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A Gift from the Gods? — The Trial of Ascendancy is an original work of speculative fiction written by Dr. Veritas, The Alchemist, as a companion to *Project Lucifer: The Hidden Gods of Hollywood*, Volume II of *The Rabbit Hole Collection*.

This story brings together fictional characters, mythological figures, and concepts drawn from multiple storytelling traditions and entertainment franchises. All recognizable third-party characters, names, settings, and associated intellectual property remain the property of their respective rights holders.

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The story is presented as a fictional crossover exploring themes of mythology, consciousness, creation, free will, morality, and the nature of power. Its events, dialogue, interactions, and interpretations are imaginative works of fiction and should not be understood as factual claims about historical events, religious figures, or the intentions of the original creators.

The extended *Trial of Ascendancy* is intended to be available to readers free of charge as supplemental material accompanying *Project Lucifer*.

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THE FORBIDDEN CHAPTERS

A Gift from the Gods?

The Trial of Ascendancy

An Important Note from Dr. Veritas, The Alchemist

The portal is open. The full Trial is still being prepared.

If you've arrived here by scanning the QR code in *Project Lucifer: The Hidden Gods of Hollywood*, congratulations. You've found exactly what you were looking for. Well, almost.

What you're about to read is the **official published version of *A Gift from the Gods?***, presented exactly as it appears in *Project Lucifer*, Volume II of *The Rabbit Hole Collection*. This is not an unfinished draft, an alternate storyline, or a discarded chapter. It is the actual version included in the book, temporarily reproduced here while I complete the extended edition of *The Trial of Ascendancy*.

And believe me, there's considerably more to this story.

The full version will take you deeper into the arena, where twenty-seven legendary heroes and villains have been pulled from their respective realities to participate in an experiment devised by five ancient gods. You'll witness the encounters, alliances, betrayals, confrontations, and impossible choices that unfold between the Summoning and the aftermath. The printed book deliberately leaves that portion of the story for you to discover here, in **The Forbidden Chapters**.

For now, consider this page your invitation and your first glimpse through the doorway. Once the extended Trial is complete, this temporary version will be replaced with the full story **at this same web address**. You won't need to scan a different QR code or search for another page.

If you've arrived before the extended story is available, thank you for being among the first to enter. Bookmark this page and return soon.

The gods have already made their decision. The contestants have already been summoned.

The arena is waiting.

Dr. Veritas, The Alchemist

Author of The Rabbit Hole Collection



A GIFT FROM THE GODS?

Author Unknown

THE CHAPTER I DON'T REMEMBER WRITING

There is a point in every book when the author has to stop touching the damn thing. Writers are notoriously bad at recognizing it. *Project Lucifer* had become particularly guilty of this. Gods became aliens. Aliens became superheroes. Superheroes became archetypes. Archetypes became consciousness. Consciousness wandered into quantum physics without knocking, and somewhere along the way I had spent hundreds of pages asking whether Hollywood had been recycling humanity's oldest memories while pretending to sell us popcorn.

Eventually, I reached the end. Or so I believed. The Signal Survived had closed the circle. I saved the manuscript, checked it, saved it again because writers treat the Save command with roughly the same faith earlier civilizations reserved for prayer, and sometime afterward I fell asleep. At least, I think I did. I had been working too late, drinking too much Earl Grey, and staring at a screen longer than any optometrist would recommend. A piece of that night is missing from my memory. When I returned to the computer, the manuscript was still open. The page count was not the one I remembered. I blamed Microsoft Word, naturally. Instead, I found a chapter. Not notes. Not fragments. A finished chapter. A very long one.

I read it waiting to recognize myself in the words. I didn't. Writers know their own fingerprints. These felt different. The narrator seemed less interested in inventing events than recording them. Places were described as though remembered. People entered the pages as though whoever wrote them had once watched them breathe. So, I checked the file history, timestamps, autosaves, backups, older versions, and stray documents. I searched phrases. I even considered the humiliating possibility that I had written the entire thing half asleep. Nothing explained it. The file said the chapter belonged there. My memory said it didn't. Then I discovered I was in it. Not Dr. Veritas as narrator. Me, or a version close enough to make the distinction uncomfortable. The story knew Project Lucifer. It knew The Emerald Truth. More importantly, it knew the machinery beneath them: creator and creation, gods beneath gods, recurring archetypes, consciousness, branching realities, temporal slices, memory, déjà vu, worlds beside worlds. Ideas I had spent hundreds of pages examining had become machinery, conflict, and consequence, and eventually that machinery reached through the story and dragged its supposed author inside.

Here is the line I will not cross: I do not know what happened. Maybe I wrote this chapter and forgot. Maybe exhaustion produced the strangest piece of unconscious fan fiction in human history. Maybe there is an explanation I haven't found. After spending an entire book asking you to separate evidence from interpretation, I am not going to manufacture certainty because mystery makes a better ending. I cannot prove where this chapter came from, who wrote it, or even that I didn't. What I can tell you is what I did with it: I didn't rewrite the

story. That distinction matters. I did not change its events to fit my theories or replace its conclusions with mine. What follows is the story as I found it. But I kept recognizing ideas we have already examined together, sometimes turned into literal machinery. Even our strange temporal model, where time may behave less like an arrow than a structure whose moments remain part of the whole, stops being a thought experiment here.

I could pretend not to notice those connections, or interrupt the story explaining them. I chose neither. Where a connection to Project Lucifer genuinely matters, I occasionally point at it and get the hell out of the way. Later, when I enter the story myself, even that becomes unnecessary. The version of me inside these pages reacts, asks questions, and connects dots. That does not make my interpretation an answer key from the universe. Maybe I'm connecting dots that belong together. Maybe I've spent so much time staring at dots that I've developed a condition. You know the rule by now: Look for yourself.

I also left the mystery intact. Project Lucifer has spent hundreds of pages asking whether stories are always invented, or whether we sometimes receive, inherit, remember, translate, carry, and pass them from one consciousness to another. I'm not going to answer that question by pretending I know where this one came from. And I won't put my name beneath it. Taking credit for words I cannot remember writing would be dishonest. Assigning them to Enki, Thoth, extraterrestrials, higher selves, or anyone else would be worse. I don't know who wrote this. Maybe I did. Maybe I didn't. The decoder ring is still yours. What follows isn't another argument about the ideas we've spent this book examining. It's what those ideas might look like if somebody turned them on. Look twice.

THE WANDERING WORLD

Before men divided eternity into years, a world wandered. It moved through the darkness beyond the familiar planets on an orbit so immense that civilizations could rise, declare themselves eternal, collapse into dust, and be forgotten before it returned. Humanity would eventually give that world many names. Some would call it impossible. Others myth. The arguments mattered greatly to the humans having them. They mattered considerably less to the world itself. Nibiru was coming home. It emerged from the deep black beyond the outer solar system, enormous and silent, carrying cities beneath a sky no human eye had seen in thousands of years. No proclamation warned Earth that something its ancestors had once feared, worshipped, remembered, and finally dismissed was returning. Neither did the beings aboard it. Humans had called them gods because humans needed a word. Words have always been mankind's favorite containers for things too large to hold.

Anu stood before the observation glass as the distant light of the old solar system appeared ahead. He looked perhaps forty, though the estimate would have been wrong by millennia. Behind him stood his sons, both appearing older than their father. Enki wore his years loosely, long white hair and silver beard framing eyes that still suggested somewhere in the universe remained a locked door he had not yet been told not to open. Some beings conquered worlds with armies. Enki preferred questions. Questions were considerably harder to contain. Enlil's years had sharpened rather than softened him. His white hair and beard were kept with the discipline of a commander who had informed even individual strands that disorder would not be tolerated. The paradox of their ages would have confused the humans who once recorded fragments of their story, but time was never as obedient as humans imagined. Anu had spent much of his existence far beyond Earth while his sons remained nearer it, accumulating years under different conditions. The patriarch wore the youngest face. Humans would have called it impossible. Humans frequently use that word for mathematics they have not learned yet.

Farther behind them stood Ningishzida, Thoth to the Egyptians, Tehuti in older tongues, Hermes when memories migrated north and changed their clothes. Names had never troubled him. He watched. That was what Thoth did. His eyes moved across Anu, the navigation displays, the distant star, and the streams of information crossing the chamber walls. Thoth believed the universe spoke continuously. The difficulty was getting everyone else to stop talking long enough to hear it. Marduk had never suffered from that particular problem. He stood nearby with the posture of a king even when no kingdom had been offered, gazing toward Earth as though the planet had kept him waiting. "How long?" he asked. "Until what?" Thoth replied. "Earth." "Until they detect us? Not long. Until they understand what they are detecting?" Thoth looked at him. "That depends upon whether they have improved." Enki smiled. "Have they?" Anu asked.

That changed the room. Thousands of Earth years had passed since members of this family walked openly among men. Back then humanity had looked upward with terror, reverence, and occasionally questions. Enki had always preferred the questions. “That,” Thoth said, “is what I intend to discover.”

The solar system appeared above the central platform, rendered in scale and motion. Thoth expanded the third world. Earth rotated before them, blue and white, its night side covered in light. Not fires. Cities. Enki stepped closer. “They survived.” Enlil studied the world. “Apparently.” “You sound disappointed.” “I sound unconvinced.” Marduk folded his arms. “They were alive when we left.” Enki glanced at him. “That was never your preferred condition.” Some arguments can sleep for thousands of years and wake completely rested. Anu ended this one before it began. “What have they become?”

Thoth opened the incoming signals. Earth was no longer quiet. Radar, satellites, military communications, radio, television, digital networks, scientific telemetry, music, advertisements, speeches, arguments, prayers, pornography, weather reports, wars, weddings, conspiracy theories, cartoons, cat videos, enough human conversation to make even an immortal reconsider the value of language. Humanity had once sent smoke toward the heavens and wondered whether the gods could see it. Now the heavens were drowning in humanity. Thoth reached into the stream. For the first time in thousands of years, the returning gods listened to Earth. And Earth, completely unaware that anyone was listening, had a great deal to say.

EARTH IS STILL TALKING

The first transmission they recovered wasn't meant for them. This disappointed Marduk. Humanity had once filled temples with prayers and offerings addressed to beings no longer there to receive them. Now those beings finally returned, and Earth greeted them with an advertisement for automobile insurance. “What is this?” Marduk asked. Thoth was busy separating the signal from thousands around it. The problem was not receiving Earth. It was getting Earth to shut up. Signals poured outward in overlapping shells, decades of human history traveling side by side through space: wars beside breakfast cereal, presidential speeches beside baseball games, sermons beside comedy, weapons capable of ending civilization interrupted by advertisements for laundry detergent. Enki watched, delighted. “They learned to speak across the world.” “They learned to speak constantly,” Enlil corrected.

Then came the Internet. Thoth described billions of humans exchanging information nearly instantaneously across the planet. Enki looked impressed. “They connected their knowledge?” “In principle.” Enlil heard the qualification. “And in practice?” “They appear to use a significant portion of it to argue with strangers.” They argued about politics, religion, history, whether Earth was spherical, whether ancient monuments had been built by humans, and whether beings from other worlds had once visited Earth. That held the room. Humanity was arguing about the Anunnaki. Some called them gods. Others extraterrestrials. Some claimed they created humanity. Others dismissed the entire subject as mistranslation and imagination. Enki watched men who had never held a Sumerian tablet scream at other men who had never held one about what Sumerian tablets definitely said. “This is magnificent.” Enlil turned toward him. “They have forgotten us.” “They are arguing about us.” “They do not know who we were.” Enki smiled. “They didn't know who we were when we were standing in front of them.”

Human civilization raced across the displays. Aircraft crossed continents. Humans walked on their moon. Machines reached other planets. Telescopes looked billions of years into the past. Scientists split atoms, mapped genomes, repaired hearts, and taught machines to calculate at impossible speeds. Then Thoth opened the weapons archives. Nuclear detonations bloomed across the chamber. Missiles rose from silos. The same species that had reached the Moon had applied equal ingenuity to finding better ways of killing itself. “They learned,” Enlil said. Enki watched another city disappear beneath artificial sunlight. “Yes.” “They simply never learned what you wanted them to.” “What did I want?” “Wisdom.” Enki's face hardened. “Wisdom cannot be given.” “Yet knowledge can.” “Yes.” “And there lies the problem.”

Anu watched without comment. But humanity had built more than weapons. It had built stories. Thoth opened a motion picture. A man in a cape flew across the sky. “Why is that human flying?” Marduk asked. “He is

not human," Thoth said. "Obviously." "He is fictional." Then came the others: masked vigilantes, warriors from hidden bloodlines, gods with hammers, women deflecting bullets, mutants bending metal, giant machines transforming into vehicles, wizards facing armies, Jedi raising glowing blades, a man discovering his world was a simulation, Saiyans splitting skies with energy. Humanity had created pantheons again. They simply called them franchises. Marduk watched a theater erupt when a familiar hero appeared onscreen. "They gather in enormous temples." "Theaters," Thoth corrected. "Facing illuminated images." "Yes." "They wear their symbols?" "Often." "Teach the stories to their children?" "Yes." Marduk stared at him. "And this is not worship?" Thoth considered the question. "The refreshments are considerably more expensive."

Enki laughed. Thoth kept searching: languages, histories, religious texts, scientific archives, entertainment databases, digitized tablets, archaeological records. Then he stopped. That was enough to silence everyone. A book appeared on the display.

PROJECT LUCIFER.

Its subtitle concerned hidden gods, Hollywood, ancient memory, and stories humanity had mistaken for fiction. Marduk scoffed. "Another human fantasy." Thoth continued reading. His expression changed. Inside a book written by a human on a planet that had not seen them openly in thousands of years were names. Anu. Enki. Enlil. Marduk. Thoth. Not merely names. Functions. Patterns. Relationships. A father above the throne. A teacher. A ruler. A conqueror. A keeper of wisdom. Enki's amusement disappeared. Anu stepped away from the observation glass. "Who wrote it?" Thoth searched. A name appeared. Not a king, priest, government, or scholar known to them. A title chosen by the author himself. *Dr. Veritas.*

Thoth read further. "What is it?" Anu asked. "This human knows our names." Enlil dismissed it with a gesture. "So do thousands." Thoth brought another passage into view. "Yes," he said. "But he knows what we did."

THE BOOK THAT SHOULD NOT EXIST

At first, Thoth treated Project Lucifer as he treated most human reconstructions of the ancient world: with patience. Humanity possessed fragments. Tablets survived while those beside them became dust. Gods migrated between civilizations, changed names, borrowed stories, and accumulated centuries of theology until scholars were left reconstructing the original from debris. Thoth did not blame humans for getting things wrong. He had watched religions emerge from misunderstandings that could have been corrected in five minutes if anyone had thought to ask the person standing beside the statue. Then he read how the human had described them. Anu was not Source or the ultimate Creator, but the Father Above the Throne: a being who could stand atop a hierarchy without standing atop existence. Enki was the Teacher: inventor, builder, giver of dangerous knowledge. Enlil was the Ruler: guardian of order whose error was not recognizing danger, but believing control could cure it. Marduk was the Conqueror: ambition expanding until leadership became ownership. Thoth himself was the Wisdom Keeper, the recorder who carried knowledge through destruction and placed it into the hands of those prepared to carry it farther. Marduk read his description twice. "I object." Enki smiled. "To which part?" "All of it." Thoth examined the passage. "No. This is substantially correct." Marduk stared at him. Thoth had survived temples.

The human called the method a decoder ring. Strip away names, costumes, religions, civilizations, and franchises. Stop asking whether two beings looked alike. Ask what they did. Who taught? Who ruled? Who conquered? Who preserved? Who gave knowledge? Who restricted it? Apocalypse. Prometheus. Stargate. Eternals. The Matrix. Transformers. Star Wars. The Anunnaki Codex. The Bible. Middle-earth. Stories separated by centuries and cultures arranged themselves around recurring functions. The human was not claiming every character was literally one of them. He was tracing the architecture. Then Thoth began finding errors. "No." Another passage. "No." A proposed identity. "Not exactly." Traditions had been merged, chronologies compressed, names drawn too close together. Enki leaned against the console. "I was beginning to worry the man had achieved omniscience." "No human has ever suffered from that condition," Thoth said. Marduk gave a sound of agreement. Thoth glanced at him. "Though many have reported symptoms." The errors reassured him. Errors

meant reconstruction. A human had gathered fragments and tried to assemble the missing picture. There was no mystery.

Until Thoth stopped scrolling. “What did he get wrong?” Enki asked. “Nothing.” Thoth read the passage again, checked the author's sources against Earth's surviving records, then lowered his hand. “This should not be here.” Enlil looked at the text. “Why?” “Because the records necessary to reconstruct it do not survive.” “Then he guessed.” Thoth studied the passage. Several incomplete traditions had been arranged in precisely the relationship required to expose something none preserved independently. The conclusion was imperfect. The shape beneath it was not. “He reconstructed it.” Enki frowned. “From fragments?” “Yes.” “That sounds like something you would admire.” “It does.” Thoth looked again at Project Lucifer. The human had written repeatedly about memory surviving destruction: civilizations vanished, names changed, stories migrated, and still some underlying pattern continued forward. He called stories the original time travelers. Thoth had watched libraries burn, and conquerors rewrite history. He knew memory rarely survived intact. It survived by becoming something else.

Anu spoke. “Find him.” Thoth already had. Earth's networks revealed a writer. A father. A lifelong collector of questions. Not a priest, archaeologist, government official, or keeper of some secret archive. Marduk studied the ordinary human life. “Then by whose authority does he write about us?” Thoth looked at him. “He appears not to have asked.” Enki smiled. “I definitely like him.” Thoth searched the author's other work. Another title appeared: *The Emerald Truth.* Ancient Sumer. Egypt. The Anunnaki. Atlantis. The Emerald Tablets. Thoth. Lost civilizations. Ancient technology. Consciousness. Source. *Project Lucifer* had been interesting because a human recognized their functions beneath modern stories. The Emerald Truth was different. This human had been looking for them before he ever turned toward Hollywood.

Then Thoth found a chapter written in a voice that was supposed to be his. Not ancient scripture. Not a claimed translation. A human reconstruction, an attempt to let Thoth speak for himself. He read it to the end. Enki finally broke the silence. “Well?” Thoth looked toward the human face beside the book. “He does not know me.” “Clearly.” “He has never met me.” “No.” “He has never heard my voice.” “No.” Thoth looked back at the chapter. “Then why does he know how I speak?” No one answered. Beyond the chamber walls, Nibiru continued toward the Sun. Earth turned in the distance, unaware. And aboard the wandering world, five beings humanity had once called gods began reading a book that should not have existed.

THE HUMAN WHO REMEMBERED

They read *The Emerald Truth* for a very long time. Thoth moved through the manuscript, comparing the author's interpretations against surviving human records and memories no library on Earth possessed. Veritas had reconstructed the Anunnaki from Sumerian fragments, later traditions, comparative mythology, archaeology, religion, and the inconvenient habit ancient civilizations possessed of describing impossible things as though they were ordinary. He got things wrong. Thoth appeared almost relieved whenever this happened. “No. That occurred later.” Another passage. “Those were not the same structure.” Enki glanced at him. “You seem happier.” “Because he is human.” There was comfort in imperfection. Veritas confused titles with names, compressed events separated by generations, sometimes mistook symbolism for machinery and machinery for symbolism. He connected dots belonging to different constellations. But then came the Flood. Different peoples remembered different versions: divine anger, warnings, boats, mountains, survivors, knowledge preserved against annihilation. Names changed. Gods became God. Natural catastrophe became moral instruction. But the water remained. Veritas understood something beneath the argument over dates and mechanisms: the Flood was not merely a story about water. It was a story about a decision. Enki stopped reading. Enlil noticed. For a moment the brothers were somewhere else, before tablets and theology reorganized memory into myth. Veritas could not have known what either remembered. He had nevertheless found the wound.

Atlantis produced the same unsettling pattern. The name humanity preserved was not the name everyone in the chamber remembered, nor did every surviving account refer cleanly to one place or catastrophe. Human memory had compressed events. Cities became empires. Technologies became magic. Separate collapses bled together until later generations inherited a magnificent drowned civilization somewhere beyond the horizon. “He

understands compression," Thoth said. "He does not require the surviving story to preserve the event perfectly. He asks what kind of event could survive imperfectly." One description of an ancient energy system caused Enki to move closer. "You recognize it," Thoth said. Enki read again. "He does not understand it." "That was not my question." Enki hesitated. "He understands what it was for." The mechanism was wrong. The vocabulary was necessarily wrong. But the purpose beneath it was close. Enlil looked at his brother. "You left too much." Enki did not answer.

The book moved into consciousness, and Anu became more attentive. Source. Consciousness. Perception. Reality experienced through differentiated points of awareness. Veritas did not place Anu at the summit of existence. The hierarchy itself existed inside something larger: Source. Not another king above Anu waiting for a larger crown, but totality experiencing itself through innumerable perspectives. Humans. Animals. Worlds. Perhaps gods. Everything. "We are God," the human argued in essence, "but we are not all of God." Marduk shifted. "This human has abolished hierarchy." "No," Thoth said. "He has placed hierarchy inside unity." "That is worse." Enki smiled. "For you, perhaps." Thoth kept reading. This time he did not say no.

Ancient teachers appeared throughout the manuscript: bringers of agriculture, astronomy, writing, architecture, medicine, mathematics; beings emerging after catastrophe to rebuild what had been lost. Veritas had begun arranging them by function long before *Project Lucifer* turned the method toward Hollywood. Enki saw himself everywhere, sometimes correctly and sometimes not. Marduk fared less comfortably. Veritas followed conquest through Babylon, rewritten pantheons, political theology, divine succession, and the recurring human tendency to discover that whichever god supported the victorious empire was suddenly the most important god in the universe. "He calls me a conqueror." Enki looked at him. "You were a conqueror." "He implies I manipulated their religion." "You manipulated their religion." Marduk found another passage. "He compares me to fictional villains." Enki laughed. "This human has never met me." "That argument did not help Thoth." Marduk returned to the book with the grim determination of a defendant reviewing hostile testimony.

Thoth went backward. Veritas did not know everything. That was becoming important. His mistakes were large enough to prove he possessed no secret transcript of history. But then there were the other passages. An ancient teaching whose surviving form had lost its original meaning. Too close. A technological function inferred without the principles required to understand it. Too close. A relationship between figures whose later names concealed the connection. Too close. A conclusion about consciousness buried inside a story humanity had reduced to religion. Too close. Thoth began marking them. The list grew. Enki noticed. "How many did he get right?" "That is not the question." Thoth enlarged the passages. "The question is how."

A wrong conclusion could be explained. A correct conclusion supported by surviving evidence could be explained. Even an improbable guess could be explained. But repeatedly reconstructing missing relationships from incomplete information required something else. Pattern recognition, perhaps. Intuition. Inherited memory. Collective memory. Thoth did not know. Then he found another passage and stopped. "Again?" Enki asked. Thoth nodded. "He has events wrong. His chronology collapses things that were separated. He attributes actions to some of us that belonged to others. Some conclusions extend farther than his evidence permits." Marduk nodded vigorously. "At last, wisdom." Thoth ignored him. Anu watched him. "But?" Thoth looked toward Earth. "But he remembers the shape." "The shape?" Enki asked. "The relationships between events. The functions beneath names. The recurrence beneath civilizations. He loses details, but repeatedly finds architecture that should have disappeared with them." "How?" Anu asked. "I do not know." Marduk scoffed. "Then he is fortunate." "Once is fortune. Twice may be intuition." Thoth brought forward another passage. Then another. "This is more than twice."

Names die. Languages die. Cities disappear. Books burn. Statues are smashed. Gods are renamed. History is rewritten. Yet sometimes the pattern underneath survives because someone, somewhere, tells the story again. Different names. Different costumes. Different world. Same signal. Veritas had not remembered facts. He had remembered relationships. That was harder to erase. Thoth looked toward Earth. "He should not know these things." Enki stood beside him. "Yet he does." "Some of them." "Enough." Behind them, Marduk had returned to the passages, concerning himself with the offended concentration of a defendant reviewing hostile testimony.

His problem was different. Thoth was disturbed because the human remembered too much. Marduk was disturbed because the human had remembered him accurately.

THE FAMILY ARGUMENT

The argument did not begin with shouting. The oldest family arguments rarely do. Enlil had watched his brother while Thoth moved through *The Emerald Truth*, watched Enki smile when humanity rediscovered something useful, grow quiet when old catastrophes returned, and show pride whenever Veritas recovered another fragment that should have vanished. He had also watched the nuclear explosions, wars, weapons, and civilizations that discovered knowledge only to hoard, weaponize, suppress, or destroy it. At last Enlil looked away from the book. “This is your doing.” Enki turned. “My doing?” “You gave them knowledge.” “We have discussed this.” “We have survived it. That is not the same thing.” Enlil gestured toward Earth. “You gave them the means to alter their world before they possessed the wisdom to understand what alteration meant.” Enki looked at the same evidence: reactors and bombs, aircraft and bombers, medicine and biological weapons. “Wisdom cannot be given.” “Yet knowledge can.” “Yes.” “And there lies the problem.” Enki shook his head. “No. There lies the choice.” Thoth finally looked up. “You are both looking at different moments. Enlil sees what humans do when fear, scarcity, and ambition govern them. Enki sees what they do when curiosity, compassion, and cooperation govern them. Both examples are abundant.” “Which proves my argument,” Enlil said. “It proves you have one.”

Marduk stepped closer. “Then perhaps they require direction.” Enki glanced at him. “Here we go.” “A civilization cannot survive if every generation decides reality for itself.” “You mean they require a king.” “They require order.” Enlil's expression hardened. “Do not mistake my argument for yours.” Marduk smiled. “Why? Because I am willing to finish it?” Enki looked between them. “Amazing. Give this family ten thousand years, and eventually everyone finds a way back to obedience.” Enlil faced him. “You call it obedience because you refuse to call anything restraint.” “I call it obedience when someone above decides everyone below is too dangerous to choose.” “They split the atom and built weapons capable of sterilizing their world.” “They also built reactors and hospitals.” “They carry the accumulated knowledge of their species in their hands and use it to lie to strangers.” “They also cure disease, rescue strangers, rebuild cities, compose music, raise children, overthrow tyrants, and leave their planet.” Enlil stepped closer. “And they keep producing tyrants.” “Because men like you keep teaching them that order requires one.”

“Perhaps because one works,” Marduk said. “Thousands of governments. Thousands of religions. Competing histories. Competing truths. Every human convinced his fragment deserves sovereignty.” Enki stared at him. “And your solution is Marduk.” “My solution is unity.” “With Marduk in charge.” “Someone must be.” Thoth sighed. “There were periods when you had precisely that authority.” “And they ended because it was taken from me.” “That is generally how losing authority works.” Marduk pointed toward Earth's religions, ideologies, celebrities, superheroes, and fictional pantheons. “They replaced us with stories. They wear their symbols, teach their children their names, and gather to watch counterfeit gods while those who raised their civilization are dismissed as myth.” Enki smiled. “Perhaps they preferred gods who saved them.” “I saved civilizations.” “You conquered them.” “Sometimes those are the same thing.” “Only to the conqueror.”

The room erupted. Enlil accused Enki of romanticizing humanity. Enki accused Enlil of mistaking fear for wisdom. Marduk insisted hierarchy was civilization's natural structure. Thoth tried, unsuccessfully, to distinguish hierarchy from domination. Thousands of years of unfinished argument collapsed into minutes. “Knowledge without control produces catastrophe!” Enlil shouted. “Control without knowledge produces slaves!” Enki answered. “Freedom without restraint destroys itself!” “Then teach restraint!” “We did!” “You commanded it!” Marduk cut across them. “The child does not need to understand the cliff if the king builds a wall.” Enki turned. “And charges admission.” “Power establishes authority.” “No. Power establishes power.” “That is the same thing.” “Only if you're a tyrant.” Marduk laughed. “Every defeated king calls the victor a tyrant.” “Every tyrant calls himself necessary.”

Then Enki said the one thing that stopped them. “What if surpassing us was the point?” Enlil stared. Even Thoth turned. Enki gestured toward Earth. “What did you think teaching was for? The student is supposed to

exceed the teacher. The child is supposed to go somewhere the father could not. Otherwise knowledge isn't inheritance. It's a leash." Marduk shook his head. "You would celebrate them surpassing us?" "Yes. If they become wiser than us, good. If they discover truths we missed, good. If one day they look at everything we taught them, everything we did to them, everything we got wrong, and decide they no longer need us, then perhaps I taught them well."

For a moment no one spoke. Enlil's voice returned, quieter. "And if they surpass our power before they surpass our mistakes?" There it was. Beneath the anger was something harder to dismiss: fear, and not an irrational one. Before Enki could answer, Marduk did. "Then we remind them who the gods are."

The argument exploded again. Only Anu remained silent. Then he stood. The others continued for perhaps two seconds before something older than habit registered the movement. The father was standing.

"ENOUGH!"

The word struck the chamber. Enki's next sentence died before leaving his mouth. Enlil straightened. Marduk went silent with visible reluctance. Thoth folded his hands. Anu looked at them, then toward the blue world turning above them. His eyes had moved beyond the argument. He was no longer asking whether humanity had used knowledge wisely. He was asking what humanity had become.

THE OTHER GODS

The silence after Anu's command lasted until Thoth noticed what the others had not. Anu was no longer looking at Earth. He was looking at its gods. They surrounded him in images pulled from *Project Lucifer* and humanity's entertainment archives, not gods in the ancient sense, yet humanity had given them something the old gods understood well: immortality through story. Apocalypse appeared first, a god-king promising transformation while treating weakness as something existence had condemned. Marduk studied him. Enki noticed. "You like him." "I said nothing." "You didn't have to." Then came Ra, not the Ra they remembered, but an extraterrestrial ruling humans from a pyramid, technology transformed into miracle because those beneath him could not distinguish machinery from divinity. Thoth looked toward Enlil. "This seems familiar." "No." Enki smiled. "No resemblance whatsoever."

Neo appeared next, physically unimpressive beside Apocalypse, yet able to bend his world because he discovered its rules were instructions. Anu studied him. "Human?" "In the story." "Then how does he do that?" Thoth answered, "He understands where he is." Optimus Prime and Megatron followed: power used to protect against power convinced it had earned the right to rule. Enki watched Optimus. Marduk watched Megatron. Darth Vader emerged next, a gifted child whose fear became the doorway to control, the man beneath the imposed identity surviving long enough for a son to call him back. Gandalf possessed power yet refused to impose goodness through domination. Aquaman stood between humanity and Atlantis. Superman possessed strength sufficient to rule a world and chose not to. Marduk frowned. "He could rule them." "Yes," Thoth said. "Yet he does not." "No." Enki smiled. "Interesting, isn't he?" Batman required a different explanation. "What does this one do?" Anu asked. "He prepares." "That is his ability?" Marduk said. Thoth opened the history: a mortal standing among gods, surviving by observation, preparation, and the assumption that power never made anyone infallible. Anu's interest sharpened.

Wonder Woman followed, then David, a machine created in humanity's image who judged his makers and began experimenting with creation himself. Enlil looked toward Enki. The irony required no explanation. Then came the Eternals, beings who believed themselves one thing before discovering they served powers above the hierarchy they understood. Finally, Arishem filled the display, ancient and immense, a judge of worlds. Anu looked upward. For once nobody spoke. Across the archive came mutants, wizards, aliens, machines, Jedi, kings, teachers, rebels, created beings confronting creators, heroes powerful enough to become gods and villains convinced that power proved they already were. Names changed. Costumes changed. Worlds changed. The architecture did not.

Anu looked toward Thoth. “Are they real?” Enlil answered first. “No. They are stories.” Thoth remained silent. “Do not,” Enlil warned. “Do not what?” “Consider it.” “I consider most things.” Marduk gestured toward the projections. “You cannot believe these creatures exist.” “I believe dismissing the possibility before looking is intellectually lazy.” Anu asked, “What would you look for?” Thoth expanded Earth's creative archive. “If these stories are entirely invented, there should be no external correspondence beyond coincidence, archetype, cultural inheritance, and human psychology.” Enlil nodded. “Exactly.” “But if they are not entirely invented…” Enki understood. “You search for the worlds.” Thoth looked at him. “I search for the signatures.”

Nibiru's instruments reached beyond ordinary space, probing fields and structures humanity had barely begun describing mathematically. Thoth converted Earth's stories into search conditions: environments, physical constants, biological and technological patterns, energetic behavior. Enlil watched. “You cannot search infinity for fictional characters.” “Not by name.” “Then what are you doing?” Thoth did not look away. “Listening.” “To what?” Thoth's hands stopped. “The same thing humanity may have been listening to.”

The search began. Nothing. Then a weak pattern appeared and vanished. Thoth recalibrated. It returned. Enki stepped closer. “Where?” Thoth stared at the coordinates. “That is the problem. It isn't anywhere.” Enki understood first. “Not anywhere here.” “No.” The signature existed adjacent to their observable universe, not separated by distance, but by a different relationship to reality itself. Thoth entered another pattern. Another response. Then another. The room went silent. He tested one of humanity's fictional profiles. A correspondence appeared so precise that he ran it again. Same result. “Again,” Anu said. Thoth searched. Another world answered. Again. Another signature. Again. Another impossible correspondence.

Enlil's certainty fractured. Marduk moved beside Thoth. The old gods watched as human fantasies produced echoes beyond their universe. Not metaphors. Not archetypes. Coordinates. Thoth looked toward Earth, then *Project Lucifer*, then the impossible results. The question had reversed itself. Humanity had not merely imagined these beings. Somehow, humanity had found them.

THEY DIDN’T INVENT THEM

The first coordinate might have been an error. The second made that less comfortable. By the seventh, nobody was speaking. Thoth stood inside a web of impossible locations suspended above the platform. These were not positions within space but relationships between realities, worlds no vessel could reach simply by choosing a direction and traveling long enough. He tested Neo first. Humans trapped inside an artificial reality. Intelligent machines. Thomas Anderson becoming Neo. Morpheus. Trinity. Smith. The Matrix itself. The distant signature sharpened until even Enlil stepped closer. “Coincidence.” His certainty had become effort. Thoth tested Optimus Prime. Cybertron answered. Autobots. Decepticons. Mechanical life. A civilizational war corresponding to something humans believed they had invented. Then Darth Vader. Luke. The Jedi. Gandalf. Atlantis. Aquaman. Wonder Woman. Batman. Superman. One reality after another produced correspondences too specific to dismiss.

The searches accelerated. Apocalypse. David. The Eternals. Celestials. Then Goku and Vegeta. Thoth widened the range and found them too. The energy readings forced him to rebuild the scale. Marduk stared. “The small one with the hair does that?” “Apparently.” Thoth found Frieza, then Beerus and Whis. Enki folded his arms. “This is becoming embarrassing.” “For whom?” Enki looked around the chamber. “Potentially all of us.” Enlil was no longer amused. “Can the machine reach them?” “In principle.” “Do not.” Marduk glanced at him. “You object to confirming what they are?” “I object to confusing discovery with invitation.” Thoth remembered that.

World after world followed. Weak correspondences were discarded. Partial ones marked uncertain. The strong ones remained. Too many. Children on Earth pretended to be these beings. Writers sat before blank pages believing they were inventing people who had never existed. Yet somewhere beyond their universe were echoes. Not every detail. Not every story. But enough. Enlil stepped toward Thoth. “Search their technology.” “I have.” “Military. Experimental. Quantum systems. Intelligence programs.” “All of it.” “Find the machine.” Thoth held his gaze. “There is no machine.” Marduk frowned. “Signals require receivers.” “Correct.” “Then where is the receiver?” Thoth looked toward Earth. Billions of minds lived below, sleeping, waking, dreaming, imagining, writing, painting, hearing melodies before instruments played them, meeting characters who sometimes seemed

less invented than discovered. Most of that required no exotic explanation. Minds associated. Dreams recombined memory. Imagination created. But those explanations no longer accounted comfortably for the coordinates surrounding them. Enki understood first. “What if imagination isn't only creation?” Enlil looked at him. “What if sometimes it is reception?” Nobody laughed. Enki continued. “A human mind wouldn't receive coordinates.” “No,” Thoth said. “It would receive impressions.” “Possibly.” “Images.” “Yes.” Thoth looked toward the worlds. “Stories.”

The word changed everything. A signal passing through a human mind would not arrive intact. Personality would distort it. Culture would translate it. Writers would interpret it. Editors would alter it. Actors would embody it. Studios would commercialize it. The result could be wrong in countless details while preserving something underneath. Perhaps stories did not travel only through time. Perhaps some traveled sideways. Enki stared at Superman, Neo, Goku, Vader, Optimus, Gandalf. “They didn't dream them.” Thoth looked toward the impossible coordinates. “They found them.” Enki remained still. Then his expression changed. “Unless we have assumed the direction of the relationship.” Thoth turned toward him. Enlil's eyes narrowed. “Explain.” “We began with the worlds,” Enki said. “We found that they exist, then assumed the human mind somehow received impressions from them. Perhaps that is correct.” He looked toward Earth. “But we have not established which came first.” Marduk gave a short laugh. “You just said they found them.” “I said that because it fit the evidence. There is another interpretation.” Enlil's patience thinned. “Then speak it.” Enki gestured toward the impossible realities surrounding them. “What if imagination is not merely receptive?” Silence returned. “What if consciousness does more than observe possibility?” Enki continued. “What if imagination gives possibility structure?” Marduk's amusement disappeared. “You are suggesting humans created these worlds.” “I am suggesting we do not know that they didn't.” Enlil stepped toward him. “Absurd.” “Is it?” “Yes.”

Enki pointed toward the display. “A human imagines something that does not exist. They hold the image. Refine it. Give it structure. Other minds encounter it. They imagine it too. Millions participate. Sometimes billions. The world acquires history, geography, laws, relationships, generations. They return to it for decades. They teach it to their children. Those children add to it.” “They are telling stories.” “Perhaps.” “They are inventing.” “Perhaps.” Enlil's voice sharpened. “Then stop speaking as though children's fantasies manufacture universes.” Enki met his anger without moving. “Why? Because the idea is ridiculous, or because we have just discovered universes corresponding to those fantasies?” That silenced him. Thoth moved through the surrounding coordinates, comparing temporal relationships, first appearances, branching signatures, and the records gathered from Earth. “We cannot determine precedence.” Enlil turned on him. “You cannot determine whether the world produced the story or the story produced the world?” “No.” Marduk stared at Thoth. “Surely causality establishes one before the other.” “Within one continuity,” Thoth said. “We are no longer examining one continuity.”

Enki's attention remained on Earth. “Humans already believe thought can influence experience. Intention. Prayer. Visualization. Manifestation. Different traditions, different language, same suspicion: that consciousness participates in what becomes real.” Enlil rounded on him. “And now superstition is evidence?” “No. The worlds around us are evidence. I am asking whether their superstition was an imperfect description of a mechanism they could feel but did not understand.” Thoth studied the branching signatures. “Reception and creation might not even be separate processes.” Everyone looked at him. “A mind encounters possibility,” Thoth said. “It gives that possibility image, language, structure. Other minds reinforce the structure. At some point the distinction between discovering a reality and participating in its formation may become meaningless.” Marduk looked genuinely offended now. “So a human sits in a room, imagines a man in a cape, and somewhere an entire universe begins?” “Perhaps not begins,” Enki said. “Perhaps branches. Perhaps strengthens. Perhaps becomes accessible.” “Perhaps,” Thoth added, “possibility is the material.” Enki looked at him. Thoth continued. “And consciousness gives it form.”

For several seconds, nobody spoke. Then Enlil looked at Enki. The anger came slowly. “No.” Enki knew immediately what he meant. Enlil stepped closer. “You altered them.” “Long ago.” “You interfered with their development. You increased their capacity. You gave them what they were not meant to possess.” “I gave them the ability to become more than labor.” “You gave them knowledge.” “Yes.” “Awareness.” “Yes.” “Choice.” “Yes.”

Enlil pointed toward the realities surrounding them. “And what else?” Enki said nothing. “What else did you put into them?” The chamber seemed to contract around the question. Enki looked down at Earth, at billions of human minds creating things that did not exist until someone first imagined them. “Perhaps,” he said quietly, “more than I intended.”

Enlil's restraint broke. “I warned you.” “You warned me they would become difficult to control.” “I warned you they would surpass their purpose.” Enki turned toward him. “Their purpose according to whom?” “Do not do this.” “According to you? According to Father? According to the beings who engineered them and then declared the design complete?” Enlil pointed toward Superman, Neo, Cybertron, Middle-earth, worlds hanging in impossible relationship around them. “Look at what your generosity may have produced.” Enki did. And smiled. That made Enlil angrier. “You find this amusing?” “No.” “Then what?” Enki's smile disappeared. Wonder replaced it. “I thought I gave them knowledge.” He looked again at Earth. “Perhaps I gave them imagination.”

Marduk stared at the planet as though humanity had just committed an offense against the natural hierarchy of existence. “You made them like us.” Enki slowly shook his head. “No.” The word landed harder than Marduk expected. Enki looked at the surrounding realities. “We build with matter. Machines. Fields. Mathematics. We cross boundaries by understanding them and constructing something powerful enough to survive the crossing.” His gaze returned to Earth. “They may be learning to build with possibility.” Even Thoth stopped moving. Enlil's voice dropped. “You are suggesting they could surpass us.” “I am suggesting,” Enki said, “that we may have been arrogant enough to assume becoming like us was the highest thing they could become.”

Enlil's fear immediately became calculation. “How many humans can do this?” “Unknown,” Thoth said. “Can they choose what they receive, or create?” “Unknown.” “Can information move both directions?” “Unknown.” “Can consciousness cross?” “Unknown.” “Physical matter?” “I see no evidence.” Enlil's eyes hardened. “Yet.” Marduk stared at Earth as though the planet had personally insulted him. “We required dimensional mathematics. Field stabilization. Navigation systems. Generations of research.” “Yes,” Thoth said. Marduk pointed toward Earth. “And one of them sits in a room, imagines a man in a cape, and reaches another universe?” Enki smiled again. “When you phrase it that way, it is rather impressive.” “It is offensive.”

Enlil barely heard them. His attention had moved farther ahead. What happened when humanity learned to do deliberately what it currently did unconsciously? When imagination became navigation? When manifestation became architecture? When story became map? Or worse, when the map became territory? He looked toward Anu. “You understand the danger.” Anu enlarged the display. Worlds appeared around them, not planets, but entire continuities. Histories. Civilizations. Lives. Somewhere in the relationship between consciousness and possibility, stories from a small blue world had crossed the walls between realities. Perhaps humanity had received them. Perhaps humanity had helped create them. Perhaps those were merely two names for the same act viewed from opposite sides.

Anu looked toward Project Lucifer. The human author believed he had assembled recurring myths and fictional archetypes. Perhaps he had unknowingly assembled a map. Or perhaps, by imagining connections between things that had never before been connected, he had participated in creating one. Enlil saw danger. Marduk saw insult. Thoth saw a mechanism he could not yet name. Enki saw the student doing something the teacher had never taught, and perhaps becoming something the teacher had never been. Anu saw possibility. And smiled.

THE LOAF

Enlil did not share his father's fascination. To Enki, humanity had learned something the teacher had never taught. To Thoth, it was a mystery demanding investigation. To Marduk, an insult. Enlil saw an open door. “Can they cross?” “With their present technology, I see no evidence they can deliberately transfer physical matter between realities.” Enlil caught the word. “Deliberately,” Thoth said nothing. “Can we?” Marduk asked. Thoth looked toward Anu. “Yes.” He expanded their universe beside the one associated with Neo. “But they are not elsewhere as another star is elsewhere. Distance is the wrong model.” “Then give us the right one.” Thoth considered it. “Imagine a loaf of bread.” Marduk stared. Enki laughed. “It is an adequate model,” Thoth said. “For

bread?" "For time." A long object appeared above the platform, divided into slices. "Humans experience time sequentially. Yesterday appears gone, tomorrow nonexistent, because consciousness encounters one moment after another. But that does not require the other moments to vanish." He touched several slices. "Birth. Childhood. Adulthood. Death. Consciousness moves through the structure. The structure remains." The loaf multiplied, each representing a different continuity. Some diverged slightly. Others contained entirely different histories. "Different worldlines. Different temporal structures. Different realities."

The bread disappeared. Worldlines replaced it. Thoth selected their Earth, isolated a room, and revealed Veritas sitting before his computer. "This is a temporal coordinate. But identifying an individual across realities requires more than location." Four layers appeared: Reality. Worldline. Temporal position. Individual signature. "If we wished to retrieve him, we would identify the exact coordinate and isolate it from local temporal progression." The moment containing Veritas separated from those around it. "Freeze the slice," Enlil said. "Crude, but sufficient." Thoth removed Veritas from the chair. The room remained. The clock did not move. "His universe does not continue without him. He could remain elsewhere for an hour, a year, a lifetime, then return to the same coordinate." Veritas reappeared. The moment rejoined the worldline. His hand continued toward his cup. "From Earth's perspective?" Enki asked. "He was never gone." "And he remembers?" "Everything, unless we alter that." Thoth dismissed the image. The demonstration had served its purpose. At least, everyone believed that.

Anu looked toward the discovered realities. "If one dies after extraction?" Thoth's expression changed. "The extracted individual dies. The source moment remains." Marduk frowned. "Then he is dead here and alive there." "At the preserved moment. Do not confuse that with resurrection." Thoth restored the model. "The person was extracted. The source moment remained. If the extracted person dies, that death is real. Nothing reverses it." The extracted figure went dark while the source coordinate remained illuminated. "But if the extraction itself is released rather than completed, the source continuity can proceed from the preserved moment without the theft ever entering its history." Enki studied it. "So nobody wakes after dying." "No." "Nobody is resurrected." "No." "The version who died here stays dead." "Yes." Thoth touched the preserved coordinate, and the worldline advanced. "Home still has the moment before we took them." Enlil watched the dead figure beside the continuing source worldline. "Then what happened here still happened." "Yes." "Even if their world never experiences the theft." "Correct." "And memory?" "A living subject's extracted experience can be preserved or suppressed before reintegration."

Enlil studied the machinery. "What keeps them connected to home?" A thin thread appeared between the extracted figure and its worldline. "The retrieval architecture retains the coordinate." "A path home." "Yes." "And someone who understood the system could use that path?" Thoth hesitated. "Potentially." Enlil looked toward the immense signatures they had discovered. "Then every retrieval brings something from another reality into a room containing the door back to it." Anu held his gaze. "You believe some should remain where they are." "Discovering a god is not sufficient reason to invite one into our house."

Anu turned toward the waiting worldlines: heroes, villains, teachers, conquerors, machines, kings, monsters, mortals, and beyond them beings whose mere presence could turn an experiment into catastrophe. "How many can we extract simultaneously?" Thoth studied him. "That depends upon what you intend." Enki understood first. Then Marduk. Enlil's face hardened. "Father. No." Anu looked toward the waiting worlds. "We have learned enough," Enlil said. "Have we?" "Humanity somehow perceived adjacent realities. Investigate that." Anu continued studying the map. "I intend to." "Not like this." For once, Marduk said nothing.

THE TRIAL OF ASCENDANCY

Anu stood before the impossible map and studied the beings humanity had somehow found without knowing it had found them. Apocalypse. Neo. Optimus. Vader. Gandalf. Aquaman. Superman. Batman. Wonder Woman. David. Goku. Vegeta. Others waited deeper in humanity's archive. "You cannot compare them," Enlil said. "Different realities. Different physical laws." Anu looked toward Thoth. "Can it be done?" Thoth began constructing models. "We could create an artificial environment capable of preserving the local conditions required by each subject." "Overlapping physical rules," Enlil said. "Compatible rules." "Until they conflict."

“Then the system mediates.” “And if it cannot?” Thoth paused. “Then we learn something.” Enlil stared. “That answer sounds like Enki.” Enki smiled. “Thank you.” “It was not praise.” Anu looked at Thoth. “Build it.”

Enlil stepped forward. “Not all of them.” He indicated the Celestials, Beerus, Whis, and others whose scale threatened to overwhelm the experiment itself. “Every retrieval brings another intelligence into the system containing the door home. Some should remain outside it.” Thoth agreed. “The retrieval system selects a specific version: Reality. Worldline. Temporal position. Individual signature. We are not summoning characters. We are selecting versions.” He isolated an embodied Sauron, individual, powerful, bounded. Goku and Vegeta remained possible. Frieza, Thanos, Beerus, Whis, and the Celestials remained outside the selected set. Anu formalized the boundary: “The contestant must be containable within an individualized, embodied form and capable of participating meaningfully without its mere presence invalidating the experiment.” Enlil looked toward the excluded coordinates. “The door remains closed.” “To them,” Anu said. “Yes.”

Enki studied the remaining beings. “What are you testing?” Anu looked across heroes, villains, teachers, rulers, conquerors, creators, and creations. “Whether power makes one worthy to stand above another.” “And humanity?” Enlil asked. “They found these beings. I want to know what they found in them.” Marduk frowned. “Then how is victory determined?” “It isn't.” “No victory condition?” “No.” Anu looked toward the waiting realities. “Strength is easy to measure. I want to see what they choose when power does not provide the answer.”

Deep within Nibiru, dormant mechanisms awakened. Somewhere outside conventional space, emptiness acquired boundaries. Gravity followed. Light. Ground. Mountains rose above forests and deserts. Rivers cut toward an artificial ocean. Cities assembled: modern towers, ancient streets, abandoned homes, temples, and ruins. No inhabitants. Beneath it all ran the true architecture: dimensional stabilizers preserving incompatible physical laws, observation systems hidden throughout the world, and retrieval machinery maintaining twenty-seven paths home. Reality. Worldline. Temporal position. Individual signature. From the surface, it was a world. Beneath it, an instrument.

“Where do they begin?” Marduk asked. “Separated,” Thoth said. “Why?” Anu answered. “Because I am not interested only in what they do when attacked.” A participant could hide, explore, seek others, form alliances, hunt, protect, betray, or refuse the contest entirely. The world would not tell them what kind of beings to be. That was the point. Enlil studied the newborn world. “What will you tell them?” Anu watched dawn spread across its empty cities. “As little as necessary.” Thoth regarded the experiment. “A trial of ascendance.” “No,” Anu said. Thoth waited. “Ascendancy.” The word entered the system.

THE TRIAL OF ASCENDANCY.

Marduk still believed he understood the question. Enlil believed they had contained the danger. Enki saw possibility. Thoth saw too many variables. Anu saw an answer waiting to be discovered. None of them yet understood that the Trial would expose the question's flaw.

THE SUMMONING

The world was ready. Beneath its artificial oceans, forests, cities, deserts, and sky, the retrieval architecture held twenty-seven coordinates: Reality. Worldline. Temporal position. Individual signature. They were not summoning characters. They were selecting versions. Frieza, Thanos, Beerus, Whis, Arishem, and the other beings whose presence threatened to invalidate the experiment remained outside the retrieval set. Anu looked upon the empty world. “Begin.” Thoth touched the first coordinate. Superman vanished while flying beneath Earth's yellow sun and emerged above an unfamiliar ocean. The person was extracted. The source moment remained. He stopped and listened. No cities. No aircraft. No millions of human voices. Only wind, water, thunder, and machinery somewhere below. Batman arrived among urban ruins and disappeared into shadow before anyone could explain anything. Wonder Woman appeared inside an empty temple with her hand already reaching for her sword. Aquaman entered an ocean without fish, whales, or anything else alive. He noticed the silence before he noticed the displacement. Enki glanced at Thoth. “You built an ocean for Aquaman and omitted the fish.” “Intentionally.” “That may be worse.”

Optimus Prime arrived mid-sentence in a mountain valley. “Until all are one.” No Autobots answered. Megatron crashed through an abandoned building and immediately armed his cannon. Luke Skywalker appeared beneath unfamiliar stars and reached into the Force. It was there, but crowded with presences belonging to no world he knew. Elsewhere, Vader appeared inside an ancient temple and felt the same impossible gathering, then one familiar presence. Far away, Luke's eyes opened. Both knew. Palpatine arrived without his throne, dropped half a meter, rose, touched the Force, and smiled. Enlil watched him. “I dislike him.” “You haven't heard him speak,” Enki said. “I don't need to.” Gandalf changed roads, noticed the world was wrong, sighed, and kept walking. Saruman appeared atop a mountain and immediately demanded to know who had brought him there. Gandalf heard him in the distance. “Already?” Sauron arrived in the embodied incarnation Thoth had selected and regarded the ruined fortress around him less as shelter than property awaiting recognition. Teal'c appeared armed at the edge of an empty city. “Served gods?” Anu asked. “False gods,” Thoth said. “Then rebelled against them.” Enki smiled. “I like him.” Ra arrived inside a desert temple and immediately assumed it belonged to him. Enki looked toward Marduk. “Don't.” Marduk said nothing.

Elizabeth Shaw arrived alone in desert sand, no armor, powers, or weapon worthy of the company surrounding her. She saw the temple and started toward it anyway, unaware Ra waited inside. Sersi touched the ground and immediately sensed something constructed beneath it. Phastos began dismantling city infrastructure within seconds. “That one found you,” Enki said. “Not yet.” “He's looking.” Makkari crossed mountains, coast, and city before several contestants had decided where they were. Gilgamesh called for Thena. No answer. Thena appeared kilometers away with golden weapons forming before she steadied herself and called his name. Magneto arrived in a city full of metal. Street signs bent. Vehicles lifted. Steel whispered inside the buildings around him. Apocalypse appeared in the desert, studied the unfamiliar world, and smiled. Marduk leaned closer. “Now this one.” Enki sighed. “Of course.” Goku arrived mid-training, sensed the impossible collection of power around him, and smiled. Vegeta arrived furious, energy fracturing the stone beneath him. “Kakarot!” Across the world, Goku's smile widened. Marduk nodded approvingly. “I prefer this one.” “He shouted another man's name.” “A tactical inquiry.” “It was not.”

Agent Smith required more care. Thoth isolated an embodied instance inside the Matrix. The system hesitated. Green symbols spilled across the Nibiruan display. “Resistance?” Enlil asked. “Possibly.” Smith appeared in the artificial city, removed his sunglasses, and studied the world with the faint suggestion that he could see something beneath it. He smiled. Thoth did not. David arrived beside the ocean, touched the water, tasted it, then studied the sky. “What does that one want?” Anu asked. “To understand creation.” Enki watched the android. “That sounds harmless when you say it quickly.” Around the world, the others began moving. Superman listened. Batman observed. Wonder Woman explored. Aquaman crossed the silent sea. Optimus searched for Autobots. Luke and Vader reached toward one another. Shaw approached Ra's temple. The Eternals searched for each other. Magneto gathered metal. Apocalypse crossed the desert. Goku searched for challenges. Vegeta searched for Goku. Smith studied the seams. David studied creation. Twenty-six contestants had arrived.

Thoth looked at the final coordinate. Neo. The machine found him inside the Matrix, walking through a pale corridor. Thoth isolated the temporal position and opened the dimensional boundary. For every other contestant, one reality had simply become another. Neo turned his head. Thoth froze. “What?” Enki asked. Neo was looking toward the opening. Green symbols appeared across the corridor wall, symbols that did not belong to the Matrix. His eyes followed them past the boundary and settled somewhere they could not possibly settle. On Thoth. Thoth knew the difference between being looked at and being seen. Neo saw him. The extraction completed. Neo appeared in an empty city beneath the artificial sky. He looked at the buildings, his hands, the world around him, then slowly down. Far beneath concrete and stone, machinery no contestant was supposed to know existed held twenty-seven paths home.

Above the world, Thoth replayed the extraction. Neo turned. Saw. Vanished. Enlil stared at the image. “He saw the extraction.” “Part of it.” “How?” “I don't know.” Marduk looked toward the arena. “Can he escape?” “No.” Thoth answered too quickly. Anu watched Neo crouch and place one hand against the pavement. They had excluded Celestials and gods whose scale threatened the experiment. They had selected incarnations carefully, preserved source moments, and hidden every retrieval path beneath the world. They had kept the gods outside

the door and invited in the human who could see the hinges. The twenty-seventh contestant had arrived. The Trial of Ascendancy could begin.

THE LOST SCROLLS

Okay. I'm interrupting. And before anyone gets excited, no, this is not another mysterious voice from beyond the veil. This part is me. If you've made it this far, you just watched the Anunnaki reach across realities and drop twenty-seven beings onto an artificial world with one beautifully vague instruction: *Survive.*

Apparently, whoever wrote this chapter decided that wasn't enough. What happens next is enormous. Alliances form. Enemies find each other. Gods bleed. Heroes fall. People who should probably never occupy the same universe, much less the same battlefield, meet anyway. Some fight. Some investigate. Some sacrifice themselves. And at least one contestant eventually makes the rather inconvenient discovery that the real mystery isn't what is happening on the battlefield. It's what's underneath it.

When I first came across this chapter, I had to make a decision. I could put the entire *Trial of Ascendancy* here and allow *Project Lucifer* to suddenly grow another book inside itself, which, considering the size of the rabbit hole we've already crawled through together, seemed a little cruel, or I could preserve the complete Trial somewhere readers could enter it without forcing everyone else to spend the next small eternity watching gods, machines, wizards, superheroes, Saiyans, and assorted megalomaniacs beat the hell out of one another. I chose door number two. Besides, there's another problem. I didn't write this chapter. It seems a little rude to discover a mysterious manuscript on my computer, slap my name on the whole thing, and start charging admission. And since the chapter arrived as *A Gift from the Gods?*, I figure the least I can do is honor the title. So, I'm giving the rest of it away.

The complete, unabridged *Trial of Ascendancy* is preserved on my website in *The Lost Scrolls* section, free to anyone who wants to keep going. Nothing has been rewritten to make it fit. Nothing important has been quietly erased. The battles, confrontations, deaths, discoveries, alliances, and everything else that happened between the Summoning and the aftermath are there. If you want the whole thing, and I mean the whole thing, scan the QR code below or visit **e-thereal.com** and enter *The Lost Scrolls.* You'll find the complete version of *A Gift from the Gods?* and can pick up exactly where we just stopped.

Go now if you want. Seriously. I'll wait.

...

See? Still here.

If you'd rather keep moving, that's fine too. You can continue directly to the aftermath. You'll know what you need to know to finish *Project Lucifer*, although you may occasionally find yourself wondering what the hell happened while you were gone. That's intentional. Just understand that when we rejoin the story, time has passed. The Trial has been fought. Things have been discovered that were never supposed to be discovered. Some of the twenty-seven will no longer be standing. And somehow, somewhere along the way, I ended up inside the damn story. Don't worry. I was confused too. How that happened, and what happened to everyone else, is waiting in *The Lost Scrolls.*

For now, my interruption ends here. The words that follow return to the account exactly where I found it, written by the same unknown author who wrote the rest of *A Gift from the Gods.* So, let's give the story back to whoever the hell that was. And pick up after the battlefield has already collected its price.

SILENCE

The Trial became quiet. A great deal had happened since the twenty-seventh contestant placed his hand against the pavement. Heroes had fallen. Enemies had found one another. The machinery beneath the artificial world had been discovered, seized, and nearly turned into something its creators had never intended. Worlds had touched that were never meant to share a sky. And somewhere in the middle of it all, the experiment had reached beyond its twenty-seven contestants and pulled in one more man, a man Anu had never selected. Veritas. He had entered the Trial as unexpectedly as everyone else had entered his books. By the time it ended, Neo was dead, Superman was dead, others had fallen with them, and the machine that had brought them together had nearly torn open the realities it was built to keep apart. Now it was over.

Not peaceful. Peace implied relief, and there was none. The overlapping worlds were gone. The sky belonged to one reality again. Gravity had remembered its direction, the streets had stopped changing beneath their feet, and the machine beneath the world no longer screamed as it tried to make incompatible universes agree. What remained was wreckage. Entire districts had collapsed. Fires burned without urgency now that nothing was left to outrun. Weapons lay where hands had dropped them. The survivors emerged slowly from ruins they had spent the last hours trying to keep from becoming graves. Nobody celebrated. Optimus lowered himself beside a shattered structure, armor split and systems failing but still functioning. Wonder Woman stood exhausted with the lasso hanging at her side. Luke stared across the battlefield and said nothing. Gandalf leaned against his staff. Batman found Veritas near the dead machinery and gave him a single nod. It was enough.

Veritas looked for Neo. He already knew where the body was. Knowing did not make walking toward it easier. Neo remained where he had fallen, one hand near the pavement he had spent his final hours learning to read. Elsewhere lay the dead and the places where the dead had fallen. Superman. Goku. Vader. Gilgamesh. Ra. Apocalypse had left no body at all. Aquaman had vanished into the catastrophe he chose to hold back. Bodies and absences scattered through an experiment that had begun with one instruction: *survive.* Veritas stopped beside Neo and remembered the last word he had spoken. *Watch.* He had watched. He had understood. The multiverse still existed because of it. That did not make Neo less dead. Thoth approached and stood beside him without speaking. For once, the recorder did not reach immediately for a record.

Anu walked through the ruins of his experiment. Enlil followed, his armor damaged and his interest in reminding anyone that he had warned them. Marduk carried his weapon low. Enki stared at what remained of the machinery he had helped construct. Anu looked at the survivors, then at the dead, and finally at Veritas. “You believe their worlds have lost them.” Veritas looked toward Superman’s empty place in the Trial. “You took them. Some of them died. That seems fairly conclusive.” “Here,” Anu said. Veritas turned. Anu pointed toward the surviving coordinate display. Though the controls had been released, faint relationships remained beyond the Trial, stable now, separate, untouched. “When each contestant was taken, the person was extracted. The source moment remained. Their native continuities did not advance through the theft. From the perspective of those worlds, the departure has not yet become history.” Thoth understood immediately. Veritas did not. “Neo died.” “Yes.” “Superman died.” “Yes.” Anu did not soften it. “So did the others who fell here. Their deaths are real. Their choices are real. Nothing that happened in this Trial becomes unreal because the temporal positions from which they were taken remain preserved.” He indicated Neo’s thread. “But his world still possesses the moment before extraction entered its history. Release the extraction at its source, and that continuity proceeds from the preserved moment without the theft ever becoming part of it.”

Veritas stared at the signal. “You can bring them back?” Anu’s expression hardened. “No.” The word stopped him. “Nobody gets resurrected. The versions who died here stay dead.” Anu looked across the ruined Trial. “But home still has the moment before we took them.” Around them, the Trial remained silent. No resurrection. No reversal of what had happened. Neo had died here. Superman had died here. Goku, Vader, Gilgamesh, Ra, and Apocalypse had died here. Whatever had become of Aquaman belonged to this place as well. Their sacrifices, failures, victories, and choices remained part of the Trial and of everyone who had witnessed them. But somewhere beyond the ruined arena, preserved moments still waited at the ends of relationships the machine had never severed. For the first time since Neo fell, Veritas looked at his signal and understood that death and return were not the same question. Nobody needed resurrecting. They needed the theft never to happen.

NOBODY NEEDS RESURRECTING

Veritas hated the explanation until Thoth showed him. The recorder opened Superman's surviving thread and separated two things Veritas had been treating as one. The first was the instant on Superman's world when the retrieval system reached him. That moment remained anchored exactly where it had been found. The second was everything Superman experienced after extraction: the Trial, the ruined city, the people he protected, the choice in the basin, the twenty-first second he purchased for strangers, and the death that ended his experience here. "Two histories?" Veritas asked. "Not exactly," Thoth said. "One preserved point of origin. One experience created by removing him from it." Veritas looked toward the place where Superman had died. "So, the Superman who came here is dead." "Yes." "And his world?" Thoth indicated the preserved coordinate. "Has not yet experienced his removal." No duplicate lived a second life. No hidden body waiting to awaken with convenient amnesia. The retrieval system had copied nothing. The person had been extracted. The source moment remained.

Neo's thread worked the same way. So did Goku's, Vader's, Gilgamesh's, Ra's, and Apocalypse's. Every contestant who had died inside the Trial had truly reached the end of the experience that began when the machine removed them. Nothing could undo that. Neo had felt pain, understood the architecture, accidentally found Veritas, discovered that something else had completed the transfer, and died with one hand against the world. Superman had known he could escape the basin and chosen not to. Goku had survived Apocalypse only to die at Vader's hand. Vader had died after helping create the very son who eventually chose mercy over hatred. Gilgamesh had spent his strength protecting another. Ra had challenged something stronger and paid for it. Apocalypse had built his entire philosophy around adaptation, only to discover a limit even he could not survive. Their decisions were not simulations merely because the worlds they came from remained preserved at the threshold. "Then what are you returning?" Veritas asked. Enki answered, "Nothing that died here." He pointed toward Neo's original temporal coordinate. "We release the extraction at its source. The preserved moment proceeds without our intervention ever entering its history." Veritas frowned. "That sounds like erasing everything that happened." "From his world," Thoth said. "Not from this one."

That distinction mattered. The Trial would remember even if the native continuities did not. The damaged arena existed. The Anunnaki had witnessed what happened. Thoth had recorded it. Enlil had watched heroes choose strangers over themselves. Marduk had stood beside Optimus and learned that strength could carry, not conquer. Anu had surrendered authority over his own machine. Veritas had watched Neo die. Releasing the preserved source moment could prevent that theft, and everything caused by it, from entering Neo's native history, but it could not make Veritas unknow the weight of Neo's hand slipping from his wrist. It could not take back Superman's twenty-first second. The Trial did not become meaningless because somewhere else the door would never open. Veritas looked at Neo one last time. "So, nobody gets resurrected." "No," Thoth said. "Nobody wakes up after dying." "No." "The versions who died here stay dead." "Yes." Veritas looked toward the surviving signal at the end of Neo's thread. "But home still has the moment before we took them." Thoth nodded.

For once, the distinction did not feel like a loophole. It felt like the only honest way through. Nobody needed resurrecting. They needed the theft never to happen.

ANU'S FINAL ORDER

Anu sent the living villains home first. There was no trial, no punishment, no final judgment delivered from a throne. Anu had constructed the experiment to observe what beings did with power; he had learned enough about the temptation to decide who deserved reality. Palpatine resisted until the moment his thread took him. Megatron demanded access to the machine even as Cybertron called him back. Saruman looked from Thoth to Enki to the ruined architecture, memorizing everything he could. Smith was the most dangerous because he understood what they were taking from him. "You cannot erase an idea," he said. Anu looked at him. "No. But I can return you to the moment before you learned this one." Smith disappeared. Sauron followed without protest. He had watched enough rulers mistake possession for permanence to recognize when a kingdom was already lost.

Then came the others who had survived. The return system no longer imposed destinations. Enki released each preserved relationship and allowed it to resolve toward home. Wonder Woman vanished into golden light. Vegeta folded his arms and disappeared without granting anyone the dignity of a farewell. Teal'c inclined his head toward Shaw. Optimus looked once toward Marduk, and the Conqueror returned the gesture without speaking. Magneto gave the ruined machine one final look, as though deciding whether humanity was better off never knowing such a thing could exist, then allowed his thread to take him. Sersi, Phastos, Makkari, and Thena followed their own signals home. Gandalf looked toward the place where Neo had fallen, then toward Veritas. "Stories are not always false because they are stories," he said. Veritas managed a tired smile. "You already said that." Gandalf's eyes warmed. "Then perhaps you needed to hear it twice." He was gone before Veritas could answer. Luke disappeared beneath distant starlight. David watched his own returning thread with fascination until the final instant, less concerned with leaving than with understanding the mechanism that made departure possible.

The dead went home differently because nothing that died here could be sent anywhere. Superman remained dead where the Trial had taken his life. Neo remained dead where Veritas had watched his hand fall away. Goku, Vader, Gilgamesh, and Ra remained dead. Apocalypse had left no body to return. Aquaman remained among the Trial's absences, whatever final instant the collapsing ocean had claimed from him belonging here. Enki did not retrieve them. He released the extractions at their source. Somewhere impossibly far away, a man beneath a yellow sun continued from the heartbeat before a machine reached for him. Somewhere else, Neo's native continuity proceeded from the instant before the Trial entered his history. The same happened for Goku, Vader, Gilgamesh, Ra, Apocalypse, and Aquaman: not resurrection, not return, but the preserved source moment continuing without the theft. Only afterward did the remains inside the arena begin to fade as the severed extractions lost their final anchor to the machine. Veritas watched Neo disappear last. For one instant he wanted the man in that untouched continuity to remember. Not everything. Just enough to know that his death here had mattered. Then the body was gone.

Soon only the Anunnaki, Batman, and Veritas remained. Batman had spent the returns studying the machine until Anu noticed. "You intend to remember this." Batman did not insult him by denying it. "Someone should." "That is what Thoth would say." Thoth glanced toward Anu but remained silent. Batman looked at Veritas. "You understand why this knowledge can't leave here." "I understand why *you* having a map to the multiverse might make people nervous." "You wrote the map." "Apparently I wrote the index." For the first time, Batman almost smiled. Then his signal brightened. Veritas felt an unexpected ache. "For what it's worth," he said, "you're exactly as exhausting as advertised." "And you talk too much." "Also as advertised." Batman vanished.

The Trial emptied. Anu looked across the arena that had begun with twenty-seven contestants and ended with one man who had never been invited. "The others will return without knowledge of this place." Veritas understood the necessity before Anu explained it. Palpatine could not remember the switchboard. Smith could not remember the controls. Megatron could not remember infinite Cybertrons. Saruman could not carry knowledge of other realities home. But neither could Batman remember Neo's discovery. Wonder Woman would forget the people she had protected. Optimus would forget standing beside Marduk beneath the weight of a collapsing world. Luke would forget the strangers he had nearly broken himself to save. "All of them?" Veritas asked. "All."

Enki prepared the final return. Thoth stood beside him, recording nothing now. Enlil watched Veritas with an expression that had changed since the beginning of the Trial. Marduk said nothing. Perhaps there was nothing left for a conqueror to say after watching reality survive because someone refused to possess it. Veritas's thread appeared. Home. His desk. His computer. His unfinished manuscript. Earl Grey cooling beside it. The same instant from which he had vanished. Anu looked at Enki. "Return him." Enki placed his hands over the controls. Anu watched Veritas for a long moment, then added one final command. "Everything."

Veritas felt the word before he understood it. Not merely the Trial. Neo. Thoth. The machine. The gods. The fractures. Superman's sacrifice. The knowledge that his stories were real. Every answer he had found and every question that answer had created. Enki looked at his father. "As you command." Thoth's eyes shifted toward Enki. Enki looked back. Nothing was said. Then the machine reached for Veritas.

DÉJÀ VU

The machine returned them to moments that had never noticed they were missing. On Earth, Clark Kent stopped halfway through a sentence. The pause lasted less than a second. Someone asked if he was all right. “Yeah,” he said, though his attention had drifted toward a piece of heavy machinery being unloaded across the street. There was nothing remarkable about it. Steel, hydraulics, diesel, men in reflective vests shouting over the noise. Still, something in the sound of metal carrying weight filled him with a sadness so sudden he could not explain it. He watched until the machine disappeared behind a building, then continued speaking. On Cybertron, Optimus Prime stood silent after receiving a routine transmission. His systems reported no interruption. No missing time. No damage beyond what had already existed. Yet when another Autobot asked for orders, Optimus looked down at his hands before answering. For an instant he felt weight. Not an image. Not a place. Just the impossible certainty that something enormous had once rested upon him and that someone beside him had helped carry it. The sensation vanished. “Optimus?” He looked up. “I am here.”

Across another galaxy, Luke Skywalker woke from a dream he could not remember. He sat quietly, reaching into the Force for whatever had disturbed him. There was no vision waiting. No warning. Only the fading impression of another presence beneath impossible weight, dark, wounded, familiar. Somewhere else, Darth Vader paused in an empty corridor. His respirator continued its measured rhythm. An officer approaching from behind stopped immediately. Vader did not turn. For several seconds his gloved hand remained lifted slightly from his side, fingers curled as though holding something that was no longer there. Then the hand lowered. The officer was permitted to live without ever understanding why. In Middle-earth, Gandalf stopped on a road and looked toward a horizon that contained exactly the mountains it was supposed to contain. A sentence entered his thoughts without a speaker: *Stories are not always false because they are stories.* He frowned. It sounded like something he might have said. He could not remember saying it.

Batman noticed nothing. That bothered him. He stood in the Batcave reviewing data he had no reason to review. System logs. Satellite anomalies. Electromagnetic disturbances. Missing seconds. Impossible signals. Every search returned nothing. Alfred asked what he was looking for. Bruce stared at the screen. “I don’t know.” He closed the files, walked away, then stopped after three steps and looked back. The monitors showed only Gotham. For half a second longer than necessary, Batman watched them anyway. On another Earth, Diana touched the Lasso of Truth and felt the peculiar certainty that it had recently been wrapped around the wrist of someone whose name she could not remember. Aquaman surfaced from the ocean with the taste of unfamiliar rain in his mouth. Teal’c dreamed of a human woman carrying a makeshift weapon through ruins beneath the wrong stars. Elizabeth Shaw woke with the conviction that she had once stood among gods and discovered that some of them were much less impressive than advertised. By breakfast, the feeling was gone.

The darker echoes survived too. Megatron looked toward the Cybertronian horizon and experienced fury without an object, the maddening sense that something infinite had once been within reach. Palpatine meditated and found, buried beneath thought, the impression of countless empires opening before him and then closing at once. Saruman stood before the palantír longer than usual, troubled by the feeling that its vision was suddenly too small. David examined a human face and wondered why the word *actor* entered his mind. Smith felt something worse. For one fraction of an instant, the system around him seemed larger than the system. He turned, expecting to find a door where no door existed. There was only the world he knew. His expression tightened.

On Nibiru, nobody spoke of the Trial. Anu had forbidden it. Enlil obeyed. Marduk obeyed. Enki returned to his work. Thoth returned to his records. If anything remained between them, it lived in pauses too small to accuse. Once, Enki passed Thoth in a corridor. Neither stopped. Neither spoke. Their eyes met, and for an instant both seemed about to acknowledge something neither intended to name. Then they continued in opposite directions.

And somewhere inside the Matrix, Neo walked down a familiar street. He stopped beside a wall. His hand rose before he knew why. He placed his palm against the surface and waited. Nothing happened. No hidden architecture opened. No distant realities appeared. No writer sat beyond the world. There was only a wall beneath

his hand. Neo lowered it and kept walking. Behind him, a black cat crossed the doorway. Neo stopped. A moment later, the same black cat crossed it again.

EPILOGUE — AUTHOR UNKNOWN

I woke up at my desk. No thunder. No flash of light. No ancient god standing behind me waiting to explain the universe. My head was resting on my arm beside the keyboard, my tea had gone cold, and *Project Lucifer* was open on the screen exactly where I remembered leaving it. I checked the clock. A few minutes had passed. Apparently, I had fallen asleep. Not exactly a supernatural event when you've spent months writing about ancient gods, Hollywood, and the possibility that human beings have been retelling the same stories for thousands of years. I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and reached for the tea anyway.

Something felt wrong. Not the room. The room was exactly as I remembered it. Same desk. Same chair. Same cold tea. No ruined city outside the window. No wizard waiting to strangle me. No Batman standing in the corner looking disappointed in my security arrangements. Nothing. Then I saw the cursor. It was farther down the manuscript than I remembered leaving it. I scrolled. Beneath *THE SIGNAL SURVIVED* sat a chapter that should not have been there. *A GIFT FROM THE GODS?* I stared at the question mark. Then I started reading.

I will not repeat what I found. You just read it. What I can tell you is that reading it felt different from reading something I had written and forgotten. Certain passages landed with the unpleasant familiarity of a dream remembered half a second before waking. Superman's twenty-first second. Optimus beneath the weight. Batman telling me to run. Thoth standing beside machinery I could not understand. And Neo. I stopped there. For one instant, I could feel a hand slipping from mine. Not imagine it. Feel it. Then the sensation disappeared so completely that I wondered whether it had happened at all.

I kept reading. Eventually I reached the final order. *Everything.* I sat there looking at that word for a long time. Then I reached the end of the chapter. There was no explanation. No confession from Enki. No note from Thoth. No ancient symbol blinking on the screen like a cosmic signature. Just two words where an author's name should have been: *AUTHOR UNKNOWN.*

I wish I could tell you I solved it. I didn't. Enki would make sense. The Teacher giving humanity forbidden knowledge once more. Thoth would make sense too. The recorder preserving what everyone else had been ordered to forget. Neo had opened a door nobody completely understood. Maybe whatever completed my passage through it could send something back. Maybe I wrote every word myself and somehow erased the memory of doing it. Maybe none of those explanations are right.

And that is where I am going to resist the temptation this entire book has been warning about: control. The need to force the unknown into an answer simply because uncertainty makes us uncomfortable. I don't know who wrote *A Gift from the Gods?* I don't know whether any of it happened. I don't know why reading about Neo dying felt like losing someone I had actually met.

So I did the only thing I could justify. I left the chapter where I found it. I left the question mark in the title. And I left *AUTHOR UNKNOWN* exactly where an answer should have been. Then I saved the manuscript, pushed myself away from the desk, and went to make another cup of Earl Grey.

A black cat crossed the doorway.
I stopped.
A moment later, the same black cat crossed it again.