

EDEN'S LAST HERO

EDEN: BOOK #1: EPISODE 1

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Published by Leigh Barker at Smashwords

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ISBN: 9781005790080

INSTRUCTIONS:

CAN OF WORMS — OPENING OF

The archangel Michael and the Holy Ghost sat on opposite sides of the polished wooden table and tried to remain civil, even though the desire to scream abuse hung over the huge table like a storm cloud at a picnic.

‘Sometimes I wish we hadn’t jumped right in and exiled Lucifer to the pit,’ the Ghost said, with more than a hint of accusation. ‘Then we wouldn’t be having this discussion.’

‘No,’ Michael said, ‘we would be having a much shorter discussion. In the cells, waiting to be executed.’

The Ghost nodded reluctantly. ‘True, I suppose.’ He sighed a rattly sigh.

Michael ran his hand over his chin and wondered what had possessed him to shave off his beard. He’d had it for years, and it was... well, comforting. He was the Supreme Commander of Eden’s Guardians, and a beard had a certain gravitas and gave the impression that he was steady and wise. Except when it got clogged with food, then less so, but that was an infrequent event these days. Particularly since the beard was now—

‘As I was saying,’ the Ghost said sharply, cutting across Michael’s meanderings. ‘If we hadn’t been so quick to incarcerate Lucifer, then we could have negotiated. You know that.’

Michael didn’t know that. He stood up slowly and walked to the window overlooking the gardens and watched Gabriel tending the roses and stopping to stretch his back. He watched his most effective killer snip the roses with gentle care. He felt old, his bones ached, and he was sure he was starting to lose his hair. That would be a disaster. He ran his hand through his shoulder-length grey hair and tutted quietly as strands drifted away in the shafts of golden sunlight. It wasn’t surprising that he was losing it, what with Lucifer trying to start a revolution. Then the bickering over what to do with him. And finally the screaming and shouting as the Guardians tossed him into the Pit of Endless Suffering. Ah, he should come to stay with my mother-in-law, Michael thought.

He turned and leaned back against the windowsill. True, he was no longer a young man, but he was still striking, standing six foot four and two-hundred and ten pounds. He used to be in better condition, but then he’d been a warrior, while now he was just a politician. He missed those days, when you knew who you were fighting and why.

‘Lucifer was a far greater threat than his son can ever be,’ he said, pushing himself off the sill and returning to the table.

The Ghost sniffed. ‘Perhaps, but Lucid almost had us... had you.’ He raised a hand. ‘I am not apportioning blame.’

Yes, he was.

‘But had it not been for the stupidity of his troops, his invasion would have been successful. He caught us—and I believe the term is—with our pants down.’

Gabriel glared at the semi-transparent politician in the long, blue robe and tried not to swear. 'We,' he said slowly, 'were caught... with our pants down, as you put it, because your agents failed to provide any useful intelligence to warn us that the invasion was imminent.' Now he raised his hand. 'Despite the fact that you had many, many agents on the Dark Continent. At great expense.'

'Be that as it may,' the Ghost said, waving his hand as if to shoo away the implied criticism. 'We are where we are. And where we are is not where I would be if I was where I would like to be.'

Michael blinked slowly while he unravelled it. 'Then you agree?'

The Ghost watched him for a moment, then nodded. 'Yes. It is unprecedented, but these are perilous times.' He stood up, rising through the tabletop. 'I shall arrange for a hero to be brought back from the Other Place.'

Michael sighed. 'It does not sit well with me,' he said and closed his eyes tiredly. 'But I can think of no other way to defeat Lucid.'

'Our army... your army,' the Ghost said, 'has been at peace for so many millennia, it has lost its ability to think beyond sparring and gentlemanly jousts.'

It was another dig. But also painfully true.

'We do not need to revisit this,' Michael said, looking up and fixing the Ghost with hard, grey eyes. 'That is why we must bring the hero back with his memory intact. He will teach us the underhanded, deceitful, devious, and dishonourable methods of the Other Place.' He stood up. 'Let's get this done and put it behind us as soon as possible. It leaves a sour taste in my mouth.'

'The Other Place was created for that very purpose. So that our young could live in a world where such traits are considered a virtue. And learn the error of that misconception.'

Michael nodded slowly. 'Except that now we, who have lost the ability to be dishonourable, must call on just these traits to save Eden from Lucid's revenge.'

'I shall instruct the Tallyman to return a suitable hero,' the Ghost said, 'and we will sup with him using a very long spoon.'

ALL HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO

Dylan was dead, he just hadn't realised it yet. Nor did he realise he was in Heaven, but wouldn't have believed it had he known — there was no way they would have opened the pearly gates, that would have been too much of a cock-up even for Saint Peter, who let's face it, is getting a bit, well, dodderly — so he kept his eyes firmly shut and resisted the temptation to jump up and shout, 'Ah, missed me!' He heard muffled voices and strained to hear if it was the bad guys hanging around in case he recovered from being shot twice at close range.

He thought about the past few minutes and wondered how he could possibly have survived. He and his sister, Abbi, had been trying to open the window, but like most of the stuff in the shabby hotel, it was broken, and they'd been caught with nowhere to run when the two gunmen burst into the room and started blasting away. They couldn't have missed, and from what bits he could remember, they hadn't. Chalky White's boys. He'd known he shouldn't do it at the time, but it was just too tempting, all that loose cash.

He felt guilty about getting his sister into this mess, but it was such a rare feeling, it soon got bored with being all alone and wandered off.

He moved his fingers and felt sheets. Hey, he was under sheets, so he was home in bed and had dreamt it, yippee! But that flew like a cast-iron duck. So he must be in hospital, which seemed more likely,

since these were clean, crisp sheets, and clean sheets of any crispness were something he hadn't owned since he'd packed his bags and moved out of his mother's house to make it on his own. Well, that had worked out just fine. A voice in his head whispered, 'Morgue', and he shut it up quickly.

He could still hear muffled voices, so opened his eyes as wide as a spy in a sandstorm and moved them very slowly in the direction of the sound. He couldn't see much, his eyes being mostly shut, but he could see he was no longer in the cheap hotel room. There was white, lots of white. White is good. He risked taking a proper peek, but kept still, no point pushing his luck. Yes, he was in a hospital, he could tell that because he was in a bed, a white bed, a white bed that was as hard as... the same little voice helped him out, 'A slab'. Cheers.

He moved his head and looked along the ward at the two rows of beds stretching off into the distance, like a railway line of white linen. And dead people, rows of dead people in white beds. No, hang on, they couldn't be dead or they'd be in a... 'Morgue,' whispered the voice again.

He lifted his head a fraction, looked the other way, and saw the same rows of white beds against white walls stretching away to a convergence point in the distance. Packed like sardines, so it must be one of those hospitals for poor folk, but hey, it's better than being dead.

So what about Abbi? He sat up slowly, but all he could see was sleeping bumps and no movement. Man, she could be anywhere, 'Probably dead,' the voice said. He gritted his teeth and thought, 'Shut up!' then realised he'd said it out loud, and the voices had stopped. Rats.

He lay back down quickly, closed his eyes, kept still, and hoped they'd forget about him.

Like that was going to happen.

He heard the click-click of heels approaching and knew the jig was up, looked up and saw two huge nurses at the foot of the bed, their faces hidden behind surgical-type masks, but he could see their eyes, and that was enough. He threw off the sheet and bolted for the exit, wherever that was.

He couldn't have caused more commotion if he'd streaked naked through Wimbledon Centre Court.

Suddenly, white-coated figures appeared from unseen rooms and curtained spaces provided for the sole purpose of hiding medics. Voices shouted, 'Stop him!' Which struck him as nuts, even as he skidded on polished linoleum. Why do they always shout that? Who are they asking? Who in his right mind is going to tackle a nutter in a white nightshirt pelting through a hospital full of dead people? But just in case, he dashed between the beds and jumped through an open window, which, considering he might have been on the tenth floor, was a bit of a rash thing to do. Luckily, it was the ground floor, but that wasn't his fault.

One thing was clear from the moment he sprawled headfirst across the cobbles, he wasn't in Kansas anymore, Toto.

He got up slowly and rubbed his grazed knees. There were people, and they were staring at him, but that was nothing new, people were always staring at him — usually just before they started throwing things and shouting for the police — but these people were not your everyday cheery Cockney folk, cor blimey no Mary, they were weird. Not weird with humps or anything like that, but they were wearing

robes tied with rope, floppy hoods, and sandals, and he wondered if there was a Friar Tuck convention in town.

He reached behind and was relieved to find that the white gown hadn't got one of those embarrassing gaps at the back.

The town was as weird as the Friar Tucks. The bit he could see across the narrow, cobbled street was a jumble of ill-matched wooden houses, crammed together so that their sagging pitched roofs touched and overlapped each other above the narrow alleys that tapered to nothing six feet above the cobbles. There was clearly a shortage of real estate space as the houses had been added to and extended vertically with no regard for order or the laws of gravity.

The Friar Tucks were backing off as if they were afraid of him, which was cool, except that nobody was ever afraid of him, so that meant they were afraid of someone or something behind him. He decided not to look around, so he wouldn't have to see what was scaring them. Yeah, that's a plan, ignore it and it goes away, stands to reason. He turned and looked. Well, so much for willpower.

It wasn't the white-suited minotaur climbing through the window that had the people cowering in fear — that was just your everyday, run-of-the-mill man with the head of a bull. It was the man standing at the open window that had the townsfolk squeezing into any little nook or cranny — though they had to double up in the nooks, there being a shortage of crannies.

Dylan stared open-mouthed at the man, at his long white hair and translucent skin, his pink eyes with piercing red pupils, and wide-spaced teeth showing between lips pulled back in what might have been a smile. He was too tall for this world and had adjusted by hunching his shoulders and leaning forward, like an albino vulture waiting for its prey to peg it so that it could tear the flesh off its still-

warm body. And presently, that body belonged to Dylan. The vulture spread his smile, and his teeth flashed like an advert for Hollywood White teeth bleach. He wagged a long, bony finger at Dylan.

The small crowd watching from the shadows of the houses knew this vulture as the man who caught the loonies who escaped from the asylum, a creature to stay well clear of. What they didn't know was this was the Tallyman, Trinity's truant officer, whose job it was to catch any students who wandered away from the Academy and return them to their studies, and their physical condition on return depended on whether or not they resisted — and strangely, they always did.

Dylan stared into those pink eyes and felt his will start to ebb, like the stuttering feeling when an escalator slips. With a tremendous effort, and because the minotaur was now out of the window, he tore his gaze away and did what any self-respecting, red-blooded male would do under similar circumstances. He ran away.

The minotaur gave chase and was surprisingly nimble for a chap with a bull's head. This was a seriously ugly creature, with a squat, over-muscled body, hairy arms extending below his knees, and vicious horns curving up out of its huge head through a thick mane of black hair that flowed over bulging shoulders. But it was its face that was its real winning feature. It had a low forehead, showing an intellect that suited its job as guard dog on two legs, and an elongated snout that finished in a huge jaw lined with razor teeth, that only added to the canine bone-chomper image. This was what was chasing Dylan in a shuffling run along the cobbled streets of Medieval World. It couldn't get any worse.

But of course it could.

As Dylan ran towards the end of the narrow street, two more of the creatures stepped out onto the cobblestones. This is bad, he thought,

putting himself in the running for the understatement of the year award.

The two minotaurs smiled, or at least the flesh around their mouths peeled back to reveal pointed yellow teeth. One of them was wearing a nose-ring, and it crossed his mind that it might be a fashion statement. He didn't know — and thankfully for his sanity, would never know — that the nose-ring wearer was a female. There is a long and colourful story behind her struggle to be accepted as one of the Catchers, but some creature's habits are best not described in detail, sometimes it's just better not to go there.

Dylan glanced over his shoulder and saw that the other monster was gaining on him. It was because of the sharp grit beneath his shoeless feet, he told himself. Ignoring the fact that he was a physical wreck whose idea of exercise was making six trips to the fridge to fetch beer instead of carrying the whole pack in one go. And here in Medieval Land, his physical condition seemed to have improved not a jot. Things were looking bleak for our recently dead hero.

As mister and missus minotaur opened their arms and began to edge forward, ready for the catch, a black cat strolled out of a narrow alley, walked into the middle of the street, and gave the monsters a long, old-fashioned look. They shot bolt upright, as if goosed by Ol' Flattop, and backed off. As the cat looked them up and down slowly, they turned and fled in terror.

'Thanks, moggy,' Dylan said and ran out of the street and into a big square dominated by a ramshackle market selling perfectly ordinary fruit and vegetables, that differed from the real thing only in their gnarled and misshapen form — and by a complete lack of copious amounts of decent plastic wrapping.

The market was teeming with men in flowing tunics, breeches and stockings. Dylan did a double take. Stockings? That'd go down well at the Old Blood 'n Sawdust on a Saturday night. But the women were cute, wearing smocks and ankle-length kirtles, emphasizing their innocence and purity, an image that appealed to him greatly, even pursued by the bone-chompers. They were staring at him with a mixture of shock and curiosity, and he was pleased to see that the curiosity came mostly from the girls, giggling and pointing at his knobbly knees. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad here in Medieval World

The giggling stopped abruptly, and the crowds backed off, eager to put the stalls between themselves and whatever it was they were pointing at behind him. Here we go again, he thought, where's that moggy?

He turned around to look for the cat and saw the angel. He knew his jaw had dropped, but the data link between his brain and his muscles was in overload. A real angel stood there, her long blonde hair rippling in the soft breeze and her bare breasts rising and falling gently with each breath. And she had wings, real wings, curving up above her shoulders and disappearing behind her back. He had never seen a more beautiful creature.

She smiled and beckoned him to come closer, something she didn't have to do twice. He walked slowly towards her, his arms hanging limply at his sides and his eyes fixed on her breasts. She was stunning, but she was about to find out that he was a pretty good catch himself, a bit of a...

He fell over, or more accurately, he tripped over, and landed flat on his face in the dusty straw scattered across the cobbles to muffle the

horses' hooves and to soak up anything they might drop. And his face was right in whatever they might drop, and it smelt like...

'Meow,' said the cat sitting and watching him.

A shot of anger zipped into his stomach. 'Damn you, moggy, now I look a right prat!' And he surely did, and in front of the beautiful winged angel. But wait up, hold the phone, there are no such things as beautiful winged angels. Of course, there should also be no such thing as minotaurs, but Murphy's Law states quite clearly that if it's fragile, beautiful and has bare breasts, it does not and never will exist, whereas if it's ugly, huge and likely to tear your head off, it's a racing certainty that it's real.

He looked up slowly, convinced the beautiful angel would have flown, dismissing him for a right wally, and there she was, gone. In her place stood the albino vulture smiling down at him, anticipating his eyeballs for a tasty snack.

With a painful wince, Dylan pulled himself up onto his scraped knees and looked past the pale horror to the minotaurs emerging sheepishly into the street — which is quite an achievement for bull-people. He pointed urgently across the square and, as the albino turned, jumped to his feet and ran into the tangle of stalls, careful not to upset any of the wares — he'd seen those movies where the townsfolk come hunting the stranger, with flaming torches and a rope.

The albino let him run and looked around slowly to see if he had been observed by the Ghost's watchers. He couldn't see anyone, but that's the nature of unseen watchers. He pointed to the sides of the square, and the minotaurs split up and shuffle-ran to the houses, while he walked slowly down the middle of the square, the crowd parting before him.

But Dylan had got clean away, skilfully evading his pursuers and taking refuge in a quiet courtyard at the side of a small, empty square where he could see anybody or anything approaching, if he hadn't slammed the big gates, that is. Well, there you go, he thought, it's not too bad a getaway. And he was right. He was in a cool, quiet courtyard, with fragrant flowers and stuff — and smooth walls that stretched up like white cliffs, right up to the rooftops fifty feet above, without a single door, window or handhold.

Outstanding.

What the rest of us knew some time ago slowly dawned on him, and he began to mutter, curse, and generally do nothing that resembled escape. He knew that if he opened the gates, there would stand the minotaurs, snarling, snorting and maybe pawing the dust, prior to goring him like an apprentice farmhand in a red shirt. He kicked the flowerpots, muttered, whimpered some more, and finally convinced himself that this was just his over-active imagination given wings by raw fear. He pulled the gates open a slit and looked out, chanting, 'Nobody there... nobody there...'

There was nobody there — except the three minotaurs standing quietly in the street, waiting for him to give up and come on out. The one considered by the Squad to be the cheeky little thing with the nose-ring snorted attractively and shuffled forward.

He was about to become el Matador (deceased) when he spotted his means of escape. A white stallion was leaning against a wall a little way across the square, and Dylan threw caution to a convenient wind and ran. Somebody had draped a feather car rug over the animal, and he supposed there was going to be a frost.

The horse watched him coming, snuffled its irritation, and stood up, ready for the human to do all that jabbing and pulling they seemed

obsessed with, when it was perfectly obvious where they wanted him to go. If they would just let him get on with it, he was quite able to find his own way from here to wherever, without—

Dylan jumped onto the horse, and a feeling of elation rushed through him now that he had a means of escape that excluded running around on bare feet. The elation masked one very important point — he couldn't ride.

But he needn't have worried about being unsaddled onto the cobblestones. The horse took four strides, unfolded its car-rug that turned out to be huge wings, and soared into the pale sky, with Dylan screaming, hugging the pommel, and hanging on for dear life.

The horse, curious that there was no pulling, jabbing or kicking, glanced back to see what sort of horseman it was that left the reins dangling and made that dreadful screeching noise. He saw the chubby youth clinging to his saddle, decided that this was a human who needed ditching at the earliest possible moment, and set about doing just that. Usually the head down sudden stop did the trick, pitching the hijacker over its head and down to the street below. It had worked several times before, and he recalled the fat thief who had plummeted screaming into the city cesspit. Happy days. He tilted his wings and stopped, like a Harrier jump jet reversing thrust.

Dylan's grip of death broke, and he shot forward, but fortunately, the ornate pommel saved him, by slamming into his groin. How lucky was that? He slid back into the saddle, undecided whether to clutch safety or comfort.

The horse took off, peeved that the young human was still there. Plan B it is, then. He looked around until he saw what he needed and swooped down and under the bridge with barely a foot clearance, a superb piece of flying in any circles, loops, or straight lines.

Dylan was not impressed and would have been mashed, had the sudden manoeuvre not caused him to slide out of the saddle to hang on like a circus trick-rider clinging to the side of the horse.

‘Hey, pack it in!’ he shouted, his voice bouncing back from the bridge walls.

The horse didn’t understand the plea, not speaking human, and was too busy anyway, trying to decide whether or not a loop-the-loop would do the trick, but he couldn’t get the flight calculations sorted out with all that screaming and shouting, so decided to hit that idea on the head, reached back, and tried to bite his rider. Primitive, true, but it still might have worked, sometimes the daftest things do, but the human flinched away at the last moment, as teeth snapped shut with a loud snick — and they really were truly excellent teeth, a testament to the oral cleansing properties of good carrots.

So that was Plan A, B and the long shot of nibbling the human’s leg all done. Okay, onto the next plan, except that he’d never needed a next plan. Think, think, what he needed was... was... help. Ah, exactly, help. Without further deliberation, he beat his powerful wings, banked, and turned back towards his point of departure.

‘No!’ Dylan screamed as he realised what was happening. He leaned forward, grabbed the flapping reins and pulled hard with his right hand, as he’d seen the cowboys do when the herd was about to stampede them to death.

The horse turned, then cursed itself for its reflex action, but obedience to the reins was too deep seated, too ingrained. He sighed a horse sigh and gave up, deciding that the sooner he got the human where he wanted to go, the sooner he could go back to his nap. And he’d been thinking the wall he was leaning on was a bit hard, which just goes to show that you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone.

As the horse turned, Dylan could see the minotaurs glaring up at him and waving their huge fists. He considered giving them an appropriate gesture, but thought better of it, aware that he hadn't got far enough away yet, and they looked pretty angry already.

Then he saw the girl, and she looked a whole lot angrier than anyone who'd tried to swat him so far today. He frowned. There she was in the square, jumping up and down, waving her fists and shouting something that probably wasn't a cheery farewell. What could possibly be wrong? Ah, right, it was her horse, wasn't it? He flinched and sucked air through his teeth.

'Sorry!' he shouted, but she was too far away in the rapidly shrinking square and too busy promising painful retribution to hear.

As the horse flicked its tail and corrected its physical and mental attitude, Dylan saw the minotaurs grab the girl, saw her struggle and kick one of them between the legs. Pity it was the one with the nose ring. She thrashed and fought, but she was a minnow caught in a bear's claw, three bears' claws, in fact.

Dylan pulled the reins to turn the horse and... and what? Ride down to rescue the fair maiden? Yeah, that would work. He relaxed his grip and swore.

I wish he would make up his mind, the horse thought, irritated at being distracted from the complex mathematics of flight. Most people think it's just a matter of batting your wings and off you go, which proves how little humans know about self-powered flight. He sighed. There are a million calculations to do: wing beats per minute, attitude, altitude, speed and crosswind compensation. The list is endless, but of course, he'd mastered it long ago, though not a difficult feat for a horse of such — he looked up, saw the church spire dead ahead and made a hasty right turn.

Dylan fell off.

Ah, the horse thought, now there's a Plan C for future reference. He turned slowly and headed home to his warm stable and a crunchy oat dinner.

Dylan didn't do falling very well, which is surprising considering the practice he'd had during his drinking days, when he'd fallen over, fallen down and fallen out, but that was just Monday to Saturday, Sunday being a day off, which is always a good reason to celebrate. But those days were behind him now, since that time he decided to sun-bathe on the windowsill of his first-floor bedsit. Luckily the roof of the parked police car had broken his fall, amongst other things.

He still wasn't doing falling well, but the screaming was top-notch, just loud enough and with that appealing vibrato you hear from the truly great tenors, and it was right on key — a nice B flat, rising to F sharp as the ground approached.

The cobbles rushed up to meet him, and his life did its best to flash before his eyes in the limited time available, skipping over the boring bits to get to the juicy scenes.

Dylan's low-key arrival had not gone entirely unnoticed by the Guardians, the elite group tasked with keeping Trinity safe and well ordered.

Michael listened to the report being delivered by Jehoel, a cocky young Guardian who expected very soon to be promoted to a position better suited to his under-appreciated ability, and this breach of security could be just the opportunity he was looking for.

'The transitioner has escaped the guards and is at large in the city,' Jehoel said and watched his Supreme Commander get up from behind

his desk and begin to pace his office. ‘What are your orders, my lord?’ He suppressed a smile at his boss’s obvious discomfort. Things were not looking too good for the Old Man — which pleased him greatly. This was the second breakdown of the Academy security in just a few months, and the last one had led to a war that even now threatened to return to Trinity.

Michael stopped pacing and stared out through the wide window without seeing the beautiful country rolling down to the banks of the River Styx. He too was thinking about the last time a transitioner had escaped. He knew that many people woke up during Transition, but few remained awake for very long, the Watchers saw to that. A few had even managed to get out of the Academy, but they were usually so disoriented that they were easily recovered, and even those who gained their senses enough to run were quickly retrieved by the Tallyman and his ghastly Catchers, which was just as well, as they carried the imprint given to them before they went to the Other Place, and that imprint could easily mean they were the wrong gender, a murderer, or both. And such a state of mind could see them totally unhinged and highly dangerous.

But Lucid had been the first one in two millennia to evade the Tallyman and escape across the Perfumed Sea to the Dark Continent.

What worried Michael most was that Lucid could not have made his escape without help, and that help must have come from someone in a position of influence. Nobody, not even the son of the Fallen Angel, could just walk out of the Academy, stroll through the city, and board a boat for the Dark Continent without the Tallyman or the Guardians hooking him and reeling him in.

Lucid had wasted no time in letting it be known that the son of Lucifer had returned to free his father from the dimension of ever-

lasting war into which he'd been cast for plotting against the Senate. His call had rallied the disparate tribes of rogues and monsters, exiled angels and those beyond redemption, who had sought refuge on the Dark Continent. But even though their spies had reported Lucid's actions to the Guardians, they were still totally unprepared when his army set out towards the Perfumed Sea on route to Trinity. For the son of Satan to have moved against them so quickly, even now seemed impossible.

Michael was furious with himself and his spies for not seeing this coming, when with hindsight, it was obvious that Lucid would try to avenge his father's imprisonment and seek to release him. The thought chilled Michael's blood.

The day and night following the news of Lucid's imminent arrival had been a mad scramble to assemble men and equipment, with every able-bodied man and woman from the triple city of Trinity volunteering or being volunteered, and runners being sent to every corner of the land, but it was still a pitiful rabble of men, women, and children that welcomed him as he emerged from the palace at dawn on the second day of the invasion.

Michael led his hastily formed rag-tag army across the Purple Plain, a fist clutching his heart at the thought of what was to come. He rode alongside Uriel and the war-chariots of the First Triad, close behind the vanguard. Overhead, winged horses flew in perfect formation, guided by young girls picked for their riding skill and light build, while above them the beautiful and terrifying mist dragons soared through the clouds, their riders mere boys, but proud and thrilled to be actually riding their charges into battle, when a hundred generations before them had simply practiced their art in preparation for this day.

At the vanguard of the army thundered the huge desert dragons, pounding across the plain at a pace that would outrun a galloping horse. These monsters were ridden by muscular Second Triad angels, struggling to control the man-eaters that fiercely resented being treated as beasts of burden. They were noble creatures, at the top of the food chain in their natural habitat in the scorching white deserts of the Southern Continent, where the searing heat would drive a man insane. They were powerful, terrifying creatures that would have had their riders for a light snack had they suffered even a moment's loss of vigilance.

Bringing up the rear was the infantry that would do the fighting; everyday people indistinguishable from the foot soldiers of any army in any part of the multiverse, armed with scythes, knives, spikes, hoes, or anything they could find to use as a weapon. A thousand men and women running in the dust of the stampede ahead of them, wild eyed, shouting, cursing — terrified.

Michael halted his chariot on a hill and watched the pathetically small and ill-equipped army race across the plain to engage the invaders in the desperate and seemingly doomed bid to prevent them gaining a foothold in Trinity. It was a magnificent and suicidal act of heroism, and one that he knew was almost certain to fail.

Standing with his commanders, he watched as the two armies ran together like blood and water. Winged horses and Messengers fell under a storm of arrows and crossbow bolts that filled the sky like wind-blown hay. Mist dragons crashed to the ground, brought down by quarrels as big as fence posts, fired from the massive siege crossbows pulled by squads of minotaurs. And all around, men and monsters hacked at each other in a crush of bodies that left almost no room to move.

On a hill across the valley, Lucid stood with his lieutenants, watching the carnage on the plain below and patting his dog, a vicious three-headed beast, whose life and duty was to protect its master. He smiled smugly and waited patiently for Michael's army to break and run.

But they did not run. For two long days the battle raged, with exhausted soldiers on both sides collapsing to sleep among the dead as night fell, until morning brought the nightmare once again. Though many would not see the morning, for in the dead of night, the demon Abbadon drifted across the battlefield, seeking out the young riders and slitting their throats as they slept.

At the end of the second day, Michael looked down from the hilltop and saw the last of the beautiful mist dragons lying dead or dying beside their young riders, scattered like broken toys on the bloody battlefield, and knew that he was witnessing the extinction of these legendary creatures.

Of all the many stories of bravery that came out of that day, it was the self-sacrifice of the mist dragon SatoJu and her young rider that would be told and retold in taverns and in the hushed bedrooms of children waiting for sleep.

SatoJu had begun the flight with the others, nervous but excited at the thought of glory and battle. She responded willingly to the directions of the boy, known to his peers as Sky rider for his love of flying above the clouds, higher than any other flyer dared go. Sky rider was one of the youngest of the flight, barely twelve years old, but already showing courage far beyond his years. His unflinching bravery was to cost him his life.

He and SatoJu left the rest of the flight behind and climbed above the clouds as high as possible, up to where the air became so thin his

lungs screamed their desperate need. From here, he could see the whole of the Purple Plain rolling down from the mountains of Nysa to the Perfumed Sea.

It was from this high vantage point that he saw a section of Lucid's line break away and race to the right to outflank Michael's exhausted force, and he knew they would breast the hill above the army before even SatoJu's speed could get him back to warn his commander. He sent a single thought that SatoJu was already anticipating, and she folded her wings and dived through the clouds, straight at the enemy.

The outflanking force comprised more than two hundred heavily armed cavalry, centaurs, and minotaurs armed with their deadly siege crossbows.

SatoJu erupted out of the sky, spraying liquid fire onto the galloping army. Terrified horses stampeded, hurling their stunned riders to the ground under the pounding hooves of horses and centaurs. Riders fought to control their mounts as they careered into each other and reared in terror as the fire poured over them.

Those few precious moments of shock and confusion gave SatoJu time to turn and make a second run, and the last of the centaurs, the most feared of all the cavalry, fell under the searing stream of fire.

For all their power, it was not the quarrels from the two-metre-wide crossbows that ended the suicidally heroic flight, but a single arrow fired in panic by a lowly trooper a moment before a blazing centaur crushed him to death.

But the shaft found its mark.

SatoJu felt the ever-present telepathic link sever like the parting of an umbilical cord and knew the boy was dead even before he fell forward against her neck. She cried out against the sudden silence, swept round in a tight arc, and roared her grief at the surviving enemy,

a wash of white-hot flames exploding everything and everyone it touched. Then she beat her wings and climbed into the sky, tears streaming from her golden eyes. She climbed up through the clouds, higher than she and Sky rider had ever been, until finally the air was gone and oblivion wiped away the pain and the silence. As darkness closed over her, she saw the boy fall away, his unseeing eyes open and his hands outstretched, as if reaching for her in death.

Though SatoJu's skill and Sky rider's sacrifice had saved the army, it was the young girls on their winged horses who finally turned the battle.

While Lucid's army of monsters and demons roared and charged the exhausted farmers and shopkeepers, the Messengers carried vital orders to the scattered commanders, taking to the air again and again, knowing their fate should the massive crossbow bolts bring them down among the enemy.

Like crashing waves, Lucid's army surged and charged the wavering line of men and angels again and again, then strutted triumphantly back to their ranks with cheers ringing in their ears. While the monsters preened and postured, Michael's army, guided by the orders carried by the Messengers, moved as a single unit, gradually rolling up the invaders, until once again their backs were to the sea.

From the high ground above the rocky beach and protected by Michael's irregular infantry, his disciplined ranks of archers rained arrows on Lucid's massed men and beasts for hour upon hour, fed with new ammunition by children barely out of infancy, running back and forth to the endless convoys of supply wagons arriving at the rear.

It was obvious that the slaughter could not continue, but still the man-beasts roared their contempt and defiance as they charged up the beach and died.

On the morning of the third day, the remains of Michael's army climbed wearily to its feet and stared in disbelief at the deserted beach. For a long time an eerie silence hung over the battlefield, then the exhausted troops began to cheer, to laugh, to hug each other and sob.

'Your orders, my Lord,' Jehoel repeated.

Michael turned back from the window and let the images retreat below the surface of his mind, where they would wait to emerge again in his dreams.

'Are you certain He does not know about the runner?' he asked.

Of course He knows, Jehoel thought, He knows everything. 'No, my lord, I am sure He does not.' He shifted uncomfortably. 'I believe He is taking...' Jehoel chose his words carefully, '... a trip.'

Michael closed his eyes for the briefest moment, but it was long enough to reveal his feelings about his chief's 'trips'. If His obsession became public knowledge, it could ruin everything and cause a scandal that would give the senators the ammunition they needed to force an election, which, with Lucid's likely return, was the last thing the Supreme Commander needed. The first act of a new Leader of the Senate would be to poke into everything, that's what they always did, that and give titles and positions to their cronies, who then felt obliged to exercise their new power.

'That will be all,' Michael said.

Jehoel frowned and stood up slowly. ‘My lord?’ he said, annoyed at being dismissed.

‘That will be all,’ Michael repeated, with the merest glance at the Guardian, but that was enough.

Despite Michael’s apparent concern, Dylan waking up in Transition and evading the Tallyman was no surprise. He had tasked the Ghost with finding His Instrument to bring Lucid to book. What better way to catch a thief than to send another thief? But the choice of Instrument puzzled him. Of all the beings in Transition, the Ghost had chosen a youth, and one with a record that would make a grave robber wince.

He picked up a small bell and rang it once — but contrary to popular belief, an angel didn’t get his wings. Angels don’t have wings.

A moment later a side door opened, and Obadiah, a fawning, greasy little man, entered and waddled across to the desk without looking up. He wrung his podgy hands in the certain knowledge that he was too humble for such an important position as servant to the Supreme Commander. Yes, far too humble.

Dylan opened his eyes a little, expecting to be dead, but all he could see was a huge cobblestone filling his vision. Slowly his fear-boggled brain put the cobblestone into perspective. It wasn’t huge, it was just really close.

He opened his eyes fully and found he was floating a few inches above the street, which was impossible. Okay then. His nose slapped down onto the stone, and a rather overdressed firework display burst in his head, but no classical music, which was a plus. He groaned and rolled onto his back. ‘Ow da gell...’ he said loudly.

‘What did he say?’ a voice said somewhere beyond his tears.

‘I don’t know,’ another said. ‘He’s holding his nose. Do you think he has a cold?’

Dylan sat up, took his hands off his expanding nose, and looked up at the speakers, though it would be more accurate to say he looked up at one of the speakers, the other being at ground level. He stared around quickly in case he wasn’t actually going mad, but there really was only the old man and the cat. Okay, insane it is, then, must have been the fall, or the fear of the fall, or his life’s rerun — which is never as good as the old Polaroid’s remember it.

He looked the speaker over and saw an old man wearing a blue silk robe with stars and moons embroidered randomly on the sleeves. ‘You’re a wizard,’ Dylan said, in a tone that was more a statement than a question.

The old man was puzzled. ‘I am Lailoken,’ he said slowly, in case the poor boy was touched.

‘Merlin,’ Dylan stated flatly, climbing painfully to his feet and putting out his hand. ‘Thanks, Merlin.’

The wizard looked at the hand for a moment, still frowning. ‘Thank me for what?’

Dylan pointed at the cobbles. ‘It was you who saved me from being road kill.’ He shrugged and let his hand fall unshaken.

Merlin smiled. ‘It was a small thing.’

‘Might be a small thing to you, but it’s all I’ve got,’ Dylan sniffed, turning and walking away up the middle of the narrow street.

Merlin trotted after him and put a hand on his arm. ‘You cannot go back that way.’

‘Oh,’ Dylan said, ‘and why not exactly?’

‘The Tallyman,’ Merlin said, as if that was enough.

Dylan looked at the old wizard, then back down the street. 'Who were you talking to back there?'

Merlin followed his pointing finger. The cat sat at the side of the street, watching them with a slightly haughty demeanour, as cats do.

'I was speaking to you,' Merlin said helpfully.

'No, no, before that.'

'Why do you call me Merlin when my name is Lailoken?' Merlin said, changing the subject.

Dylan pointed at the embroidered robe and shrugged. 'If the cap fits.'

Merlin put his hand on his head and felt around with a puzzled expression that he was afraid was going to be the norm from now on.

'Merlin was a magician, back where I...' Dylan started, but couldn't work out how to finish.

Merlin shook his head and looked around quickly. 'No, you are mistaken.' He shook his head some more. 'Magic is not allowed here, it is expressly forbidden, and the punishment for flaunting the law is banishment.'

Well, that cleared that up.

Dylan shrugged. 'Merlin, saying you're not Merlin doesn't make you not Merlin when you are Merlin.'

Merlin tried to unravel the sentence, but his brain began to hurt.

Dylan smiled and started walking again, but stopped and sighed as Merlin put his hand back on his arm. 'What is it now?'

'The Tallyman, remember?'

'No,' Dylan answered, then nodded. 'Albino guy with a beak?'

'A beak?' Merlin asked and then smiled. 'Ah, yes, a beak.' He stepped up onto the narrow pavement and raised himself up to Dylan's

chest height. 'If the Tallyman catches you, then I'm afraid it will all be over.'

Dylan sighed, if he had a pound for every time he'd heard that... well, actually, he'd have a pound, but that's not the point.

'Where did those weird creatures come from?' he said, pointing at a wall in the general direction of the Academy.

Merlin shrugged. 'I don't know, I wasn't there.'

'True. Well, they were big guys, with horns and looks only a mother could love.'

Merlin nodded slowly. 'Minotaurs,' he said. 'They are the Catchers, they... err, catch.'

'But they're not real,' Dylan explained.

Merlin looked puzzled again.

'They're a myth,' Dylan went on. 'You know, a fairy tale, but with horns.'

Merlin smiled. 'Ah, I see. Yes, transitioners sometimes retain a partial memory of home. That will be where your myth came from.'

'Yeah, right,' Dylan said.

'You are going to find a lot of things in Eden that seem strange to you, or mythical, but we had them first.'

Dylan didn't want to hurt the old duffer's feelings by explaining that just because a couple of bouncers let their hair grow and favour horned headgear, it doesn't make them mino-thingies. He smiled what he thought was a reassuring smile and crouched down to look the old man in the eye, 'Look,' he said gently, 'that damned flying horse.' He looked up, as if expecting to see it grinning down at him, and completely missed the point that it had been a mythical flying horse. 'Well, it belonged to a girl...'

'Yes,' Merlin said, 'a Messenger.'

‘Okay, a Messenger. Anyway, some heavies...’ He tried to think, but couldn’t remember how. ‘What did you call those things?’ He frowned for a moment. ‘Catchers, right. Anyway, they grabbed the girl...’ He raised his hand. ‘Okay, they grabbed the Messenger-girl.’

Merlin shook his head. ‘Are you sure they were Catchers?’ He frowned again. ‘Kidnappers are usually Lucid’s monsters.’

Two questions jumped into Dylan’s mind, the second one being why am I standing in the middle of the street talking about monsters to this old loon who thinks he’s a wizard. He went with the first. ‘Who’s Lucid?’

Merlin looked over his shoulder, as though afraid he might be overheard. ‘Lucid is the Lord of the Dark Continent.’ He could see from Dylan’s expression that more was needed, took his arm, and led him in the opposite direction to the one he’d been going. Dylan did not resist.

‘Lucid is the son of the Fallen Angel and wishes to invade Trinity and take over the Academy. If he is successful, then this will be the end of all creation, the whole multiverse.’

Dramatic enough?

He saw Dylan’s surprised expression and continued. ‘Some time ago. Let me see.’ He rubbed his chin, which appeared to help. ‘Six months, yes, six months ago, well, there was a war between Trinity...’ He saw that puzzled look again and pointed at the street by way of explanation. ‘Trinity?’ No, not received. He sighed and clicked his teeth together as he thought how to phrase it so the poor boy would understand. ‘The war was between the people of the Triple City and Lucid’s army seeking to free the Fallen Angel.’ He could have saved his enamel.

‘Who won?’ Dylan asked without a flicker of irony.

Merlin stared at him for a moment, trying to determine if he was serious, and decided he was. ‘Some would say we did, but I believe it was a draw.’

Dylan knew a draw usually meant a replay and decided to get out of there as soon as possible, but first he had to save the girl. Not out of any misplaced sense of chivalry or honour, well, okay, a bit, but mostly because he’d got her into the mess in the first place — and because she looked really cute, of course. ‘So this Lucid bloke has grabbed the girl.’

‘Yes,’ Merlin said, nodding, ‘he took her, certainly.’

‘Then they’ve done this before?’

‘Many times.’

Dylan stared in surprise. ‘Then why doesn’t somebody do something about it?’

Merlin blinked slowly as his mind processed the question. ‘What do you suggest?’

‘Well, they could send a gunboat, for starters.’

‘What is a gunboat?’ Merlin was beginning to think the young man was indeed touched.

Dylan let that one go. ‘What about the police?’

Merlin hazarded a guess. ‘Do you mean the Guardians?’

‘Yeah, okay, the Guardians. Where are they? Let’s go and report the kidnapping, and they can go and get her back.’

‘Oh, no, no, no,’ Merlin said, shaking his head to add a couple more. ‘You can’t go to the Guardians. They would hand you over to the Tallyman.’

‘True,’ Dylan said. ‘If they’re anything like *The Bill* back home.’ He sat on the edge of the pavement, the pavement that had been baking in the hot sun all day. He jumped up, rubbing the bits that had been

scorched through the thin hospital gown. ‘I need to get some more clothes.’

Merlin nodded, walked into one of the tall wooden houses, and came out a few minutes later carrying a bundle of brown rags, which he handed to Dylan, who moved them reluctantly under his nose and screwed up his face.

‘Did you steal these?’ ‘Cus I’ve got to tell you, the owner isn’t going to be in any hurry to reclaim them.’

Merlin smiled. ‘It is your choice. If you wish, you can continue to walk around in that shirt, which incidentally, does a poor job of covering you.’

Dylan looked down at the short gown. ‘Okay, I’ll go with the rags until I can find a clothes store.’

Merlin opened his mouth, then thought better of it and let him start to put on the robe. After a moment, he tapped him on the shoulder and pulled the long robe round to face the front, otherwise the boy would be wearing the hood as a facemask.

The coming days were going to be a severe challenge.

Eventually Dylan got the robe on, but wished he hadn’t. ‘I think something is still wearing this,’ he said, scratching various places. ‘Okay,’ he said at last, the biting having subsided, ‘you were telling me about Lucas.’

‘Lucid,’ Merlin corrected.

‘Okay, Lucid. So why is he snatching girls?’ Dylan asked, even though he could think of a few reasons. Turns out he was right.

‘Breeding,’ Merlin said and started to walk down the street.

Dylan’s jaw dropped. ‘What?’ He hurried after the old man, who was a lot sprightlier than he looked. ‘Wait up! Why is Lucid... breeding?’ Stupid question.

He caught up with the wizard and glanced down as the black cat padded alongside. 'I think I've seen this cat before.'

Merlin glanced at the cat. 'Possibly, she gets around.' He smiled a little smile. 'Her name is Galen.'

Dylan looked at Galen; it was a black cat. There are thousands of black cats. 'Hey, wait, about the girl.'

Merlin nodded knowingly. 'Yes, she was very pretty, wasn't she?'

Dylan shrugged. 'Didn't notice,' he lied, 'I was too busy trying to stay on that damned horse.'

'Not very successfully, it would appear,' Merlin said.

'I prefer something with an engine and no brain.'

'Did you notice anything else about this girl?' Merlin asked, stopping and looking up at Dylan. 'Besides her looks.'

Dylan pulled an 'I'm thinking' face, then nodded slowly. 'I suppose she looked a bit like Abbi.' He saw the old man's frown. 'Abbi's my sister.' He flinched. 'Which, now that I think about it, sounds a bit, you know, pervy.'

Merlin nodded sagely, not having the vaguest idea what the boy was talking about. 'I'm afraid it is more than a passing resemblance.'

Dylan stared at him. 'What do you mean?' He looked back down the street and replayed the memory. 'Come on, that girl was much younger than Abbi, and...' He let it go.

'And Abbi walks with the aid of a stick,' Merlin said. It wasn't a question, and he raised his hand to stop Dylan before he could respond. 'Have you asked yourself where you are?'

No, of course he hadn't, that would involve walking and thinking at the same time.

‘I’ve been a bit busy for pondering the meaning of life,’ Dylan said sharply, then sighed. ‘Okay, it did occur to me that this was a strange town to have such a big hospital.’ He looked around. ‘Too primitive.’

‘Thank you, I’m sure the populace of Trinity would be flattered.’

‘No, that’s not what I meant.’ Yes, it was. ‘It’s a bit... rural.’ Good recovery.

‘It’s more than that,’ Merlin said, wandering off.

Dylan took a long look around, as if it was the first time he’d seen the rough wooden buildings leaning against each other for support, or the cobbled streets without any sign of cars, or anything else mechanical for that matter. Rural, he concluded, but a little nagging voice told him that was not the whole truth — or maybe he just needed a kebab — but wherever he was and whoever that girl was, even if she did look a bit like Abbi, he’d dropped her in it, and he was going to get her out again. A noble goal, but an obstacle lay in his way — several, in fact.

‘Where have they taken her?’ he called after the departing old man, who waved a walking stick and strode on, leaving Dylan wondering if he’d just missed the stick, or if the old man he’d named Merlin really was a bit of a conjurer.

He looked back down the street, as if weighing up what to do next, and slowly his shoulders sagged as he realised at last that there was nothing he could do, next or at any other time. He strode after the wizard and the cat, which had stopped for a moment to give him a long looking at before padding after her master.

I hate cats, Dylan thought as he caught up with them.

‘We’re not highly enamoured with you either,’ said a voice in his head.

He stopped and looked around, then down at the cat. No, no way, he was just tired. 'Hey, where are we going?' he called after the wizard, who had turned right into a narrow alley. He heard an echoing reply that could have been anything and ran after the old man.

'Hey, wait up!' But the old man was already rounding a sharp bend and disappearing out of sight. Dylan realised suddenly that if he lost the wizard, he would be on his own in Medieval World, which would be like getting off the Circle Line a stop too soon; man, you could be anywhere.

He caught up with Merlin as he crossed a small square, which would probably be called something like Piazza Bella Seniorita if it was in Italy, but here it was called Scragg's Cobbled Yard. He put a hand on the wizard's arm. 'Hold up.' He puffed as he caught his breath. No taxis in Medieval World. 'Let's sit over there in the shade, and you can catch your breath.' Dylan pointed at a rug some kind soul had hung over a low wall in the inviting shade.

It never even occurred to Merlin that the rug was anything other than an act of kindness provided for the weary traveller, and he followed the boy into the shade, gratefully, it has to be said.

They sat, and Merlin waited patiently for the boy to get his breath back. It was time he knew the truth. 'You remember the story of Eden?'

'Yeah,' Dylan said, 'Adam, Eve, and some weasely guy with an apple or a snake.' He shrugged and was sure there was more. Something about fig leaves.

Merlin smiled. 'Rather a simplified version, but it will do as a starting point.'

Dylan frowned, an expression that was becoming almost de rigueur in this nutty place. ‘What’s that got to do with some hairy guys snagging the Messenger-girl?’

‘Like I said, it’s a start.’ He smiled. ‘In fact, it is The start.’ He liked that. ‘Many millennia ago,’ Merlin began, and Dylan resisted the temptation to add, ‘In a galaxy far, far away.’

Merlin wondered if millennia was pushing the boy too far, but decided to go for it. ‘A long time ago,’ he corrected in mid flow, ‘all mankind lived here.’ He spread his hands expansively, and Dylan looked around Scragg’s Cobbled Yard. ‘It was a bad time, with wars and pillaging as the strongest tried to grab whatever everyone else had.’ He shook his head. ‘Bad times indeed.’

‘Ah, tell me about it,’ Dylan said absently, in a staring contest with the cat, and losing.

‘Very well,’ Merlin said and told him The Story, as his father had told him, and his father before him, and... well, a lot of them anyway.

It was dark — which is a bit like saying infinity is big. There was nothing in the universe except a big ball of hot swirly fire, rolling about itself and crackling angrily. Not pleasant.

Tze was a novice Architect with big plans, and he was about to kick one of them off. He poked the big crackling ball with his stick — a special Architect’s stick made of, well, Architect-stick stuff. Not much happened, except a bit more cracking and fizzling, so he looked around to make sure none of the Architects could see him out here in the nether regions of the multiverse. He was alone, well, as alone as it’s possible to be when you’re part of a cosmic consciousness, which I have to tell you, is totally overrated.

‘Oh, sod it,’ he thought, swung his stick over his shoulder, and let rip. A perfect setup, not too fast, and a lovely follow-through. The swirly ball streaked up towards the top of infinity and curved back a little before its surface tension shattered and it exploded with a very satisfyingly big bang.

Not too shabby, Tze thought, watching the pretty fireworks whiz off into the void. You know, he thought, this could be a good place to practice, you know, without anybody seeing my cock-ups and pointing a finger.

And so this, contrary to all that rubbish in the press, was how the universe was born.

All he had to do now was design a decent planet or two, stick some people on them, and he’d be away. Couple of months, tops, and he’d have ironed out the kinks in his approach to Architecting. What could go wrong?

Things went wrong from the start, as is the way with most best laid plans. Tze designed and built an array of star systems, planets, and other stellar bric-a-brac as specified in the Architect’s handbook for fledging universes. Then he balanced the environment in one of the more promising solar systems, but if, as later reported, in the beginning was the Word, then that word was ‘bugger!’

He built a nice planet, with lush foliage, and water, and happy bunnies, and he saw it was good, so he created man, but it was Saturday, and he was tired and a bit bored.

Right off, they started fighting each other — and eating the bunnies, which was not part of the Grand Design. And they started multiplying at an alarming rate — due mostly to running around in the forest wearing nothing but shiny fig leaves. The more of them there were, the bigger the punch-ups.

By the time Tze came back after his Sunday off, it was totally out of hand. They had invented all sorts of ways of doing each other in, so the victor could collect more things, because things, it turned out, gave the owner a power over others, so that they bought more things, which gave him more power. Tze finished off his breakfast on Monday morning and watched his experiment with growing alarm. A nice cup of tea later, they had invented automatic weapons and flying machines and were grabbing whole countries full of stuff. Two rounds of toast munched was time enough for them to have graduated to chemical and biological warfare.

He guessed that by the time he'd finished off the little bunch of grapes his mom insisted he have every day, the pests would have exterminated each other, and his problem will have gone away. Oh, if only life were that simple.

A scientist in the western continent had the idea, and it was a doozy. He realised that if a man could live forever, well, at least a long time, then he would have longer to enjoy all the things he'd got by killing off the other folks. Scientifically speaking, it was hard to fault.

Tze saw it straight away, which showed he wasn't quite the dimwit this cock-up would suggest. If these greedy, selfish, and bloodthirsty people got to live forever, it wouldn't be long — in cosmic terms — before they were up here with the Architects. Bad, oh yes, really, really bad. But what to do? He hid, but that didn't work out, as they'd invented space travel by the time he came out of the cupboard and were transporting their barbarism all over the place.

That was it, then, he'd have to tell his master, and the prospect caused his knees to shake. He could just hear him now, he'd say...

'You did what?' Tze Tsu's face was purple, which is never a good sign for apprentices bringing bad news to the boss. 'Let me get this

straight,' he said through clenched teeth. 'You created a Place, and then you populated it with beings?'

Tze nodded, looked at his feet, and noted they were still there. His master would calm down, he always did.

'Are you completely devoid of even a modicum of sense, boy?' Not calm, then.

'We could terminate it,' Tze suggested, breaking the first law of being chewed out by your boss — that being... shut up.

'No...we...cannot...terminate...it,' Tze Tsu growled very slowly. 'Haven't you learned anything in your time at my drawing board?'

That'll be no.

Tze Tsu took long, deep breaths, which, though they didn't calm him down much, at least stopped the impending heart attack. He walked away; he walked back. 'That Place was not scheduled for deployment until next financial year.' Which for those of us on standard time, is... well, a one with lots of zeros.

'Very well, it's done,' Tze Tsu said, closing his eyes for a moment to find his centre. 'We can simply pick up the pieces and engineer the cosmical expanse into some kind of order.' He scratched his chin. 'Perhaps it isn't too late—'

'They have discovered immortality,' Tzu said quietly, without looking up. Shouldn't be a problem, though, his master was a...

'They have done what?'

Ah, not quite as expected.

'They have discovered—'

'Yes, yes, I heard you!' Tze Tsu snapped. 'How, how...' He shook his head. This was a disaster. They would say it was his fault; say he didn't keep a tight rein on the smart-ass kid, who was turning out just

like his father, they'd say. He would have to tell the judges, and they would say...

'He did what?' Tze Tsu Tza was not chuffing. He had only popped into the office today to pick up his golf clubs, and what lands in his lap? A breach of the Second Legal Statute, that's what. He looked at the golf bag leaning forlornly against the wall. Well, he could forget that, but perhaps it wasn't completely hopeless, the Second Statute had been broken before, and they just rolled the timetable forward. Now if it had been the First — he trembled at the thought, but no, it was just the Second, so, yes, golf was still possible, if—

'They have discovered immortality,' Tze Tsu said quietly, looking at his feet and confirming, as had his apprentice, that they were still there.

Tze Tsu Tza sat down, put his elbows on the desk, and sank his head into his hands. No tears, but the day wasn't over yet.

That was it, then, he would have to tell the Legislature. He sighed. And they would say...

'He has done what?' The Deputy Judgemaster General was not a happy bunny. He'd been planning to knock off early for a long weekend with the missus.

Tze Tsu Tza got in quickly, 'They have developed immortality,' before they got their hopes up.

There was a shared groan from the twelve old and wise judges sitting behind the curved legislature benchette — the full bench being in the workshop for repairs after that idiot Tze Tsa Tro dropped the mace when he was passing sentence. They'd told the old codger it was too heavy for him, but no, off he goes, waving it about like it was a wand or something.

The Deputy Judgemaster General — whose name, not surprisingly, began with Tze, but then became unpronounceable, so his wife called him T G — pulled himself back to the problem. ‘So, gentlemen,’ he said a trifle pompously, ‘we have somewhat of a dilemma.’

‘I should say so,’ said that mouthy new judge sitting at T G’s right, but shut up under the withering look from his superior.

T G continued, feeling a little cheered by the success of ‘The Look’ he’d been practicing in the mirror after shaving. ‘This is a first, I believe—’

‘No,’ said the old codger who’d dropped the mace, ‘I think you will find that it is not entirely without precedent.’

Whatever, T G thought. ‘Still, it has been long enough for any other occurrences of this transgression to have disappeared from shared memory.’

All Tze heard was ‘transgression’. He was in the smelly stuff, that was for sure.

‘I remember it,’ the old codger said.

Yes, you would, T G thought. ‘Yes, quite,’ he said and took a long blow into his hanky. ‘I’m sure it wasn’t the same anyway,’ he added, then deployed The Look again before the old codger could argue. ‘I propose, therefore, that we terminate the Place forthwith.’ Then he could get on with his long weekend before it was too late.

‘Can’t do that,’ the old codger said with a shake of his head and a firm set chin — not easy at his age.

‘And why not?’ The mouthy new guy again, butting in.

The old codger took a deep breath in preparation for the big speech.

‘We passed a law some time ago forbidding precisely that action,’ T G said, with a sigh of resignation as he remembered why. ‘To prevent, err, shall we say, less responsible members of this Legislature

erasing, shall we say, less favourable actions before a judicial review can determine the constitutional—'

'Before the proper finger wagging and apportionment of blame.' The mouthy new guy had a point.

'Yes, well, be that as it may,' T G said, ploughing on. 'Issuing notice for the removal of the unscheduled Place is not within this Legislature's remit.'

'We could just cull the inhabitants and either start again or use it as a prison,' said the really thin judge with the watery eyes. 'Or a theme park. I love theme parks.'

T G closed his eyes and sighed heavily. 'Yes, you would,' he said mostly to himself. 'Prison or theme park? Not much to choose from there.' He made a decision. They could all see that from the puffed-out chest and all that nodding. 'You,' he said, pointing at Tze Tsu.

Tze Tsu snapped back from the standing nap he'd been taking. 'What? Who? It wasn't me. I have no recollection of that event.' That worked, nobody would have noticed.

'You,' T G said in the voice of the Legislature — which was like his own voice, but a bit strangled from all the puffing up. 'You created this mess,' he said to the startled Tze Tsu. 'Then you clean it up.' He picked up the mace and put it right back down again because it weighed a ton and his back was giving him jip. 'Or else,' he added, for effect.

'I have an idea,' Tze said, very, very quietly.

'Shut up,' Tze Tsu hissed.

'Speak up,' T G said. 'Speak up, boy.'

Oh great, Tze Tsu thought, seeing his future turn into one designing rocks in a two-dimensional universe.

Tze spoke up. 'We could educate the new beings so they know how to behave.'

'Ah,' the mouthy new guy said, 'that won't work.'

'That might work,' said the thin judge with the watery eyes. 'It's better than terminating them.' He shrugged a 'What?' shrug in response to the long pitying looks from the others. 'It might be fun.'

T G thought about it for a moment, then remembered what his missus had promised she would do to him if he was late for the trip to her mother's, again. 'Yes,' he said quickly. 'Yes, go and do that.' He stood up, started to collect his bits and pieces, then stopped. 'And you...' He pointed at Tze Tsu. 'We hold you responsible for the success or otherwise of this plan,' he said, putting a mental tick in the 'somebody pencilled in for blame' box. He smiled at the apprentice trying to become invisible. 'Well done, boy.' The smile again. 'An excellent plan.' One has to encourage the young.

Tze Tsu got a handful of Tze's collar and dragged him away from the Legislature. 'What did I tell you?' he growled. 'Don't say anything, I said. What did I say?'

'Don't say anything,' Tze said, as is required of such questions.

'And what did you do?'

We all know what he did, so no answer was necessary.

'Right,' Tze Tsu said, stopping on the steps and glaring at the novice Architect. 'No weekends for you, not until you come up with a workable plan.' Right, time for golf.

'I have a plan,' Tze said, feeling a little cross now. Okay, he had screwed up, but only a bit, and all this fuss and threats. Is that any way to reward enthusiasm? No, I don't think so.

Tze Tsu tilted his head and dared the apprentice to speak.

'I will visit them and—'

‘Ah!’ Tze Tsu threw his head back and tutted a good tut.

‘I will let them know they are not the only beings in the multiverse and that they have to learn to behave.’

That will never... you know, it just might. Tze Tsu chewed the inside of his lip and thought it over. ‘Very well,’ he said with a shrug. ‘Probably a complete waste of time, but we have to be seen to be doing something.’ He sat on the marble steps and waved Tze down beside him. Cosy. ‘Very well, tell me your plan.’

Tze made it up as he went along. ‘I will speak to their leaders...’ So far, so good. ‘And tell them that they must curb their barbarism and...’ And... and...? ‘They must follow our guidance in becoming responsible omnipotent beings.’ Quite good. ‘I will arrange for their young to have their souls sent to school in another dimension, where they can make all the mistakes they need to make, without the consequences.’ Better and better. ‘Then, when their race is truly wise, they will be able to join the Accord.’

Tze Tsu nodded slowly. That could work, it was just off the wall enough to do it. ‘Very well,’ he said, getting up slowly and rubbing his icy-cold bits. ‘Do it.’ Command given, off for a warm bath — he had arranged for a quick game of meteor marbles, but now it was too late and too cold, and anyway, his partner for the round was much better than him, and who wants to keep losing? She could find somebody else to humiliate. Bath it is, then.

Tze wasted no time crossing the cosmos to the planet of the barbarians, but he couldn’t just turn up, that would scare the pants off them, so he visited each of the world’s leaders in various disguises. And each one gave him their considered response to his wise and bountiful offer.

‘Bugger off!’

Not an auspicious start, so he fell back on the fine foil of the true diplomat and told them to sign up or get squished. Okay then, all signed up.

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‘And it has worked perfectly well for six million years. Up till now,’ Merlin said pointedly.

‘Yeah,’ Dylan said, still trying to out-stare the cat, ‘and I bet I can guess what’s happened.’

Merlin watched him for a moment, waiting for him to guess, then gave up. He could see he had exceeded the boy's one-minute concentration span, so summarised it for him. ‘So here we are, in Eden, after completing our time in the Other Place,’ he said and stood up, clearly ready for the off.

Dylan gave up on the cat, deciding he had an unfair advantage, being of higher intelligence. ‘So, this Other Place, err... place,’ Dylan said.

‘Oh, yes,’ Merlin said, ‘Transition.’

‘Bit of a strange name,’ Dylan said, trying not to look at the cat, who seemed to be annoyed about something.

‘Oh, you call it Earth, but that’s just one of those hungover memories transitioners sometimes have and think are real,’ Merlin said and strode away, leaving Dylan with his mouth open as a docking port for any passing blowfly.

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