

Chapter 1

Eric Erikson answered his cell phone without looking up from his computer screen at work. His desk was a shambles of a half-eaten vending-machine sandwich and too many bags of Fritos.

What blocked number would need to be calling him at two in the morning on a Friday night? He was just getting down to the second level of tonight's guilty pleasure, indulging in a new Internet role-playing game. He'd gotten in on the beta release of a new project with the weird name of *Chraze* that looked cool, but he wasn't very far into the world yet.

"E-Squared!"

Well, that told him who the caller was. Only his boss, Valerie McKenzie called him that. Everyone else still called him Eric-Squared, for Eric Erikson but she had edited his name down a year ago, before his job interview with Ms. Incredibly Erudite had even ended.

"Hi, Mac." That was the nickname he'd tagged her with during his first week at McKenzie Book Publishers. It had started as "Mac hold the cheese" because one thing about Valerie McKenzie, she wanted it her way. And she got it. She hated New York, so had convinced a major publisher to let her run her own imprint from Seattle. And then, against all projections, she had made it into a very successful concern.

Now, everyone called her Mac, and "McHell" was a whispered warning that permeated down the halls just moments before she

swooped in and touched down like a personalized whirlwind at some poor fool's desk.

"You've got to help me."

Boss in distress. Her voice sounded really wound up, even more than usual. Eyes still glued to the screen, Eric shoved the mouse around to avoid a can of root beer and an upopened bag of peanuts on his desk, barely saving his on-screen avatar from being skewered by a black knight riding a Harley in full armor across a grassy plain in Spain where, according to the stats bar down the side, it hardly ever rained.

"What's up, boss?"

"You know that cookbook?"

No one in the office could avoid "that cookbook." The Mac had torn through the office on a rampage just three days earlier. Mathilda Reeves had finally delivered her latest cookbook manuscript, six weeks late and in miserable shape. The layout team had tried to put it together, but it was a total train wreck. On Wednesday morning, The Mac had grabbed the manuscript, a laptop, and stormed out in order to work from home.

"I know that cookbook." Eric kept his tone carefully neutral. No one had heard from Valerie for three days. Which had made the office calm and peaceful for a pleasant change of pace. Though he did kind of miss her tornadoing around the thirtieth floor of the Two Union Square building, she certainly kept things interesting.

He whacked the black knight's helmet with a handy caveman cudgel, which he'd bought cheap from an on-screen dealer in Neanderthal artifacts. It made the knight's helmet ring like a church bell. Very satisfying.

"Well, the cookbook now insists that it's looking for God."

That froze his hand on the mouse, at just the wrong moment. The knight gunned the Harley's engine and ran over Eric's figure, flattening him into the sod. Then he circled back and rolled over Eric again crosswise. That sucked. This game handed out some serious retributions when your avatar died.

The Mac took his silence as rapt attention rather than cursing to himself.

"I was working on editing and laying out one of the very last recipes, a typical Mathilda dessert, Flan with Lingonberries. What the

hell is a lingonberry anyway, it's not as if any normal grocery in hell-and-gone Missouri is going to have them in stock, and suddenly the laptop made a gagging sound, like a loud retching. Next thing I know I'm looking at a recipe titled 'Flogging with Lingonberries' and there's an embedded video of some giant red berry wielding a cat o' nine tails on an apple pie holding up its crust to defend itself. When I tried to hit Undo, the berry turned to me and asked me, *by name*, if I knew where to find God? The thing called me Valerie McKenzie for crying out loud. I'm totally creeped out. You've gotta help me. I was almost done and I haven't backed up in days."

It was impressive. As far as he could tell, she hadn't taken a single breath in all that.

"Uh, I can try to fix it." He was still trying to piece together the image of a lingonberry knowing its editor's name. And that she'd used words like "totally" as an adverb and "gotta." And contractions. She was rarely desperate enough to use contractions.

"Good, thanks! Can you... Oh God— No! Wait, I didn't mean to say that. Good thing the software can't hear me or it might start asking me more questions."

Eric wondered if she'd been drinking.

"I'm sorry, I didn't notice the time. Could you come by as soon as you can in the morning? I don't care what time. Pretty please, E-Squared?"

Eric had never heard The Mac apologize, let alone beg. He agreed and instantly she was gone.

He looked back at the screen where the black knight had broken into song, singing harmony on a Norse drinking song with the thudding reverberations coming from the Harley's big exhaust pipes, about how he'd been born to be wild. All the while he kept circling around in different directions to run over Eric's figure that foolishly kept trying to get up from his body-shaped hole in the sod. The wheel patterns over the sod were making the shape of an infinity symbol. Eric shut down the game.

One thing for sure, he wasn't going to wait for the morning. He'd never heard The Mac so flustered. Angry? Often. Perhaps too often, though not usually at him. But genuine distress? That was new.

He grabbed his bicycle helmet. He'd ridden in this morning and then stayed at the office to take advantage of the high-speed

connection, and the big screen, to beta test the new game. From McKenzie Book Publishers' Westlake Avenue office to Ravenna was only a couple miles and the Seattle streets would be quiet in the middle of the night.

He hit the street and was already moving before he noticed that the pavement was wet. Eric considered going back to get his rain slicks, but it wasn't raining at the moment, so he just downshifted and hurried north along Westlake, past all of the sailboats and houseboats, up to the Fremont Bridge.

He hit the draw bridge and rolled past the sign, "Welcome to Fremont, the center of the Universe. Set your watch back five minutes." The problem he had was that he didn't wear a watch any more. Instead, he used his cell phone that stayed in perfect sync with the cell provider's signal all on its own. Fremont had, through no fault of its own, gone from arcane to archaic and he felt bad on its behalf.

He cut across town on Thirty-Fourth so he could wave at the huge concrete troll squatting under the Aurora Bridge. The troll had the remains of a VW Beetle clutched in one mighty fist. As usual, he didn't wave back at Eric.

The neighborhoods were all quiet as he sped through. He'd always liked this time of night in Seattle. Most people only saw the bustling city that had doubled in size over the last few decades. But in the middle of the night, there was a silence so deep that he could hear the quiet spatter of his bike tires on the rain-wet streets and the ticking clunks as relay boxes flipped streetlights from red to green just for his passage.

He'd never actually been to The Mac's new apartment. He'd been to the estate she used to have out on Bainbridge Island for last year's Christmas party. A big place filled with canapés and ostentation, that both had and hadn't fit its occupant. Super-editor, The Fearsome Mac, the Woman of Steel, would of course have a sweeping view of Liberty Bay and the Olympic Mountains isolated by large stands of timber along the shore of Port Orchard Bay. And of course she'd be married to some useless guy like Landau McKenzie. He'd been a weird Scottish guy, who looked like a laird and acted like a dweeb. And no sense of humor at all. Not that Mac had one either.

But The Mac had this other side to her, one he spotted only rarely, the human Valerie McKenzie. Sometimes, when exhausted but pleased

with herself at shipping off another soon-to-be bestseller, she'd drop by his desk. The woman would collapse in his guest chair and chat for a few minutes. Still perfectly coifed, chestnut-dark hair in a tight French chignon, power suit sharp and expensive, but a smile would emerge and light up her face. Eric had to admit to feeling secretly superior to the rest of the world, as he suspected he was the only one who got to see that life-altering smile.

Everyone else told him he was fantasizing, 'The Mac never smiled except the way a shark might. So he'd learned to keep his mouth shut, but he'd become more and more intrigued by the Valerie he glimpsed behind The Mac.

Then six months ago she'd divorced Landau Fucking McKenzie, as she now unfailingly referred to him, and life around the office had really become hell. Her mood swings had gone from lethal, to chaotic and lethal.

Her current gripe was that changing back to her maiden name wouldn't do any good because she'd "for reasons unknown" thought it cute that she and Landau Fucking McKenzie had the same last name before she was dumb enough to marry him and how in the world could she have ever thought that was charming? Then she'd launch into yet another diatribe on Landau's character.

Eric considered riding north around Green Lake and getting his car, but he was already so close, he just rode to her house on Ravenna. She'd gotten a place just past the shop that had custom-built his road bike, costing him most of a month's pay, over the crest and down toward the park. She lived in a giant Victorian house from Seattle's heyday, now cut up into eight apartments.

#

Eric Erikson hit the buzzer for Valerie's apartment and got no response.

He considered that it was awfully late, she'd probably gone to bed. Maybe he should go. But she'd sounded so desperate.

He hit the buzzer again, longer and harder.

No voice squawked out of the speaker. But there was click, then a groan, like someone in deep pain. Like someone who'd been stabbed, or worse. When the door release buzzed, he went in fast. He shouldered

his bike and bolted up the two flights. He dropped his bike in the hall, leaning it against the sturdy mahogany railing that overlooked the stairwell, and knocked on her door with a fast rat-a-tat.

No response.

He was preparing to test his shoulder against her door locks when he heard the chain drop and the deadbolt being thrown back. The door cracked open and The Mac looked out at him. At least a version of her did. Someone had taken the sharp-edged senior editor and run her through the Photoshop blur tool. Several times.

She blinked at him like a sleepy cat. Rather than pulled back into an immaculate French Roll, her dark dark-red hair, half dry from a shower, snarled about her face and cascaded well past her shoulders. Half of it was caught inside a faded Smith College sweatshirt that might have once been white and gold. It was that oversized thing that women bought for sleeping in. Right now, the too big collar had slipped down to one side and revealed a vast expanse of splendid right shoulder. The sweatpants matched, equally oversized. Her bare feet danced back and forth a bit, the floor was probably cold this time of year, just like at his place.

“Valerie?” This wasn’t tougher-than-any-man, The Mac McKenzie.

She blinked those sleep-fogged eyes at him again. He’d never been close enough before to really see them. He knew they were blue, but had never noticed the little flecks of gold. It made him think of calico cats, not super editors. Not of a woman powerful enough to build her own imprint on the West Coast much to the New York publisher’s shock.

The Fearsome Mac, tousled. He had to take a steadying breath. It was like having the universe change on you unexpectedly. The fiercest, most driven, and most successful editor in the conglomerate’s most profitable imprint never had a single thing out of place. Not a fold of her jacket, not a hair on her head, not one comma in a thousand pages.

Also, he was looking down at her. Normally in serious heels and power suits, she was completely intimidating. Towering over people, even taller ones by sheer intimidation if necessary. Now, barefoot, she stood five-six, five-seven tops. Weird.

“Uh... hi.” She blinked once more and came a little more into focus. “Thanks for coming.” She looked at one bare wrist. Then the

other. Then she turned slowly in place, stopping when she faced a grandfather clock opposite the door.

“You came fast. I’ve only slept about twenty minutes. I appreciate it, E-Squared.”

Like he’d wait until morning when receiving a panic call from The Mac.

“It’s over there.” She swung open the door and pointed toward the table.

Most of the apartment was about what he’d expected. Beautiful art on the wall, but rather than investment art, it was mostly soft, Impressionist-style scenes of Italian coasts and French lavender fields that invited you in. Some comfortable chairs, clearly intended for a larger room, but crowded together companionably enough to host a small circle of friends. Light curtains of gold and gray which masked the much heavier curtains of midnight blue needed to cover old apartment windows during the wet Seattle winters. Hardwood that probably dated back a century, complemented by the rosewood-hued pillows on the dusky-aubergine couch.

All very cozy except, taking up a third of the space, an oaken table that would easily seat eight if it weren’t shoved into a corner. Nor was there room to pull it out.

This table, he decided, was all Valerie and very little Mac. It was a disaster worse than his apartment, covered in leftover food wrappers, a delivery pizza box, manuscript pages, and an impressive array of soda cans. He wanted a photograph of this, something to keep in his mind’s eye the next time she was busy scaring the shit out of him and everyone else in the office, but he didn’t think reaching for his smartphone would be a wise choice.

A trail of clothes led from the chair in front of the computer, past the kitchen and down the hall toward the bathroom. A very intriguing trail. Nice slacks and a simple cashmere sweater that belonged to Mac. A “Come to the Dark Side, We Have Cookies!” t-shirt he wasn’t so sure about, since it would imply that The Mac had a sense of humor. And very feminine underwear and bra in pale blue satin that certainly didn’t belong in the same time zone as the Woman of Steel.

He did his best to simply take it all in with a single glance then look away. Wouldn’t do to be caught staring at his boss’ underwear, even if it wasn’t on her body.

He edged over to the table and sat, not even removing his jacket. The Mac morphed into a tousled woman who owned sheer, blue satin underwear was giving him problems. And if her underwear was strewn across the oak flooring, what was under the sweats...

He shook his head to clear it.

She'd moved up close behind him, kicking her slacks over to stand on and insulate herself from the cold floor.

"Mathilda Reeves' cookbook is a disaster. I was close, so close. Another ten or twelve hours and I'd have had it ready for the printer, and then it crashed. You have to save me, E-Squared. I hadn't saved in a couple of hours, but I'll deal with that if I have to. I don't have a backup at all, and I'll just completely lose it if I have to redo three days of work. I don't think I can face that. And that lingonberry scared the shit out of me."

He knew that The Mac swore, but he didn't know she had limits. That was news as well.

"Okay, I'll see what I can do." He didn't give voice to his next thought, that he'd be a lot less nervous if she'd move back a few steps and didn't sound so human-woman-in-distress rather than demanding-boss-on-a-tear.

He flipped open the laptop.

An apple-green screen faced him. He hadn't seen one of those in years. It was a normal laptop, but instead of some GUI applications all made for point and click, there was a black screen covered with apple-green question marks in a font like the early DOS days, like in the old mainframes. He wiggled the mouse, but there was no cursor to move around, just the blinking underscore character inviting him to type.

He tapped an enter key.

Nothing.

He typed "exit," but it didn't return to its modern, windowed interface.

He hit control-alt-delete.

The computer flashed a solid screen of bright green at him.

When he'd blinked and could focus on the screen again, he saw a new message there.

Don't do that! I already told her not to do that, but does she listen? Nooo! She just slaps me up the side of my screen, like that's going to jar some electrons loose.

Eric glanced up at Valerie.

She shrugged and whispered, "I was pissed and out of other ideas."

He turned back to the screen.

And now I've got you to deal with? Go away Homo sapien. I've got no more use for you than her...

Unless you happen to know where God is?

"I don't." Eric was so surprised that he typed his response before he'd even thought about it. "In Heaven?"

Nope! Already checked. Not there. Now go away, I'm thinking.

Eric turned to look up at Valerie's gold-flecked eyes. "Uh, this may take a while."

DAY TWO

And God made the firmament,
and divided the waters which were
under the firmament from the waters
which were above the firmament.
And God called the firmament Heaven.

Chapter 2

Michelle slapped the side of the computer screen.

Hard.

The screen flashed to life in an eye-searing array of blacks and greens. The old thing shimmered, strobed, and at long last stabilized. The computer terminal was the only object on her vast, black-obsidian desk other than a massive cup of coffee.

Cut that out! The words etched onto the screen as if driven with chisel into stone one painful stroke at a time.

She smacked it again. After all, she was the Devil, there was no way she'd let the universe's software boss her around. She was so sick of it all. Hell, Heaven, Creation... All of it. And, while it made for a sad statement, if the Universal Software was the only thing left that she could feel superior to, she'd make the best she could out of brow-beating it.

One more whack.

Hey! No slow etching this time. Couldn't y'all just tap the space bar like everyone else?

"Less fun," Michelle typed. And it was. After fourteen billion years, her life had come to this, sad as it was. Harassing the Universal Software and waking up every morning in Hell.

Of course, being the Devil Incarnate made the latter a common enough occurrence; she should be used to it by now.

Well?

She ignored the software for a while longer just to tick it off.

Maybe she'd redecorate, if only she could think of something interesting to do with it all. The soaring palisades of black granite reached up into the unseeable darkness and wrapped all four sides of the immense marbled hall that was both her private office and Hell's throne room. Waterfalls of raging fire cascaded down to crash into a burning moat that surrounded her vast office floor on all sides. The only break in the circle of fire was the pointed arch over the grand three-door entry that would dwarf the front entry of any Gothic cathedral ever conceived by man.

Her obsidian-glass desk was centered in a rich-red Oriental carpet, one of the only pieces that she'd liked enough to move into each incarnation of her office. It represented the height of Afghan weaving before it was destroyed by Alexander the Great, and again a millennia later by Genghis Khan. So, she'd offered the rug some extra protection that it had gladly accepted, and therefore still looked fresh from the weaver.

Old man Gropius had stated that, "The whole place is a little ostentatious for an office." Of course, for the travesty of creating Bauhaus architecture, he wouldn't be leaving Hell anytime soon. What idiot wanted to live in a house of glass anyway? Damned exhibitionist.

Some parts of life called for privacy and a touch of coziness not offered by his glass and steel. His offense at her suggestion had been so great that she'd created a Hansel and Gretel cottage built with heavy wooden beams decorated with homey trinkets, doilies, and curlicues. It had taken a half dozen demons to drag him through the door, which she'd then bolted from the outside. If she remembered, she'd let him out at some point in the next couple decades and see if he'd mellowed.

"Tell me something new," she typed into the terminal. "Anything."

Maybe she'd just get a haircut. The rippling mass of black was down past the middle of her back, after all. Or maybe she'd do that later.

The computer started putting up a line of periods to indicate it was thinking about it.

The screen was half full before it offered, *Hector is kicking butt today.*

“That’s not new!” She hammered into the keyboard with her finest two-fingered typing. “He and that idiot Achilles have been trying to rehash the Trojan War for 3,500 years. I said NEW!!!!” Besides, she’d learned centuries before that brawn only took you so far. And that it wasn’t far enough.

Again the stupid line of periods.

Her office wasn’t Bauhaus, but neither was it cozy. It would be okay during winter, if there were winters here. But as it was hot as, well, Hell outside, her office was pretty unbearable. All she’d actually achieved with this place was a different way to create an unpleasant work environment, better than the cubical hell that modern corporations so loved, but not by much. Maybe if she hadn’t broken Hell’s thermostat.

Redecorating sounded mildly amusing, even if not particularly inspiring. Total makeover. Bring in the wrecking demons and clear this place back to the pilasters of creation. Nothing much in here worth a damn anyway. But the change all sounded like just too much trouble to bother with.

In American politics today—

She whacked the screen hard.

What?!

“My fault,” though she didn’t really care. “New and not so Me-damned boring.” Why god would damn anything was beyond her, that was the Devil’s job anyway. Just one more thing he’d appropriated for himself.

She always liked the capital “M” when using herself as a pejorative. It looked good on the screen. If himself got to use capital “G”s and “H”s and “T”s and “J”s and near enough every other damned letter in the alphabet, then bloody well so could she. She loved lower-casing him, because it really pissed him off. It was his only point of vanity, so she couldn’t resist needling it. She had a job title to uphold after all. She’d expected the fun of it to wear off after the first or second billion years, but it hadn’t yet and the universe’s fourteen billionth birthday was coming soon. Maybe she should get him a card.

Of course that made her almost fourteen billion years old as well. Michelle didn’t like that thought at all. No card, sorry god. “god.” “himself.” Jehovah and Yahweh were more in the proper name category, so she’d leave those uppercase in her thoughts. For now. How many words had the man appropriated on his own behalf? It

seemed she couldn't complete a sentence without somehow referring to the almighty creator, bringer of light.

Okay. How 'bout this, pardner?

The software had clearly watched too many old Westerns. It was totally addicted. Michelle shrugged. Guess everyone needed a hobby.

She almost didn't bother to read what the computer had to say. She knew it wouldn't gain her interest any more than the rest of it. But she was weak and looked anyway.

Y'all have a visitor.

On the verge of asking who, a blast of trumpets roared from outside the walls blowing open all three sets of adamantine double doors as if they were Japanese rice paper screens. It rang and echoed off the granite cliffs, sounded off the unseeable ceiling. A mighty wind washed through the length of the hall, briefly snuffing several of the flaming waterfalls, though they soon rekindled from those around them. The wind burst into a thousand little breezes that smelled of honeysuckle and pudgy bumblebees. Of pine-scented forests and baby squirrels romping in dappled sunlight.

Frankly, it stank of—

“HEAVEN SENDS YOU GREETINGS OF GREAT JOY!”

A massive voice, in a perfectly mellifluous baritone, roared past her desk to play with the echoes of the trumpet chorus that were still fooling around with themselves over in the corners.

Yep! Totally stank of Heaven. Definitely lower case.

The messenger strode through the flames. He, there was no doubting the gender of this boyo, handsome behind his mirrored shades, came forward until he stood on the other side of her desk.

“WHAT HAPPENED TO THE THRONE?” His question boomed forth with such strength that the image on her computer screen shivered for a few moments, its electrons shuffled out of alignment by the sheer sonic energy.

“Can we lose the voice?”

“SURE, I— Sorry.” His tone suddenly modulated to a pleasant, if soft tenor, almost lost in the roar of the shattering impact of renewed fires upon the moat. Blond hair, almost Nordic in lightness, danced in gentle waves down to his broad shoulders. A toga of shining white wrapped about his body as if placed there by the hand of god himself.

If she didn't already know this Heavenly messenger far too well, he might peak her interest. Might cause her to wonder what Heavenly messengers wore beneath their togas. But she knew that in a few moments he'd just piss her off, and it wouldn't be going Heavenward from there. Something about the mirrored shades that hid his eyes made his face hard to focus on. For one thing, she could normally tell if a guy was checking out her chest, it was a hell of a chest after all, but she couldn't tell with him.

"The throne? I thought it was pretty."

Michelle glanced down the hall to where the dais had soared at the opposite end of her office. One of the Egyptian builders had fashioned it in tier upon tier of periwinkle and buttercup yellow crystal. Druid priests had carved in Celtic runes of fertility, Norse dwarves had etched in legends of the great debauches held in the heroes' hall at Valhalla, and the Dravidic priests from the Indian subcontinent then added more than a few intensely pornographic carvings from their temples. Romulus had dropped by and topped it with a Grecian divan more appropriate to a Bacchanalia than a throne room. The Greeks always did know how to party.

It had been a fantastic spectacle. When she lounged on it in a filmy negligee, men had a great deal of trouble speaking, mortal or immortal. Actually, most of the women too.

"It had drawbacks." Michelle looked away from the empty expanse of floor with a shudder. She wouldn't even walk across the marble where it had once stood in case destroying the dais and scattering its bits across five continents, seven oceans, and the center of three suns had not been sufficient.

Whether it was the carvings, the crystalline structure, or its position in the space-time continuum, the throne had focused all of a select category of prayers meant for Heaven directly into the subconscious of anyone who napped atop its pyramidal pinnacle. Rather than a position of luxury, it had acted like an Incan pyramid focusing evil in the name of holy sacrifice.

The focus of prayers might have been tolerable, she could usually ignore background noise, especially those without proper preregistration codes attached. But her dais and the throne had collected and focused only the prayers from post-pubescent teenage girls wearing tennis skirts. One particularly long nap had left her body so charged up that

it had required a decade to sate. That had led her to some serious mistakes in judgment she decided not to waste time remembering.

She eyed the messenger and waited. At this point her boredom was so vast that even this Heaven-sent irritation ranked as a relief.

“I COME BEARING—”

“THE VOICE!” She shouted back with all the power of fourteen billion years of anger riding muster on creation and evolution. It boiled in her stomach like a foul brew worthy of the Hecate witches. She was so god-damned and Devil-damned sick of Heaven she could destroy this whole spiritual realm with a fireball that would burn until the final entropy of the universe’s collapse had faded away into eternal darkness.

The burning firefalls fled back up the walls. Great slabs of the granite palisades shattered off and plunged into the moat with crashes that shook the vast floor and sprayed flaming rock chips throughout the room. The disaster rumbled back and forth down the length of Hell’s throne room, taking several minutes for the induced quakes to finally settle. Gaping chasms now revealed steaming depths where moments before you could have played a fair game of hockey on the smooth marble. The vast Oriental rug remained unscathed and appeared to be the only undamaged area of the entire room. As per contract.

Crap! She dropped back in her chair and scowled about the room. Now she’d *have* to redecorate. It was rather past the point of destruction that she could term as a “distressed ambiance.”

The messenger did his best to brush away the smoldering rock chips that threatened to scorch his shining white toga. Then he wiggled his finger in his ears and worked his jaw to clear his hearing.

“Sorry,” he resumed much more reasonably. “I come bearing an invitation.”

“To do what?”

“To dine.”

“From...” she prompted him. Maybe if she put him on a rack and stretched him a bit, the words would leak out faster.

“Um... THE LORD GOD—”

She held up a finger, then aimed it at his chest.

“Right, sorry again. There is an invitation for you to dine in Heaven. There’ll be minestrone, a nice salad, and a pasta Florentine that your host is rather pleased with.”

Michelle leaned back in her chair and propped her feet up on the desk. She stared at the computer screen which bore a single question mark. It filled most of the screen, made up entirely of normal-sized question marks. As she watched, it shifted to an exclamation point, made up of miniature poodles for reasons she didn't want to know.

Clearly the Software that Runs the Universe had much the same feeling she did. She hadn't been invited to Heaven since... the ash cloud of Pompeii?

Or maybe that thing on the Nile? himself had taken a nap after making sure the baby Moses was launched on his way. (Would have caught a cold and died of pneumonia inside two weeks if Michelle hadn't slipped in a swaddling blanket.) She taken god's clothes while he napped and left god incarnate there to be found by the locals. Painting him blue had been completely an afterthought. That the dye had taken decades to wear off made it a good afterthought.

Or was it...

Well, it would get her out of Hell for an evening. Be worth it for that alone.

"Sure! Why the Heaven not?"

"EXCELLENT!" The messenger smiled like a boy of ten looking at a brand new bicycle even as he slapped his hand over his mouth. Between his fingers, he mumbled, "Around seven?"

"Tonight?" she raised one eyebrow. It had taken practice, but she'd seen how effective it was watching Spock on *Star Trek* and decided it was worth the effort to master. It intimidated most men surprisingly well.

Michelle wished she'd learned the eyebrow trick before facing down all those popes and bishops who claimed there'd been a horrible mistake when they'd arrived at Hell's Gates In-processing Center. Not a one had received a jump-to-head-of-line pass, and those lines could take decades.

Pope Joan still held the papal record. A thousand years ago, she'd cleared Hell's queues in just under fourteen hours. One sharp lady. Her only real mistake had been giving birth while on papal Easter processional.

"Learned that lesson the hard way," Joan had told her one night over a nice glass of Merlot and sirloin pepper steaks. "The first contraction caught me by surprise and I fell off my horse and went into

labor. If you're living as a man for thirty years and have climbed to the pinnacle of the Church, the stupid masses think 'demons' rather than 'child' when you go into labor. Their solution, being stupid masses, is to tear you apart limb from limb. At least my girl made it out okay."

The joke was how the Catholic hierarchy had finally solved the issue.

"So, for the next half-dozen centuries, the grand papal inaugural procession was done on a chair with a hole in the bottom. At the start of the processional, an elder reaches under the chair to check, and then intones solemnly, '*Duos habet et bene pendentes*—He has two, and they dangle nicely.'"

Michelle had nearly snorted her wine in laughter. Those had been good times. She missed having a friend.

That stopped her cold. She dropped her feet to the floor. She hadn't had a friend, a true friend she could just be herself with in ages. How had that happened?

"Would another evening be better?" The Heavenly messenger inquired at her prolonged silence. "Did you have other plans tonight?"

Not a damned one.