

THE CARETAKERS



RAGE OF THE IMMORTALS



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Notion Press

No.8, 3rd Cross Street,
CIT Colony, Mylapore,
Chennai, Tamil Nadu – 600004

First Published by Notion Press 2020
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ISBN 978-1-64828-840-1

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Before We Begin



Think of the Universe as a living being, thrust into existence by the Big Bang. Think of all the anger in little Baby Universe as it got its first metaphoric slap on the bum.

Think also that if there is really no God, or if He/She was as **physically** present in Baby Universe's life as She has been in ours—nil, zilch, nada—then the Universe grew up as an orphan.

Think of all that anger solidifying as its own attractive force outweighed any newborn laws of gravity, and becoming the second sentient being in the Universe, the first Emotion.

One can hope that these two beings, one within the other, found each other and gave each other company during the millions and billions of years of their existence, but one might as well hope for flying unicorns. For our sanity, let's hope that they did.

Other Emotions were, of course, born in due course of time. One can only wonder how Joy was born, or Love. Or Lust. Maybe Baby Universe was not as alone as we thought. For our sanity, let's not go there.

Really, it gives a new meaning to the Big Bang though...

Chapter 1

A Room without Personality



It was a warm and damp night in New Nyssa, the kind that makes you want to dunk yourself in a pool every hour. The outsides were cooler than the insides, and in an island country, as endowed with natural beauty as New Nyssa, that would have meant hordes of tourists lounging around the many seaside bars, getting drunk and hooking up, knowing somewhere in the back of their minds that they might well wake up without their wallet the next morning. Tonight, however, the streets were almost empty, the last of the stragglers hurrying towards their destinations before the first moon rose.

Cifer leaned against a wall and gazed up at the gloomy facade of the house across the street. What was it with humans these days? How could any architect with any self-respect design a house that looked like some enlargement magick had been done on a shoebox?

While the premium localities did try to live up to the city-state's name, derived from the ancient Roman city that had thrived eons ago and light years away, most of New Nyssa's streets were filled with ugly monstrosities like the one in front of him. This one was better than many others in that the owner had not chosen to paint it a garish purple.

Cifer thought fondly of the good old days, of massive columns and arches, of elaborate carvings and entire epics told in stone. His gaze returned to the sad sight in front of him and he sighed.

Plain, bland walls were broken in places by squares of glass and wood that New Nyssans called windows. Patches of lighter colour amidst the black trails of rainwater bore witness that the walls had indeed once been painted.

There were no lights in the windows. Cifer knew that the sole resident of the house occupied the upper floor, renting out the lower floor as a

working studio to art students from the University. He also knew that the bland exterior of the building was a mask. Within the building, there were several rooms full of paintings, stonework, and pottery. The house's present owner and her family before her had always provided this place at a very low rent to budding artists, many of whom had left them gifts of their talent when they left as their fame grew. The house had been lucky for them.

The same could not be said for the owner. Cifer knew that the current owner was searching desperately for a job, and was only one meal away from starvation. He wondered if she knew the current market value of some of the art pieces gathering dust within the four walls of her house, and was simply too proud or too sentimental to sell some of them off.

The upper floor, now that's what interested him. He had tried twice to gain admittance, once by seducing one of the students, and once as a cleaning man. The first time he only managed to elicit a sigh and a reluctant goodbye, with the excuse that visitors were not allowed. The second time, at least, he had been able to view the lower floor before being told hurriedly that he must have made a mistake, and his services were not needed there.

"Really?! Madam, I have seen pigsties that are cleaner than that room behind you, no offence."

In hindsight, it was a stupid move, for the door was slammed shut in his face.

Oh well, no option left. He would have to do it the less legal, but definitely easier way. He stepped into the deeper shadows until he disappeared into an alley between two houses. The next moment he was standing on the roof of the house. He took a few steps back, then ran up and leapt off, clearing the road easily and landing on the opposite roof. The roof door was latched from the inside. Cifer snapped his fingers and it opened.

He stepped into the darkness. It would have been easy to simply snap fingers again and switch on the light, but he did not want to give away his presence. So he dropped down on all fours. By the time his hands hit the ground, they had converted into the soft-padded paws of a Pfeline, the party-creatures of his home-world.

The dark didn't bother him anymore. In Pfeline mode, this was a fairly brightly-lit room. There was a mattress on the floor, a cupboard on one

side and the door to the washroom on the other. Besides the door, a pair of slippers were placed neatly. Near the front wall, a small kitchen had been set up. There was a threadbare sofa in the centre of the living arrangement, which faced an Idiot Box. This room was as devoid of personality as the outside of the house. There were no photos, no books, no sports equipment, no clothes strewn around, no hair on the floor, and no entertainment or music, other than the Idiot Box. A perfectly boring room, in Cifer's opinion.

That is until he opened the cupboard. His Pfeline nose could smell fresh blood. It was coming from a long rectangular box at the bottom of the cupboard. Turning partially human, he pulled out the box and opened it. Inside was a short, black, cruel whip. By the smell, it had been used as recently as last evening.

His curiosity satisfied, Cifer left the way he came.

* * *

The office of the Prime Minister of New Nyssa island was in a tizzy. Reports had just come in of another kidnapping, this time from the swanky Homer Street.

"This is not good, Commander Pink."

"We are doing all we can to locate the girl, Prime Minister."

"Do more, Commander. I don't need to tell you the repercussions of this. The girl is the daughter of Captain Bose, the most influential man in New Nyssa and my personal friend."

Not to mention one of your biggest election-donors.

"We have our best man on the job. Officer Robinsh, please tell us what you are doing to find the girl."

A short, fat man stepped forward and threw a crisp salute. "We have set up check-posts throughout the island and we are keeping a watch on all the ships going out of the island. We are also talking to the previous kidnap victims in case they remember anything."

"Do they remember anything?"

"No, sir. Their memory is as blank as the day they were released by the kidnapper."

“Weird case, this!” The Prime Minister took a long drag from the cigar he was smoking.

“Yes, sir! All kidnaps happened in the evening after the blue moon rose but before the red. Five people kidnapped so far, four of them deposited back in the same location they were picked up from. As far as we can tell, all miss any memory of what happened to them, where they had been taken, or who their kidnapper was.”

“Today’s kidnapping makes six. This could have a very bad impact during election season.”

“Why, sir? All four people who lost their memory were nevertheless not hurt at all, in fact, one of them said that, and I quote, ‘I feel refreshed as if a big worry has been lifted off my shoulders.’ Another found money deposited in his bank account; money that he desperately needed for his daughter’s surgery. What if...”

“Get me facts, Officer, and keep your speculation to yourself. If this kidnapper is some sort of a do-gooder, why is he hiding? Why is he deleting the memory of these people? In my experience, if someone is hiding themselves, they can’t be up to any good. And don’t forget the homeless man who was never found.”

“We actually have a lead in that case, sir. It appears there was a witness.”

“Fantastic! Why didn’t you say so sooner? See if this witness can help you find the Captain’s daughter.”

Robinsh took that to be a dismissal. He saluted and marched out.

It was a good thing that the Prime Minister hadn’t asked what the witness had seen.

* * *

Kara walked fast. It was getting dark and she needed to be inside her house before the first moon rose. Odd things had been happening recently.

She looked around. The street was deserted, but her home was just around the next corner. She would be there in a few minutes. She had cut it close today. Her appointment had been at the other end of New Nyssa.

Normally, she would have taken a taxi to get back home, especially given that by the time her interview got over it was evening, but she was down to the last few coins in her pocket. She chose to walk.

Life had definitely taken a turn for the worse ever since *that day*. She had lost her job. She had lost respect. None of her former colleagues would refer her for any jobs she interviewed for, not that she bothered to ask. She had seen the scorn written on their faces the day she was thrown out of the CAU.

The first moon was already rising on the horizon, its pale blue light the only illumination on the street.

A soft breeze caressed her back. She knew, just knew, that someone was right behind her. She should have run, but a morbid fascination seized her. She wanted to see who was terrorizing her city. She stopped and turned around slowly. All she saw was a flash of bright light before the world went black.

* * *

Robinsh found his feet taking him due north. “So you are thinking what I am thinking.”

It felt silly talking to himself. A couple of people gave him odd looks as they rushed past. The rumour mill had been active. People wanted to be indoors at night. Robinsh was a little offended. There was a time when people would be reassured by the presence of a uniformed police officer in the street. Now he might as well have been a doorknob.

He walked along a high stone wall that circled the Magickal Society Headquarters until he reached the tall, white gates. Robinsh stared at them. “So how do you open? Do I have to say a magick word?”

“Yes,” someone answered.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t realize I said that out loud. This is my first visit. I am Officer Robinsh of New Nyssa Police. I need to talk to the person in charge.”

“We are all in charge of our own fates, Officer. I still need the magick word.”

“This is urgent police business. I don’t have time for games. Would you open the door, please?”

The door swung open. Robinsh strode in, fully intending to give the gatekeeper a piece of his mind, but there was no one there.

“Please go straight and knock on the first door you see. Professor Locke is waiting for you.”

* * *

Chapter 2

The Deal



When she woke up, she found herself in a huge, semi-lighted room. She was lying on a soft bed and someone had covered her with a warm quilt. The bed was against the wall farthest from the window from which the light of the two moons was streaming in, blue and red, large and small, like mismatched eyes of an angry god.

A door was to her left. She wondered what lay beyond. Would she find friends or foes if she went through it? Her head was still groggy. So she decided to give herself a few minutes before she got up and started looking around for whoever brought her here.

She turned on her side. There was something hard between her hand and her temple, something cold. She pulled at it and heard the tinkle of metal. As her mind snapped to attention, she saw that her wrists were handcuffed together. She jumped out and ran towards the door. She hadn't reached halfway when she tripped and fell. Luckily, the carpet was soft. She stared at her feet. Both her ankles were chained to the bed.

A shadow walked towards her.

"No! Please! Please don't hurt me!"

Strong hands picked her up effortlessly and dragged her back to the bed.

"No! Let go of me! Don't touch me! Let me go!"

She struggled, but her captor was clearly much stronger than she was. She screamed for help.

"Scream all you like, Kara. No one will hear you here." The man spoke in a low voice.

"How do you know my name?"

“I know everything about you, where you live, where you work, where you grew up, and even who you are going to marry.” He paused to see the effect of his words. “I also know,” he breathed into her ear, “that the match is not to your liking. You are being forced to marry this man.”

“That’s not true! I love my fiancé!”

“If that were true, you would not have been so miserable ever since the alliance was fixed.”

Kara didn’t say anything.

“Now that you have calmed down a little, let’s talk business. I have a proposal for you.”

He motioned to the bed. Kara sat down reluctantly. The stranger pulled a chair and sat opposite her, which was weird because Kara didn’t remember seeing a chair there. It would be a sad day for her if she couldn’t trust her own senses, especially after spending ten gruelling years honing them to perfection in the Crack Action Unit or CAU, the special operations unit of New Nyssa’s Navy.

She focussed on the stranger. The process had been drilled into her hundreds of times. The man was tall, around six-and-half feet, broad-shouldered, and muscular. He had an angular face but Kara couldn’t make out the features in the semi-darkness. He had a loping gait and a purposeful stride. *How does that help?* She asked herself irritably. There were no physical peculiarities, scars, or tattoos that she could discern.

“If you wanted to talk business, you should have contacted my office.”

“Your office? Your only source of income is the studio you rent out. You are searching for jobs, but no one will take you. Isn’t that right, Lieutenant Sefina?”

“Don’t call me that!” Kara growled.

“You shouldn’t hide your CAU background from your potential employers. It only shows up as a big blank in your résumé and doesn’t impress anyone.”

“Thanks. I’ll let you know if I need your advice.”

The sarcasm was lost on the man. “Do that, but next time you’ll have to pay for it.”

“What do you want?” Kara asked exasperatedly.

“I want to offer you a once-in-a-lifetime deal—a way to solve both your problems together. You can get a job and get out of this marriage.” Kara wanted to slap that smirk off his face.

“I don’t understand.”

“Let me explain. You are about to enter a loveless union. I have done my research on your fiancé, and you can take my word for it when I say that a fiery woman like you will never be able to fall in love with a selfish bastard like him.” Despite herself, Kara’s eyes welled up. “You are approaching your doom, that’s for sure. Your fiancé is going to suck the happiness right out of your bones. You will wilt and grow old before your time. Soon, you will die. I wouldn’t bet more than a couple of years on you.”

As he spoke, an image formed in Kara’s mind of a thin, old woman, dressed in gaudy clothes, pulling on a cigarette. The woman looked straight into Kara’s eyes and gave a wistful smile.

“I can call off the marriage anytime I want. I don’t need your help.”

“Don’t you? I wonder what your parents will say to that. Didn’t it strike you as odd that your parents favour him so much? I mean, they met him once, and they fell head over heels in love with him? Didn’t you ever wonder what hold Moss has on them?”

“Are you telling me that Moss is blackmailing them?”

“That’s a thought, isn’t it? What could it be that your parents value even more than your happiness?” The stranger grinned.

This was a no-brainer. “No. There’s nothing, not for my parents,” Kara said slowly. “But it can’t be magick either. I have already consulted the masters at the Magickal Society.”

“Professor Blastit is an admirable chap, though not quite the best at magick, I’m afraid.”

“How...”

The stranger held up a hand. “I told you already. I know everything about you. I don’t take my business lightly, and neither should you. If I tell you that I can do the job, rest assured that it will happen. All you need to decide

is if you want to take the deal or not. Believe me. You won't survive Mr. Moss for long."

Kara knew what the man was saying was right. She had told herself that countless times, but could never force herself to act on it.

"What's the deal?" She asked, defeated, knowing that she would accept almost anything at this point.

"Ah, I thought you'd never ask. I promise you freedom from your engagement, and in exchange, you work for me the rest of your life."

"The rest of my...! Are you mad?!"

"Why? Lots of humans stay with the same employer all their lives."

Kara ignored the odd choice of words. "Yeah, if they like their job. You haven't told me what the job is, and you are expecting..."

"Oh, didn't I? How stupid of me! I want you as my personal bodyguard slash secretary."

"Why me? I haven't done any bodyguarding ever."

"Oh, you have, Kara. Don't bother lying to me. Or, should I refresh the memory of your assignment?"

Kara looked away, "If you know about that, then you would also know..."

"You don't need to know the 'why'. You only need the 'what' and the 'how much'. You will be paid five gold coins every month, in addition to your freedom."

"Freedom? I will just be switching one devil for another."

"Don't insult me by comparing me with your fiancé. I am infinitely more evil than he is."

Kara opened her mouth. "But..."

"No. Let me finish. I will give you an exit clause. After five years, you can leave my employment if you wish."

"Really? What's the catch?"

The man smiled. "I am impressed. The catch is that I will wipe your memory of the time that you have been employed with me."

“Wipe my... Hey! Are you the one responsible for all the people turning up with missing memories? What kind of deals did you make with them?”

“That’s between them and me, but, yes.”

“Who are you?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Why have you chained me?”

“Do you think I am crazy enough to kidnap Lt. Sefina of New Nyssa CAU and talk to her without taking any precautions? I have no intention of keeping you here against your wishes. If you decline, you will be dropped back in the same alley I picked you from.”

What’s he talking about? He seems way stronger than me.

The stranger smiled and leaned forward. “Why did you leave the CAU, Lieutenant?”

Kara’s eyes blazed with menace. “That’s none of your business.”

The man continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “Was it perhaps due to the incident? That child... what was her name again?” He whispered in her ear.

Spots of red danced in her eyes. Her elbow spun around, catching a solid blow on his chin. Kara followed up on the momentum with the rest of her body till he was flat on the bed. She had punched him twice before she realized that the man was smiling. Her hands froze in the air.

“I have to say I like you better this way. That helpless damsel act was getting on my nerves. So, will you accept my offer?”

“Are you a gangster or something? A criminal? I don’t want to get caught up in anything illegal.”

“I won’t ask you to do anything that you consider unethical. Of course, I expect you to be fully committed to your duty as my bodyguard and secretary.”

“Just call me your secretary and be done with it.” *Five gold coins.* That was a rich sum, even by New Nyssa standards, the most expensive city on

New Earth. Kara could send some money to her parents. They will be happy to see her back on her feet again. Even if the boss was...

“So you accept? Splendid! The washroom is through that door. I will bring along the documents for you to sign at dinner.”

“What documents?”

“All deals have to be documented, don’t they? Otherwise, do you intend to rely on my word five years hence?” The man winked and disappeared. So did Kara’s chains.

Once her captor had left, Kara re-considered her options. Was there really no other way to make her parents see sense? Was it worth sacrificing five years of her life?

Better five years than your whole life, Kara. And this guy seems like a powerful sorcerer. Prof. Blastit said that even simple magick requires a lot of energy, and here this guy disappears and appears like it was no big deal.

Having made up her mind, she freshened up. The two moons shone through the windows casting a mix of red and blue on the floor, making the room bright enough that she did not need to switch on the artificial lights.

There was a knock on the door and it opened.

“Dinner?”

Kara nodded but didn’t move. The man stood there patiently. “It is okay. Take your time.”

Hesitantly, she stepped forward. Forcing her feet to a slow shuffle, she left the room.

They walked up a flight of stairs. A table was set on the rooftop. Moonlight drifted gently on the silverware. The meal was delicious, lightly spiced fish and fragrant rice. Kara forgot her fear and gobbled up the food. This was typical New Nyssan comfort food, what her mother always made when she was feeling low.

“This tastes great! Did you make it?”

The stranger smiled and nodded.

After the meal, he brought out two papers.

“This one is the non-disclosure agreement and this one says that I will get you your freedom from this marriage. In exchange, you will work for me from now till the end of your days, with a one week re-consideration period every five years. Should you decide to leave my employment, I am free to delete your memory of me,” he said.

Kara took the papers. In the dual moonlight, the letters glowed silver. Her heart hammering, Kara held out her hand for a pen.

“Ouch! What was that?!” Something sharp had sliced her finger.

The stranger took her bleeding finger and held it over the first document. Blood dripped on the paper and the words glowed gold. Then he sliced his own finger with a small, silver knife. As his blood touched the paper, the words burnt red. A little flame kindled and soon the paper was swallowed.

He then repeated the process for the other document.

“There! Filing completed.” He smiled and stood up.

“You know, Kara, you have a surprisingly pure aura. Pure gold auras are so rare and precious. I already feel privileged to have met you.” His eyes gazed thoughtfully into the distance as he spoke.

“I don’t even know your name,” she managed.

“I am known as Cifer of the UnderWorld.”

“Okay, Mr. Cifer. When do I start?”

Cifer smiled. “Your new life starts tomorrow at 6:00 a.m.” With that, he waved his hand and Kara found herself back in her room.

* * *

Kara couldn’t sleep for a long time after that. Guilt assaulted her for betraying her fiancé, Moss. Soon it was replaced by anger at Moss and her parents for trying to force her into the marriage.

Arranged marriage used to be quite common in her country a couple of generations ago. Now, it was on its way out, except for some families, like hers, still holding on to an outdated custom. Even then, families would consider multiple options and have lengthy discussions before they made their choice. Her family hadn’t.

It had to be magick. In her parents' eyes, he was the most eligible bachelor. Their first date was forced by them and she shuddered at the thought of having to spend the rest of her life with him.

It wasn't that he wasn't good looking. Quite the contrary.

It was just that the man was rotten. Kara was as certain of it as her own breath, though at the time she couldn't pinpoint the reason if her life depended on it.

She remembered crying herself to sleep that night.

She declined the proposal when it came through her parents first. She loathed the guy. But her parents kept pestering her. They were nice, reasonable folk, but in this matter, they completely lost their sanity. Kara remembered all the emotional blackmail she had been subjected to. That is why she believed that Moss had put a spell on them. But she couldn't prove anything. She consulted the magickal masters, but they were unable to detect any traces of magick on them. Finally, emotionally exhausted and having no recourse, she relented.

She would remember that night for as long as she lived.

Moss visited her a few hours after her phone call with her parents, where she had finally said 'yes' to the marriage proposal. He was slightly drunk. Kara didn't feel safe letting him in, so she came out to talk. It turned out that Moss didn't want to talk. He pulled her into the alley alongside her apartment, pushed her against the wall and started groping her.

Kara tried to bear it. He was her future husband after all. No point antagonizing him. But when he tried taking off her clothes, right there in the alley, she broke.

A year ago, Moss would have found himself severely impaired, in more ways than one. But ever since *that day*... Kara couldn't find the strength to fight back.

She started sobbing and begged him to let her go.

He wouldn't listen.

"You should've let me in," he breathed in her ear.

He ripped off the buttons on her blouse and was working on her skirt when suddenly he was thrown off her.

Kara looked at her saviour. A tall man, in an old-fashioned coat and tie, was standing with his back to her, glaring at Moss. Kara was so scared there would be a fight between the two, but Moss, coward that he was, ran away after encountering a bigger opponent.

Her saviour turned to her. "Such kind eyes!" Kara remembered thinking at the time. She couldn't discern any other features. The light just wasn't enough.

Kara covered herself with her arms and lowered her gaze to the ground.

"Thank you for saving me," she mumbled. The stranger approached her. Was he coming to finish what Moss had started? Tears started leaking out of her eyes again.

She felt something warm around her shoulders and looked up. The man had disappeared but had left his coat to cover her. *Thank you*, she breathed to the skies.

* * *

In the room beside hers, Cifer smiled sadly as he heard her thoughts. She was right in guessing that Moss used magick to alter her parents' perceptions. What she couldn't have guessed is that Moss also dosed her drink on that first date with the same Perception Altering Medicine, or PAM as it was called in the magickal circles. Cifer knew all this because it was from him that Moss had stolen PAM, and he had been tracking the stolen medicine for over a year now. Cifer was flabbergasted to find out that it hadn't worked on Kara. This was the first time that any of his preparations had failed.

The second time was when his memory altering magick didn't work on Kara that night in the alley. He wanted her to forget not only that she had met him, but also about her ordeal.

Cifer was still thinking all this when the alarm rang. Was it morning already?

* * *

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