GriidlordS

By Tom Wrath

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Foreword

Enter the realm of The Griidlords: a post-apocalyptic world set 1000+ years after the fall of civilization, where the remnants of America have fractured into 32 warring city states. In this bleak, unforgettable universe unlike any other, you join an epic, sprawling narrative that blends the passion and excitement of professional football with the intrigue and power struggles of beloved fantasy and sci-fi epics like Game of Thrones and Fallout.

Intertwining real-life NFL history with the alternate timeline of The Griid, this serialized novel offers world-building that draws on NFL history, creating a rich history that is hard to compare. From the mighty Pittsburgh Hill Clans reigning supreme 500 years in the past, to the rise and fall of the New England Empire, crumbling in the current events of the stories like Rome, this vast world of intense, interconnected histories demonstrates the passage of time, the transition of power, and the impact of victories and defeats, on and off the field.

The Griid offers a wholly immersive experience for every reader. Imagine having the power to not only witness but participate in the events that shape the world through an interactive Patreon experience. Patrons can enjoy privileges such as voting on the importance of real-life NFL games that, in turn, decide the fates of Griidlords or the future of city-states themselves.

Hold your breath as you watch your favorite teams clash on the field, knowing that the lives and fortunes of the characters you've grown to love hang in the balance. Stay up to date with the story, by watching the Dallas Freemen march against the forces of the RedKing of Kansas, knowing that the Chiefs-Cowboys game's outcome might crumble empires, kill favorite characters, or gather the precious resources to keep a sick child alive.

Delve into the unique world mechanics underpinning The Griid, where each city-state's technology levels are influenced by the mysterious elements of Order and Entropy; some have regressed to wielding swords, while others have advanced towards automatic weapons and electric motors. The Griidlords, power-armored representatives from each city, act as guardians, gods, or demons, depending on your city's allegiance, locked in an eternal contest for the Orbs, which determine the balance of power and resources.

It's time to embark upon a journey that transcends the boundaries of traditional fiction, taking storytelling to a new level of engagement and suspense. The Griid introduces a complex, engrossing universe filled with fantastic characters, rich world-building, and an innovative blend of sports history and speculative fiction.

The fate of your favorite characters – and your city – may well hinge on the outcome of the big game.

The future of storytelling has arrived. Answer the call to join the ranks of Griidlords and unlock access to time-exclusive episodes by becoming a Patreon patron.

Will you rise to the challenge? The next episode is already waiting on Patreon.

Welcome, dear reader, to The Griid.

Tom Wrath

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I am the author of this book, every scene, every idea. To ensure the quality of the text, my work was passed through an AI service to compensate for my own challenges for proofing.

EPISODE 1

Chapter 1

Clive had just blinked, his eyes darting quickly over his shoulder toward Bret, who was in the gleaming, shining workshop. It was the kind of place that belonged in a futuristic sci-fi novel – pristine, orderly and high-tech. But in the blink of an eye, his world came crashing down.

A sudden wave of confusion washed over him, his heart pounding in his chest like a wild animal, desperate to break free from the confines of a cage. Thoughts raced through Clive's mind, each of them vying for his conscious attention. And as quickly as the confusion set in, he realized that he was no longer in the workshop.

Instead, he was standing in a room that was a stark contrast to the modern lab he had just left. Carved stone walls enclosed the space on all sides, their uneven surfaces slightly damp from the humidity in the air. The scent of mold and decay filled the room, making it hard for Clive to breathe. Dim light emanated from the corners, where containers of burning oil seemed to be the only source of illumination.

The flickering glow from the flames danced on the walls, casting looming shadows that seemed to reach for Clive as he tried to make sense of his surroundings. Toward the far end of the room, he could barely make out a distant, rectangular sliver of daylight that seemed to tease him with the promise of an escape.

Clive closed his eyes tightly, willing himself to believe that this was all just a hallucination, maybe a side effect of a stroke - certainly not something that could be real. With his eyes shut, he tried to picture Bret's face, the texture of his beard and the telling expression of warning that seemed etched permanently on his features. Clive held onto that image, convincing himself that when his eyes opened again, he would be back in the familiar, gleaming workshop, looking at Bret.

However, when Clive dared to open his eyes, the same stone room loomed before him, its dim flickering glow confirming that he was still trapped in this unfamiliar place. Panic began to bubble up inside of him, his breaths coming in short, rapid bursts as he started to hyperventilate. The room seemed to close in on him, the damp smell overwhelming his senses, and Clive felt as if he were drowning in a sea of despair.

As the panic continued to mount within him, Clive muttered to himself, "I'm losing my mind, this can't be real. What the fuck could possibly have happened? Oh God, I'm going crazy."

The cold, lifeless walls seemed to mock him in his despair, only adding to his sense of isolation and dread.

Desperate for any semblance of an explanation, Clive took a closer look at his surroundings. His eyes locked onto the rotting food in ornate bowls scattered about the stone floor, the putrid stench assaulting his nostrils. He shifted his gaze upward to find carvings on the posts supporting the oil burners, their intricate designs hinting at some sort of religious significance.

The mysterious, seemingly sacred nature of the space only served to heighten Clive's fears and questions. Where was he? How had he gotten here? Was there any hope of escaping this

nightmare? In his desperation, Clive couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding creep across his heart, casting a dark shadow over any hope he had at finding answers.

Gathering every ounce of strength he could muster, Clive closed his eyes once more and took a deep, quivering breath. He repeated to himself, like a mantra, "This isn't real. There's something wrong with my mind. I have to calm down and ground myself."

Slowly, he looked down at his clothes, noting the lab coat and ruffled shirt he was wearing. If the room was an illusion, Clive thought, then maybe focusing on something familiar might bring him back to reality.

With his heart in his throat, Clive hesitantly raised his head, praying that he would see something - anything - different when his gaze returned to the room. Yet, despite his desperate pleas, the room remained unchanged, the carved stone walls continuing to confine him in this chilling, unfamiliar place.

The sense of despair threatened to overwhelm Clive once more, but with a steely determination, he forced himself to remain as calm as possible.

Clive stood rooted to the spot, his mind racing as he replayed the last moments he could remember back in the workshop. Bret's worried voice echoed in his head, warning him, "Be careful, Clive. The safety systems are down."

Clive had brushed off the concern easily, responding with a touch of arrogance, "Don't worry, Bret. I've done this a million times. Nothing's going to happen."

His breathing began to slow a little, still far from normal, but his racing thoughts made it difficult to concentrate on anything else. As he continued to take in the details of the stone room, his ears gradually became attuned to the muffled sounds of human bustle coming from beyond the distant door.

The realization that there were people nearby stirred a mixture of hope and anxiety within Clive. While the distant noises seemed to offer a potential escape from his bizarre prison, he couldn't help but wonder who or what he might encounter if he ventured outside the confines of the stone room.

Taking a shaky breath, Clive began to move hesitantly toward the door, each step echoing in the cavernous room. As he ventured closer, the sounds outside grew louder, reminiscent of the bustling atmosphere of a crowded shopping mall.

His senses were further bombarded by an array of new smells - the unmistakable stench of horseshit mixed with the mouth-watering aroma of cooking meat. Clive tried to make sense of the cacophony of sights, sounds, and scents, but it was simply overwhelming.

The situation felt so surreal that Clive couldn't shake the odd feeling as if he were wearing a virtual reality headset, experiencing something that couldn't possibly be real. Nevertheless, the sensations around him seemed all too tangible, leaving him with little choice but to press onward and confront the unknown waiting just beyond the door.

As Clive neared the door, the sunlight streaming through it grew more intense, practically blinding him after the dimness of the room he had just left. He squinted, trying to adjust to the brightness but also eager to catch a glimpse of what awaited him outside.

When his vision finally cleared, Clive was bombarded by the sight that unfolded before him. It was a scene seemingly plucked straight from a medieval town or a storybook like Arabian Nights. A dirt street stretched out in front of him, lined with an odd assortment of mud hovels and sturdy stone houses. Market stalls filled with colorful fabrics, exotic spices, and other unfamiliar wares were scattered about, their lively merchants calling out to passersby.

Feeling dazed and almost catatonic, Clive took another step, emerging from his stone confinement and out into the open air. The moment his foot hit the large stone step outside the doorway, he was plunged into the hustle and bustle of the strange new world that greeted him.

The people around him were dressed in a bizarre mishmash of styles, with some clad in medieval cloaks and robes, while others wore modern attire like blue jeans and t-shirts. Everything felt off-kilter, a disjointed portrait of reality that was difficult to comprehend.

Clive's eyes then landed on a piece of meat rotating slowly on a spit over a bed of glowing coals - a sight that would ordinarily seem mundane, yet felt oddly too real amidst the chaotic disarray. Further along, he noticed horses tied to nearby posts, their tails flicking impatiently as they waited for their owners to return.

His gaze finally settled on a pair of soldiers, outfitted in shining armor with navy and orange trimmings. The emblem of a white horse was emblazoned boldly on their shields, adding to the surreal tapestry that surrounded Clive. All around him, the world teetered on a precipice between the familiar and the fantastical, leaving him struggling to understand his place in it.

"How can this be?" Clive muttered to himself, feeling utterly lost in the sea of contradictions that was his new reality. He incessantly replayed the last moments he spent in the lab, Bret's warning echoing in his head and his own arrogance gnawing at him like a persistent itch.

The field generator - could it have been the cause? Clive considered the possibility, but his mind simply couldn't fathom how. The nature of the mistake he had made should have ended his existence, or so he thought. Not transported him to a world caught between the past and the present.

With no other place to go, Clive numbly stepped onto the dirt street, his legs moving almost mechanically, leading him through the strange world without really processing where he was

going. He was too preoccupied with the whirlpool of chaotic thoughts and unanswered questions churning within his frenzied mind.

As Clive wandered aimlessly, he couldn't help but overhear a conversation between a meat seller and a man in dusty robes. Their voices carried over the background noise, fueled by the intensity of the exchange.

The meat seller, seeming weary, said, "Three pieces, sir. That's the final price."

The man in dusty robes was unhappy, "Two pieces should be enough! That's what it costs everywhere else!"

The meat seller seemed unyielding, his voice firm and resolute. "Prices have gone up, sir. I'm afraid it's three pieces for the meat."

Looking outraged but ultimately defeated, the man reluctantly handed over the three pieces. The meat seller promptly wrapped the chunk of meat in a piece of flatbread, handing it to the man.

As the man in dusty robes took his purchase, he continued to grumble under his breath, "These damn 'Denver' bastards really know how to rob you."

Clive's panting grew heavy, seemingly straining to even the score between his rapidly beating heart and his chaotic surroundings. At the mention of Denver in the exchange, his confusion spiked, leaving him reeling with thoughts about how this place could bear any relation to the city he knew.

He raised his eyes to take in the full sweep of the scene - a medieval town, but with jarring inconsistencies. Here and there among the muddy streets and stone buildings, Clive noticed certain features completely out of place. Doors with modern designs, metal accents that belonged to another era, and other elements that simply didn't fit the ancient aesthetic.

In the distance, Clive's eyes locked onto a sight that defied explanation: a colossal tower, its design reminiscent of a skyscraper, yet infinitely more unique. Its architecture seemed almost alien, with glowing strips of light running along its sides like veins of energy pulsing through the structure. Whatever this place was, Clive knew it strayed far from the Denver he knew, leaving him with even more questions in his maddening search for answers.

The tower didn't just look modern; it looked like something straight out of a science fiction movie. Clive stared at it intently, his mind wandering as he tried to make sense of its existence. Had he seen sketches or blueprints of something similar at a meeting? He couldn't be sure.

Distracted by his thoughts, Clive glanced around, only to catch sight of the two guards eyeing him from a distance. Their hands rested warily on the hilts of their swords, as if prepared for any

potentially dangerous move Clive might make. He then noticed a man in a flowing, ornate gown making his way toward the stone doorway Clive had just left, as if it were a place of importance.

Further cementing that notion in his mind, Clive couldn't help but think that perhaps the key to understanding his predicament lay somewhere inside that very room. With a renewed sense of urgency, Clive watched the man in the ornate gown, trying to piece together how everything he saw fit together in the perplexing puzzle that was his current reality.

Realizing the potential risk of drawing the guards' attention, Clive quickly turned away, doing his best to act casual. As he cautiously walked through the busy market, a young child passed by, shooting him a perplexed glance and exclaiming, "Funny clothes, mister."

Confused but unwilling to dwell on the comment, he continued on, coming across a stall displaying a unique array of weapons. Among the medieval swords, bows, and crossbows, he spotted what appeared to be a bulletproof vest. Clive couldn't reconcile the existence of such a modern item in a place that seemed so rooted in the past, deepening his confusion.

As he walked further, he overheard the sound of children bickering nearby. Their voices were high-pitched and excited, a familiar scene that somehow felt comforting in the midst of the bizarre environment Clive found himself in. However, their words only served as another reminder of the disconnect between this world and the Denver he knew.

Clive decided to listen more closely to the children's discussion hoping that it might offer some insight into this strange place.

The blond boy said, "Dad says we can't do worse than The Rustknight. I'm glad he's gone, and I hope we find a better warrior to be The Sword."

A dirty child countered, "Roland was a great warrior! He won the Key in the West when he was The Sword in Seattle. It's just bad luck, and battles can be about luck sometimes."

The blond boy snorted dismissively, "Well, Windrake barely won for us. Dad says because of so few flows, the main factories will be shut down. We really need to win this year."

A girl chimed in, "Windrake's squire might take The Sword."

The first boy frowned, "Stormhand would be even worse. Someone better better be found at The Choosing."
Clive listened intently, trying to make sense of their conversation. He found himself utterly confused by the words and concepts they mentioned - The Sword, The Key, flows, factories - none of them provided a clear answer as to where he was or how it related to his familiar world.

Emotions began to well up within him, threatening to spill over as tears, borne from the immense frustration and fear of what had happened to him. The only thing holding Clive back

from letting his feelings consume him was the residual hope that somehow, he might find a solution by understanding the peculiar world he had been thrust into.

Suddenly, Clive's train of thought was interrupted by a disturbing commotion. The sound of a man screaming in despair and shock echoed from inside the stone room he had so recently left. His heart raced anew as he stood rooted to the spot, his mind filled with even more questions and concerns about the nature of this mysterious place.

Moments later, the ornate robed man reappeared, his face twisted in a mixture of fear and disbelief as he wailed, "The Prophet is gone!"

He continued his mournful cries, his words slicing through the air like an icy knife, "The disappearance of the Prophet means doom for us all!"

Reacting to the alarming cries, the two soldiers who had previously eyed Clive cautiously rushed past the distraught priest and hurriedly entered the stone room. Their weapons were drawn, their expressions tense and determined, leaving Clive to wonder what horrors had unfolded inside the very room he had so recently escaped.

With each passing second, Clive's situation grew more perplexing and his once-familiar world seemed more distant than ever before.

In the aftermath of the priest's chilling proclamation, the once-bustling crowd descended into a mix of anger and fear. Cries and shouts echoed throughout the market square, the people visibly distraught by the news of the missing Prophet.

Clive noticed the little boy, who had earlier commented on his clothes, trying to engage the weeping priest in conversation. The boy wore an expression of concern mixed with confusion, echoing Clive's own feelings.

Meanwhile, the soldiers who had rushed into the stone room emerged pale-faced and visibly shaken. In their eyes, Clive could see a mix of fear and disbelief, further confirming the gravity of the situation. The growing chaos only served to deepen Clive's own turmoil and his desperate desire to understand what had happened to him and how he might find his way back to the world he knew.

Suddenly, the priest seemed to pay close attention to the little boy's words. He lifted his head and scanned the crowd in an apparent search for something - or someone. As Clive looked on, the priest's eyes locked onto him, and with a bony finger, the priest pointed directly in his direction.

The soldiers, catching sight of the pointed finger, immediately turned their attention to Clive, determination flaring in their eyes as they started to rush towards him.

Seeing the approaching soldiers, Clive's instincts took over, and he turned to flee without a second thought. The terror and confusion within him surged like a tidal wave, driving him to escape the mysterious forces that seemed to threaten his very existence.

Clive weaved through the labyrinthine streets, his heart pounding in his chest as he desperately tried to put distance between himself and his pursuers. The sound of armored footsteps echoed behind him, a relentless reminder of the danger at his heels.

His surroundings passed by in a blur - the mud walls, the ancient stone and glass doors framed in steel clashed discordantly. He barely had time to register each incongruous detail as he fled from the soldiers.

Suddenly, Clive found himself on a cobbled street, narrowly avoiding a collision with an odd-looking vehicle. The strange contraption seemed to be a bizarre mixture of an early motor car and a steam-powered train – a fitting representation of the implausible world he was now a part of.

As Clive stumbled back from the bizarre vehicle, regaining his footing amidst the commotion, the driver yelled something at him, which only served to disorient him further.

Before he could recover, Clive suddenly felt the grip of leather gloves on his shoulders. He was spun around to face one of the guards he had been fleeing from, now standing in front of him, a stern expression on his face.

"You're coming with us," the guard announced, his authoritative tone allowing no room for argument or resistance. Clive's heart sank, his newfound sense of terror mingling with the ever-growing puzzle his life had become.

Chapter 2

"The fuck are we even doing here, anyway? If those fuckers would just split up they could cover all this ground in a tenth the time it will take us. Those three up there are an army on their own. What the hell are we doing risking our lives out here?"

Nicolas absently listened to the words of his Sergeant as he waited. They were both looking at the rise in front of them. Behind him, the murmurs and whispers of three thousand men filled the air.
Nicolas began slowly, trying to keep his voice calm and steady, as he replied to his Sergeant. "If those three ever strayed too far from one another, The Sword would be an easy target for an Axe. The enemy knows that. And we both know how crucial The Sword is to our success. He wouldn't risk exposing himself like that."

Nicolas couldn't help but let his gaze wander up to the three armored figures standing proudly on the rise before them. Their metal armor gleamed menacingly in the sunlight, and the energy that pulsed between the gaps seemed to be a physical reminder of their immense power. The tubes and wires embedded in their armor gave them an otherworldly appearance, and he couldn't shake the feeling that they were more than just mere warriors – they were a force to be reckoned with.

The murmurs and whispers of the soldiers behind him only served to strengthen his resolve, every word spoken a reminder of the human lives that depended on the actions of their small scouting party. They were the eyes and ears of the army, the first line of defense against any threat that could come their way. And they had been tasked with a mission: to scout the surrounding terrain in search of an Orb.

Nicolas studied the three figures more closely, taking in the orange and black armor that marked them as part of the elite. First, there was Jorin Brightforge, The Sword. A prodigious young warrior with a giant, energy-pulsing blade strapped to his back. Despite experiencing a string of ill luck over the past year that resulted in few Orbs being gathered, the stockpile wasn't yet depleted, thanks in large part to the victories of recent years.

Standing close to Jorin was Arcstone, The Shield. Clad in monstrously bulky armor, it was clear he took his role as protector and leader seriously. The unwavering trust between The Sword and The Shield was palpable, even from this distance.

On the opposite side of Jorin stood Jareth Hunter, The Arrow. With his lean, finely crafted armor and bladed arms glinting in the light, he was the ideal counterbalance to Arcstone's imposing bulk. Together, Hunter and Brightforge made for a formidable pair, two of the most promising Sword and Arrow talents in the land. The hopes of the city rested squarely on their shoulders, and they carried the burden with relentless determination.

The Sergeant, Bryan, gave a heavy sigh. "I don't know, Colonel. Sometimes I wonder what the point of us being here is. Each of those Suits is worth a thousand men. Meanwhile, we've all got families and work waiting for us back home."

Nicolas knew that Bryan's words were fueled by fear rather than genuine disdain. In an attempt to reassure his Sergeant, Nicolas replied, "Bryan, we all play our part in this. There are only five Suits in our city, they can't be everywhere at once. Our presence here – all three thousand of us – is enough to make an enemy Suit think twice about attacking. We can secure and hold an Orb until it's safely collected."

Pausing briefly, Nicolas continued, "I've been doing this for a long time, and speaking from experience, men like us rarely see any real action on the battlefield. The Suits usually determine the outcomes of these encounters, and there are few who can match our Sword and Arrow."

Bryan snorted in response, his lingering fears still gnawing at him, and countered, "If that's the case, then why are we rationing Flows again?"

The question hung heavy in the air, and Nicolas was forced to admit that he didn't have all the answers.

Nicolas adjusted the carbine rifle strapped to his chest, which, while a useful tool in the right circumstances, wasn't something he enjoyed carrying. It felt like unnecessary weight when he considered the odds of actually using it. It was useless this far from an orb. However, he knew that the rifle could be crucial if an Orb should land nearby. His hand instinctively returned to the hilt of his sword, a weapon he felt much more comfortable and prepared to wield.

"Ill luck played a part, that's true," Nicolas admitted. "Brightforge sustained some damage in the battle with the Axe from the Hill Clans last year, and he struggled to make a swift recovery. The Sword's presence on the battlefield is crucial – it's around him that the other Suits' strategies revolve. This year will be better, though. The lights will shine, and the factories will be churning again soon."

Bryan nodded, his anxiety still lingering but tempered with a glimmer of hope. "I sure hope so," he muttered. "My wife's been complaining nonstop about the lack of denims, and we're struggling to find medicine for our youngest. It's easy for those bastards up in the tower – their lights are always on. It's the little people like us who suffer when the Flows run low."

As the armored figures began to descend the slope towards Nicolas and Bryan, the two soldiers instinctively straightened up, snapping to attention. "Looks like we'll get a chance to see our purpose soon enough," Nicolas whispered. "I think they've figured out where to go."

As Brightforge approached, his armor hummed with the sound of actuators, and his visor was aglow with energy. His voice, emanating from a speaker on his helmet, carried an air of authority. "Due north. We are detecting something faint. If there's an Orb there, it's far away. Start moving in that direction, we'll go on ahead. We'll signal if we need you to hurry."

"Yes, sir," Nicolas responded immediately, his voice strong and confident.

With that, Brightforge turned and rejoined Arcstone and Hunter. All at once, the trio gave a sudden pulse, and they shot forward, racing away at a speed many times faster than any horse could manage. Dirt sprayed in their wake as Nicolas and his men were left to follow, relying on their own strength and determination to guide them towards the potential of a battle – and the promise of victory.

Bryan couldn't help but voice his frustration. "If it's so important for us to be there, why not use the Glow to bring all of us there faster?"

Nicolas waved for his men to start moving as he responded, "Using the Glow to move three thousand men would be much slower, Bryan. Besides, we need to conserve that energy. Remember, if there's an Orb out there, we have to be quick about it. The Hill Clans are roaming too, and Thorn Jaxwulf has been sighted. To beat Jaxwulf, we'll need every advantage we can get."

At the mere mention of the name, Bryan shuddered involuntarily. "Damn, I can't even imagine seeing Jaxwulf in person."

Nicolas, also fearful but maintaining a brave facade, reminded his Sergeant, "Brightforge and Hunter are with us, remember? They would surely be a match for even someone like Jaxwulf." With that, the company began their march northward at a brisk pace.

"I don't know," Bryan replied hesitantly. "I've heard stories about Jaxwulf. They say he killed the Shield from Cleveland just last fall. I've never heard of an Axe beating a Shield before – a Shield's whole purpose is to defeat an Axe."

The weight of those stories weighed heavily on the minds of Nicolas and his men, but they didn't falter. They knew it was up to them to do their part, no matter the odds.

The company of three thousand men marched steadily through the landscape, a mix of rugged hills and lush forests defining their surroundings. The air was damp with the scent of dew-drenched foliage, and a symphony of birdsong accompanied their journey. Even as they navigated the challenges of the undulating terrain, the soldiers couldn't help but appreciate the natural beauty that surrounded them.

In the valleys, they passed rivers that meandered gracefully, their waters teeming with fish and reflecting the vivid blues and greens of the sky and trees. Along the way, they encountered small, tight-knit communities with quaint wooden houses that blended seamlessly into the landscape, their inhabitants watching the soldiers with a mix of awe and trepidation.

As the company climbed the sturdier slopes, they were afforded sweeping panoramic views of the countryside. Verdant rolling hills stretched into the distance, punctuated occasionally by stark outcroppings of ancient rock. It was breathtaking, to say the least, and the soldiers couldn't help but feel a deep connection to the land they were fighting to protect.

Through it all, the men moved forward as one, their resolve unwavering. The serene beauty of their surroundings belied the darkness shadowing the world, but it also served to remind them of what truly mattered. It was not just a fight for the present, but for the future of their families and the very soul of the land they called home.

Suddenly, in the distance, a plume of energy shot into the sky, illuminating the area with a burst of bright light. Nicolas recognized the signal immediately and barked, "Brightforge is calling us – the Orb must be there!"

He turned to face the troops and roared, "Double time!" The soldiers picked up their pace, adrenaline fueling their tired legs as they pushed forward.

Bryan, panting beside Nicolas, shared his thoughts, "I've never actually seen an Orb."

Nicolas took a moment to reflect on the fact that it was rare to have a Sergeant as inexperienced as Bryan, given he had never seen an Orb before. However, he reminded himself of Bryan's exemplary performance in the skirmishes with the Cleveland forces the year prior, allowing him to climb quickly through the ranks. Despite his greenness, Nicolas had no regrets having Bryan by his side in battle.

"If you're involved in a battle for an Orb," Nicolas explained, "it's usually against other soldiers – it's rare to fight the Suits."

Bryan hesitated, then asked, "Have you ever fought a Suit?"

Nicolas' eyes grew distant, his mind flickering back to that harrowing day. The titanic fight against the armored warrior who tore through their ranks, leaving a brutal trail of bloodshed, severed limbs, and fear in his wake. The soldiers had fought desperately, some fleeing in terror from the unstoppable force that seemed more like a demon than a man.

His voice filled with somber reverence, Nicolas admitted, "Yes, once. We lost 600 men and had 300 wounded, but we managed to beat him back. It seems like such a terrible price to pay, but just think of your child needing medicine and the thousands like him back in Cincy. The Orb we secured that day kept the ebbs flowing and made a difference in their lives."
The soldiers pressed on, climbing a steep rise that overlooked the surrounding landscape. As they ascended, the panorama unfolded before them; vast, rolling hills carpeted in vibrant green, interspersed with dense patches of woodland. The atmosphere was alive with the chatter of birds and the collective footsteps of 3,000 men marching with purpose and determination.

At last, reaching the summit of the rise, they were afforded a view of something truly awe-inspiring: a glowing sphere, almost glassy in its appearance and the size of a horse-drawn wagon. Its ethereal beauty went beyond anything the men had ever seen before, and it seemed almost out of place in the natural world that surrounded it.

Nicolas, trying to keep his focus, repeatedly thumbed the safety of his rifle on and off, attempting to gauge by sound alone if the Orb was close enough for his weapon to have any effect.

Bryan's voice held a note of wonder as he said, "My God, that's beautiful."

Nicolas nodded in agreement but quickly returned to the task at hand. "That Orb holds a hundred Flows. It could sustain the first sector for quite some time – it would make a big difference."

"Let's go get it, then," Bryan said with renewed determination.

The scene below them suddenly erupted into a whirlwind of action, as the orange and black armored warriors clashed with their brown and black opposites. Each fighter in their powered armor moved with superhuman speed, a blur of force and fury, as gods clashed with gods in a furious ballet of metal and power. The soldiers above looked on in fascination as they realized that the stakes had been raised – now, it wasn't just an Orb they were fighting for, but their very survival.

Nicolas remained frozen, his eyes darting around the scene below as he tried to identify the combatants. He could make out Brightforge clashing with another figure that appeared to be another Sword. If they were facing Cleveland forces, then it had to be Dahlia Wraitheshade – a fearsome warrior in her own right and a possible match for Brightforge.

His gaze shifted to Arcstone, The Shield, who was engaged in a fierce battle with an Axe. The Axe, nearly as massive and armored as Arcstone himself, radiated energy as their powerful forms collided. Cleveland's Axe was known as Galeheart – a figure whose reputation was only slightly less terrifying than that of Jaxwulf.

Although Shield suits typically held an advantage over Axe suits, Galeheart was a force to be reckoned with. Hulkingly enormous and seemingly composed of pure destructive energy, he was one of the rare exceptions who could defy the usual hierarchy of combatants. The soldiers watched in awe and dread as the battle of titans unfolded before them, each combatant pushing themselves to their limits in a struggle that would determine the fate of the precious Orb – and the lives of those fighting for it.
Nicolas' attention then turned to Hunter, who was locked in fierce combat with Alura Copperleaf, the Cleveland Arrow. In this matchup, Cincinnati seemed to have a clear advantage – Hunter was potentially one of the most powerful Arrows in the land. The two opponents danced around each other, and despite Hunter's undeniable edge in both power and skill, Nicolas knew that a single misstep could quickly turn the tide of the battle.

"We need to get into position," Nicolas declared with determination. "Our presence could make a difference. We can help secure our Suits' backs and make the Cleveland bastards think twice about pressing their attack – maybe even force them to back off."

Bryan looked doubtful as he questioned, "But they're like gods – what can we do against them?"

"I've seen it before," Nicolas insisted. "They can't afford to risk themselves too much. The mere presence of three thousand soldiers can make a difference – the threat we pose might be

enough to make them think twice. We don't see a Cleveland army backing them up; these three are isolated. Let's move."

With a nod, Bryan relayed the command to his troops, roaring, "Move out!"

The soldiers sprang into action, adjusting their formation to provide their Suits with the advantage Nicolas had devised. Their hearts pounded in their chests, the adrenaline and tension of the unfolding battle steeling their resolve as they prepared to face the challenge of gods.

The army surged forward, streaming down the valley toward the Orb and the intense battle that raged between Brightforge and Wraitheshade. As they grew closer, the soldiers could feel the waves of heat emanating from the clashing, glowing blades of the two Swords, the radiant energy intense enough to ignite the grass around them.

"Get the 2nd and 3rd Order troops to the front as we get closer to the Orb," Nicolas instructed Bryan, his voice filled with purpose.

Bryan, though nervous, nodded and replied, "2nd Order troops, I understand – do you think the Orb is close enough for the 3rd Order?"

Nicolas clicked the safety of his rifle, confidence ringing in his voice as he confirmed, "It's close enough. She's ready to fire."

No more hesitation, Bryan decided, his voice booming as he shouted, "Twos and threes to the front!"

The 2nd Order soldiers, their muskets primed and ready, rushed forward without delay. Meanwhile, the 3rd Order troops, armed with automatic rifles and sheathed swords, quickly assumed their new positions. The entire formation seemed to come alive with renewed energy and focus, each soldier fully aware that every move they made from this point on could mean the difference between life and death, victory and defeat.

With the Orb less than a hundred yards away, Nicolas shouldered his rifle and prepared to open fire. Bryan echoed the command, ordering the 2nd and 3rd Order troops to follow suit. In unison, they aimed and began firing their weapons, sending a torrent of musket balls and bullets streaming toward Wraitheshade as Brightforge nimbly danced backward to avoid friendly fire.

The hail of projectiles pummeled Wraitheshade, causing her to stagger before she redirected her focus toward the oncoming army. Nicolas couldn't help but flinch as he witnessed the god-like figure, now consumed with wrath, making a beeline for them.

But just as swiftly as the turn of events transpired, Brightforge's sword struck a phenomenal blow, halting Wraitheshade's advance. The force of the strike sent the enemy Sword flying

through the air, and the resulting shockwave of energy rippling outward from the impact staggered the front line of the army.

For a moment, time seemed to slow, and the battlefield fell silent as the soldiers took in the sight of a fallen god. Though her fate was not yet sealed, this small victory sparked a glimmer of hope in the hearts of the Cincinnati troops.

In the blink of an eye, the atmosphere on the battlefield shifted. The other two Cleveland Suits disengaged their opponents, moving to stand protectively alongside the wounded Wraitheshade. It was clear that the mood had changed – the battle seemed to be over, as the opposing forces recognized that pressing on would make little sense; the presence of the 3,000 soldiers had proven to be the pivotal factor.

Wraitheshade's voice, booming through her helmet's speaker, taunted Brightforge. "Are you sure you don't want to see if you can finish me off?"

Brightforge's response was swift and confident, "Some day when I don't have an army by my side, we might get the chance to find out."

Wraitheshade laughed, though her voice conveyed a hint of sincerity. "I'm looking forward to it."

Nearby, Galeheart seemed almost restless with anticipation, urging her, "There are only a few thousand men. Just take down one of their Suits, and it will balance the playing field for us."

Wraitheshade shook her head, her voice staunch and resolute, "It's not worth the risk. There are more battles to be fought, and we can't afford to lose one of us here. We need to know when to cut our losses."

The standoff between the two groups of warriors, the orange and black painted gods and the Cleveland Suits, was palpable. Each bearing the marks and scars from the brief but intense battle, they stared each other down, the air thick with tension and anticipation.

After a long moment, Wraithshield turned away from her opponents and, with a pulse of energy, vanished like a demon – a torpedo streaking across the landscape. Copperleaf, not one to be left behind, quickly followed suit.

All eyes were now on Galeheart, who stood alone, staring down the trio of Cincinnati Suits and the 3,000 soldiers behind them. His towering form bristled with power, seeming to loom even larger in the face of the challenge before him. Despite the odds favoring Cincinnati, Nicolas couldn't help but feel a chilling fear take hold as he imagined the carnage the legendary Galeheart could cause if he decided to stay and fight.

Then, seemingly reluctant to withdraw but recognizing the necessity of preservation, Galeheart turned away from the gathered forces. In an instant, he too propelled himself away across the

valley, leaving the victorious Cincinnati soldiers to take possession of the battlefield – and the precious Orb that had been the cause of it all.

The battlefield, once filled with the cacophony of clashing metal and anguished cries, now fell eerily silent. It was a silence that stretched thin as anticipation mounted – until, finally, it was Brightforge who broke the tension. "Victory!" he proclaimed, his voice ringing out clear and strong.

The effect was immediate. In an instant, the energy of the whole army seemed to shift as the soldiers erupted into whooping cheers, celebrating their hard-won victory. The precious Orb, and the undeniable power it held in the form of Flows, was now in their hands, secured for their people and their city.

Chapter 3

In a state of disbelief, Clive sat on the laminate floor, chained to the wall. He couldn't understand the strange paradox that had enveloped his life. Outside the small room was a medieval town, filled with men wielding swords and riding horses, yet here he was in a room with plastic floors and other modern elements. He questioned his reality - was this some sort of mad dream? Or perhaps he was trapped in a coma, with everything around him nothing more than an elaborate, mind-generated fantasy.

As time trickled endlessly, Clive's mind raced, trying to discern the logic hidden within this bizarre world. The saturation of the modern and archaic, the incoherent elements that had woven themselves together into this ambiguous reality - it filled him with an unrelenting, gnawing confusion.
Opposite Clive sat an old man with a long beard, also chained to the wall. They had spoken briefly before, but Clive had been too catatonic to make sense of anything. Now, gathering his emotions and deciding to suspend his disbelief at the world around him, he initiated a conversation with the old man.

Clive, blurted, "What's a Sword?"

The old man, looking at Clive as though he was a crazy person, replied, "Sharp metal with a handle for chopping folks."

Clive, realizing the misunderstanding, repeated and emphasized the word "Sword" in a way that indicated he was talking about a specific use of the word in the context of their strange world.

The old man, still looking bemused, responded, "Ah, you mean the Suit? What the hell are you talking about? How could you not know what a Sword is?"

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