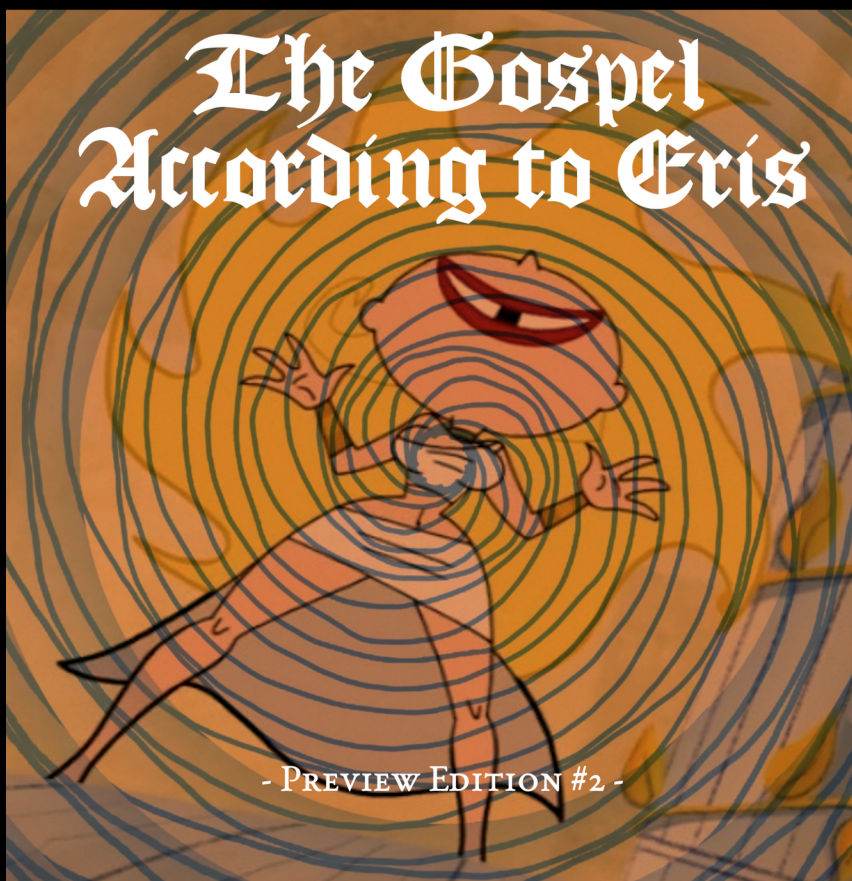


The Gospel According to Eris



- PREVIEW EDITION #2 -

The Gospel According to Eris

or, Glass Arm Shattering:
12 Short Stories About
the End of the World

as Divinely Revealed to and Truthfully Proclaimed by
His Most Holy High Reverence [CAPTAIN H.B.G. CORNFLAKE](#)
Heiropope and Grand Master Wizard of the
PARATHEO-ANAMETAMYSTIKHOOD OF ERIS ESOTERIC
([P.O.E.E.](#))

PREVIEW EDITION #2

ANONYMOUS EXTRA LEGIO

DISCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE

EVERGLADES CITY, FLORIDA - MMXXIII

*Greetings, chumps and chumpettes! It's me, **ERIS**, and I am here to declare for the various public and private Courts of this world, that this Official Statement of mine was Enabled by the following Actors, via the *Temple Of Discord*, which both World History and Divine Providence attest is *my* Exclusive legal domain:*

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The Paranoids Are Watching You!

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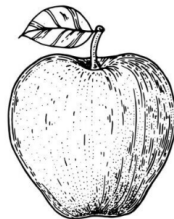
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From Captain H.B.G. Cornflake, CHIEF EXORCIST of *Anonymous*,
born of the REMNANT of the *Anglican Communion*,
drafted against his will as POPE into the *Ancient Discordian Mysterees*:

To the Twelve Tribes who are scattered over the face of the earth,
the band of /b/rothers who are scattered across the internet,
anyone who is seeking to discern WISDOM or the 7ruth,
and of course, the *Prettiest One*:

"He that hath ears to hear, let him hear..."



That which has been, it is that which shall be
And that which is done, is that which shall be done
And there is nothing new under the sun

Is there anything of which it may be said, “*See, this is new*”?
It has already been in ancient times, which were before us!

There is no remembrance of former things
Nor shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come
With those that shall come after

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES



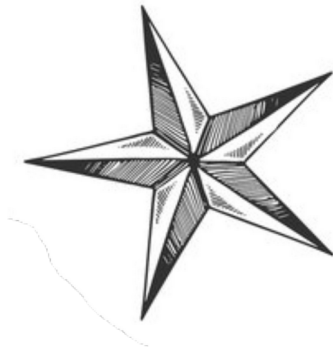
The Gospel According to Eris



AROUND ATHENS

- IN -

24 HOURS



“Do not reject these teachings
as false because I am crazy.

The reason that I am crazy
is because they are true.”

MALACLYPSE THE YOUNGER



old on, back up,” said Eris. “Dad said you’re off the job tomorrow?”

“That’s right,” said Dike from across the table at Dionysus’ bar.

“Zeus really just told the Goddess of Justice to stay away from the justice system?” asked a flabbergasted Calliope, who was also sitting with them. “The daughter he personally appointed to oversee it because he was too busy ‘*running Athens*’ to deal with the courts himself?”

“Father stormed into my office, and told me that he’s taking complete control of the court for the whole day tomorrow. I tried asking him why, but he kept dodging me. All he would tell me was that there was a really important case on the docket that he wanted to handle personally, and that ‘temporarily relieving the court of my inexperienced and impulsive feminine judgment was for the good of the CITY.’”

“What an asshole,” quipped Calliope, “but he still wouldn’t explain why?”

“Nope. But Socrates is on the docket, so I suspect this might be about that,” speculated Dike.

Eris slammed her fists on the table, and shook her head. “This is *definitely* about that.” Then, she proceeded to recount her own bizarre encounter with Zeus earlier that day.

Eris had been tidying up her home. When she was done, she poured herself a large cup of wine, and sat down to unwind at the little table she had set up by one of the windows overlooking the Attica basin. She was just about to have a drink, when her father barged into the cottage without knocking.

“I know you’ve been meeting with Socrates,” Zeus bellowed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Eris said with her most innocent face, before taking a sip of wine.

“Don’t play dumb with me. I know you’ve been giving him ideas and encouraging his aberrant behavior.”

“I don’t tell him to do anything. He comes up with everything on his own. I just tell him when his ideas are stupid and dangerous.”

“Well you didn’t tell him they were dangerous enough, because I’m here to let you know that this latest stunt of yours is over.”

“Is it now?”

“That’s right, Socrates’ days of causing trouble in Athens are at a conclusion. He is being charged with impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens, and tomorrow he will be tried and sentenced to death.”

“You’re going to *execute* him?”

“He is a charlatan and a threat to social cohesion.”

“Why even try him if you’re going to execute him anyways? And for what, because he doesn’t live inside your fantasy dream world?”

“Fantasy? Our family has ruled as gods over the Hellenic lands for over a—”

“Poisoning Grandpa? You never poisoned Grandpa!”

“Drama in the narrative keeps the people engaged and—”

“You turned Grandpa into this horrible monster that ate children and castrated his father! No wonder he’s nation building with the Latins without you!”

“Maybe when you actually contribute something to this city, you can have a say in how it gets run.”

“I don’t understand why you go through all this effort for your rigged little democracy. You subvert the entire process by doing things like possessing the minds of citizens, or shapeshifting into elected officials that are just your alter egos. It doesn’t make any sense!”

“***I. AM. ATHENS.*** And everyone else in this family does something that keeps the gears of this city moving. All you do is sleep and stir up trouble!”

“I am certainly doing more than that around here!”

“Look at the mess in here! This place is a disaster! I’ve never seen anyone so disorganized!” said Zeus, gesturing at the room she had just organized moments before he arrived. “And on top of that, you don’t even have a temple!”

“I’ve told you before, ***I don’t want a temple!***” protested a very frustrated Eris. She looked down and rubbed the bridge of her nose, before lifting her face back up to shout at her father. “This whole thing, where everyone is supposed to worship these creepy idealized versions of us... it’s insane, Dad!”

“It wouldn’t matter if you did want one. You couldn’t even get your act together enough to get one built.”

Eris glared at him. “You think that’s all it is? That I can’t build a dumb little temple like everyone else?”

“I *know* you can’t build a temple,” he retorted, laughing heartily. “You have the scope and vision of a drunk simpleton who is content to achieve nothing in her life. If your mother hadn’t given you this hovel, you would be living in a washtub with stray dogs in a back alley somewhere.”

Rage boiled in Eris. "I could have a temple built by this time tomorrow if I wanted!" she shouted, furious her dad would suggest she was simply too inept to do the stupid thing that the rest of her family was doing.

"You, finishing a temple? This time tomorrow?" Zeus laughed even harder, scaring away the birds that were perched on the roof of her home. "The only thing that's going to be finished tomorrow is this sorry attempt of yours at exploiting some deluded deviant for your own amusement!"

"You think this is over? Wait until you walk out of that courthouse and see the temple that I'm going to put up! You have no idea!"

Zeus laughed some more, wiped a tear from his eye, and walked towards the door. "If only that after dealing with Socrates for good, I could see my underachieving daughter to have finally built a temple for herself. Then I may be proud of her for once."

"Wow. That's even worse than anything he said to me today," remarked Dike, while Calliope was trying to calm Eris down by braiding her long golden hair.

"Then when he left, he slammed my door so hard that it broke off the frame," said Eris "He just left it sitting on the ground, and walked on down the road like nothing had happened. I've never felt so speechless before in my entire life."

"I've seen the worst criminals that Athens has to offer," said Dike. "Murderers. Rapists. Chariot Gangs. I've even had to arbitrate the most depraved disputes between our own temples. By comparison, Socrates barely crosses the line. I don't understand Father's obsession about him."

"He's just jealous that he doesn't have these mobs of teenage boys following him around," said Eris. "Dad, Hera and Athena have been completely snubbed by today's hipster youth of Athens, who instead hang on to Socrates' every word. It has him so eaten up by envy that he's looking for any excuse to get rid of the man."

"You know," said Calliope, "Apollo probably complained to him about your use of his Oracle."

Dike raised her eyebrow. “What did you do with his Oracle?”

“We had a casual conversation.”

“She hoofed it all the way to Delphi, gave her some rare Asiatic pharmakeia, and got her to tell Apollo’s visitors that Socrates is the smartest man in all Hellas,” revealed Calliope.

“You *drugged* the Oracle and got her to officially utter that in Apollo’s temple?”

“Apollo **already** drugs her, and on top of that he gives her *terrible* drugs!” retorted Eris. “And he does terrible things to her! So what if she said a few words in gratitude for me?”

“Speaking on behalf of a temple that you are not a part of is a serious offense! You know that Apollo can’t easily recant prophetic utterances in Delphi’s internal legal structure,” lectured Dike. “Remember how hard it was to change his name from Python?”

“So what? Are *you* going to do anything about it?” Eris asked.

“It’s a good thing for you that Delphi is outside of my jurisdiction.”

“Guess the Socrates statement is canon then,” jeered Eris.

“You really are following in your mother’s footsteps,” sneered back Dike.

“I wish! Mom also has a lot of shiphands working for her. I have nothing!” lamented Eris. “I don’t even get to keep any of Socrates’ followers because Dad ‘*decreed*’ them all to Apollo and Hermes. Now he executes the closest thing I have to an acolyte! How am I supposed to build a temple on my own?”

“It’s really not that hard,” said Calliope.

“But I don’t even know where to start!” pouted Eris. “What is a temple even supposed to be? Just some macabre harem of corruption and degeneracy where people go to sacrifice animals to me?”

“If you want it to be.” Dike then began to explain, best as she could in simple terms for an increasingly intoxicated Eris, the clever legal and bureaucratic framework that made up the Hellenic temple

system. “A lot of our family members have temples without altars or animal sacrifice. Take Poseidon’s seaport in Piraeus, for example. He doesn’t have a single building of worship down there: His ‘temple’ is the docks, and it controls everything that comes in and out of the Bay of Zea. He has more traditional temples elsewhere, but the port dwarfs all of them. Or you can just ask Calliope. She has a temple registered with the CTRY at ‘no address’ followed by a heart.”

“You could say that my temple is the music people write and sing about me,” added Calliope.

“That sounds like a great way out of this, but to win this bet I have to get something built.”

“Physical temples are a bit more complicated,” continued Dike. “Since you’re family, I’ll waive all the permit requirements to help expedite this. But you still need to find contractors that are skilled enough to assemble something without it collapsing on citizens under its own weight. Not to mention a place to put it.”

“I still don’t quite understand what a temple is supposed to *do*,” said Eris, still very confused. “There are so many different types of temples, and they all operate by different rules.”

“You need to think of it this way: A temple is simply a sort of tax-exempt private business, whose internal operations are offered a great degree of privacy from the outside world. Temples generally house key parts of the Athenian economy and government under the stewardship of one of our family members. They show partiality to other temples when awarding state contracts, protect artifacts of national interest, and provide secure lines of communication to our temples that govern the Colonies. The layering is so complex that even parts of the legal code that govern all this are hidden away to a select few.”

“That sounds like a life meant for professionally trained lawyers.” Eris felt defeated already. “I’m in way over my head.”

“Don’t give up!” said Calliope, trying to encourage her. “Most of us had to start our temples from scratch. Just find your niche, like

Dionysus did with this bar, and everyone else will give you everything you need.”

“Or like the niche your mother carved out with her smuggling business,” said Dike. “Father grumbles about her, but all the temples need her more than she needs them.”

“Eureka!” exclaimed Calliope. “Just ask your mom for help!”

“I don’t know,” said Eris. “She doesn’t have her own temple, either.”

However, Dike picked up on the relevance of this idea right away. “I think you should talk to her anyways. A temple is just a front business, and your mother probably knows more about running front businesses than anyone else in all Hellas.”

“Besides,” said Calliope, “she has a handful of Oracles of her own, does she not? She’s probably not as out of depth on this matter as you think.”

Eris pondered for a moment, stood up, and put her hands on her hips. “You know, I think you two are right.” She was now seriously considering the idea. “She has statues and altars too, but she doesn’t build or manage any of them. Everything is delegated out. She’s in port tonight, I could just walk down to the Bay and ask to borrow some of her men. Problem solved.”



ris set out early in the evening to make the descent to the Bay. The Long Walls had been left in ruin for a few years now, but Eris preferred it that way, as now she could see more of the

countryside from the road to Piraeus. She liked her walks to the sea, especially in the late afternoon when the heat of the day started to cool off.

The sun was beginning to hang low when she arrived at the docks. Poseidon was inspecting fish being unloaded from a caique, when Eris found him.

“Uncle Po!” Eris shouted across the docks, “Is Mom here yet?”

“She just got here not too long ago!” Poseidon shouted back, barely looking up from his work. “They’re unloading on the dock at the far end. You better hurry if you want to talk to her though – It didn’t sound like they were staying here too long!”

The scene Eris found at the end of the docks was chaotic. There in all its glory, was Nyx’s flagship, the RANGOON. Scurrying to and from the RANGOON with crates and cargo was a small army of dockworkers and deckhands. In the midst of the frenzy was her mother, Nyx, barking orders and yelling at people. While shorter than everyone else on the dock and obscured by the throng, her presence was undeniable.

“Mom!” Eris shouted.

“Darling!” Nyx’s voice echoed out. A gap immediately formed in the crowd (lest anyone be thrown into the water by Nyx for being in her way) and she came out and embraced Eris. “How splendid it is that I can see my daughter on this layover! What brings you down here?”

“I’m actually kind of in a urgent bind,” said Eris, “Dad got me riled up in an argument that he started. Now I’m trapped in a stupid bet with him, and if I lose, he’s never going to let me hear the end of it.”

“This already sounds like another one of your father’s classic power plays,” said Nyx, dramatically squinting her eyes and clenching one of her fists. “Don’t worry, he can’t really do anything to you. You already know how easy it is to misdirect him or keep him occupied with Hera.”

“That’s what I came to you for. I’m in way over my head. I need your help.”

“Anything at all for my precious daughter,” said Nyx. “What exactly is the wager over?”

“I’m supposed to build a temple for myself by the time the courthouse closes tomorrow.”

“Oh, I’m so proud of you!” Nyx hugged Eris again. “Getting it going is the hardest part, I’m told. I have people build my cult facilities for me, so I don’t have to deal with the mechanics of it all. Oh, but the amount of business I could send your way! A Temple of Discord right here in Athens would be a great node in my worldwide network of front operations!”

“So you’ll help me build it?”

“I don’t know how to build those things. Like I said, I have people who handle that for me.”

“Can I borrow them? I have no idea how to build one of these things either.”

Nyx laughed. “Your temple is supposed to be an expression of you, my dear. Whatever you come up with, I know it will be perfect.”

“How can I come up with anything if I don’t even know where to start?” begged Eris.

“That’s nonsense, darling. You’re related to every power player and temple owner in Athens. Surely, you can coordinate suppliers for a temple.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do!”

“I’d love to keep cheering you from the sidelines here darling, but I have to get back out to sea with these swords, drugs and chariots before the sun goes down.” Nyx hugged Eris one more time. “I believe in you, dear! Good luck!” she said, and then vanished back into the crowd to continue shouting expletives and insults at deckhands and dockworkers.

Eris felt defeated. She sulked her way back towards the main gates of the seaport. The fish she saw being unloaded earlier were already being packed into a cart for the CITY. Poseidon was now untying the vessel. Eris was too busy in her head, staring at the ground as she walked, to notice any of this.

As Poseidon finished sending the caique back out to sea, he noticed Eris walking back up the docks.

“Catch her in time?” Poseidon asked.

Eris looked up. “Yeah, she was still there.”

Poseidon perceived through the tone of her voice that something was troubling her. “Is there something else?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” said Eris, looking back down as she kept walking.

“I didn’t fall off the turnip cart yesterday, kiddo. What’s up?”

Eris stopped and thought about it for a moment, and told Poseidon about the bet.

“So Athens is finally going to have a Temple of Discord!” he exclaimed excitedly.

“If I can even get one built. But I don’t even want one in the first place, so I’m not motivated or inspired by anything except to spite Dad.”

Poseidon laughed. This was a regular position for him to be in. Very often he found himself mediating disputes between Zeus and other members of the family.

“I wish I could offer you advice, but I’m past my temple building days,” said Poseidon. “Ever since Athena won the heart of Athens, I’ve found more purpose just being woven into the fabric of the CITY’s economy.”

“That sounds like the life, Uncle Po. Unassuming and simple. Who needs a personality cult? Reality is way more fascinating. Imagine what the Athenians would say if they knew the Great God of the Seas was actually just some old man that worked at the seaport!”

“Imagine what the Athenians would say if they knew the Great God of the Seas couldn’t even control the seas.” Poseidon solemnly stared off at the waters. While he was generally pretty rational compared to her father, there were still times that he seemed to be genuinely upset that he wasn’t as powerful as the state religion said he was.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Eris said, already regretting having said anything. “You run this seaport because nobody else here knows the sea as well as you do.”

“I can tell where storms are clear across the ocean and what direction they’re moving in. I can listen to the sounds of all the creatures in the sea and understand what they are saying.”

“That’s still pretty impressive,” said Eris, genuinely jealous as she had long wished to understand the speech of the beasts.

“But I am no God, for I cannot even alter the whims of the waves or winds or tides. Small local events, sure. But anytime I try to really control the sea, it just goes right back to whatever it was doing as if I were not even there.”

Eris was rapidly getting impatient. She had more important things to worry about right now. She never felt any of this inane lament about her own inability to control Discord, despite knowing much about how to spread Discord.

“Well,” she said, trying to wedge in an exit, “I’ve got less than a day to figure out how I’m going to win this bet. Have a good night Uncle Po.”

Poseidon, however, did not hear her. He was too focused on trying to alter the tides, again. Now he was the one unaware of their surroundings. As Eris left, she could see the veins throbbing on his neck and forehead as he stared at the sea with an intense determination.

Eris walked further up the docks and past the edge of the seaport. She just wanted to be away from everyone, human and ‘god’, right now, and she knew a secluded spot up the undeveloped part of the shoreline to go hide at.

The sun was touching the horizon by the time she got there. She climbed atop her usual perch – a large boulder – and let out a long exasperated sigh.

How am I going to build something that I don't even want to build? Eris thought hopelessly to herself. She was young, comparatively speaking to the other gods of Athens, borne after her family had settled in the lands of the Hellenes. She was not, however, naive. She had been around long enough to see how this bizarre cult of theirs had warped the minds of everyone who got too deep into it. It seemed the more temples and followers one had, the more mentally unstable they were.

Eris felt the most pity for the Hellenes. The burden of labor inflicted on the Cities and Colonies to maintain the cult images seemed like such a waste of everyone's time and energy. But worst of all, many of the citizens of Athens carried about with a sad and pathetic countenance — dependent on looking at statues of idealized versions of Zeus and Hera and Athena and the rest of the clan for purpose and direction. Lost souls, doomed to wandering the land forever with no grounding of who they are or where they really came from.

The family wasn't much better in that regard. None of them could (or would) tell her about where they came from. She knew at various points in time, before she was born, they had lived in Babylon, Assyria, Phoenicia, Egypt, and even more places that she hadn't yet figured out. If they really were from the stars as the Priests and Oracles claimed, they sure never talked about it around her behind the scenes.

She was still a child when she figured out something strange was up. It was the very same day Zeus bestowed upon her an official state title: THE GODDESS OF DISCORD.

“Dad, how am I a goddess of Discord?” Eris asked him.

“**THE** Goddess of Discord,” Zeus said patronizingly. “And the how is that we were born gods.”

“So how do I control Discord?”

“You’re already pretty good at causing it.”

“But how do I *control* it? How do I just will a whole field of allied soldiers to turn their swords against each other? Or how do I flip it the other way, and reign in an angry mob?”

“You control it about as much as I can control the Air,” Zeus said, almost longingly. Eris then realized she had never actually seen him throw a thunderbolt at anyone.

“So, what you are saying then, is that we aren’t really gods.”

“We have ruled as gods for thousands of years, and we will do so until the end of time!” Zeus snapped at her.

Eris pondered this moment, and many other conversations with him over the years, as she watched the sun set. For years, she resisted getting her own temples or statues or anything else of that sort. She was content with her little dwelling and no servants. She walked everywhere and abhorred the idea of making the humans carry or cart her around. She never possessed the humans and rarely took advantage of them. If ever she needed a favor from anyone, she had an endless supply of free contraband and rare oddities to barter from her mom’s smuggling business.

I suppose I can always have the temple destroyed after I win the bet. Best not to leave this thing up. Otherwise, I’ll just end up going insane like everyone else.

But she still had no idea how she was going to get one built.

Eris yawned. The sky had long since gotten dark, and the stars were starting to come out.

“Oh well, guess that’s a problem for Future Eris,” she said out loud. She stood up, stretched, and started the long walk back to the CITY.



ust as the sun came up the next morning, Eris grabbed her leather satchel and set out for Hephaestus' workshop. If her mom wouldn't source her anything for a temple, his shop was the next best place to ask around.

Hephaestus was already awake, working by himself at his forge when she walked in. "Heff!" she yelled while waving excitedly to get his attention.

"Morning Eris!" he responded, smiling. "What brings you in here today?"

"I need a really big favor," she said.

"Uh oh, what is it?" he asked, already suspicious.

"Long story short, I have a bet with Dad, and to win it I need to build a temple for myself."

"You, a temple?" Hephaestus laughed. "I never thought I'd see the day! Well you certainly came to the right place!"

"Yeah, and I need it done by the end of the day."

Hephaestus paused for a moment, and set down his tools. "Are you kidding me?"

"Nope! What can we throw together?"

"In a *day*?"

"Really more like ten hours."

"*Ten hours?!*"

"Yeah, I've really got to prove Dad wrong on this one."

“Eris, I’m excited for you here, but what you’re asking for is beyond impossible. Temples take months to build, years even. Lots of planning and work goes into construction projects like that. You can’t just throw one together in half a day.”

“Come on Heff. I know you’ve got that lot out back full of altars and pedestals that clients never paid you for. Besides, you still owe me for helping you get revenge on Aphrodite and Ares.”

Hephaestus gulped. “That’s not fair,” he protested, “I didn’t even get the full dowery back.”

“Listen, **Heffy**,” Eris said, irritated. “You could’ve gotten it back if you were a little more persistent with Dad. It’s not my fault you got lazy and sold the debt to Uncle Po for a fraction of its value. Now I went out of my way to help you that night, and you still owe me for it.”

Eris glared at Hephaestus, waiting for an answer. He had no choice but to acquiesce, and try to move on with this unscheduled custom job as quickly as possible. “I can get you an altar, but that’s not quite a full temple. Temples have walls, columns, support beams, archways, lintels... Do you even have a place to build all this?”

“I figured I’d sort that part out later. Show me what you’ve got back there.”

Hephaestus groaned, and ushered her out back.

Eris browsed around all the incomplete and abandoned projects, until she stopped at a simple altar made of beautiful white marble. It was a chest-high altar, half as wide as it was tall, as deep as it was wide, and completely clean of any kind of inscription. “What’s the story with this one?” she asked, pointing at it.

“Oh, Mother left that one here. Suddenly decided that she didn’t want marble, after I had already completed most of it.”

“Classic clueless Hera move.”

“I wasted so much time making it. Now it sits here like a cursed albatross in this lot of broken dreams,” bemoaned Hephaestus.

“I’ll take it off your hands.”

“Wait, what?”

“Yeah, I’ll take it. What’s left on it?”

“Well, it just needs some of the rough edges cleaned up.”

Eris suddenly felt optimistic about her situation. “It’s perfect. How soon can you finish it?”

“I’ve got some other work to wrap up this morning, but I can have it ready to go by the afternoon. But what about, you know, a building for it to go in? What am I inscribing on this?”

“I can figure that out. I’ll let you know what to inscribe on it when I get back.” Eris would have loved to hang out, as she always enjoyed watching happenings at the workshop, but she had someone else to visit before it got to be too late.



Socrates went out his front door to walk to the courthouse for his trial. There he found Eris waiting for him, leaning against the wall of his home.

“Didaskalos!” he exclaimed.

“The youth of Athens calls you that. I am merely a friend.”

“I am still unfitting to be called anyone’s teacher.”

“You say that you know nothing, but you are still wiser than all men in Hellas.”

“As spoken of by the Oracle!” Socrates laughed. “So have you come to stop me from going?”

“You march towards certain death, but no, I have not.”

“Then so I must march.”

“But... *why?*”

“For the good of the Crry that I love, and have always loved. To turn my back on the rule of law now would be to invite Anarchy, and bring Chaos and Ruin.”

“Even if the law is a mere illusion?”

“Even if so, it is not my place to upend the peace of Athens. Everything that I have done, has been done in accordance with our people’s law. I am too old to change that course now.”

“I see. So you are going to make yourself an example,” Eris discerned.

“For all future generations, in the cities of Hellas and everywhere else. Besides, all I have to return home to is my vain and dimwitted wife, who daily throws urine and feces at me. Soon I will get the best sleep I have had in a long time.”

“It is still a shame. Athens is going to be a lot less entertaining without you around, babysitting everyone’s children. If anything, the Crry should be compensating you financially for the valuable service you provide.”

“I’ll be sure to tell the court that,” laughed Socrates.

Eris laughed too. Then, after an awkward period of silence, Socrates asked “Is it true that, after I die, I will finally meet Zeus and all the other gods?”

Eris chuckled, and shook her head. She had never quite fully explained to him her relation to the other ‘gods’ of Hellas, nor the bizarre and confusing way her father managed Athens. *No time to explain it now*, she thought regretfully. “My dearest Socrates,” she said dotingly, “there are things about Death that even the gods do not understand.”

“I suppose I shall find out for myself then.”

Eris gave a salute. Socrates did the same, before turning back to the road.

“Give ‘em hell, kid,” Eris said, as Socrates walked courageously towards his fate.



Eris next set out for the eastern rocky outcrops of the CITY, where Hecate’s cave was located. Hecate, much like herself, was also somewhat of a loner. Hecate didn’t care so much about the politics of the CITY or the glamour of temple worship. Instead, she spent most of her time inside her cave workshop, tinkering with magical inventions and poking at the fabric of reality itself.

With the deadline getting uncomfortably close, it was time to play a traditionally reliable wild card.

When Eris got there, Hecate was standing over her bubbling cauldron in her Crone form, stirring away. Without looking up, she croaked out:

Discord has risen today
Serving the notice of a new age

“What do you know about that?”

Transforming into her Mother form, Hecate said:

Self-appointed gods ensure dissidents are shunned
But through Discord, all their Workings shall be undone

“What on earth are you talking about?”

Hecate transformed into her Maiden form, and shrieked:

**Your charge serves only the agenda of Creation!
Not even Daddy can contain you!**

“Come on H, stop playing games.”

“Awww, you never let me have any fun.” Hecate transformed into her normal self. “Anyways, come in! Come in!” she said, ushering Eris over to the cauldron.

“What do you got brewing up in here today?”

“A little something to help you win your bet with Zeus.”

“You know already?”

“Honey, I’ve been watching you hike all over Athens,” Hecate waved her hand through the steam over the cauldron. A slew of images of Eris since the prior afternoon appeared on the surface of the hazy green liquid inside.

“This is absolutely creepy, H.”

“I call it CAULDRONVISION,” Hecate boasted, quite proud of her invention. “If you think that’s creepy, you should take a look at what’s live on Channel 2.” Hecate waved her hand through the steam again. Hestia appeared on the surface, polishing the stones of a hearth with a threadbare rag. When she was done, she arranged a series of statues and vases on and around it, stepped back to look at the whole hearth, and then rearranged them again. After repeating this whole process several times, she pulled everything back away from the hearth and started polishing it again.

“Aunt Hestia is being a little obsessive about this fireplace,” remarked Eris.

“A ‘*little*’ would be a major understatement here,” Hecate dryly responded.

“What do you mean?”

“She’s been at this for seven days.”

“Seven *days*?” Eris asked in disbelief.

“She hasn’t left her house. She hasn’t eaten. She hasn’t slept. She hasn’t done *anything* since she started cleaning this hearth.”

Grumbles and curses echoed from the cauldron as Hestia pulled everything back away from the hearth again, and started buffing it with the polishing rag even harder than before.

“What’s wrong with her? Is she sick? Poisoned? High?”

“I’m not sure what’s wrong with her, but it’s nothing like that.” Hecate was staring almost sympathetically at Hestia. “This goes way back with her, I think. Every so often her mind reverts to this basic routine. She just shuts herself inside and cleans this hearth, and she doesn’t come out until she can light a fire in there that doesn’t send her into a boiling rage.”

Eris watched as her aunt continued to polish the hearth in an endless loop, and began to understand what she was looking at. Internally, she recoiled in horror when she started to feel a sense of empathy. How many of her own sleepless nights had Eris spent stress-cleaning her cottage in a manic blur? “You’re right,” she admitted, “This is creepier.”

“Oh, you still have no idea.” Hecate waved her hand over the cauldron again. Hestia faded from the surface, and Ares’ appeared in its stead. Then, after a bright flash of light overtook his face and even lit up Hecate’s workshop, Ares started laughing maniacally.

“What is he laughing at?” asked Eris. “And what was that burst of light?”

“I’m not sure,” said Hecate. She waved, pulling back the perspective of the cauldron until it displayed the rest of Ares’ body and his surroundings. He was lying on his stomach in a field, his face propped up in his hand, in front of an anthill the size of his head.

Ares reached his finger to one of the many ants crawling around the anthill. Then a brief flame shot out of the tip of his finger, reducing the ant to ash. As a tiny plume of smoke went up, he started laughing again.

“I told you that I was going to come back here and kill your whole family.” Ares giggled as he delicately picked up the lifeless (and limbless) exoskeleton of the only dead ant that had not been burned, and held it up to his face to stare it down. “You didn’t believe me when I said I held their fate in my hand. Now you will stay here with me, and watch them all perish, as have entire nations before them.” He gently set the ant back down on a rock, as if to give the corpse a view of the entire battlefield. Then, utterly destroying another ant in a burst of flame, Ares’ eyes went wide as he let out a hearty cackle.

Eris wasn’t shocked that Ares was going hard on an ant colony. She had seen him use his pyrokinesis on actual people many times. What did unsettle her, however, was how Ares was carrying the biggest smile she had ever seen on him in her entire life.

While Ares was torching ants one-by-one, Enyo walked up behind him, choking on tears. “H-h-honey, I don’t want to b-bother you, but Sparta has kidnapped and chained up little Enyalios!” she stammered out.

Ares’ smile suddenly dropped into an irritated scowl. “Do I hear the sound of someone rudely interrupting me at work?”

“I’m sorry, but our son—”

“Do **you** want to be chained up as well, and have **your** limbs torn off, and have **your** pretty little body roasted to a crisp in *The Battle Of The Ants*? Because if you don’t, then you should **quietly** go back inside and figure out how you’re going to apologize to me when I get home from work!” he shouted, still not looking away from the anthill.

Enyo left, trying as hard as she could to muffle the sounds of her sobbing in her hands and arms. Ares went back to annihilating ants, and his smile returned as jarringly as it had left.

“How many more ‘*channels*’ do you have on this thing?” asked Eris, as the room lit up with the light of another ant being rubbed out to the sound of hysterical laughter.

“I’m not sure yet. Billions, I think.”

The room glowed again, and Ares laughed again.

“Can we change it to something where the main character is a *little less sadistic*?”

“I’ll try,” said Hecate, waving her hand a couple times through the steam, “but it’s hard to predict what this thing is going to show sometimes.”

Ares vanished, and the surface of the cauldron settled on a scene of Apollo and Hermes. They were sitting alone on an open patio, facing the Bay, and smoking a handful of substances from an array of pipes on a table between them.

Eris and Hecate were both relieved that Apollo and Hermes were only getting high, and not up to their usual psychotic shenanigans.

Or so it was, until Hermes spoke up.

“I’ve been thinking of our conversation the other day, about what new hilarious and degrading things we should trick the humans into doing next. Specifically what you kept saying: That the glory days of the cults are over, everything is going to be a rehash, and we’re never going to have fun with this again.”

Apollo nodded out an “*mhmm*,” holding in a lungful of smoke.

“Bro, I gotta say, I think you’re being way too cynical about this. We haven’t yet begun to think outside the box. We just have to take this in a more abstract direction.”

“And just what ‘*abstract direction*’ is that?” asked a very bored and cynical Apollo, rolling his eyes before taking another hit off of his pipe.

“Let’s get the humans to worship prime numbers.”

Apollo choked and began coughing, then exclaimed, “Dude, that’s brilliant!”

Eris and Hecate both stared at the cauldron, speechless, as Apollo and Hermes stood up together and started flexing their muscles, grunting out Pythagorean code words and fist-bumping each other.

“See what I mean?” Hecate dismissively gestured through the fog to send the foul image away. “It’s a little hard to predict what this thing is going to show sometimes.”

“I think I’ve had enough of watching the idiots on the CAULDRONVISION for one day anyways,” shuddered Eris, eager to move on. “Besides, how is this going to help me win the bet?”

“It helped me find you a vacant lot on the Acropolis for the new Temple of Discord.” Hecate theatrically waved again. “*Behold!* The perfect location!”

The Parthenon appeared on the surface.

Eris was confused. “That’s Athena’s temple. I can’t build there.”

“Not the temple. The alley behind it.”

“I should build in *the alley?*”

“Sort of. Due to an accidental ancient oversight by the CITY, a tiny sliver of that alley is private property. The latest longstanding owner was an Athenian citizen who died childless in one of the battles between Athens and Sparta.” Hecate waved, and the perspective of the cauldron closed in on the part of the alley in question. “I bought it off his nephew earlier today in exchange for pronouncing a curse of painful warts on several of their family’s enemies. It’s small, but just big enough to fit—”

“An altar,” Eris finished, finally understanding what Hecate had done for her.

A big mischievous grin flashed on Hecate’s face. She grabbed a papyrus scroll from her workbench and handed it to Eris. “Here’s the deed. I took the liberty of putting it in your name.”

“Well, that definitely solves a major obstacle I hadn’t yet figured out,” Eris put the deed in her satchel. “Thank you so much, I don’t know how to repay you.”

“I’m just in it to see the look on Zeus’ face.”

“It looks like you’ve got yourself the perfect vantage point in here.”

“Heh heh heh....”



ris was sitting on a rock besides one of the CITY’s sloped streets. She had her own plot of land in the heart of the Acropolis, by far the most coveted and respected part of the CITY for temple addresses, and a tasteful marble altar to put on it. Now she needed to figure out exactly *what* to inscribe on the altar.

However, she was drawing blanks. She had no idea what to wrap around her name or official state title without it sounding presumptuous and narcissistic.

And time was running out.

I can’t believe I let Dad goad me into this. I never should have made this stupid bet, she thought hopelessly to herself.

Meanwhile, an acolyte from Aphrodite’s temple was savagely whipping a donkey that was straining to pull a cart full of apples up the hill.

That disease-ridden copycat doesn’t even like apples, Eris thought, shaking her head. Then she felt a tug on her clothes. She looked down, and saw a frail orphan boy in rags.

“Please miss, I’m starving. Do you have something I can eat?”

“Sorry kid, I’ve got nothing.”

“Oh, okay...” he replied meekly, and wandered off down a side street.

Eris looked at Aphrodite’s cart full of apples again, and the donkey being whipped. She thought about how many starving people lived in Athens — *while hundreds of perfectly edible apples were being wasted every week in Aphrodite’s freakshow temple and its violent sex magick rituals* — and felt disgusted. For all the talk that Dad had about ‘*running Athens*,’ it oftentimes didn’t seem to be run very well at all.

Then, out of nowhere, a great falcon flew up the hill screeching. As it did, it buzzed right next to the donkey, which in turn spooked. As the donkey started thrashing around, the acolyte was thrown down to the ground, and a barrage of apples was sent rolling in all directions down the street.

As a large golden-yellow apple came to rest in front of Eris' feet, she looked at the falcon. It had perched itself on the corner of a housetop, preening its feathers. *Just a regular falcon.* She looked around, sensing a very deliberate thing had just happened, but could not sense any superhuman presence. She looked at the apple at her feet. Then she looked at the falcon again. Then she looked at the acolyte (certain to be beaten to death later by an army of eunuchs and prostitutes, unless he fled the CITY) who was now being helped to his feet by an old woman. Then, as if all the Mysteries of Creation dawned on her at once, she reached down, grabbed the apple, and took off as fast as she could after the orphan child.

"Hey kid, wait up!"



Eris strolled back into Hephaestus' shop just as he was putting the finishing touches on Eris' new altar.

"It looks beautiful, Heff!" she said, looking it over.

"Thanks! I've had fun with this one today. I never thought I'd get closure on this old hunk of stone. Decide what you want on it yet?"

"Yeah! Just put **'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD'** in big bold letters."

Hephaestus paused what he was doing, and looked back up at Eris. "Are you serious? I get the feeling like Father is gonna flip when he sees something that, uh, *unorthodox*."

"Dad lets Apollo and Hermes get away with the unhinged circuses of depravity that are the Orphics and Pythagoreans."

"That's different. Apollo is Father's favorite child. He can get away with anything he wants."

"They're having the humans *literally* worship prime numbers now."

"My point still stands. And I still don't want to deal with Father today."

"I'll deal with Dad myself. Just do it, please."

Hephaestus sighed. "Fine, but we're even after this one."

"You've got it." Eris watched Hephaestus pick back up his tools and chisel the phrase into the big empty spot on the front of the altar.

"There." He set his tools down, and blew the dust off of his creation. "It is finished."

Eris admired it for a minute, and thanked him. Then she picked up the big pillar of marble and set it on top of her shoulder.

"Uhhh," said Hephaestus, uneasier than ever. "You want a cart and a donkey for that?"

"I think I can handle this part. I ought to do some of this work myself, right?"

"I mean, the normal citizens are going to freak out when they see a tiny lady like you carrying a five ton piece of stone with one arm."

"Fine." Eris transformed herself into a tall burly Athenian soldier. "Just get Dike and Calliope and meet me behind the Parthenon in an hour for the dedication."

"You're doing this *behind the Parthenon*?"

"Just meet me there!" she said, jogging off with the alter.



ris set the altar down on her new plot of land, and after checking that nobody was watching, transformed back into her normal self. She pulled the deed out of her satchel, lined the altar up between the narrow property lines defined in the deed, and took a few steps back to admire how it all looked.

It looked like something she never expected: A thing that she hoped would actually stay there until, like her dad said, “the end of time.” There was only one thing missing: Alcohol. So she put the deed back into her satchel and dashed back over to Dionysus’ place.

Dionysus was working behind the bar when she showed up. “Here for a drink?” he asked her when she walked in. “I just heard about Socrates. You can have whatever you want on the house today.”

“I’m here for several drinks, actually,” she replied, walking behind the bar. She scanned the rows of amphoras for all the ones with Hera’s name on them, and of those grabbed the fanciest looking of the largest ones.

“Whoa, hold on there,” he said, grabbing it out of her hand. “This one isn’t for customers. This is a special order for Hera’s temple.”

“I know full well what it is,” she said, grabbing it back and stuffing it into her satchel, which it awkwardly stuck out of. “I have a temple of my own to dedicate in a few minutes to win a bet with Dad.”

“Hera’s gonna kill me if she finds out I let you take that.”

“Just tell her that I beat you up on OFFICIAL DISCORDIAN TEMPLE BUSINESS,” she said, winking. “And that afterwards, I *single-handedly* ran out of here with her precious wine, screaming about how she has a horse face and that she constantly smells of rotten fish.”

“Eris...” weakly protested Dionysus, trying not to laugh.

“Dad and Hera can’t get mad at you if I’m the one that said it-”
Eris lilted. She knew that Dionysus wouldn’t take much convincing. After all, Hera had a massive outstanding tab, and her horsey countenance and rank fishy stench were popular subjects of jokes in his bar.

Eris also knew that she would have plenty of time to get out of town. *Dad probably won’t find out about the heist until Hera spends all night yelling at him. He asked for this. He probably won’t hear the end of it for weeks. Maybe it’s finally time to visit Grandpa in Rome...*

Dionysus relented, and let Eris start walking away out with the wine. She paused at the door and turned around. “You can come by for the dedication if you want.”

“I can’t. I’m short-staffed. All of my workers are hungover today, and I’ve got a dozen different temples besides yours breathing down my neck.”

“Your loss,” she said, and stuck her tongue out before walking outside. She had walked a little ways up the street when she heard Dionysus shout her name. She turned around to see him outside, waving a second large corked amphora of Hera’s wine over his head.

“Make it a party!” he shouted, tossing the amphora to her, which she caught gracefully. “You only get one opening night!”



ephaestus, Calliope and Dike were already waiting at the altar when Eris got back. They passed one of the amphoras around, all taking many long swigs, until Eris stopped them when there was just one seventh remaining. Then, Eris let out a long wolf-like howl, and smashed the amphora on the altar, sending wine and chunks of clay all over the alley.

At that moment, Zeus, who had just left the courthouse, walked down the alley. “**Just what lawless commotion is going on back here?!**” he bellowed.

“Just dedicating my new temple,” Eris boasted proudly. “What do you have to say about that?”

“This is your temple? An altar next to Athena’s temple in a public alleyway?” Zeus asked in disbelief, looking at the altar.

“Actually, this part of the alleyway is *mine*,” she responded, pulling the deed out of her satchel and handing it to Dike.

Dike looked it over. “It checks out. Legally that little patch of ground is the sole property of Eris.”

“*Give me that!*” snapped Zeus, snatching the deed out of Dike’s hand as everyone else watched and waited. Eris looked smug, while Calliope could barely contain a grin. Hephaestus was on the verge of a panic attack. Zeus looked the deed up and down, and then looked it up and down again. “Is she properly registered with the CITY?” he finally asked.

“My office has officially witnessed the dedication of this temple, and everything is clear with the permit department,” Dike explained.

With a raised eyebrow, he calmly handed the deed back to Eris. Then he walked over to the altar, ran his fingers across the surface, and squatted down to examine it. “So what is this about: **’TO AN UNKNOWN GOD?’**” he asked.

“That is Athens’ newest mystery cult!” Eris enthusiastically replied. She watched Zeus feel out the smoothness of the fancy notched

bevel that Hephaestus had run along many of the edges of the altar. Then quickly, she added, “And before you ask why it’s outdoors, you know how much I love simplicity.”

“It is very simple,” mumbled Zeus, still running his hands along the altar. “I do like the craftsmanship of this marble though. Did you get Hephaestus to do all this in one day?”

“Actually, I—” started Hephaestus, but Eris interrupted to say “**Yeah**, he did *all that* today!”

“Impressive,” said Zeus. “Well, I’ll give you credit – you know how to subcontract out.”

“I had to call in the big guns since you’ve got my acolyte imprisoned.”

The comment went over Zeus’ head. With Socrates now condemned on death row, Zeus had completely forgotten about his existence. He instead, stood up. “Well, it is a very odd temple, and I still don’t quite understand it, but I suppose I’ve underestimated you here,” he conceded. “Maybe we’ll make a productive Athenian out of you yet.”

Eris put on her biggest “*I told you so*” face, and then Zeus turned to face Dike.

“Are you ready to go back to work tomorrow?” he asked her. “We’ve got a long docket ahead of us.”

“Actually,” said Dike, “Tomorrow is the first day of my vacation. You’re on your own for a few weeks.”

“Whatever,” said Zeus, straightening his chlamys. “I wish I could stay here getting drunk in an alley with you lesser gods, but I have a city to run.”

As Zeus went to leave the alley, he walked right past the second amphora, not even noticing Hera’s name scrawled on it in multiple places as he passed.

“Well,” said Hephaestus, once Zeus was out of sight, “that went far better than I was expecting.”

“About what I expected,” said Calliope, deadpan.

“I didn’t even know what to expect,” said Dike, amazed.

The three of them looked at Eris, who was now stuffing the second amphora into her satchel. “This worked out quite well,” she said, slinging it over her shoulder. “Now if you all would excuse me, I have one more place to go today.”

“Where’s that?” asked Calliope, “and why do I get the feeling it involves the rest of that fancy wine?”

“I am off to the jail,” Eris said, transforming into a guard, “to have a drink with my friend.”

The Gospel According to Eris



THE SNIPER
- AT THE -
GATES OF HEAVEN



“I will execute great vengeance upon them,
with furious rebukes.

And they shall know that I am the LORD,
when I shall lay my vengeance upon them.”

THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL



Jules kept the scope of his TAC-50 trained at the window. Next to the window and behind a solid concrete wall was the primary target: Ezekiel T. Davis, leader of the terrorist cult that had taken control of the hydroelectric facility on the island atop Avalon Falls.

Jules spent all morning stationed at Palisades Point, one of many designated Army sniper posts along the banks of the River Khalem. Next to him, scanning the power plant with his binoculars, was his spotter Vinny. They had been at the Point for the past seven hours, with strict orders to terminate Davis whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Forty days prior, Davis and his rag tag militia had stormed Avalon Island – blowing up the bridge that connected it to the east and west banks of the Khalem – and declared it “*The People’s Republic of Avalonia*.” And for forty days, the Babylonian government laid siege upon it with a succession of law enforcement and military entities. Efforts to dislodge the cult, however, resulted in a mere stalemate.

The facility, which stood at the foot of Mount Rama upon a massive complex of drains and turbines underneath the Khalem, could not

simply have the power cut as it was self-sustaining. Nor could the Army disable the plant without cutting power to the entire Babel metro area and its population of 20 million people above and below the falls.

To complicate matters further, the CITY's corporate overlords – which had recently financed the construction of the hot new Babylon Highlands and Black Pyramid on the other side of the Khalem – decided to block military access to multiple sites on the river. An army of lawyers representing companies like Macrotech, Orange Computers, and Kalasahila Semiconductor, gave a dizzying array of reasons. Reasons which included business and traffic disruptions, environmental pollution concerns, the civil rights and due process the cult and its members were entitled to, and the possibility of the CITY's pets and children being traumatized further by the Strange and Unusual situation in the middle of the river. For forty days, the lawyers were free to dictate terms to the Army as they drove \$100,000 golf carts up and down the banks of the Khalem with their cameras and fancy briefcases.

That is, until this morning, when a federal court finally dismissed the remaining injunctions that were blocking the military from accessing many of the parks on the river, including Palisades Point.

“Eureka,” said Jules when they first arrived at the Point soon after the court's ruling. “This is the spot.”

Vinny stood at the tip of the Point, and looked across the river at the Complex. Here, at the intersection of the Cliffs, the Palisades, the Khalem, and the Falls, he could see the entire front of the Complex and right into a handful of windows that had not been blocked off from the inside.

“That's the room intelligence says is his control center!” exclaimed Vinny, pointing at the biggest exposed window. “Those damned lawyers were keeping us from the best vantage point on this whole river!”

“Well those yuppie traitors aren't holding us back anymore. He can't hide from us here.” Jules was already setting up his rifle. He was excited to get to work. Today was the day for sure.

Other than those few windows, the cult had been fortifying the plant extensively. They were making full use of the facility's maintenance department – including taking advantage of the plant staff and technicians – to make the steel and concrete behemoth even more impervious to small arms fire than it already was. All the Army could do was block all access in and out, jam all communications to keep them isolated, and wait for opportunities to pick off members of the cult from afar.

Jules, however, was not here for shooting at random guerrillas. As one of the Army's most decorated snipers from the Khorasan campaign, he had direct orders from General McLendon himself to focus *only* on terminating Davis when he could get a clear shot at the head. And now that he was at the Point, there was no doubt in his mind that this was the place to do it from.

Occasionally a shot or ricochet would ring out, the echo fading into the sound of the nearby water rushing over the falls.

"These fools keep wasting their ammo," remarked Jules, not looking up from his scope.

"Can you blame them?" asked Vinny. "This has gone on for so long. Everyone is probably antsy to get this over with and go home."

"That's still no excuse to be wasting this much ammo. Does anyone around here actually know how to aim their rifle?"

Suddenly they heard the crunch of gravel behind them. Vinny quickly drew his 1911 and spun around. However, it was just their relief party Swoff and Troy, a pair of fresh graduates from sniper school, coming up the trail.

"You guys are three hours early," said Vinny, putting the pistol back in its holster.

"We figured we would just hang around up here until our shift started," answered Troy as they dropped their packs.

"Yeah, someone shot one of the mirrors right off of General McLendon's vintage Jeep, so he's stomping around back there with

his cowboy hat and corn cob pipe giving everyone a hard time,” said Swoff. “We just figure it’s safer to wait up here.”

“Why not hide someplace else?” asked Vinny. “We have work to do up here.”

“Just to hike here in a few hours anyways?” asked Troy, who was out of breath.

“You kids can stay, just don’t distract me!” yelled Jules, still not looking up from his scope.

Swoff leaned his rifle against his pack, and sat down on one of the park benches. Troy, still slightly winded, lit up a cigarette.

“Better not let the Sheriff catch you smoking in the park,” teased Vinny.

Troy took a long drag, and exhaled. “I grew up in Eastside, and I’ve been smoking in this park since I was a teenager. I dare him to come up here from his cozy downtown office and stop me,” he said.

“Yeah,” laughed Swoff, “Nobody has enforced the smoking ban this entire siege.”

“No need to get defensive boys,” said Vinny. “But you should give me one of those.”

Troy tossed the pack to Vinny, who took one and tossed the pack back to Troy.

“How about giving me one of those?” asked Swoff. “I want to break the smoking ban too.”

Troy handed Swoff a cigarette. “I’m just a vending machine for these today,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I guess you want one too, Jules?”

“That menthol garbage you smoke?” Jules derided. “Nah, I’m good without it.”

Troy breathed a sigh of relief, and pocketed the pack.

“I gotta say, it’s still pretty surreal to see an Army encampment set up where I used to have soccer practice,” Swoff said after taking a few drags.

“Let alone some crazy preacher declaring Avalon Island its own country,” added Troy.

“Is what I can’t believe, is that this guy had the nerve to come back here after we drove him out of town before,” commented Vinny.

“Some people never learn,” said Jules, still watching the window like a hawk while the others smoked.

After some time, Troy spoke up again.

“Hey, when you guys were in Khorasan, did you hear anything about those guys who were decorating their barracks with human skulls?” he asked.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” asked Vinny.

“That group of soldiers in Khorasan that was hanging skulls up as trophies like deer heads! They were led by that Sergeant that was court-martialed last year. I can’t remember his name,” said Troy, turning to Swoff.

“Oh yeah, Sergeant Gibbs?” Swoff said.

“Gibbs! That’s right,” said Troy, turning back to Jules and Vinny. “The army swept the entire thing under the rug and pinned it all on Gibbs, but it was several dozen guys and even other Sergeants all collecting corpses, cleaning the bones, and even stringing Christmas lights through them.”

“There was even a slogan in those barracks – ‘In Gibbs We Trust’” chimed Swoff.

“That just sounds like TMB to me,” said Jules, unamused.

“TMB?” asked Troy, confused.

“Typical military bullshit,” said Vinny.

“No way, I’ve heard this story from another guy who was in Khorasan,” Troy said defensively.

“Listen kid, there is no fucking way that dozens of soldiers would be able to get away with decorating their barracks with human skulls. This isn’t the 20th century. There’s cameras everywhere and people gossip on the internet all the time. Something like that would have gotten out,” lectured Vinny.

“Not necessarily,” retorted Troy. “The government conceals a lot of atrocities that nobody ever finds out about.”

“I hate to break it to you kiddo, but just because Uncle Sam summoned you here for getting on the leaderboards in *Call of Duty*, doesn’t mean you know how the Army works,” scoffed Jules.

“Hey now,” said Swoff. “We may not have spent a decade in the sandbox, but we signed our lives into this organization same as you two.”

Another shot flew overhead, sending a flurry of small branches and leaves to the ground around them.

“And so did whoever fired that shot,” coldly remarked Jules.

“This is ridiculous,” trembled Troy. “I’m afraid the 47th friendly-fire injury is gonna be one of us.”

“You greenhorns could always go back to the camp,” suggested Vinny.

“I’m still more afraid of General McLendon,” said Troy.

“Yeah,” said Swoff, “Mole got thrown on latrine duty just for being the one to tell the General about his mirror.”

Another shot cracked out. It punched through a nearby tree trunk, sending bark and splinters everywhere.

“Who keeps doing that?” asked Troy. Swoff and Vinny both looked at him.

“Oh, you want me to go look. I get it,” Troy said sarcastically, and climbed a nearby tree with his binoculars.

Another shot rang out.

“Holy shit guys,” yelled Troy. “I can see the Black Pyramid from up here, and guess who is sitting on it with an AR-50?”

“It better not be Jenkins,” said Vinny, already putting two and two together.

“It’s Jenkins,” said Troy.

“Dammit, Jenkins,” said Vinny.

“What’s he doing on the pyramid?” asked Troy, from his tree.

“Being Jenkins, undoubtedly,” said Jules cynically, still not looking up from his scope.

“I still can’t believe they issued him a fifty cal,” said Swoff, looking jealously at Jules’ TAC-50.

“I still can’t believe he passed Basic,” said Vinny. “Dude is a regular Private Pyle.”

Another shot cut through the air, and ripped through a truck a little ways up river.

“I wish Mendoza would keep a better eye on that kid,” said Vinny, annoyed.

“Someone has to go over there and stop them before someone else ends up in the medic tent,” whined Troy.

“If only the radios worked, then someone could yell at Mendoza. Or command. I hate this,” bemoaned Swoff.

“If only the radios worked! You drama queens need to radio in for assistance to wipe your asses, too?” yelled Jules, mockingly. “Vinny, get over here and cover me,” he said as he stood up.

As Vinny took over the TAC-50, Jules grabbed Swoff’s smaller MRAD and climbed the tree Troy was in.

Jules rested the rifle on a branch, and after taking aim, put a bullet into Jenkins’ foot.

“Holy shit, dude!” yelled Troy, as Jenkins clutched his foot in agony, rolling with his rifle down the side of the pyramid.

“What happened?” asked Swoff, looking up at Troy as Jules climbed back down the tree.

“Jules just shot Jenkins right in the fucking foot!” shouted Troy. Jules calmly set the MRAD back down on Swoff’s pack. Vinny fistbumped Jules as he took back the TAC-50.

“I guess Jenkins is number 47,” quipped Swoff.

“This isn’t funny,” said Troy, as he watched medics tend to Jenkins across the Khalem. “He looks like he’s in a lot of pain.”

“He is lucky I didn’t shoot him with the 50 cal.”

Vinny and Swoff both burst into laughter. Troy, still horrified, climbed down the tree.

“Hey Jules,” said Swoff, wiping a tear from his eye. “That 50 cal of yours, it can shoot through concrete, right? So why don’t you just shoot Davis through the wall?”

“Because he might spook,” Jules told him, while staring intensely through his scope. “If this round passes next to him and not through him, he’ll run into deep cover, like a deer.”

“Listen man,” interjected Troy, “Jenkins is bleeding out pretty hard over there. You can’t just leave him like that.”

“Sure I can!” Jules replied.

“You’re going to get court-martialed for deliberately firing on a fellow soldier!”

Then, Jules pulled his trigger, catching Davis in his temple just as he peered through the window.

“No, I’m not,” Jules said confidently, racking the bolt.

Vinny immediately looked at his watch. “Primary target neutralized twelve twenty eight,” he said out loud.

“Swoff! You hear that?” Jules shouted, pulling the magazine out of his rifle.

“Yeah, why?” Swoff asked.

“Good. Now since the radios don’t work, you and Troy go run as fast as you can back to camp and tell it to General McLendon.” Jules then fed a fresh round into the clip and popped it back in the gun.

“Why do we have to do it?” Troy asked, flabbergasted. “It’s *your* kill.”

“Because the Army has a blitzkrieg raid to start right about now before this cult’s remaining chain of command can react,” said Jules. “And frankly, we’re more useful up here than you guys are with that little MRAD.”

“Oh, I see how it is. You want all the kills for yourself! You selfish prick!” Troy shouted, rolling up his sleeves and swaggering towards Jules and Vinny.

“We have a whole list of doors and heads to start punching out with this 50 cal,” Vinny said calmly. “Unless you think you guys can do it somehow.”

“Come on man, it’s not worth it,” Swoff said, now holding back Troy while trying to bottle up his own jealousy over the 50 cal. “It’s technically still their shift. We can find another spot to shoot from after we inform the General about Davis.”

Jules then made an extremely lewd gesture with his hand and mouth.

“This isn’t over!” shouted Troy, while Swoff tugged him back down the trail.

“Don’t worry, we’ll leave you guys some leftovers,” taunted Vinny. Vinny and Jules fistbumped each other again.

“Go jump up your own ass, Vinny!” Troy shouted from the trail, giving the middle finger as Swoff pulled him along. Jules and Vinny both flipped him off in return, and turned their attention back to the power plant.

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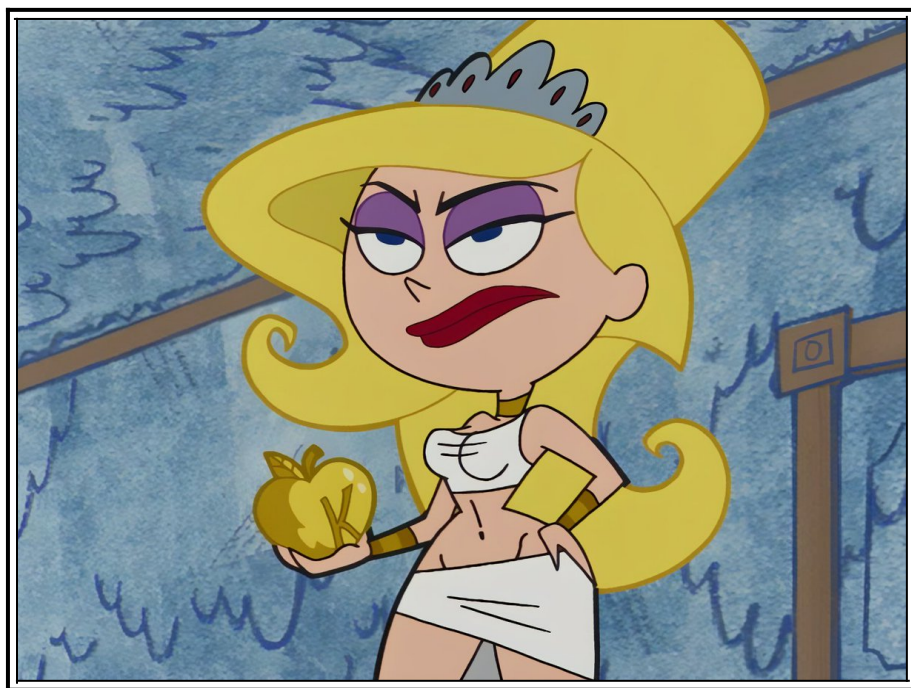
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