

STRANGER THAN FICTION

— A LITRPG ADVENTURE —



1 GODSFALL

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STRANGER THAN FICTION
— BOOK 1 —

T. B. MARE



*To all the readers who have supported us throughout the creation of this series,
and especially to Solo Starfish, a longtime reader and close friend,
who has beta-read and contributed to the meticulous editing of the entire work.*

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To travel to the Great Below was to traverse a path of no return.

It was a known tale, one that every mother told her child. A tale of caution shared amongst one's brethren, a wise old saying that prevented men of spirit from undertaking journeys that would consume their very souls.

Such tales meant nothing to her. Caution, after all, was merely an excuse. One used by vermin when faced with that which transcended them.

*For this was the domain of the Underworld. The Blackness of the Grave.
Her sister's dominion.*

Turns out ... those mothers?

They had it right.

CONTENTS

Prologue

Part I: The Crypt of Fiendish Worms

Chapter 1: Waking Up to an Apocalypse

Chapter 2: Wiggle Wiggle

Chapter 3: The First Challenge

Chapter 4: Bargain

Chapter 5: Here Be Gods

Chapter 6: Rules of the Game

Chapter 7: Anomalous Origins

Part II: Saints and Sinners

Chapter 8: A Banquet of Sinners

Chapter 9: Stirring Shadows

Chapter 10: Behind the Masks

Chapter 11: Hitting Hard

Chapter 12: Massacre

Interlude I: The Beaten Path

Part III: Fork in the Road

Chapter 13: Sucker Punch

Chapter 14: Free Lunch

Chapter 15: Mystery

Chapter 16: Alone with Everybody

Chapter 17: Assimilation

Part IV: Among the Other

Chapter 18: Imprisoned

Chapter 19: Fight to Live

Chapter 20: Soul Siphon

Chapter 21: Quid Pro Quo

Chapter 22: Revelations

Chapter 23: Skin in the Game

Chapter 24: Training

Chapter 25: To Be a Monster

Chapter 26: Rule Breaker

Chapter 27: Toe to Toe

Chapter 28: A Stitch in Memory

Interlude II: The Legend of the Fox

Part V: Heart of Ice

Chapter 29: Trouble

Chapter 30: Wheels within Wheels

Chapter 31: Blood in the Water

Chapter 32: Winter in My Blood

Interlude III: Twisted Soul

Part VI: Battleground

Chapter 33: Nature of the Beast

Chapter 34: No Quarter

Chapter 35: Prestige

Chapter 36: Juggernaut

Chapter 37: Judgement

Chapter 38: Boy Meets Girl

Chapter 39: Converging Paths

Part VII: Live and Let Die

Chapter 40: 25th Hour

Chapter 41: Something Wicked This Way Comes

Chapter 42: Hurricane

Chapter 43: Retaliation

Chapter 44: Predator – Prey

Chapter 45: Escape

Chapter 46: Reunion

Chapter 47: Expansion

Chapter 48: Shadow of a Doubt

Chapter 49: Counters

Chapter 50: Aggressive Negotiations

Chapter 51: The Big Uneasy

Chapter 52: Into the Maw

Chapter 53: Broken Mirror

Chapter 54: Opening Salvo

Chapter 55: War Cries

Chapter 56: Anomaly vs. Anomaly

Chapter 57: Goddess Proposes! Anomaly Disposes!

Epilogue

About the Authors

PROLOGUE

Inanna was bound in chains.

Three sets of shadow-forged metal entwined her waist, the cold, poisonous links tearing into her flesh. They pried at her back and kept her upright while the collar around her neck constantly pulled her head down. Four more chains wrung around her wrist and ankles, holding her spread-eagled, leaving her breasts to dangle freely as she hung in midair.

All the while, countless spectators—denizens of the Great Below, fallen gods, creatures of the night and the grave, and even wraiths whose names had been lost to time—gathered around to watch her heinous degradation. Jackals howling at the sight of a wounded lioness.

“I do hope you are enjoying the royal treatment, dear sister.”

Inanna raised her head, ignoring the accursed metal that dug into her neck. Her shadowed eyes took in the audience, feasting upon their hesitant features as her gaze passed over them. *Vermin*. Even in this state, she made them cower in fear of her.

It made her smile.

She glanced up at the towering spine of basalt that rose like a cruel peak, with a magnificent throne of bones at the top. Seated upon it was a tall, willowy woman wearing robes of pitch black belted with joined fragments of bone. A tall crown of more bones rested upon her head, framed by white hair that spilled over her shoulders. Distant and cold, she looked as lovely and merciless as moonlit snow.

Ereshkigal. Empress of the Dead. Queen of the Great Below.

Her eyes were illusion. Her touch, death.

And yet, Inanna thought, merely an imitation. A soft chuckle escaped her throat.

“Laughing, are you?” the empress’s voice boomed from her throne, throaty and suggestive. “Even in such a state, you think yourself my better?”

“I *am* your better, Ereshkigal,” Inanna softly chided, as if talking to a slow child. “But then, you have always known that. Have you not, little sister?”

The Empress of the Dead stood up from her throne, her robes billowing in the harsh winds of the Underworld. At once, every single entity in the chamber knelt, their heads bowed in quiet reverence. Inanna felt her legs being pulled on either side. Yet, not a single sound escaped her throat. Her sister’s righteous fury was met with casual indifference.

The message was sent. Silent, but loud and clear.

Ereshkigal heard it all too well.

You will not break me.

“Enough,” the empress rumbled. The monsters of the night near her drew back, leaving nothing between the dangling Inanna and the Stone Table beneath her. A single golden chain erupted out of the polished surface, its tip spearing into her navel. Precious, crimson lifeblood oozed down the chain into the table below, and the sigils on its surface glowed with maleficent power.

Inanna glanced down at the construction—no, *conduit*. One that dragged everything from the victim and gave it to ... something else. But what? She could not say. If she’d had her pendant with her, she could have read its Truths, seen its concept of creation.

The golden chain pulled, and Inanna fell spread-eagled upon the table, her jaw dislocated from the fall.

She looked like a wasted slave.

Debased.

Demeaned.

Gleeful laughter rang in her ears. The squealers and climbers howled like mad dogs at her disgrace. The specters soon showed their conceited joy, joined by hordes of fallen gods, bestial abominations that lived on as symbionts, and other existences she had slain with her bare hands.

They will pay for it, Inanna promised. Over and over.

“How the mighty have fallen!” Ereshkigal declared. “Supreme Queen of An and Ki. Daughter of the stars themselves! Destroyer of civilizations and plunderer of pantheons! How does it feel to be reviled by so many?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe, sweet sister,” Inanna replied, licking her lips. Her thin smile could pierce through solid stone. “I could have you fucked on all fours for weeks on end and you would not feel what I feel.” Her eyes shone with mirth. “Orgasmic, I tell you.”

That sparked a reaction. Not from her sister, but from the surrounding vermin. Another rabisu, one of the rabid spirits that followed her sister, leaped up on the pedestal and drove a spear through her shoulder.

“Do not insult our queen!” it snarled, its tentacular maw quivering.

“Step away,” Ereshkigal ordered, walking down the hill of basalt. With a flick of her fingers, the spear disintegrated, though the injury remained fresh.

Still the same. She could never stand anyone else being so close to me.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden pull on her neck. She was thrown atop the Stone Table, a painful mix of blood and drool dripping from the corners of her lips as she rested upon her injured knees and palms.

Like a dog.

“You were saying?” her younger sister offered, her head slightly tilted. She always did have the best expressions. Even now, as Ereshkigal stood tall, Inanna noticed the slight whitening of her sister’s knuckles. It reminded her of back then, at—

Inanna drew in a rusty, painful breath. The constant drain of her life blood was affecting her. Her mind ran in odd directions. Splotches of darkness began to invade her sight.

“I was saying that it is the prerogative of vermin, Ereshkigal,” she continued, uncaring of the slow tightening of the chains binding her. “To stand in a herd, untrusting of one’s own might, acting in unison against an opponent like a pack of angry dogs. Barking is something you are intimately familiar with, after all.”

The chains constricted further.

Her smile only widened.

“Do not fool yourself. You did not force me down here. You are nothing but a filthy thief of power, a snake priding herself on collecting the scraps I

discarded on my path to power. A back-biting coward who assembles has-beens and hustlers, standing on my shoulders and calling herself tall.”

“And yet, chains can be forged,” Ereshkigal softly, but firmly, replied. “And clearly, predators can be bound. Call me a backstabber. Call me a traitor. But today, I will see to it that justice prevails.”

Inanna began to laugh. She laughed and laughed and *laughed* at the sheer hilarity, at the hypocrisy of it all. “Justice?” she spat. “Is that what they call it these days? Very well, begin this farce! Make me stand in judgment of my many grievous sins.”

The collar around her neck was yanked to the right by an unseen force, compelling her to look upon the hordes of rabisu. Their fangs were bared, bodily fluids dripping from their maws as they gazed upon her with hunger.

“Do you remember them? Priests of the fallen god Marduk. You tore him apart, obliterated his kingdom, usurped his Truths. You violated all that these people held dear, even their right to exist.”

“And what of it?” Inanna demanded. “When titans clash, the grass will suffer.”

Ereshkigal stiffened. “As my parents did?”

Inanna’s expression twisted into a sneer.

“Why did you do it?” A slight tremor entered the empress’s voice. “Why did you spare me? Train me to fight? What—what was I to you? Nothing more than a *puppet* to entertain yourself?”

“Precisely.” Inanna grinned. “I took you in. I made you everything you are today, Empress of the Dead. Perhaps I should have left you there, lying in that ditch.”

“But why?” Ereshkigal repeated. “Why even bother? Why not just kill us? Why make us the way we are? We stood by you through every trial imaginable. We faced gods for you. Yet you treat us like slaves. You took away everything I valued! My parents. My husband. *Everything*. You made me suffer alone.” She staggered forward. “Why?!”

“Why do you pick flowers?” Inanna asked mockingly. “Everything I did, it was simply because I could. You may have me in chains, but do not pretend, *girl*. Killing me is a feat beyond your ability.”

Ereshkigal recoiled.

“There exists no curse that can taint me, nothing sacred I cannot violate. You seek my remorse, yet I have none to share. Try me, Ereshkigal. I am

willing,” Inanna said. “You may steal my power. Bind me away in the depths of the Underworld. Tear me down for the rabble to feed on.” Her voice lowered to an icy whisper. “But you will never get what you truly want. You will never. Become. Me.”

“I have already become you!” her sister roared. “Do not forget which of us sits on a throne, while the other lies defeated, shackled by chains.”

“Come, now. Even you cannot be so deluded as to believe your chains will hold me forever.” Inanna’s shackles clinked, as if acknowledging her words. “And without your trickery or your bindings, do you truly think you can face me?” Inanna swiveled her head to stare at her audience. “I *will* tear my way out of this prison and destroy everything you hold dear. Your power, your Truths, your sacred relics—I will take everything. And upon the hill of your corpses, I will build a new world. Those by my side will become the new gods.”

She looked toward Neti, the gatekeeper of the Underworld, who flinched away.

“And if you are foolish enough to not fear my vengeance, ask yourself this.” She pulled at her chains. “Who does? Who is the weakest? The most afraid? Who will break first? Is there still time for it to be you?”

Uncertain, hesitant eyes glanced around the room. Quite a few stepped back. Some even fell to their knees.

“*Kill everything that moved!*” came the order, cold and unforgiving. The rabisu leaped upon the hapless crowd and tore the offenders to pieces before they could plead for mercy.

Utter silence shocked the chamber.

“Now then.” Ereshkigal darkly smiled, her icy blue eyes gleaming. “Who else is willing to stand by my sister?”

Inanna could not help herself. She chuckled. “To think you would learn to use fear as a weapon now of all times. Even in your betrayal, you find ways to emulate me. You make me proud.”

The Empress of the Dead strode forward, her robes smoothly gliding across the stone floor. Inanna stared back at her, devoid of hatred, allowing her younger sister to see a defiant, uncaring queen. The tables were turned against her, but she would prevail. She had done so in the past several times.

This would be no different.

Ereshkigal's right hand came up and caressed Inanna's bloodied cheek. It felt warm, familial, and welcoming. "In my heart of hearts, I knew this would not work," she lamented. "Agony does not faze you. Death does not frighten you. You will never succumb to mortal wounds. But you raise a fair point."

She gently cupped Inanna's chin.

"The Supreme Queen cannot die. But she can suffer."

Suddenly, the chains binding Inanna disappeared, and she weakly fell onto the floor like a sack of flesh. Ereshkigal swooped down and lifted her head up by the neck. She brought Inanna's face close to her own, until she was able to whisper in her ears.

"You were right. You made me what I am. You are my Creator. And for that ... I will always respect you. And now, I will take your place."

And the Underworld *changed*.

A massive stone archway rose out of the ground like an eerie tombstone. Even through the red haze of her vision, Inanna could not miss the sigils engraved upon it, glowing with a bright, silvery sheen.

And there were six others behind it, forming a long, narrow passage for someone to walk through.

"Welcome, sister," Ereshkigal's voice boomed, "to the Seven Gates of the Underworld!"

Seven gates. Seven archways. The edifices standing before her were the gates that drew the line between the living and the dead. Each Gate held authority over one of the seven fundamental tenets of existence itself. Passing through them would mean an absolute suppression of each one.

This was no judgment. It was an eternal prison. A manifestation of isolationism in its truest form. An existence neither alive nor dead. The soul would remain, but all else would fade.

For the first time since she entered the Underworld, Inanna felt her heart tremble.

"YOU, WHO HAVE ALWAYS TAKEN, SHALL FEEL WHAT IT MEANS TO BE DEPRIVED."

As Ereshkigal's voice echoed around her, Inanna felt an unseen might drag her to her feet. Chains, unseen and unbreakable, formed around her

fists, her waist, her ankles, and her neck, unhurriedly dragging her through the First Gate.

The Trap of Opulence, Inanna quietly recognized. Everything that was her and hers would stay. Everything that was not, ceased to be hers. Her blazing connection to the divine Ax of Marduk faded. Her opal ring, the symbol of her victory over the Goddess of the Night, slid down her finger. Her necklace and her divine bracelets, smidgens of Truth that once belonged to Gula, now dropped onto the floor.

***“MY HUSBAND WAS LOST TO YOUR UNABATED LUSTS.
LIVE AN ETERNITY BEREFT OF THEM.”***

The Second Gate, the Trap of Passion, tore at her sacral knot. Once the Goddess of Lust, Inanna would no longer feel pleasure. Her body shriveled like a prune and her breasts sagged. Her cheeks wrinkled as every bit of her sensuality and charm faded away, leaving a twisted, ugly caricature of herself behind. One that would forever be unable to feel another’s touch.

***“WARS HAVE FOLLOWED YOUR FOOTSTEPS.
CIVILIZATIONS BURNED AND LIVES TORN APART, ALL
FOR YOUR PRIDE. FOREVER LOSE YOUR DOMINANCE
AND CONVICTION.”***

The Trap of Self-Esteem revoked her authority as the Monarch of the Heavens. Her golden crown appeared in an earthen heap on the floor as she was flung through the Third Gate. No longer would she hold the title of queen.

***“YOU WHO HAVE COMMANDED LEGIONS TO BRING
FORTH DESTRUCTION SHALL BE CURSED WITH
ETERNAL SILENCE.”***

Her lips were sealed together, not allowing even the slightest murmur to escape as the chains dragged her through the Fourth Gate: the Trap of Expression.

***“YOUR MIGHT RISES WITH FEAR. BE ISOLATED FROM
ALL EXISTENCE. YOUR THRONE, YOUR RELICS, YOUR
TEMPLES, YOUR WORSHIPPERS. MAY YOUR FAITH BE
ENTIRELY LOST.”***

The Fifth Gate, the Trap of Connectivity, untethered the memories of her temples and the collective faith of her worshippers. Once aware of everything on Heaven and Earth, Inanna could no longer see past the archway that stood before her.

***“QUEEN. CONQUEROR. PLUNDERER. YOU WHO
CONSIDER YOURSELF ABOVE ALL ELSE SHALL BREED
NO THOUGHT. LIVE AS WOULD A PEBBLE.”***

Inanna turned around, her dry, parched lips wanting to speak to her sister. To explain, to—

To do what?

She no longer knew as she was dragged through the Trap of—

Of—

***“LET THE MEMORIES OF THE RUTHLESS GODDESS
FADE AWAY. LET HER DOMAIN BE BURIED IN TIME. NO
LONGER SHALL YOU BE ONE OF US. I CAST YOU ... OUT!”***

Inanna trembled before the Seventh and final Gate’s power as it drank from her very soul, etching upon it a curse that marked her as a denizen of the Underworld. The world above lost its meaning to her, as she dropped like a marionette with its strings severed.

Naked and unmoving, she lay on the cold floor. Her glassy eyes stared lifelessly ahead at her sister, a single tear trickling down her cheek.

“Always remember, dear sister,” Ereshkigal murmured fondly. “Whatever I do, I do for love.”

She flicked her hand, and Inanna’s limp body was carelessly tossed against the wall. At the last moment, a rocky spike erupted outwards, piercing her through the chest.

Straight through her heart.

PART I

THE CRYPT OF FIENDISH WORMS

CHAPTER 1

WAKING UP TO AN APOCALYPSE

*The arrival of the twin-tailed ball of dust shalt signal the end of the
crust.*

Some will fight, some will reason, some will find hope in religion.

The bane of worlds shall be unbound.

Only in death shall respite be found.

In the flames—

Flames ... ?” Lukas Aguilar hummed. His fingers flew across the keyboard as he scoured the online thesaurus. “Flames” and “fire” were a little too generic, with the whole *Pit of Hell* theme in Christianity. What he needed was something more uncommon. Something archaic.

Banefire?

That felt better.

Nodding to himself, he began typing again.

In the banefire of—

Lukas paused. Rubbing the tip of his nose, he pushed his chair away from the computer screen. Even from a distance, the Word document gazed back at him, the poetic prose making him feel stupider with every passing second.

Something was missing. Something ... something ...

“This sucks!” he groaned, raking his fingers through his hair. “What the hell am I doing?”

It was the third night in a row he'd stayed up late working on this nonsense. With less than a month left until the end of the semester, he should've been preparing for his finals, not writing shitty poetry. Yet here he was.

How can anyone take this crap seriously?

Lukas's current task was to edit an article about an ancient Akkadian prophecy for a sensational news site. *Edit* being the keyword. Somewhere along the way, Emma had him not only research the whole thing but also write it down and rework the translated prophecy so that it rhymed.

As if translating the gibberish into readable English wasn't Herculean enough of a task.

DING!

Frowning, Lukas grabbed his phone. It was a text from Emma.

Speak of the devil, and she would text you like a jilted lover. Or so the saying went.

[Where the hell are you? I've been trying to reach you for the last hour.]

With everything going on, Emma's constant phone calls were exactly the sort of distraction he didn't need. One would think that after fifteen missed calls, she'd finally get the memo. Instead, she, in a strictly Emma-like fashion, wouldn't rest until she got what she wanted.

The screen blinked again.

[I need the article before noon tomorrow. Coming over.]

What the—

Lukas speed dialed her number. Emma picked it up on the first ring.

“So,” came a rich, feminine voice, laden with condescension, “*your phone does work after all.*”

“I was supposed to get until the end of the week for this, Emma,” he flatly replied, pushing himself off of the chair. From the sound of it, she was walking. Furiously. Maybe even climbing the stairs. He really hoped she was just joking about coming over. Hurricane Emma distracting him over the phone was one thing, but being in the same room as him?

He'd never be able to get any work done.

“What can I say? Things change. I fired the other guy, and we need this by tomorrow evening. You’re all I’ve got.”

“Listen, Emma, you don’t need to—”

KNOCK! KNOCK!

“Open the door,” she said.

Lukas disconnected the call and hurled the phone at his bed. Deciding to take his sweet time, he walked over to his refrigerator and grabbed an apple first. Red Delicious, his favorite. He then went over to his laptop and saved the document. Twice. Ignoring the increasingly frantic knocks, he took a bite out of the fruit and stared patiently at his screen. Only minutes later did he finally walk to the door and crack it ajar.

He was greeted with a strained smile and a glare that could melt steel.

“Hey, Emma,” he offered, opening the door all the way.

Emma took a few calming breaths, though her fingers were still twitching. “I was wondering if you were going to let me in at all.”

Lukas shrugged. “A part of me hoped you’d get tired of knocking. Turn around and go home. Maybe let me get a good night’s sleep for once.”

She wrinkled her nose. “You need it. You look like a hundred miles of bad road.”

Lukas glanced toward the mirror in the corner. As he had pretty much confined himself to his room, his skin was pale and dark circles hung heavy beneath his eyes from one too many late nights working his ass off for a conspiracy website. It was hardly respectable work by any means, but his bills wouldn’t pay themselves.

“Still, that’s not enough to chase me away,” she exclaimed. “I still want the manuscript.”

He groaned and trudged back toward his desk, the half-eaten apple still in his hand. He’d known Emma ever since he began working for the website where she worked as an assistant manager. They’d recently begun seeing each other outside of the workplace, though both of them agreed not to label it.

Of course, that hadn’t stopped her from being a complete ass when it came to managing people.

“But I’m serious, Luke,” Emma said, stepping beside him. “You look like a radish.”

She wasn't trying to piss him off. It was Emma-speak for *I have so much regard for you that I went out of my way to create this insult so we could have a mildly adversarial but fun conversation. See how much I care?*

"And you're a massive pain in my ass." Lukas sighed. "Come on in." He held the door open as she stepped inside. She threw her handbag on the couch and crossed her legs, leaning against the fridge.

"So, what gives?" he asked. "Why is this article being tossed onto my shoulders?"

Emma sighed. "Chris quit last minute—"

"I thought you said you fired him."

"—and you're the only guy in like a thousand miles who's a genius when it comes to mythology. How you manage that while pursuing a law degree, I'll never understand. Seriously, look around you!" she exclaimed. "This room feels more like an anthropology museum than a college student's apartment."

"It's not that bad," he weakly retorted, wincing as he followed her gaze. One of the perils of growing up with his dotty grandfather was not batting an eye at seeing all sorts of worldly relics lying around the home. The man had been a collector of bizarre objects, most of which Lukas had taken possession of post his demise—an opal necklace from India, a talisman from the Native Americans, an actual human skull from Louisiana, and more. The wall of mahogany bookshelves contained over two hundred limited edition books, from modern law to mysticism. *Color of Law* and *Hutchinson's Case Histories* stood next to *Kybalion* and *Zohar*.

His favorite item, however, was the grainy polaroid photo hanging above his desk. It was a picture of him and his grandfather, taken after they'd visited a local museum when he was a kid. The caption underneath was simple, and something the old man used to parrot from time to time.

"THE KEY TO OUR FUTURE IS HIDDEN IN OUR PAST."

"Lukas?"

"... Sorry, just lost in thought." He softly sighed. Memories of his grandfather made him oddly conscious of the familiar presence on his chest. It was a pendant—tendrils of blended gold and copper converged around a lapis lazuli orb in the center, ending in a blunt tip at the bottom. It was a

most curious thing to wear as a pendant, but it had been a gift from the old man for his thirteenth birthday.

His fingers slid up and touched the pendant. It felt cold as always.

“Eccentricity comes with the territory, I suppose.” Lukas grinned, turning toward his ... friend. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten. I have yet to hear one good reason for this rush job. I’ve got exams, you know.”

Emma smirked. He liked her smirk. It did interesting things to her lips. Letting her purse slide off of her arm, she sauntered toward him. “Perhaps a favor?” she offered. “Something shared between two people who are attracted to one another?”

“Oh? Like what?”

She plopped down onto his bed and propped her chin in her hand, studying him through long lashes. Her skirt rode up to her knee, revealing the soft, pale skin hidden underneath. Her other hand played with an errant lock of hair, twirling it around a finger.

Lukas took another bite out of his apple.

“Oh, come on!” she complained. “Most men would be putty by now.”

She wasn’t wrong. Emma was someone who used her charm relentlessly to get things done her way.

“I guess I’m just pure of heart and mind.” He half shrugged, ignoring her loud scoff. “Now if you’re quite finished, I’ve got some exams to prepare for. Those cases aren’t gonna read themselves.”

Emma stared at him in frustration for a moment—

Before tilting her head back and laughing. It was a good laugh, rich and refined.

Emma was a known quantity. She was attractive, bright, and appealing. Her motivations were simple, and she was honest in pursuing them. She spent her free nights attending Instagrammable parties with her friends downtown. He hadn’t been joking when he’d called her a hurricane.

“Tell you what, Luke,” she said. “You get this done for me, and I’ll take you to a new Japanese place I found. The teriyaki there is to *die* for.”

“And you get me a raise. A good one.”

Her eyes glittered with cheerfully malicious ambition. “Sure. If you take over Chris’s work for the rest of the month.”

“Nope.”

“Just this month!” she pouted. “I’ll get you your raise and even some paid time off during your semester exams. No work then, I promise.”

“No,” he stubbornly repeated.

“I have two tickets for Saturday night. Maybe we can share a joint afterward?”

“No—” He paused. “Wait, what? Yes, but that’s—”

“Super!” Emma kissed him on the cheek, dangerously close to his lips. “It’s a date. Now get this article done and email me by noon tomorrow. See you on Saturday.”

With that, she grabbed her purse and walked out the door, leaving him staring in her wake.

Sighing, Lukas closed his laptop screen. It was late, and his bed was looking far too inviting for him to do anything but sleep. Life could wait until morning to kick him in the pants.

The floor is shaking.

There is no fire, simply heat and wispy fumes. The earth beneath his feet parts open. Alien images and sensations overwhelm him, along with the presence of heat—so, so much heat—but no light. Only darkness, accompanied by the groans of something titanic, yet ... aware. Conscious. It’s like—

Like what?

In a single moment, he sees the ponderous dance of continents clashing against one another to form mountains. He feels everything slowly seep into the deepness of the crust, feels the waves rise and fall and heavenly bodies move and twist and smash into each other while blades of grass—

Grass?

He sees gold. Minerals. Lava. A potted plant. Ants marching.

What is—what is happening? What is all this?

Images overwhelm him like the unstoppable force of a raging river. They come and go, flickering across his eyes. There is light, darkness, and brown, dewy soil. He sees lightning in a sky of stars, with the moon utterly black and opening a hole into the molten stone atop the—

Lukas’s eyes snapped open.

His heart pounded within his ribcage. His eyes were teary, and gooseflesh had erupted all over his body. *What a weird dream,* he told