

## Better Watch Out

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by Jim Bernheimer

"How bad is it?" I asked fearing the response.

"Not good, sir." The smallish being named Graffa looked up from the sheaves of paper filled with bizarre equations that I could barely follow. "Even increasing the output of the emmanaters we deposit over the world each year will only buy us a few more seasons at best. The void will open again and hell will return to this world."

Shaking my head, I wondered how it had all come to this. "Children just don't believe in me anymore. We're losing them earlier than ever. We need that belief funnelled through the emmanaters to keep the void closed. What is our best option? Do we dare go public?"

"It didn't work well last time, sir. Remember the Dark Ages and the fall of your pantheon? Inevitably, when they discover who is behind the Great Seal, a large portion of the population will demand it be opened regardless of the consequences."

"Yes, yes. I know, but the people of this day and age don't cling to their dogma like they did in the past. They have new idols that they worship with names like Obama, Palin, Jolie, Winfrey, Pitt, Beckham, James, and Woods ... that last one, he's on the naughty list right?"

"Very much so, sir," Graffa responded, his ears twitching in rhythm to the blinks of his bulbous eyes. "However, that kind of appeal is generally a short term gain, long term loss. It might actually hasten the apocalypse. Humans today create unrealistic expectations in their idols and delight in watching them fall. We should only consider this as a last resort. We're close, but not there yet."

"What about the 'Macy-day Bump' and Black Friday?" I asked looking for a way around the dilemma. It was only a band aid solution and never meant to be an answer to the problem.

Graffa shrugged and rechecked his computations. "It's not enough. With the world's economy in decline, humans are less happy and that trickles down to the energy the children contribute to the Great Seal, but the Seal is at its weakest level in the last five centuries. We can try to expand our reach through the newest human media, but I can't see a way for even that to overcome the rising levels of apathy. Honestly, I cringe at the idea of you as a website, a blogger, or a tired late-night guest on a television show."

For a being such as I, who had outlived the mightiest of my brethren, the idea of it all coming to an end was unbelievable. I looked across the table to my beautiful wife, still mesmerizing after all these years, and said, "Tia, what would Odin, Tyr, or Thor do in my place?"

She gave me a reassuring smile. "Darling, they wouldn't have lasted as long as you have. They'd have either foolishly challenged him in direct combat or demanded the mortals bow down before them. Thor barely defeated the enemy's pet snake before perishing. You are the best Asgard had to offer, Baldur. I watched my brothers and sisters attack him in full force. Even with the help of the few surviving Egyptian and Babylonian deities, Mount Olympus was a slaughterhouse. Their sacrifice bought the world just slightly over a millennia until your kin were forced to fight him as well."

I stroked my white beard and replied, "Ironic isn't it, Tia? I was once the 'god of peace' to a savage and warlike race and you the 'goddess of home and hearth' to a land filled with great wanderers. Now, we are the last gods to walk this earth and virtually the only defenders left."

"Take heart, my husband. His own followers are growing increasingly fractured. When the Usurper returns, his power will be diminished by the same apathy and malaise we are experiencing."

"Oh, I'll take his heart, if I get the chance and assuming he has one to begin with!" We all laughed at my gallows humor. A glance at the clock told me time was running short. "It's almost time for me to encircle the earth and see how little peace and goodwill is still out there. Tia, please see to the sleigh and check on the animals. I have a few more questions for Graffa and will be along shortly."

She nodded and kissed me. The "reindeer" were really the descendants of the valkyries' flying horses who survived Ragnarok. They themselves had been descendants of the Pegasus that Hestia rode to the rainbow bridge bringing dire news from her realm. Inbreeding had severely disfigured them.

I waited until the light of my life departed before gazing down at the elf. "It's worse than you're letting on, isn't it?"

"Yes. I've rechecked the calculations. The Mayans were remarkably close ... for humans. They were only four days off in their result. The Seal will fail on December 25th, 2012."

"A remarkable coincidence, or perhaps just another instance of the Enemy's hand at work. Two thousand and twelve years since the birth of the Usurper. I chose the day before his birthday to make my deliveries on purpose. Do you think I have a chance at defeating him?"

"You've trained three hundred and sixty-four days a year for well over a dozen centuries. You have the skill, but can't match his sheer power. He will underestimate you. Use that to your advantage. You will need to be the crafty being that can circle the planet in a day so silently that the children never hear you. Use stealth to create an opportunity. Wait for that chance, milord, because I fear you will only have one."

"What weapon should I use, Graffa? My brother's hammer? My father's spear? Tia insists on using her sister's bow and a club that belonged to one of her half-mortal nephews. I fear that sentimentality will get her killed."

Graffa pulled a box out from below his desk and handed it to me. "Merry Christmas, sir," he said before spitting on the ground.

I opened it and found a set of gauntlets, each with a pair of blades built into the back of the hands. The black metal reeked with elvish death magic. "Claws? Are you reading those comic books again?" I asked with a hearty laugh. My chief assistant had a penchant for irony.

"I thought something created especially for you was in order. Throw either the hammer or the spear first. They could slow the enemy for a moment, use that window to get under his guard and deliver the finishing strike. If you're lucky, you'll know when he is sleeping and ambush him then."

I did not look forward to that battle. Shaking my head, I drove away my concerns. It would not be fought tonight and I was needed elsewhere. "I must get going. I'll see you in the morning, Graffa."

"Safe journey to you, milord. Take the claws. His minions on this side of the Great Seal won't hesitate to attack."

I slid my hands into the gauntlets. They felt good. "Yes, let them come. They better watch out!"

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