

*Pandemonium: Stories of the Apocalypse* features eighteen original stories set at the end of the world, as imagined by award-winning science fiction and fantasy writers including Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Lauren Beukes, Jonathan Oliver, Sophia McDougall and Chrysanthy Balis.

The tales are inspired by the art of John Martin. Although Martin (1789 - 1854) received varying (and often negative) critical attention, his huge and wildly imaginative paintings were enormously popular with audiences. Since his death, Martin's reputation has cycled through periods of complete insignificance and others of great renown.

*John Martin: Apocalypse* is at Tate Britain until 15 January 2012. Tate will be selling a limited edition of *Pandemonium* from November 2011. The anthology will also be available for the Kindle and other e-readers from [pandemonium-fiction.com](http://pandemonium-fiction.com).

# PANDEMONIUM

## STORIES OF THE APOCALYPSE

Original tales inspired by the art of John Martin

Magnus Anderson  
Scott Andrews  
Chrysanthy Balis  
Lauren Beukes  
Archie Black  
David Bryher  
S.L. Grey  
Jon Courtenay Grimwood  
Charlie Human  
Kim Lakin-Smith  
Sophia McDougall  
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Introduced by Tom Hunter, Director of the Arthur C. Clarke Award

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# THE ARCHITECT OF HELL

DAVID BRYHER



Dear Mr Martin,

So. It's like this. I need your help.

Hi, by the way. Hi. My name is Mulciber. Me and the boys think you've probably heard of me – and that's one of the weird things, certainly, yes, I guess I should mention that. I'm back here, you're way ahead over there. Just take it as read that we're all on the same clock, just some of us are looking at different hands.

*Anyway:*

There's this box on my desk, here in this dungeon. I say 'dungeon' – I mean, it's my home, I'm free to wander in and out. It just started life as a dungeon. A big one, for all of us. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let's start with... There's this box. Here, at this end, it's a simple wooden cube. It splits around the middle and the top flips back. Brass hinge. Lined with a thin sheet of pale silk. Nothing special. But I guess by now you've found the matching box at your end, and that might be special. I hope it is. That's kind of the point.

Whatever it looks like, that will be up to you. The thing that makes you who you are – that fizz, that white flash of imagination that no one else has – will give the box its form.

The point is, you'll have found the box, with this note inside it, somewhere in your imagination. And this *only* works if you find the box. This letter will *only exist if you find the box*.

So, it's in your imagination. A dream, maybe. Something crumbling into mist as you wake. But try to grasp that image. You gave the box its form in your mind, your vision made it real. Remember what it looks like. Remember *hard*. You'll need to find it again over the coming months. Not too often, I hope. Not if we're both on the same page.

I'll write again soon. Remember: seek the box, hold its image in your mind, and you will find my next message.

In the meantime, I hope you keep well!

'Oh, the irony', right? Tell me about it.

Your pal,  
Mulciber

Hey John,

Another letter! I guess it's working.

So, here's the thing. I said I needed your help, right? Well, it's like this.

I need you to design the biggest city in Hell.

No, don't worry, there's no pitching process, no interviews. I know who I want for the job, and that would be you. I've seen your stuff, it's a done deal. No one better for the job.

I should be clear: I'm subcontracting, I should be. His Satanic Majesty (Oh yes, He's made Himself an adjective already, lah de dah, on top of the 'always capitalise me' edict)... Where was I? Oh, right. Satan turned to me for this one. I just, ah, I just need someone to take it for me. Don't mention anything, if it comes up. (Though I can't imagine how it could.) I just need another eye, you know. Some real red-sky thinking.

Oh, which is a *thing*. We're all big fans of your skies. That liver-coloured, swirly crap you rain down on those poor victims? The hot horror of God's wrath? You may think that's what you're painting, God's judgment made manifest, but hey that's a sunny day down here. You *get it* and we get you.

And that's how I know this box thing must be doing its job. Psychic link, John. Mind to mind. Mano a... demo?

Which is another thing. Satan wants to call this city Pandemonium. We think He's taking the piss. "Suffer the 'little spirits' to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of Hell." One in the eye for God. Okay, He's never been one for originality. That's never been His thing. Which is why He came to me.

"Mulciber'll do it!"

Oh, a gleeful threat, that was.

So, that's what He wants: the Architect of Heaven, turning his skills instead to the greatest structures ever seen outside those gates.

And that's the problem. We're very much outside those gates. And I kind of think, when I was kicked out, God stripped my skills from me. After all those buildings I designed for him! That's gratitude!

I know, I know. Look, we're the kings of irony down here.

So, Satan wants a city. A capital for Hell. Seat of government, seat of power and military command. A throne for His Satanic Majesty. A council chamber of infinite size. Residence for all the hosts of Hell. Maybe a coffee shop. One of the good ones. And I'm fresh out of ideas.

So, what have you got?

Your little spirit,  
Mulciber

John,

Look, I know you're getting these messages. They exist, so you must be. So, what's the hold-up? Come on, I've got Beelzebub buzzing down my neck about this. This isn't going to go away. And it's not like I need much — just the one city.

Remember the box, John. Just hold it in your mind. Keep the link strong, and it should all just flow from that.

It works. I *know* it works, because it has before. Let me explain, maybe. Some context could help fix your mind on the possibilities.

When God kicked me out, I got kicked so hard I crashed through the walls of one mythology and ended up in another. Bits of me did, anyway. In fact, I was altogether a bit shattered by the experience, as I am sure you can imagine. Some other bits fell here and there, Greek, Roman, oh and Etruscan — they were fun. Best bit of Italy and hot on women's rights. (How times change.) Anyway, point is, the pieces of me got picked up and shaped into the stories of Vulcan, or Hephaestus, or a hundred other things. I nearly lost myself — we all did.

(Imagine it, John. The Fall. Not the crummy fall that came later. The big Fall, the one without which no other fall can happen. Our first taste of fire, the true, golden fire of punishment. Those chains that weighted us to the black rocks of Hell — a place God *made* for us, a place *he made* out of hate and pain and fruitless penance. The memories he left us. The memories he left *me*: all those palaces, that shining sky, the liquid sun. But... Falls, fire, chains and memories. Four words; you know what each one means. But you have no idea. Even *you* have *no idea*.)

Anyway, despite being shattered into pieces, splintered, I still managed to pull the threads of me together. And it was a thunderbolt that did it. That's all it took. The box here, and an idea I planted in the minds of many men. An image of a thunderbolt.

I was sewn back together by streaks of white light.

All it took was a few well-placed words here and there. Much less than it's taking now, John. Which is kind of my point. We've got a thing going here, right, you and me? We do, we do. And I need to see results, John, or someone's going to get their ass kicked.

We all know that someone's going to be me, but I'm just preying on your sense of mercy.

I know, right? Oh, the border of mercy is about three thousand miles that-away! We have we laugh, though, don't we? We have a laugh.

Yours in hope,  
Mulciber

*Sewn back together by streaks of white light.*

John,

Seriously, now. I'm in big trouble. I know, I know, how much more trouble could a fallen angel be in? You'd be surprised – horrified, and surprised.

Satan is *fuming*.

He's having this big thing in a few days, some sort of debrief or something on the storming of Heaven, I don't know – I'm not invited, I'm just putting the chairs out, right? Anyway, He was expecting Pandemonium to be ready. But all there is to speak of right now is a big, basalt plain, rimmed with lava. I mean, it's very striking and all, great gathering place for Hell's hordes, but He doesn't even have a *stage*.

So, He's freaking out. His heralds have gone out already, spreading the call, and the hosts of Hell are converging on the plain. Thousands of them. You can see the black dust from miles away, kicked up by their steady, tireless marching feet. On they come, clouding the skies above them. I think I can hear them sometimes, the crunch crunch crunch of the blistered ground beneath their feet. Virgin land – if you can call anything here virginal – sullied by their steps. Ribbons of demons, curling inwards, here to the centre of Hell, to meet their Lord for the first time since the Fall.

It's a Big Deal.

But He didn't think to check with me whether I was ready, oh no. That's not His style. We dance to His drum, apparently. Funny that the beat of His drum led us all the way down here, and yet we're still dancing.

If I'd just stayed, if I'd ignored the sly bugger's first call, I could have built twenty marble spires by now. White rock shooting into that silken sky. White rock rippled with cream-and-gold veins. Oh, man, John. The things I could have done instead.

Oh, but. He wouldn't be who He is without that knack for temptation, would he? Anyway.

We need the city, and we need it fast.

Don't worry about building it – God saw fit to kick out a bunch of my best boys, too, so we can handle that. (Also, you're there, we're here. The visas are a nightmare.)

All we need is the *spark*.

Yours in desperation  
Mulciber

*Sewn back together by streaks of white light.  
It is a door.*

John! Seriously!

Look, you may be worried, I suppose. You might even be freaking out. “It’s a demon! Talking to me from the very depths of Hell itself!” I get that.

Would it help maybe if I explained how it’s all going to work? There’s no contracts, no your-everlasting-soul-is-ours-for-ever, none of that kind of thing. This is a freelance gig, completely.

God won’t even know about it, I promise you. Well. Maybe. Let’s be honest, there’s that whole predestination thing. He knew we’d revolt. That’s the current thinking on the matter. He knew he’d cast us down here. He knew we’d build a new kingdom on the lava fields, under the smoke sky. He knew all that — just like he knows that you’re going to help us. It’s your destiny. You were always going to do this. The Almighty put it in your plan. But it’s cool. I hear he’s hot on forgiveness. For some folk, anyway.

All right, say you’re not down with destiny? Again, not a problem. You’re a free man, John, you do what you like. It’s just we’d really, really like you to like this. Think about it. A monument to your art — and make no mistake, that’s what it is, not architecture or engineering or building or any of that crap. It will be *art*. Maybe I should explain the process:

Me and my builders, we’ve already imagined the systems. They already exist. Underneath the lava plains, we’ve dug out tunnels. Well, we *thought* them out, but the effect is the same. Thousands upon thousands of tunnels, each with thousands of vents leading up to the surface. The tunnels link with the molten lava beneath the rock, and that heats chambers like furnaces, in which we smelt the gold that Mammon found in the mountains ringing the plain. That’s another kick in the teeth from God, I think. He couldn’t get enough gold in the palaces of Heaven. Floor tiles, wall tiles, window frames, filigree gates... And the taps, of course. Every damn tap. I sometimes wonder if it was all that tacky, yellow metal that flipped the switch in my head. Did it make me snap? Is that why I rebelled? Sick. Of. Gold.

So — predestination, right? He knew that was going to happen. Okay, at the very least, we can agree on omniscience, right? So, he knows that — now I no longer walk the golden terraces of Heaven — I really am *sick* of the sight of gold. So, what does he give me to build with?

God’s a bastard, John. To the core.

I could have used the basalt, I suppose. But it’s soft and brittle, far worse than something like sandstone, even. It would have *done*, of course it would. It would have built perfectly serviceable walls and roofs and whathaveyou. It wouldn’t have been pretty, and any kind of fine work would have been out of the question. For a while, I think Satan would have been happy with a kind of jaggy-rock and crumbling-to-dust aesthetic. But He’s not a teenager, and I think He knows, deep down, that he would have grown bored of it in a few weeks. It’s clichéd, let’s be honest. And once I suggested the gold that I’d found in the mountains, he was all over it — I think the irony appealed.

But who's got to suffer the irony? God don't give a damn — in fact I doubt that, right now, he's got many damns left to give! Satan just thinks a gold palace would be... I don't know, cute or something. And so I'm left to smelt up even more of this oh-so-very-definitely Godforsaken metal, just to build the capital of Hell.

SO.

(Sheesh, sorry. Bee in my bonnet, I guess.)

SO.

Specially smelted gold — tempered in the fires of Hell itself — all bubbling under the ground, ready to spring up and form Pandemonium. All it needs is you. Your idea, your vision. The minute that picture forms in your head, that dream of Pandemonium, the pumps will spring into action. The city will flow from the earth, and grow into place — perfectly reflecting the image in your mind.

I've said this before, and I'm afraid of repeating myself but come on, we need to act quickly: all we need is that idea. Your vision of Pandemonium. And the city will just *happen*.

John,

The armies are here.

These dust clouds are hanging over the hills ringing the plain, hovering over the shuffling hordes as they draw closer, closer. We could hear the rumbling of their feet, the grumbling of their voices, for half a day before they arrived. And when they did arrive, when they crested the hills around the black circle where their city should be, they just stood. In silence.

Moloch was the first of Satan's generals to get here. Standing alone, blood running from every pore. It mixed to a dark, slick mud around his feet. Chemosh, Baal, they followed him. Marching a hundred yards behind each prince was a phalanx of demons. Their generals leading the way, like an arrowhead brings death.

Ishtar, cold and white, came next. Rising from behind the crater, a beacon in the hot darkness. Her light fell into the valley, her silver-robed followers crowding round her in a crescent. A thin new moon. The start of something. Together, Ishtar and her priestesses, they illuminated the space where Pandemonium should be. Her lover, Thammuz, crested the hill opposite. His satyrs carried him, on a litter bound with ivy. The first green thing I'd seen since I got here. But it was *too* green, too lush. We could hear the creak of the constricted wood beneath the ivy leaves, tortured oak bursting along its grain.

Dagon next, and he could probably have done with being carried, too. Body of a man but, waist-down, a mess of tentacles and fins and who knows what else. He's not coping with the heat or the dry down here. Then came Rimmon and Belial and, with them, the true kings of Egypt. General after general marched in with their legions, their soldiers dressed like Romans or something. Shining breastplates. Clattering shields. Spears aloft, directing a curse to God.

They seemed... I hesitate to say it, because there's been a sorry lack of this since we got here, but... They seemed *joyful*. They've not given up. Our punishment, our exile here — both of the body and of the soul — the thought of what we have lost... None of that has ground them down. They marched on, faces to the sky, soft pipes carrying them onwards, over the blistered ground that crumbled beneath their feet.

I think... I think they think they can still do it. It's crazy to think that, I know. I mean, how much more crushing a defeat could we have suffered? But you weren't there. You didn't see our Lord rise to meet his army. You didn't feel the silence that fell in his presence. The anticipation. The *expectation*.

When Satan arrived, He still glowed. That light we thought was lost to us, that light we left behind, it still clung to him, still hung around his shoulders. Where once his wings spread like the morning, now there was nothing but a pair of grey stumps — but the light... The light remembered the shape of his soaring. The heights, the heights He reached. Our heights. Our *home*.

He stood at the highest point on the ring of hills around the plain. He *shone*.

And when he spoke... His words were interwoven with sighs: not sighs of defeat or of sadness, but of soft regret. Regret that he dragged us all down with him. But He was sure — so sure — that this was nothing more than a setback. Sure that, even still, we couldn't fail to take Heaven. *How could we not?* he cried. He looked around, at every general, at the legions upon legions of soldiers hanging on his every word. An army greater than any seen in history. *How could we not?*

A roar went up, so loud it shook the earth. Black dust lifted, and it was crowned by shards of light: the fiery swords of millions of demons, held aloft in defiance, in certainty of a victory that — at that moment — no one could doubt. They bashed their shields with their spears. Satan had called them to war, and they had answered.

He smiled. I had never seen him smile.

But still.

The plain is empty. Satan needs somewhere from which to launch His new war.

Cue you.

*Open the door.*

You should have heard the cheers, John! Well, a roar, really. It was deep, so deep, and the sound made the black earth tremble under all of us. It rose as suddenly as the city. Snap! My breath caught in my throat. I wasn't ready for it. I don't think anyone was.

The sound of the demon army's roar shuddered out across the plain. A haze of shattered basalt dust rose from the ground. For a few, long minutes, it obscured the city from their view. And that shut them up for a while. But the dust sank again, eventually, and the view cleared and they roared with triumph again, and charged in to their new capital.

Everyone's praising Satan. His generosity. His power, his influence. His bold gesture a golden city, rising from the site of our utter defeat, a fist waved in the face of God. I had my back slapped a few times, too. (I tried to give proper credit, I really did, but everyone was just too excited to listen.)

They continued to roar the noise turning from triumph to just an uncontrolled rush as they poured through the arches, swarming through the outer colonnades, filling up their new home.

They flowed like blood. Rushing through the streets, through the alleys, up and down the stairs and under the cloisters. They clotted at corners, and under hanging silver lamps. They burst through gates, spilling into empty courtyards, shocking the grey cobblestones with their red and black feet. Filling it with life.

From the instant they entered their new home, they became Pandemonium.

And Satan roared with them. Or it was a laugh, maybe. I don't know. The sound, John, oh the *sound*. Just hours before, those sighs of sorrow that passed his lips, the apologies of the vanquished... All gone. Scorched away with *noise*.

Satan threw back his head, and shouted out thunder. He begged the sky for victory, tearing down hope with every cracked note of his cry. It was a promise. A threat. A glimpse of the future. And then, I think, we all understood at last:

This is step one.

And more than one of us is scared.

But that, that's not your problem. Not yet, anyway. So, thank you. *Thank you*. Thank you for the city. You saved my hide.

But here's the thing.

If Pandemonium is real now, that means this whole process worked: the box, and the letters, and the link between our minds, all of that did its job. So, it worked it's done. It's *done*. And yet, you're still reading, right?

Because you see, that's not right. Not right at all. So, what does that make it? That's right: that's *wrong*. The link should have been severed; at the moment the city came into existence, the letters were no longer needed.

So, explain this.

Yours,  
Mulciber

Still there, John?

Oh, dear.

It's getting weirder, too. As Pandemonium sprang up, a storm broke in the clouds above the city, right above the roof of the tallest building. Which, incidentally, was of course earmarked as the throne room the minute Satan saw the city burst into existence.

Anyway, that storm — it's still going. It never stops. There's no rain — there's never any rain down here. But there is the strangest thing: a cool breeze. Like the air shifting on a stuffy summer day, the weather changing its mind, a new front coming in.

The storm snaps the sky with lightning as it goes. Breaking the back of the heat. A fierce, white streak. A crack, a rumble, and then

I hate to say it. I can't believe it, what it feels like.

It's relief. Cool relief.

I wonder, do the others look up at the roiling sky above the city and feel it too?

Relief. Just a spot of it, just a few square yards of... Sympathy. That's what it feels like. Like someone understands what we went through, where we find ourselves — and that someone is reaching out to us. With sympathy.

Got anything to say, John?

*It's a door, Mulciber.*

*Once before, you told me, you were put back together by streaks of white light. I thought I'd help you do it again.*

*And sorry about the sympathy, but whose fault is that, really?*

*Open the door, Mulciber.*

*Travel the worlds.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Bryher makes his living surfing in the wake of the greatest television programme ever made. As well as being a regular writer for *Doctor Who Magazine*, he's written a Doctor Who chapter book and co-written *The Brilliant Books of Doctor Who 2011* and *2012*. His earlier work includes editing an anthology for Big Finish's Short Trips series, and contributing stories to several others. He is currently working on several projects, all of them secret. So hush.

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Anne C. Perry and Jared Shurin are the editors of the geek culture blog Pornokitsch. It has been merrily rolling along since 2008.

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