

Danger & Destiny

“Where did you say you got this?” Zeke asked.

“Back of the library.” Brad replied. “*Way* in the back.”

“I see. It's certainly seen some action.”

“That it has.”

Zeke flipped through the book's tattered pages. In that tome waited their next great adventure. For weeks, perhaps even months he and his friends would live inside that world. Saturday night was D&D night. The best night of the week by far.

After so many years of slaying dragons, charming she-elves, toppling empires and questing for items rare and otherworldly, few mountains remained that were still worth the climb. Zeke and his friends (known as The Lightbringers in some circles) had purchased and played through every Danger & Destiny campaign in circulation. Parched for glory, they even tracked down discontinued campaigns from decades past.

Inevitably the well ran dry. To combat the tragic banality of life, Zeke began writing adventures for the gang to play through. They were rich, compelling and full of colour. It was like nothing he'd ever done before – breathing life into a world of infinite possibility. There was a drawback, however. By writing the adventure, Zeke had no choice but to act as GOD (Giver Of Design), which precluded him from creating and playing a major character. Oh, how he missed the joy of reducing a rock-troll to smouldering dust with a well-placed lightning bolt. How he missed not knowing the end and just enjoying the ride.

This time would be different. Brad, Zeke's best friend, had managed to locate a seemingly intact, seemingly complete D&D adventure buried in a dusty corner of the town's public library. The edges of the great manual were frayed. Pages were taped together here and there. The entire thing had been scribbled and sketched in black fountain pen. Where it came from, they could only speculate.

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There was no registration number, no mention of it on any D&D forums and the title, *Void's Conduit*, turned up no search hits online. This time Zeke would play a character. End of story.

“Have you seen any of the art in here?”

“I flipped through a bit when I found it.”

“Really cool style. Very dark.”

It would be less than an hour before the others showed up. Less than an hour before six young-ish nerds would embark on a journey of remarkable greatness.. before the most important dice roll of their lives.

A bang on the front door signalled them.

“Dammit.”

Zeke, never cheerless to bear the burdens of the group, headed upstairs to unlock the door.

Sophie growled and tossed her folder against the table.

“I thought you said he wasn't coming.”

“He *said* he was working.” Corey protested, mouth full of burrito.

“Well apparently he's not, and now we have *that* to deal with.”

“Guys. Chill.” Brad said, leaning back in his chair. “Give him a break.”

Brad's easy charm was impossible to resist. As always, the others listened.

Muddy boots thunked down the stairs.

“Whatsup bitches!” Ricky shouted. “Let's fuck some shit *up!*”

“Ricky, how many Redbulls have you drank today?”

“About five and a half, and I'm feeling pretty great about it!”

“Lovely.”

He shouldered his way into a position at the table, noisily dragging a chair from across the

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room. Without any sort of prompt, he began sharing a distracting story about the woes of his job at the local Tim Horton's. Didn't he know they were trying to plan their characters!?! Ten minutes later, he elbowed Corey's Dr. Pepper onto the floor.

“Jesus, man! Settle down!” Brad scolded, amending his earlier position of sympathy.

To that, Ricky replied with a WWE 'suck it' gesture. It was shaping up to be a long night.

Finally, the time came to decide who would be GOD for the much-anticipated and deliciously mysterious *Void's Conduit*.

“Highest role.”

Each of the friends (and frienemies) began juggling their own personal twenty-sided die. Time slowed down. Challenging looks were exchanged. If you listened carefully, you could almost hear tribal drums somewhere in the distance.

Six little *clacks* and six unique dice struck the table. Bone. Jade. Quartz. Copper. Slag. Amber. The slag and copper dice made more of a thud. Some had been purchased. Others had been created. One had been stolen. One won. A rich history would unfold if these dice could speak. *The Shepherds of Luck*, as they were sometimes referred to.

All eyes found the table's surface as the numbers finally settled. Sophie stifled a cheer as her marbled jade showed a 2. Corey made a victorious fist at his copper 13. There were a few relieved sighs followed by a nasty silence. Ricky's frame slumped at the crude 18 displayed by his crafted chunk of slag. He would be GOD of this game, the only position he hated to play.

“I'm not doing it.” And he crossed his arms in obstinance.

“You *have* to. We agreed on this. Zeke always does it.. and a find like this.. it deserves to be random. He rolled just like you did.”

“Fuck that. I'm not playing if I have to be GOD.”

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“Oh my god, think of someone else for *once* in your life!” Sophie howled, throwing up her arms.

“Guys, it's okay. I can do it.” Zeke conceded. “I really don't mind.”

“No, man. That's bullshit. You've done it like ten times in a row and you always say how you wanna do a character again.”

Brad was standing firm on the issue. He looked to Elliot, but was met with the usual timidity. Elliot was brilliant. Faster than any calculator when dealing with the statistical side of D&D. In games where he acted as GOD, brain-gears whined at the riddles he devised. But when time came for confrontation – which happened often with Ricky and occasionally when Corey was deprived of his snacks – he was a mouse. Sometimes when arguments got too heated he would shrink away for cup of ginger tea.

“Come on man, say something.” Brad whispered in Elliot's direction.

“H-he's right.” Elliot squeaked, holding his chin high in fragile bravado. “It was fair.”

“If you don't wanna do it, then just go! We'll be fine without you!” Even for Sophie, it sounded bitchy.

Ricky's features drooped. What choice did he have? If he refused, he would miss out on Void's Conduit entirely. How he hated them for saddling him into this position. *They're gonna pay for this.* He brooded as he gathered a few minor character creation charts.

“Okay, *fine*. I'll do it.”

“I mean, I still can't believe how complete this is and how it's nowhere online.”

A few concurrent nods. Zeke dragged a hand over his blank character creation sheet. *At last*, he thought wistfully. Sophie scribbled with vigour. She was always the first to finish character creation, and as a night-shifter, her speed (and impatience) only increased as the moon rose higher. She delivered

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Ricky a scathing up-down as he mangled a pencil with his teeth.

Corey reached over his shoulder at the donuts on the computer desk.

“I’m done.” He rumbled cheerfully.

To that, Sophie offered her first genuine smile of the night.

After a painstaking 87 minutes the melee was set to begin. The map had been unfolded and flattened across the table. How the artist was able to draw so precisely with drippy black ink was astounding. Mountain ranges, a serpent in the neighbouring ocean, rivers, valleys, wetlands and forests. A shining palace looked out from its coastal fortifications over a sprawl of farms and fishing villages. Deep in the mountains, a craggy barbarian city seemed to prickle with the charge of battle. In the very centre of the map, a magical portal hovered, seeping corruption and anti-matter out onto the plain. On the other side.. well, soon they would find out.

Ricky began reading – at first with exaggerated vexation – then, as the plot unveiled, with honest intrigue.

“To the mortals who have discovered this rare tome: tread with caution, for in front of you awaits the most nefarious, glory-laden and soul consuming adventure you will ever know. There is no place for timid heroes in Void's Conduit, nor is there place for merciful villains. The Conduit is a chaos of extremes.”

“Hell. Fucking. Yeah.” And Brad ran a comb through his jet black hair.

Ricky continued.

“On opening the portal: by reading the sacred incantation, you will bathe in the infernal radiation of Void's Conduit and you will change on the molecular level. An inter-dimensional bridge will link you to Void – a place trillions of light-years away, trillions of years in the future. There, an infinite battle rages between the men of sorcery and the men of science.”

“Ugh. Always the *men*.” Sophie grumbled, pushing Corey playfully with her shoulder.

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“The choices you make upon opening the portal will brand history forever. Lines will be drawn. Kingdoms will rise and fall. Thaumaturgy will flood your world, saturating the very Earth you stand on. This event is irreversible. No realm has ever broken free after the opening the Conduit.”

Zeke laughed, rubbing his hands together excitedly.

“This is gonna be *mental!*”

Ricky began skimming the rest of the introduction.

“Blah blah *blah*.. life-altering consequences.. yadda yadda.. inconceivable power.. okaay, I think we can just get going. Everyone roll to see who goes first.”

“What the hell? Read it normal.” Brad argued.

Ricky rolled his eyes.

“It just says a bunch of stuff about the portal and this Void place. You can read it on your own once we get started.”

Brad sneered as Ricky turned the page.

“Okay, here we go. The incantation. Once I've read this, the portal opens and the adventure officially starts.

Let the star of pandemonium shine down on this night. Through it's wicked flares, let the Conduit form. And through the Conduit let spill a trillion eons of devilry, divination, witchcraft and war. Let the air crackle as the particles electrify. Let the seas glow and boil as the clouds of mana distill. Let this be the moment of chimerical rebirth.”

Lightning flashed outside, followed by a too-close-for-comfort thunderclap. The lights flickered.

“Okay.. that was slightly creepy.” Zeke murmured. His eyes shifted suspiciously around the room.

“I gotta check on Obiwan.” Sophie said, standing abruptly.

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“Are you serious? It's just an iguana!” Ricky whined as she climbed the stairs.

“It's a *he!* And *he* gets scared in thunderstorms!” She fired back.

At that remark, the whole table enjoyed a quick chuckle. When she returned, her pet lizard was draped over her shoulder.

As usual, Corey was playing a barbarian. It suited him well, what with his hunger-rage, thick beard and thudding footsteps. This time Sophie chose to be a shape-shifter with an affinity for darkness. Given her black sweater and pale skin, she certainly looked the part. Elliot created an arcane technologist – a character with no skill in magic but a vast knowledge of science.

“Gadget guy. Nice.”

Brad high-fived Elliot for his selection.

“Yeah, I really wanna see what kind of tech this world offers. What did you pick?”

“Scoundrel. Max luck. Fortune find. Charm. Followers and daggers for combat.”

Brad nodded decisively.

“Sweet, you can be our ambassador when we get in trouble.”

“Yeah right. I'll be the one getting us into it!” Brad followed his reply with a garish laugh.

All eyes were on Zeke now. Even Ricky stopped fussing over his stack of half-finished minor characters and listened.

“I've been waiting a long time for this. I just wanted to say thanks.. to all of you. I am frickin' pumped.”

He cracked his fingers.

“For Void's Conduit, I will be playing a mystic – illusive, ethereal and gifted in the subtle side of the magical spectrum.”

“Here, here!” Brad shouted.

“Ricky.. start us off.”

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As he turned the page, thunder boomed again. It was like a cannonade in the driveway. With a dazzling flash, the lights went out. Then the rain came, slapping the windows in furious torrents. The storm seemed to swallow the house, as though it were being visited on them and them alone.

“Obiwan!” Sophie screamed as her lizard leaped to the floor and scurried away. She flicked her lighter and waved it in a frantic, searching arc.

When the ground started to shake and dishes began shattering upstairs, the group became necessarily distressed.

“I think it's an earthquake!” Brad shouted over the clatter.

“What do we do!?” Sophie shrieked.

Corey, peering around through saucer-sized eyes, held a grocery bag of snacks to his chest as though it were his first born son. The wind howled, remorseless. Terrible scraping sounds conjured images of possessed trees grabbing at the house.

“We should stay here!” Zeke yelled. “It's safe in the basement!”

The Lightbringers were used to dealing with calamity, but they were also used to wielding enchanted weapons and the insurance of a saving throw. Here, in the muted real world, they were simple peasants – helpless against any great force, natural or otherwise. Just as panic was set to ensue, the storm began to wane. The ground stopped shaking. The evil trees relented. There, in the static-charged shadows, you could hear a pin drop.

“What the hell *was* that!?”

“I don't know..”

Dimly, and slowly at first, a purple glow revealed some of the room. The table was a mess of avatars and dice. The manual was face down on the floor where Ricky dropped it.

“Do you have a black light?” Elliot asked.

“Um, no. Where's that coming from?”

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Perplexed, the group appraised their newly dishevelled surroundings. Everyone except Ricky. He simply stared at the ceiling. His pupils were swollen, occluding his rust-coloured irises. He wore a mask of petrified wonder. When Zeke followed his gaze upwards, he realized why.

There, just below the shattered light bulb hovered a swirling nebula of supercharged violet. Cool smoke spilled down to the floor like a classic horror movie. On the other side of the apparition, Zeke could see twinkling stars and the endless deep of space. Galaxies boiled. Mana clouds pulsed with potential. In that moment, Zeke realized – the conduit was real.

Elliot trembled in his seat, averting his gaze from the accursed portal. His ginger tea began to boil. The tv in the corner turned on and began cycling furiously through the channels. The moment rang with urgency.

“This is no D&D game..” Brad said, stepping backwards.

Zeke couldn't peel his eyes away. There was so much happening on the other side. When he looked closer, he could make out interplanetary battles raging between two distinct factions.

Science and sorcery.. just like the book said.

“Guys, it's getting bigger.” Brad warned.

Corey shuffled away from the table like a scolded mastiff, snack bag still pressed against his chest. Sophie followed, but like Zeke, she was fixated on the singularity.

“I don't feel so good.” Elliot's face was the colour of algae. Moments later, he collapsed to the floor.

“Elliot!”

Zeke and Brad rushed to his aid, only to be overcome by the same impossible dizziness. Soon, all three were unconscious.

Sophie struggled to get closer to the apparition, but Corey held her back.

“No!” He shouted. “Stay away from it!”

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It didn't take long for him and Sophie to pass out as well, and then only Ricky remained. He stared into the void and the void stared right back into him.

“So much power..” He whispered.

It beckoned him. How he loved the mystery of the darkness. Would he be the one to traverse the dimensional bridge? Would he drink from the temporal well?

Arms outstretched with corrupted desire, he collapsed face-first onto the table. Blood leaked from his nose and his eyes rolled back into his head.

When morning came, it was to ear-splitting Sunday church bells. Even through the one small window at ground level, the sun was blinding. Zeke shielded his eyes and slowly sat up. His head ached terribly, worse than any hangover he'd ever known.

He shook Brad's shoulder.

“Wake up, dude.”

“Goddamn.. what the hell happened?”

Zeke shook his head. It hurt too much to speak.

Elliot blinked rapidly as he found consciousness. Everything about the morning offended his senses. Corey and Sophie rose as well, but Ricky was nowhere to be seen. Zeke laboriously climbed the stairs as the others exchanged a few groans of confused disbelief. Upon returning, Zeke's face was grave.

“The place is a mess and I can't find Ricky anywhere.”

“Figures he'd leave without helping us clean up.”

Zeke's expression didn't improve.

“His car is still here. I'm worried.”

Corey looked equally perturbed, even as he crunched on a mouthful of dill pickle chips. The

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room might as well have been turned upside down. Chairs were knocked over. Broken glass littered the floor. On the ceiling, where the quantum fracture appeared, the drywall was charred to a glossy crisp. The gravity of last night's events was finally settling in. It wasn't just some fever dream or trick of the imagination, Void's Conduit had indeed been opened. Authentic fear followed.

“That shit actually happened..”

“What about all that stuff it said in the book about molecular re-shuffling..” Elliot's face creased with concern.

“I mean, what if it's like.. nuclear or something? We were exposed.”

“I don't feel any different.” Corey said.

Zeke flicked on the tv.

“Maybe there's something on the news.”

A reporter in a black suit with coiffed grey hair spoke smoothly into the camera.

“..an unusual electrical storm struck the area around 10 pm last night, causing several power outages across the city. The cause of the storm is unknown. There was nothing on radar to warn of it's approach..”

Zeke called Ricky's phone, but it went straight to voicemail.

The reporter paused for a moment, putting a finger to the tiny speaker in his ear.

“I'm.. I'm getting a breaking report of some kind of attack in the downtown core.”

His eyes widened and he donned the expression of dread.

“There's been an explosion..”

He looked seasick.

“..the police are declaring a state of emergen-”

He was cut short when the tv went black. A rumbling boom shook the house, and through the small basement window, Zeke spied a lime green mushroom cloud in the distance. Purple starburst

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crackled around the fulmination, then the shock wave hit. Windows shattered and the smell of sulphur choked the air. The five dove to the floor.

Ears ringing, Zeke looked up at the window in terror.

“What have we done..”

Nineteen years passed.

Acid rain sizzled harmlessly against the force-field encasing Zeke's hydraulic battle armour. The sky glowed it's usual cancerous burnt orange. Across the Hudson, in the ruins of what used to be New York, the enemy waited inside his fortress of moonstone. To Zeke's right stood Brad, one of the only friends he had left in the world.

“It'll be twenty years next month..”

Inside his own fusion-powered combat suit, Brad shook his head. The spotter lights on his helmet illuminated the sheets of piss-coloured rain as they fell.

“Tempus fugit.”

At their flanks, the battered and rebuilt remainder of Elliot's remotely controlled machine army waited for the attack order. Spider-tanks. Suicide wheels. Avitrons. Infiltrators. Shield-bots. Hunter-killers. One towering 80-foot colossus had survived, but it's armour plating was still badly damaged from the initial invasion.

On the other side of the river, a terrible host of demons, sorcerers and beasts prepared for the counter-attack. Above it all, atop the battlements of the tallest spire of his unholy castle stood the Lord of Ruin. A lifetime ago, when they were all just innocent nerds, this great enemy had been their friend. Back then, they knew him by a different name.. Ricky.

As the aged manual had forewarned, the opening of Void's Conduit changed their lives forever. Earth became an inter-dimensional target for all the most dreadful factions of Void. Accursed and

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empyrean energies spilled through the portal and transformed Zeke and his friends, amplifying their greatest strengths and weaknesses. Ricky's disappearance haunted them for years, and it wasn't until it was too late that they realized where he'd gone – through the singularity into Void itself.

Ricky may have been inconsiderate and annoying, but he wasn't cruel. When he returned to Earth with a legion of villains at his heel, only one conclusion could be made – that like Anakin, he had been seduced by the siren song of power. Despite nineteen years of preparation, the five were unable to repel the attack.

Elliot's voice came through the radio. “Vision, it's been an honour to have you as our leader.”

“Please don't call me that.” Zeke replied. His voice was scabbed with regret.

On that fateful Sunday morning after the Conduit opened, a few errant demons managed to slip through and cause some local chaos. It was then that Zeke experienced his first premonition – a vision of Earth as a smouldering, soul-harvested wasteland. In that moment, he knew that Earth's fate was sealed.. unless he and his friends could prevent it. This, coupled with the ability to rewind the flow of time by a few seconds, earned him the moniker *Vision*. That morning, they made a vow – to ensure Earth's protection against the inevitable return of the terrors of Void.

For Brad, the one with good looks and good luck, things only got better. When he wanted something, the laws of probability always seemed to bend in his favour. His trademark charm became so powerful that even the shrewdest negotiators couldn't say no to him. Over the years, he built a financial empire of mammoth proportions. To the others, he became known as *Gamble*.

“Elliot, you know what to do if we fail..”

Thousands of miles away on the remote, privately owned island of Praesidium, Elliot hustled around the command centre. A virtual reality helmet connected him to his machine army, allowing him to see through their eyes and control their actions. Everything on the island – the factory, the research lab, the airstrip, the farms and residences – all were hidden by a cloaking field and protected by an

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electromagnetic shell. It was their secret bastion and the cave to which they retreated after failing to defeat Ricky the first time.

Elliot lifted his visor and glanced at one of his monitors. In crimson letters it read *enter security key to execute*. The prompt was for the Star-Splitter, a satellite weapon which could re-direct gamma waves from the sun into a concentrated beam of unparalleled magnitude. If his friends were to fail, it was on him to destroy the Lord of Ruin once and for all. The drawback – New York state would be vaporized. Compared to his boundless xenophobia, this dire responsibility felt like nothing.

The exposure to the cosmic particles of Void bolstered Elliot's already keen intellect. As the years passed, he developed technological marvels the likes of which the world had only dreamed. Force fields. Teleportation. Long distance space travel. Renewable energy. Advanced robotics. The cure for cancer. AI. He even learned to play piano. It seemed that no puzzle or problem could prove mysterious to Elliot anymore, so Zeke started calling him Mr. E. Along with this remarkable intelligence, he developed a crippling social anxiety. After a time, the fear became so powerful that he couldn't even face his friends anymore.

“We do this for humanity.. and for the friends we've lost.”

Corey and Sophie, who became known as *Crush* and *Spektra*, had been killed four weeks earlier. The arcane potential of the Void universe gave Corey inhuman strength and the ability to heal his wounds at an incredible speed. But he was also left with a tragic Achilles heel – if he didn't eat every couple of hours, his body would begin eating *itself* and he would eventually waste away. This weakness proved to be his undoing. During the invasion, the Lord of Ruin captured Corey in a cage of magnetic inertia and left him there to die.

Crestfallen by Corey's death, Sophie rashly sought revenge. Like her character in that fateful game of D&D, she acquired the ability to shape-shift and an affinity for darkness. Sadly, her quick temper intensified as well, ultimately leading to her demise.

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She morphed into a raven and infiltrated the moonstone castle as it was being built. The cloak of night granted her camouflage and deadly speed, but it wasn't enough. The Lord of Ruin found her out and disintegrated her with an anti-matter lightning bolt.

“Remember to target the mages with the teal auras first..”

Elliot's voice trembled through the radio transmitter in Zeke's helmet.

“..their fireballs can melt a spider tank. After that, bring down the trolls.”

“Roger that.”

Alas, poor Ricky. There had always been a running joke that he was cursed. He was never on time. He could hardly keep a job. His luck was the exact opposite of Brad's. And there seemed to be a correlation between his touch and the catastrophic failure of electronic devices. As such, no one would let him use their phones when he ran out of minutes on his pre-paid. After he inexplicably turned Elliot's playstation into a plastic brick, he was banned from borrowing consoles. On one evening in particular, he was trying to copy some music from Brad's computer onto a flash drive and the machine simply failed – blue screen of death.

Sometimes Zeke wondered if they had inadvertently created the monster Ricky became. Because of their jokes and relentless chiding, perhaps Ricky came to believe, on some level, that he actually *was* cursed. Maybe that's why the baneful energies of Void consumed him so. *If only I could have a do-over*, Zeke lamented. *If only I could've built him up instead of wearing him down*. But it was too late for that now.

“NLs are on standby.. just waiting on you, boss.”

The Northern Lights. They were one of Elliot's first airborne weapon designs – supersonic, para-atmospheric drones capable of lasing targets on the ground with an error margin of six inches. When those poolwater rays pierced the puke-coloured clouds, something was sure to disintegrate.

“Let's turn on the lights, boys.”

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At that command, the machine army unleashed robotic hell. The artillery pummelled the opposite shore. Brief, sweeping beams of neon blue cut swathes of ash through the enemy ranks. The colossus fired it's hover-boosters (the only feature aside from the weapon systems that Elliot had time to repair) and began rumbling slowly across the river. The water beneath it frothed and boiled.

The enemy returned fire. Green fire bombs. Purple lightning bolts. Comets the colour of sapphires. Searing globes of opal that ricocheted, somehow gaining speed with each bounce. Many robots perished instantly, melting into jagged heaps of hot metal. Only a precious few survived. For a moment, it seemed the great colossus would be allowed to endure. Instead of one primary shield generator, it now housed a tiny factory for tarantula-sized shield-bots. They swarmed it's surface, each generating a bubble the size of a four-man tent. If one of these defensive tiles collapsed, it was replaced almost instantly.

Brad and Zeke rocketed into the sky, then down into the fray in true superhero fashion. With each swing of his plasma sword, Brad halved another snarling demon. Caustic blood illuminated his defence-field like sunlight on a cresting wave. His combat style was rage and momentum – charge and swing and don't look back. With augmented serendipity on his side, there wasn't much need for strategy.

Zeke moved with subtle lethality. No stroke of his prismatic staff was wasted. To watch him fight, it looked as though he'd done it a thousand times before. And who knows? With his tendency to skate back in time when something didn't work out, it could very well have been a million. A trail of lemony blood and body parts followed Zeke's advance.

As they approached the castle, a towering lava-giant overwhelmed the colossus' defences. They toppled together in a landslide of burning obliteration. When the colossus' nuclear containment assembly ruptured, a tremendous flash filled the sky.

“Shields up. Red alert.”

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Even as they met their fate, the three were still able to share a laugh. And why shouldn't they? Before the invasion, they longed to be warriors, wizards, druids and thieves. Each had carried the shield of virtue, swung the blade of malice and flipped the coin of chaos. Now they lived those dreams. Some would say The Lightbringers delivered this plight into the world. Others would simply say it was their destiny.