

Chapter One

“What shall we do about Uron?” said Skimif, the God of Martir, to all of the hundreds of gods gathered in the Temple of the Gods. Ordinarily, he would have performed a roll call to make sure that every god was present, but as this was one of the most important meetings the gods had had in a while, he didn't bother. Besides, a quick scan of the area with his godly presence told him that every single god in both the Northern and Southern Pantheons was present anyway, making a head count redundant.

Except, of course, for the Mysterious One, Skimif thought, reclining on his massive marble-and-crystal throne, putting the tips of his fingers together as he looked at all of the gods. We'll just have to make do without him, as always.

That single question he had asked had made all of the gods silent, even though mere moments ago the gods had been trading news and making lots of noise. He saw the Historical God, the God of History, who resembled a green octopus with the head of a human, on the other side of the wide-open Temple look away nervously, while Tinkar, the God of Fate and Time, leaned against his staff as if all of his thousands of years weighed heavily on his shoulders. Of the goddesses, Kano, the Goddess of the Sea, was muttering something to the Mechanical Goddess, Goddess of Machines, who was currently occupying the body of one of her automatons, the one called Calir, if Skimif recalled correctly.

Skimif wasn't shocked by their silence. After all, Uron was no ordinary criminal. Last year, he killed the Avian Goddess, and last month had led an army of half-gods to destroy World's End, where the Temple of the Gods was located. Uron had even proven

to be a match for Skimif himself, which was why he had given the gods so much trouble recently.

Indeed, the only reason Uron was currently not a threat to Martir in general and the gods in particular was because of the brave actions of the minor spirit known as Durima. Skimif remembered well how shocked Uron had looked when Durima tackled him into the ethereal, that second plane upon which only the gods and katabans could travel. It had been quite satisfying.

Next to Skimif, Nimiko, the God of Light, shifted in his seat uncomfortably. “Well ... what is there to do about Uron, Lord Skimif? He's trapped in the ethereal. There's no way he can get out, and with no one in there, he can't hurt anyone, either. Maybe he'll starve to death, since there's no food in the ethereal.”

“Starve to death?” barked the Loner God, the God of Solitude, Jungle, and Animals, from his seat on the other side of the huge chamber. “Oldest brother, I know how slow you are, but I didn't know you were that stupid. Uron is basically a god, as far as I am concerned, and gods don't die of starvation.”

“The Loner God is correct,” said Skimif, nodding. “While Uron technically isn't a god, I doubt he'll starve to death in there. He managed to survive as a bodiless spirit for thousands of years until just recently. If we leave him alone, he'll just become angrier and more hateful than ever.”

Grinf, the God of Fire, Metal, and Justice, leaned forward on his metallic throne and raised his gavel. “I propose that we execute Uron in the style that my followers execute their criminals. It is only just.”

Kano rolled her eyes. “You think we *haven't* been trying to kill him, brother? Have your flames burned your ears? Or are you just deaf?”

“Justice is not deaf,” said Grinf. “Besides, sister, I don't see you coming up with any useful suggestions. Like the sea, you only wash away things, never build anything of use.”

“Enough snipping,” said Skimif, holding up a hand wearily. “Sometimes you gods are like children.”

“Says the godling,” said the Loner God under his breath.

Skimif glared at him, but shook his head. “I know we are all afraid of Uron, but we can't let our fear divide us or cloud our reasoning.”

“Tell that to the Fear Goddess,” said Nimiko, gesturing at a woman several rows down who appeared to be covered in blood and had a wide, disturbing smile on her skull-like face. “She's the one who controls fear around here, not us.”

The Fear Goddess simply nodded to acknowledge that Nimiko had spoken to her. Out of all of the gods, only she seemed to be keeping her cool, though Skimif didn't find that very odd or strange, seeing as she was always one of the least jumpy goddesses, even with the knowledge of Uron running around trying to kill everybody.

“That's not what I mean,” said Skimif. “I mean that as the gods of Martir, it is our sworn duty to deal with threats like Uron permanently. As long as Uron remains alive in the ethereal, his escape is always a very real possibility.”

“Why don't we banish him into the Void?” suggested the Loner God. “Worked for Hollech, didn't it?”

The mention of Hollech—who had, according to Durima, been killed by Uron in cold blood in the Void—caused several of the gods to cough and shift uncomfortably in their seats. Skimif himself felt his neck growing hot from embarrassment, as the only reason that Hollech had been in the Void in the first place

was because Skimif had banished him there thirty years ago as punishment for conspiring against him. It had seemed like a good idea at the time; after all, how else was Skimif supposed to know that Uron would kill Hollech three decades later?

Still, Skimif's popularity with the gods—already fragile and shaky in the best of times—had plummeted when the news of Hollech's death became common knowledge among the rest of the gods. He didn't want the gods to focus on his shortcomings at the moment, however, because they needed to be united as one, not divided as many.

So Skimif, in an attempt to change the subject, said, “Because Uron has already proven that he can travel to and from the Void without trouble. Throwing him into the Void would be like exiling a murderer to a remote island with a fully-equipped sailing boat; it just doesn't make sense.”

“Then I'm out of ideas,” said the Lone God, shrugging and kicking back in his seat, resting his short, stubby legs on the throne in front of and below him, upon which the Chaotic Goddess, Goddess of Chaos, sat. “Anyone else?”

“Mechanical Goddess,” said Skimif, his eyes flicking in her direction. “What do you think?”

The Mechanical Goddess made a series of clicking and beeping sounds, followed by a loud whistle of steam that made several nearby gods cringe. She then followed it up with a snap of her fingers.

Unlike the other gods, Skimif had always had a hard time understanding the Mechanical Goddess due to her complete refusal to speak in anything resembling a normal language. Even after thirty years, Skimif still didn't quite always catch everything she said, though he had improved enough that he could usually catch

the gist of whatever she was trying to say.

And what the Mechanical Goddess said now made Skimif shake his head. “I doubt we could build a machine capable of draining Uron's life force. It would require a lot of knowledge we just don't have, and it might not even work anyway.”

“Why not summon the Powers?” said Tinkar, looking up from his throne a few rows from Skimif. “Uron may be strong enough to challenge you in a fight, Lord Skimif, but he might not be strong enough to defeat the Powers. If we tell the Powers about the seriousness of this situation, then they might just kill him for us.”

Skimif rested his chin on his hand. “The only question is, how do we contact the Powers? Last time I saw them, they said they were going to be working on a new world somewhere beyond the Void. And honestly, I don't want to risk the Powers changing their mind and deciding to destroy Martir again after they learn about Uron.”

“This is getting boring,” said the Loner God with a yawn. “I want to go back to my island. I think there might be some dumb humans who have crossed the Dividing Line and are going to land on the shores of my island under the mistaken belief that it is safe. In other words, I'm going to miss my free lunch if I stay here any longer.”

Skimif held up a hand. “No. We all stay here until we come up with a plan to get rid of Uron once and for all, however long that might take.”

The Loner God groaned, while several of the other gods and goddesses also made noises of impatience. Not that Skimif paid them much attention. As much as he understood their desire to leave, he didn't want a single god or goddess absent from what he

considered to be the most important meeting the gods had ever—or would ever—have.

Uron is the worst threat Martir has faced in some time, Skimif thought. As a matter of fact, he's the only major threat that our world has faced, at least that I know of. Maybe that's why we've had such a hard time figuring out how to deal with him.

“What we need to do, in my opinion, is take away from the God-killer from him,” said Kano. She looked around at her fellow deities. “Without the God-killer, do you think Uron would be as big of a threat as he is now? Of course he wouldn't. Therefore, if we are going to come up with a plan to destroy him, we first need to disarm him.”

“Go right ahead, sister,” said the Loner God, gesturing toward the air like a gentleman allowing his lady friend to enter the ballroom first. “You can be the one to do it. Of course, if you touch the God-killer, you'll die instantly, but I'm sure you're willing to make that sacrifice for the greater good, aren't you?”

“The point our loner brother is trying to make is that we don't have any real way of disarming him at this time,” said Tinkar, shaking his head. “If any of us gods try, Uron will kill us; if we try to send any of our servants to do it, he will kill them even more easily than us.”

Skimif nodded. “Tinkar and the Loner God are correct. While disarming Uron is a good idea, it's just not practical. We'll just have to figure out a different way to kill him without disarming him.”

“Maybe the Ghostly God knows how to defeat him,” said the Loner God with a yawn. “After all, he was the one whose dumb plan allowed Uron to become a threat in the first place, wasn't he?”

About three rows down from Skimif's left, the Ghostly God, the God of Mist and Ghosts, folded his arms across his chest as he snapped, "He manipulated me, you introverted idiot. How many times do I have to explain that I knew nothing about Uron until he revealed himself? I have done nothing wrong."

"Nothing except be the biggest fuck-up in the entire history of Martir," the Loner God remarked. "I just noticed that you've been awfully quiet during this whole discussion, brother. Don't you have any ideas? Maybe summon an army of ghosts to haunt Uron's dreams or tear Uron's soul from his body or something like that?"

The Ghostly God scowled. "Clearly, you don't actually understand my powers. Not that that is much of a surprise. Shut-ins like yourself rarely have much *practical* knowledge about the outside world, just your own vague ideas about how things *should* work."

"Shut-in?" said the Loner God, raising his voice slightly. "That's rich, coming from the god who shuns outside contact just as much as me, if not more so."

"What did I say about not snipping at each other?" said Skimif, before the Ghostly God could respond. "If all you're going to do is agitate each other, then we might as well free Uron and let him do as he pleases. It will accomplish the same effect as our current efforts."

The Loner God shrugged. "I thought getting my brother angry would liven things up a bit around here."

Skimif rubbed his forehead. He was now starting, as he had many times over the years, to wonder how the gods had managed to get anything done before he came to power. It seemed like all of the gods were constantly fighting with each other, as though the concept of 'teamwork' was as foreign to them as human cul-

ture was to the average aquarian.

And I am the idiot who is trying to bring them all together, Skimif thought. *Sometimes, I wonder what the Powers were thinking when they decided to make me the God of Martir.*

Then Skimif felt a slight tremor in his throne. It was so subtle that he almost missed it, but being the God of Martir, his senses were more sensitive than most, so he caught it. He glanced at his throne, puzzled about what it might have been, but it did not repeat.

While Skimif wondered what that tremor might have meant, Xocion, the God of Ice and Mountains, said, “I say we freeze Uron in an iceberg and banish him as deeply into the Void as we can. If Lord Skimif and I work together, we could do it.”

“Doubt it will work,” said Nimiko. “Even if you succeed in freezing Uron, he will probably break out at some point and make his way through the Void back to Martir. That is yet another temporary solution, which is the opposite of what we need.”

Skimif opened his mouth to offer his opinion on Xocion's plan, but then he felt another tremor, this one slightly larger than the last.

The other gods must have felt it, too, because Tinkar looked to the dark-skinned, bald woman to his right and said, “Mica, are you trying to shake the foundations of our Temple or are you bored like our dear loner brother?”

Mica, the Goddess of Earth and Ink, shook her head. “This isn't my doing. Someone—or something—else is behind it.”

“What is it, then?” said the Loner God, who was now sitting upright in his chair again, looking around the chamber for the tremor's source. “I have forgotten, but do earthquakes occur naturally on World's End or not?”

“They don't,” Mica confirmed. “The land around here is too stable for that.”

“I don't like this,” said Kano. She stood up from her throne. “I say we should leave before—”

Through the thick glass dome above, the bright blue sky suddenly turned blacker than midnight. The entire Temple of the Gods was cast into blackness, causing the gods to cry out in surprise before Nimiko snapped his fingers and a massive light ball appeared in the center of the chamber, several feet above the sandpit in the center. Even then, Nimiko's light barely penetrated the darkness, as if the shadows were a massive tidal wave trying to put out a tiny candle.

“What in the name of the Powers is going on here?” said Tinkar, gripping his clock-topped staff tightly. “What is this darkness? Ooka, is this your doing?”

The God of Shadows and Knives, Ooka, who sat a couple of rows down from Skimif's right, shook his shaggy head of hair vigorously. “No, brother, I don't know what this darkness is or where it came from.”

“No one panic,” said Skimif, sensing fear creeping up in the chamber. “Whatever is happening, I am sure we gods can deal with it. We just need to remain calm and rational.”

Calm and rational? came a light, feminine voice that Skimif had never heard in his life. **No one can remain calm and rational in the face of the unknown, no one except a fool. And I trust that you tiny gods are no fools.**

Skimif shivered when he heard that voice, while Grinf barked, “Who are you? Where are you? Show yourself, whatever you are. Or are you too afraid of the collective might of the gods of Martir to do even that much?”

The feminine voice laughed as politely as an aristocratic woman at a joke that only the upper class could find entertaining. **Fear is an unknown concept to me, God of Justice. Besides, you already see me everywhere around you. I am not hiding from anyone, because I am nothing, and nothing is incapable of hiding.**

“Are you the darkness itself?” said Nimiko, looking around wildly. “I don't understand. Darkness cannot talk.”

Darkness is only the form that your minds can comprehend, said the feminine voice. **I am surprised that you have not recognized me. After all, you see me every day and you banished one of your own to me when he acted out. I relished eating away at his sanity; I only wish he had lived a little longer, as I do not think I succeeded in destroying his sanity as completely as I would have liked.**

Skimif didn't want to say it, but he did it anyway: “Are you ... the Void?”

Bingo, said the feminine voice with another laugh, this one harsher than the last. **And no one, not even you gods, can ever completely escape the Void forever. So I hope you did not leave any important tasks incomplete or unattended to, because it will be a very, very long time before any of you will see the light of the sun again.**