Vyn reached the top of the staircase. A large iron gate blocked the entrance to the Great Hall, where a human with pitch-black wings was perched at the top. It swooped down and landed in front of Vyn.

“Welcome back, Vyn,” the Sentry said, flashing its jagged teeth. “Tough luck this cycle. Catching a stray bullet at six years old is unfortunate.”

Vyn’s pale face was stoic under its large satin hood. “It happens,” it said. “What did I score?”

“2. Some more bad news for you. While you were gone, Zipharos got back and scored 50. It deescalated the conflict in Kashmir to a bitter rivalry. So that brings you down to Number 4. I’ll have to change your mark.”

Vyn’s face remained expressionless. “So be it.”

The Sentry extended a jagged finger and touched the red “3” on Vyn’s cheek. It quickly morphed to a number “4”.

“Any other news for me?” Vyn asked the Sentry.

“Tamtim was looking for you.”

“Fantastic,” Vyn murmured.

The Sentry turned around and whispered something under its breath. The massive gate doors slowly opened, and Vyn walked through, its long coat dragging behind it.

Vyn followed the familiar garden path that snaked through the lush flora. Several small, gnarled wooden cottages were scattered among the shrubbery. Vyn passed a smoking chimney redolent of coriander and cumin. Its owner, a furry triangle-eared creature, came out of the door soon after. A red “179” was etched below its left ear.

“Vyn! Vyn! What happened? Early death? Guess so. Zepharos is Number 3 now.”

Vyn did not slow its step. “Yes.”

“When are you going to start your next cycle?”

“Now,” Vyn answered.

“Oh...well...I was hoping I could ask you something. You see...I’ve been stuck at the bottom for *so* many cycles now, and...I just need some help, ya know?”

“The Originators,” Vyn declared.

“I asked them, but they just told me what they tell me every time - ‘make Earth a better place before you leave it’. I make sure I do that every time! But I’m missing something. I need help from another god!”

Vyn grunted. “Not me,” it said.

Two tall wooden doors ensnared in vines stood at the end of the garden path. Vyn’s grey hands pushed them open. The pointy-eared creature did not dare to follow.

The Great Hall was an immaculate room. Atop its woven red carpet was a long, ornate wooden table. Two creatures sat at each end of the table. One had dark, unkempt hair strewn across a pair of black horns and an aging purple face. The other was younger, a tiara tucked neatly in its rust-colored hair. Its shining human face beamed as Vyn and its companion entered. Vyn bowed as soon as the doors shut behind him.

“Welcome home, Vyn,” the Originators said in unison.

“Thank you,” Vyn lifted its head to face the other two creatures.

The purple-faced horned creature spoke first. “There are two matters we’d like to bring to your attention. First, this is the 500th cycle that you have been in the top 5 of the Number System. You continue to prove your elite ability as a god who improves the human race.”

Vyn nodded and again expressed its gratitude.

“Second, Yojimbo has been found in violation of commandments one and four. The Sentry is taking Yojimbo to Calcifus before your next cycle starts. If you care to have any final conversation with Yojimbo, it is waiting at the World Tree. However, it is not recommended, as it could affect your performance.”

Vyn bit its lip, its hood concealing its expression from the Originators. “I understand,” it said.

The purple-faced horned creature looked at Vyn compassionately. “Don’t push yourself too hard, Vyn. Take some time to recuperate before your next cycle.”

The human-faced creature chuckled. “Ha! Or else you’ll end up like Yojimbo! Ha!”

Vyn grunted in the affirmative. Its grey eyes were fixed on the banner above the purple-faced horned creature’s head. It read:

1. DO NOT REVEAL TO HUMANS YOU ARE A GOD
2. DO NOT FORM LONG-TERM EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS with HUMANS
3. TREAT YOUR VESSEL WITH CARE and respect
4. Make the world a better place before you leave it

The purple-faced horned creature noticed where Vyn was looking and smiled to itself. “Vyn, you may go now. And Tamtim?” One of the wooden doors opened and the pointy-eared creature poked its furry pink face through. “You may pass through, as long as you assure us that you will no longer be a nuisance to Vyn.”

“Oh...yes! Of course, Belyu!” Tamtim squeaked.

“On your way,” Belyu said. Vyn started up the velvet-laden staircase located behind the human-faced creature, who was still smirking from its joke earlier. Tamtim cautiously followed behind.

The top of the staircase let out to a white void. Other gods sporadically dotted the vast space. In the center, a massive tree stood proudly. Its branches sprawled across the void, covering an indeterminate amount of space. From the staircase, Vyn could discern that two other gods were gathered at the base of the colossal trunk.

Tamtim popped up at Vyn’s hip. “You’re here to see Yojimbo, aren’t you?” Tamtim prodded.

“Go. Away,” Vyn said slowly, each word petrifying Tamtim to its core. The pointy-eared creature bent down and leapt away on all fours with no particular destination in mind.

Vyn eventually reached the base of the World Tree. A broad-shouldered, saber-toothed creature was in deep conversation with an equally built creature with a boar’s skull covering the top half of its head. The saber-toothed creature turned towards Vyn as it approached.

“Vyn,” it said in its deep voice.

“Hello, Yojimbo. I came to bid my farewell,” Vyn said softly.

Yojimbo flashed a wry smile. “Hmph. I was just telling Zepharos how the only thing I will miss about this place is our days vying for the title of Number 1. I never wanted to be Number 1, it was just fun to watch you two compete.” Frustration suddenly overtook Yojimbo’s face. “Damn the rest of it to Calcifus! I’d rather be tortured in one thousand different ways than live through one human vessel ever again. Each life is just the same as the next.”

Vyn scratched the side of its forehead with a grey finger. “You cannot escape boredom in Calcifus either.”

Yojimbo did not flinch. “So be it.”

“You’d rather live in eternal pain and boredom than not?” Zepharos chimed in.

“Yes. I’ve seen every side of the human race, just as you have. They are doomed. Each time I entered a vessel, no matter which part of the world I was in, they always fell back on their selfish ways. They think that because they are the main character of their story everyone else is secondary. Introduce to them one novel idea and they flock like a murder.”

“Especially when that novel idea is that at any given moment there are one hundred gods masquerading as humans with the sole goal to improve the world,” Zepharos muttered.

“Exactly. Now that I’ve revealed our existence and our purpose to humans, they will stop caring altogether,” Yojimbo answered. “And that’s exactly what they’ve done. How pitiful.”

Zepharos sighed and adjusted its skull helmet. “I don’t think your intentions will bear as sweet fruit as you imagine. Your legacy on Earth is a small cult following that has already started to dissipate in your absence.”

Yojimbo stared directly at Zepharos. “Even if you pick the fruit, the seed still remains.” It then turned to gaze up at the branches of the World Tree. A small twig fell down from high above and landed at the gods’ feet. They watched as it slowly shriveled, splintered, then dissolved into the ocean of white nothing at their feet.

“It’s more disappointing than anything else,” said Yojimbo. “Humans document their history quite well, but don’t even bother consulting it when making critical decisions. It means they’ll just keep making the same mistakes for all eternity. You two will lose faith eventually as well. Even you, Zepharos.” Zepharos narrowed its eyes at Yojimbo.

The sharp-toothed creature continued. “It’s not like I despise humans. They don’t know any better as mortals. If they spent the required time to learn about their ancestors, they’d be dead before they could do anything! Ha!” Yojimbo’s teeth gleamed with malice.

Vyn felt a breeze pick up behind it, and immediately after saw the Sentry’s obsidian talons pass above its head. “It’s time, Yojimbo,” it crowed, landing on a low-hanging branch on the World Tree.

“So be it,” repeated Yojimbo. “Vyn, Zepharos, this is not goodbye,” it said with unbridled confidence.

“Goodbye, Yojimbo,” Zepharos said.

The Sentry swooped down and grabbed Yojimbo’s sturdy shoulders with its talons. Yojimbo did not resist. The two flew high above the World Tree until Vyn lost sight of them.

“What a fool,” said Zepharos.

“Time will tell,” replied Vyn.

Zepharos recoiled in shock, its skull sliding up on its head. “What? You actually believe the filth Yojimbo was spewing?”

“We hold no stake in the success of the human race,” Vyn stated.

“Of course we do! Are they gullible? Yes. Yojimbo was right about that. But they are beginning to build technology that helps them preserve and acquire knowledge at a faster rate. They will be gullible no more.”

“And then you will be satisfied?” Vyn prodded.

“I will be satisfied when one day they are able to face us as equals. I believe they can find their way here,” Zepharos declared.

Vyn bit its lip. “Still a long way from building anything close to the Harbinger or the Omni. And if they do face us as equals, they will be upset once they discover what we have been doing to them for eons.”

“Will they? I doubt it,” Zepharos said emphatically. “Without us guiding them, they’ll never reach the primary singularity. Or it will go horribly wrong when they do. We’ve made those mistakes so they don’t have to. Why do you think the Originators chose the humans specifically as targets for our vessels? Because they still have time to be changed. Before they doom themselves like we did.”

“Not much time left,” Vyn muttered.

Zepharos removed its skull to reveal a blue face and a pair of eyes shut permanently by a jagged scar. “It’s remarkable that two hundred of us survived,” Zepharos said. “But at least it wasn’t fifty. Or ten.”

Vyn did not respond.