

Hell On High: Chapter 1

[By Holly Lisle](#)

by Holly Lisle and Ted Nolan

“I’m going on vacation.”

The angel Gabriel looked up from polishing his trumpet and almost dropped the instrument to the ground. God stood before him, dressed in orange Bermuda shorts, a Hawaiian shirt with red, blue and green macaws and palm leaves against a vivid fuchsia background, navy blue nylon dress socks, and penny loafers with the pennies in. He carried two cameras around his neck—an expensive Nikon 35mm and a cheap Kodak Instamatic—and he wore RayBans and a Panama hat with a red, white, and blue checked band. He had giving his features a distinctly Japanese cast.

Gabriel cleared his throat. “Vacation?”

“Absolutely. Do you have any idea how long I’ve been working?”

“Well, you had a day off—”

“—Billions and billions of years ago,” God said, and for a moment he sounded just like Carl Sagan, who was currently making himself known in the Celestial Special Events department of Eternity.

Gabriel swallowed. “Yes. It has been quite a while. So when are you planning on taking your vacation, Your Magnificence?”

Two battered suitcases appeared at God’s side. “Now.”

“NOW?!” Gabriel yelled, and looked around to see who else was listening in. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Now. But I have so many things I’ll have to do in order to get ready. How am I going to set up a communication link for you? How am I going to forward all your calls in a prompt and efficient manner? How am I going to establish a priority policy for contacting you with emergencies? How am I going to forward your mandates dealing with Heaven and the Summerland and Valhalla and ” His voice died away to silence.

God was smiling. He wore the silly grin of someone who has heard Heaven’s Celestial bells for the first time, and discovers they’re playing Jimmy Buffet’s “Blue Heaven Rendezvous.” People rarely suspected that God was a big Jimmy Buffet fan. Gabriel didn’t like that smile at all, and he liked it even less when God said, “You aren’t.”

Gabriel thought he might faint. “Then what are we supposed to do while you’re gone?”

“You’re supposed to handle things.”

“Handle things? Handle things! How are we supposed to do that?”

God kept right on grinning—a very toothy, Cheshire cat sort of a grin.

Gabriel cringed.

God patted him on the shoulder. “Think of this as a learning experience. All of you will do just fine.”

He started to fade from view, and Gabriel shouted, “Wait! Where are you going? When will you be back? You can’t just leave like this!”

“Don’t worry,” God said, his voice growing faint even as he began to shimmer like a desert mirage. “Be happy!”

And then he was gone.

Gabriel shivered and stared around Eternity. The words don't worry-be happy circled in his mind with the tenacity of bad lyrics tied to a catchy tune. Easy for God to say. The Almighty was on vacation, leaving the angels in charge.

Billie Holiday wrapped up "Billie's Blues" in the background, and started into a cover of Sara Hickman's "Time Will Tell" from the Necessary Angels album.

It will, won't it, Gabriel thought. Time will certainly tell.

He hoped, perversely, that God got a bad sunburn, wherever he was. Maybe poison ivy. Maybe even a traffic ticket. Glowering, he cut off Billie's voice in mid-note, and announced "All archangels to the Mother Teresa Center in one millisecond for a staff meeting. Repeat—all archangels to the Mother Teresa Center in one millisecond for a staff meeting."

Then he tried to figure out what exactly he was going to tell them.

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