

# Godless Armageddon - Excerpt

By Scott Coon

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After Thomas Jefferson Stoneshield VII dies in World War II, he uses weaponized memories to battle two false gods bent on Armageddon, as well as his own deeply repressed homosexuality.

*At this point in the story, Thom has died during the WWII invasion of Normandy. His soul has risen through a golden ocean that surrounds the Earth and is now a puddle of mist on the surface of that thick gold fog. He has watched his fellow soldiers sink back to Eather, be consumed by giant soul wells, and also fade from existence. Thom is now barely holding onto his own existence.*

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## **Chapter 2: Judgement**

“Yup, another one gone,” said a voice from somewhere above.

“That soul shall soon fade as well,” said another, referring to Thom. “This new Great War does not bode well for their planet.”

“I think they're calling it the Second World War now,” said the first voice, which Thom somehow knew to be Snake. It had other names but preferred Snake. “I guess they're planning to keep count of their World Wars,” Snake added.

“What made us think that other worlds would fare any better than either of ours?” said the other voice, which belonged to someone who preferred the name Prometheus above his others, though Thom didn't know how he knew that. “It seems an inevitability,” Prometheus continued. “Every species of technological sentience appears bent on self-destruction. We are all snakes eating our tails.”

Snake said, “Oh, lighten up. They ain't dead yet. Like this guy. He ain't dead yet. Are you, Thom? You're not dead.”

Unable to see the owners of the voices from his flat vantage point, Thom asked, “Who are you?”

“I told you, I'm Snake.”

“No, you didn't,” Thom said, not sure he was right.

“Well, I did, and I didn't,” Snake said.

Prometheus said, “He still thinks he's using his living senses. That means he will soon fade, as I warned.”

“He could sink, too, you know. But you're not gonna fade or sink, are you, Thom? You're gonna stay with us.”

Fading. Sinking. Thom had seen Williamson falling back down. He'd been eager to get back to Earth. And Thom had seen that other soul fade away, just like Johnston must've faded. Thom didn't want to fade or sink. He wanted to live, whatever living meant now.

Thom pulled himself together and lifted a part of himself out of his puddle. Looking across the flat golden surface, he again saw other dark puddles of haze, most of them fading. But one nearby puddle rose from the surface, ascending toward the three layers of colorful clouds above. The soul passed through the lower layer of pillowy clouds, to the upper layer where it vanished into the great pinwheel of dark blue clouds circling an orb of even darker blue.

Prometheus said, "Another soul has joined the choir of Nietzsche."

Thom turned toward the voice and found two solid silver orbs floating a few feet away from him, each appeared as wide as a man was tall. The orb on the right said, "Hey, Thom's going to make it. I told you so." Thom somehow knew this orb to be Snake.

"My condolences regarding your friend, Johnston," Prometheus said.

"But good effort trying to save him," Snake said. "It was pointless but a good effort."

"What happened to him?" Thom asked.

"He died, all-the-way died," Snake said.

"He failed to exist," Prometheus explained. "He didn't have the willpower to hold his life energy together, so he faded away. His life energy has been dispersed. The willpower that made that energy Johnston is no more. There is no Johnston."

Thom shivered, or at least he felt like he was shivering. He couldn't be sure about it or anything, other than he didn't want to all-the-way die.

"But that won't happen to you," Snake assured Thom. "You'll be a free soul like us."

Thom muttered, "A what soul?"

"A free soul...not part of a choir or consumed by a soul well," Prometheus told him.

"Soul well?"

“Yes,” Prometheus said. “Your planet has two, Alpha and Unum. They're the dark harvesters you saw below, the ones you believed to be octopi.”

“And you got about a hundred choirs right now.” Snake's orb grew a stubby, pudgy nub that pointed toward the clouds above.

“You need not fear the choirs,” Prometheus said. “A choir is not like a well. The individuals within choirs retain their own willpower.”

Snake said, “But in soul wells, there's one selfish person in the middle, sucking up everyone else's willpower...the greedy jerk. Keeps them all locked in nightmares too. But choirs are nice, like the choir of Buddha. That's it, there.” Snake pointed toward the largest of the spiraling pinwheels, the one with arms of gold orbiting a silver sphere.

As Thom focused on it, he heard it speak...or think...or something. “If you fear, if you grieve, we are here for you. We will help you reach nirvana. Join our choir and we will care for you.” Around Thom, puddles gathered themselves and floated up. Most joined Buddha. Many others joined Nietzsche. Just a few joined the smaller puffy clouds hovering below them.

Snake told Thom, “If you focus a little more, you'll experience a memory from a choir, get an idea of what it's like in there, see if you wanna join.”

Thom focused on the choir called Buddha. He focused until, once again, Thom was Thom and also someone else, a monk this time. The monk sat in the courtyard of a monastery, with curving tiled roofs and dragons and monkeys adorning the walls. He sat alone in the moonlight, holding a small clay jar filled with a silver liquid.

It was supposed to be a magic potion, a shortcut to nirvana. Thom the monk had been seeking nirvana for a long time, spending long hours in meditation, studying texts, trying to grasp that elusive state of being. His efforts lacked focus and he knew it—his mind always

wandering, never clear. But this clay jar held the key to becoming one with the Buddha. Found in an ancient alchemical tome, the potion was mostly mercury and arsenic. He drank.

Thom, who was the monk, assumed the lotus position and waited for enlightenment. Instead, his guts burned. Thom fell forward onto his hands and knees. Head pounding, body shaking, Thom gasped for air. The potion, it was not a path to nirvana, only death. But it was already too late, he'd killed himself like a fool.

Before the sun crested the distant Mountains, Thom the monk was dead. When he reached the surface of the golden ocean, he felt that he deserved to fade from existence. But the Buddha felt otherwise and welcomed Thom into his choir where he could again walk the path toward enlightenment.

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When it ended, Thom felt like he'd fallen out of the memory and landed with a thud. His body had again spread into a murky puddle upon the glittering gold.

Hovering near him, the orb of Snake said, "Ain't that like your third memory? You should be used to it by now."

"He does not look used to it by now," Prometheus said.

"You okay, kid?"

Still lost between identities, Thom focused his thoughts on the now, willing himself to be himself and only himself. Feeling more stable, Thom's cloud grew. It rose from the surface and hovered a few feet in the air like Prometheus and Snake. Still, he remained a thin dark blue haze, not a solid silver orb, like them. And he was less than half their size.

“Hey, you're getting yourself together,” Snake said. “Good for you.”

Thom asked, “What's nirvana?”

“In your fiction and Philosophy, it is many things,” Prometheus explained. “But in our existence, it is to become a fully realized soul, as we are, and as the soul of Buddha is.”

Thom said, “You mean that silver ball up there, that's actually Buddha? The oriental god, Buddha? He's real?”

“Yes, he is,” Snake said. “But people don't like being called *oriental*...and while we're on the subject, you can get a head start on not using *kraut*. But, yes, that's really Buddha in there. Nice guy. Alive, he was really beefy for someone who sat around a lot. His Earthly depictions are all over the place, though. None look anything like him.”

“Our Earthly depictions are quite inaccurate as well,” Prometheus said, “always turning us into humans or animals.”

“Your depictions? As animals and *humans*?” Thom asked. Everything that had happened to him from the moment he died forward, it all piled into his brain, overwhelming his understanding of everything. Nothing made sense. His mind spun. “You mean you're not people? Or not from Earth? Are you Martians? And how am I hearing you? And seeing you? I'm a cloud! And you're...you're...what the hell are you? What am I? I mean, I know I'm dead. I died. I'm dead but...but...everything. Everything else. What the hell is everything else! What in the holy hell is going on!”

Prometheus hovered closer and said, “You are understandably confused.”

“Let me explain,” Snake said.

“No,” Prometheus said, “don't let him explain. Let me explain. It'll be more effective.”

“What does that mean!” Snake demanded. Prometheus did not reply. After a brief silence, Snake said, “Yeah, let him explain.”

Thom asked, “What are you two?”

“We're Martians,” Snake said.

“No, we are not from Mars,” Prometheus corrected him. “We are from other planets around other stars that are not your Sun. And Snake and I are not from the same star. We did not meet until we each came to your planet, separately.”

“Prometheus got here first,” Snake said.

“Thor arrived first,” Prometheus said. “Though he is gone now.”

“If you're not from Mars,” Thom said, “then where are you guys from? Venus?”

“No, not Venus,” Snake said, “that's still a planet around your star. I thought you humans knew about solar systems?”

“Do you see the lights above?” Prometheus asked. “What you see are not the stars. You can no longer perceive matter, like stars and planets and the living. You can only see the life energy of souls expressed as emotions. Thus, each light in the sky is the emotional radiation from the souls surrounding a planet. Snake and I came from distant lights like those you see now. But the light of the souls around our planets have been extinguished, as yours shall be one day.”

Snake said, “There's that Prometheus optimism I love.”

“Like your planet, my planet once had two soul wells,” Prometheus continued, his solid silver shell dimming as if tarnished. “I stood apart from those massive orbs and tried to help others do the same. I failed and once one soul well had defeated the other, it became our *Armageddon*...a relentless monster that consumes all souls...dead...or living...”

As Prometheus trailed off, Snake said, “Yeah, so, that's the thing we came here to do, to help you...well, not you specifically, like whoever became the technologically sentient species. I got here third, but I still got here before you did. I mean, I got here before you evolved. Prometheus and Thor were already here but, other than them, your afterlife was pretty empty...except for the gold, of course. There'd been so many non-sentient and calm-sentient beings on your planet that your afterlife already had a very healthy animalsphere.”

“Animalsphere?” Thom asked.

“All that glowing stuff you're sitting on top of,” Snake explained, while Prometheus remained dim and silent. “It's the souls of the less agitated animals of your world.”

Thom gazed down through the shimmering ocean beneath his cloud. “That's made of animal souls?”

“Yes,” Prometheus said, his tarnish receding. “Their willpower is strong but also calm, so they gather into a denser mist of life energy.”

Snake said, “You're a more scatter-minded soul, so your life energy spreads out, making you lighter. That's why you float.”

Thom's cloud grew darker and thinner. None of this made sense. Where was the judgement? Where were his angry ancestors, the pearly gates, the lake of fire, any of it? His thoughts escaping, he muttered, “...and you're not even human?”

Prometheus said, “No, we are not human because we're not of your world.”

“We just came to help,” Snake said. “But it went really unappreciated. I mean like, Prometheus is Prometheus.”

“You mean the liver guy?” Thom asked, remembering an image of Prometheus chained to a rock, a bird eating his liver, an eternal torture for his crime of helping humanity.



“Yes, I gave you fire and was thus depicted as 'the liver guy' as you say.”

“And I gave you sex for fun!” Snake proudly declared.

“To be fair,” Prometheus said, “you gave that to a lot of species.”

Growing a pair of shoulder nubs, Snake shrugged. “I didn't know which one of you would become dominant. To be honest, I was betting on the otters.”

Prometheus added, “But we couldn't give your kind anything without it becoming a weapon, sex or fire.”

“Yeah, so, he was the actual Prometheus,” Snake said, “and I was the actual Snake in the Garden of Eden story. And in Ragnarök.”

“But,” Thom said, his cloud clenching, “how could both of those stories be true? Which religion is right?”

“Neither story is true, and no religion is right,” Prometheus said. “They are merely propaganda fed to your people through surrogates of the soul wells, Alpha and Unum. The wells place words in the minds of your preachers.”

“Unum's the big one,” Snake said. “But yeah, propaganda. Though I am a snake, kind of.”

Certain he heard that wrong, Thom asked, “You're a snake?”

“Kind of,” Snake said. “Here, look.”

Snake transformed from an orb into a being that looked very much like a snake with a long body of dark brown scales and a diamond head with two nostril slits, two black eyes, and one wide, thin mouth. But unlike any serpent that Thom had ever seen, Snake had four pairs of thin curling tentacles evenly spaced down his body. After a moment, Snake returned to his spherical form. Thom continued to stare.

“Yup,” Snake said, “that was me. But in your stories on Earth, I didn't have my coils. I was depicted like the armless snakes of your world.”

Still trying to wrap his head around what Snake had been, Thom reluctantly asked Prometheus, “What do you look like?”

Prometheus turned away. “I don't recall.”

“I was also Satan in story of Job,” Snake declared, “and I was Loki...and also the Monkey King of China. And the Great Serpent that battles Thor, bringing an end to your world. And Prometheus was, of course, Prometheus.”

“I was also Lucifer,” Prometheus said, “because I tried to raise an army against Unum. I merely failed, giving rise to Alpha.”

“But if you hadn't, this whole place would've been wiped out by now,” Snake said. “So, don't beat yourself up about it.” To Thom, Snake said, “He was also the turtle that your whole planet was supposed to be on the back of. That was a dumb one. Oh, Osiris! He was Osiris in the penis story, but he doesn't like to talk about that one.”

“It didn't really happen,” Prometheus said, his silver briefly tinted red.

“And yet, you hate it every time I bring it up.”

“And yet, you continue to bring it up. It's behavior like this that drove Thor from this planet.”

“Wait, Thor?” Thom asked. “The Thor. That kraut—I mean, that German myth?”

“Norse,” Snake said. “But yeah, I think they picked up on our little thing we had, Thor and me. But really, we were good friends.”

“You intentionally annoyed him until he left,” Prometheus said. “The Norse depicted the two of you as destroying their world. It's pretty clear that he did not like you.”

“But I liked him.”

Prometheus sighed heavily.

“Prometheus was also Casandra,” Snake said, “and that time he really was Casandra, the Troy one.”

“I was not,” Prometheus corrected him. “I spoke to Casandra. I tried to help the people of Troy. Unum had inspired the Greeks to end the Trojans, so their city would no longer feed souls to Alpha, whom they worshiped as the god of...uh...I forget.”

Snake said. “So, like you said, Thom, we are Martians, but not from Mars. Does that clear things up?”

No. Nothing was clear. It all confused the hell out of him. With the words of Snake and Prometheus ripping his brain apart, Thom collapsed back into a puddle. He needed to think but he couldn't think. He asked, “Am I in Purgatory?”

“I don't believe we're getting through to him,” Snake said.

“This afterlife is not described in any of your religions,” Prometheus said. “Well, not exactly, and not in its entirety.”

“Yeah,” Snake said, “so, Purgatory, Limbo, Siberia...call it what you will. You're nowhere, kid. Does that help?”

It didn't help. Nothing would. Thom could feel his soul losing mass, but not all of it. Why didn't he fade to nothing like Johnston had? He'd been an atheist like Johnston, more so even— Thom had it on his dog tags. So why was he continuing to exist? Why bother?

As his soul became smaller and smaller, Thom heard that voice, the one he knew to be his father, a man whose voice he'd never heard while alive. It said the same thing as before, “I'm sorry, Son. I shouldn't have done that to you.”

The words were distant, barely discernable, but Thom definitely heard them. What did they mean? Thom couldn't imagine what his dead father had ever done to him. He died before Thom had learned to walk. He died for his country. But he'd continued the family line. Thom was the one who'd ended it. So why was his dad apologizing to him?

“Hey, Thom,” Snake called from somewhere nearby, “I think you know this guy. You should come help him.”

Thom's cloud stopped shrinking. The idea of becoming truly nothing felt comforting but it also felt cowardly. Thom couldn't fade, not without finding out what his dad was talking about, and not without facing some kind of judgement.

“Seriously,” Snake said, “pull yourself together and get over here, Soldier!”

Thom reflexively gathered himself into a dark cloud, now a quarter the size of Snake or Prometheus. Barely hovering, he drifted over to Snake. There he found a puddle of dark red.

“I got the flare off,” said the puddle. “I got the flare off. Did they see it?”

“Corporal Lowenstein?” Thom asked. “Is that you?”

“Sergeant Stoneshield?” said the puddle that was David Lowenstein. “I got the flare off. Did the reinforcements see it? Are they coming? Wait? You're Sergeant Stoneshield. How did you...? You... You're dead. Oh, dear god, I'm dead...”

“Yup,” Snake said. “You're as dead as a doornail. But don't let it get you down. I mean, you may be dead but at least you've got a friend.”

Floating up behind Thom and Snake, Prometheus said, “That is not always a good thing, having a friend.”

“You're talking about me,” Snake said. “You're picking on me, aren't you? It took millions of years, but I finally got you to ease up, y' ol' fuddy-duddy.”

Prometheus ignored him.

“Lowenstein?” Thom said. “Can you get up, Corporal?”

David didn't answer. His soul darkened and thinned.

“Lowenstein, can you hear me?”

Still, only silence. David's soul was thinning fast. Not thinking, Thom reached out to hold him, as if they were still in living bodies. Two smoke tentacles grew where Thom expected his arms to be. When he touched David, Thom fell into another memory. In it, David was halfway up the ladder when he heard a grenade explode. Through David's eyes, Thom saw his own dying body, face mangled by shrapnel. Peterson lay near him, his leg gone. And Corbin lay face down, blood gushing from under him. Watching himself die, Thom felt detached. Too much had happened, too many deaths relived.

David got back on mission, hurrying up the metal rungs, not checking for Nazis before throwing himself over the top. Heavy fire focused on him. Grazing bullets tugged at his uniform. A few found their mark, hitting his left arm and shoulder. On his belly, he scurried into a shallow depression. Barely hidden and quickly bleeding out, David got out a flare and fired.

As the flickering light arced across the sky, Thom who was David found himself floating. He'd died but he hadn't figured that out yet. As his soul rose, he gazed out over the open water, searching for reinforcements. The Channel was lousy with Allied ships and landing craft, but none were coming to Pointe du Hoc. The handful of Rangers would have to take the gun emplacements alone. David wanted to get back down there and help them. But he was dead. He'd never make it to Berlin. He'd never find his parents.

With that thought, Thom lurched out of David's memory.

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