the blade suddenly slammed through her, and impaled her into the stone below. She coughed up blood and he dismissed her, forgoing the sword and her slow and painful, withering death, ignoring the blood seeping into the crags of ruined architecture. He turned instead to meet his greatest foe of these, as Juggernaut prepared to meet the man who now stood his own height – but the Juggernaut paused, looking up, to the surprise of Erebus. One of many surprises, and also his very last.

Struggled up from beneath the rubble, she watched in horror as her teammate was murdered. The brand of the Midnight Sons burnt on her, as it did on all of them, and she sped across the battlefield. Her hand gripped the pommel of the blade, and she did not even bother to offer her apologies to her fallen teammate as she ripped it free of her heart, allowing it to bleed yet freer. She propelled herself into the air, and swung herself wholly around as she fell, her arc graceful and perfectly coordinated; the first Erebus felt the sheen of the blade's edge touch his neck was the very same moment it fled the opposite side; in one smooth, slick motion, his head parted from his shoulders. Erebus' look of puzzlement etched onto his face, as it collided with the ground, rolling as his body fell just moments later, leaving what should be nothing but a ruined, and battle-torn castle, haunted by the silence of mourning and pain.

"Vampire. Slayer," she repeated, breathing heavily, above his body, and dropped the sword, crumbling to her feet. There was no relief of silence and suffering. There was only a slow, casual clapping.

The kingdom began to fall apart. The stones themselves were disappearing in the absence of its owner. The stony expanse turned instead to the rocky, ruddy red nothingness of the rest of Hell, flames licking in the distance. And from amongst all the damage, a man

dressed in a fine white suit with perfect blonde hair and a seeming glow about him, that seemed to hint at the vague shape of wings suspended somewhere behind him cast in light. "So, then," Lucifer began slowly. "You've won. Good job. My commendations." With a flick of his hand, a portal of flame erupted from the air, showing through it the clear image of a rooftop somewhere above.

"Now. Please leave, before my grace runs out."

He continued to wave his hand, and their wounds sealed. The Red Wolf's shoulder ceased to seep its blood though his arm remained severed, Frank found his arm broken but he returned to consciousness, and the Werewolf's body re-knit itself faster than even he expected. They were given back what health he seemed willing; but those complete destructions – Red Wolf's loss, Valkyrie's life – seemed either beyond his power or beyond his will.

"No," Vicki stated, standing firm as she walked forward, clutching the page plainly in her hand. Her voice began to read, the Italian she spoke casting to their minds a wellspring of panic as the verses spoke of cruelest damnations even beyond the constraints of their knowledge of language.

Lucifer raised his hand slowly, to his temple, and rubbed it gently, as if frustrated. "Really? That's what this is all about? Oh, just be done with it – I don't want Blade's soul. It's too tainted. So. Fine. Contract of the page. You were to force my hand, so why bother waiting? I'll trade you one life for another. When they die, they're mine, and I'll even restore Blade wholesale to sweeten the pot," he offered, rolling his eyes at the entire spectacle. It even brought Vicki to pause in her reciting of the word.

"We don't trust you," Drake made clear.

"Well, if you do it your way, I choose who replaces him on the rack, Francis," the Archfiend promised. "our options are limited, mortals. If you want your precious Blade returned."

"...I'll do it," Mr. Immortal offered, again. He had said it aloud before, but now he spoke it as a contract, praying for the damnation offered in Hell to be greater than that on Earth. "I'm a hero. Selfless. Please. If you let them use this page with me as the named, I swear to you – when I find my final reward, it will be with you owning my soul."

Frank scowled. "No! We're not making deals with this asshole!" he began, but Craig's head snapped to meet his gaze, and his own narrowed.

"I don't give a damn what you want, Frank. This is my choice. I want release one day. And Blade has done more good for this world than I ever will," he swore, and looked back to Lucifer, with determination in his eyes.

"So, get it over with—" Craig began to say, and the Archfiend before him wagged his finger.

"No need," Lucifer promised. "It's already done." Gesturing with his hand, there was one more body that rose from the destruction. Blade stood up, slowly, on shaky legs, brushed free of the detritus around him. Dressed in tatters of what he was the day he was taken below by the mission gone awry to banish Erebus forever, he seemed unsteady in his steps still, but it was clear. It was Blade.

As they all visited this sight, every eye on them, none – and certainly not Mr. Immortal – saw the obvious progressing. Lucifer’s hand reached out, suddenly, for Craig’s head and grasped him by the neck, while his other hand grabbed his shoulder. Then, without a pause, he tore Hollis’ head free from his body and cast the two aside, the shower of blood incinerating on contact with the glowing aura surrounding Lucifer’s form.

The next moment was even further unexpected. A creature of pure black, with eyes like diamonds, appeared from the nothingness of shadow, his hand reaching forward into what seemed like nothingness. His grip seemed to struggle with Lucifer’s, and he snarled out his protest. “NO! Give it to me!” the otherworldly manifestation proclaimed. “I am D’Spayre! He’s under my protection, and I have devoured his soul long before you sought to claim it, devil!”

To this, Lucifer just smiled, as if things had played out much as he had anticipated. “Oh, you. Do you have any idea how difficult a process this was? Alternatively, in simpler concepts... no. You are a shard of a cosmic force, and have the slightest dominion over the beyond. This is all true.

“But you are only a shard. Whereas I have dominion over all within this realm. Moreover, ask yourself where you have just come, shade? By God’s choice, you are no longer the true specter, but a shadow.”

D’Spayre suddenly released the soul cast before him, and looked around, as if he sought protection. The scene was silent but for this, even the newly reformed Day Walker puzzling at the sudden events. “Fine. Have him. I’ll leave you to it. He’s only trouble anyway, altruistic and tiresome,” the shade attempted to say, fighting away any display of the fear which began to seize even he, a creation as old as time.

“Again,” Lucifer began, “No. I deny your rights to walk free my plane. You say you bear rights to the soul he sold me? So be it. You will take his place.” With that final declaration, his hand moved forward, and it captured the dark spirit before him. It dissipated suddenly, and he seemed to shudder as if enjoying a particular pleasure, before he looked back to the assembled.

“Leave,” he commanded, and looked to Mr. Immortal, with a slight smile. “And in the end times? You’re still mine. I promise you that, Mr. Hollis,” he crooned, and in a blaze of fire, he disappeared, leaving them alone, with a gateway before them to the freedom they so deserved. Taking their wounded and dead with them, they stepped through their portal to the safety promised above.

|NEW YORK CITY|

They re-appeared in what was clearly New York City, a rooftop overlooking Times Square from several blocks away. Behind them was a large billboard presenting the greatest heroes famed of New York City. It was a strange juxtaposition to the bloodied and plain-clothed mystics who traipsed back into their own world. They are left to suffer, but their mourning, the sight of the body laid before them all, none of it allowed them to feel that unity they had with purpose. They realized, suddenly, they were strangers. Violent, dangerous men and

women cast together to end a threat – and it was ended. Yet, the cost was clear to them all in the end.

Jennifer, ever pragmatic, focused entirely on doing something – she spoke whispered words, and the Red Wolf found his arm regrowing itself, and Frank’s set as he stood there, painless and efficient as the Atlantean healing magic warmed them, returning them to their most ready, cleansing them of the taint of below. In its resolution, they were left as cold as they were before its warmth. Not from the weather, that admittedly was a sharp drop from the blaze of Hell. No, it was from the mood as silence overwhelmed them. With the dead body before them, and the returned body beside them, everyone reeled from the loss, the gain and the victory. The victory that did not feel nearly as sweet as they all prayed it would.

Blade spoke first, of them all. His voice seemed tired, struggled out. His voice was even more grated than ever. “How’s Marlene?” he asked, quietly, of the man who led an expedition into Hell to retrieve him from eternal torment.

“We’ve got a kid now. Not a very good father. You left a lot of work. I did it. And ... she didn’t like that. You know. Marlene. Being Marlene. She doesn’t want to see me until I’m ‘done with all this’, whatever that means,” Frank responded, darkly, as if it took his mind off the tragedy and horror of what just transpired. Of what he just endured.

“I’ll pick up that burden,” Blade claimed, firmly, and Frank nodded his head to that.

Looking aside, he said simply, “I know. Jenny?” Then, with his query, Frank placed his hand on Blade’s shoulder. The Mark of the Midnight Sons burnt into his dark flesh, and Frank’s eyes narrowed. “I’m done now,” he breathed.

Anger grew in him, and he looked Blade clear in the eyes, ignoring the hunger visible in the man opposite him, unknowing of Blade’s secrets, of the Destiny whispered in his ears just minutes before his death. “This is the third time I’ve brought you back, Eric. I’m out of the game. I’m going home. To my wife. To my kids. While they’ll still have me.”

|FIRST EPILOGUE|

|SANCTUM SANCTORUM|

Staring into his viewing pool, Stephen Strange shook his head, trying to fight something in his gut, or perhaps caught in his throat, as he heard a soft rapping against the door of his study. Aware already of the presence, he called simply out to his constant friend. “Wong, come in,” he spoke quietly, but Wong still heard, and entered into his ally’s study, moving to address the Sorcerer Supreme with a firm nod of his head.

“You have visitors downstairs,” Wong informs him, quietly, his voice carefully filtered to avoid any sense of condemnation.

Shaking his head, Stephen gestured, and his orbiting Eye of Agamotto slid itself into its position upon him, and he lowered from his slight hover to stand on his own floor, turning his head to the door before he turned his body, beginning his slow and careful steps. “Well,

let's get this ugly business over with," Stephen tells Wong as he mists over the scrying tool behind him and began forward.

"Hard to be right, is it, sir?"

"Please don't patronize me, Wong."

They understood, now, what their futures meant. The Mystic Order of Nine was now Eight; yet, somehow, strangely, their sigils, their marks, burnt brightly. The Circle was not broken, and it was uncertain yet what that had truly meant for them. However, the rest was much clearer. They had a purpose now – there was darkness in this world, and they were there to wait for it. The Sorcerer Supreme had corrupted its purpose, manipulated them against him, but it had not changed their duties.

They were heroes. They were monsters. They were villains and giants. Blade and Jennifer Kale set the story, set their tone; they were the guard. They were to stand ready to battle these threats – but even now, from every day forward, their mark would be clear. They might be separated a hundred miles from another of the Order of Nine, but they were no less sworn to their duties.

Some returned to what they were. Some sought to pursue this new duty directly, daily, constantly.

They were all other things, once, too: average.

Now, however, they were the Midnight Sons.

END

SPECIAL ALTERNATE ENDING!



"HELL AND BACK"

Part Four: The Sacrifice

Conclusion

Written by Meriades Rai

Perseverance, n: A lowly virtue whereby mediocrity achieves an inglorious success.
Ambrose Bierce

DRAMATIS PERSONAE:

The Darkhold – the veritable Pandora’s Box, an ancient book of arcane evils, root of vampire and werewolf among man’s world.

Satan, Lucifer and the Devil – the Triumvirate rulers of Hell.

Erebus – Vampire God, prisoner of Blade.

Man-Thing – monstrous Gatekeeper of the Nexus of all Realities.

Satana – Daughter of Satan, dissident of Hell.

Doctor Strange – the Sorcerer Supreme.

Blade – vampire hybrid ‘day-walker’, banished to Hell.

Cain Marko / The Juggernaut – super-strong super villainous inheritor of magical bands.

Craig Hollis / Mr. Immortal – over-excitabile and suicidal would-be hero cursed to live forever.

Frank Drake – descendant of Dracula, veteran monster-hunter

Jack Russell / Werewolf – cursed as a werewolf, and has mastered it as a weapon against darkness.

Will Talltrees / Red Wolf – bears a Native American Wolf Spirit, superb tracker, protector of the abandoned.

Cassie St. Commons / Dusk – a living dead girl empowered with many abilities by unknown sources.

Elsa Bloodstone – a superhumanly able monster-hunter, daughter of famed immortal Ulysses Bloodstone.

Jennifer Kale – a powerful sorceress of Atlantean magic.

Samantha / The Valkyrie – a powerful Ancient Nordic warrior woman

Victoria Montesi – a chronicler of the Darkhold and solely able to bear it without taint.

Topaz – able sorceress and friend of Jennifer Kale.

"You know it doesn't have to be like this, right?"

The man - or, at least, the thoroughly desecrated remains of what had once been a man - twitched in his chains at the sound of a nearby voice. After so long of hearing nothing but the echoing screams of his fellow damned and the snarling rage of demons, these honeyed tones were a gentle balm. He immediately dismissed them as delirium, but then the darkness shifted and a faint breeze stung at his ravaged flesh, and in that moment he knew that she was real.

A dark angel, porcelain skin swathed in the soft, black shroud of death...

"It took me a long time to understand," the girl said. "When I was here, I mean. Here, or some place very much like it. The fire, the scorched earth, the rivers of blood... Hell gave up its secrets a long time ago, and now everyone knows what it looks like even if they don't end up in residence."

Blade no longer possessed the capacity for speech, not least because his tongue had long since been detached at the root. If he'd been able to talk, however, he would've asked the girl to cut to the chase. That was Blade all over. Never much one for polite conversation.

"What I mean to say," Cassie St. Commons continued, with a scowl that suggested she could read the chained man's thoughts well enough, "Is that all of this - all this flayed flesh and spilled blood, all this drama - it's all conditioning. You don't need flesh here. It's a spiritual realm, and physical matter is just the outward manifestation of your soul. I mean, look at me. You see what I want you to see, projecting how I appeared when I was truly alive, the black hair and the pale skin and the sigils and whatever else. My spirit, though, it's just... darkness. Or near-darkness. You know? That indigo-blue-grey that sinks at the exact moment light fades away, before twilight begins to glow."

The girl's whole body souged, flickering like black flame. "Dusk," she said, quietly. "That's my name. That's me."

Blade settled back into his chains, blood and pain pooling beneath him as it ever did. Cassie looked abashed.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "You're probably thinking that's not very helpful, right? I mean, a soul can be tortured just as much as fake flesh. Maybe more. But I wanted to give you a message. They're coming for you, Eric. Your friends, and their companions. You know that, right? But for them to succeed, you need to be ready. Trust me on this, I've... been there. When the time comes you need to remember what I've told you, that the flesh and blood is illusory and the spirit is what's important. Okay?"

Blade twitched. Cassie sighed. Hell was hot - that sounded silly, but it really was - and airless, and it tasted and stank of such misery that every part of her screamed in indignation that she'd put herself through this. But she'd had no choice. Unlike some, she couldn't just stand by and do nothing - not when she was able to make a difference, by slipping between the fabric of dimensions by fading into the shadows of one world and re-emerging in another.

And every world had shadows. Even Hell.

"Be ready," she said again. "And have faith." Then, with a whisper of black cloth she was gone.

And once more, the man called Blade was left alone with only the sound of distant screams for company...

The war raged on the Hellish plains far below, but for one combatant the greater battle had long since ceased to have any meaning. It wasn't that she cared nothing for her companions - indeed, the seeds of friendship sown these past few days had been like a sudden flowering at the heart of barren wastes long since bleached of colour - but for Brunnhilde the Valkyrie there was now only one matter of importance: Vengeance.

It was nothing less than was due to her. Regrettable, then, and no less unjust, that her unearthly foe was seemingly enjoying what would surely be their final encounter...

"Your rage serves you ill, my sweetling," the Gargoyle rasped, wheeling in the scar-stained skies of the netherworld upon smouldering wings. "I can see the blackness in your heart, pumping sharp as cactus spine into every vein. Is it fire, burning bright? Is it ice, as cold as night? Or is it plague and pestilence, the cancer of lost innocence...?"

The Valkyrie screamed and thrust wildly with her enchanted blade, the angle of her flight guided instinctively by the winged horse upon which she rode. Aragorn the Pegasus was a flash of dazzling white in the blood shadows of Hell, a single splash of purity, and the sight of the beast enraged the Gargoyle more than even Valkyrie herself. The woman was a threat, of course, but she wasn't an embodiment of an ideal, not now she'd been tainted; the horse, on the other hand, was a symbol, a true and blessed light in this unholy realm, a guiding star marking the passage of these motley Magi. The Gargoyle knew that it must die.

The scattergun magicks of the witch Jennifer Kale were keeping the Gargoyle's demonic forces at bay but he was convinced he didn't need them. He was, after all, the General of Erebus' legion, appointed by Lucifer himself. And it was true what he'd noted, that Valkyrie's hate was blunting her effectiveness as a warrior. Grinning, the winged fiend stole forth as his enemy's blade sailed harmlessly over his head yet again, his claws outstretched...

"Finally," Valkyrie snarled. "I was beginning to wonder if your arrogance had given way to something approaching intelligence. But some things never change, do they Isaac?"

Suddenly cool as ice, the woman shifted her balance to the opposite flank, her seemingly wayward strike no more than a feint. It was then that the surprised Gargoyle realised that it was all a ruse: the anger, the madness, the apparent loss of control. The scheming little bitch. She'd been lulling him, tantalizing him with the belief that he could ever have hoped to match the prowess of one like her. He heard Aragorn snort, as if the stallion was in on the joke, and he growled deep in his throat - but then Valkyrie's powerful forearm curled about his neck and locked tight, and the edge of her blade slid along the underside of his crusted brow, a hair's breadth from his eyes.

"Would you kill me then, my love?" the Gargoyle asked. "Blind me, bleed me, chip away at my stony skin in search of some spiritual recompense? It will yield you nothing, you simpering whore. You cannot forget. You cannot unfeel. I win, don't you understand? Kill me quick, kill me slow, kill me a thousand times, it can't erase the fact that I enfolded you tightly in my wings and held you down and pleased myself inside you whilst you wept and begged. I win. I win. I win."

Valkyrie leaned in close then, her blue eyes shining. "No," she breathed in her abuser's ear. "In truth, we both lose."

She placed the flat of her hand over the Gargoyle's chest, and when he glanced down he saw that it had begun to glow.

"What is that?" he muttered, his malevolence suddenly curbed. "What are you doing?"

"Just a little something Stephen Strange agreed to conjure for me in the event that this opportunity should ever arise. I wanted you to know what it felt like, Isaac. Not just rape in itself - I could easily pin you the way you pinned me and sheathe my sword in each of your nasty little orifices in turn if I wished to - but everything I have felt. The physical pain, the violation of the soul, the revulsion, the despair, the uncontrollable loathing for a world I once adored and my place in it... I wanted you to experience it all, Isaac, the way that I did. The way that I still do. From start to finish, every tiny little detail, on continuous, magical loop."

The Gargoyle shivered. "Wait," he rasped. "Stop. I lied. Do you hear? I lied when I said that a person couldn't unfeel. Because they can. Your good Doctor, regardless of whatever he might have told you, he can help you - and so can I. Together we can concoct an enchantment that - "

"Fuck you, Isaac," Valkyrie whispered. And then she let loose the spell that Doctor Strange had entrusted to her with such heavy heart, and in that moment Isaac Christians, the Gargoyle, finally understood for the first time in his terrible, terrible life, just what it felt like to be helpless and lost, with no mercy on hand to prevent his suffering.

The pieces on the chessboard of Hell were arranged thus: as Valkyrie and the Gargoyle engaged in their private skirmish up above, and with two more members of the Order of Nine presently unaccounted for amidst the demon shoals that flooded the battlefield, so the remaining six heroes made their stand in pyramidal formation. At the apex, levitating above ground and scouring the surrounding terrain with wave after wave of arcane magicks, there was the lissom blonde sorceress Jennifer Kale, whilst below her there was the Yin to her Yang, the raven-haired and dusky-eyed Victoria Montesi, young yet formidable keeper of the ancient tome of doom The Darkhold. Maintaining a four-cornered protective ring about Vicki - the most important member of the party, as she was the one ordained to cast the enchantment that might destroy Erebus and release Blade from his torment - were Frank Drake, Elsa Bloodstone, William Talltrees and Craig Hollis, otherwise known as Mister Immortal.

So far they'd held their own against the relentless demon hordes. But how much longer could that last?

"I think I understand now."

Vicki Montesi glanced sideways at Will as the Cheyenne Indian spoke. Up until that point the warrior sometimes known as Red Wolf had been becoming increasingly desperate, slashing away with a tomahawk in one hand and his sacred staff in the other, but all to little avail. Now, however, he was smiling, an incongruous sight considering that his skin was awash with the blood of demons and that his previous anxiety was entirely justified. Their mission was close to foundering as wave after wave of unholiness crashed against them - but, suddenly, the Cheyenne was inspired.

"I know why I'm here," he insisted. "And it's certainly not because I can wield a mean hatchet."

"Then what?" Vicki asked.

Will turned towards the legions of the damned, an inexorable, churning froth of wickedness, and his eyes darkened. "It's because I can channel what's needed, right here, right now. Owayodata, the Wolf God, the protector of the abandoned."

"Your guardian can manifest here?"

"Not in itself. That's why it appoints a champion in the earthly realm, manifesting through me... but at my behest, perhaps it can instead take possession of another."

Vicki frowned momentarily, but then her eyes shot wide behind the glossy black wave of her fringe. "Oh," she said. "God, Will. Do you really think that's - "

"Wise?" Will Talltrees raised an eyebrow. "Well, if you can excuse the expression... what the hell, right?"

Vicki pursed her lips, then breathed deeply. What the hell indeed? It wasn't like things could get any worse...

Will closed his eyes and pressed the wedge of his axe blade to his forehead, then began muttering beneath his breath. Victoria looked on nervously. And then, some fifty feet ahead at the heart of what appeared to be a demonic feeding frenzy, there was a sudden shudder of flailing wings and spiked tails and blood-red, fleshless bodies - and in the next instant there came a deep and mournful howl that rippled through the Hellish earth itself like a seismic tremor.

Frank Drake brought his magically augmented shotgun Emily to bear against a cluster of attacking demons and pumped them full of silver laced with blessed, concentrated hellfire, reducing them to a bloodied mist. Then he glanced across at his companion Elsa, who was despatching fiends in a similar manner using a Colt .45 but who was also brandishing a long-bladed katana to lop off heads and outstretched claws with abandon.

"What was that?" Drake barked. His expression was concerned, and rightly so; any sound that could drown out the incessant wailing of demonspawn and curdle the blood more than it was already was bound to be bad. However, before Elsa could reply, it was Craig who lunged forward and clapped his hands above his head in delight.

"Did I say something about a nine-foot chainsaw earlier?" he said with a grin. "Maybe it's time for me to recalculate that..."

Up ahead, demons were now screaming in fear rather than bloodlust as they attempted to scramble clear of the explosion of fury that had flared among them. Then, as all turned to look, an enormous form rose clear of the masses - fifteen feet tall now, with an upper torso comprised of broad shoulders, chest and rib-cage that tapered to a narrow waist before widening again to accommodate massive haunches, and with elongated arms and legs ending in gleaming, twenty-inch claws. It was the beast's head, however, that was most terrifying: thick-necked, with a mane of the same shaggy, rust-coloured fur that swathed the rest of its body, with eyes the general size and colour of throbbing hearts and with a lengthened snout crammed with dagger-blade teeth.

Jack Russell, the Werewolf, his own not-inconsiderable savagery - and physical bulk - now fortified by the manifested energies of the ancient Wolf God, Owayodata.

Vicki looked at William again. "You know, if he's still hungry after he eats all the unholy scum in Hell, I'm definitely blaming you."

Ahead, the now-gigantic Werewolf was now tearing through the demon hordes with an almost mechanical efficiency, leaving behind a wide, blood-strewn path in his wake - and something else. The last of the Nine as yet unaccounted for was Cain Marko, the Juggernaut. As fearsome as he was, Cain had been engulfed in fiends as soon as the war had begun. Now, as the Werewolf cleared the immediate battlefield, the man's huge body lay uncovered. He wasn't moving.

Craig swore, preparing to rush forward, but Elsa reached out and blocked him with her sword. Craig whirled on her, furious.

"Don't try and stop me!" he snapped. "I know what the rest of you think of him, but he's my friend. I'm not going to let him just - "

"Craig, look. Look."

Elsa gestured with her Colt. Craig looked. And then his eyes widened and his grin returned, twice as broad as before, as he witnessed something that he of all people shouldn't have deemed impossible, but which he'd doubted all the same. The Juggernaut was rising. Bloodied, battered, resembling for all the world a boxer who'd been bludgeoned mercilessly for fifty rounds straight but who just wouldn't stay the fuck down, Cain Marko was getting to his feet and coming back for more.

A single demon that had escaped the carnage wrought by the Werewolf now skipped forward, all claw and fang, only for a massive hand to reach out and close around its head. Cain lifted the fiend and stared it in the eye.

"Nothing stops the Juggernaut, motherfucker," the big man snarled. "Now go tell your buddies."

And with that he hurled the demon skyward with all his might, all the way towards the distant, milling throng that was slowly but surely being driven back to the foot of Erebus' Keep.

"Jack's carved us an opportunity," Vicki cried, eyes as black as crow hearts as she strode forward. "Let's not waste it, people."

They surged forward then, renewed, sprinting along the path that the Werewolf and now the Juggernaut were clearing for them, cutting down the straggling Hellspawn on either flank with guns belching concentrated hellfire and with slashing blades and with luminous spellbolts and magical flare. The Order of the Nine, disparate souls in truth and scattered across the battlefield, but nonetheless united in a common cause. Heroes, storming Hell itself for the lost soul of one man few of them had ever called friend, but whose fate as a plaything for eternal tormentors was not just, and would not be accepted.

And then they were there. They arrived at the foundations of the gigantic Steppes and they stared up into the swirling mists of black and red, knowing that they could never climb that far or penetrate the Keep itself but also knowing that they didn't need to. They simply needed to be in range for Victoria Montesi to cast her spell, the one gleaned from a special page of the Darkhold, to put the final stage of their plan in motion.

Victory almost belonged to the Nine.

So why, in the name of all that was unholy, was Lucifer - a third of the malevolent royal Triumvirate of Hell, now drifting lazily through the carmine skies - staring down at the events unfolding way below and laughing...?

"All is lost," Erebus hissed, marking the approach of the Nine in despair. "Filthy, cancerous, human bastards. All is lost, and the blame falls upon you, Blade..."

The God-King of the Vampires turned away from the battlefield below and stalked back into the red shadows of his castle. Observing the inexorable annihilation of his troops from the vantage of an overlooking balcony, Erebus had all but forgotten about his prisoner. He'd certainly been too distracted to be aware of Cassie St Commons' covert visit a short while before. Now he returned to where Blade's remains were snared with chain and unholy bonds, his intentions plain. If all was lost, then one thing remained in his power before the Triumvirate deemed it necessary to mete out punishment for his failures.

The humans would not get what they'd come here for.

"I would have gloried in your agonies for all of time, mongrel," the demon lord spat. "A thousand curses on those who force me to waste such - "

Erebus faltered as he entered the torture chamber where Blade had been entertained in recent times. The man was no longer bound. He was also no longer the steaming wreck of pulp that the God-King had last laid eyes upon. He was whole again, or as close to it as made no difference... and he was free.

"What is this?" Erebus raged. "What is this?"

"Just an encouraging whisper from a friend," Blade rasped, obviously unused to his newly re-grown tongue and vocal chords. "A friend I didn't even know I had. She reminded me of

a certain truth I'd forgotten, one which you beat out of me. It's not about who has the strongest fist, Erebus. It's about who's got the strongest will."

Blade advanced slowly, his legs weak beneath him. He wasn't the proud man he'd been once - he didn't stand as tall or as straight, and his poise wasn't as cocksure with those narrowed eyes and telling smirk - but he was getting there. He was The Daywalker, the hunter, the slayer of all vampire-kind. He'd slaughtered thousands in his time, reduced these bloodsucking bacteria to ashes wherever he found them, and he'd saved the world from this one nasty son of a bitch, Erebus... but he'd never been able to finish the job. Now, now -

"You posturing fool."

Erebus swept out a clawed hand and ripped away a bloodied chunk of Blade's newly matured flesh, the blow sending the slayer crashing backwards into the wall on the far side of the room. Blade staggered and fell. But then he began to rise again.

"You can't defeat me."

Erebus slithered in and bit off one of his enemy's hands, swallowing it whole and then licking his lips with a dozen black tongues.

"You can't destroy me."

Blade struggled to his knees, only for Erebus to strike him down again, tearing away one of his legs at the knee.

"You can't do anything but die. Die. D - "

"You know, the irony of me appearing right at this moment? Absolutely priceless."

Erebus whirled at the sound of a voice at his shoulder and found himself staring into the face of a scrawny fellow with scruffy blond hair whom had appeared out of nowhere. The man was grinning. He was also holding a shotgun, with both barrels aimed between the God-King's eyes.

"This is Emily," said Craig Hollis, cheerfully. "As in The Exorcism Of Emily Rose, right? It's a movie buff thing. By the way, my friends send their regards."

And then Craig pulled the trigger and blew Erebus the God-King's head to smithereens with a burst of blessed hellfire, filling the torture chamber with a mist of screaming demon blood.

Blade staggered, eyes wide. "What...? Who...?"

Craig tipped an imaginary hat. "The Amazing Mister Immortal, at your service," he declared. "I'm your handy-dandy replacement. Your soul man, if you like. Because a mutual acquaintance of ours, the quite delectable Miss Victoria Montesi, she's a lady with a plan. Now, I reckon we've got the luxury of, oooh, all of about thirty seconds before the Lord of the Fangs here pulls himself together and remembers what he was doing before I arrived, so... can you give this back to Frank for me? Tell him he was right. It did come in useful."

Craig threw the shotgun to Blade, who caught it in the crook of his good arm. His lost hand and leg were already growing back and the torn flesh of his chest was knitting back together, not healing in a physical sense but reconstituted by the power of the mind. Cassie had been correct. Unfortunately, what was true for Blade was also true for Erebus. Even as they spoke, the God-King was recovering.

"Wait," Blade muttered. "Damn it. I don't understand. What did Vicki - "

But it was too late. In the next instant, Blade vanished, fading away to breath and shadow just as unobtrusively as Craig had arrived. The blond man looked on sadly.

"See ya," he said, quietly. "Wouldn't want to be ya. Or, then again, maybe I would." And then he turned, sighing, already knowing that he would see Erebus behind him, freshly risen and understandably pissed as all hell.

"An enchantment from the pages of The Darkhold," the vampire lord hissed. "The bartering of one soul for another, even without the consent of whomever that original soul was forfeit to."

"Pretty much."

Erebus' eyes burned like distant stars, trembling with the barest hint of the fury that now consumed him. "And so Blade is taken from me, and you, little one, are left in exchange. Do your companions value you so poorly that they'd willingly sacrifice you thus?"

Craig shrugged. "Well, I am quite annoying. And I have really bad gas. Honestly. Never let me eat cheese before lights out, it's just frightful. In fact - "

Erebus reached out and closed one clawed fist about the prattling human's head. "I shall feast on your soul for what you've done here," the demon whispered. And then his talons hooked, not just through Craig's flesh and skull but through his very spirit, and began to pull.

And Mister Immortal screamed...

Just as the Werewolf's howl had quietened the forces of darkness earlier so Craig Hollis' scream now elicited a similar hush across the battlefield. The fields of pain fell silent and still, and in that moment the remaining companions stared up at Erebus' Keep, eyes frightened and faces pale. It was Cain Marko, turning slowly upon Vicki, who spoke first.

"What's this?" he growled. "What did you do? That spell of yours - "

"It's not working."

"What?"

"The exchange worked, soul for a soul, but Erebus was supposed to be destroyed into the bargain. It didn't... it hasn't... fuck. Fuck. I don't understand."

"There's something here," Jennifer Kale murmured, her pale eyes raised to the skies. "Something more powerful than even a Darkhold enchantment."

"But what about the kid?" Juggernaut insisted. Vicki paled.

"We discussed this," she replied, quietly. "This was the strategy. For the first enchantment to be successful we needed a... sacrifice. Craig for Blade. He wanted to go, remember? And Blade - "

At that moment, on cue, the sultry air shimmered and a figure materialized among them. When his was fully corporeal, Blade staggered forward - into the arms of Frank and Elsa.

"Eric?" Frank breathed. "Jesus..."

High above, Craig's scream intensified. Vicki trembled, her eyes panicked behind her fringe. Cain's expression darkened still further.

"Just so you know, sweet cheeks," he said, menacingly, "I reckon your plans suck root."

"We have to go," Jennifer snapped. "Now. We'll have all Hell on our backs before we know it, and the residual portal back to our world won't last forever."

"We're not leaving without him."

Jennifer and Vicki exchanged glances. Cain towered above the pair of witches, his ruby red bands glimmering in agitation. "You hear?" he barked. "I said, we're not - "

"Wait. Look!"

Elsa was pointing up at the sky. Everyone looked - and gasped.

Victoria Montesi said, "What in God's name...?" but even as she spoke she realised that this was a misnomer. This wasn't God's abode.

It belonged to someone else.

In all the times he'd died - or, at least, his equivalent of death - Craig had never experienced his soul quite literally stretching before. It wasn't pleasant, and it was the kind of sensation that put the pain of broken limbs and ruptured organs - and even blowing out his own brains with a shotgun - into perspective. It was an agony unlike anything he'd ever suffered.

But it wasn't the end of him. Both he and the beast assaulting him, Erebus, reached that conclusion at roughly the same time.

"What is this?" the demon lord blustered, finally releasing his grip on his victim's essence and skittering backwards. Craig sagged, his screams dying in his throat. He forced his eyes open.

"You don't like... being proved wrong... do you?" he rasped.

Erebus lunged forward once more, prepared to try to harvest this man's spirit once more simply because he was all out of alternatives. However, he never got the chance to follow through.

"Intriguing, isn't it?" a honeyed voice murmured, at the same time as a slender, gloved hand reached out and snared the vampire lord about the throat as surely as leashing a pet hound. Erebus fell away, choking. The newcomer to the scene, the God-King's new master, paid no attention to his underling. He merely waved a casual finger and the fiend screamed...

...and then dissolved away into crawling darkness.

Craig looked on, nervous for once. "What did you...?"

"Merely allowing your companions' spell to finally take hold. A momentary pause for dramatic effect. Just a little foible of mine. None of your concern, my boy." The new fiend smiled, his handsome face inclined. "Well," he said, "I'd be lying if I said you were what I'd expected."

Craig was about to speak again, but Lucifer again waved his hand and instantly their immediate environment began to shift and fade. Craig held his breath - but in the next instant he was floating free of Erebus' Keep in the skies about the battlefield, one of three Lords of Hell drifting above him. Again, it was like a dog held fast by an invisible tether. Craig struggled but he couldn't free himself. Down below he could see his companions, now with Blade among their number. He grimaced.

This wasn't in Vicki's plan. Although, to be honest, he was also beginning to think that Vicki's plans left much to be desired...

"Hear me, mortals!" Lucifer intoned, grandly. He turned and winked at Craig. "You like that? I always aim to be impressive."

Craig groaned. So, his personal devil was one who considered himself amusing. The demonic equivalent of Craig, in fact. "I promise," he muttered, "If I get out of this alive I will never ever make with the funny again..."

"I want to thank you," Lucifer told those who had invaded his realm and who now gathered, helpless, before him. "Whilst there are some infernal beings who value their petty enmities, I've always believed myself a class above. To me, this man Blade is... nothing. Just another pathetic little soul to twist and scrub and bleed as is our want. But in your precious attempts to redeem him you've delivered into my hands something far more delightful. A true Immortal."

"That's Mister Immortal, bud," Craig declared, forgetting his earlier pledge. Lucifer ignored him anyway.

"As our mutual acquaintance Erebus has just discovered," the demon continued, "True Immortals are thus not because their fleshly shells can regenerate over time but because their souls cannot be extinguished. This young man exists here, in this realm, as a being of

pure flesh, blood and spirit, a whole, and nothing we can do to him can change that. A rare thing indeed, and so rich with potential. Would it perhaps astonish you to learn that this ragged specimen is a far greater source of power than any previously entertained on these shores? The nomadic Norrin Radd, the meddlesome Thor, even your beloved Doctor Strange... they are like nothing compared to this inexhaustible spirit."

Lucifer turned and beamed at Craig, who wrinkled his nose.

"Man, you're not going to kiss me, are you?" he asked. "Because it doesn't matter how thick you lay on the sweet talk, we are not making out."

Lucifer's grin widened, and now Craig could see his teeth. One hundred thousand tiny little red needles, eager to puncture his flesh, immortal or not. And, suddenly, none of it was amusing any more.

"I'm giving you an opportunity to say farewell to your companions before I digest you whole and take your power for my own," the arch-demon hissed. "Never let it be said I lacked the capacity for sentiment. You should be - "

Suddenly, Lucifer faltered. As if alerted to something close by, he began to turn his head - and then saw a dark shape appearing just below him, materializing from the shadows of his own robe. It was a girl, human of visage but something... other in essence. Dark hair, dark eyes, porcelain skin decorated with arcane sigils.

"And what are you, my pretty?" the demon breathed.

Cassie St Commons, otherwise known as Dusk, simply smiled.

"Just a distraction," she said.

Lucifer scowled. "A distraction? From wh - "

Shuk.

A gleaming blade entered through the back of Lucifer's skull and exited between his eyes, splitting his forehead wide open and expelling the clotted red lump of his demonic brain out through the wound. Craig squealed. Then he looked, and behind Lucifer's twitching body he saw an old friend, a blonde warrior woman riding astride a winged horse, her expression austere and her sword-arm outstretched.

"These blackguards are all the same," said Brunnhilde the Valkyrie, with a scowl of disdain. "They talk too much."

Craig let out a whoop of joy. "Oh, my Goddess!" he cried. "This is such a Han Solo moment!"

Valkyrie arched an eyebrow. "A what?"

"You know. 'You're all clear, kid; now let's blow this thing and go home?' Like, in A New Hope, when - "

"Craig? Hush now."

Valkyrie swept Mister Immortal up in her free arm and deposited him on Aragorn's back, then pulled Dragonfang free of Lucifer's skull. Almost immediately the demon lord began to reconstitute himself, his momentary paralysis a result more of shock than any true injury. After all, in this realm - as Cassie had told Blade earlier - physical form was merely illusory. Now Lucifer was shrugging off all fripperies of appearance and was re-manifesting in more traditional form...

"Go!" Vicki barked at her companions, below the events that had just transpired. "Back to the portal!"

And so they ran, travelling the bloodied path they'd already torn through the plains of Hell, expecting the demon hordes to be hot at their heels... but, astoundingly, that never happened. Instead, the remaining demonspawn gathered in Lucifer's shadow, eyes bright, mouths agape - and they began to laugh.

"Everyone through," Jennifer barked as they reached the region of the portal through which they'd previously entered the nether-realm. However, clustered at the gate, no one made a further move.

"Something's wrong," Will said. "Why aren't they following?"

"Go. Through. The. Gate."

"But - "

"As she says," Frank snapped, beginning to herd everyone with his gun. "If there's more to be done we'll worry about it later."

Will and Elsa stepped through the haze of the portal, a semi-coherent Blade between them. Jack the Werewolf, now shrunk back down to his regular nine-foot height, followed on, and then Vicki. Next came Cain, but still he refused, waiting for Valkyrie to land with Craig. Frank sighed and shouldered Emily, then passed through the portal at Jennifer's request.

Aragorn the Pegasus came to ground, snorting and flicking his glorious mane. Valkyrie led him through the portal as Craig jumped down and beamed at Cain.

"See?" he cried. "I knew that plan was going to turn out okay. That Vicki, I said. Her plans are never less than - "

But then with an astonished splutter Mister Immortal was flying backwards through the air, back along the path towards the demon throng, and when Cain and Jennifer looked up in shock they saw the crooked, winged behemoth that was Lucifer of the Triumvirate of Hell crowing in triumph. Like a hound on a leash. And Lucifer wasn't prepared to let his pet go.

"That's why they weren't following," Jennifer said, softly. "That utter bastard..."

"There are rules to magic," Lucifer's voice boomed. "A soul for a soul. You have Blade. I will not relinquish what is due to me..."

Cain's brow furrowed and his eyes darkened. He stepped forward.

"You can't," Jennifer whispered. "He's right. I understand now. This is the way things have to be, why my divinations led me to Craig. You - "

"See now, there's the thing. I've never had much time for rules. And I guess that's why your fancy divinations also led you to me."

Jennifer was about to protest more, but it was too late. Cain Marko was already on the move. He strode forward with huge, echoing boot-steps, gathering momentum, his ruby bands shining brighter than ever. Like a freight train, rumbling on into the darkness, the Hellish earth shuddering beneath him in supplication...

"Turn back, little man," Lucifer hissed. "This is not your time."

Cain said nothing. He just kept going.

"Turn away."

Just kept going.

"You - "

Just. Kept. Going.

Lucifer screamed in rage and flung out a clawed hand, unleashing a devastating burst of hellfire just as Cain reached the spot where Craig Hollis now lay, struggling helplessly upon scorched rock. Cain was consumed, and finally, in that instant, his momentum faltered.

He vanished from view. Craig looked on, weeping. Lucifer laughed.

But then, when the smoke and flame and ash cleared...

...Cain Marko, still standing, reached out one massive hand and gathered Craig to his chest, protecting him with his strength.

"Nothing stops the Juggernaut," said Cain, through gritted teeth. "Not Charles Xavier. Not Magneto. Not The Hulk. And not you, you preening, self-satisfied goat-fucker. You call me little man? Cyttorak of The Octessence says to say Hello - and that you new religion infernals always were a pack of pussies..."

Turning back in the direction of the portal, the Juggernaut was immediately engulfed in a swarm of fiends and hellflame. But it didn't matter. Enfolding Craig's body inside the same ruby bands that afforded him mystic protection even against the devastating rage of Hell, Cain Marko refused to be impeded.

Nothing stopped the Juggernaut.

At the cusp of the portal Jennifer Kale looked on, awestruck and perhaps even a little fearful. There was magic and there was magic. The sorcerous entity that was Cyttorak was

one of the most ancient powers abroad in any dimension, but its often prevailing lust for mindless destruction - and its present Avatar, who embodied such chaos - meant that, as a force, it was sometimes underestimated. That was a mistake, one made by Lucifer as much as any of them.

The Juggernaut finally reached his destination, smouldering with sulphur as he shed the last of the minor demons clinging to his bulk and absently crushing the fiend's skull underfoot. He looked down at Jennifer, his eyes dark, possessed by something... distant.

"Take us back," said the voice of Cyttorak, by way of Cain Marko.

Jennifer Kale nodded mutely and did as bidden.

And, far overhead, the mysterious Cassie St Commons smiled as she folded herself back into the shadows of Hell and prepared for her own return to the real world.

All things considered, she thought that had worked out rather well...

Victoria Montesi blinked in the sudden sunlight, shielding her eyes with her arm. Beside her, Jennifer Kale was equally disoriented. They both looked around, then exchanged glances.

"What happened?" Vicki asked. "Where are we? This isn't Citrusville..."

"No."

Jennifer breathed deeply. She then walked to the edge of the rooftop where the two of them had materialized after passing through the portal, and pointed to the street below. "We're in New York," she said, quietly. "Greenwich Village, to be exact."

Vicki grimaced. "The Sanctum? Oh, terrific. Why - "

"I'm afraid that would be my fault."

Both women turned to see a familiar figure standing behind them, his colourful cloak flickering in the wind and his expression sombre.

"Stephen," Vicki said, coolly. "You hijacked the dimensional gate?"

"I had no choice," Doctor Strange replied. His voice was soft rather than angry, the manner of tone a doctor of medicine rather than magic might employ when conveying bad news, and that alarmed the two witches. They'd been expecting to be chastised like errant children. Instead...

"Something went wrong, didn't it?" Jennifer asked. Strange breathed deeply.

"I needed to re-direct your portal for good reason. There was an... anomaly. Here, or in Hell, I'm not entirely sure. Not without further study. But..."

"But?"

Strange lowered his gaze. "It was a temporal shift. You were gone a long time. Longer than you think."

Vicki's heart froze. "How long?"

"Almost three years."

The two women staggered, leaning against each other for support. No. No.

"The Darkhold," Vicki croaked. "Protecting the world from Chthon. It was my - "

"Your responsibility, yes." Strange looked up again, his eyes sharp now. "Which is why I advised you against planning to travel to Hell in the first place - and why your ancestral duties were then revoked in your absence, when Chthon recently attempted to return to the world of light, in San Francisco. I was forced to guide the efforts of... others to stop him."

Vicki turned aside, her eyes dark with tears. "Oh God. I failed. I didn't think, I - "

"Our companions," Jennifer said, interrupting. "Frank, Jack, Will... all of them. Where are they?"

Doctor Strange looked away, eyes narrowed against the sunlight.

"My magic directed them to wherever they needed to go," he said. "To make their peace."

Brunnhilde stood upon the extreme edge of the Alstad cliffs, staring out into the cold, grey wastes of the Vestfjorden. Out here, in the damp chill of the Norwegian island mists, it was almost impossible to recall the furnaces of Hell. Almost. Of course, there were some things that she would never be able to erase from her memory.

You cannot forget. You cannot unfeel. I win, don't you understand?

The Valkyrie bowed her head, her enchanted blade heavy in her grip. She swayed in the wind, her blonde hair stinging her eyes. Far below, waves splintered fiercely upon the rocks, again and again and again. A fall from this height into freezing waters and jagged reef would be fatal, even for one such as her. She fancied that she could hear the siren's call... or perhaps it was the echo of drunken merriment resounding in the distant halls of Valhalla. Either way. She could reach for the song, or she could pull back. Her decision.

I win. I win. I win.

"No," Brunnhilde said, softly. "In truth, we both lose."

And then she made her choice.

William Talltrees sat motionless in a wooden chair on the porch of the old ranch house, his haunted eyes scanning the darkness of the trees on the horizon. There was a canyon ridge out there, and the Rocky Mountains beyond. That made this... what? Montana? Colorado? He wasn't aware of whom this residence belonged to, or why he'd materialized here after passing through the portal. He just understood that he'd been absent from the earthly realm for three years, and that this place was far from home.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, eyes glistening in the breeze. "I'm sorry I left you behind. I didn't know... I..."

He exhaled a ragged breath, then took a long drink from the bottle of beer clenched in his fist.

I'm sorry.

"Will?"

It was Jack's voice. His brother wolf. They'd found themselves here, together, the previous morning. Since then they'd barely spoken, knowing only that they'd eventually need to work their way east, most likely to Doctor Strange's Sanctum in New York, but neither willing to set any plan in stone. It was as if they were waiting for something, although they weren't sure what.

"Will," Jack called again. "Come see. Out back here."

Will sighed, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, then stood and slowly descended the porch steps. Shoulders slumped, he went to see why Jack had the temerity to sound so excited, considering that everything had turned to crud. That was when he saw the animal – the wolf – standing in the shadows of the trees some hundred feet away, eyeing the two humans cautiously but also with an altogether different emotion.

Hope.

William Talltrees uttered a strange sound, halfway between a howl and a whimper. Jack Russell turned and grinned.

"Well, don't just stand there," he said, gently. "Poor bastard's been waiting three years for you to come back. Least you can do is give him a hug."

Will's heart contracted. And then, sobbing as he rushed forward, he did just that.

"You know the worst part?" Craig asked, through a haze of cigar smoke and whisky. Cain grimaced.

"No. But I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"Yes, I am. It was the way he looked before he changed. Before he became just another wings-and-fangs Hollywood special effects extravaganza. See, now, Lucifer – or Satan, or whatever, I think they're all just facets in the end – he's been romanticized. Movies, books,

comics. An offshoot of all the bullshit vampire-goth-whatthefuckery you get these days. The image some people have of the Devil, especially teenage girls, is that he's this smooth, dangerous bastard, and I think he loves that idea. So that's exactly the modern image he's adopted. But I saw beyond that. You know what I saw?"

Cain puffed on his cigar. "Tell me."

"I'm going to tell you. I saw... the fuckers. The fuckers. All of life's assholes. Child molesters, rapists, lawyers who let the child molesters and rapists to walk free, corrupt politicians, the kind of self-serving shit-eaters who make money out of genocides in war-torn countries..."

"You saw all of this?"

"In his face. Yes, I did. Because the Devil is not fucking romantic. I don't care what religion you believe in, it doesn't matter. He exists and he's... wrong."

Craig poured himself another four fingers of whisky. Cain Marko glanced across at him, his expression inscrutable.

"You're even more touched in the head than before we went to Hell."

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"Because of what he told you? About your power, your potential..."

"Maybe."

Cain took the whisky. Craig stared at him, then shook his head, smiling.

"You're a hero, you know."

"No."

"Yep. The others were going to leave me behind – which I don't blame them for at all, it was all part of the deal and I offered myself up in the first place, so clear consciences all round – but that's the way of it. Not you, though. You came back for me."

"It wasn't being a hero."

"But - "

"It wasn't. And it wasn't friendship either, or any other feelgood crap you want to lay down."

"Then what?"

Cain drained his glass, then poured another.

"Way back when," he said, eventually, "So far back I can barely remember, I came to understand something about life. In most situations, you can do one of two things. You can stand still and let life bury you or drown you or kick the shit out of you, whatever it's got a

head for. Or you can move. But there's your choice. Once you start moving – once you know what you want or where you're headed – you don't stop. No matter what."

"Nothing stops the Juggernaut."

"Right."

Craig raised an eyebrow. "But when we came looking for you, when we found you in that bar - "

"I had stopped. And it was killing me. And maybe I wanted it to. Then."

They drank awhile. And then Craig said, "You could have moved in the other direction though, couldn't you? You could've walked through the portal and kept on walking. You didn't need me."

"That would've been running away," the Juggernaut replied. "I've never done that in my life. I wasn't going to start just because I had Hell on my tail."

Craig grinned and raised a glass. "You know what? Cain Marko, you are a total badass."

"Damn straight."

"You want to go pick up some cheap women and get laid?"

"Damn straight."

"Well, alright then."

They chinked glasses.

Three days after returning to the earthly realm, Elsa Bloodstone was lying in bed eating pizza and channel surfing when there was a knock at her apartment door. Elsa was naked save for the jewelled choker about her neck. She pulled on a half-length silk robe before she answered the knock but the gown left little to the imagination. The FedEx guy making his delivery was appreciative, but Elsa didn't really notice. She wasn't that type of girl.

The parcel was long and heavy. Elsa took it to the bed and unwrapped it. Inside was Frank Drake's shotgun Emily. Elsa hadn't heard from Frank since passing through the portal, even though she'd made a dozen attempts to contact him. She couldn't imagine what the poor man was going through, what with the whole missing three years thing and his family and whatever else, but when she read the note attached to the gun she knew that she wouldn't be ringing his number again any time soon.

The note said, Goodbye. I'm sorry, but this isn't my fight any more. Please don't come looking.

Fair enough. Elsa placed Emily in her closet alongside her Colt, then returned to her pizza and television. She cried a little. She'd come to love him in her own way, of course. Surrogate father, older brother. Much older. Something like that. Maybe something else. She didn't want to think about it, though. Not now.

She recommenced flicking channels, and she only stopped when she caught a news retrospective on San Francisco and the troubles the city had experienced in the recent past – a past she'd missed, what with screwy timelines and all. There was mention of much in the way of ritualistic murders and dark dealings. And vampires.

Elsa raised a delicate eyebrow, chewing thoughtfully on a slice of pepperoni and jalapeño.

San Francisco, huh?

Well, hell. It wasn't like she had anything better to do...

Frank Drake looked up at the sky. It was a fine day, crystal bright, nary a cloud to be seen. That didn't feel right. It should've been raining. Standing in the cemetery at your dead wife and daughter's graveside, the least it could do was rain.

"It's done," Blade said. "The package you wanted mailed to Elsa? Your gun, right?"

Frank didn't look around as the other man spoke at his shoulder. "I'd have used it if I could," he murmured. "But I heard somewhere that suicides go to Hell. And, all irony aside, that's not where Marlene and Rachel are waiting for me."

He reached out and ran his fingers over the curve of one tombstone and then the other. The stone was rough with lichen. They'd been in the ground two and a half years by now, although in his timeline he'd seen them both a little under two weeks before. It's been a car crash. Hit and run. The other driver never caught. Frank didn't know if he would've been able to change anything had he never got involved with the Nine, had the temporal shift not fucked him sideways, but that was always the hook, wasn't it? The devil was in the details.

"Change your mind, Frank," Blade said. "Please."

"You owe me this."

"What I owe you can never be repaid."

"Then do it. Because if you don't, I'll just get someone else. And they might not do it right."

Blade said nothing more. Frank thought he could hear the other man crying, but he blocked it out.

"I just want to be with my family," he said, softly. "Like I should have been in life."

"I know," Blade said.

He raised his sword. Measured his swing. He wished to God that there was another way to end this, but if God existed then he sure as hell hadn't been paying attention just recently.

Blade whispered, "Goodbye, Frank."

And then he carried out his friend's last request.

Far away, in a place with no knowledge of what had occurred since leaving Hell, Cassie St Commons sat upon a lonely rooftop and watched the sun begin to set over the city, heralding the arrival of her favourite time of evening. She was smiling, which was quite unusual. However, she had a lot to feel happy about.

She'd helped save the day. Hell had been stormed and Lucifer vanquished, and all the mystic portents had been proven mistaken. No sacrifice had been required. No soul for a soul.

Sometimes, the heroes won.

It was enough to make a girl rediscover her faith.

THE END

EDITOR'S NOTE

Whoa, wait, two versions of Midnight Sons #4 by two different authors? What's going on? Which story is canon and which one isn't?

Heh, let's see if I can keep the answer to those questions simple. The long and short of it is this: Bowie Sessions kind of disappeared for a long time and it wasn't expected that we'd ever see the final issue of this mini written by him. Meriades Rai graciously stepped in to wrap everything up as his first ever in-continuity contribution to Marvel 2000. He submitted the issue and it was ready to go up... and then Bowie suddenly turned in his final issue.

There was some discussion as to how to resolve the situation, but ultimately Meriades decided that he would be okay with his version being posted after Bowie's as a sort of an "alternate ending." No one wanted to see either issue go to waste, so this seemed like a fine compromise. Bowie's ending is canon, Meri's is the alternate, but both are good tales nonetheless and we all hoped you enjoyed reading both! In closing, Meri originally had this to say about Bowie and concluding his run on Midnight Sons...

I remember when Bowie Sessions burst onto the fanfic scene some three years ago, garnering deserved acclaim for his first two issues of Midnight Sons. It's a damn shame that real life restricted his contribution thereafter, and that after a delayed third issue this series became stuck in limbo (or Hell, as it were).

Signing on to conclude the story without knowing much more than a sketch of a plot was daunting, but I've given it my best shot. It helped that the set-up was so sharp and the characters so readily defined. Bowie, if you ever read this, I'm sure everyone - myself included - would have preferred you to finish this labour of love yourself, but hopefully I've managed to do your vision proud.

What a sport, eh? Thanks for reading, everyone, and be sure to send Meriades any feedback that you had on this issue as I know he put a lot of hard work into it and was very proud of the product! Whether it's by e-mail or even on the board, I know he'd appreciate even just a, "hey, good job, bud!" or "some questions for you, good sir..."

-Cory Wiegel

June 30, 2009