

# SPELLCRASH

PREPARE FOR A TOTAL SYSTEMS FAILURE.



"[McCullough] just may have created a new fantasy subgenre."  
—Sci Fi Weekly

A WEBMAGE NOVEL

Author of *CodeSpell* and *MythOS*

KELLY McCULLOUGH

Copyrighted Material

# SPELL CRASH

PREPARE FOR A TOTAL SYSTEMS FAILURE.



"[McCullough] just may have created  
a new fantasy subgenre."  
—*Sci Fi Weekly*

A WEBMAGE NOVEL

Author of *CodeSpell* and *MythOS*

KELLY MCCULLOUGH

## Table of Contents

*Title Page*

*Copyright Page*

# Dedication

---

*Acknowledgments*

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

# Epilogue

---

## More praise for

### MythOS

“A smooth, flowing tale that entices the imagination.”

—*Huntress Book Reviews* (4½ stars)

### CodeSpell

“A hint of cyberpunk, a dollop of Greek mythology, and a sprinkle of techno-magic bake up into an airy genre mashup. Lots of fast-paced action and romantic angst up the ante as Ravirn faces down his formidable foes.”— *Publishers Weekly*

“One long adrenaline rush, with a few small pauses for Ravirn to heal from his near-fatal brushes with the movers and shakers of the universe, all while trying to figure out how to survive the next inevitable encounter.”— *SFRevu*

“Imaginative, fascinating, with a lot of adventure thrown in . . . Mr. McCullough has followed his first two books with a worthy sequel. *CodeSpell* will keep the reader on edge.”

— *Fresh Fiction*

“This third book featuring hacker extraordinaire Ravirn is every bit [as much] of a fast-paced, energetic page-turner as its predecessors. Ravirn continues to be a fascinating protagonist, and the chaotic twists of the plot carry the reader through to the end.”— *Romantic Times Cybermancy*

“McCullough has true world-building skills, a great sense of Greek mythology, and the eye of a thriller writer. The blend of technology and magic is absolutely amazing, and I’m surprised no one has thought to do it quite like this before.”

— [http://Blogcritics.org] Blogcritics.org

“This is the second book in McCullough’s series that fuses hacking culture with ancient gods, and it’s every bit as charming, clever, and readable as its predecessor.”— *Romantic Times continued* . . . “It’s smoothly readable, vivid, and fun . . . highly recommended.” —

[http://MyShelf.com] MyShelf.com

“McCullough has the most remarkable writing talent I have ever read . . . Not satisfied to write a single genre or to use a subgenre already made, he has created a new template that others will build stories upon in later years. But know this: McCullough is the original and unparalleled.”

— *Huntress Book Reviews*

### WebMage

“The most enjoyable science fantasy book I’ve read in the last four years . . . Its blending of magic and coding is inspired . . . *WebMage* has all the qualities I look for in a book—a wonderfully subdued sense of humor, nonstop action, and romantic relief. It’s a wonderful debut novel.”

—Christopher Stasheff, author of *Saint Vidicon to the Rescue*

“Inventive, irreverent, and fast paced, strong on both action and humor.”— *The Green Man Review*

“[An] original and outstanding debut . . . McCullough handles his plot with unfailing invention, orchestrating a mixture of humor, philosophy, and programming insights that gives new meaning to terms as commonplace as ‘spell-checker’ and [as] esoteric as ‘programming in hex.’”

— *Publishers Weekly* (starred review) “A unique first novel, this has a charming, fresh combination mythological, magical, and computer elements . . . that will enchant many types of readers.”—

*KLIATT* “McCullough’s first novel, written very much in the style of Roger Zelazny’s classic Amber novels, is a rollicking combination of verbal humor, wild adventures, and just plain fun.”

— VOYA

“*WebMage* contains a lot of humor and a highly inventive new way of looking at the universe, which combines the magic of old with the computer structures of today.”— *SFRevu*

“Complex, well paced, highly creative, and, overall, an auspicious debut for McCullough . . .

well worth reading for fans of light fantasy.”— *Sci Fi Weekly*

“[A] fascinating world, somewhat redolent of Zelazny’s Amber universe . . . The interface between magical and computer technology definitely tickles my inner geek.”

— *MIT Science Fiction Society*

“This fast-paced, action-packed yarn is a lot of fun . . . weaving myth, magic, IT jargon . . . into a bang-up story.”— *Booklist*

“McCullough has done a fantastic job integrating technology and mythology, and Ravirn is a wonderfully sympathetic protagonist.”— *Romantic Times*

“Kelly McCullough has the hacker ethic and the hacker mind-set down pat . . . The combination of mythos, magic, and technology is great fun . . . Ravirn is the literary grandnephew of Corwin of Amber . . . If you like the Amber books, you will certainly enjoy *WebMage*.”— *Bewildering Stories*

“It has finally happened. Someone crossed the genres of sci-fi and fantasy to create a magical world that has modern (futuristic) computer hackers . . . McCullough has taken characters out from the darkness of mythology and brought them into the light of this modern digital age . . .

out-freaking-standing.”— *Huntress Book Reviews*

“The action kept me reading way past my bedtime . . . gripping and imaginative.”—

“This is a wild, fun ride. It is perfect reading for any time.” — [<http://Rambles.net>] Rambles.net *Ace Books by Kelly McCullough*

WEBMAGE

CYBERMANCY

CODESPELL

MYTHOS

SPELLCRASH

## **THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP**

### **Published by the Penguin Group**

**Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA** Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)  
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India  
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

SPELLCRASH

An Ace Book / published by arrangement with the author

PRINTING HISTORY

Ace mass-market edition / June 2010

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

For information, address: The Berkley Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

eISBN : 978-1-101-18775-3

ACE

Ace Books are published by The Berkley Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014. ACE and the "A" design are trademarks of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

[<http://us.penguin.com>] <http://us.penguin.com>

*For Laura,*

*who holds my heart*

## **Acknowledgments**

Extra-special thanks are owed to Laura McCullough, Stephanie Zvan, Jack Byrne, Warren Lapine, and Anne Sowards.

Many thanks also to the active Wyrdsmiths: Lyda, Doug, Naomi, Bill, Eleanor, and Sean. My web guru: Ben. Beta readers: Steph, Ben, Sara, Dave, Sari, Karl, Angie, Sean, Laura R., Norma, Warren, and Angela. Keith Spears for his comments on introducing hands. My extended support structure: Bill and Nancy, James, Tom, Ann, Mike, Sandy, and all the rest. My family: Carol, Paul and Jane, Lockwood and Darlene, Judy, Lee C., Kat, Jean, Lee P., and all the rest.

I also want to thank some of the many people who have worked on these books at the Penguin end of things and made me look so good in the process. My fabulous series copy editors: Robert and Sara Schwager. Cover art I love: Christian McGrath. Likewise, cover design: Judith Lagerman. Anne Sowards's assistants: Cameron Dufty and Kat Sherbo. Publicists past and present: Maggie Kao, Valerie Cortes, and Rosanne Romanello. Interior text design: Kristin del Rosario. Production editor: Michelle Kasper. Assistant production editor: Andromeda Macri.

Finally, I'd like to give a big thank-you to my readers of this series. I wouldn't have gotten very far without you.





# CHAPTER ONE

---

*Pop quiz, multiple choice: When is having a gorgeous naked woman coming after you a major problem? (A) When she's your ex-girlfriend. (B) When she's there to tear your arms off. (C) When she's a Fury.*

*Why do I always have to be an "all of the above" kind of guy?*

It can't be Fate, the family I left behind. I've been off Fate's roster ever since the goddess Necessity decided to transform me from a sorcerer of the hacking-and-cracking variety into an aspect of the Trickster. The Trickster . . . Yeah, that's probably it. Nothing is ever simple for the Raven.

Which is why my involuntary vacation in the land of the Norse gods had ended with an equally involuntary deportation back to my MythOS of origin, the Greek pantheoverse. The process ended with my rather abrupt return to the Garbage Faerie Decision Locus, carrying my clothes rather than wearing them. I was accompanied on my trip by one small sarcastic blue goblin, one giant god-wolf recovering from an unfortunate piercing, and one disembodied but very perky hand. Dignity and grace in all things, that's my motto.

I'd just managed to get my leather pants and one boot on, and was struggling with the next boot, when the unmistakable sound of someone tearing a hole in the universe announced the imminent arrival of one of the Sisters of Vengeance.

Since I was none too sure of where I stood with the Furies at the moment, I dropped the boot and reached for my shoulder holster. Not that I believed a .45 was going to do anything against one of the baddest goddesses on the block—I just wanted something vaguely threatening to hang on to by way of a security blanket. My magic sword, Occam, would have made a better choice if I hadn't recently managed to break it. Sigh. They don't make them like Excalibur anymore.

"Is Ravirn always this dignified?" asked the wolf from off to my left.

"You have no idea, Fenris. You have no idea." My webgoblin familiar, Melchior, shook his head sadly.

"Said the laptop with delusions of grandeur," I replied. I wouldn't trade Mel for anything, but sometimes I wondered if we shouldn't tone the sarcasm down with his next upgrade. Yeah, that was going to happen.

I'd have defended myself further, but the incoming Fury picked that exact moment to pass through from wherever she had been before she sliced a doorway in space and time. An ice-clawed hand was the first thing that emerged, telling me that this must be the replacement for Tisiphone—whom I loved and had been forced to leave behind in the land of the Norse gods when she chose freedom in exile over servitude at home. I couldn't blame her; she'd seen a chance to shed the mantle of a power forever and taken it. I'd probably have done the same if I'd had the opportunity.

The new Fury entered my world fully, and I let out an involuntary gasp. Like her sisters, she disdained the use of clothing, going naked before the elements. She was tall and slender, with hair and wings

that seemed to have been carved from living ice. Beautiful, too, beautiful and cold and deadly. More than capable of tearing me in half if she wished it. She was also desperately familiar.

“You!” I said, in the exact same moment as she did.

“Well, dip me in garlic butter and throw me to Cerberus,” said Melchior.

“Raven,” said the Fury, and her voice dripped scorn.

“Cerice,” I replied, giving her my best court bow. “How lovely to see you again.” My ex-girlfriend Cerice had become the new Fury. Just as the ex-Fury Tisiphone had become my new and already-much-missed girlfriend. Naturally, I’d ended up close and personal with the wrong one.

She sniffed disdainfully as she alighted in front of me. In almost the same moment that her nostrils flared, her eyes narrowed. I couldn’t help but remember just how keen the Fury sense of smell was and relate that to the fact that I was barely ten minutes out of bed with Tisiphone. This was not going well, which meant I might as well up the ante. That’s how a trickster plays the game . . . whether he wants to or not.

“Oh, and you might recall that I prefer Ravirn,” I said.

“That name was taken from you by your grandmother. You remember her, right? Lachesis, the Fate who measures the threads?” Cerice’s voice sounded acid etched. “It no longer belongs to you. You are instead what my grandmother Clotho named you, the Raven, a power of chaos and a traitor to the Houses of Fate.” She picked that moment to snatch the pistol from my hand and twist it like a dishrag.

“Sounds like you two have some history.” Fenris’s tongue lolled as he gave a wolfy laugh.

Cerice turned a hard glare on him. “Who . . . or what in Necessity’s name are you?”

“I’m the big bad wolf and, unless I’m totally mistaken, you have to be Little Red Flaming Hood’s nee baby sister.”

“If you’re referring to Tisiphone, you’ve hit one mark. As to the rest, I’m not impressed, Fido.” I took the ensuing glaring contest as an opportunity to slip on my remaining boot. I’d forgotten my shirt bag in the Norse MythOS, so I had to slide my jacket on over bare skin. It wasn’t the most refined fashion statement in the world, but I liked it a whole lot more than the half-naked state it replaced.

“Look, Cerice, I’ve had a really shitty week. Did you have a point in coming here, or are you just out for a lark? Because if you’ve come to kill me, I wish you’d go ahead and make the attempt so we can get it over with. If you have some other purpose, say one that doesn’t involve you spitting and snarling at me, then you’re wasting both our times in a pretty boorish manner.” She spun around and stomped over to glare into my face from a distance of inches. If I’d had any sense at all, I’d probably have backed up or given some other sign of submission. But no one has *ever* accused me of having any sense. I leaned forward and kissed the tip of her nose.

Ouch.

The punch took me in the solar plexus with near-surgical precision—hard enough to fold me up and

leave me gasping on the ground, soft enough to inflict zero lasting harm. I was still trying to remember how to breathe when Cerice knelt and took the tip of my nose between two claws. —

“Would you like a nice new nose ring, Raven? Because that could be arranged.” She released her grip and flicked the end of my nose, drawing blood. “I’m here because Shara wanted to see what had made its way into this multiverse from elsewhere. That done, I’m a free agent for the rest of the visit. If I wanted to kick the crap out of you, I could. I’m not going to do that because of what we used to mean to each other, but don’t bet on past relationships saving your skin a second time.

“I used to be Cerice,” she continued, “a wayward child of House Clotho and your onetime lover.

About a week ago, Shara offered me a new job, and everything changed. I’m a Fury now, and my temper is not something you want to trifle with. It owns me, and it doesn’t give a damn about your continued welfare. Piss me off enough, and I might kill you before I have time to change my mind. I’m going to go away now. Think about it.”

Her claws flashed out blindingly fast, slicing a line that ran from about a half inch in front of my eye to a hairbreadth in front of my groin. Smiling grimly, she slipped through the cut she’d made into somewhere else and was gone. I’m almost certain the reason I didn’t come back with a snide remark before she departed was because I couldn’t breathe and not because she’d scared the bejeeburs out of me. Almost.

“You’re an idiot, you know that, right?” Melchior’s normally pale blue face had darkened to something in the neighborhood of indigo. “Why are you always trying to get yourself killed?”

“I’m not,” I said, “but the Raven might have other plans.” Melchior looked away.

One of the problems with becoming a power is the loss of some degree of autonomy. Take Cerice’s comment about her temper. Among the things she would have inherited when she became a Fury was an extra-large helping of little-f fury. In my case, becoming the Raven had amped the daylights out of all of my worst tendencies toward risk-taking and mischief-making.

Ravirn the hacker and cracker was a trickster. The Raven is a mask of *the* Trickster, one that all too often wears my face rather than the other way around.

Take my response to Cerice as Fury. The old Ravirn would probably have been appalled on her behalf and at least tried to think before speaking. The Raven? Not so much. The part of me that was the Trickster didn’t care about whatever madness had driven Shara to use her position within Necessity to offer Cerice Tisiphone’s place as a Fury. Nor about the madness that had convinced Cerice to agree. I cared about winning the conversational duel no matter how much of a callous ass that painted me.

On the lemonade-from-lemons side, the Trickster isn’t big on self-doubt, so I have trouble hanging on to morose. At least, when no one is actively shooting at me, I do. I rolled backwards and up onto my feet.

“Forget it, Mel. I’m sure life will drop a bucket of bricks on us soon enough without my help.”

“Now, that’s reassuring.” Melchior shook his head and started to pace. “Do you think she really meant

that about Shara?”

---

“The hiring-decision thing?” I shrugged. “I don’t see how else you arrive at Cerice as Fury. We still don’t know what happened with Necessity to get us sent off to the Norse MythOS. It’s possible that was a symptom of a complete and unfixable crash, and that Shara’s running the show now.”

“Care to clue a guy in here?” Fenris asked me.

“Sure. Necessity is our version of MimirSoft—the goddess in computer shape who keeps track of the gods and all the infinite worlds of probability. Because of a couple of minor miscalculations on my part, she caught a virus that just about ate the entire multiverse.”

“To say nothing of the hardware damage your duel with Nemesis inflicted,” said Melchior.

“Well, yeah.” I looked at my feet. “There’s that, too, but that wasn’t really my fault.”

“So that mess you made with Mimir and Rune wasn’t exactly outside your normal mode of operations,” said Fenris.

“More like his specialty,” said Melchior.

The wolf whistled. “No wonder Odin wanted to get rid of you. Between that and your little self-aware laptop buddy here”—he indicated Melchior with his nose—“you’re something like the ultimate biological malware.”

I shrugged. “I prefer to think of myself as a hacker and cracker, but you might have a point there.”

“So who’s Shara?” he asked.

“That’s complex. She used to be Cerice’s webgoblin and familiar. Laptop by day, miniature purple Mae West by night, or something like that anyway. Now the part of her that’s really her is trapped inside Necessity and—if what Cerice said is true—she may be running the whole show.”

“Should I assume that’s your fault, too?” asked Fenris.

I looked away.

“Wow.”

“I hate to interrupt,” Melchior said, coming to my rescue, “but I’m thinking this might not be the safest place to hang out for any length of time. Shall we move this elsewhere?”

“Good point,” I said. “It’s always harder to hit a moving target. How about we start by introducing Brer Wolf around? I suspect that if we don’t do it now, we’re going to get way too busy with other issues.”

There were a million things I needed to be doing, starting with finding out what had happened to Necessity and how we’d ended up in the Norse MythOS, and moving right along to finding out what the hell Cerice and Shara were thinking. But just for today, I was going to play hooky from

responsibility.

---

“Did you have anyone in mind?” asked Melchior.

I was about to answer when I felt a squeeze on my ankle. I glanced down. A severed hand clung there. Laginn.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to forget you. We’ll introduce you around, too.” Laginn used to be the hand of the Norse God of War, Tyr. That was before Fenris bit the hand off and a few hundred years of marinating in the Norse-style chaos that lives in the giant wolf’s belly gave it new life. Now, *it* is a *hat* as well as Fenris’s constant companion and occasional chew toy. They have a strange, semisymbiotic relationship. Which I suppose could be said of me and Melchior as well.

“Introduce us around?” Fenris canted his head to one side, managing to look simultaneously confused and hungry. “Why?”

“Well, I figure it’s my fault that you’re stuck here in the land of the Greek gods. That makes it my responsibility to help you get settled. You’re welcome to stay at Raven House for as long as you like, but that’s a pretty isolated corner of reality. I’m sure you’d like to make some friends beyond yours, truly and find a better place to hang your”—I tried to think of a suitable substitute for *hat*—“collar?”

“I *hate* that word; you should watch . . .” The huge wolf stopped and made a series of slow turns, looking rather like a dog chasing his tail at one-tenth speed. “Gleipner really is gone, isn’t it? I don’t think I fully understood what that means until this very second.” Fenris threw his great head back and let out a howl that probably terrified everything remotely edible within a ten-mile radius. “I’m *free!*”

Then he actually did start chasing his tail. Just when that looked like it might be starting to lose its appeal, Laginn bolted past, running on tippy-fingers. Fenris leaped in pursuit, barking like a puppy the whole time.

I couldn’t help grinning as the two dodged in and out among the weird detritus that dotted the surreal landscape. The worlds out at the edge of the Greek MythOS can get very strange, and Garbage Faerie is one of the oddest I’ve ever visited.

It looks rather like what you might get if a high urban civilization turned over a hundred years of its trash and junk flow to a really twisted designer of Japanese formal gardens. Big-screen TVs lie cracked screen up, with delicate arrangements of pebbles tracing the fractures. Old train engines have been planted like the menhirs of Stonehenge, their original shapes all but obscured by the wild grape and morning glory that grow on them. It is beautiful and bizarre and I love it.

The exuberant game of chase played between a wolf roughly the size and shape of an anorexic Clydesdale and the bitten-off hand of a god made it all the stranger and more wonderful. I laughed aloud for the sheer weirdness of existence. Fenris was a power, too, or had been in his home MythOS. Here, he would be much weaker but also free. Free of the mantle of a power and free of the silver collar of Gleipner the Entangler, which had bound him for more than a thousand years. What would it be like to shake all that off?

I was feeling pretty good about that and my whole Big Fat Norse Odyssey up until Laginn leaped over

the edge of the large and very fresh crater that dominated the scenery, and Fenris followed him down. ~~That was when my smile died. The giant hole in the ground had once been a hill with a home under it~~ the home of a dear friend whose life had paid for the freedom of Fenris and his fellow Norse deities, friend I had killed.

“You miss Ahllan, too, don’t you?” Melchior walked over to stand beside me.

“It’s more than that,” I said.

Melchior looked up at me, his expression shrewd. “You believe you’re responsible for her death, and you’re feeling guilty.”

“I *am* responsible for her death, Mel. I killed her as surely as if I’d put a bullet in her heart. I may have had the best motive in the world, but the details don’t change a thing.”

“Bullshit.” Melchior’s voice was flat and the coldest I’d ever heard it.

“What?”

“I said, ‘Bullshit.’” Melchior glared up at me. “That’s guilt talking, not sense. Details mean everything. Shooting someone because you don’t like the color of their jacket is senseless murder. Shooting someone who’s about to kill you is self-defense. Shooting someone as part of an honest, trial-generated execution is justice.”

“No matter how you slice it, somebody ends up dead and somebody else ends up a killer.”

“Look, I don’t know exactly what happened there at the end,” said Melchior. “But I do know you and what you’re capable of. I also know, or knew, Ahllan. She was the closest thing I have to a mother. The computer that absorbed her memories told us that Ahllan believed what you did was right. Between the two, I know enough to call bullshit on all this ‘I killed her’ angst. There was a lot more in the balance than just Ahllan’s life. Can you look me in the eye and tell me that what you did didn’t have to be done?”

I looked away. “I could have saved her.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

How could I explain it to him? Yes, I’d done no more than what I had to, but that didn’t make it any better. Ahllan’s life was over, and it *was* my fault.

I was still trying to figure out what to say when Fenris bounced to a stop in front of me. “I feel *better*. So, where to next?”

“I know just the place,” I said.

It was the strangest game of Risk I’d ever played. The board lay on a huge gray slab of granite.

On one side lolled Cerberus, or more accurately, Mort, Dave, and Bob, since the heads were each playing individually. Fenris sat to their left, looking rather like the world’s scariest puppy by

comparison. The wolf of Asgard is the size of a draft horse and looks like he eats busloads of children as often as he can get them, but the hound of Hades is built more along the lines of what you'd get if you crossed the great-granddaddy of all bulldogs with a carnivorous elephant. Add a disembodied hand and me to the picture and place the whole thing on the banks of the Styx with the Gates of Hades in the background, and you get something that makes *Dogs Playing Poker* look downright Norman Rockwell by comparison.

"You cheat," growled Bob, a Doberman, and my least favorite head. He'd just lost a battle for Iceland.

"How could I cheat?" replied Dave, the rottweiler middle head whom I usually partnered at bridge. "It's luck. You roll the dice and take your lumps."

"He's right," said Mort, the mastiff.

"He cheats," said Bob.

"Are you going to keep repeating that all night long, or are you going to finish your turn and pass the dice?" asked Fenris.

The big wolf looked like he was having the time of his life, and maybe he was. I'm pretty sure that growing up in a place where everyone treated you as a monster because a prophecy said you were inevitably going to turn into one would have a distorting effect on your sense of fun. It might also turn you into a monster.

That it hadn't spoke to the innate resiliency of . . . people? Giant wolves? Gods? Don't get me wrong, he was still a giant, slavering deity in wolf shape, if a much less powerful one. And he was potentially capable of all sorts of harm and horror, but none of that makes him stand out particularly from the rest of the divine crowd, Norse or Greek. Take my extended family for example . . . please. There's plenty of ripping people to pieces, involuntary transformation, and old-fashioned warmongering to go around, and none of it for particularly admirable reasons.

Speaking of that last, it was at about that point that Laginn and Mort formed a temporary alliance and drove my game armies into the sea.

After I'd boxed my pieces up, I headed down to the water's edge, settling near where Melchior was sitting with Cerberus's webpixie, Kira—think iPhone meets miniature goth chick, and you've pretty much got the right picture. In pixie shape, she's about three inches tall, blazingly hot in a dye-job black and pancake white sort of way, and straight from the capital city of bad-attitude land. The two of them were chattering away in machine language at about seven thousand times the data-transfer rate of English, and neither looked up as I passed them.

The Styx is a looped river that surrounds Hades the place. Both lie in a gigantic cavern somewhere under the roots of Mount Olympus. The underworld gates, which lay just across the water from me, were huge iron monstrosities set in a stone arch. As usual, they stood open, offering both a threat and promise. I felt it on an extremely personal level—Hades the god has promised me a special place within. I shivered at that thought but couldn't look away. Just outside the gates is Hades' main concession to modernity, a check-in line taken straight from the heart of America's dysfunctional airport-security system, complete with a full five acts of security theater.

“Hey, Boss,” said Melchior from behind me.

---

“Yes?” I didn’t turn around.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his tone shifting from demanding to concerned.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because you’re not arguing about the ‘Boss’ thing. That only happens when you’re in too much trouble to take the time, or when something’s really bothering you.”

“Would it make you feel better if I grumped at you?” I asked.

There was actually quite a lot bothering me, starting with Cerice. The more I thought about her becoming a power, the less I liked the idea.

Mel sighed. “Forget it, *Boss*. The reason I spoke up is that you’ve got an incoming visual transfer protocol request from Eris. Do you want to answer or not?”

“How’d she find out I was home so quickly?” The idea of Eris keeping a close eye on my comings and goings made me nervous. I turned around. “Initiate Vtp. Please.”

“Done.” Mel opened his eyes and mouth as wide as possible. From each came a different beam of light—red, green, and blue—meeting about a foot in front of his face and forming a golden globe with a somewhat misty miniature version of Eris standing at its center.

“Ravirn, dear child, I’d like to have a private word.”

“I’m kind of in the middle of something at the moment,” I replied. The “dear child” made me *very* nervous—Discord is never sweet or gentle. “I can give you a couple of moments of Vtp time or maybe stop in a bit later in the week.”

“You make it sound like I’d made a request. Silly boy.”

Her hand suddenly shot forward out of the globe, taking on weight and substance as it grew impossible long. Before I could do so much as yelp, she caught the collar of my jacket and jerked me forward into the globe. As I became one with the projection, I could actually feel myself shrinking and growing more diffuse. It was one of the stranger experiences of a rather strange life.

I have traveled through the chaos between worlds many times. I have done it as a string of digital code moving along the carefully guarded channels of the mweb or as a deadweight dragged by a Fury. I have gone the route of curdled probability that lies at the heart of a faerie ring, or stepped straight from point A to point B by the fixed gate of a magical portrait. I have even flown the pathless infinities on my very own Raven’s wings.

None of that felt half as strange as my current means of locomotion. It was as if I had become a field or wave function that somehow propagated itself through the stuff of chaos, an impulse encoded in the very motion of the Primal Chaos. When I arrived at the other end, I had the distinct feeling that none of the me that had started the trip had any kind of direct connection to the me that ended it. Deeply,



deeply creepy.

---

“What the hell did you just do to me?” I demanded of Eris in the instant that my mouth reconstituted itself.

She stood atop a waist-high white marble pedestal in the shape of a fluted Ionic column at the exact center of a circular colonnade and temple. A bronze plaque on the plinth said DISCORD, in case I had any doubts. In the moment of my arrival, she wore the aspect of a white marble statue in the classical mode, complete with the traditional clingy dress and strappy sandals. She stood as still as stone, and for reasons unclear, she had on a blindfold and was holding a set of bronze scales in the mode of Justice. Well, mostly in the mode. A severed thumb firmly weighted the left side of the balance, and the blindfold didn't fully cover her eye on that side.

Her left arm was partially hidden behind her. By stepping around to that side, I could see her hand, sans thumb, held discreetly open. A cascade of coins fell from nowhere into the hand, where they vanished.

“What do you think?” Her voice seemed to issue from the air about a foot to my left. “It's sort of a commentary piece.”

“Subtle,” I replied. “Almost as much so as usual.”

She snorted with amusement, and the whole statue routine vanished. In its place stood Discord.

How to describe a goddess whose stock-in-trade is change? Start with her height. Without the ever-present stiletto heels, she usually stands in the neighborhood of six-five, and today was no exception. Her skin shifts from onyx black to eighteen-karat gold in the blink of an eye and back at the next blink, or occasionally between blinks—think taffeta and hallucinogens. Her hair, equal parts midnight and blond, hangs to her waist, thick and straight and silken. Her body is perfect, no matter what your definition of perfect might be—that's part of her magic. She wants you to want her so much that you're willing to ruin yourself chasing after her though she can never be caught—again, part of the magic.

For me, today, she wore an elegant face with high-arched brows, sharply defined cheekbones, and bestung lips, though that almost certainly said more about my current appetites than it did about her real appearance. The goddess dress was gone, replaced by black leather pants, tight but not obscenely so, and a thin gold turtleneck that made the pants look baggy. The sandals had become a pair of knee-high boots with delicate golden chains around the ankles.

Her eyes . . . were my own, only more so. The tumbling madness of chaos fills the eyes of Eris.

Knowing the same disturbing effect looks out at the world through the slits of my pupils is one of the things that makes meeting her gaze one of the least comfortable aspects of any encounter between us. Doubly so now that I know that Loki comes equipped with the same package. It says things about my place in the cosmic scheme that I don't particularly like to hear.

“How's tricks . . . ter?” she asked.

She always knows exactly what not to say. Hence, "Discord." I sighed. She laughed and winked again.

---

Finally, I laughed, too. "You're impossible, you know that, right?"

"Honey, that's my primary job description."

"What do you want?" I asked.

"What makes you think I want something?"

I raised an eyebrow. "I'm not anywhere near as stupid as I look. So far you've called me 'dear child' and 'honey,' and you haven't yet done that whole magical come-hither thing you do when you're trying to get my goat."

"Are you saying I'm losing my sex appeal?"

She gave me a pouting look that would have made a monk regret his vows of celibacy. It certainly redlined my libido gauge, but it did it the old-fashioned way, with moist lips and artful posture and none of Eris's patented magic-most-sensual special effects. Once I'd put my tongue back in my mouth and my eyes back in their sockets, I was able to shake it off easily enough.

"Not in the least," I said. "We both know exactly what I meant; it's just that one of us is playing games. If that's how it's going to be, could we at least move this to a poker table. I'm used to you fleecing me at cards."

"You're getting harder to manipulate," she replied. "That's quite unfair." As she finished the sentence I found myself seated at a round table covered in green felt. Eris sat across from me wearing the traditional green eyeshade of a house dealer and holding a deck of cards. Around us the temple had become a cross between a high-end Riviera-style casino and a thoroughly equipped video arcade. On my right, slot machines shared wall space with the latest successors to the PacMans and Galagas of my childhood. On my left, a roulette table backed against a sunken pit holding a giant-screen TV, a couple of couches, and a suite of gaming consoles. Castle Discord is an infinitely mutable Greatspell taking whatever shape Eris wants at the moment.

"What's your game?" she asked, flicking the cards from one hand to the other in a fancy cascade.

"I think that's my question actually, and I'm not playing anything until I know the stakes."

"You want stakes? All right, I'll show you."

Eris bent the deck between index finger and thumb, then flicked the center with her middle finger so that the cards shot straight across the table at my face. One by one, in the instant before they would have hit me, they turned into butterflies, each patterned in the suit of the original card. Soon fifty-two red and black butterflies were dancing around my head.

"And every one a potential hurricane," said Eris with a wicked smile, "but only if I weight the odds right." She snapped her fingers, and the butterflies vanished—off to cause havoc-weather if I knew how at all. "Those are the stakes."

“Ooh, obscure *and* portentous. What more could a guy ask for?” Now it was my turn to snap my fingers. “Oh, that’s right, specifics.”

---

She sighed and shook her head in the manner of a teacher with a particularly slow student. “You want to know everything?”

I nodded, and the world changed around me. I sat in a high-backed leather chair and was wearing a tweed suit. A pipe was tucked in the corner of my mouth, and a notebook rested on my knee.

Eris lay at full length on a chaise beside me, one arm thrown dramatically across her face.

“I had a very unhappy childhood, Doc,” she said. “My father was a dominating bastard who thought he should be the king of the gods. My grandfather was worse—he *ate* my aunts and uncles one by one and would have eaten my father, too, if the old man hadn’t gotten him first.

Not surprisingly, I began to act out as a teenager. Wild parties.” A ghost of a bacchanal manifested itself around us. “Skimpy clothes.” Eris’s outfit went briefly as ghostly as the bacchantes. “Attention seeking, really.” The party went away, replaced by a heavy golden apple thudding down on a long marble table. “But I was just a product of my environment.” A hundred scenes of divine Greek depravity flashed by in an instant. “My family is the very definition of dysfunction and abuse.” She caught my eyes with her own. “Or should I say *our* family, cousin mine?”

I spat out the pipe. “Is this going somewhere?”

Eris shook her head sadly and sat up. “You really ought to be able to read between the lines by now.” She touched the side of her head. “This is going to give me such a migraine, and I promise that I’m going to take it out of your hide later.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“I know. I am Eris, but also Discord, both goddess and power. Straightforward hurts me when it aids order against chaos.” Her brow wrinkled in pain.

Eris snapped her fingers and produced a butterfly wearing the jack of hearts on its wings. “A storm is coming.” She let out a little gasp.

Snap. Wind filled the room, tugging at my tweeds. “It will be the biggest blow our world has seen since the Titanomachy, a *hypercane*. And you are the butterfly who gave birth to the winds.” Her eyes closed.

Snap. Lightning struck the butterfly in her hand, burning it to a crisp. “You must not trust Zeus.” Her free hand went to her forehead.



*Duh*, I thought.

Snap. The thunder came, and a golden apple replaced the ash on her palm. “You must not trust any of us.”

---

*Double duh. Family.*

She gave a little gasp. “Not even me.”

*Wow, the hat trick of duh.*

Eris handed the apple to me. “The stakes are—no.” She gagged, then doubled over and vomited behind the couch, clutching at her head the whole time. “That’s all. Go!” I glanced at the apple and swore. Or it were the words, “For the specialist.” **CHAPTER TWO**

“Cryptic metal fruit, you gotta love that.” Melchior held the apple up in one hand, peering thoughtfully at it like Hamlet with Yorick’s skull. “Especially the kind that starts wars. I wonder whatever happened to the original.” He sat on the rail of the main lanai of Raven House.

“I don’t know, Mel. Aphrodite’s not the most thoughtful of goddesses. I’m guessing that ten seconds after the contest was over, she forgot all about it in favor of the next shiny thing to catch her eye. It’s probably playing doorstop in one of her thousand and one bedrooms.” I leaned forward and rested my elbows on the deck rail beside Melchior, looking past him to the sea. Raven House sits on the Island of Kauai in a Decision Locus that is largely devoid of people for reasons I’ve never bothered to look into. It’s a beautiful and bizarre place, a product of my somewhat twisted subconscious messing with the stuff of probability by means of the faerie-ring network.

The style lies somewhere between Tiki-Modern and Neohedonist. The world’s fanciest Hawaiian-themed hotel rendered in acres of black-veined green marble and vast expanses of tinted glass.

The view is fabulous. The half-moon of white sand and blue sea that is Hanalei Bay is backed by the near-vertical tropical forest of the mountains beyond. The latter provides a great sweep of velvet green punctuated here and there with ragged patches of rusty soil and waterfalls like threads of diamond. Breathing the air is like drinking a really good piña colada, sweet, heady, and pure tropics.

Speaking of which . . . I reached a hand back behind me. A cold drink filled it a moment later. I took a big sip, then choked and almost snorted it out through my nose in the next instant when it tasted nine kinds of wrong and far too strong. I managed not to drop the glass, but only just.

“Absinthe?” I hacked, and turned half-around to face Haemun.

“Not right?” The satyr shook his head sadly and looked contrite, though a tiny twinkle of mischief in his eyes made me doubt his sincerity. “Then yours must have been the piña colada.” He plucked the glass from my hand and exchanged it for another on his tray.

Haemun is the spirit of Raven House made manifest, a combination butler, cook, valet, bartender, and wicked commentary on my subconscious. From the waist down he’s a goat. From the waist up . . . He’s got a lot in common with the traditional satyr there; human head and torso, curly hair, tiny horns. But his beard is a very sixties soul patch, and his aloha shirts are loud enough to violate most urban noise ordinances. The current one showed a complete luau scene, only all the participants had tie-dye

octopuses where their heads should have been. It made for a sort of Jerry Garcia dropping acid with Don Ho and H. P. Love-craft vibe. Haemun can also read the needs of the house's occupants . . . most of the time. Witness the replacement drink I was even then lifting to my lips.

"I'll take the absinthe," said a deep, growly voice from the direction of the stairhead that led down to the beach.

Fenris, back from his latest attempts at surfing—I'd shown him the basics the previous evening after Eris released me. He seemed to have fallen in love with the sport despite the obvious handicaps involved with being a giant wolf. I turned toward the stairs, took a swallow of my piña colada . . . and then went to my knees when pain lashed my eyes and clawed at my right hand when my glass exploded.

"Down!" Melchior yelled somewhere behind me, followed by the sound of more shattering glass.

"Mine." Fenris's voice came out as an angry snarl, and I heard claws scrabbling on marble before a blurry gray streak raced past me.

Melchior arrived at my side in the next moment. "Boss, are you all right?" I wanted to say yes, but I didn't know yet. While the pain in my eyes had stopped getting worse, the signals from my hand had a shocky feeling I didn't like one little bit.

"What happened?" I demanded.

Melchior didn't answer immediately. Instead, he whistled a binary spell string that I recognized as "Better Living Through Chemistry" before jabbing a hollow claw freshly full of morphine into my right wrist. Not a good sign, that.

"Just hang on, Boss. I don't think it's as bad as it looks."

"I can't see shit, Mel. What happened?"

"Assassin. High-powered rifle, I think. If you hadn't turned when you did, we'd be picking up pieces of your skull. As it is, the bullet hit your drink, and maybe your hand. It's hard to tell what's what with all that blood."

*Damn it, damn it, damn it.* "Should I be scrambling for cover?"

"I expect Fenris has it under control, but getting off the balcony sure couldn't hurt."

"Guide me." I closed my eyes to minimize distractions.

Melchior caught hold of my right wrist and tugged. I followed on hand and knees.

"Let me give you a boost." Haemun wrapped a helpful arm around my waist.

After we slipped into the shadow of the roofed portion of the lanai, I let my next worry surface.

"How bad are my eyes?"

They felt like they were getting better but . . .

---

“I didn’t see any blood or glass fragments, but why don’t we have a closer look now.” Melchior halted our forward progress, and I felt his tiny fingers tugging at my eyelids.

I let him open them, and a blurry version of my inner lanai materialized. Mel’s attentions hurt, but I tried to hold still.

“I think they’re fine. You just got sprayed with alcohol when your piña colada exploded. That’s bound to sting something fierce, but I don’t see you going all Oedipus Rex anytime soon.”

“You have no idea what a relief that is, Mel.”

“Actually, having met the bundle of spite and bile that is your mother, I rather think I do. Just a second.” He whistled another string of binary, something extemporaneous this time. A moment later, I felt warm saline washing out my eyes.

“Much better.” I blinked several times as something like normal vision returned.

Haemun had flipped over a Hawaiian-print sofa, putting at least a visual block between us and anyone pointing a gun in our direction. So, temporarily out of the line of fire, check. Eyes functional, check. Time for item three on the triage list.

My right hand was a mess. Reflexes are a wonderful thing, except when they aren’t. Mine had closed the hand into a tight fist when the initial pain hit. Not the best plan in the world when your drink has just been converted into a rapidly expanding cloud of alcohol and broken glass.

“Ugly.” I rotated my half-open hand this way and that, trying to ignore the blood and focus on actual tissue damage.

“Can you move it?” asked Melchior.

“I guess I’d better try.” Not that I wanted to.

*Pinkie? Ow. Ring finger? Ow! Middle fi—aieee! Grit teeth. Index—owowow, not good. Bite tongue. Thumb? . . . Okay.* I flipped my right hand over and looked at the back. After a moment, I pointed at it with my left.

“You see that bloody spot, just inside the knuckles, between the index and middle fingers? Exit wound?”

Melchior nodded. “I think you’re right. Haemun, hold his wrist.” The satyr did as told, and I turned my head away. Even through the morphine, what Melchior did next made me want to scream.

“Small-caliber, high-velocity,” he said after a while. “Very clean shot, and it doesn’t look like it hit the bone or any major tendons. About as good as you could hope for, but once we get all of that glass out of your hand, we’re going to need to get you to someone who stitches better than I do. Hands are touchy.”

“I can do it,” said Haemun.

---

The satyr sounded as surprised by that as I felt. His reaction turned me back to face him once again.

“Really?” asked Melchior. “I didn’t know that about you.”

“Neither did I,” I said.

“That makes three of us,” said Haemun. “It wasn’t until Master Melchior said what he did that the knowledge came into my head. Though, when you consider the way you two live, it’s no surprise that Raven House would come equipped with a decent field surgeon.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Where do you want to work? I think I can crawl a bit farther now.”

“No need for crawling,” said Fenris from somewhere beyond the overturned couch, his voice sounding strangely muffled. “I got the shooter. I had to kill it, and it’s the weirdest damned thing I’ve seen in a very long life.”

I’m not sure what I expected Fenris to drag around the couch, but I know I got something entirely different. Different, and deeply unsettling.

“Why is a spinnerette trying to kill you?” asked Melchior.

That was a good question. Fenris dropped the limp body of the spider-centaur on the ground at my feet in a grim parody of a Labrador bringing a duck to its master. This one was longer and thinner than most, reminding me almost of a scorpion. I’d never seen one quite like it. It was also rougher and less refined than the normal model.

“I take it from your reaction that you two recognize this thing?” he said.

I nodded. “The spinnerettes are part of the network Fate built to control destiny in the days before Necessity created the mweb.”

“They work for Fate?” The huge wolf settled back on his haunches and started to scrub his mouth with his tongue like a dog eating peanut butter. “That’d sure explain the taste.” Fenris and his family disliked their version of the Fates every bit as much as I did mine, if somewhat less personally.

“Not exactly,” I replied. “They used to, but once Necessity’s network came along, Fate decided to surplus the lot of them.”

“Is that a fancy word for kill?” asked Fenris.

“I guess it is,” I said after a moment’s thought. “The whole thing happened years before my time, and with mixed results as you can see. It’s how my grandmother Lachesis always talked about it, as though the spinnerettes weren’t really alive—I guess I picked it up from her.”

“Have I mentioned recently how very screwed up your family is? Especially your grandmother and her sisters?” Melchior got up and went to walk around the dead spinnerette, leaving the job of picking glass out of my hand to Haemun, who had produced a pair of tweezers from . . . well, somewhere.

Lachesis isn't really my grandmother. There are actually quite a number of generations between the middle Fate and me, but no one sane could argue that the great sprawling family of the Greek gods is anything other than monumentally screwed up. Witness Eris's little game of psychologist. Or, more to the proximate point, the fact that the Fates still hadn't publicly acknowledged that the various webgoblins, webtrolls, and webpixies are fully autonomous individuals. An awful lot of Melchior's friends and relations had also been "surplused" by my grandmother and her sisters over the years.

"Do you want to jump in here?" I asked Fenris. I wanted to distract myself from the way Haemun's sharp little tugs seemed to transmit themselves all the way up my arm, as though he were actually pulling yard-long threads out of my flesh. "Melchior's absolutely right."

"Nope." He wrinkled his nose. "My father is the god of mischief. My mother is a Jotun. My brother is a world-girdling snake. My sister is *literally* half-dead. I don't throw stones at anybody's family. The 'kill' question was strictly for clarification's sake. I want to make sure I understand what's really going on around here." With his nose, he indicated the corpse. "If these things don't work for Fate anymore, whose side are they on?" I shrugged. "Necessity, maybe. At least the only one I've had dealings with was." The thought gave me a nasty little chill. "Back then, it saved my life. Now . . ."

"Now we have to wonder if the goddess that really runs our MythOS wants us dead," interjected Melchior.

"Well, that's no—" Fenris gagged abruptly, swallowed noisily, then started coughing. "Oh hell.

Not this again."

The coughs got harsher and harsher, quickly reverting to gagging. Tail down, and looking more than a little embarrassed, the giant wolf turned away from me and quietly threw up—splash, thud. The raw chaos that served as Fenris's answer to stomach acid immediately began eating a hole in the marble floor, while the severed hand that came up with it just lay there and twitched for several seconds. Finally, Laginn rolled over onto his palm and walked toward the spinnerette, leaving little smoking fingerprints in his wake.

"I wish you'd warn me before you do that," Fenris said to the hand. "That's the second time we've made a mess in Ravirn's home."

"Don't worry about it," I replied. "Raven House seems to self-repair."

"Yeah, right, it does," humphed Haemun, as he kept working on my hand.

Laginn seemed fascinated by the spinnerette—walking around and around the corpse. Then he stopped, and it started to circle him. Or maybe that was just the room spinning. Oh. Morphine and blood loss. Right.

Good night, Gracie.

When the world came back, I found that it had put me neatly away in my very own bed and tucked the covers in around my chin. Very considerate of it.

My room is on the second floor of Raven House and about three times as big as I would have picked



- [download online IPv6 Network Administration pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [Is Your Job Making You Fat?: How to Lose the Office 15 . . . and More! for free](#)
- [\*\*read Bodies in Crisis: Culture, Violence, and Women's Resistance in Neoliberal Argentina online\*\*](#)
- [read The Chemical Cosmos: A Guided Tour \(Astronomers' Universe\) pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)
- [read online Dead Room Farce \(Charles Paris, Book 17\) pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)
  
- <http://unpluggedtv.com/lib/The-BHS-Complete-Manual-of-Equitation--The-Training-of-Horse-and-Rider.pdf>
- <http://aneventshop.com/ebooks/Is-Your-Job-Making-You-Fat---How-to-Lose-the-Office-15-----and-More-.pdf>
- <http://www.mmastyles.com/books/The-Meaning-of-Disgust.pdf>
- <http://yachtwebsitedemo.com/books/Les-Destin--es-sentimentales.pdf>
- <http://interactmg.com/ebooks/Letters-to-My-Daughter-s-Killer--UK-Edition-.pdf>