

Emmett Burgess  
825 N 60 E  
American Fork, UT 84003  
307-797-1732  
emmett.burgess@gmail.com

about 73000 words

THE LONE AND LEVEL SANDS

by

Emerson Grey

## CHAPTER ONE

### Desert and Mountain

Shifting sands slid through the rib cage of the skeletal cow. It reminded Tarlos of his brother. He had sat to rest his tired legs on the small hillock when the loose earth fell away to reveal the dead animal. Small bits of fur clung to the bones on strips of dried leather. Its jaw gaped wide open, and its neck was bent backward. The legs reached out in a sort of running position, like a dog that dreams of running through a field while sleeping on its side. Its death must have been slow and painful. It most likely died of thirst.

Thirst.

*I am thirsty.*

He tipped his water bag to his mouth, using a bent elbow to lift it. He let the water only just past his lips before pulling back. He was not sure how much longer it would take him to reach the mountain, and the hide bag was almost empty. There was no water here in the middle of the desert.

Tarlos knelt beside the cow skull and stared into its empty eye sockets. He narrowed his own eyes, allowing the anger to well up inside him.

*Hello Krastos.*

He traced the cow's jaw with a dry finger. He imagined the sticky saliva on its once full lips. He could see it standing. Walking. Breathing. It bellowed in the desert, letting its presence be known. Its heart beat, its tail swished the flies away, and sweat ran over its back and down its shoulders. One day it was alive. The next day it was dead.

*How seamlessly life leads to death.*

The ground beneath it was dry and hard with the perfect cow hide impression in the packed earth. Tarlos could count individual hairs. He had no way of knowing how long ago this cow died, but the image in the ground erased all sense of time between him and the living animal.

He shook his head. So much evidence of life, or the absence of life, right before his eyes. Would anyone or anything remember this cow? Tarlos doubted it. But he would.

The cow's jaw was long and white, lined with thick square teeth that clung to the bone. Some of the teeth had loosened over time, yellowed, or disappeared entirely. Tarlos poked at them, feeling how loose or intact they were, and one fell freely from the jawbone. It was a larger tooth and oddly shaped. Instead of flat and smooth for grinding plants, this tooth was sharp with a deep chip in its side. Tarlos picked it up and felt the chipped tooth with his thumb, made a fist over it, and dropped it in his pocket.

He stood, and he clapped the dirt from his hands. The bleached white skeleton would always be a part of him so long as he kept the tooth. It was once a living, breathing animal. Now it was a fading memory. "My condolences," said Tarlos.

The desert stretched out behind him and ahead of him, and in every direction where it met with the horizon, merging in the distance with the grey-blue sky. Tarlos grew up here, but his home had food and water, and this desert outside of Kesh was cursed and barren. It had not rained since he began his journey. He lost track of how many days that was. Possibly thirty.

He carried with him two skins of water. One had been empty for two decans. Each time he thought about taking a drink from the second bag, he forced himself to think about other things. The water must be saved for when he could not continue without it.

*Tonight, when I bed down, I'll have another drink.*

Shar-shu-ma, Shar's Mountain, rose in the distance. The air shimmered in the heat and played tricks on the mind. When Tarlos first saw the mountain, he thought it must have been a mirage. But there was no doubt about it, in the last few days the mountain had grown larger and its image had become clearer. He was getting closer.

Tarlos's feet and legs ached, and sometimes he could barely walk at all. He was not used to having to walk such a distance. Being a Holder, he never had to. He fingered the tooth in his pocket and pulled it out, laying it flat in his hand. He was tired, and his mind needed focusing, but he managed to lift the tooth from his palm with a little effort. The tooth hovered a few inches above his hand, and it wriggled a bit before dropping back into his grip. It seemed so long ago that he was able to do that with his own body; when there were entire days that his feet never touched the ground. When was the last time he had flown? He could not remember. Before Krastos died, surely. Perhaps in the fight against Bawa.

Tarlos closed his eyes against a flash of violent memory, and his feet carried him farther.

*I miss it. The wind in my eyes, screaming past my ears. Seeing the world so tiny below me.*

He dropped the tooth into his pocket and looked ahead to the mountain. It resembled his tooth. What may have once been a triangular peak was now cracked down the middle, creating a V-shape. Every morning for the last several days, Tarlos had watched the sun rise, stretching forth from that V in the peak. It was Shar's doorway into the living world from the dead country.

Tarlos was envious of those who lived beneath the mountain, in that country from which no man returns. At least they were at rest. They did not get thirsty or hungry. Here in the living world, there were only sore feet, sand, and skeletons.

A small dusty whirlwind passed in front of him, and he paused to watch it. It was beautiful in an odd way, twisting and silent. He saw them sometimes when the days were especially hot and dry. He wondered how many there were in the vast stretches of the desert that he missed every day.

The sun beat down on him as he made one step after another. All the while the mountain in the distance loomed over the desert. He would get to that mountain if it was the last thing he ever did.

His feet screamed in hot pain and his thighs cramped and called for rest. Tarlos thought about what awaited him if he could only make it through the Tunnel of the Sun and the dead country beyond.

As the day went on, Tarlos forgot about his promise to save his water for emergencies. Or maybe, this was an emergency. He touched his lips to the water twice more and made a silent prayer that there would be water on the mountain.

*Why would there be? The mountain belongs to the gods, and the gods don't drink water.*

He hoped for it nevertheless. Hope was all he had, other than his ragged clothes, and his meager provisions.

*And a tooth.*

He must not forget his tooth.

He rested during the hottest part of the day when Shar was the highest, and he pushed as far as he could until the sun set behind him and the desert turned a dark shade of purple. Above, the stars blinked, silently watching him.

When the day ended, Tarlos did not bother to build a fire. There was nothing here to burn anyway. He slept in the open and chilly desert air with his bent arm as a pillow and the sky as his blanket.

The last three miles were the most difficult. He lost track of the time he had spent in the desert so far, but he felt every step of that last stretch to the mountain. The last of his water bags had emptied and dried completely the day before. His mouth was full of dry cotton. He tried to swallow, but there was no saliva in his parched mouth and he gagged on his fat tongue. The beginnings of sores dotted the inside of his mouth, behind his lips, and in his cheeks.

It had been three days since the cow. At least, he thought it was. Time was hard to keep track of. He gripped the tooth in his pocket and pressed on.

The mountain was now taller than he had imagined it was, and it stood over him in an angry brooding way. *How dare you come to me*, it seemed to say. Tarlos craned his neck and looked at the peak: two points that cut the sky above. The sun rose from between them, from the dead country. The sight made him dizzy, and he stumbled backward. For a moment the loss of balance brought back a memory, and he slapped his hands to the sides of his face until Krastos's frown left his mind.

*You're here*, came the voice of his twin brother. *Now what?*

"Be quiet, you're dead," Tarlos said. His dry and cracked voice didn't sound like his own.

Brittle grass grew on the gentle sloping foothills. The area around the mountain was a strange island in this ocean of sand, and the off-yellow of the prickly grass was stark against the monotone tan of the desert that surrounded it. The mountain lightened in color as grass gave way to rocks, white as bone. It all seemed alien. Tarlos did not linger. There was grass here, brittle and yellow though it was, and that meant one thing.

He heard the trickle and smelled the water before he saw it. The sound and scent woke his exhausted and dehydrated mind, and he jumped to search for it.

A dry crack in the earth ran down the foothills from the mountain, and thicker bunches of the brittle grass grew along the sides of the crack. Tarlos crouched low to it and placed his hands in the dirt.

It was dry and cool. There must be water just beneath the surface. He could hear the trickle, but he could not see it. He stood, not bothering to dust his legs off and clap the dirt from his hands. His mouth gaped, and he did not notice it. His tongue clicked dryly in his mouth. He followed the trickle up the hill. That sweet sound—it was like bells.

It led him farther up the hills, and the grass grew a mote greener there. He kept the trickling to his left, and he followed the sound of it ever onward. He jogged, then he walked, then he slowed to a shamble. At last, he fell to the ground in a crawl, and he followed still on his hands and knees until the sound was right below him.

Right below him? He could hear it. He could smell it. He could almost taste it. The air closest to the ground was just the tiniest bit cooler. Tarlos pulled at the grass and dug at the dirt with his chewed fingernails.

The water was there, and the sound was sweet. His tongue flopped in his mouth as he took scoop after scoop of dirt from the ground, closer and closer to the water.

Perhaps eight inches into the ground, Tarlos stopped digging. He could hear the water just beneath. It could not be much farther.

He dug in another place just right of the first hole. He yanked at the grass and clawed at the dirt. He dug ten inches, and the ground was dry.

He dug a third time. Dry.

A fourth and a fifth. Both dry.

All the while the sound and smell of water surrounded him. Tarlos's temples pounded, his mouth was numb, and his head spun.

*Now what*, came the voice of Krastos.

"Be quiet, you're dead," Tarlos tried to say, but the words came from his parched mouth garbled and incomprehensible.

There was no water here. Tarlos rolled onto his back and looked up at the split peak above him. The white rock face of the mountain was tinted pink in the late afternoon. He grimaced at it, then looked west to the sun. It was a few hours yet until dusk, and it was the hottest part of the day.

"Damn you, Shar," he meant to say. The slurred speech that met his ears offended the very thought of language.

"And why do you say that?" asked a voice.

Tarlos's heart was already exhausted, and the voice made it leap in his chest. He closed his eyes and gasped at the sudden rush of adrenaline. He was dehydrated, probably dying, and the gods had made him hear the voice of a young boy before he died. He could not guess why.

"Are you asleep?" asked the voice. Tarlos opened his eyes and forced them to roll to the left where the voice came from. The hazy shape of a small person appeared beside him, and Tarlos blinked a few times. It was a boy, a very young one. Perhaps ten years old, not yet an adolescent. "Can you hear me?"

"Who are you?" Tarlos rasped.



"Father never gave us names," said the boy. "At least none we wanted to keep." He was naked but for a white tunic around his waist. "Everyone just calls us 'the twins.' Are you thirsty?"

Tarlos nodded. The boy reached into a small pocket in his tunic and took a silver cup from it, the size of a cedar nut. He dipped it in the empty hole Tarlos had dug, and Tarlos groaned.

"Wuh..."

"Here you go." The boy gave the small cup to Tarlos, taking care not to spill it.

Tarlos narrowed his eyes at the cup and then at the boy.

"Do you want it or not? You think getting water is easy? Here." The boy pressed the cup to Tarlos's lips. Tarlos's eyes widened as he tasted cool, clear water.

He took the cup from the boy and tipped it back. Water, fresh and clean, gushed into his mouth and down his throat. His shriveled tongue soaked it in, the sores on his cheeks and on his gums screamed at its touch, but he wanted more. Tarlos ignored the pain. It was hard to give it notice over the heavenly feeling of water in his throat and gut.

After several long seconds of drinking, Tarlos brought the little silver cup away from his mouth to breathe. He looked into it and saw that it was only half-empty.

"Is this magic?" he asked the boy. His voice was a broken whisper, but at least he could enunciate again.

"It's water," the boy answered. "What did you say before?"

Tarlos took another long drink, and he relished in the ecstasy of quenched thirst. "When?"

"Before. You cursed the sun. Why?"

Tarlos shrugged. "He never did anything good for me, I guess." He handed the cup back to the boy, and it disappeared into his little pocket.

"Have you met him?" the boy asked.

"Shar? No. I don't plan to, either."

"He never wanted to meet us," said the boy, "even though we guard his precious gate." He smiled at Tarlos, a strange and somehow half-given gesture.

"Who else is here?" Tarlos asked. "Your parents? Where do you live?"

"It's just my sister and me. Father left us."

Tarlos scanned the area. There were no signs of a camp or provisions for living. "Has he been gone long?"

"I think it might be coming up on ten thousand years now. But I really don't keep count."

Tarlos straightened in his sitting position and took a better look at the boy. The water worked its way through his body, and his head cleared. Sitting in front of him, the boy was average in almost every way. He was no older than twelve, wearing a common loose tunic. His hair was black, curly, and cropped short to his head. There was no dirt on his face or hands, although he was barefoot and sat on the ground.

Before Tarlos was rehydrated, he had not noticed that the boy's eyes were entirely black with no whites. They were dark like obsidian, empty like the night sky, and if there was any light within them the light was sad.

"You're a jinn," said Tarlos. "A child of Ablis."

"Yes, my sister and me." The boy smiled again, and darkness hung in his eyes. "She's up at the gate. I should be there too. Would you like to meet her?"

"The gate," Tarlos said. "You mean Shar-shu-ka? The way to...the other side?"

"The Scorpion Gate." The boy nodded. "Of course. Come, I'll show you. Can't go through it, of course. Only Shar and Moresh do that. But you can look just the same."

The boy rose and gestured to follow. As Tarlos stood, his knees and spine crackled. The boy led him the rest of the way up the foothills until they came to a sheer rock face that was the start of Shar's Mountain.

"This way." The boy walked around a large outcropping of rock, and behind it was a narrow path that wound upward until it disappeared behind the other side of the mountain.

Tarlos followed. The boy was small and thin, and he jogged without effort through the narrow rock canyon. Tarlos struggled in the tighter places. He sucked in his breath and squeezed between the walls.

The path ended at the top of the mountain, almost at the split peak. It opened up into a small green clearing, bordered on one side by a large flat wall of tan rock. It was more than a four-hour hike, and Tarlos sat down to rest.

"Are you thirsty?" the boy asked. "I only ask because we hardly ever do. Get thirsty, I mean."

Tarlos nodded. In truth, he was fine without another drink, but he had no idea when he would again be able to fill his water bags, and he doubted the boy would give him the magic silver cedar nut to keep.

The boy knelt in the grass, which Tarlos ventured to call a proper green, and he dug a small hole in the dirt with his hand. He dipped the tiny cup in and handed it to Tarlos. Again, Tarlos stared at the cup, and he did not believe that it held so much water within a few visible drops. He was grateful for it, and he took a long drink.

He gave the cup back and said, "Was that a gift from your father?"

The boy almost laughed. He opened his mouth into a splitting grin as he hid the silver cup away in his white tunic. His teeth were small and sharp, and there were dozens of them. "Father never did anything to us except give us to Shar to guard the gate. No, we have our own power. What little we were born with, anyway."

Four short trees grew in the small clearing, and the trees were covered in broad green leaves. Tarlos guessed that there must be water beneath the ground for the trees and grass to grow so green. He wanted that tiny silver cup.

The boy shouted into the trees, "We have a visitor!"

The leaves rustled on the branches, and a small pale girl the same size and apparent age as the boy dropped down to a low branch. She hung there, upside down, her legs hanging onto the tree. Her arms fell down over her head, and her black hair fell longer still. She regarded Tarlos with curiosity and dropped down to the ground with a flip. She landed soft on her small feet and stood beside her brother.

"Who is this?" she asked, staring at Tarlos. Her voice was hardly a whisper, and her brother lowered his own voice as he spoke to her.

"He came from the desert," he said. "I haven't asked what his name is."

"What is your name?" the girl asked. Her eyes were as black and solemn as her brother's.

Tarlos hesitated. "My name is Tarlos."

"Why are you here?" asked the girl. "Why have you travelled so far over miles of desert? Tell me."

Tarlos's neck stiffened and he pulled his head back. "None of your business, jinn."

The boy scratched his chin and mumbled to himself. "Tarlos." He turned to his sister. "Does that name sound familiar to you?"

The girl nodded. "Tarlos, son of Ninsun?"

Tarlos drew back at the sound of his mother's name. "How did you—"

"Oh, we know all about your family back in Kesh," said the boy. Both he and his sister smiled. "Your mother Ninsun...sorry about that, by the way. She was a wonderful queen and a lovely woman. So we've heard on the wind."

"And your brother," said the girl, and she stepped closer to Tarlos. Tarlos wrinkled his nose and leaned away. "Krastos, was it? Oh yes, we know all about him, too." She giggled, and Tarlos felt the bile in his stomach rise.

"Sorry about him," the boy said. "I wish I could say I know how you feel, to lose a sibling. But we're both immortal, and we don't know any of our father's other children."

Tarlos did not respond. He had no desire to speak of his mother or his brother to anyone, much less these jinn. He pointed to the split peak.

"How do I get up there?" he asked.

The jinn followed his finger and looked at the peak.

"Why would you want to go up there?" asked the boy.

"I need to get through. To the other side."

"Why? Are you dead?"

"No."

"Are you a god?"

"No."

"Then you can't." The boy shrugged in an apologizing manner. "Rules are rules."

"Are you trying to rescue your mother and brother?" the girl asked. "That's very chivalrous of you, but I'm afraid it doesn't work like that."

Tarlos shook his head. "I'm going for myself, and not for the dead country, but for what lies beyond."

"The Ageless," whispered the boy. He held his sister's hand and sneered. "You're looking for the Ageless. Trying to figure out how they got eternal life and see if you can't do the same. I can save you the trip. You can't."

The boy laughed, and the girl joined him. Their little bodies shook as they laughed, and Tarlos had to look away. The sound was painful and sick in his ears. They were not human children, he reminded himself. They were demons. Children of Ablis, the Discarded One. Half-siblings to the monster that killed his mother and brother.

Tarlos said, "My business is not your concern, jinn. I'm going through that mountain, with or without your permission."

"Oh no," said the boy, and he wiped a tear from his obsidian eye. "It's not a question of whether you have our permission or not. You simply *can't* go through the mountain."

"I don't care about the rules."

"I didn't say *may not*. I said *cannot*. Do you see that peak?" The boy pointed.

Tarlos nodded.

"What comes out of that peak every morning?"

Tarlos lifted his hands in a half-shrug. "The sun, of course. Shar, father of gods."

"And how long does it take for him to climb through the earth every night?"

"It depends on the season, but this time of year I'd say about eight hours."

The boy nodded and his sister held onto her brother's arm and giggled. The sound sent a clammy shiver up Tarlos's back and neck.

"If it takes the father of gods eight hours to make the journey, how long do you think it would take you, son of Man, before he finds you in his passage and burns you to something less than ash?"

The boy lifted one eyebrow and smirked. "You'd have to be able to fly to have a chance of making it."

Tarlos smiled back at him. "But I can fly."

The smirk left the boy's face, and the girl stopped giggling. "I suppose that would make sense," he mumbled. "You are the son of Lakaeus, after all." He shook his head. "I still don't understand what you could possibly have to gain by crossing the dead country. There's nothing useful for you there. Why don't you just go home? Back to Kesh, your kingdom, your people. I'm sure they miss you. Don't you have any children? A wife?"

Tarlos swallowed, and he felt heat rise through his throat. "Are you going to show me the way through the mountain or not? I've wasted enough time as it is. Maybe I should be going."

"No!" the girl screamed, still clinging to her brother's arm. She looked at her brother and said, "This man is driven by despair. He's exhausted and burnt by the desert. Look at him. He can barely stand. He's been so brave to have come this far. We have to help him."

The boy nodded in agreement. "I've never seen such a desperate man. You're dedicated to your goal, then, Tarlos? To cross the dead country and find the Ageless?"

Tarlos gave a single nod.

"And you know that they probably can't help you with your problem? Whatever that may be."

"That's for me to find out," said Tarlos. "Where is the way?"

The boy sighed and turned around. The girl lowered her head at Tarlos and stared at him through her long black hair. She turned with her brother, and they faced the sheer tan rock wall that bordered one side of the small clearing. The jinn raised their hands to the wall, and the sunlight shimmered over it.

Tarlos blinked, sure that as the wall began to ripple it was the hot sun playing tricks on his mind. The desert wall warped and moved in tiny waves, and the tan color of the rock lightened to a bone white to match the rest of the mountain. Small spindles of black lines crawled around the wall as if drawn by some invisible hand. They began at the ground and curved upward several feet above the jinns' heads. When the drawing was finished, two scorpions faced each other on the wall with their pincers locked together.

Where the black lines were drawn, the rock began to dissolve, and matter became steam. It boiled away wherever there was black, and soon the wall had been carved and cut away in chunks and fissures, leaving three-dimensional likenesses of the scorpions. Between the creatures' pincers, between their legs and stinging tails, the wall had melted away into holes. Behind them, the mountain was hollow and dark.

Tarlos stared in amazement at the gate that had materialized before him, and the two jinn turned to face him. They both wore malicious grins, exposing several sharp teeth. Their faces were drained and exhausted.

"Rabu-zorak," Tarlos whispered. The Scorpion Gate. He had grown up hearing tales of this magic gate that led to the dead country.

The boy and girl spoke together in one voice, and Tarlos squirmed at the sound.



"The tunnel leads downward into darkness," they said. "All will be black behind and before you and to both sides. You have eight hours to reach your destination. If you do not emerge from the tunnel before Shar enters it in the morning, his fire will engulf you, and there is no refuge from that. May the tunnel of the sun lead you safely to the end of the living world."

The jinn ceased their speech and stepped aside. Between them was the gate, and the stone scorpions vibrated. With a loud *CRACK* they separated from each other at the pincers. They folded outward, and Tarlos stepped back to give them room to open.

Behind him to the west, the sun's last rays were cast onto the desert in lone orange and pink fingers, and Tarlos could almost feel the eyes of Shar on him, daring him to venture into his mountain and see what awaited him.

Tarlos stared into the abyss, and he saw no light at the end of the tunnel.

"I wouldn't waste any time if I were you," the boy said.

"It was nice to have known you," the girl said.

Tarlos ran.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Dead Country

When Tarlos set out on his journey, he had had an idea of how long it might be through Shar's Mountain to the dead country. This is why he did not fly at all as he crossed the desert. Flying cost him almost the same amount of energy as running, though it was his mind that became tired instead of his body. He guessed that the tunnel through the mountain would be a fair distance, but he was wrong.

He thought about Shar's path through the sky, and he thought about the dead country. Surely the dead had sunlight for the same amount of time as the living, as the night is roughly the same length as the day in the living world. So then how far could the tunnel possibly be, if the sun travels the same speed through the sky, not slowing or speeding up, and both the lands of the living and dead have the same length of days? The tunnel must be short, for as soon as a day on one side ends, the day on the other side begins.

But then, what if he was wrong, and a day in the dead country was shorter than in the living world for several hours? Or time was irrelevant on the other side?

Tarlos cast the thought aside, knowing that it did not matter, and he held onto his confidence. He was ready for the task ahead, and he knew he would make it to the other side before it was too late.

As he ran into the tunnel, the Scorpion Gate closed behind him with a heavy thud, and as the holes in the rock between the scorpions melted back into solid rock, the light in the tunnel faded.

Tarlos was not prepared for the darkness.

*This is what it's like to be blind.*

He inched forward with his hands outstretched. There was no light at all, and the darkness was thick like tar. This worried him. If the tunnel was short, he should be able to see light on the other end, the light coming from the dead country. But there was no light, and Tarlos could see absolutely nothing. He walked, and he kept his hands in front of him.

Twice, he found himself walking into the wall on the right side, and he adjusted his course. A few times he waved his hands above his head to guard against low ceilings, but there were none. This made sense; the sun was enormous, and the tunnel must be large enough for it to fit.

He was comforted by this realization, and he thought that if the tunnel was made for the sun, then it was large enough for him to fly if he was careful. Slowly, slowly, he lifted himself into the air, and he remembered that great feeling of weightlessness that he had not experienced since before Krastos died. He could not see the walls or floor of the tunnel, so he could not be sure how high he was. It was disorienting.

It was always a secret pride he kept within himself, knowing how birds and dragons felt to soar hundreds of feet from the ground, seeing huge cities as tiny dots and great forests as green splotches in the red desert sands. In this tunnel, though, there was nothing. As far as he could tell, he was floating in empty space extending forever.

He propelled himself forward, and he kept his hands in front of him all the while. He tried to keep his flight slow, yet faster than he could run, while still being safe from slamming into the rock walls. There was no way to tell how fast he was flying, as there were no landmarks to be seen. The air moving past his ears and waving through his hair was enough to tell him he was advancing quickly, but how quickly was hard to tell.

There was no way to measure time. After what felt like several hours, he began to worry. What if he had seriously miscalculated, and the sun would rise through the tunnel at any moment? There was still no light to be seen at the end, so he could not be close. And yet he knew he had been flying for a while. He pressed on harder and faster, feeling the air whip past him rougher than before.

Hours later, or at least what felt like it, Tarlos was weary. He did not know that he was slowly nearing the floor of the tunnel until his feet grazed the smooth rock. He flinched at the touch of it, and he realized he had been drifting off to sleep.

Tarlos slapped himself across the face. The sound echoed loudly through the tunnel, bouncing back and forth a thousand times before dissipating.

"Get up," he told himself, and his voice joined the echoes.

He lifted a few inches from the ground and then felt that part of his mind give out like a pulled muscle. Tarlos cried out in pain and crumpled to the ground. His temples throbbed, and he pressed the heels of his hands against them, rocking back and forth on his bent legs.

Trying again, he hovered for a moment. He barely cleared the ground before the searing pain of a hot knife pierced his head and he screamed in agony. He fell once more.

*No more flying, then.*

He stood, still pressing his hands against his temples, and swallowed. His mouth was dry. He went to grab for his water bags and felt that they were not there. After a moment's panic, he remembered that he had left them in the clearing with the jinn, and they were empty anyway. They would have only slowed him down. But he needed water. He rammed a fist against his forehead and squeezed his eyes shut.

Tarlos took a few steps forward. His legs were sore, although he had not used them for several hours. He jogged on. No more flying. Only feet from here on.

He had no idea how much time he had left, and so he ran. He kept one arm outstretched ahead of him, the other hand pumped beside him to help his legs push faster and longer.

He guessed he had run for about half an hour before his heart made a funny rushing feeling, and he paused to catch his breath. Sweat poured down his forehead and into his eyes, dripping from beneath his arms and down his back and torso. He bent down, placed his hands on his knees, and puked. Perhaps running so fast for so long without water was not such a good idea after all.

The sun would rise any time, now. He had to move no matter how much it hurt.

He tried to run, but he had stitches on both sides of his belly. His throat was raw, and his dry nose stung to breathe. So he walked, but he kept a brisk pace, and he always kept a hand out in front of him.

Tarlos felt the wind on his face and in his hair. He rubbed his sweaty brow, feeling the breeze cool him, and he thought how amazing it felt to fly. He stopped, remembering that he had been walking for a long time now. He should not be feeling the wind on his face.

But the wind was there. It was faint, but he could feel it on his sweaty forehead, and the ends of his hair flickered.

Tarlos lifted his hands in front of his eyes. It was too dark to see. He brought them closer until they were no more than half an inch in front of his eyes. Unless he was imagining it, he could almost see the faint blurry shapes of his hands. That meant there was light, however small of an amount there was. He was almost there.

He ran, ignoring his screaming sides, his burning throat and lungs. Yes, there was a breeze, and it was picking up.

Farther and farther. *Follow the breeze.*

He ran for a mile before he noticed that he no longer needed to stretch his arm ahead of him. He could see the ground. The light was becoming stronger with the breeze.

A flicker of light twinkled ahead. His breath caught, and he paused to stare down the tunnel. He moved his head from side to side, and the tiny speck of light seemed to blink on and off.

He forced himself on. The end was in sight, and a stiff breeze blew across his face. He closed his eyes and smiled at it, loving the feeling of that fresh air. The light grew brighter, and before he reached the end of the tunnel he had to shield his eyes from its intensity.

The tiny prick of light grew into a tunnel opening as large as the sun, and Tarlos found the energy within himself to sprint.

The cavern opened up to a mountain face, it was almost a mirror image of Shar's Mountain on the other side. Just below the tunnel opening, foothills covered in lush green grass rolled away from its wide foundation. Tarlos reached the opening of the tunnel and collapsed. He rolled down the grassy hill and only stopped himself when he had reached the bottom, well away from the yawning mouth of darkness that he emerged from.

Tarlos panted and swallowed as he lay in the green grass, and he stared upward into the evening sky.

*I'm here. The dead country.*

He reminded himself that no living person had ever reached this place since the creation of mankind, and he took pride in that fact.

Trees with green and yellow leaves surrounded him and lined the foothills that led to the mountain. They shimmered and shook in the breeze, and Tarlos rubbed his face as the wind cooled his burning skin. Above him, the sun was setting.

Shar, the sun god in his fiery chariot, soared over Tarlos and dipped down toward the mountain. The fire of the sun was bright and burning, and Tarlos turned away to save his eyes. When the light in front of his eyelids faded, he opened them and looked at the mountain above him. The tunnel glowed and then faded to black. Shar had moved on, and soon the living world would see the sun once more.

Tarlos did not know what the dead country would look like, but he had imagined something grimmer than what stretched out before him. He had pictured grey skies, cold wind, and sprinkling rain that never let up and never quite became a full shower. He thought the landscape would be painted in tones of brown and grey, and that the sun and stars would always be hidden behind an overcast sky. There would be souls wandering around the place, not having anywhere to go, but desperate to get there anyway.

None of this turned out to be true. There was more life in the dead country than in the desert Tarlos had crossed. A lush green forest began at the mountain slopes and flushed down into a great valley, which was green from horizon to horizon. Although he could see no birds, he could hear them chirping in the distance and in the trees. There were no animals that he could see, but if there were birds then there were certainly other creatures in the forest.

From his vantage point halfway up the mountain, Tarlos saw over the tops of trees and all the way to the edge of the valley. There the mountains fell into flatlands and disappeared into the distance. With the sun gone through the mountain to the living world, the sky was falling into darkness. Tarlos

squinted down into the valley, and his eyes adjusted to the fading light. On the far horizon to the east, Moresh rose. She was almost at full face, and Tarlos was grateful for that.

Down in the valley, perhaps two miles away from the mountain and nested in the foothills, a light flickered through the trees. Tarlos peered through the forest, widening his eyes as much as he could against the dark. There was a white light, and a faint line of smoke floated upward from it to disappear into the sky.

Tarlos made his way down the mountain. The slick rock underfoot transitioned to gravel and grass and then dirt as the trees grew thicker around him.

The birds had stopped singing, and Tarlos assumed it was because they were sleeping.

*Do the dead sleep?*

Tarlos tossed the question around in his mind for a few moments and then cast it aside.

Ahead, the sound of rushing water was growing apparent. Tarlos's pace quickened, and he batted away low-hanging branches and kicked at the waist-high ferns and conifers. The moon was bright, and Tarlos found that it was easier to see at night in the dead country than it was in the living world.

Water streamed a few feet away when Tarlos stopped. Whatever water he was hearing could only be one thing. He would have to see it to confirm his theory.

It was a river, and the rapids it made were in a small stretch of it. The water bubbled up over rocks, creating small eddies and white foam. The river was about twenty feet across, and to the left and right Tarlos could see that it was much deeper than in this section.



At the sight of the water, which appeared to be fresh and clean, and at the feel of the cool mist on his face, Tarlos felt his thirst more than ever. He wanted nothing more than to plunge his sunburned head into the river and drink long and deep.

*But it would kill me. This is the Styx. This is the river Ilshu uses to ferry the dead to his country.*

The water was tempting, and Tarlos licked his dry and cracked lips as he stared into it and listened to it bubble over the rocks. He held himself back. He had not come all this way to kill himself in the Styx.

The white light he saw while on the mountain was on the opposite shore, just beyond the tree line. The clear outline of a building broke through the forest, and the shadow of smoke rising from its chimney. He looked up and down the river, searching for a bridge. If there was one, it was not close by.

Keeping the river on his right, he walked upstream. He would not get lost as long as he stayed within sight of the Styx.

To his left, in the forest, a cricket chirped. Tarlos paused and turned to the sound. The cricket chirped again, and Tarlos raised a corner of his mouth in a half-hearted smile. He had heard nothing but birds since arriving in the dead country, and he did not know how long it had been before then that he had heard anything but the calls of vultures. He entered the forest, and he kept his eye on the river. The cricket chirped again.

A tree with round green leaves stretched high into the night sky, and the stars shone through its branches. At the base of the tree was a boulder, flat on the sides and the top. Tarlos crouched beside it. A small green cricket sat still. Its tiny antennae wiggled at his presence, and the cricket chirped again.

"Are you alone?" Tarlos whispered.

The cricket sprang away, disappearing into the undergrowth. Tarlos frowned and shrugged. Now he knew that there really was life here, and that was something he would never have imagined.

He moved to stand and caught sight of something on the boulder. There were marks on it, carved, and the marks were strange letters that Tarlos did not recognize. But although he did not know the foreign writing, he could read it.

*John Talbot was here*

Tarlos's eyes narrowed, and he ran his hand over the carved sentence. A cricket chirped behind him, and he stood and turned. The river rushed before him, and the moonlight glinted in the water. A small footbridge, only a few feet wide, stretched from the near shore to the far bank. Tarlos was sure it was not there a moment ago. The cricket was nowhere to be seen.

He walked across the bridge, listening to the Styx rush away beneath. On the other shore, Tarlos stepped off the bridge and looked around. A small sign sat to his right, sunk into the ground on a long post. He stepped closer to read it. There were two words:

*Windmill District*

## CHAPTER THREE

## Tavern and Boat

The building sat at the edge of the trees several yards from the riverbank. It was wooden, two stories, with a few windows in the front and a wood porch and steps leading up to the door. Orange light from a fire glowed through the windows on the first floor, and shadows crossed on the inside. Hanging above the door was a sign written with more strange letters that Tarlos did not know, and yet he could understand them.

*Tavern*

Tarlos looked around. There was no one around the building. He was standing on a dirt path, wide enough for a cart to pass over, and the lane led up and down the river. Upstream, Tarlos could just make out the shadowed shapes of more buildings in the dark, within the cover of the trees. They were smaller than the tavern, and smoke rose from a few of their chimneys. The smokeless buildings were devoid of any light in the windows.

He climbed the steps and approached the door of the tavern. The handle was strange to him. It was not brass, as were all the door handles in Kesh. This one was round and brown, shiny with use, sticking directly from the wood like a growth. He touched it. It was cool and hard. Metal. He grasped it, feeling the cool metal in his palm, and he tried to move it down; that was how all door handles in Kesh worked. But this one did not slide down. He bit his lip and twisted it instead, and it gave way with no hesitation. There was a click, and the door swung inwards with a low and slow creak.

The smell hit him first. Most of it was smoke from the fire that bellowed in the hearth in the wall. Above the fire was a rack with garments hanging over it, dripping dry. There was the sour smell

of alcohol in the air, though it was like no alcohol he had smelled before. The bitter sensation was stronger than the mead and beer he was used to in Kesh. But the aroma of drink reminded him of his dry throat, and his thirst returned stronger than ever.

And then there was the perfume of cooking food. A counter near the back of the tavern was covered in dirty plates, and there were leftover bits of food on them. There was a door behind the counter that swung freely on a hinge, and more whiffs drifted from whatever room was behind it. Meat, vegetables, bread, and fruit were the scents that Tarlos recognized best. There were more, but he had no labels in his mind for them.

The tavern was one big room, and more than a dozen tables were littered around the place. Tarlos guessed that on a busy night, this tavern could hold more than a hundred people. Tonight, however, there were only a few. One man sat in a far corner, farthest from the counter, with a wide-brimmed hat that hung low on his head, shading his face. He was drinking an amber-colored liquid from a large clear cup. Another man and woman sat at a table in the center of the room, and they seemed to be enjoying a plate of meat with what appeared to be small carrots and brown sauce. Tarlos's mouth watered at the sight and smell of it.

A woman stood behind the counter, rubbing a transparent cup with a small towel. She was the only one who looked up at Tarlos as he entered the tavern.

"Welcome," she said, waving the hand that held the towel. She jerked her head to the side.

"Come on, have a seat."

Tarlos said nothing as he stepped toward the counter, weaving between the tables. None of the other people looked at him as he passed.

He sat on a cushioned stool and placed his arms on the counter. He looked at the woman and wondered what part of Edorath she came from. Her hair was brown and thick, and it fell in waves over her shoulders. Her nose was small and freckled, and her brown eyes were lined with dark eyelashes. Her lips were full, and her face was round and childlike. She was not as tall as Tarlos, but he felt that she carried with her an air of authority regardless of her physicality.

"Hungry?" she asked. She set the cup and towel to the side and smiled at Tarlos.

He nodded. "More thirsty than hungry. What is that?" He pointed at the strange cup.

She glanced at it. "What?"

"That...cup."

"What do you mean, what is it?"

"What's it made out of?"

She raised an eyebrow as she smiled and flicked the cup with her finger. It gave a small delicate ring, and Tarlos leaned back in surprise.

"They don't have glass where you come from, huh?" she said. "You want some water? You look like you need it."

Tarlos nodded, and the woman held the glass cup under a small metal pipe. She twisted a knob on top, and water gushed into the cup. She handed it to him, and he drank slowly. The water was delicious.

When the cup was half-empty, he paused and stared at it. "Where does this water come from?"

"The spring, a few miles away. Why?"

He shrugged. "Just making sure." But he knew that if the water had come from the Styx, he would be dead already. He gave the empty glass cup back and asked for another, and the woman complied.

"Hungry?" she asked again.

"Yes, I'd like some meat. Do you have boar?"

She laughed, and the laugh was sweet and friendly. It made Tarlos smile, although he was also confused about why she laughed at all.

"How about a burger?" she asked him, then disappeared behind the swinging door.

Tarlos did not know what a burger was, but he waited patiently for it as he sipped at his second cup of water. He chanced a glance behind him at the others. The man drank alone in the corner, and the couple ate their meal.

The woman came back a few minutes later with a white plate. She set it on the counter in front of Tarlos. He stared at the thing she had brought him.

"What is this?" he asked. He poked the top. It felt like bread, but it was wrinkled and covered in small seed-things. There was some kind of meat between the bread, but the other things that were there he was not sure about.

"They don't have burgers there, either?" she replied. She shook her head. "Man, where *did* you come from? Or I guess the better question would be *when*?"

Tarlos raised an eyebrow. "I don't understand." He picked up the bread on top of the pile and smelled it. There was yellow and red slime on the other side, and he grimaced at it.

"It's just ketchup and mustard. I hope that's okay." The woman turned to grab another dirty cup and began cleaning it with her small towel. "Who doesn't like ketchup and mustard on their

burger? I guess someone who's never had one. Don't eat it like that! Here." She set her cup and towel down and slid the plate over to her side of the counter. "You don't mind cooties, do you?"

Tarlos did not know what a koo-dee was, so he shook his head. The woman grabbed the burger in her hands, keeping the slices of bread on each side of the innards. She brought it to her mouth.

"Like this." She mimed biting and chewing, then gave the burger back to Tarlos.

He grabbed it as she had and brought it to his mouth. It seemed too thick to fit, but he opened his jaws wide and did his best. He bit down, feeling the soft crunch of the green vegetable and the hot juice of the meat, which he guessed was beef. There were other tastes he could not identify, but they blended well, and he chewed and swallowed. His stomach roared with hunger.

"Good, huh?" the woman asked. "Better than McDonald's, anyway." She went back to cleaning her cups.

Tarlos nodded, not sure what she was talking about. He ate his burger in silence. He had no idea how hungry he was until he tasted this food, and he realized he had not eaten anything for several days. Perhaps more than a decan.

The woman set the glass cup on a shelf beside her which held dozens of others. She smiled at Tarlos and narrowed her eyes a bit as she inspected him.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Tarlos almost laughed. Instead, he returned her smile and shook his head. "No, I'm not okay. Not yet."

She nodded. "You look...well, you don't look good. Usually when people come here, they look refreshed and sort of...refurbished. Know what I mean?"

"Yes." He did not know what refurbished meant, but he understood her. His cheeks were hollow. His face was frost-chilled from the cold nights and sunburned from the hot days, and his arms were thin and tired. And of course, there was the depression. He had carried it with him since Krastos died, and it sat heavily on his shoulders and made him slouch. He knew he must have been a sight.

He finished his burger, and the woman took the plate away to the back room. When she returned, she reached beneath the counter and brought up a green glass bottle. She used a special metal tool to pop the lid off, and she gave it to Tarlos.

"I think you need a beer," she said.

Beer was something Tarlos knew. He drank with eagerness. After a few gulps, he took the bottle from his mouth and looked at it. He smacked his lips.

"This isn't like any beer I've had before."

The woman asked, "Is there a lot of beer where you come from?"

"We invented it."

He drained the bottle, and the woman gave him another. Before she could take the lid off with the metal tool, Tarlos raised a hand. "Please, I'm already very tired."

She smirked and put a hand on her waist. "It's not like you can get drunk or anything. Go on, it's free. In life I'd never turn down a free drink."

Tarlos nodded and took a sip from the second beer. He cracked his neck, which was painfully sore, and he rolled his shoulders to try and relax his muscles. All at once his body reminded him of how exhausted it was, and Tarlos let out a heavy sigh.

He took the tooth from his pocket and held it in his open palm. It hovered a few inches above his hand and spun slowly in the air before dropping.



The woman stared. "That's some trick."

"It's not a trick. I'm a Holder."

The woman seemed nonplussed. She looked at the tooth with fascination, and she did not blink. "Where did you get that?" she asked. She ran a finger through her thick brown hair, pushing a loose strand behind her ear.

"I found it in the desert."

"When?"

"A few days ago, I guess. Maybe a decan. Why?"

She shrugged, still staring at the tooth. "It looks familiar."

"Teeth do look similar."

"I guess. What's a decan?"

"Ten days," he said, and then asked, "What's your name?"

She looked up from the tooth and into Tarlos's eyes. "You're new here," she said. "You have a lot to learn. Wait a minute—" As Tarlos put the tooth back in his pocket, the woman put a hand on the side of her face and her eyes grew wide. "How do you have that with you? You don't get to bring anything with you. That's impossible."

Tarlos licked his lips and took another sip of beer. "Listen," he said. "This is going to be strange to you, but you should know."

The woman nodded. "I know." She gave Tarlos a friendly smile and patted his hand on the counter. "It's not easy for anyone. You come down here, you have no idea where you are or who you are, no idea how you got here. It gets easier with time. Eventually your memories come back and you

get to remember your life. But not your name. That's lost forever. Maybe it makes it easier knowing we all had to go through it at some point."

Tarlos looked down at the woman's hand. It reminded him of another hand he liked to hold in the privacy of his room back in Kesh. He pulled his own away. "I see what you are getting at. But there's something else."

The woman nodded her head, "What's that?"

"Well, I'm not dead."

The woman stepped back and made a short noise through her nose that sounded like a laugh. "That doesn't..." She shook her head. "I mean, it usually takes a few days to know that you *are* dead, and that this is purgatory. It's common not to believe you're dead at first, but...how did you know what I was talking about anyway?"

Tarlos squeezed the glass bottle in his hands. It was cold in his dry cracked palms, and perspiration ran down the neck of the bottle. "Because I know where I am. I've never heard the word *purgatory* before, but I know what this is. I know you're dead, and they're dead." He threw a finger behind him, indicating those who were eating and drinking at the tables. "But I'm not dead. And if I can help it, I never will be."

The lock of hair behind the woman's ear came loose once more and she pushed it behind her ear again. "I got some bad news for you. You are dead. No one thinks so at first. That's normal, so don't feel bad. You get used to it. Really, being dead isn't all that different from being alive. We still have the same food, and the company isn't bad. Don't believe me? What's your name, then? Can't remember, can you? None of us can. That's part of being dead."

"My name is Tarlos."

The color fell from the woman's face, and she held her tongue between her teeth. She stepped back.

Tarlos continued, "My father was Lakaeus and my mother was Ninsun, king and queen of Kesh. My twin brother was Krastos. They're all dead. I'm not."

The woman said nothing for several seconds. Her eyes were wide and white, and her lips were pressed together in a thin line. She kept her distance from Tarlos. "If that's true, how did you get here?"

"I went through Shar's Mountain."

"Where is that?"

"At the edge of the desert, where the sun rises. It opens up not far from here. Haven't you seen it?"

She shook her head, and the hair behind her ear fell again. "I grew up in Oregon. Newport. There was definitely no desert there. Not on that side of the state, anyway."

It was Tarlos's turn to look confused, and he leaned back a bit in his stool. "Where is Org-en?"

She came back to the counter and to Tarlos, and she placed a hand on his. She gave it two soft pats and said, "I know this is a lot to take in. It's better to just accept it. I don't know how you remember your name and the names of your family members, but..." She looked around the tavern, at the people eating, drinking, and speaking in low tones. "Trust me, it'll all make sense eventually."

"I'm not dead," Tarlos said. "I'll never die."

"Oh? How's that?"

"On the far side of this country, at the end of the Styx, is the Ageless country. I will find the Ageless and discover their secret to immortality."

She nodded. "Well, I've never heard of anyone who lived forever. Except gods. I guess if that's what you feel like would be the best thing..." She shook her head and sighed. "I can't imagine that, though. Living forever. I had a good, full life. I honestly feel satisfied and rested now."

Tarlos took another drink. "If you had been what I've been through, you would say different."

The woman laughed. She threw her head back and let out three huge guffaws. She ran a hand over her face and through her long brown hair.

"I could tell you stories from my life," she said. "Not to discredit what horrible things you've no doubt been through—I'm not saying your life hasn't sucked—but I had myself a doozy. More pain and heartbreak than anyone should ever have to go through."

Tarlos nodded in understanding.

"But," she continued, holding up a finger, "I would never want to live forever. Even if it meant I could right all the wrongs that happened in my life."

Tarlos said, "I don't think you understand, then. Have you ever actually known someone who died? Have you seen their dead husk and tried to shake them awake, knowing they will never breathe again or speak your name?"

The woman stared at him, unblinking, unsmiling. Her eyes glazed over as if her memories were flashing over her face in a river of images, and none were pleasant. She said nothing to Tarlos, but she nodded.

Tarlos sighed. "And yet you say you would not want to right those wrongs or live forever."

"Tarlos..." She turned away for a moment, picked up another glass cup and began cleaning it. "People are born. They live, they die. That's just the way of things. Until the end comes, you should just enjoy your life. Sure, mourn those you lose, but don't lose your own life over them. Eat good food,

take hot bubble baths, dance and sing and love..." She inspected the cup in her hands and nodded.

"That's what you should be doing."

She set the cup down. "I wish I had done more of that, honestly. It's funny, when it's all over, what you really regret is not doing more of the little things."

Tarlos asked, "What are you trying to say?" His voice came out louder than intended, and the woman drew back in surprise. "My heart is *sick* for those I've loved, who are gone forever! What you say, it means nothing. I'm going to the Ageless country, and I *will* find the way to immortality. And I will never die as my mother and brother did."

The few others in the tavern turned their heads to Tarlos as he spoke. He could feel their eyes on him, and he lowered his head. The people turned away and continued their conversations, drinks, and meals.

The woman scratched her ear and raised an eyebrow at Tarlos. "Do what you need to do. A person's goals are important, no matter how misconstrued they are."

Tarlos turned his head and scanned the three people in the tavern, then looked back to the woman. "Is there anyone here who can take me down the river? I've travelled a long way, and I'm exhausted. I'd rather take the trip by boat than hike the rest of the way down the riverside. I have no idea how much farther I have to go."

"You're going to the very end of the river?" the woman asked.

"Yes, to the Ageless country. On the other side of the land of the dead, at the end of the Styx."

She turned her head to look at him sidelong. "You sure you're not from Greece?"

"I don't know what that is."

She nodded and took up her cleaning again. She tipped her head to the side, toward the man drinking out of a mug alone in the corner. "That guy has a boat. He trades up and down the river with the other communities. He knows he doesn't have to, because we all have everything we need, but I guess it gives him something to do. I think it reminds him of his life. Maybe he can take you where you need to go, although I've never heard of that place. But maybe he has."

"What's his name?"

She let out a chuckle. "Very funny."

Tarlos moved to stand up from his seat. The woman grabbed him by the wrist before he could go.

"Woah, woah," she said. "You trynna leave tonight?"

"As soon as possible." He tugged his arm free from her grip.

She smiled with sympathy. "I can promise you he won't want to leave now. People around here tend to sleep at night. You told me yourself you're exhausted. There's a spare bedroom upstairs with a shower. Get a good night's sleep and talk to him in the morning."

Tarlos considered this for a moment. "He'll be here?"

"Oh yeah," she said with a nod. "He's here every day for all three meals, and sometimes more often than that, unless he's on the river. Here." She reached below the counter and brought out a key, handed it to Tarlos. It was the smallest key he had ever seen, half the length of his finger, and it was thin, light, and made of silver. "Take a shower and get some sleep. I know you need it."

Tarlos took the key and nodded. "Fine. This is your tavern, so I'll respect your wish."

She patted his hand one more time. Her eyes were deep with memory and experience, and the freckles on her nose stood out as she blushed. Why she reacted that way, Tarlos had no idea. "I just work here," she said. "Goodnight, Tarlos."

Tarlos climbed the steps to the second floor and found the empty bedroom at the end of the hallway. There was a large bed with thick blankets, a dresser, and a table with a single chair. A door led to somewhere in the back of the room, and Tarlos opened it. He recognized the huge white oval bowl to be a tub, although it was much smaller than he was used to. There was a pipe hanging over it, much like the one the woman used to give him a cup of water, and the knobs on it looked similar. He guessed they worked the same way.

He twisted the knobs as he had seen the woman do, and water gushed from the pipe. Tarlos put his hands beneath it, then withdrew them in surprise. The water was hot. A small lever sat on the top, and he moved it back. The water stopped coming from the pipe and instead came from above, turned into a thousand drops of rain through a piece of metal with several holes.

"Must be the 'shower'," Tarlos said to himself. Feeling the warmth of the water, he stripped his clothes off and climbed into the bath. He ran his hands through his matted hair, combing it with his fingers. Not seeing any soap, he scrubbed himself with his hands as best he could. The water became thick and muddy, and it spiraled down the drain. His neck and nose pained in the water, having been sunburned worse than the rest of his body. After it was too late, he wondered if this water came from the same spring the woman had spoken about, or if it came from the river. But if it was from the Styx, he would be dead already.

He twisted the knobs the other way, and the water stopped its flow. He squeezed the water from his hair as best he could. Hanging on the rack on the wall was a blue towel, and he used it to pat himself dry. The towel was warm and soft, softer than any towel he had ever used.

A sort of fold-up knife sat on a basin beside the bath, and he picked it up and tested the edge with his thumb. It was razor-sharp. He ran a hand across his cheeks and chin, feeling the stubble that was growing too long. He used the knife to shave, and he had no more stubble.

The bed beckoned to him, and he climbed into the clean fluffy sheets. The mattress was more comfortable than any bed he had slept on in his life, and the pillow was a cloud beneath his head. He was asleep in less than a minute.

Tarlos woke to the aroma of food cooking. He pulled his dirty shirt on, and his filthy trousers, then laced up his sandals. His hair had been damp when he got in bed, and now it stood out in every direction. He wet it in the bathroom and tamed it as best he could and rinsed his face to wake himself up.

Downstairs, the tavern was filled with dozens of people. They all spoke loudly and excitedly, laughing and moving from table to table, sharing food and drink. Tarlos stopped at the bottom of the stairs. He wondered how many people like this lived here. At a glance, he guessed there were at least a hundred people this morning.

"Tarlos!" called a familiar voice. "Good morning! How'd you sleep?"

Tarlos held up a hand in greeting to the woman behind the counter. She was dealing out plates of steaming food, and the smell made Tarlos's mouth water and stomach grumble. On the counter, there were plates of bread and boiled eggs, and stacks of what looked like thin bread. There were



pitchers of juice, coffee, tea, and milk. Tarlos never imagined that there would be such things in the dead country.

"Hungry?" asked the woman. She waved him over, and Tarlos approached the counter. A man with short brown hair and a long nose smiled at Tarlos and moved aside for him.

"Heard you're the new guy," said the man. His eyes were green. Tarlos had never seen eyes that color.

"I'm just passing through," Tarlos said.

"That's what she tells me." The man clapped Tarlos on the back, and Tarlos's eyebrows knit together. "Well, I gotta get back," the man said. "I hope we get to officially meet soon." He nodded at Tarlos, and Tarlos gave him a weak smile in return. The man grinned at the woman and said, "Later." He left them, disappearing through the crowd.

"Who's that?" Tarlos asked the woman.

"Oh, just a friend from before," she said. "So, what'll it be? Eggs? Bacon? Pancakes? French toast?"

"Um..." Tarlos scanned the plates with the food, recognizing only a few dishes. "What do you like best?"

"Waffles. But we don't have any today, sorry. I'd recommend French toast and raspberry syrup." She made him a plate and poured him a cup of dark coffee. The cup was not glass; it was white and—Tarlos guessed—made of clay, like the cups in Kesh.

"Cream, sugar?" she asked.

Tarlos shook his head, not understanding what she meant, and the woman pushed the plate across the counter to him and handed him an eating utensil. He held it in his fist and gave her a questioning look.

"Man, you really are from the Bronze Age," she said. "It's a fork. You use it to eat with, so you don't get your hands messy. Like this." She took another fork and pretended to eat with it. "I'd really like to know about your homeland and your life, when you have the time to talk."

Tarlos choked down the French toast. It was entirely too sweet for breakfast food, but he did not wish to be rude. He finished his plate before moving to the coffee so it was cool enough to drink.

"Is that man here?" he asked.

"The boatman? I think so." The woman stood on her toes and craned her neck to see over the crowd. "Yep, I see him. He's at his usual table. Looks like he chose pancakes today. He always chooses biscuits and gravy when we have it."

Tarlos thanked the woman for the food, and she took his plate and cup away.

The tavern was crowded, with at least four people to each table, all of them speaking and eating. The place was filled with the sound of utensils on plates, beverages being poured, conversation mixed with laughter. The only table that was not full was in the corner of the tavern, and the boatman sat there alone, poking at his food.

Tarlos navigated his way through the tables, avoiding the chairs that were pushed too far from them, making narrow gaps for Tarlos to squeeze through. Hardly anyone looked up at him, and those who did gave him a friendly smile.

The man who ate alone was wearing a brown hat with a wide brim, and thick-soled boots made of leather. His shirt was plain blue and buttoned down the front, and his trousers were tan and

worn at the knees. He bent over his food, the wide brim of his hat covered his face. Tarlos approached slowly, and he cleared his throat when he reached the table.

The man raised his head, and Tarlos was met with pale blue eyes. Tarlos had seen blue eyes only once before, and something painful tried to rear its head in his mind. He pushed it away. There was stubble on the man's cheeks and chin. His mustache was thick and long, curled up at the ends. He nodded a greeting at Tarlos.

"Have a seat, if you want," he said with a gruff voice. Tarlos took the seat across from him, and the man continued poking at his pancakes and eggs.

"I hear you have a boat," said Tarlos.

The man raised his head once more and pushed his plate away. "I hate eggs. Don't care much for pancakes, neither. I always get biscuits and gravy when I can, but this ain't heaven yet. Yeah, I got a boat. Why?"

"I need to get down the river." Tarlos folded his hands together on the table.

The man sucked his teeth. "Mm-hm. Nothin down there."

"Have you ever been?"

The boatman shook his head. "No, but I been far enough, I guess. Far enough to see that there's no point in going any further."

"I need to get to the end of the river. I have business in the country on the other side of this one.

"You ain't got no business anywhere but here, son," the man grumbled. He picked up a cup of coffee and drank half of it. He sighed and licked his lips, then ran a finger across the handlebars of his mustache. "This is where the good Lord sent you, and you'd do best to accept it and continue your

existence in peace. Ain't no use dreaming about what else is out there. You're dead. What else is there to know?"

"I'm not dead."

The man smirked. "That's what we all think at first. There's no shame in it if you're new here. But it's best to accept it as quick as you can. If you put it off too long, it gets real difficult to let it sink in later. And it always sinks in."

"My name is Tarlos," he said with a stern face. "I came to this country through Shar's Mountain, I'm not dead, and I need to get down that river."

The man raised his eyebrows. For a while, he said nothing. He stared at Tarlos from the shadow of his hat's brim, studying him. After several moments, the man said in a softer voice, "Way is dangerous. The river isn't meant to be floated down by the likes of us. It's for the Reaper, only."

"I understand that you float it regardless."

The man nodded. "Yeah, well, I never was one for keeping the rules. They say the water is poison, but that's never been a concern for me. Might be for you, though."

"It might."

The man stuck his little finger into his mouth and picked something from his teeth, then flicked it away. He looked past Tarlos, into the crowd, and his eyes stayed fixed to something for a moment. Before Tarlos could turn to see what the man was staring at, the boatman spoke.

"You say your name's Tarlos. Are you sure about that? It's no name I've ever heard before."

Tarlos nodded. "Tarlos, son of Lakaeus, king of Kesh."

The man looked back to whatever he was staring at, and this time Tarlos turned to follow the man's gaze. A small woman with olive skin and black hair, and almond-shaped eyes like those who

lived in the Southern Isles, stood reverently at the counter, speaking to the tavern woman. Tarlos looked back to the boatman and saw that he was still staring at the small woman.

"Did you know her when you were alive?" Tarlos asked.

The boatman snapped his gaze back to Tarlos and cleared his throat. He finished his coffee and slammed the empty cup down on the table. He wiped his mustache.

"Listen," he said, "I've been down the river once, not all the way but further than anyone else, I think. I told myself I'd never go again. But..." His eyes flicked up one more time to the counter. The man sighed.

"What?" Tarlos said.

"I never heard of Kesh. And I never met someone here who remembered their name, neither, but it seems like you're telling the truth." He cracked his knuckles, and his knee began to bounce beneath the table. "What the hell, I'm dead anyway. Let's go before I change my mind."

The boat was long, slender, and flat. A box sat on top large enough for them to stand up in, with a bunk, a chair, and a wash basin. Ropes and posts were strewn about the deck, ready to be put to use if there was anything to ship up or down the river.

"Hardly ever go down," the boatman told Tarlos as he untied the mooring line from a small wooden post on shore. He gave the boat a shove out into the water, then jumped aboard as the craft floated away. "Hardly anyone in that direction, anyway. I mostly go upriver. Pain in the ass, really. Gotta push against the current with a pole, and it does get mighty tiring after a while. I always thought that after I died I wouldn't feel tired anymore. I guess that's what I get for being philosophical. Should be fun, though, for the most part. At least I ain't alone this time."

The man sat beside the rudder and steered the boat downstream. Tarlos took a seat on the deck and leaned against the wall of the box-room. He played with the tooth in his pocket.

"So, Tarlos," said the man. "I never heard that name before, and I been everywhere, or pretty much everywhere. America, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, even as far as India in my early years. Where are you from?"

Tarlos took the tooth from his pocket and held it in his palm. "I've never heard of any of those places. I'm from Kesh, in the Fertile Valley."

"Never heard of that, neither. Is it nice there?"

"I suppose."

The tooth floated a few inches above Tarlos's hand and flipped around two or three times before settling back down again. He closed his fist over it and sighed.

"What on Earth?" said the man. He let go of the rudder for a moment to take a step toward Tarlos. He lifted his chin and stared down at Tarlos's closed fist. The rudder turned slightly and the boat jerked. He went back to steady it. "Was that thing just floating?"

Tarlos nodded. "I'm a Holder."

"A what? Did you make that move?"

Tarlos lifted his eyebrows. "You don't know what a Holder is?"

The boatman shook his head. "Enlighten me."

Tarlos took a moment to organize his thoughts, then spoke with reverence. "I've been able to do it since I was twelve. I inherited it from my father, and he got it from his mother, on and on since the first people. The firstborn always inherits the Power."

"Okay," the man said. He tipped his hat back and scratched his forehead. "I guess I've seen stranger things."

"There are four Powers," Tarlos said. He spoke softly now, not really caring whether the man was listening or not. "Space, Creatures, Mind, and Time. But the Power of Mind has been lost since—"

"What does the time power do?" the boatman interrupted.

Tarlos glanced at him and shrugged. "Control time. Speed it up, slow it down. But I don't think they can make it run backwards."

"Hang on," snapped the man. "You're telling me there are people from your world who can slow time." It was more of a statement than a question.

"Yes."

"I'll be damned," he mumbled. "I knew a bunch of people who could do that."

"Do what?" Tarlos mumbled. His eyes closed as he leaned back against the wall.

"Slow time. On my honor, I knew em."

Tarlos opened his eyes. The boatman was grinning, staring off across to the south shore, mindlessly steering the boat at the rudder, bobbing it up and down in the water.

Tarlos said, "You lie."

The man took his eyes from the shore and looked at Tarlos. His smile diminished a bit, the ends of his mustache coming down. "Excuse me?"

"You could not have known people who could slow time. There is only one in each generation. Perhaps you could have known two, a parent and a child, or even also a grandparent. How many did you know?"

"Dozens," the man said. "They were called samurai. They had this thing inside them they called chi, and they used it to slow down or pause time for as long as their strength would let them. I remember there was this one samurai, older than dirt, who could stop time for days, or longer, I don't know. He used it to meditate for hours and hours without losing a second in the real world, and he'd read every book ever written, I'm sure. The man knew more than was good for anyone. Hey, can I see that?" He pointed at Tarlos's pocket.

"The tooth?"

"Yeah."

Tarlos handed it to him, and the boatman held the tooth close to his squinting eyes. His tongue darted between his lips.

"I swear I seen this before," he said with a low voice. "Or at least something just like it." He gave it back. "Pretty, though."

"Strange," said Tarlos. "The woman at the tavern said the same thing."

The boat floated along the Styx quietly and smoothly. The man talked and Tarlos listened. At least, he pretended to listen. Most of the time Tarlos was sure that the man spoke only to hear the sound of his own voice, and that he did not care whether Tarlos listened or not.

*It must be lonely for him, floating the river all the time by himself. He's his only entertainment.*

The man had packed dried meat, bread, and water. There were boxes of fizzy drinks, which the tavern woman gave Tarlos before they left. He did not care much for the bubbly flavored water, as it was too sweet and the bubbles hurt his throat and nose. The boatman had one every hour or so and belched his approval upon completion. By the fourth day, half the boxes of the drinks were gone.



The first time the man threw an emptied drink cup—which was made from a very thin metal that the boatman called "soda"—overboard into the water, Tarlos watched it land in the Styx and begin to melt. It sizzled and boiled, and the metal merged with the water around it and mixed with the Styx, dissolved forever.

"Why doesn't the boat dissolve?" Tarlos asked.

"Nothing makes sense here," the boatman replied.

"What would happen if we touched it?"

The man shrugged as he cracked open another drink. "We'd die, probably."

"But you're already dead."

The boatman swallowed, belched, smacked his lips. "There's dead, and there's dead, and there's dead."

At the end of the fifth day, as the sun set on the dead country, Tarlos realized that he had not heard the boatman's voice in well over an hour. This was strange to him, and he opened his mouth to ask if everything was all right. But the boatman caught his gaze before Tarlos could speak, and he raised a quick finger to his lips.

"You'll wanna be quiet," the man whispered, so softly that Tarlos almost did not hear him.

Tarlos mouthed the word *why*, and the man pointed downstream. The sky was growing dark, and Tarlos had to strain to see where the man was pointing. But the moon was at full face and in view, and the landscape was shrouded in shadow and getting blacker. Tarlos moved to ask the man why it was so dark when he saw that the light of the moon and the stars stopped above the water ahead of them, just about head level. An invisible bubble covered the Styx and its shores, not allowing in any natural light. On the left bank, Tarlos could make out trees and rocks in the fading light. On the right,

he stared into the face of nothingness. Only the faint outline of a building could be seen through the veiled darkness.

The boat came closer as they made their way down the river, and the building enveloped in darkness neared. Tarlos could now see how large the building was. It was the size of the stone temple in Kesh or bigger. It was made of stone, and the back of it merged with a rocky hill behind, giving the impression that the building continued on underground for an unknown distance. Tarlos could almost make out the thick green vines crawling up and clinging to the walls.

The boatman once again held a finger to his lips and held the rudder steady. Tarlos's breath was caught in his chest, and he made no sound as they passed.

Then he heard it. He thought it was a wounded animal crying out for help but only signaling predators of an easy meal. But the more he listened, the more it was apparent that it was no animal.

It was the sound of moaning. A mournful weeping that hung heavily in the air. The intense emotional and psychological pain was palpable. It reminded Tarlos of a mother crying for a killed child, or a son waiting for a father who will never return from war. It embodied the pain a man would feel if he could look back on his life and see all the missed opportunities that would have made his life a happy one. It stirred in Tarlos all the hurt he may have caused and the people who suffered because of his selfishness. It was anguish that would never end. And whatever it was that made the noise, it knew its torment was eternal.

Tarlos felt his eyes water. The sound stank in his ears and was sour in his mind. The boatman held fast to the rudder and wiped a tear from his cheek. Tarlos said nothing to him until the boat had floated well past the dark bubble and the building was invisible behind a bend in the Styx. The

weeping and groaning faded, and Tarlos sighed in relief. His breath was shaky, like the breath of one who had been crying for several minutes.

The boatman mumbled, "That's why I never come this way. I guess if there's a Hell, that's it. It's some wonder I didn't end up there, and you better believe I thank God every day that I didn't."

"I think I've heard of that place," said Tarlos. "Although I never really put much effort into imagining what it looked like. And I suppose a part of me never believed it existed at all. The High Priestess in Kesh called it the House of Dust. I think..." He swallowed a lump in his throat. "I think that's where my father is. And it'll probably be where I end up if I don't find the Ageless."

The boatman raised an eyebrow at him. "How d'you figure?"

Tarlos shrugged with one shoulder. "It's a long story."

"Well, we got a ways to go, yet. I'm up for hearing a long story if you're up for telling one."

Tarlos sat for several minutes in silence. The boatman did not press him to speak. At length, Tarlos nodded and took a seat in his usual place against the wall of the boat. After another moment's consideration, he reached for a fizzing beverage and cracked it open using the tab on the top of the strange metal cup. He began:

"I suppose I should first explain that when my father, Lakaeus, was still a prince, he wasn't permitted to marry until his father, king Hestos, was dead..."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Tarlos and Krastos

Hestos lived to be very old; Tarlos never knew exactly how old, but Lakaeus was aged himself by the time Hestos finally died. Lakaeus met Ninsun when they were both young, but they were permitted by law to marry only after Hestos was gone. And by then, Ninsun and Lakaeus were afraid they could not produce an heir.

They tried for many years, but the gods would not grant them a child. The news spread that the king and queen of Kesh were having trouble. The kingdom feared for them. Much of the world feared as well.

Each Holder passes the Power onto their eldest child. If this fails to happen, it is said that the universe will come apart at the seams and all life will cease to exist. Everyone in Edorath knew this and was nervous as the years passed with no heir to the Power of Space.

Lakaeus and Ninsun tried for a child for twenty years. Other women were brought to Lakaeus, concubines, and princesses of far-off kingdoms. But he refused to give a child to anyone but Ninsun, his beloved wife.

They prayed and sacrificed to the gods until a miracle was given to them. Moleg, the god of strength, came to Ninsun in a dream as she slept beside Lakaeus.

"Ninsun," said Moleg, "I have heard your prayers and have received your sacrifices. You and your husband, the king, have served the gods well. You are both old, but the king must have an heir to his Power."

Ninsun cried out, "Yes, lord, give us a child, I beg you!"

"I will give you a child," said Moleg, "but you must give me something in return."

"Anything, great god."

"Come to me on your child's twelfth birthday, the day his Power will come to life. I will await you in the Cedar Forest. Then I will ask the favor of you."

Ninsun awoke in tears, and she shook Lakaeus awake to tell him about her dream. He was happy, and they embraced in love.

Nine months later, Tarlos was born. He was small, pink, and perfect, and he cried and wriggled like a baby should. Lakaeus held Tarlos and grinned. His firstborn son! The one who would inherit the Power of Space and the throne of Kesh.

And then, something unexpected. Another son! Krastos held onto Tarlos's foot and entered the world moments after his brother. Krastos was a large baby and was covered in hair, as he would be his entire life. He never cried as a baby. Ninsun often referred to him as a peaceful old soul.

A few years later, just after the twins began to walk and speak, the king and queen noticed that Tarlos and Krastos were quite different. Tarlos was a normal, average child. He was the expected size and weight for his age, and he looked like his father with his narrow feet, slender hands, and lean face.

But Krastos looked like neither parent. He grew faster than a wolf cub. By the time his legs could stand beneath him, his arms could lift a cedar chest. While other children tripped over their own feet, Krastos sprinted faster than a bull. Most full-grown men struggled beneath a plow, but Krastos dug tributaries with his bare hands.

The king and queen knew that Tarlos was their son, the next Holder of Space and king of Kesh. But it was apparent that Krastos was the son of Moleg.

Ninsun loved both boys fiercely and would have done anything for them. She denied the traditional service of a wet-nurse or anyone else to change their soiled clothes or tuck them into bed. She was present for every moment of her sons' lives until her death.

The night before the twins' twelfth birthday, Ninsun gathered her servants and soldiers. They made ready to set out to the Cedar Forest, two days' journey west of Kesh. One soldier survived to tell what happened.

Before Moleg came to Ninsun to ask his favor from her, the monster Bawa attacked her and all who came with her—Bawa, the monster spawn of Ablis, who was discarded from the sight of Shar and Moresh.

Bawa killed Ninsun before Moleg arrived, and a single soldier rode home on an exhausted horse to tell the king. Lakaeus wept that day.

Four days after the twins' birthday, Lakaeus came to their bedroom and sat on a chair across from their beds.

"Sit and be quiet," the king said. He ran a hand through his greying beard, and he did not look either boy in the eye. "I will tell you why your mother is dead."

Tarlos and Krastos sat in silence as they listened to their father's story. They did not interrupt, only nodding whenever the king looked up—which was seldom—to communicate their understanding. When the king finished his recount of events, the two boys stared at him with blank faces. Lakaeus said no more about their mother, and he left them as he whispered, "Sleep well, boys."

Tarlos did not cry that night. He wanted to, but the tears would not come. He thought of his mother, and of Bawa. A seed of anger was planted deep within him that would not surface for many years.

Krastos did cry, but Tarlos heard his brother try to stifle his sobs into his pillow. Tarlos never told anyone that Krastos cried, and he was envious that he was able to cry at all. He often wanted to weep for his mother since she died, but he was never able to.

Ninsun's body was never recovered, but a golden sarcophagus was buried just the same. It was filled with treasures and inlaid on the outside with lapis lazuli. The goldsmith had made it into the likeness of the queen, and Tarlos saw at it and did not think it looked like his mother.

The sermon at her funeral was read from an ancient text, and it was word-for-word the same funeral that was received by all the dead—royal or not. After the sermon, the sarcophagus was sealed away in a stone tomb in a secret place in the desert. No one stayed long afterwards. Even Lakaeus departed the scene before the stones were set in place.

Tarlos stayed, as did Krastos. As the stones and mortar were placed around the gold coffin, Krastos cried. Snot and tears ran down his face, and he wiped himself with his huge hands and linen tunic. Tarlos did not cry. He knew that what they were burying was not his mother. She was gone forever, and all who had been at the funeral knew that. The goldsmith could not remember her face. No one bothered to stay even a few minutes after the sermon. Whatever memories anyone had about Ninsun were buried in that tomb, and Ninsun might as well have never been born.

Krastos's death began on the twins' twentieth birthday. Tarlos was sound asleep in his comfortable bed when Krastos pounced on him like a jaguar. Krastos was a huge man, heavy like a boulder, and it knocked the air right out of Tarlos. He woke with a breathy shriek, kicking and punching. Krastos put a hold on him from behind, and Tarlos saw that the room was full of laughing guards and slaves. Krastos had brought them all to watch Tarlos be humiliated.

"Krastos!" huffed Tarlos, still catching the breath that was knocked out of him. "Let me go!" He tried to move, though his arms were pinned behind his head and his legs were squeezed together between Krastos's feet.

"Happy birthday, brother," said Krastos. He put a finger in his mouth, sucked on it, then stuck it in Tarlos's ear. Tarlos growled, and the bed levitated into the air. "Hey! None of that! I want to wrestle you fair today. My birthday gift to you."

The curtains and the sheets on the bed floated like smoke around them, caught up in the surprise and adrenaline that triggered Tarlos's Power. The bed tilted on an invisible axis and they toppled over the side. Krastos landed with a crash on his shoulder. He rolled away, stood, and cradled his arm.

"How am I supposed to complete my trial with a dislocated shoulder?" he asked. His smile never faltered beneath his beard.

Tarlos had not landed at all. He floated down, touching his toes to the wood floor before settling his full weight on his feet. He grimaced and rubbed his wet ear.

"I hate when you do that," he said. "There's nothing you can do when the inside of your ear gets wet. You just have to wait for it to dry, and that takes forever and a day." He gave up the futile task and nodded to his brother. "But you're right. We have a hard day ahead of us, so let's not wrestle this morning."

Krastos laughed, and the slaves and guards stepped back. "No using your Power, and I won't use my strength."

Tarlos looked at his hairy hulk of a brother and laughed. "You can't choose to abandon your strength, son of Moleg, any more than Katla can abandon her beautiful legs." He winked at his slave.



Katla was from the North, and her skin was pale as milk. She blushed, and her freckled nose and cheeks turned a hot pink.

"Well, I'll restrain myself as best I can," said Krastos. "As long as you don't lift me so I can't touch the floor, or suck the air from my lungs like you did last decan."

"It was entertaining, watching you squirm like a fish."

One of the guards laughed at that, and he choked when Krastos shot him a glance.

"You're on *his* side, Lugal?"

Lugal shifted his weight on his feet and gripped his spear. "Forgive me, prince."

Krastos pointed at Tarlos. "You turned my friends against me!"

"They have their own free will, same as you and me." The brothers were now circling each other in the center of the room. Tarlos's ear was still wet, but he ignored the discomfort. "Surely, they have only chosen the cleverest, strongest, and most handsome prince to support. It's natural they would want to see the slower, uglier, hairier brother to lose."

Krastos said, "Who are you calling slow?"

Lugal pumped his fist into the air and laughed again.

When Tarlos could think of nothing more to say, he emptied the space between Krastos and himself of air, and the two of them were sucked together in a temporary vacuum. Tarlos drove a punch into his brother's gut, catching him unaware.

Krastos laughed. His muscle was like iron, and he could hardly feel his brother's blow. He reached over Tarlos, his shorter and smaller twin, and grabbed him by the waist. He lifted Tarlos upside down and above his head as a child would lift a housecat.

Tarlos lifted Krastos with his mind, and the two of them hung suspended in the air. Having been in this situation many times before, Krastos let go of Tarlos and stood upside down on the ceiling.

"Behold, the strength of a demigod!" he shouted, and pushed off from the ceiling. Krastos almost reached the floor when Tarlos's Power slowed him to a stop. But Tarlos felt the full weight of Krastos, and his mind gave way. Krastos crumpled to the ground. He lifted himself and rolled his shoulders.

Tarlos remained on the ceiling, a safe ten feet above Krastos. "Give in, brother?" Tarlos asked.

Krastos sneered and jumped. The wooden planks in the floor groaned as he propelled himself upward. He grabbed Tarlos around the shoulders and pushed off the ceiling with his feet. The two of them fell in a heap with Krastos on top.

"Just let me know if this gets too uncomfortable," said Krastos. He held Tarlos's arms behind his back and pulled.

Tarlos let out a roar, and the hot water his slaves had been preparing for him jumped from the stove and flew at Krastos's face. He let go of Tarlos and rolled away. The water splashed on the wood floor near the bed and steamed there in the cool morning air.

"Hey!" Krastos yelled. "Jokes aside, that would've actually hurt me!"

He leaped at Tarlos, and the two of them locked hands. Their feet drove into the floor, and they growled against each other's strength.

"You're too kind-hearted," Tarlos said. Sweat beaded at his temples. "That's why you never win. You're afraid of hurting me."

They snorted like bulls locked in combat. The walls shook with Tarlos's Power. The floor vibrated under Krastos's weight and strength.

Tarlos bent his knee with his foot planted, and he threw Krastos to the floor. He sunk his feet under Krastos's hairy chest and said, "Do you submit?"

Krastos's chest heaved with his breath, and for a moment he looked at his brother in anger. But it was only for a moment, and a smile spread over his bearded face. He laughed and held out his hand, and Tarlos helped him to his feet.

"There's none in the world like you, brother," Krastos said. "Not even a demigod can best a Holder." He took Tarlos in for a hug, and Tarlos's head came up to Krastos's chin.

"Even still," said Tarlos, "only a Holder can best the son of Moleg, the man who could carry the Sun himself on his shoulders."

The slaves and guards applauded them, and they each gave a short bow.

The bedroom door flew open and slammed into the wall behind it. The High Priestess charged into the bedchamber. Tarlos's room slaves, Katla and Mez, backed away with their heads down. The four guards who had come to watch them wrestle stood erect and clutched their spears.

"As Shar himself sees you behaving thus, I wonder why he does not burn you all where you stand!" She pointed at the rising sun through the window with an elegant finger. Her painted eyes burned with fury, and her skirt dusted the floor as she approached Tarlos and Krastos. "I thought the end-times were upon us, the way the palace was shaking and creaking and thundering. You've woken everyone in the palace, royal and slave both! And did you think of your father? Sick in his bed, needing

all the rest he can get? He thought Ilshu had come for him at last, the way the walls were swaying around him. And on the anniversary of your mother's death, no less! You should know better. Well?"

The twins averted their gazes from the anointed High Priestess, who spoke on behalf of the gods. Their bowed heads hid their smirks, and they risked a humorous glance at each other.

"And you!" She turned to Katla and Mez. "Why is the stove lit? Why are the tea leaves out? Today is the day of the princes' trials—they are not to eat or drink today until they are men."

Katla and Mez kept their eyes on the floor.

"Forgive us, High Priestess," said Mez. "We lost track of the day."

"You will both be punished accordingly," said the High Priestess.

"No," Tarlos said. "I asked for it, Priestess. Don't blame them."

"Why would you ask for tea, Tarlos? You know the commandment."

He nodded. "Forgive me."

Krastos said, "We're sorry things got out of control. We're both anxious for our trials today, and we wanted to let out some energy."

"You'll need all the energy you can muster," said the High Priestess. Her legs were far apart in a defiant stance, her hands on her hips. Her eyes were lined with blue and red paint, which cascaded down her cheeks in three lines. The ends of her black hair were dyed green. Every finger wore a ring, and bands of bronze and lapis lazuli adorned her thin arms. Standing with her splendor and authority before them, the brothers felt more like rebuked children than princes.

"Come," she said with a wave of her arm. "It's time to prepare."

As she led them from the room, Tarlos gave a friendly smile to Katla, and the Northerling girl shook her head, smiling in return.

Krastos punched Lugal's shoulder on the way out, and the guard grunted in pain. Krastos snickered and patted Lugal's arm. The guard smiled and nodded at the prince, and the twins followed the High Priestess through the palace.

The bathhouse was of cedar wood, as was most of the palace and most of the city-state. The bath itself was a small swimming pool, and it sat above a natural hot spring that kept the water perpetually hot.

Krastos and Tarlos undressed and eased into the steaming water. Body slaves scrubbed them down with soap, lathered their hair with oil, and smoothed out their tangles with cedar wood combs.

Tarlos asked his body slave, "What do you think they have in store for us, Basmem?"

"I couldn't say, prince," the slave replied as he washed Tarlos's hair. Basmem was probably about fifteen years old, but even he did not know his exact age. When he was much younger, he was caught stealing an apple from a merchant. He had lived as a slave and without thumbs ever since.

Basmem poured a red liquid soap into Tarlos's hair. As he had difficulty holding objects, the small vase slipped from his hand and the soap dripped into Tarlos's eyes.

"Gah!" Tarlos rubbed his stinging eyes with wet hands.

"Prince—!"

"No, no, it's all right. But if I fail my trial because I can't see, I'll cut off the rest of your fingers."

Basmem chuckled.

Tarlos said, "I imagine a giant boar for me, or maybe an aurochs. Have you seen the mammoths that the traders from the North ride? I'd bet I could take one of those. Krastos, though, they probably have a dairy cow for him, eh, Basmem?"

Krastos sent a splash toward Tarlos, and Basmem laughed. He wiped water from his forehead with a thumbless hand. Tarlos moved a small wave back at Krastos without lifting a finger. It drenched Krastos and his body slave.

Krastos sighed. "Patnu spent *hours*, probably, getting his hair perfect this morning, and now it's ruined. I hope you're happy, brother." He made one more tiny splash at his twin, for the sake of having the last move.

"Will you forgive me, Patnu?" Tarlos asked, still rubbing soap from his eyes.

"Nothing to forgive, prince." Patnu ran his hands over his face and curly black hair, dripping the water off. He was the only slave in Kesh from the South, across the Narrow, across the deserts and jungles. Neither Krastos nor Tarlos had ever known how Patnu had managed to find himself in Kesh, thousands of miles to the north in the middle of a vast desert.

"Unless," Patnu added, "you'd like to apologize for not thinking of inviting me to this morning's wrestle. I always enjoy seeing Krastos put in his place."

Tarlos exploded with laughter. Krastos reached a giant hairy hand behind him and pulled Patnu over his head and into the water. Patnu surfaced, sputtering and laughing. Krastos laughed as well in spite of himself.

The last thing to do was to rub a special oil on the princes' faces to help their beards to grow. A good beard was a symbol of power and authority, and it befitted the twins to grow them. Tarlos was never able to grow much more than stubble, and Basmem gave his face an extra rub. Krastos, who had had a beard since he was thirteen years old, as well as being covered in hair everywhere else on his body, received a trim before his own oil rub.

The twins lifted themselves out of the bath, and Patnu and Basmem wrapped them in hot towels and brushed their hair. They wrapped cotton tunics around their waists.

The High Priestess was waiting for them outside.

"It's time for your blessing," she told them. "Follow." She spun around, and her braided black hair flew around her head causing its colored beads to snap against one another.

"High Priestess," Krastos said. "Couldn't we have just some bread and water, at least? Slaying a beast will be tiresome, and I'm already starving."

"You will eat or drink nothing until you have completed your trial. That goes for you as well, future king."

At the same time, both twins realized where she was taking them.

"Why are we going to see Father?" Tarlos asked.

"Isn't he too sick to have visitors?" Krastos asked. "And on the anniversary of our mother's death, no less!"

The High Priestess caught Krastos's satirical tone and turned to him.

"How dare you?" she said. "May Moresh, goddess of motherhood, with whom your mother now lives, forgive you for taking Ninsun's death so lightly." Her voice was not loud, nor was it angry. There was disappointment in her words, and Krastos heard it.

He frowned and nodded, lowering his eyes from the Priestess.

"I expect more of you, prince," she added, then turned back and continued to lead them to Lakaeus's apartment.

The guards at the massive cedar doors stepped aside and opened them for their superiors. Light hurt the king's eyes, so his chambers were kept as dark as possible. Heavy black curtains covered the

windows, and no flame was allowed in the room. For more than three years, Lakaeus had been weak and sensitive, symptoms of his blood disease. He would cry out in pain, gripping the sides of his head if the light of a single star squeezed into the room.

The king himself lay on his bed with the curtains pulled back. Slaves and a healer tended to him. As the princes and High Priestess approached, the doctor saw them and bent close to the king.

"Your majesty," the doctor whispered, but in the silent reverence of the room, his whispers bounced from the walls. "The High Priestess has come with the princes."

A low grumble came from the king, and the healer nodded to the slaves. They left the bedside, and they bowed to the Priestess and to the princes as they departed from the room.

Leeches covered the king's arms, legs, torso, and neck. Tiny trickles of blood snaked between him and the leeches, and stained the white sheets. Old stains from previous leeching sessions dotted the sheets, and the spots had turned brown.

"Your majesty," said the High Priestess. "The princes have come for your blessing before their trials of manhood."

The king's eyes rolled in his head, and they were white and naked. He looked at Tarlos and Krastos. He held out a bony hand, and Tarlos took it. The skin was like tissue.

"My son," Lakaeus said. His voice was dried leaves in the wind. He swallowed, licked his lips, and looked to Krastos. "Brother of my son, son of my wife." A small smile played at the corners of his mouth. "You have come to visit me?"

"Yes, Father," said Tarlos. He had not been permitted to visit his father for several decans. Now that he saw him, he was filled with dread at the certainty of death.

*Soon I will lose my father as I lost my mother.*



Lakaeus's cheeks were sunken, his lips thin and pulled back, revealing yellow teeth and grey gums. His eyes were round, and they swiveled in their sockets like birds' eyes. His whole head looked like that of a skeleton—fleshless and white. The rest of his body was not so different: skin dried like papyrus covering bones as soft as mud.

"I do not look well," the king mused. "Your eyes tell me."

Tarlos shook his head. "You look wonderful, great king. Healthy as Moleg, who gives you strength."

Lakaeus smiled. "I am happy to see you. Why have you come now, after all this time? How long has it been since I've seen your faces?"

"You've been feeling poorly. We didn't want to disturb you. You need your rest."

"I need death, that's what I need." The king laughed, and it was a sound like a headless swan attempting to breathe underwater. "I am too old to have lived this long. The only mercy I pray for is Ilshu to ferry me across the river."

Tarlos patted his father's hand, frail as a child's, and looked into his pasty eyes. A regret began to surge up within him. He didn't really know his father. After Ninsun died, Lakaeus retreated within himself, hardly speaking to anyone, least of all his sons. Her sons. They reminded him too much of her. Tarlos blamed no one for his father's distance all those years, but he did regret it. King Lakaeus's time was not long for this world, and Tarlos felt it as heavily as the king did for a moment.

Krastos remained silent beside his brother. Although Lakaeus had raised him as his own, Krastos was not blood, and therefore not permitted to speak unless spoken to. Only the High Priestess and Tarlos were allowed that privilege.

"Our trials are today," Tarlos said. "We become men. We ask for your blessing before we begin."

"Ah-h-h..." Lakaeus lifted a thin clawed hand to Tarlos's head and rested it in his hair. "And so you have it. May the gods bless you as I do. May you be a greater king than I, and a greater father."

Tarlos took his father's hand from his head and held it in his own. "No one could be a better king or father than Lakaeus the Great."

The king did not respond, and he took his hand back. He gestured to Krastos. "Come."

Krastos lowered his head to the king and allowed the feather-light hand to rest in his hair.

"I am not your father," said the king, "but I have raised you and loved you as my son. And as surely as your father, the great god Moleg, blesses you, so shall I bless you as your foster father. May your life be fruitful. May men and women sing of your life forever."

Tarlos saw the beginnings of tears in Krastos's eyes, and Krastos wiped them away before they could fall down his face. He was thankful for the blessing, and he had not hoped for a better one, nor had he expected it—not from a man who had never asked for him to be born, but had raised him as his own son nonetheless, even after his wife and mother of his only son was taken from him.

Krastos took Lakaeus's hand and kissed it. "Thank you, my king. May you live forever."

At this, the king laughed once more, and it was an awful wheezing sound. Krastos drew back in confusion.

"No, dear boy," he said. "To live forever in my state would be a curse. I have lived a full life, and I am at peace with my death, which is soon to come. Only gods and Ageless live forever."

The king pointed to a small dresser on the other end of the room. "Tarlos. The first drawer. Bring me the little box."

Tarlos did as his father said and found a small black wooden box in the drawer, and he set it down on the bed next to the king. Lakaeus opened it and pulled out two small talismans. They were identical, made of bronze and stamped with the seals of Moresh and Shar, half colored blue and half colored red. They were on silver chains, and Lakaeus gestured for the twins to put them on.

"A gift from a dying father to his boys," said the king.

They put the necklaces over their heads. Tarlos let his drop to his chest, keeping his eyes on his sick and dying father. Krastos inspected his for several moments, running his fingers over the stamp and feeling the weight of the bronze. He wore the talisman on the outside of his tunic while Tarlos placed it underneath against his skin.

Lakaeus took a hand from each brother and smiled. "Good luck with your trials. Gods, has it been twenty years already? I will forever think it the greatest shame that life lingers so slowly when we suffer, but the time we spend with those we love is more fleeting than sunshine in a storm."

Before anything else could be said, the High Priestess swept in and placed her hands on the twins' shoulders.

"Your majesty, the princes must now prepare for their trials."

Lakaeus gave the smallest of nods and waved the princes away. "Don't worry about me. I've still got a few decans left, I'm sure of it." He gave them one last smile, then fell asleep.

The High Priestess led them through the king's apartment and outside the palace, through the courtyard and gardens. The courtyard was shaded from the hot summer sun, and the place was filled with palms and Joshua trees, conifers, lilies and roses. The gardens buzzed with hummingbirds and honeybees.

She led the princes to the temple on the other side of the gardens. Unlike most structures in Kesh, the temple was built from stone, each block weighing over a ton and dragged from a quarry fifteen miles away, on the border of the Fertile Valley. It was in the temple that the gods spoke to the priestesses and gave them commandments to convey to the people of Kesh.

When they were young, Tarlos and Krastos thought the temple reached to the heavens, to the throne of Shar, and they had to crane their necks back to see the top-most block scrape the sky. Now that they were older and bigger, the temple was not large at all. In fact, their own palace was taller.

A few slaves worked in the gardens in the courtyard and in the smaller gardens surrounding the stone temple, and some worked on the structure itself sealing cracks in the old rock with mortar. They all paused their work and touched their foreheads to the ground as the princes walked by with the High Priestess.

Krastos spoke to one of the slaves. "Good morning, Namgan. How is your family?"

The slave did not lift his bald head from the ground but answered just the same. "Healthy, with full bellies. Thank you for asking, prince."

"For as long as I shall live," said the High Priestess, "I will never understand your friendliness toward slaves."

"It's not their fault they were born slaves," said Krastos. "They're only people. Like us."

Tarlos nudged his brother with his elbow. "Says the man whose father is a god."

Krastos continued, "If I were king, I'd give them wages. The royal family has enough possessions. We can afford to pay them."

They climbed the stone stairway to the matching door above.

"You will not be king," said the High Priestess. "Your brother will." Tarlos thought this last bit was spoken with a hint of resentment.

Tarlos said, "Maybe we will rule together. A Holder and a demigod. Co-rulers of Kesh."

The High Priestess chuckled in her throat, sounding disgusted. "Such has never been heard of."

The door was open and dark before them, and the High Priestess extended her slender arm, motioning for the princes to enter before her.

The inner room was lit with candles, and statues of the gods lined the walls. There were more than a dozen in all, though Tarlos cared for only a few. The dancing light from the candles gave the gods menacing stares and grimaces. They judged the twins with their stone eyes.

Priestesses, all young girls who had devoted their lives to the gods and had vowed never to marry or bear children, came to the princes to help them into ceremonial clothing: a sleeveless leather shirt, belt, sandals, and a copper headband.

At the end of the room were the statues of Moresh and her husband Shar, the moon and sun. The High Priestess motioned for the brothers to kneel, and they knelt before their gods.

Shar wore the sun as his crown, and he held the sun in his right hand, and he was the sun.

The moon was in Moresh's right eye, and she cradled the moon against her bosom, and she was the moon.

In the beginning there was nothing, and then there was chaos, and from the chaos came Moresh and Shar, and they were the moon and sun, and together they formed the stars and the earth. They separated the stars from the earth, and they had children, who are the gods, and the gods came together to create mankind from clay and fire.

A brazier stood before Shar, and a brazier stood before Moresh. The High Priestess brought a torch and first lit Moresh's, and then Shar's. The flames on Moresh's brazier turned blue, and her husband's flames were red.

The High Priestess lifted her hands to the goddess of the moon. "Moresh, two children come to you this day to receive your blessing, that they may become adults. As they use their skill and cunning during their trials, look upon them in favor."

A young priestess, perhaps seventeen years old, held a bowl to the High Priestess. She dipped her fingers into it and smeared blue paint on the princes' cheeks.

The High Priestess lifted her hands to the god of the sun. "Shar, two boys come to you this day to receive your blessing, that they may become men. As they use their strength and force of will during their trials, look upon them in favor."

Another young priestess stepped forward with her bowl, and the High Priestess smeared red paint on the princes' foreheads and chins. Tarlos saw the young priestess give a tiny smile to Krastos, and Krastos gave her a wink. Tarlos glanced at the High Priestess, hoping she did not see the exchange, but it appeared that she had, and she shook her head.

"Gods save us from the future king and his brother," she whispered under her breath.

She motioned for the twins to stand, and they bowed to the gods—first to Moresh, then to Shar, then to each god and goddess that lined the walls from right to left.

When Krastos came to Moleg, he stayed a bit longer. The statue depicted Moleg as grinning, with pointed teeth and huge round eyes. There was no emotion in the statue, and Krastos did not expect any. But Tarlos watched as his brother looked at his father with wonder and respect, and Tarlos knew that Krastos was giving one final prayer especially for Moleg. Tarlos had overheard him many

nights leading up to this day, praying to his Moleg idol in the privacy of his bedroom: "Give me strength. Show the king that I am Ninsun's son, and let him be proud." Krastos always kept his pain hidden away within himself and behind a smile, and Tarlos was the only one who knew how much Krastos wanted Lakaeus's love.

The day was dry, and the hot sun beat down on the princes as they walked through the streets of Kesh. All through the city, people lined the roads and cheered for them. They shouted the princes' names, threw lilies and palm leaves at their feet, and they threw red and blue chalk powder on them to bring favor from the gods.

Tarlos smiled, even as his heart beat madly in his chest. He had waited many years for this day, and now that it was here it was surreal. He thought he would have been more excited than nervous, but he was wrong. The closer he and Krastos came to the arena, the more Tarlos's heart thumped, and the more sweat dripped from his forehead and armpits, making tiny trails in the chalk powder.

Krastos ignored the cheering crowds, and he ignored the blue and red chalk dust that clouded the streets and covered him from head to toe. Krastos was never one to be distracted by applause. He had always been focused when he needed to be, and he was focused now. His brow was down low over his dark eyes and his jaw was set beneath his bushy beard. His strength had never failed him and he knew it would not fail him in the arena. He was the son of Moleg. No beast could best him.

The arena lay on the outskirts of Kesh, without the city wall that encircled the city-state. It was a great bowl in the red and yellow rock of the desert, partly carved from the living stone, partly built from quarried granite and cedar wood. It was more oval than circle, six hundred feet by five hundred in the arena itself, and the walls reaching upwards more than two hundred feet with thousands of seats already filled with citizens.

The guards who escorted the princes through the city led them through a small private gate in the city wall, and down a path kept off-limits to civilians.

Tarlos punched Krastos's shoulder. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm ready." Krastos did not look at his brother. He was focused.

"I mean, what do you think it'll be?"

Krastos shrugged. "Doesn't much matter, does it? You'll fly above it, whatever it is, and throw it around with your Power. Maybe toss a boulder at it. I'll grab mine and wrestle it to the ground, choke it until it passes out."

"And then you'll kill it."

"Not if I can help it. Whatever it is, it's just an animal. I'll tell them to release it after."

Tarlos shook his head and grinned. His fingers and hands vibrated with adrenaline, and there was a hop in his step.

A trial of manhood for a Holder happened once a generation. The firstborn of a Holder was also a Holder, and therefore heir to the throne. If the king and queen had multiple children, they were also expected to complete a trial. Holders faced a monster, such as a dragon or gryphon. A Powerless prince or princess would only have to fight an animal—a gorilla or an adolescent elephant—and they were given weapons. Holders were not given anything.

Today there would be two trials, and both initiates were more than human. Tarlos was a Holder, able to move things at will with his mind; Krastos was the son of Moleg and had inherited his godlike strength. Today's trials would be such not seen in Kesh, or perhaps the world, ever before. And, as it turned out, never again.



The path led behind the arena, into a small room in which initiates would prepare themselves and pray. Above them, Krastos and Tarlos heard the thundering of the crowd, their cheering and shouting, the stomping of their feet. Small puffs of dust drifted from the stone and wood ceiling above the twins.

The guards stood at attention as Tarlos and Krastos each made one last silent prayer to Moresh and Shar. Tarlos was sure that Krastos included Moleg in his prayer. They finished their supplications and looked to the guards.

"Are you ready, princes?" asked the captain, who stood in front of the rest and held a spear that was taller than him.

Both princes nodded.

The captain said, "I will let them know. Prince Tarlos will be first. Best of luck to both of you." Before he turned away, he paused only for a moment to take one last look at Krastos. His eyes lingered, and then he and the other guards bowed, and he led them from the small room. The brothers were alone.

"Did he seem worried?" Krastos asked.

"I don't see why he should be." Tarlos crossed the small room and leaned against the door that would open at any moment, open to the arena and to the cheering crowd and to the monsters that would try to kill them. "We're the once facing possible death."

Krastos took the talisman from beneath his shirt and looked at the image of the sun and moon, and he ran his fingers over the outside edge.

"I forgot we had those," said Tarlos, and he grabbed his own talisman. He took it off from around his neck and stuffed it in a pocket.

"Don't you like it?"

Tarlos shrugged. "It's just a necklace. Nothing special."

Krastos frowned a bit and squeezed the talisman in his fist. "Don't laugh, but...since Mother died, this is the first time I've really felt like family. Lakaeus almost treated me like I was his son." He hid the talisman back under his shirt and took in a shaky breath. "So, you're first?"

"I'm older."

Krastos nodded. "Good luck."

Tarlos returned the nod, hoping this would not be the last time he saw his twin. "See you on the other side, then."

Outside, great drums *boom-boom-boom*'d and the sound carried through the arena, and the crowd cheered ever louder. Their stomping made more dirt fall on the princes' heads and shoulders. The sound of chains rattling made Tarlos's heart race as the door pulled open.

The roc was already there when Tarlos stepped through the door into the hot and sun-bright arena. The spectators filled every seat above and around him, and they called his name and applauded. The door shut behind him. There was no handle on this side.

The giant bird stood over an aurochs, tearing into it with its beak as sharp as obsidian. Its enormous talons helped the ripping of the flesh, and blood poured from the dead aurochs and puddled around the bull and bird in a thick red pool.

Tarlos swallowed and scanned the area. The roc had not yet seen him, and they were on separate ends of the arena. Tarlos had a few seconds before the roc smelled fresher prey. An aurochs

was but a morsel to a roc, whose wingspan spread over two hundred feet, and it was no doubt only meant to keep the roc occupied until Tarlos had formulated a method of attack.

He was not allowed a weapon. In the trial of manhood, a Holder was allowed only his or her hands and wits. He stepped lightly around the edge of the arena and saw that there were many boulders littered around the place. He made note of it but discarded them as a good first plan. Using his Power cost energy, and he knew he could not throw boulders for long. Besides, Krastos might have better use for them.

The only other object in the arena was a wooden scaffolding holding a narrow ladder that connected the arena floor to the stands above. The ladder was used by guards in case someone was seriously injured and needed a quick escape. If Tarlos was injured, he would not need the ladder. He could fly.

*But I won't be able to fly if I'm unconscious or exhausted. And what if Krastos needs a quick escape?*

*Stop worrying about your brother and worry about the roc.*

The last of the aurochs went down the roc's long neck, and the giant bird stretched its wings and screeched. Everyone in the stands covered their ears and grimaced against the sound. Tarlos closed his eyes and put his arms over the sides of his head. The sound was like a copper knife being dragged over rough granite, and it made his teeth rattle.

The roc flapped its wings down, and a thunderclap shook the stadium, blowing dirt and small rocks outward in a circle. The shockwave knocked Tarlos off his feet and sent him flying into the stone wall behind him.

He grunted as he hit the wall, then once more when he fell to the ground. He stood and stretched his neck. It popped, and he sighed in relief of being intact.

The roc folded its wings and craned its head upward. It cawed at the people above it, and with another thundering flap of its wings, it attempted to fly up to them. The people screamed as the sharp gaping beak of the roc soared up at them. But a chain had been attached to its feet, and the chain was short. The giant bird was jerked down, just shy of its prey. The spectators still screamed, and that section of seats was emptied as the people fled to sections at the sides.

Tarlos avoided the last thunder shock by laying on his belly. He felt the wind and tiny rocks graze his back, but he was not thrown.

The roc hovered down, disappointed in its failure. It began to preen its black and brown feathers.

Tarlos regarded the talons that stretched from the roc's toes. It was difficult to tell from a distance, but he judged them to be at least a few feet long. They were silver, and they glinted in the sunlight. He had seen the way the talons had torn into the aurochs as if it were made of soggy papyrus, and he knew he must avoid them. But Tarlos would get nowhere near the bird if he did not take care of those wings first.

The roc hobbled around, pacing the circumference of the arena and testing the length of the chain. It considered the audience with passive interest, more concerned with the chain holding it to the ground. It pecked at the stone wall of the arena, and great chunks of red rock came loose and fell to the ground in puffs of red dirt. As it walked around the field, Tarlos moved as well. He kept himself on the opposite end of the bird at all times. He stayed low and quiet.

Maybe he could rip its wings off. That would stop the thunderclaps. But no, that would be too messy. Although it was a monster, Tarlos would prefer to leave his opponent some dignity. He circled the arena in time with the roc, thinking of what to do.

With another tooth-rattling screech, the roc lifted its head and stretched its neck, and it looked directly at Tarlos. The obsidian beak opened, and the pink tongue within clicked against the roof of its mouth. The enormous wings opened, and Tarlos fell to his belly.

The thunderclap hit him like a galloping horse, and he felt the weight of the air ram into him as it threw him to the wall behind. Even lying flat, he stood no chance.

Tarlos stood, groaning, and he shook the stars from his head. The roc trotted over to him from across the arena, its huge clawed feet sending ripples of sand outward with each step.

Tarlos jumped in the air and flew above the roc's head. The bird looked up at him with confusion, and it leapt to meet him in the air. The chain pulled it down, and the roc landed hard. It cried and screeched, and it watched Tarlos in the air with a swiveling head and eyes like black marbles.

Tarlos eyed the roc from his vantage point, and the roc squawked and paced. Tarlos noted the civilians, his soon-to-be subjects, as they looked up and down, from Tarlos to the roc, and back again. He had to smile.

Reaching out with his mind, Tarlos selected a medium-sized chunk of rock that the giant bird had pecked loose from the wall, and he brought it to his height. He had been lifting rocks this size since he was young, and it did not cause him any strain to lift this one. The people followed the boulder with their collective gaze, and so did the roc. Beside him now, the boulder was about half his height, and many times heavier than himself.

Tarlos steadied the boulder over the roc and let it fall. It struck the bird in the back but did not injure it at all, which was exactly what Tarlos wanted.

The roc screamed in pain and in annoyance, and it flapped its huge wings. The arena rocked with thunder and wind, and the people cried out and ducked between the seats to shield themselves from the debris. The roc carried itself as high as the chains would allow, and it screamed at Tarlos.

With a flick of his hand, Tarlos removed the restraints on the roc, and the bird soared at him as fast as wind. The people screamed, and Tarlos's smile grew into a grin.

Up, up, up.

Tarlos led the roc into the sky, speeding toward the noon sun as fast as his mind would allow. Just below him, the roc flapped its mighty wings and sent thunder throughout the Fertile Valley. It bared its talons and opened its razor-sharp beak. The pink tongue wriggled in its mouth like a serpent, eager for the meal to come.

Tarlos stopped, and he hovered a few thousand feet above the ground. The arena was a tiny oval, no bigger than his little fingernail. A few inches to the east lay Kesh, surrounded by a great wall as thick as a hair. It was cold this high up, and the air was thin. Tarlos's next move had to be quick before he fainted and fell from the sky.

He allowed the roc to reach within a few feet of him before he pinned its wings to its sides. The roc squawked once more, and it struggled to spread its wings. It lingered in the air for a moment with its momentum, and then it fell.

Tarlos stayed beside the roc, watching it roll around in midair and thrash at nothing with its clawed feet and scream at the sky.

The tiny oval became bigger and more defined, and the bird swiveled its head to watch the ground rise to meet it.

Tarlos halted at the top-most level of the arena and rested on its roof. The roc plummeted into the red dirt. A spray of rock and sand and feathers lifted upward. When the dust settled enough to see onto the arena floor, the audience and Tarlos beheld a crumpled mass of feathers and twisted broken limbs. Tarlos floated down and landed on the great roc's head, and he waved to the crowd as the people of Kesh cheered and shouted his name.

These were his people smiling at him. "Tarlos! Tarlos!" they chanted. He drank it in, and he felt their praise in his bones and in his blood, and he knew that there was no greater life to be lived than his own.

Tarlos flew to the top of the stands, the highest of the seats, and the arena was small below him. He rested on the roof and dangled his feet off the edge, and he waited for the soldiers to clear away the mess so that Krastos could come out for his own trial.

Tarlos's heart was sprinting and the adrenaline in his body made him nauseous. He had never had the rush he was feeling at that moment. He knew Krastos was waiting in the small room, nervous and probably praying. Any moment now, that heavy stone door would open and it would be his twin's turn to face whatever monster awaited him in the arena.

Tarlos sent up a small prayer to Moleg, on behalf of Krastos. *God of strength, lend your strength to my brother.*

Krastos must have been afraid and anxious. He was never one who enjoyed fighting unless it was a friendly wrestle. But Tarlos knew that whatever creature he would have to face, Krastos would wrestle it into submission. He had seen Krastos do it before with cave lions and wild bulls.

*Only a Holder can best the son of Moleg.* Tarlos had said that earlier that morning, and he only half meant it. He knew that Krastos let him win those wrestling matches, but he never said anything about it and neither did Krastos.

There was the sound of metal against metal, chains rattling, and the stone door pulled open.

Krastos stepped into the bright sun and shielded his eyes with his huge arm. The crowds erupted in applause for him, and Tarlos sent down a shout of his own.

"Krastos! Give it hell!" He did not know if Krastos could hear him or not.

Then, on the opposite side of the arena to Krastos, more chains rattled. The *click-click-click-click* of gears brought Krastos's attention to a large metal gate in a section of the arena that housed the large animals.

Krastos planted his feet firmly in the ground and took a low stance.

The metal gate opened completely, and only darkness faced him. Several silent seconds passed, and the crowd was anxious. Tarlos found himself chewing on a fingernail.

From above the gate, two guards threw a dead sheep into the arena. It landed in front of the dark hole like a limp doll. A huff and a sniff came from the darkness, and the monster walked on all fours to inspect the dead sheep.

Tarlos's heart stopped in his chest. It was a manticore—a huge, demonic animal with the body of a lion, the tail of a scorpion, and the face of a man. Its body, from mane to tail, was covered in sharp



poisonous quills. Krastos would not be able to wrestle it. He would not even be able to touch it. Even a Holder would have trouble fighting a manticore.

Krastos crouched low, hiding behind a boulder as he gathered his thoughts. The manticore nibbled at the sheep. Although it had the body and teeth of a lion, it did not have a lion's snout, and it slowly and methodically tried to fit its man-like mouth around the carcass.

Lakaeus used to tell the brothers stories when they were young about the monsters and demons that roamed the desert. The manticore in the stories had huge bat wings and three rows of sharp teeth on each jaw, and it could shoot poisonous quills from its tail like arrows from a bow.

But this manticore did not have wings, and although Tarlos could not see well from his vantage point, he did not think it had three rows of teeth on each jaw. So could it shoot quills from its tail, or was that an embellishment of the stories?

Krastos could not risk it. He would attack the tail first. He looked around from his hiding place. All there was around him were boulders and dirt and the stone door behind him that would not open from this side. Then his head stopped as he caught sight of the narrow scaffold and ladder against the arena wall.

Krastos nodded to himself, and Tarlos swallowed. If Krastos was about to do what Tarlos thought, he would only have one shot.

Krastos wrapped his massive arms against the boulder he was hiding behind. With a slight grunt, he hefted it from the ground and over his head. As the boulder soared through the air, he sprinted for the ladder.

The boulder collided with the manticore's face as Krastos grabbed the first rung of the ladder. The monster's mannish nose broke beneath the rock. Blood sprayed in all directions. The manticore roared, displaying its sharp teeth, and blood ran from its nose and into its mouth.

It saw Krastos climbing the ladder, and it galloped toward him. Its claws extended from its furry toes, and it leapt through the air. Krastos neared the top of the ladder, almost able to see over the wall and into the stands when the monster jumped, and Krastos turned to it. The manticore's mouth opened so wide that it was almost flat, and even from a distance Tarlos could see that it did indeed have three rows of teeth on both the top and bottom.

Tarlos bit his thumbnail, and a tiny trickle of blood seeped out of the quick.

As the manticore flew through the air, Krastos reached the top of the wall and planted his feet on the last rung of the ladder while steadying himself on the wall with one hand. He bent his knees.

Krastos jumped, using all his strength to push from the ladder and wall, and he soared over the manticore. The beast seemed to catch sight of its foe too late, and Krastos drifted over its spiny back as the monster pummeled into the red stone wall. A large crack stretched from ground to spectator seat, letting out a *POP* and a *CRACK* so loud that Tarlos saw the audience recoil in a wave, spreading from the bottom row to the top. He felt a small rumble under himself as the shockwave reached the topmost level.

Krastos flew over the manticore and it slipped beneath him. As the monster's head met with the stone wall, Krastos grabbed hold of the end of the scorpion tail. He was dangerously close to the stinger, but it was the only place not covered in quills.

Using his momentum, Krastos pulled the scorpion tail to the ground. The manticore, stunned from both the boulder and the wall to its face, lay motionless for a few short moments.

Krastos landed, pulling on the tail. With a tug, a jerk, and a twist, the stinger ripped off. The entire tail wriggled like a beheaded snake, and shudders rippled up the manticore's back.

Green ooze bled from the wound, and Krastos jumped away from it. Tarlos could not remember from the stories whether or not manticore blood was poisonous or corrosive. Krastos would always rather be safe than stupid.

The monster raised itself from the cracked wall, its tail still flicking around like a frog leg in a pan. The manticore shook its head, and its huge spiny mane ruffled with its head. It brought its tail around to its face, gave it a lick with a long black tongue, and whimpered.

*Oh no*, thought Tarlos. *It feels pain*. Now he knew Krastos would not kill it, but he prayed that he was wrong.

The manticore moved its attention from its defeated stinger to Krastos. Its lips peeled back from its three sets of triangular teeth, and it growled. Every hair on Tarlos's body stood on end.

The monster leapt. Krastos somersaulted out of the way, and he landed hard on a rock. He stood, holding a bleeding shoulder.

The manticore roared, and it swiped at Krastos with a giant clawed paw. Krastos jumped over it, landed beside the manticore, then jumped away again as the tail swooped in to knock him away.

He landed beside the discarded stinger. The base of it looked to be as round as some shields that soldiers carry into battle, and the stinger itself stretched more than several feet, curling a bit at the end to a gruesome point still dripping with yellow venom.

In a single moment, the manticore puffed its bristly mane, and the mane inflated to three times the size of its head. Then, just as quickly, it seemed to pop, and dozens of yard-long quills shot from the mane and headed in all directions.

Krastos held the stinger in front of him like a shield. The quills hit the arena walls with a few dozen hard thumps. Several quills hit Krastos's makeshift shield, and the force pushed him back. His feet made tiny channels of dirt as he slid.

If Krastos had known it felt pain, Tarlos was sure he would have killed it quickly if he was going to kill it at all. Now that the monster was agitated, Tarlos had no idea what his brother was going to do.

The manticore shot its quills, and Krastos blocked them with his stinger-shield.

More quills, this time accompanied by a roar, and the manticore leapt. Krastos blocked the quills, then rolled out of the way just in time to avoid a paw full of claws to the torso.

Krastos rolled, and he stood, and more quills came at him. He blocked them. The manticore leapt, swatted. He dodged, rolled, stood, blocked the onslaught of quills.

Around and around they danced. The manticore had not yet harmed Krastos, and Krastos had not had time between blocking and rolling and dodging to make any kind of move against the manticore.

"What is he doing?" Tarlos wondered aloud. "Throw the quills like spears!" He wanted to yell it, but aiding Krastos would forfeit his trial and his becoming a man.

But Krastos was doing nothing to fight the manticore, and the manticore was doing everything it could to kill Krastos.

"It'll only take one," Tarlos mumbled. *Just one mistake, and he's done.*

Tarlos hovered around, leaving his stoop on top of the stands, and he circled the top of the arena above the civilians. He scratched his chin and chewed his thumbnail again as he watched Krastos narrowly escape death dozens of times.

And then, Krastos made a mistake.

The manticore shot its quills, and Krastos lifted his stinger-shield to block them. Out of near habit, Krastos rolled out of the way to avoid the inevitable pounce and swatting claws. But the manticore did not pounce this time, instead, it shot more quills, and one quill caught the edge of Krastos's shield as he rolled.

The shield flew from his grip and skidded to a halt several yards away. The manticore smiled a mannish grin, its broken nose wrinkled, its eyebrows knitted, its lips pulled back in a sneer, its hind legs bent.

Tarlos put his hands on his head and shouted the first thing that came to his mind: "Behold the strength of a demigod!" Krastos looked up at him with absolute fear in his eyes, but with the fear was also understanding of what Tarlos was about to do.

The manticore pounced.

*Please see your chance, Krastos.*

Tarlos reached down with his mind, and with all his strength he stopped the manticore mid-leap. He groaned under the mental strain, willing Krastos to act.

Krastos saw his opportunity in the two seconds in which it occurred. He sprinted, sending a wave of dirt spraying behind him, grabbed the broken stinger from where it lay, and jumped straight into the way of the manticore's mouth.

Its maw was open in halted roar, and Krastos dropped the stinger into the gaping jaws before vaulting off the monster's broken nose.

Tarlos let go of the manticore and panted. He was a hundred feet closer to the ground, and he willed himself not to fall.

The manticore landed on one side of the arena as Krastos landed opposite it. The manticore closed its mouth. It paused. Then it turned.

Krastos met the monster's human eyes. They were blue. Not clear like the sky, but opaque like sapphires.

The manticore fell over on its side. Its hind leg twitched, and then it was dead.

To the audience, the pause in the manticore's leap was almost non-existent. It all happened so fast, from start to finish, all the people had had trouble following the fight. And then the monster was dead, and Krastos stood victorious with nothing but a scraped shoulder.

The crowd erupted with applause and cheers. Krastos's chest heaved as he struggled to steady his breath, and he wiped his sweaty hands in the dirt. He looked at the dead animal and shook his head. He did not smile.

Tarlos came down and landed in a small crater, beaming. Krastos smiled at his brother, and they embraced tightly. The civilians cheered them on, and they grasped each other's hands and thrust them into the air.

They were men.

Some hours later, Tarlos's belly was full of spiced beer and his head was full of ideas. He looked around at the tilting and rippling room ahead of him, seeing the people talking and walking every which way, drinking and dancing and singing. Music drifted through the room, high-pitched strings and deep drums. It all gave him a headache.

A huge bonfire roared in the center of the great hall, and eight boars roasted on four spits above the flames. Slaves turned the spits, and the grease and fat dripped sizzling into the fire. The

boars' bellies were filled with apples and cinnamon, and the room was full of the aroma of baking pork. Tarlos's stomach lurched at the smell.

Someone hit him on the back and almost broke him in two. A huge hairy arm draped over his shoulder, and hot breath whispered into his ear.

"Brother, that was some kind of thing you did, the way you killed that roc." Krastos's words were slurred, and the goblet in his hand spilled over as he swayed on Tarlos. Tarlos looked up at his giant demigod twin brother and smiled with hooded eyes.

"Of course," Krastos continued, "I didn't see it. Stuck behind a door, yeah? But I heard it all. And Lugal saw it, and he told me all about it, how you put that giant chicken in its place, yeah? Flying all over the place, throwing stuff. Did you throw stuff? I threw stuff. Did you see me? Yeah, of course you did. I almost died."

Krastos swirled his beer around in his cup, and more spilled over the rim. Tarlos said nothing. He hardly ever spoke when drunk. Krastos spoke enough for the both of them.

The smell of cooking meat was too much for Tarlos, and he bent over and puked. It was brown and all liquid.

"Oh wow," said Krastos. "You need something to eat. Be back, yeah?" He left Tarlos staggering, going to the table that ran the length of the great hall. It was covered in cheese and fruit and bread.

Tarlos wiped his mouth and swallowed the sour spit in his mouth. He was thirsty, and he drained the rest of his beer. He tipped the cup upside down over his upturned face. A drop fell out and landed in his eye. It stung, and he rubbed it.

"More mead, prince?" asked a sweet voice.

Tarlos looked to his left and focused his double vision. Katla stood there with a pitcher. It seemed to be the first time Tarlos realized how small she was, with narrow hips and tiny feet. Her straight blonde hair was always pulled back, revealing her stark blue eyes. No one else in Kesh had blonde hair. No one had blue eyes, either. And now that Tarlos was really seeing her, her skin was almost milk-white. All the people native to Kesh were chestnut-skinned with dark curly hair.

"Where are you from?"

"It was a small village called Hirnhyo," she said. "I'm sure I've told you before. Can I refill your cup?"

"Did you see me today?" Tarlos held out his cup and Katla filled it with mead.

She shook her head. "Mez wanted me to. I refused." Her neck and face turned a light shade of red, and she looked up at Tarlos with sad eyes. "I couldn't. What if you had..." She moved a stray strand of hair behind her ear and cleared her throat.

Tarlos placed a hand on her bare shoulder and met her eyes. "I'm sorry if I worried you. But I'm okay." He took a sip of mead. "Have you ever seen a mammoth?"

Katla shook her head. "If I ever did, I was too young to remember."

"Traders say they're dying out."

"That's a shame." Her eyelashes were long and dark, and they fluttered with shyness. "Can I get you anything else?"

Tarlos shook his head. "I think I'm going to bed soon. I'm really tired."

"You had a long day. Congratulations, prince." She moved to walk away but turned back for a moment. "Tarlos, I...there's something..."



He burped in his mouth and smacked his lips, grimacing at the taste of vomit in his throat.

"Yes?"

She stared at the floor. "Perhaps now isn't the best time. Goodnight, Tarlos." Katla left him, offering refills to other guests in the great hall who were attending the banquet.

Krastos returned with a wooden platter stacked with cheese and red grapes.

"Eat," he said, and he dangled a hunk of white goat cheese in front of Tarlos's face. It stunk.

Tarlos waved it away. "You have to eat, brother. You can't drink the night away. There's dancing to be done and girls to bed and songs to sing and stories to tell! You can't do any of that if you're sick or asleep, and in order to keep you from that you have to *eat!*" He shoved the cheese into Tarlos's mouth as Tarlos brought his cup up to drink.

Tarlos glared at his brother with cheese in his mouth. It filled with saliva and he realized he was actually a little hungry. He had not eaten since the previous night. He ate the cheese and some grapes as well.

"There you go," said Krastos. He slapped Tarlos on the back. Tarlos choked on some cheese for a second, then swallowed it down and chased it with beer.

Tarlos sighed. "Why aren't you doing all that stuff?"

"What?"

Tarlos pointed to the party crowd all around them. "Singing and dancing and all that you said."

"Brother! We have to stay together tonight! It's our night. Not yours and mine separately. After all, if it wasn't for you, I'd be dead, yeah?"

Tarlos raised a finger to his brother's lips. "I would advise you..." He belched. It tasted like beer and cheese and grapes and vomit all at once. He scowled. "I would advise you not to talk about that. I broke the rules. As you did, taking the chance I gave you."

"Aww..." Krastos brought his brother in for a rib-cracking hug, and Tarlos held his cup to the side so as to not spill any beer. "I'm too drunk to remember that!" He released Tarlos.

"Not as drunk as this one." Tarlos nodded to a woman who was sauntering over to them.

"Oh, Tarlos, save me," whispered Krastos.

The woman was in her forties, and in her younger years she was Lakaeus's favorite concubine. Now, her age was apparent, and she covered herself in bracelets and jewelry in her ears and in her nose. Her face was painted at least half a dozen colors, and the paint was thick like a mask. The skin under her arms was loose and flabby but was reminiscent of the days when she was thin and smooth. She wore a purple robe, and it was loose in all the wrong places. The largest goblet in Kesh was in her hand.

The twins grimaced as she approached. She laid a red-tipped hand on Krastos's shoulder muscle and moaned.

"Oh, boys, boys," she said. Her breath reeked of beer. "That was some display of strength today." She squeezed Krastos's shoulder. He drew back. She stepped closer.

"Thank you for the compliment, Kamhat," said Tarlos.

"It's only the truth. Everyone knows it." She shot a smile at Tarlos. A few of her teeth were missing and the rest were yellow. She gazed at Krastos and bit her bottom lip.

Krastos cleared his throat. "We haven't seen you in a while, Kamhat. How are you?"

"Oh, fine, fine." She took a long drink from her goblet, draining half of it in one gulp. "The king treats me *so* well, me being his favorite, you know. Gods bless him, he's too tired for me to visit him anymore. Moleg give him strength."

Tarlos and Krastos both rolled their eyes, drunk as they were. They knew for certain that Lakaeus had not made physical contact with any concubine for more than five years. And he most definitely was not avoiding Kamhat for his health.

"And speaking of Moleg," Kamhat said. She ran a finger down the length of Krastos's arm. "What are you thinking about, demigod prince?"

Krastos pulled away and stepped to the side. "Thinking about those hogs on the spit! I think they're almost ready, by the smell of them. I think I'll go and have a word with the slaves tending to them. I like my pork bloodier than most." He nodded to Kamhat and frowned at Tarlos, then made for the bonfire.

"That Krastos," mused Kamhat, following him with her eyes, "is surely his father's son."

"Have you seen my father recently?" Tarlos asked, bringing her attention away from his brother.

"Oh, dear prince, no. Hardly anyone has but for his healer, a few slaves, and the High Priestess." She smiled at him. "You miss your father."

Tarlos shrugged. "As any son would. I worry about him. I wish he could have been there to see me—us—today. But I understand. This day is difficult for him. Every year."

Kamhat nodded and grabbed his bicep. "Your mother, of course. Such a great queen, Ninsun was. And so beautiful. A great loss." She made a *tut-tut* noise with her tongue. "It was thought among some of us privy to her lineage that she would live for a thousand years."

"Mm." Tarlos took a drink, swallowed, coughed. "Why's that?"

"Her ancestors, of course. She was descended from the Ageless."

Tarlos raised an eyebrow. The small motion seemed slow and difficult on his drunk face.

"From...?"

"But evidently it was not true." Kamhat shrugged and spied at her goblet. "That small thing you were talking to, is she yours?"

"Katla? Yes. She and Mez are my room slaves."

"I shouldn't have to guess then." She gave him a sideways glance and a smirk.

Tarlos narrowed his eyes at her. "No, you shouldn't."

Kamhat gave him an apologetic look. "Forgive me, prince. I forget my place when I've had too much to drink." She bowed her head. "Congratulations on your becoming a man. You will make a great king someday."

Tarlos nodded to her and took a drink, sending her the plain message that they were finished speaking.

Krastos came back some time later with a bronze plate loaded with a pile of red pork. He was chewing on a slice, and blood dripped down his chin. He wiped it away with a hairy hand and swallowed his bite, then licked his lips and tried to reach his bloody chin with his tongue.

"Mental, that one," he said.

Tarlos nodded. "I'm not feeling so well."

"You need to eat." Krastos held out a slice of bloody meat and Tarlos gagged on the smell.

"I drank too much," Tarlos said. "I think this is my eighth cup." He drained the rest of it.

"Did you talk to Katla?" Krastos asked.

"Yes."

"What did she want?"

"Nothing, why?"

Krastos pointed to a general direction toward the middle of the hall, where people danced with goblets in their hands, and the goblets spilled over onto the floor, and the hands that did not hold goblets were holding onto other people, and the people swayed to the rhythm of the music.

"I saw Lugal a minute ago, or maybe an hour ago. I can't really tell. I'm less drunk than I was. I think it's because I've eaten something. You really should eat something. It'll make you feel better. What was I...oh yeah. Anyways, Lugal told me that Katla had something to tell you, but I told him that's none of my business."

"Nor his."

"Told him that, too. Did she tell you something?"

"I don't remember. My head is swimming. The room is swimming. I really think I'm going to sleep. Hopefully the room doesn't sway too much while I'm laying down."

"I've got some herbs that Shala gave me a few decans ago—"

"That priestess girl? Are you and she still seeing each other?"

"—she gave them to me for bad dreams. It helps you sleep really, really deeply."

"You're having bad dreams?"

Krastos shook his head and shoved another piece of pork into his mouth. He chewed quietly and did not speak until he had swallowed. He licked the pink blood from his lips. "Not anymore."

"Goodnight, Krastos."

"All right, goodnight, brother. I'll see you tomorrow. If your head isn't hurting too much, yeah?"

Tarlos nodded, put his empty cup on the food table, and made his way through the crowd of people who had gathered to celebrate his coming of age, weaved through dancers and swaying drunks with puke on their robes, climbed the steps to his apartment, fell over into his white cotton sheets, and he was asleep before he closed his eyes.

Lightning cracks and forks over a mountain and the sky for an instant is illuminated in white and purple. The mountain laughs at the lightning, and Tarlos covers his ears.

"Why do you cover your ears?" the mountain asks. "Do you fear the sound of laughter?"

"Why do you laugh at the lightning?" Tarlos asks the mountain.

The mountain bends over, bends down to speak to him better. Tarlos sees the mountain with two sights. With one, the mountain is a mountain and is unmoving. With the other, the mountain is a man made of black rock and red clay, and the rain begins to fall and the rock-and-clay man glistens in the night.

He smiles a smile filled with rocks and mud and twigs and says, "Because the lightning lives only for a moment, while I will live forever. Will you live forever?"

Tarlos lies in his bed, covered in leeches, and blood trickles from beneath the leeches and stains his sheets. His once long black beard is now sparse and white, covering the shell of a once great man.

"Only the gods and Ageless live forever," Tarlos tells the mountain. But the mountain is no longer a mountain. Krastos stands beside him now, beside his deathbed, holding his frail hand.

"Do you fear the lighting?" Krastos asks.

"Because it lives only for a moment?" Tarlos—or is he Lakaeus?—asks him.

"Because I can bring down the mountain," answers Krastos, and now Krastos is a rock-and-clay man, and he stands tall and broad, and now he is a mountain, looming and great, silhouetted against a cloudy night sky filled with lightning.

Another crack splays across the sky and strikes the mountain, and the mountain crumbles under its shock. Rocks fall from the peak until there is no more peak, and the rest of the mountain follows suit from top to bottom, huge boulders cascade down and bring dust and debris in a thundering gale.

"Tarlos"

"Father?"

No. He lies in his bed, helpless and sick and dying, and he watches the mountain crumble, and the boulders and smaller rocks that were once the mountain roll on top of him, crushing the air from his lungs, cracking his ribs, crushing his skull.

Tarlos feels his tongue pop out of his head, his heart and lungs and intestines explode from his torso and squish under the rocks, and the entire weight of the mountain is upon him.

He cannot move. He is dead. He knows he is dead. But he cannot leave this stone prison. This stone Hell. He is dead and he is trapped and he will remain beneath this mountain until chaos returns to the cosmos and the earth dissolves with the Powers that be.

Tarlos woke up with a scream and clutched his beating heart. His cotton sheets were drenched with cold sweat, sticking to his naked body.

*When did I get undressed?*

He tried to swallow, but his throat was dry and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. The room was dark and the moon outside was a thin sliver. The air was still.

"Mez?" he called out. "Katla?"

A stirring in a dark corner by the door, and then a voice. "Prince?" It was Mez. "Are you all right?"

"Did I scream?"

"Yes. Bad dream?"

Tarlos rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Yes. Could you get me some water?"

"Of course." Mez's dark shape stood from his bedroll, crossed the room, and Tarlos heard the trickle of water from pitcher to brass cup. Mez gave the cup to Tarlos, moving in the faint moonlight that came through the open window.

"Where's Katla?" Tarlos drank the water and gave the cup back to Mez. His head pounded with the pain that comes after a night of drinking.

Mez lit a candle, and the room flooded with soft orange light. "She wasn't feeling well."

"Probably drank too much."

"I don't think so, prince. Can I get you something else? Some tea might help."

Tarlos nodded. "Thank you, Mez. Tea sounds good."

Mez built a fire in the small stove, and the room was cast in dancing shadow as the flames licked at the cedar wood kindling. Mez's face was lit in orange and yellow light as he set the kettle on the stove and mixed in the tea leaves.

"What time is it?" Tarlos asked. He sat up, hung his legs over the side of the bed.

"A few hours before dawn."



"When did you come to bed?"

Mez stirred the tea as it heated. "I didn't attend the dinner. My regrets, of course."

"You didn't miss much. I was just wondering if you had seen Krastos. He gets to drinking too much and becomes a different person."

"I've noticed he talks a lot." Mez added more kindling to the fire. The kettle began to steam.

"Krastos's greatest strength is his kindness. Sometimes that goes away when he drinks a lot. I guess I was just wondering if that happened last night. He was doing fine when I left."

"I couldn't say, prince." Mez poured the tea and gave it to Tarlos.

The prince took a cautious sip. The tea filled his body with warmth, and the clouds in his head dissipated a bit. "Get yourself a cup."

"Thank you, prince." Mez poured himself some tea and sat on the floor across from Tarlos. He let his tea cool and watched the steam rise.

"How old are you, again?"

"Fifteen."

"And Katla?"

"Sixteen."

"She looks younger."

"Hers are fair-looking people."

Tarlos blew on his cup and took a sip. Mez did the same.

"She was worried about you, you know," said Mez. "I didn't want to go, but neither did she, and she made me watch so that she would hear it from me before anyone else."

Tarlos said nothing. His tea steamed in his cup. "Do you talk to each other about your lives before? Has she told you about the north?"

"No. We do our duty, and our lives are here, in Kesh, in the palace, with you. Anything that happened before is irrelevant."

Tarlos made a small shrug. "If that's how you want to go about it..." His tea was cool enough to drink now, and he downed the last of it. Mez took his empty cup. "Make sure no one wakes me tomorrow. I have a feeling I'm going to be sick in the morning."

"Of course, prince."

"And don't you dare let Krastos in here. If he tries to pounce on me tomorrow, tell him I said I would have your teeth pulled out if he so much as crosses my doorway."

"Would you?"

"What?"

"Have my teeth pulled out?"

Tarlos heard the smile in Mez's words, and he smiled back in the darkness. "Go back to sleep, Mez."

"Sleep well, prince."

Tarlos was asleep within minutes, and this time he did not dream.

A guard shook Tarlos awake, and he started and snorted. He rubbed his eyes and sat up.

"What is it?" His head was full of cotton, as was his mouth. He wet it with spit and licked his chapped lips. The sun was shining through the open window and sent spears of light into his eyes and brain.

"Prince Krastos has been arrested," said the guard. "The king has summoned you to his room."

Tarlos scratched his hair and looked up at the guard. The sunlight hurt and dulled his senses, and he tried to make out exactly what was the blurry double figure in front of him.

"What about Krastos?"

"Please, prince. The king is not in a waiting mood."

Tarlos nodded and wrapped a clean tunic around himself, then splashed some water on his face. Mez was sitting up on his bedroll, hair amass and sticking up in the back. His eyes were puffy with sleep.

"What time is it?" Tarlos asked the guard.

"Two hours after sunrise."

"What did you say about Krastos?"

"King Lakaeus wishes to speak to you about it."

Tarlos accepted the response and said no more as the guard led him across the palace to his father's apartment. As he walked, his arms and legs were heavy, like stones on ropes swinging as dead-weight pendulums. His head was foggy and his eyes stung in their sockets. He needed a drink, and he needed to relieve himself in the worst way.

The guards in front of Lakaeus's apartment opened the cedar door for Tarlos, and all the guards waited outside. In the dark room, Tarlos heard the clash of something light and metal on the floor. There was another clash, and a copper plate skidded across the wood floor and came to a rest near his feet.

"Father?" he said. "Are you in here?"

"Tarlos, why in gods' graces did you take so long in getting here?" the king shouted. He did not sound as sick as he was the day before. His voice was impatient, furious, and energetic.

Tarlos stepped through the room, finding it frustrating that his eyes had only just adjusted to the sunlight, and now had to readjust to the darkness.

When his eyes did adjust with what little light seeped through the fabric that covered the king's windows, he saw his father leaning on his bedpost, his chest heaving, his hair in a chaotic halo over his scalp.

"Are you all right, Father?" Tarlos approached slowly.

"Curse that boy's father, that's all I can say. And to think I raised him as my own. Brother to my son, son of my *dead* wife, and I raised him as my own. *My own!*" A gold candle holder that sat on a chest floated up and flew to the wall behind Tarlos. The candle broke in half as it collided with the wall, and the golden holder clinked to the floor. Tarlos had not seen his father use his Power since he was a child.

"Where is Krastos?" Tarlos asked.

"In the dungeons, where he'll rot for the rest of his life unless I come to my senses and have him executed!"

Tarlos smiled. "What's really going on?"

The king hobbled over to Tarlos, keeping a hand on his bed to balance himself. He grabbed Tarlos's shoulder and leaned close. There was yellow dried spit and mucus in the corners of his mouth, and Tarlos smelled his putrid breath that came with malnutrition.

"He *raped* Kamhat, Tarlos," the king hissed. "He took her unaware when she was drunk and defenseless, and he a huge demigod with super strength! She's lucky she survived."

Tarlos lay a hand on his father's hand, the one on his shoulder. "Father, surely you don't believe that. Kamhat...she's a harlot."

"She was my best concubine when we were both younger. Your brother knew the penalty for taking her! And nothing to say of our laws against rape—"

"So maybe she was raped," Tarlos interrupted. His head was beginning to clear, and some fear and doubt began to creep into his heart and mind. "But you can't believe it was Krastos. He wouldn't hurt anything. *Couldn't* hurt anything. Father, he didn't even want to kill the manticore. He told me before our trials, if he could find a way..." He shook his head. "Krstos would never. He wouldn't take her if she begged him. What makes you think it was Krastos?"

"Her pelvis is shattered." The king stepped back and nodded, his mouth knit into an angry line. The tips of his ears were burning red, and he ran a hand through his thin beard. "Both wrists broken, as well. Bruises all over. Her back and neck and chest—all bruised. Now you tell me, Tarlos, who in Kesh—on Earth—other than Krastos could have done such a thing?"

Tarlos's mouth gaped as his eyes gaped, and he shook his head. "I don't believe it. There's no way."

"The penalty for rape alone is death. To lay with one of the king's concubines is death. If he were any other man, he would have been beheaded twice! He should be dead now, Tarlos, if I had not raised him as my own." This time it was a bowl full of grapes that flew across the room and clattered to the floor, spilling grapes in every which way. Tarlos ignored them.

"Where is he?"

"The dungeons, like I said. Chained to the wall with our strongest irons until I can figure out what to do with him. But even our strongest irons may not be enough to hold the son of..." He

coughed. "...Moleg." He looked at Tarlos with disappointed eyes. "He was like a son to me. I was like a father to him. Moleg didn't raise him, didn't show him how to be a man, how to hunt, how to fight. He was *my son*." This last part he whispered, and Tarlos thought for a moment that the king might cry.

"I didn't want to do it," the king continued, his voice softer now. "But the law is the law. If only he would confess, then perhaps I could call upon the High Priestess to ask the gods' forgiveness for him. Then Krastos may only serve a life sentence in chains. Then he wouldn't have to die." He nodded, then turned away from his son. "I would like to know your opinion."

There was a beat, and then Tarlos almost laughed. A short chuckle escaped his nose and he said, "You know what my opinion is. Krastos is innocent!"

"The time for judgement has passed!" Lakaeus shouted, throwing his arm across himself to dismiss the matter. "Now the only hope Krastos has is to confess his crime to avoid the chopping block. And he should consider himself lucky that he was raised as a prince of Kesh, as my own!"

Tarlos braced himself for another dish in the air, but this time his father only put both hands over his face and shook his head and sighed deeply.

"Talk to him, Tarlos. You're his brother. His best friend. If he would confess to anyone, it would be you."

"He didn't *do* it."

"Damn your stubbornness!" the king screamed. Tarlos drew back. "Do as I command! Go!"

Tarlos stared at his father for almost a full minute, and they looked into one another's eyes in silence all the while. Tarlos reached beneath his shirt and plucked the talisman from around his neck. He threw it across the room, and Lakaeus watched it clatter away with sad eyes. Tarlos turned and jogged from the chamber.

He shoved open the door, and it knocked into a guard that stood in front of it.

"Ow!"

"You." Tarlos pointed to the guard who had escorted him from his room. "Take me to the dungeons. Do you have a key?"

"Yes, prince."

Tarlos half ran through the palace and down the steps that led to the dungeons, and the guard kept up behind him.

The door to the dungeons opened into darkness. For a moment a shaft of orange light was projected on the floor in a rectangle, and it thinned as the door closed. The guard took a torch from a sconce on the wall and lit it with a piece of flint, then handed it to Tarlos.

"I'll wait back here," he said. There was worry in his voice. All guards, soldiers, and slaves in the palace loved Krastos. "He's in the cell down that way at the very end." He pointed.

Tarlos jogged down the dungeon hall, making tiny splashes in the puddles that lay all over the place. The cell at the end of the hall came into view in the torchlight, and Tarlos saw Krastos's grey shape behind the bars. He was chained at the wrists, arms raised above his head, which hung low and miserable.

Krastos raised his head, and he stared at Tarlos through his long and matted hair. "Hello, brother. It's good to see you before I die."

Tarlos stared at his twin, chained to the wall, feet barely touching the cold stone floor, hair tangled and cast over his face. Krastos's eyes were sad and empty, the eyes of one who had given up. All at once Tarlos hated his father.

"Get those chains off," Tarlos said. His voice was even, and he kept himself from shouting. Krastos stared at Tarlos, seeing the anger radiate from him. "Why are you still in them? Break them off."

Krastos shook his heavy head. "I deserve them. Don't you know that? Don't you know what I did?"

Tarlos reached into the shackles with his mind and felt the tumblers. With two clicks, the restraints unlocked themselves and Krastos crumpled to the stone floor.

Krastos sighed. "I told you, I want to be in chains. I deserve to be in chains. Don't you know what I did?"

"I refuse to believe it," Tarlos said. He bent down to help Krastos stand, but Krastos pushed his hands away and slumped against the wall.

"Who else could have done such a thing?" Krastos looked away from Tarlos and gave his cell a passive inspection. The torchlight showed how small the cell was. "Only the son of the god of strength."

"You're an idiot if you believe anything they tell you," Tarlos said.

"The king believes it."

"He's an idiot, too."

Krastos frowned at his brother. "How could you say that?" With an absent mind, Krastos brought a hand up to his chest and touched the talisman that hung around his neck.

"Because he's stupid enough to believe this. Stupid enough to have you put in chains when you could tear them off like cotton."

"What was I supposed to do? Fight the guards? Run away? That would only cement my guilt."



"Did you even try to defend yourself?"

Krastos shook his head.

"Why not?"

"I don't know that I didn't do it."

Tarlos sighed and sat next to his twin. He set the torch to the side, and the cell danced in its flickering light. "I know you didn't do it. The Krastos I know never could."

"I was drunk. I have no memory of last night. How do you know I didn't do it?"

"The same way I know the sun will rise tomorrow. Because it always has. Krastos, the idea of you doing a thing like this is like...it's like suggesting that a swan ate a lion."

"You're comparing me to a swan and Kamhat to a lion." It was not a question, and one corner of Krastos's mouth twitched upward.

"I'm not so good at analogies." Tarlos tried to smile, but he found that he could not.

What might have been a hint of hope on Krastos's face faded, and he said, "But the swan had just finished defeating a monster, and he was mad with drink and the thrill of accomplishment. And the lion was old and drunk, and was not afraid of the swan. I think, in that case, the swan might have killed the lion."

"She's not dead. Just..." *Broken.*

Krastos made a shaky sigh as if he had just finished crying. He covered his face with a huge hand and inhaled deeply. "He must hate me," he whispered.

"Who?"

"The king."

Tarlos stood up and kicked a small chain on the floor. "Ablis take my father. He's an old fool. You shouldn't seek his approval."

Krastos looked up over his hand. "A stranger wouldn't know you loved him only yesterday."

"Yesterday my brother wasn't in chains!" Tarlos screamed. His voiced bounced through the dungeon's stone halls. "He's old and sick, that's all. If he were young and healthy, he would see that you could never do this, and he would investigate further. But the man I call Father would never accuse my brother of rape."

"And the man I call Father has never shown me his face," said Krastos, his voice rising. "He's never spoken to me. He didn't help raise me or teach me. As far as I know, he never loved me. But Lakaeus did. He was more of a father to me than anyone else I've known, and it really upsets me when you take him for granted."

Tarlos crossed his arms over his chest. He chewed his bottom lip in contemplation. "I don't understand why you seek his favor so much. You already have it. He told me himself, he considers you his own son."

"I seek his favor because I know that I am *not* his son, and he is not my father, but he took me in just the same, even after Mother died, his only wife, and—I'm certain—the only woman he ever loved. So why don't you help me put these shackles back on and leave me alone? I deserve my fate."

"He's going to have you put to death." Tarlos stared at Krastos. His twin still sat against the wall, legs and feet stretched out in front of him, hands in his lap. He did not look at Tarlos.

"There's nothing I can do about that," Krastos whispered. After he said this, the cell was filled with a reverent silence, a silence filled with foreboding.

Tarlos chewed on his lip some more and paced around the cell. He splashed the tiny puddles and kicked aside the skeleton of a large rat. It skittered away into the dark.

"I have an idea," Tarlos said at length.

"To end my existence sooner?"

"Listen." Tarlos knelt beside Krastos and rested his elbows on bent knees. "You want the king's favor, right?"

"Yes."

"And neither of us want you to die."

"Get to the point."

"You gain his favor—regain your honor—by avenging Mother's death." Tarlos stood.

Krastos stared at Tarlos and his mouth gaped in confusion. "What?"

"Go into the Cedar Forest," Tarlos said as his mouth stretched into a smile. "Bring back the head of Bawa."

There was a silent beat, and then Krastos closed his eyes and laughed. His chest shook with his quick deep breaths, and he ran his hands through his messy hair.

"What's so funny?" Tarlos demanded. His hands balled into fists at his sides. "Why is that funny?"

Krastos wiped his eyes. "You want me to just wander into the Cedar Forest with the intent to kill Bawa. You know what Bawa is, don't you?"

"He's a monster. So what? We each killed our own monster just yesterday, and it wasn't such a huge task."

"Don't you pay attention to the High Priestess's sermons?"

Tarlos raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

Krastos sighed. "Bawa is the son of Ablis and the Mountain. Since he was cast out from the presence of the gods, Ablis doesn't have the power of godly creation. So he mates with the creations of the other gods and produces bastard offspring, nature mixed with evil, manifested in physical form. Ablis's children are all evil, but Bawa is the most neglected and despised of him. They say his voice is the Flood, his words are fire, his breath is death."

It was Tarlos's turn to laugh. "They're all just stories, Krastos. Sure, there's a monster in the Cedar Forest and its name is Bawa. He's been there for a thousand years, and he killed our mother. He killed the king's *wife*. Isn't that the perfect way to regain his favor?"

Krastos stood up and regarded Tarlos, standing before him with his arms crossed and his feet apart and his face stern. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't joke about your life," Tarlos said, and he meant it.

Krastos shook his head and waved a hand. "No. Absolutely not. I'm not going against a demon. Not by myself."

"Who said you'd be doing it by yourself?" Tarlos laid a hand on his brother's shoulder. "No way I'd let you have that thing alone. And stop calling it a demon."

"But it is..."

"—just a story."

Krastos shook his head again and turned away. "I can't. Bawa has killed more men than any other dem—monster. He's bigger than anything we've ever faced, Tarlos. We don't even know what to prepare for."

"No one who's tried to kill him has been a Holder or a demigod. He won't be able to take both of us. Just like the manticore, yeah?"

Krastos spun around and pointed a finger at Tarlos. "And about that! You shouldn't have helped me. The manticore was my right to kill, my trial—"

"Gods, Krastos, are you with me or not?" Tarlos yelled. Krastos stepped back. "You're being a coward. Your spineless words are really discouraging, you know that? The gods have our days numbered, brother. We aren't meant to die in the Cedar Forest by the hands of Bawa. He's just a monster—and look at you! Since you were a boy, lions have been afraid of you. I've seen you wrestle aurochs to the ground. No one has ever bested you in a fight."

Krastos sneered. "You never lost to me."

"The gods have given me a Power to wield, so that no one can ever defeat me." *And you let me win anyway, you know you do.* "But you are the son of a god, Krastos. Or have you forgotten that?"

Krastos said nothing. He stared at the wall, avoiding Tarlos's eyes. Tarlos crouched beside his brother and grabbed his arm.

"Mother died for us," he told Krastos. "If you die, she will have died for nothing. Please, Krastos. For her sake."

Krastos groaned and scratched his head. He sighed deep and long, and he stared at the wet stone floor. The torchlight was flickering, and the dungeon was becoming darker. Krastos nodded, looked up at his brother, and extended an arm.

Tarlos grinned as he took the arm. The torch went out, and the dungeon went black.

Tarlos said, "There will never come a day when the names Tarlos and Krastos are forgotten from the minds of Men."

Tarlos led Krastos through the halls of the dungeon in the dark, and the door opened with a creak on metal hinges. On the other side stood the guard who had escorted Tarlos there, and he started as the two princes came through the door.

"Princes!" he said, coming to attention and standing upright. "I beg your pardon, but prince Krastos is not to be let out of his cell, by order of the king."

"You'll speak not a word of seeing us leave," Tarlos told him, "or I'll suck the air from your chest and leave you squirming."

For a moment it looked as if the guard might respond or call out for help. He opened his mouth, then closed it, looked from Tarlos to Krastos and back again. There was a certain sad light in his eyes. He loved Krastos, as all guards and soldiers and slaves loved Krastos. Krastos was a kind man with a gentle soul, and no one wanted to see him executed. The guard stepped aside.

"I'll take the blame," Tarlos said, hoping the guard caught the thankful note in his voice.

The guard gripped his spear and stood straight. He gave Tarlos a nod, and the twins took off through the cedar wood hallway.

The palace was beginning to stir as the sun rose higher in the sky, and people were emerging from their rooms. Tarlos and Krastos paid them no attention as they sprinted past them, and suspicious eyes turned to follow them.

As they ran, Tarlos fought the urge to laugh. His smile was big enough, but he had to suppress his joy and excitement that was rising from his belly and through his chest and up to his throat.

Tarlos had never told anyone, but he had kept a secret desire in his heart to hunt down and kill Bawa since he was a child. The exact reason for it, he could not pin down. He told himself it was for

his mother. He would kill Bawa to avenge the death of Ninsun, the death of his father's true love, the death of Kesh's queen.

But running through the palace, ignoring the shouts of his and Krastos's names, and ignoring the guards that jogged after them for a few yards and then gave up, Tarlos realized something that he had never admitted to himself. He wanted to kill Bawa for the sport of it. For the glory of it. So that for all eternity people would remember that King Tarlos son of Lakaeus, then prince of Kesh, had slain the dread beast Bawa, offspring of Ablis the Discarded One.

He grinned as he imagined it. Parades in his honor that took place every year on the same day. His birthday celebrated long after he was departed from this earth. His death-day mourned with reverence and remembrance of the one man brave enough and powerful enough to accomplish such a deed—

"What's so funny?" Krastos asked as he ran beside Tarlos.

Tarlos snapped from his daydream and shrugged with his hands. "Just anxious, I guess. Getting my mind ready for it."

Krastos shook his head, never perfectly confident with their decision.

The armory was a small building beyond the courtyard, across from the palace. It was attached to the blacksmith's house, and the blacksmith worked solely for the royal family and their guards.

Nekhthe, the blacksmith, was awake and already working, scraping a wooden tool at an antelope hide stretched on a wooden frame. At the sound of the princes' running footsteps, he turned from his tanning and greeted the twins.

"Majesties," he grunted. Nekhte was a huge man, with a bushy black beard that he kept tucked into his belt. His shoulders were massive and made his already large head seemed small in proportion. His right arm was a degree more muscular than his left, as was the norm with all hammer-wielding blacksmiths. "What brings you to my humble establishment?"

"We need armor and weapons," Tarlos said. "And we'd appreciate it if you were quick about it."

Nekhte nodded and waved an arm, inviting them into the small building that was the armory.

"May I ask what it is you'll be fighting?" Nekhte asked. "Or would you settle for some cheap practice armor? I know how you two can get. Wake me up almost every morning with your wrestling." His tone was gruff but lighthearted. Neither Tarlos nor Krastos had ever known Nekhte to harm a person, verbally or otherwise. When they were out of the palace, they sometimes caught Nekhte slipping sweet-rolls to children, whether royal or slave.

Nekhte rummaged around the place, opening wooden chests and sifting through them.

"We're just going for a quick hunting trip," Krastos said. "For a day or two."

Tarlos punched his twin on the shoulder and Krastos drew back. "Don't lie to the man," he said, then turned to Nekhte. "We're going to kill Bawa."

Nekhte stopped what he was doing and faced them, looking at them both in turn. He was silent and expressionless for a while, and the princes glanced at each other, uneasy.

And then, like a sudden clap of thunder, Nekhte exploded in a heavy booming laughter that could only come from a man his size. Tarlos and Krastos waited patiently for the blacksmith to catch his breath and wipe the tears from his eyes.

"Are you done?" Tarlos asked. "How about the weapons and armor?"



Nekhthe cleared his throat and sighed. His breath was shaky. "You aren't serious."

"When I said before that we were in a hurry—"

"Gods!" Nekhthe bellowed. "You really mean to walk into the Cedar Forest and get killed by a demon?"

Tarlos rolled his eyes. "It's not a demon."

"Yes it is," said Krastos. "I told you."

"It's just a monster."

"Demon or monster," said Nekhthe, who was now frowning with concern, "it's a child of Ablis! Do you know what that means?"

"Nekhthe," Tarlos said, "we didn't come here for a sermon. We just want our armor and a sword or two, and we won't bother you anymore."

"His voice is the Flood!" cried the blacksmith. "His words are fire; his breath is death!"

"So I've heard." Tarlos frowned at his brother. Krastos wore a snide expression that said *I told you so*.

"This is no joke, princes," Nekhthe said. His brown eyes were wild beneath his bushy eyebrows and protruding forehead. "Ablis created Bawa for the sole purpose of terrifying Man."

"And once it's dead, they won't be afraid anymore." Tarlos crossed his arms over his chest.

"You'd best fear Bawa if you know what's good for you."

"Can we please have armor and weapons, or are you going to send us out there with nothing but our wits?"

Nekhthe shook his head and ran a hand over his face. "Oh, Tarlos. You were always the ambitious one. I could never convince you to stay. And you're right, I can't send you out there with

nothing." He sighed. "All right. Wait here. I'll be back." He disappeared into a door in the wall of the armory. The door connected the armory to his house.

Tarlos smiled at his brother. "He's getting old, I think."

"Older and wiser than us, I guess," Krastos replied.

"Don't believe those stories. People only believe things because they heard it from someone else, until no one knows the truth of things anymore. We'll be the first to actually see Bawa since—" Tarlos stopped himself. He knew the last person who saw Bawa, and she did not help his argument.

Nekhthe emerged from the door a few minutes later, carrying pieces of armor under one huge arm and weapons in the other. He let them drop to the floor, and the metal clattered against the cedar wood.

"My sons', before they went to fight the Ashurites." He lifted a cuirass up to Tarlos. It was silver, the color of moonlight through a cloud, made from layers of small metal sheets that formed a scale pattern. It would protect everything from his collarbone to his waist.

"It should fit you," Nekhthe said. "Just have to make some adjustments to the leather straps. Here, try them on, both of you."

Tarlos dropped the cuirass over his head, and the leather straps fit snugly on his shoulders. Except for some extra space in the chest area, it was almost a perfect fit. Nekhthe took no time in cutting slack off the straps and attaching new fastening loops. He tightened the cuirass around Tarlos, and Tarlos felt like it had been made specifically for him.

Krastos's armor was the same as Tarlos's, but several sizes larger. Nekhthe's older son had inherited his massive build, but Nekhthe still had to replace the straps with longer ones for Krastos. Only ten minutes had passed by the time he was finished with it.

Tarlos and Krastos moved in the armor, testing how they could bend and swing their arms.

Tarlos touched his toes, twisted his body above the hips.

"You're a miracle-worker with metal, Nekhte," he said.

"Thank you, prince. Now these..." The blacksmith picked up two sets of shin guards and handed them over. "...should fit perfectly. Let me know if they don't. There should be a finger's worth of space at the bottom, and two fingers at the knee."

They fit perfectly, and Tarlos made a little skip.

Krastos shrugged. "Perfect," he said.

"Good," said Nekhte. "Take care of these." He gave them each a spear and a sword, with scabbards to match. "I made this one for my youngest." He pointed to the one Tarlos had picked, and Tarlos practiced some swings at the empty air. "But this one was my father's, who gave it to me, and I gave it to my eldest. My father never lost a battle with it, and neither did I. Soske, though..." He scratched his beard. "He decided not to take it into battle. Said he was too afraid to lose a family heirloom. I told him he was a fool for it, but he insisted. Well, who's laughing now?"

"I'll take care of it," said Krastos. He slid the sword into its leather scabbard. "And it will come back to you. I promise. Thank you, Nekhte."

"Yes," Tarlos said, putting his own sword away. "We appreciate your help."

"I still think you're damned fools for doing this, if you'll pardon me, princes. But I've been at this a while, and I've watched you go from boys playing with sticks in the mud to men battling monsters in the arena. It's hard for a man to watch a child grow and not care for him just a little." He smiled behind his huge beard, and his right eye twinkled. Tarlos wondered if it was a tear.

"Now get on with both of you," said the blacksmith. "Before the authorities catch you." He winked at Krastos, and Krastos looked away with a frown.

"We'll come back with Bawa's head," Tarlos said as they left the armory. "And the world will know by whose swords the beast fell!"

Something deep in Tarlos's mind told him after everything was over that even as Nekhte smiled and waved them away, he never really expected to see his sons' armor or swords again.

The main city of Kesh was awake long before the palace grounds. Merchants were selling wares and food, and civilians bartered over ingredients and fabrics. The air was filled with the sounds of the city—donkeys pulling creaky carts and the wheels knocking against the grooves in the cobblestone roads, salesman waving their merchandise and shouting at passersby, customers flailing their arms and arguing with vendors, children running about playing with their sticks and hoops and painted streamers. And drifting through the streets was the smell of freshly baked bread and honey-butter, scorpions and locusts roasted and being drizzled with melted sugar or pepper sauce, the smell of sweaty livestock and dung.

Tarlos took it all in and smiled. He hardly ever had a chance to go down into the city, to mingle with the people and taste the street food. But all that would have to wait until he and Krastos returned. The guards—and by now the king, no doubt—would have noticed that Krastos was not in the dungeon, and they would be searching for him. The princes had but a few minutes left to leave the city walls.

They made their way through the main street that led to the gate, and the crowds grew denser as the minutes passed. They tried their best not to bump into anyone, but Krastos was the largest man in sight and he was having trouble getting through without a struggle.

"Watch yourself!" spat a man after Krastos knocked into him. The man was carrying a basket full of naan, and a few loaves spilled over onto the ground. "Now see what you've done! I should have you pay for these. I can't sell them now!"

"I'm so sorry," said Krastos. He bent down to help the man pick up the naan. People walked by and stepped on his hands and bumped his head with baskets and coin purses. Wincing, Krastos gathered the bread and stood, rising above the crowd. He gave the loaves to the man, who scowled at him in return but placed the dirty naan in his basket regardless.

"You ought to watch yourself, man of your size," he grumbled. He walked away into the crowd but turned for one last insult. "Damn stupid foreigners..."

Krastos lowered his eyes and scratched his head. The man did not know Krastos was his prince. How could he? Krastos did not make it into the town often, and the people who lived without the palace would not recognize someone they almost never saw. Even the ones who were lucky enough to get front-row seats to their trials would probably not remember their faces after the event.

But Krastos shrugged it off and turned to follow Tarlos. His brother had no difficulty in weaving through the crowds. He used his Power to gently move people aside to create a path for himself. Krastos picked his way slowly through the thick river of shoppers and workers, pardoning himself whenever he bumped into someone, which was often.

Close up, the city walls were enormous. Sixty feet high, the color of amber. The sun, not yet at its noon place, peeked over the edge of the wall like half a gold coin. Behind him, Tarlos heard Krastos mutter a prayer to Shar, his grandfather, to watch over them. Or perhaps he was begging the god to change Tarlos's mind about the whole thing. Tarlos never asked, so he would never know.

They came to the stables, which sat nestled in a dirty corner of the city wall, not far from the gates. Tarlos waved at Krastos, hurrying him along, and he jogged up to the stable master. The man was leaning against a fence, with one foot resting on a horizontal plank, watching a young boy ride bareback on a grey short-neck.

"Ease up on the reigns, you little fool, or she won't know what you want!" the man yelled. "And quit squeezing her with your knees. She's solid; you can sit on her without falling through, trust me. Hello." He saw Tarlos approach and took his resting foot off the fence to face the prince. "What can I do for you, young man? Oh! As the sun witnesses, princes Tarlos and Krastos are here to inspect my stock. To what do I owe this honor?" The man kept his thumbs in the waistband of his tunic, and he wore an open vest over his muscular torso. A long piece of straw hung from his mouth, and it twitched as he spoke.

"What are we doing here?" Krastos asked Tarlos, standing at his side.

"You didn't expect to walk to the Cedar Forest, did you?"

"No, but...well, I guess you have a point."

Krastos could sprint faster than a horse when out in the open, but he grew tired like any other man. He could cover at least twenty miles before having to slow to a walk. Tarlos could fly, but using his Power cost energy just as any other exercise. If they did not take horses across the desert—a two-day journey—they would be too exhausted to fight Bawa by the time they reached his lair.

"Those two will suit us just fine," Tarlos told the stable master. He pointed to the grey short-neck that the boy was riding and a similar brown horse tied to a post nearby.

The stable master nodded, and the straw in his mouth bobbed upward as he spoke around it. "Two of my finest. They'll serve you well, princes."

"We'll need saddles and tack too."

"Of course you will. I'll fetch them for you." He cupped a hand over his mouth and shouted, "Boy!"

The boy on the horse, who was perhaps twelve years old and small for his age, half-jumped half-fell from the horse and sprinted to the stable master. His face was smudged with dirt and his bare feet were caked in mud and horse dung.

"Saddle these two," the man told him. "And be quick about it. Have you finished mucking out the place?"

"No, Father, but I'm almost done. Duck is still walking funny, so I have to redo her shoe before I—"

The stable master clouted the boy on the side of his head, and the boy drew back in pain. "How many times do I have to tell you to stop paying mind to that mare? She's good for nothing but breeding, and I don't need you wasting time on making her comfortable!"

The boy nodded, and Tarlos noticed that he never looked straight at the stable master. "Yes, Father."

"Go saddle these two and be quick about it. And while you're at it, how about minding your manners in front of your princes?"

The boy turned to the twins but did not look at them, and he bowed low and quick. He ran into the main stable building and ran out a moment later with two light leather saddles and two saddle blankets.

As the boy saddled the horses, Krastos said to the stable master, "You can send the bill for the horses and saddles to the palace. Rihat, the money-handler, will take care of it."

"Nay, and say no more," said the man with a wave of his hand. "Kesh is yours, and everything she has to offer, including whatever horse and saddle finds its way within the walls. Take them. I'll say they're gifts for your coming-of-age."

"Did you see us?" Tarlos asked.

"I did. Told the boy all about it, too."

The boy led both horses by the reins through the stable gates and handed them over to the princes. Krastos took the brown one.

Tarlos jumped in his saddle and the grey stallion whinnied.

"Woah there, boy," he said, and he gave the horse a pat on the back.

"Her name is Cloud," said the boy with a shy and squeaky voice.

"Oh, sorry, girl," Tarlos told the horse. "You have our thanks, stable master."

"Say no more about it and be on your way," the man replied. "No doubt you have important business and I'm keeping you from it."

"Very important," Tarlos said, grinning from one side of his mouth. "The world will sing of it for eternity! Come, Krastos!"

Krastos eased into his saddle, and the brown stallion leered under his weight. He frowned, and Tarlos could see that he felt sorry for the animal. But there was nothing to be done about it.

They led their horses to the gates, which stretched high and wide before them in the stone walls. Two guards pulled open a smaller set of gates that sat within the larger one, and the princes galloped through them into the dry desert and the ever-brightening day.



Somewhere deep in his mind Tarlos knows that he is dreaming, but the part of him that knows he is dreaming is smaller than the part that thinks this is happening. He is Krastos, and he is fighting the manticore.

He fights the manticore with naught but his godlike strength.

"I don't want to kill you," he tells the manticore in Krastos's deep voice. The manticore laughs and throws him aside.

He lands on his chest. His jaw snaps in two places. He bites his tongue off. He screams in agony as the manticore laughs its mannish laugh and the world dissolves around him into tendrils of black substance that is neither liquid nor smoke.

The manticore remains, and its laughter does not cease, and its spiny lion's body shifts into a mountain of rock with the face of a man.

"I didn't want to kill you," Tarlos says, although his jaw is broken in two places and his tongue lies beside him like the tail end of a dead snake.

The mountain either does not hear him, does not understand him, or does not care either way. It lifts one giant rocky fist into the air, and dirt and plants rain down from it. Tarlos raises his head and watches the club of an arm pummel toward him, and then all is dark.

Tarlos shot bolt upright. He was sitting on the bare ground, and the stars above him blinked. The fire between him and Krastos had fizzled out hours ago, and ashes sat in the pit cold and silent.

Tarlos's heart thumped, and he rested a hand on his chest and took a few deep and steady breaths. He looked to the south-west, and he could see the edge of the Cedar Forest nearing. They would be there tomorrow. He wiped cold sweat from his brow and rubbed at his pathetic stubble.

Krastos rolled over on his saddle blanket and groaned. "Wh...zh...doing," he mumbled.

Tarlos ignored him and lay back down on his own saddle blanket. He stared blankly at the white and yellow stars above him that swirled in a magnificent work of art. A part of him wanted to shake Krastos awake and show him the starry sky and all the beauty it held, and tell him to take it all in and look long and deep like you're drinking from a cool spring in the desert and you know you won't have water again until the gods know when...

*Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.*

Krastos rolled over in his sleep again, and his mouth moved like a mute man.

*We might be killed if we do this.*

Tarlos looked up. A star shot across the sky.

*He'll die for sure if we don't.*

He lay back down and closed his eyes.

*He'll miss the stars.*

He fell asleep, and his dreams were no better this time.

They had brought no supplies with them, which Tarlos told himself was smart because it was better that they travel light, but he was only making an excuse for being foolish. He was in so much of a hurry to leave Kesh that he had not thought of bringing food or water. They did not have to starve, though, as plenty of desert hare roamed around, and between Tarlos's Power and Krastos's strength they never wanted for food.

The Cedar Forest was the reason Kesh was the center of civilization in the Fertile Valley, as they shipped cedar wood all over the desert to small villages and other city-states. The cedar wood

trading industry had grown large over the years, and many wells had been dug between Kesh and the forest. Tarlos and Krastos were never thirsty as they journeyed.

Tarlos found it difficult to comprehend the scale of the Cedar Forest. Where the Fertile Valley ended on the west side, mountains rose and small streams flowed from their slopes. The air was cooler with more moisture, and he could feel the dust in his lungs turn to mud. Spending his whole life in a hot and dry desert, it was a strange sensation to get used to. But even stranger were the trees.

The Fertile Valley was not called such because of its vegetation. The two rivers that surrounded the lands around Kesh flooded over their banks every year, and the silt that was left behind was ideal for crops. But the only trees in the desert were those in the palace courtyard, imported there by queen Ningal, Lakaeus's mother and Holder before him. The trees in Kesh were sparse, and they suffered in the heat. No tree in Kesh rose above ten feet.

The Cedar Forest could fit three Fertile Valleys within its borders with room to spare. From a distance, the forest was a dark green sea that stretched out to meet the sky at the horizon. As the brothers came nearer and the air became cooler, they saw that this green sea was made up of millions of skyscraping trees, and each one was hundreds of feet high. The tree trunks were thicker than ten men standing in a row, and the wood was sturdy but pliable. The first men to take advantage of this resource died wealthier than kings.

The forest's border closest to Kesh was dotted with stumps and toppled trees. It was this way for several miles until the lumbermen chose to spread out to the sides of the forest instead of going farther into it. Growing up in the Fertile Valley, anyone would know the reason for this.

Tarlos and Krastos halted their horses where the stumps ended and the healthy full-grown monstrous cedars began.

"Well," said Tarlos, "we're here."

Krastos said nothing, and Tarlos looked at his brother's pale face. Krastos's throat bobbed up and down, and he swallowed.

"You okay?" Tarlos asked.

"I was just thinking about Shala," Krastos said. His voice was quiet and reverent. "What if I never see her again?"

Tarlos leaned over to hit Krastos on the arm. "Hey. She'll love you even more when you return with Bawa's head. She'll leave the temple and marry you for sure."

"That's not allowed."

"I'll be king."

Krastos looked at his brother, and his eyes were worried. "Aren't you thinking about Katla?"

This question surprised Tarlos, and he frowned for a moment, then gave a reassuring smile to Krastos. "The same goes for her."

Krastos said nothing and did not move for several seconds. He only stared into the forest, seeing how the light faded within the trees not more than a hundred yards away. The Cedar Forest was massive, and its trees were huge, and the brothers did not expect to feel so small standing in its shadow.

"I can't," Krastos whispered. "I just can't do it. Tarlos, let's go back while we still can. Please."

Tarlos leaned over once more and slapped Krastos across the face.

"Quit being such a coward!" He had had enough of his brother's anxiety and lack of confidence in himself or in Tarlos. They had come so far, and revenge was in sight. "This isn't the Krastos I know! What happened to the man who fights lions with his bare hands to protect shepherds' "

flocks? What happened to the man who dug a trench a mile long in a single day to irrigate farmers' crops? What happened to the man who killed a manticore with its own stinger?"

"You helped me kill the manticore," Krastos said, and he stared at Tarlos with hurt in his eyes after the slap. "I'd be dead if it weren't for you."

"And I'll be dead if you don't stay." Tarlos was not turning back. His pride would not allow it. And what would he go back to? A furious father and a battalion of soldiers waiting to place Krastos under the axe. "Do you know what happens when you die? People forget about you. They don't talk about you, they don't care what you did—it's like never having been alive in the first place. Mother's been dead for eight years, and I've heard more mention of her in the last three days than in these past eight years combined. If you go back, you will be executed, and Father will make sure that there is a blot on your legacy so large and dark that no one will be able to look back and remember you."

Tarlos felt heat rise in his neck, and he could hear his heart beating in his ears. He took a breath to calm himself.

"Krstos," he continued, "I'm going to kill Bawa for your freedom and to avenge Mother's death whether you help me or not. But I need you by my side. What can he possibly do to both of us together? We've already come so far, and death is waiting for you in Kesh if we return without that monster's head."

Krstos was trembling. The sword at his waist vibrated against his armor. "I'm terrified."

Tarlos was also frightened, but he would never let Krastos know that. "It'll be over before you know it, and we'll be laughing about it in a few days, beer up to our eyeballs and bellies full of meat; men and women gathered around us asking to hear again and again how we defeated the monster they

said no man could kill. Our names will never be forgotten." He punched Krastos on the shoulder.

"Stop crying."

Krastos wiped his eyes and took a deep and shaky breath. He stared up into the cloudless sky and closed his eyes, and Tarlos imagined he was praying to every one of the gods to protect them, but especially his father Moleg.

"Fine, brother," he said at length. "I'll go if you'll be at my side."

"Always," Tarlos said, and he gave his brother a reassuring smile.

They rode on.

Once they passed the boundary that separated the stumps and hewn trees and crossed into the full green and living Cedar Forest, the mood and atmosphere changed. The sun was blocked above the thick canopy, and strange animal sounds drifted through the trees. The twins never saw an animal, but they heard plenty of chirping birds and yowling cats and singing crickets that sounded just out of sight. But they did not care about any animal except one—and it was not a mere animal.

Five miles into the forest, a clearing opened up in front of them. They stopped there to give their horses a break and to stretch their cramping legs. There was a gap in the trees several yards across that spread from north to south, end to end of the forest. Tarlos squinted at the sun above them, feeling its light and warmth on his skin for the first time in hours.

"What do you think?" he asked Krastos. "How do we find him?"

Krastos looked around and scratched his beard. "Follow the trail, obviously. The question is, north or south?"

"What trail?" Tarlos turned and peered around, looking for some footprints or broken branches that would have been evidence of a passing monster. "How are we going to find its trail? The forest is massive. He could be anywhere."

Krastos raised an eyebrow and extended an arm outward. "The trail, brother."

Tarlos took another look, and he saw the trail. The clearing was not a natural one. The several yards of bare ground that stretched from north to south was, as he could now see, a trampled path through the cedars. The ground was bumpy and overturned with brown soil and broken branches. Stumps and stunted cedars protruded from the ground every few feet, and none were tall enough to reach the brothers as they sat on their horses. Tarlos felt the blood rush from his face and neck as he realized how large Bawa must be. He did not let Krastos see his concern.

He swallowed to steady his worried voice, then said, "South is the direction of Ablis."

"But he hates his father."

Tarlos nodded. "True, but all things with the innate evil spirit of Ablis are drawn to his ways. Let's follow the trail south for a few miles, and if we don't find anything we'll double back, yeah?"

"Sounds like a plan." Krastos did not look at Tarlos, nor did he smile or nod. He only mounted his horse, kicked it forward, and led the way southward down the path of trampled trees and dirt.

They followed the trail deeper into the Cedar Forest, and the sun was beginning to set by the time the animal noises stopped. The noises may have stopped long before they noticed. The sun's journey cast long shadows on the trampled trail and subdued the princes' moods with a gloomy foreboding. They felt as if they were in the wrong place, and this was the wrong time to be there. It was then that they noticed the birds had stopped chirping, the cats had stopped yowling, and the crickets had stopped singing. The absence of sound was ominous, but the brothers pressed on.

"What if we don't find him before dark?" Krastos asked, his voice barely above a whisper. Even the sound of their horses' hoof beats seemed dampened.

"We find a place to spend the night and keep looking tomorrow." This idea scared Tarlos to no end. Sleep in the Cedar Forest while on the trail of Bawa? But they had no choice.

"I think I see a cave ahead," said Krastos. "It's going to be dark within the hour. We might as well bed down there."

Krastos pointed to a small hole in a rock face on a hill, about a mile away. Tarlos squinted to see it in the low light. It seemed safe enough, and small enough to keep a monster like Bawa away from them while they slept, or at least tried to sleep.

They rode the mile south down the trail until they came to the foot of the hill. It was covered in thick rock, and large boulders lay scattered around the place and in the nearby trees.

"I can barely see in this light," Krastos said. "Are we close?"

"It's just up there a few yards. Leave the horses down here."

They tied the horses to a tree at the foot of the rocky hill and hoped that nothing would scare them away during the night, or eat them.

The hill was steeper than it looked from a distance, and in the fast fading light it was difficult to climb the hill without slipping and breaking every bone on the way down. It took several minutes to climb what was only a hundred yards. Krastos could have jumped the whole way, and Tarlos could have flown, but they were exhausted from riding all day and wanted to save their energy.

When they came to the cave entrance, they froze. The cave was much bigger than it looked from the trail a mile away. Tarlos looked at Krastos and saw that all the color had drained from his brother's face. Krastos opened his mouth and closed it again, and his eyes widened so that they were



more white than brown. He tried to say something, but his voice would not come out. Tarlos did not have to ask him what he was trying to say. He heard the breathing coming from the cave, and slowly Tarlos's head turned to see what the sound came from.

Red eyes glowed in the darkness, and they bounced up and down as the creature walked toward them. Tarlos was stuck, unable to turn or run, and he did not have to look at Krastos to know he was the same. The breathing grew louder and the eyes grew bigger and closer, and giant feet slammed into the rock ground as the steps became louder and faster. Tarlos's blood was frozen in his veins.

Bawa made a strange noise, something between a roar and a purr. It was disgusting, and it sent cold prickles over every inch of Tarlos's skin. The monster approached and towered above the twins. It was at that moment that Tarlos instantly regretted coming to the forest at all. He should have stayed home and fought his father, not Ablis's monster-bastard.

There was just enough light from the sun left to see Bawa as he came to the entrance of the cave, and the moon was full and rising behind the twins. Bawa was more or less the shape of a man, with a huge beard and antelope antlers protruding from his forehead. Bawa walked on all fours, his arms were twice the length of his legs, and his knees bent backwards like a dog's. Behind him stretched a whip-like tail, and the claws on his hands and feet scratched the rock as he walked. He was huge, twice the size of Tarlos and Krastos combined.

"What do I see before my home?" said Bawa. His voice was deep and smooth, and it made Tarlos think that this is what a cow would sound like if it learned to speak. "Two young men. One of them with a familiar smell. Both with weapons unsheathed to me. Tell me, young men, have you come

to fight me like so many before you?" Bawa grinned, and his smile stretched back to his ears revealing teeth the shape of needles and the color of corn.

Dread surged through Tarlos. Terror flooded his muscles. His heart froze. His legs shook. He forced his eyes to turn to Krastos, and Krastos looked sideways at him. Krastos nodded. Tarlos nodded back and turned to face Bawa.

"We've come to avenge Ninsun, our mother," Tarlos shouted. He was afraid his voice might come out weak and cracking, as he felt on the inside, but his voice was strong and steady, and he sent up a quick prayer thanking the gods for that.

Bawa made four more steps toward them, and every step shook the ground and the entire rocky hill. He lowered his head, which sat on a long slender neck, and Tarlos could see his reflection in the monster's eyes.

"You are the twins of Kesh," Bawa said with a nod of his huge head. "I wondered if you might come to me someday. Honor would dictate it, after all. Go home, boys. Do not be fools."

"We will not leave without your head," Tarlos cried, lifting his sword. The moon behind him glinted off the blade, and there was a twinkle in Bawa's eye.

Bawa laughed. His breath blew at the brothers and made Tarlos's stomach lurch. It was hot, and it smelled of decay.

"Have you not heard the stories about me? The Mighty Bawa? Child of Ablis, the Discarded One." He brought his head closer to the brothers and spoke softly and slowly, as if to children. "You both stand before me like a pair of frightened pups. I will tear you limb from limb. I will crush you. I will bite off your heads, leave your bloody and mangled husks on the ground, and feed your stinking guts to the vultures and crows."

Tarlos swallowed and whispered out of the corner of his mouth. "If we survive this," he hissed at Krastos, "you don't ever have to follow me again. This was a stupid idea."

"No turning back now," Krastos mumbled back. "Don't hesitate. I'm with you until the end."

For Tarlos, the world became grey as Bawa leapt at them. He did not think about his actions, but his body reacted to the monster's movements. He felt trapped inside his own mind with little or no control, and he watched the fight as a spectator from beyond his body.

Bawa moved like a viper. He swished his tail at them. He moved his huge head on his long neck to avoid their swords. He laughed as the brothers swung at him, and his breath was burning and putrid. His teeth were razor sharp, and he snapped at them whenever they drew near. Tarlos narrowly escaped his jaws more than a few times.

It was all Tarlos and Krastos could do to keep Bawa in the cave. They knew that if he escaped and ran into the Cedar Forest, he would have the advantage of knowing the trees and all the places to hide in the shadows and in the dark of night. There in the cave, the fight was as even as it could be.

Bawa came down at Krastos with open jaws, and Krastos punched Bawa in the mouth with all his superhuman strength. Bawa drew back with a shriek, and for a moment the three of them stopped moving. Tarlos thought that Krastos had stunned the monster, and he wanted to move in with his blade for a finishing blow, but something within Tarlos forced him to wait and see how Krastos's punch would affect Bawa.

Bawa moved his jaw from side to side and spit out a handful of needle-thin yellow fangs. He smiled, and a trickle of blood ran down his chin and into his wiry beard.

"Such strength, demigod," Bawa purred. "You truly are your father's son." He jumped for Krastos, his strange deformed dog legs springing forward, and he reached at Krastos with his long mannish arms, claws at full length.

Using his Power, Tarlos pulled Krastos out of Bawa's path, and Bawa fell on empty ground. He clawed at the place Krastos stood a moment before, and he roared with frustration.

"Did your father ever teach you that using your Power in battle is unfair?" the monster asked. "There is no honor in it."

Tarlos panted. He walked in a semicircle around Bawa and stood at the cave entrance. With the moonlight behind him, he could see Bawa in all his hideousness, tall and gangly, but also somehow brutish and muscular. "I'm not looking for honor," he said.

Tarlos gripped his sword with his mind and forced it at Bawa. It flew like an arrow shot from a bow, aimed at Bawa's slender neck. The monster dodged the sword, moving his neck like a snake avoiding a hawk. The sword planted itself into the rock wall behind Bawa, and it quivered on impact.

Bawa turned his head to watch the sword fly by, and as his head was turned Krastos jumped and landed on Bawa's shoulders. Bawa cried out in surprise and flailed and wriggled like a trout in a fisherman's grip. Krastos held on with all his strength, wrapping his arms around the monster's neck and squeezing its waist with his muscular legs. Bawa shook and convulsed, and backed into the wall to knock Krastos off.

Krastos squeezed Bawa where his head met his neck with the crook of his arm, and with his other arm he drew his sword. Tarlos removed his own sword from the cave wall with his mind, and it returned to his hand, sending white moonlight in Bawa's direction. Krastos held his blade to Bawa's

neck, and Tarlos approached with his own sword outstretched. He was going to pierce the damned monster's heart if he had one.

Bawa stopped struggling as he felt cold iron at his throat and saw Tarlos walking toward him with complete wrath in his eyes.

"Tarlos!" the monster cried. "Son of Ninsun! Have mercy!"

Tarlos paused, not because he thought of granting Bawa any mercy, but because he was not expecting the bastard son of Ablis to beg for his miserable life.

Bawa continued, "Let me live in peace in the Cedar Forest. If you spare my life I will be your slave. I will cut the cedars down and deliver them to Kesh, and you may honor Moresh and Shar with a cedar temple, such as never been seen before in all the world! And you will have a glorious cedar palace even more splendid than the one you have now. Men and women will travel thousands of miles from every country just to gaze on your kingdom, and you will be a glorious king with riches and splendor. All this will be yours if you will spare me!"

Krastos, struggling to hold onto Bawa with one arm while keeping his sword at the monster's throat with the other hand, shouted, "Kill him, Tarlos! He's yours! Kill him now!"

"Krastos!" Bawa shrieked, moving his red eyes in their sockets to better see the demigod prince. "Brother! Do not kill me! Let me live in peace and you will have your own kingdom beside Tarlos! Tell your twin to spare my life!"

"Kill him!" Krastos cried. Sweat glistened on his forehead and ran down his face.

Tarlos wondered at that moment why Krastos did not slit the monster's throat. But no sooner had he asked himself the question than he knew the answer. Krastos never wanted to kill Bawa. No matter how evil or corrupt a creature or man may be, Krastos never intended to kill anything.

Suddenly Tarlos felt guilty for helping him kill the manticore instead of subduing it as Krastos had originally intended. Krastos would not kill Bawa, although his sword was already at the monster's throat. Tarlos would have to make his move.

"I can feel your fear, Tarlos," Bawa said, and Tarlos paused. "I can see it, smell it, taste it. It is loud in your mind. Death is the end. You know it to be true. And yet you desire to kill me? Your deepest desire is to stay alive forever as do the Ageless, but you do not fear to deal death. Who are you to issue judgement of me?"

"Tarlos," Krastos grunted. "He's reading your mind. Stalling you. Do it! Now!"

"Your mother died for you to be born," Bawa continued, "and you repay her sacrifice by becoming a murderer."

Tarlos had heard enough. He charged at Bawa with his sword stretched in front of him.

Bawa screamed, "Hypocrite!" and Tarlos halted for half a moment.

The monster wrenched his neck and flicked his long tail, bringing it to Krastos and snapping at his back. Krastos cried out in pain and fell from Bawa's shoulders. He landed hard on the stone floor. His sword clattered to the ground—Bawa kicked it away. It soared through the air and out of the cave, never to be seen again. Bawa lifted one huge foot and brought it down hard on Krastos. There was a snap and a crack, and Krastos screamed in hot pain. Bawa picked him up with clawed hands and threw him deeper into the cave, tossing him like a limp doll. Krastos screamed as he flew through the cave, and Tarlos heard another snap as he landed and tumbled. Krastos stopped screaming.

From the deep and dark parts of the cave, the faint voice of Krastos drifted to Tarlos, and the voice was weak and fading.

"Tarlos...my back...broken. Get out...please..."

Bawa picked Tarlos up as he had Krastos. He did not throw Tarlos but instead pinned him against the cave wall. With his tail, Bawa flicked the sword from Tarlos's hand and kicked it out of the cave to join its brother outside.

Bawa laughed, and the laugh was frustrated, exhausted, and relieved all at once. The hot rancid breath smacked Tarlos's face and caressed his nostrils, and he tasted rotting flesh, and his stomach emptied itself all over Bawa.

The monster smiled, and his teeth were long, sharp, and yellow. Tarlos saw the gap where the teeth had been that Krastos knocked out. In their place was a bloody hole, and the blood was so dark it was black, like tar.

Bawa opened his mouth and came at Tarlos, arching his neck like a viper. Tarlos used all his strength in his mind to stop Bawa before he could bite his head off, and Bawa fought against the strength of Tarlos's Power. The monster twitched and shook against the Holder's force of will.

Krastos's voice came through the cave again, and Tarlos almost did not hear the pained and strained whisper. "Get out..."

Bawa's head came closer to Tarlos as his Power drained his strength, and Tarlos could not hold him away much longer. Lights popped in his eyes as he kept the monster at bay.

"Behold..." drifted the voice of Krastos, "the strength...of...a demigod."

With a surge of realization, Tarlos used every last bit of his mental strength to push Bawa away from him, and at the same time he pushed himself from Bawa and out the cave's entrance. The next moment lasted for an hour.

As Tarlos flew through the air, Bawa was forced backwards. He dug his claws into the stone floor to stop his moving, and he lunged at Tarlos before he had even started to fall from his jump. He

heard Krastos groan loudly under strain, and there was a sound of an explosion like he had never heard before, but he knew exactly what it was. Krastos had used the last of his superhuman strength and slammed his fists into the cave wall.

Tarlos began to fall to the ground that sloped away from the hill and cracks formed in the cave. Bawa took a moment to look behind him, wondering if what he heard was actually happening. Cracks spread from the inner cave where Krastos lay broken, and they reached the entrance in webbed crevasses. Rocks fell from the cave ceiling, and the floor beneath gave way. As Tarlos landed on the rocky hill and rolled away, the cave and hill above him crumbled in on itself, and Bawa screamed his last.

The mountain above the hill groaned, and the cracks from the cave spread upward to the mountain peak. With no time to think or to process what had just happened, Tarlos flew away from the mountain, not paying any mind to the screaming pain in his head as all energy had been depleted in the last few minutes.

The rock face of the mountain crumbled and fell, and Tarlos hovered a hundred feet above the rubble as he watched Bawa and Krastos be buried alive.

It started to rain.

Tarlos's eyes went dark, and he fell to the ground.

He woke a mile away from the toppled mountain beneath a cedar tree. The dust was still settling, and the animals were coming out of their hiding places to seek shelter from the debris and rain. He had no idea how long he had been unconscious, and he was exhausted. It was night, the rain still came down, and the moon was a glowing crescent behind the clouds. He was sore, his head



pounded with searing pain, his throat was dry and raw, his stomach was empty, and the world was silent.

Krastos was buried beneath the mountain, and it took Tarlos several hours of digging and lifting boulders with his Power to find his brother's mangled body. He pulled him from the rubble. Krastos's chest was flat, his limbs shattered, his clothes torn beneath his flattened armor. With his mind, Tarlos lifted him away from the wreckage, and he did not look for any sign of the defeated Bawa.

It was only when Tarlos landed Krastos at a safe long distance from any view of the crumbled mountain, while they were both under shade and hidden from the sun, that Tarlos allowed himself to cry. He touched Krastos, ran his hand over his shattered arms and legs, felt the flatness of his torso, cleared a stray tooth away that had embedded into his cheek.

Krastos's eyes were open, and Tarlos went to close them, but he paused. He took a moment to look into the dead eyes, and he saw that there was nothing behind them. There was no light, no peace, no discomfort either. This body did not know that it was once a living person. Krastos was gone, and that was that. Everything Krastos had ever done was now rendered meaningless.

Something was beneath Krastos's shirt, and Tarlos pulled it out. It was the talisman that Lakaeus had given him. By the time Tarlos finished crying, the moon had set and the sun shone through the forest canopy.

The horses were gone, either run away or buried beneath the mountain with countless other animals. Tarlos did not have the mental energy to levitate Krastos all the way back to Kesh, and he could not lift him. Using some fallen branches and Krastos's torn shirt, Tarlos lashed together a sledge and placed his brother's body on it. Pulling him across the desert was not ideal, but he had no other

choice. He would not leave Krastos in the Cedar Forest and then send soldiers to fetch him. They had come to fight Bawa together, and they were leaving together.

Hours passed, and when the forest ended and the desert began, Tarlos's steps became slow and labored. He struggled to pull the sledge with Krastos's huge broken body. Only a few miles away from the forest, he had to set it down and take a break. He collapsed on the ground, faint from thirst and the heat and the brightness of the sun. He cried some more, and then he fell asleep.

Feathers flutter around him, the sound of a breeze through dried corn husks. It is dark, but Tarlos can see shadows of grey against a backdrop of black.

One of the shadows approaches him, and at first he thinks it is some kind of mutant bird, hunched over and walking on two tall legs. But as it comes near, he sees that the figure is a tall man, and the man is wearing a cloak of black feathers.

"The mountain," Tarlos says in Krastos's voice (is he Krastos?). "I didn't want to kill it."

"That didn't stop you from killing it, though, did it?" the man replies. His voice is dry and hollow like wind blowing through the discarded dead skin of a snake. His eyes are grey and blank.

The man bends beside Tarlos and scoops a handful of clay from the ground. He welds his eyes to Tarlos's as he brings the clay to his mouth and takes a bite. He chews, and his saliva mixes with the clay and spills from his lips in a red-brown liquid and drips from his chin. Tarlos backs away, disgusted.

He collides with another person, and he turns to see a woman dressed in feathers, munching on clay. Her teeth are black, and her eyes see no light.

Tarlos cries out and runs, but all around him are people wearing feathers and eating clay, and they all dwell in darkness.

"I didn't want to kill him!" he shouts into the abyss, as men and women turn to see him, clay falling from their lips and between their fingers as they grasp at the cold ground. "I didn't want to kill him! I didn't want to kill him!"

But then he realizes that he is not the one shouting this. He hears it, and the voice is far away. He runs to it because the voice is familiar. And there he is (there is Tarlos—he is Krastos—he sees himself through Krastos's eyes) kneeling beside a sarcophagus. The other Tarlos cries and pounds the heavy coffin, which is carved and painted to look like a man. Like him.

Krastos.

"I didn't want to kill him," Tarlos says over and over and over.

Tarlos/Krastos reaches a shaky hand toward himself/his twin and touches his shoulder. The other Tarlos turns at his touch, and his eyes are the same dark and empty ones that belong to the people who eat clay and wear feathers.

Tarlos/Krastos screams, and he runs. The clay-eaters follow him, shambling along at a miserable pace, but they somehow keep up with him.

"Who are you?" he cries out to them.

Behind him, a clammy dead hand grabs his neck and plunges the other hand into his beard to hold his chin. A hollow wisp of a voice whispers in his ear, "We forget. We forget, and no one remembers."

Tarlos woke calmly from his nightmare, thinking it odd that he was not thrashing or screaming or sweating. His eyes stung, and they were puffy with sleep and tears, and he rubbed them until they could focus on the stars and moon above him.

"Tarlos," spoke a woman's voice.

He turned to the voice, and there sat a blazing fire that had not been there a moment ago. Sitting on the other side of the fire was a woman dressed in all white. Her hair was also white, and it floated around her head as if she were underwater. Her skin was like porcelain. The only part of her that was not white was her icy blue eyes.

"Who are you?" Tarlos asked. His voice was cracked, weak from thirst and sobs.

"I am Hashri," the woman answered, and Tarlos straightened at the name.

Hashri was the goddess of death, she who watched over all the souls who crossed over to the Nether. Seeing a living, breathing goddess sitting before him did not shake him, and his heart did not speed its beating even a single degree. Tarlos was fed up with his life, ready for anything to happen. If a goddess was here to take him down the Styx, then so be it. He had no desire to live after what had just happened.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"I thought you might want to know the state of your brother's soul," she said. Her voice echoed in Tarlos's head, and the sound made him want to weep for everything that had ever passed away.

"He's dead. Please leave me alone." Tarlos turned from her and made to lay down beside the sledge and Krastos. "I don't want anything to do with the gods."

An unseen force kept Tarlos from facing away from the goddess, and his eyes were glued to her flawless face.

"Krastos lived a wonderful life," she said. Her voice was even, calm, and reassuring, like the sea after a storm, but it did not make Tarlos feel better. "He brought honor to his name and to his memory, and he overcame the burden that was his father's legacy."

This last bit confused Tarlos, and he brushed it aside for the moment, reminded of something that he had wondered to himself earlier. "Where was Moleg?" he asked Hashri. "He wasn't there to protect my mother, and he wasn't there to protect Krastos. His own son. Where was Moleg when my brother needed him most?"

"My brother Moleg has no mortal children," Hashri said. "Perhaps you should inquire about this when you return home. And you must return quickly, as forces beyond you conspire for the throne on which you will soon sit. Be at peace knowing that Krastos does not suffer in the Nether. Farewell, Tarlos, son of Lakaeus."

In less time than it takes to blink, the fire was gone and Hashri no longer sat before Tarlos. He was alone in the dark, alone with the stars and the song of the crickets, and a dead brother.

When he reached Kesh three days later, Tarlos was dehydrated and sunburnt and still in shock. He wondered if he had blinked even once since he left the Cedar Forest. The skyscraping walls of Kesh stood before him, a red dot in a yellow desert against a backdrop of stars. He pressed on, dragging Krastos behind him. The sledge was coming apart as the shirt that held it together frayed and tore.

Tarlos stopped at the huge gates and dropped the sledge to the ground. It landed in a puff of dirt, and Tarlos collapsed into a sitting position beside it. He looked at Krastos, or what was once Krastos, and felt his bottom lip quiver.

"Made it," he said, and then he fell backwards and slept in the dirt.

He woke to a spear pointing at his face and three armed guards standing above him. He shielded his eyes from the sun that was rising over the city walls.

"State your business," one of the guards said through his helmet. The spear inched closer to Tarlos's face.

He sat up, slowly, and coughed. "I'm here to bury my brother."

The three guards looked at Tarlos for several moments before one of them gasped.

"Prince Tarlos!" he shouted, and dropped to one knee. The others followed his example, and the spears fell away from Tarlos.

One of the guards looked to the sledge, and his eyes grew wide. "That's not..."

Tarlos nodded. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like you three to take Krastos to the temple to have him prepared for burial. I'm just going to sit here for a minute longer."

The guards bowed, and a stretcher was brought from the other side of the gates where the guards were stationed. They carried away the body of Krastos, and Tarlos watched them leave through the city. Dozens of heads turned and watched the small precession, and no one recognized their dead prince.

Tarlos put his head in his hands and breathed. The day was hot, the sand was hotter, his skin was burnt, and his heart was frozen. He apologized to the ground with his eyes closed, whispering to

himself and to the gods and to his brother. He did not know whether or not they could hear him, but he did not care either way. He did not care about anything anymore.

Tarlos had Krastos's body cleaned, embalmed, and wrapped in linens. Nekhte himself made a solid gold sarcophagus and formed it into Krastos's image. The priestesses took care when placing Krastos's body into the coffin. Shala, a small and young priestess, held back her tears as she helped. Before the sarcophagus was shut and sealed, Tarlos made sure to lay the talisman Lakaeus had given him on his chest, above his crossed arms.

All of Kesh was required to come to the prince's funeral, and all did come. They gathered at the Tomb of Kings, twelve miles south of Kesh, and Krastos was carried by a team of stallions. There they watched and listened in reverent silence as the High Priestess conducted the burial.

The High Priestess held her palms to her face and lifted her chin to the sky. She spoke in a loud but respectful voice.

"Hashri, everything that is undesirable of Krastos has been carried away for you." She picked up a vase of water and lightly poured it over the sarcophagus.

"Any evil which was spoken in his name, Ilshu has received and cast it into the Styx.

"The fluid of life shall not be destroyed in you, and you shall not be destroyed in it. Let him that departs depart with his soul. Hefmut departs with his soul. Moleg departs with his soul. Sekhmet departs with his soul. Sep departs with his soul. Ninety-nine gods and ninety-nine more depart with his soul.

"Krstos, the arm of your soul is before you and behind you.

"Krstos, the leg of your soul is before you and behind you.

"Hashri, I give unto you the offering of Hefmut, that your belly may be filled with the flesh and your body surrounded by the odor."

A small white sheep was brought to the High Priestess, led on a rope by two young priestesses. The High Priestess removed a long knife from her belt, held it to the sky, then slit the sheep's throat. Blood poured over the ground as the sheep bleated and twitched its hind leg.

"This libation is for you, Hashri. This libation is for you, Krastos."

A priestess brought her four sticks of incense, and she lit them and waved them around the sarcophagus.

"As Hefmut advances, and as Moleg advances, and as Sekhmet advances, and at Sep advances, so shall Ilshu advance with your soul.

"Hail Ilshu, king of the dead. Hail Hashri, queen of the dead. Hail to the gods of death who live forever, who were born of heaven, conceived of Shar and Moresh. Into your hands we commend the soul of Krastos."

Soldiers placed Krastos in his tomb. Treasures were placed around him, and fresh paintings on the walls depicted his wonderful life—from his miraculous birth and childhood, to his many feats of strength and service, to the battle with the manticore, and finally his selfless sacrifice in the fight against Bawa.

The door to Krastos's tomb was sealed shut, never to be entered again.

The sermon was word-for-word the same as every funeral since the beginning of their religion. Tarlos expected no different. But after hearing his brother receive the same funeral as his mother eight years before, with only their names switched out, Tarlos felt a small pit of anger in his belly. Why could they not at least take a moment and say something about Krastos's life?



Tarlos stood at the entrance to the tomb, and he ran his hand over the glyphs that represented Krastos's name, carved into the stone above the door. Behind him, the people of Kesh left the Tomb of Kings and made their way back to the city. Tears stung at Tarlos's eyes as not one person stayed even a few minutes after Krastos was shut up in darkness forever.

"And just like that," Tarlos said to the door, "you're gone."

The royal concubines lived together in a mansion next to the palace grounds. Like everything else in Kesh, it was built from cedar wood and did not stand apart in appearance from the surrounding houses and structures. The morning light shone through the windows and doors of the mansion, casting slats of light onto the grounds and gardens in front of it. There was no movement other than laundry hanging out to dry, flapping in the breeze. The concubines liked to sleep late, and Tarlos did not expect any of them to be awake at this hour. Kamhat would be in there, in her private room, confined to her bed with shattered hips. The slaves working in the gardens turned their heads and bowed as Tarlos walked past them into the mansion, and it was not their place to say anything to him.

The heavy cedar doors opened silently, and there was not a single concubine to be seen. Slaves walked around the place cleaning and fluffing pillows and filling jugs with water and wine. More slaves could be heard in the kitchen preparing a midday meal. A few of them looked his way as he walked through the main room and up the stairs to the topmost floor, but none spoke a word to him. As much as he respected the slaves, he was in no mood to speak to them as equals as he often did, and he was grateful that none gave him the opportunity to scream at them.

Kamhat's room was at the end of the hall, and Tarlos made his way to it with silent and sure steps. Suddenly he was aware of how dry his eyes and throat were, and he had to stop to compose himself before going in.

She was there in her bed, just as Tarlos had imagined. Her covers were unwrinkled over her frail body, and it seemed that she had not moved since the incident. She was thin and sickly, pale with sunken cheeks. She opened her eyes as soon as Tarlos entered the room.

"Prince," she said. Her usual sensual voice was now raspy and weak, and Tarlos almost felt sorry for her as she lay broken and useless and forgotten in this room. "I am sorry."

Tarlos stared at her, running his eyes up and down the lump of her body that lay beneath the blanket. Kamhat played with her hands as Tarlos said nothing for a few minutes.

Finally, he exhaled through his nose in an aggressive sigh and said, "Why is it that you, a whore and a harlot, get to live after what you've been through—and yet my brother, who never did a single wrong deed in his life, is now dead and forgotten to the world? Tell me."

Tears welled up in her eyes, and her mouth shook. "I...I..."

"Tell me what happened that night," Tarlos said. "The truth. I know it wasn't him."

It was plain to see that Kamhat was seriously injured, and Tarlos did not think she would ever walk again. Part of him felt sorry for her, but the other part was waiting to hear what she had to say before he extended any sympathy.

She shook her head, eyes still wet. "I don't know what you—"

"Just tell me," he spat. "I have had a terrible decan. I watched my brother die, I dragged him across the desert for three days. I stood there and watched as everyone in Kesh left as soon as the

sermon was over at his funeral, and no one stayed to pay their respects. I am livid, and I'm in no mood to play games with you."

"I..." Kamhat closed her eyes, and a tear fell down her cheek. She turned away from him. "I'm sorry, prince. I don't know what you want me to say."

Tarlos lifted her with his mind, and she hovered six feet above his head. She screamed in pain as her legs dangled beneath her, and Tarlos saw the bandages and plaster around her waist and thighs. She cried out and shouted, but he did not understand anything she said through his own rage.

"You're responsible for this!" he yelled over her cries. "This is your fault! He'd still be alive if it weren't for you! And I hope you rot in the House of Dust for all eternity!"

She screeched, "Put me down and I'll tell you!"

Tarlos dropped her on the bed, and she took several seconds to cry, wipe her eyes, and adjust her position. When she was finished, she could not make eye contact with Tarlos.

Tears streamed down her thin and sunken face, and she said between sobs, "Krastos had nothing to do with it. It was the guards who broke me. With hammers. They told me they would kill me if I said anything, and they told me to say that it was Krastos who did it. Do you understand, Tarlos? They were going to kill me!"

"Why?" Tarlos asked. His blood boiled. "The guards wouldn't do that on their own accord. Who gave them the order?"

"Please, prince..."

Tarlos brought a heavy fist down on her waist and pummeled her twice. She screamed again. "Tell me," he said.

"I don't know!" she cried. "I would tell you! But I just don't know. Who would want to frame Krastos? I can't think of anyone, and I've thought about it a lot." She breathed in, and her breath shook, and she wiped her eyes and bit her lips. "They would have killed me. I am so sorry, Tarlos. So sorry..."

Tarlos could think of nothing to say, and he left her there. He heard her continue to cry as he left the mansion and made his way to the palace.

The palace was silent, and almost all inside were asleep. It was a short and easy walk from a side door in the courtyard up the stairs to the king's apartment. The guards nodded to him, and he opened the door slowly. It creaked low and quiet on the hinges. The door opened just wide enough for him to slip through, and it closed behind him. The apartment was dark, as it always was, and not even the sun could be seen through the thick black curtains. The king's body slave slept in a small private room just a few feet away, and Tarlos locked it from the outside, then tugged on the door to make sure it would not open.

His father slept in his bed, his small malnourished chest rising and falling only a few inches. The sick and raspy breathing of the king made Tarlos ill. He watched his father sleep for a few minutes, letting it become real that this would be the last time he saw his father alive if things happened how he imagined.

With a snort, the king yawned and rolled over in his sleep, and the blanket covering him slipped off and revealed his thin legs. Tarlos used his Power to pull the blanket off entirely, and the king shivered. In Kesh, it was hot no matter the time of day or night, but Lakaeus had been having chills for the last several months. This was a sign that his death was near. And his death was nearer than he knew.

Lakaeus opened his eyes and searched with a wandering arm for his blanket, and Tarlos stepped forward. The cedar floor creaked beneath his feet, and Lakaeus stopped moving.

"Someone there?" he asked. His voice was weak and cracking with sleep and sickness. "Abu? Is that you?"

Tarlos whispered, "It's me, Father."

Lakaeus sat up fully, struggling with his skinny weak arms to prop himself up against his headboard. "Tarlos! Gods, boy, where have you been? I have so many things to say to you and I don't know where to start..."

"I guess you know by now that Krastos is dead." Tarlos took another step forward. His eyes were adjusting to the dark room, and he could see his father's eyes clearly. Was the king only tired, or did Tarlos see worry in those grey eyes?

The king cleared his throat. "Yes. Although they didn't tell me how it happened. How did it happen?"

"Bawa killed him. Actually, Krastos sacrificed himself to save my life." Another step toward his father and the king leaned away from his son. "I need to ask you something, and you need to answer truthfully."

Lakaeus licked his cracked lips and nodded. "Go ahead."

"Was Moleg truly Krastos's father?" He had to whisper the question. He feared that if he used his voice he might cry.

Lakaeus swallowed and ran his fingers through his hair and his scraggly beard. He shook his head, looking away from Tarlos, and he said in a soft voice, "No. Moleg was not his father."

"Then who was his father? Because it surely wasn't you."

The king looked at Tarlos, and Tarlos saw the worry in his eyes for sure this time. Alongside the worry was fury, and the king lowered his head in anger and said, "Ablis."

Tarlos stumbled back a step, not believing it at first. But after a moment's thought, it all made sense.

"Mother's life was the price for a son," Tarlos said, finally understanding. "That's why Bawa killed her—because she made a deal with Ablis. You were responsible for the manticore. You wanted Krastos dead!"

"The manticore should have killed him, even being the demigod that he was," the king spat, using his thin shaking arms to straighten himself against the headboard to better meet Tarlos's gaze straight on. "I know you helped him kill it, but there was nothing I could do about it. So something else had to be done."

"You almost killed Kamhat just to have an excuse to kill Krastos." Tarlos took two steps forward, fire burning in his veins and thunder raging in his heart. "You blame him for Mother's death, don't you?"

"Ninsun would still be alive if that abomination were never born!" Lakaeus's chest rose and fell tremendously, and he put a hand on his chest and coughed as his heartbeat grew too quick.

They stayed in silence for some time. Tarlos stared at the king, and the king stared at his son. Tarlos knew what he had to do, and he thought a part of the king knew it as well.

Tarlos said, "I'm going to kill you now."

The king sneered. "Fine. Send me to Paradise. I deserve it after the long life I've lived."

"You think you will go to Paradise when the House of Dust waits for murderous tyrants like you?" Tarlos scoffed. "You will rot in Hell for all time. And when you are dead, I will blot your name

from every record, and I will make it illegal to even utter your name, and soon there will come a day when Lakaeus son of Hestos might as well have never existed in the first place. Then you will truly be dead."

Lakaeus sniffed and whispered, "Then I shall wait for you in Hell, my son."

Tarlos shook his head. "No. I'm going to the Ageless Country, and I will learn the secret to immortality. I will be the last king of Kesh, and no more men like you will ever sit on the throne again."

The king raised his head, and his shaking arms gave out, and he slumped onto his bed.

Tarlos asked, "Will you try to defend yourself?"

Lakaeus sighed and shook his head. "It wouldn't do any good. I'm dying anyway. And the world must have a Holder of Space, so I cannot kill you. Do what you will."

Tarlos reached into his father's lungs with his mind and pulled out the air. He closed the king's throat, and the king gurgled and choked for a few seconds, and then he fell over onto his bed with a blue face.

Tarlos did not give his father the honor of being buried. Lakaeus's body was burned, and his ashes thrown to the wind.

The High Priestess performed the coronation after Lakaeus was disposed of, and Tarlos became the new king of Kesh. The crown was cold and a bit too small. It hurt to wear it, so he hardly ever did.

Sleep did not come to Tarlos for many nights, not even with the warm comfort of Katla beside him.

"Just close your eyes and lay down, and sleep will come," the queen would say to him.

"Why should I sleep when my brother will never wake again?" Tarlos replied one night.

"He's alive in your heart and in your memories, Tarlos."

But Tarlos just rolled away from her and stared at the wall every night until the sun rose.

In the rare moments when his eyes did close and his mind slipped into something close to sleep, nightmares plagued him. Rustling feathers, clammy hands, mouths full of clay, weeping, voices like dry grass...

No, Tarlos would not die. He spoke the truth to his father. As he looked into the polished copper plate at his reflection and shaved his beard, he knew a truth. Immortality was the only solution to his misery.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Ageless

After Tarlos finished his story, the boatman leaned against the rudder and did not speak for some time. The man was a good listener. He never interrupted Tarlos to clarify or ask questions, he nodded in understanding during all the right places, and his face showed true emotion by the time the story came to an end.

The Styx moved slowly through the dead country. It was wide and stagnant, and the trees on either side were dark and foreboding.

"Are there any animals here?" Tarlos asked the boatman. There seemed to be a reverence about the place that left as soon as he broke the silence.



"I think so," the man said. "I hear em, but I never see em. Seen crickets, though. Always one at a time, never a group of em."

"I saw a cricket when I came here."

The man smiled. "Might be it was the same one."

The slow current of the river rocked the boat, and Tarlos stood from his sitting position to stretch his legs and peer into the murky water. A blurry reflection stared back at him, and the eyes were sad and lost.

"It wasn't your fault, you know," said the man.

Tarlos spit into his reflection. The glob sent ripples through the water, and the sad eyes that stared at him lost their focus. "I made him go. He didn't want to."

"He wouldn't have gone with you if he didn't want it deep down. There's nothing you could have done to force him to go with you, even if you did beat him at wrestling a few times."

"He let me win."

"That ain't the point."

Tarlos shrugged off the man's words and lay down on his back, staring up at the cloudy blue sky. The sun was high, but it was not as bright here as it was on Earth. He could almost look straight into it without squinting, and yet it lit the world here with the same bright light as he was used to.

The man cleared his throat and swallowed, hand still on the rudder. "How come you think you'd go to that place with the feather-people and whatnot when you can see for yourself that ain't the case? We're all perfectly content here. It's just like old times."

Tarlos shook his head. "This is your afterlife, not mine. When I came to your village, there was a sign that read 'Windmill District.' I don't know what that is. And from what you and the woman at the tavern have told me about your world, I don't think our worlds are one and the same."

The man raised his eyebrows and nodded in acceptance, considering the theory. "I guess that would make sense. After all, I ain't never heard of a place called Kesh, modern or ancient. Some of the things you said reminded me of some ancient civilizations from my world that existed thousands of years before I was born. But they weren't called Kesh. Egypt, maybe. Or...Sumerians, I think is the word. Never was much of a history buff. Maybe the lady at the tavern would know. She always struck me as an intelligent girl. Shame she died so young. You really should listen to her story someday, if you come back this way." The man cast his eyes out of the boat and into the trees, seemingly lost in thought.

"How much farther?" Tarlos asked. He closed his eyes for a nap.

"This is about as far as I've ever been, so I don't know for sure. Can't be much further, anyway. I hope not, otherwise I'm coming back empty-handed."

Tarlos did not ask what he meant by that and instead chose to fall asleep. Nightmares did not come to him.

Two days passed on the stretch of the Styx that was wide and flat and stagnant, and then on the third day the water grew rapids in its stream, and the trees on either side began to thin.

"Never been this far before," said the boatman. Tarlos picked up a hint of anxiety in his voice, and a part of him laughed at the man. It was Tarlos who had to continue to the Ageless Country, and no one knew what awaited him there. If anyone should have anxiety, it was Tarlos.

Ahead, the sky was a pale blue and it met with the Styx at the horizon, and the horizon was near.

"Is it just me or is the river about to end?" asked the man, placing both hands on the rudder, unsure what to do.

The sound of roaring water filled the air, and the man groaned. "Waterfall. Okay, Mister Tarlos, this is where you get off."

Tarlos opened his mouth to protest but kept quiet. He knew sooner or later he and the man would have to part ways, and he did not expect the man to float his boat off a cliff for him.

The man steered the boat to the north bank, and with a crunch of small pebbles and dirt, the boat landed on the shore, and the man jumped out with a rope to tie the boat to a nearby tree.

"Careful not to touch the water," he called back to Tarlos.

Tarlos jumped over the foot or so of water between the boat and dry dirt, and he landed a safe few feet away from the Styx. He turned to the man to thank him for the generous ride, but the man was double-testing the knot and the rope on the tree.

"You aren't leaving?" Tarlos asked him.

"Oh, I will, as soon as I get what I came here for. No offense, Mister Tarlos, but I never would have agreed to float down to the end of the Styx if I didn't have something else to do while I was here."

"And what would that be?"

"A gift for a friend." He pointed downstream. "Is this the way you're going? I might need your help. But if not, we can part ways here."

Tarlos was indeed going that way, and he and the man walked together to the edge of the cliff where the water cascaded down into a small ravine about forty feet below. Beyond the ravine, the water disappeared into a large valley, and the valley was hidden under a dome of dense white fog.

The river ended between two bare trees, and the gushing waterfall fell into the woods among rocks and fallen branches. The water was white and it bubbled and roared as it fell several yards below Tarlos and the boatman. There was no trail to be seen that led down the ravine, and the man half-sat on the steep ground, and he kept one hand on the dirt beside him as he scooted down toward the water.

Tarlos followed the man, using his Power to steady himself, and once stopping the man from tumbling into the ravine when he slipped on some loose rock.

"What makes you think it's down here?" Tarlos asked him.

"Seems to be some sort of law," the man answered when he reached the bottom, and he clapped dirt from his hands and swatted the seat of his pants. "The thing you want most is often in the place you're most afraid to look."

The two walked downstream for some time, and the ravine shallowed and the walls of dirt on either side became easier to navigate beside the water.

"What exactly are we looking for?" Tarlos asked.

"A flower. Look for a place in the clay, probably next to some big rocks next to the water. They like the run-off." The man tipped his wide-brimmed hat back to wipe sweat from his forehead.

"What color?" Tarlos shouted over the roar of the white water.

"What?" the man yelled back.

"What color is the flower?"

"Blue."

"Like this one?"

The man turned and walked back to Tarlos, stumbling once on a protruding granite rock slick with Styx water. He knelt beside Tarlos to get a look at what he found, and a wide grin split his face.

"That's her," he said.

The flower was a deep blue, the color of the sky after a storm has ended and the rains have cleared. Tiny specks of white dotted the inner petals, and the three petals branches off into two points each so that it appeared to have six. In the center of the blue was a small white bulb, and the whole thing sat atop a short and thin green stem. The flower trembled between two granite boulders as it drank in the moisture of the Styx that came through the clay beneath it.

"I never thought the river of death could harbor such beautiful life," Tarlos said.

The man took his hat off, and Tarlos had to keep from laughing. Without his hat, the man's head was comically small, and his large nose appeared even larger now. His hair was thin and plastered close to his head, and Tarlos wondered if he had ever had a full head of hair or if he had always had that thin spot on top. The man picked up a short fallen twig from the ground and gently, carefully, dug a wide circle around the blue flower. He lifted the large clump of clay from the ground, and the small flower came with it. He placed the whole thing in his black hat, then dumped a little more dirt around the edges to keep the flower held in place.

The man sighed and smiled. He wiped his eye with a single finger, then looked at Tarlos.

"Thanks for the help. I guess you're going that way." He nodded downstream.

Tarlos nodded. "I'm glad I could help. Thank you for bringing me this far."

"Come see us again if you're ever going this way."

"If the gods will allow it."

The man extended his free hand, and Tarlos grasped it, and then the man turned and made his way upstream to climb the dirt wall of the narrow ravine. Tarlos turned the opposite direction and hiked downstream, and the ravine became ever shallower, and the dome of dense white fog closed in around him as he came into the valley.

Tarlos never saw the boatman again.

He walked through the aspens, which were no longer bare but covered in broad green and yellow leaves. Orange and yellow leaves lay scattered on the ground, and the broken sunrays that came through the branches painted various lines and stripes on the ground, making the oranges and yellows more vibrant in the light and darker in the shadows. Tarlos thought it looked like a beautiful painting.

A small trail appeared beneath his feet after a mile or so, and Tarlos was not sure if he had always been walking on the path or if he had stumbled upon it by chance. Perhaps the trail had manifested itself under his feet not moments ago, leading him where to where he needed to go. And Tarlos was not exactly sure where he needed to go, so he decided that following the thin track was as good of a plan as any. The trail wound through the aspens, and Tarlos followed it as far as it went.

The path was narrow and steep in some places, and it took Tarlos over hills and between rocks, down short cliff faces, and through small canyons. To Tarlos, it felt as if he had been walking for several hours, but the sun had hardly moved in the sky.

To his right, he saw in the distance the cliffs and waterfall that was surely the Styx, and he wondered about the boatman, and how he was faring up the river. The narrow trail led down a series of sloping hills, and the hills were green with lush grass and wet with dew. The grass gave way to grey

and black rocks, and the rocks became steep until Tarlos feared he would slide down the rocky slope to his death. He wondered, *If I die in the land of death, would I feel any different?*

The hills had now become cliffs, and the grass became rock, and the path became a narrow staircase carved into the living stone. Moving backwards, like descending a ladder, Tarlos placed one foot after the other on the stone steps and lowered himself to the bottom of the cliff, which he estimated to be at least two hundred feet below.

The last few feet of the rocky cliff leveled into a rocky hill, and the stone steps were shallow and wide. Tarlos paused, taking a moment to catch his breath, and he looked on to the trees that spread out before him. The place was quiet as a winter night, and all Tarlos could hear was his own breath and his heartbeat in his temples. A breeze blew past him and rustled the leaves of a nearby aspen, but not even that made any sound. Tarlos gave his ears a few light slaps to make sure he had not gone deaf, then reassured himself that he was not because he could hear his own pulse.

The trees were not thick, and they did not give prelude to a larger forest like the one that bordered around the Styx. He could see light through the trees, and he knew that they ended just ahead. He brushed low-hanging branches from his face, feeling that the leaves were soft and the wood was pliable, not resilient and hard like any tree he was familiar with. None but cedar.

The swath of trees was several yards across, and Tarlos had no trouble getting through them. When he came out the other side, his heart skipped a beat as he beheld the land that stretched out before him.

It was a wide valley, and the valley was green with grass and gold with autumn trees. There were entire gardens of flowers that looked to be made of lapis lazuli, and around them were clusters of living coral. From the ground seemed to grow enormous jewels—emeralds and sapphires, diamonds

and pearls, hematite and carnelians. Tarlos marveled at the sight of this alien world, and hope filled his entire being.

He had made it to the Ageless country.

A river wound through the valley, and Tarlos assumed it was a tributary of the Styx. But where the Styx was dark and corrosive, this river was clear enough that he could see all the way to the river bed. Fish darted by, blue and orange and white. Something in his heart knew for certain that this water was safe to drink, and he brought some to his mouth in cupped hands. The water was the sweetest he had ever tasted, and it was cool and refreshed him.

Tarlos followed the river as it fell into the valley, and he marveled at the strange plants and weird colors that covered the place. He was used to a country being all one color of varying shades. The desert was brown, red, and in places it was yellow with clay. Here existed together more colors than Tarlos thought possible, all in the same area.

A gentle humming was in the air as if the atmosphere was electrified. The harmony was pleasant, and it sounded faintly of a woman singing. Tarlos could not help but smile as he walked along and listened to the humming, and he felt it vibrate in his bones.

Tarlos walked and listened and viewed the country for some time until a new sound joined the electric humming. It was a deeper voice, belonging to a man, and Tarlos stopped. He looked around, and he saw nothing more than long green grass beside the river, and a small hill with a single willow tree. The singing continued, and Tarlos pinpointed the sound to be coming from the hill.

He approached with excitement, but also with caution. He knew that he had no right to be in this country, being a mortal, and the Ageless may not take kindly to his being here. But this is why he had come, this was the purpose of his journey, why he had crossed the desert and ran through Shar's



tunnel, narrowly escaping the heat of the sun. This is why he had floated down the Styx with a man who had no name. He would not turn back now after he had come so far.

Tarlos stretched out on his belly and lay in the long grass, then crawled slowly up the hill to the willow. The humming was deep and sweet, and the melody was eerie and beautiful. It filled Tarlos with various emotions, emotions that would accompany a father returning to his family after a war, a lost dog finding its way back home, the birth of a child. But the father was missing an arm, the dog was blind, and the mother had died in childbirth. Tarlos lay in the grass and listened to the song, and he felt elation and a deep sadness at the same time.

"Do you like to read?" came the voice of the man who sat beneath the willow.

Tarlos remained still, not sure who the man was speaking to.

"You, in the grass, trying to hide. Do you like to read? Come sit beside me."

Tarlos raised his head above the grass and saw the man. His face was wrinkled and leathery from the sun and from age, and his beard was long and white. His eyes were blue, and they sparkled at Tarlos through squinting eyelids. The man wore a light-orange robe that was draped loosely around him, and on his feet were simple leather sandals. He leaned against the willow, and he held an open book in his lap.

"Come sit beside me," the man said again. His voice was friendly.

Tarlos stood and walked toward the man. He did not feel his feet touch the ground, and his mind was convinced that he was hovering above the earth. The man stretched out a hand and smiled beneath his huge beard, and Tarlos took the hand in his own. He sat beside the man, and the man lifted his book.

"Do you like poetry?"

Tarlos shook his head. "I don't read much."

"Oh." The man clicked his tongue. "That's a shame. I absolutely love it. Couldn't live without it. Listen to this." He flipped a few pages of his book and cleared his throat before reading.

*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

"That's by a man named Percy Shelley. Oh, and here's another of my favorites." He turned the page and read.

*Your eyes met mine  
And my heart leapt, as a butterfly from a flower  
How wonderful it is  
To be worthy of your gaze*

The man sighed and looked at Tarlos with his piercing blue eyes. "Isn't that beautiful?"

"Who wrote that one?" asked Tarlos. He was not really interested, but he felt the question bubble up inside him nonetheless.

"At the time, he called himself Thoth, but he's had many names. He lived many, many years ago; and he will not be born for millennia yet."

"What does that mean?"

The man winked. "It doesn't matter. So..." He closed his book and set it aside. "What's your story?"

Tarlos swallowed and shifted his position so that he sat on bent knees. "Are you one of the Ageless?"

"Hmm. I suppose that is one of the names we have. Yes, I am." The man's smile faded a bit, and Tarlos got the feeling that the man knew why he was here.

"I will tell you my story, if you will listen," Tarlos said. "And I have to tell you the whole thing, so you'll understand why I'm here."

The man nodded and waved his hand, signaling for Tarlos to go on. Tarlos took a deep breath and began his story once more.

When Tarlos finished speaking, he felt as if no time had passed. A cricket had landed on his leg when he began the story, and it sat still until the story was over, and then it sprang away. The Ageless man did not look bored or disinterested, but he did look worried. After Tarlos's story was over, the man sighed and ran his fingers through his white beard.

"So, you believe that the only thing waiting for you after death is a dark room filled with people who dress in feathers and eat clay." The Ageless shrugged. "I think I can sympathize with your cause, then." A slight chuckle rumbled in his chest.

"Well, how do I do it?" Tarlos asked, leaning forward on his knees. "How did you become immortal? Show me how. Please."

The Ageless man frowned, and he shook his head. His long white beard brushed against his robe and made a sound like wind through fallen leaves.

"Why do you want to stretch out your grief for so long?"

Tarlos leaned back and furrowed his brow in confusion. "What do you mean?"

The man placed a caring hand on Tarlos's shoulder. "Why don't you remember Krastos in happiness, and live the rest of your life in peace with him in your heart? That way he'll never truly die."

Tarlos began to protest, but the man held up a silencing hand and Tarlos shut his mouth. The Ageless man continued,

"Have you ever stopped to think about how blessed you are? You have a body of flesh and blood, and the gods have given you one of their Powers to hold. Already that makes you more fortunate than others. You were a prince of a great kingdom, and now you are king. You have riches, and you have subjects who love you and respect you. Your parents loved you, as did your brother. While others eat stale bread and drink dirty water, you have butter and wine. While others use old ropes as belts, your tunics are made of silk and cotton, entwined with golden thread."

He continued, "Can't you see? You've worked yourself out trying to achieve this goal—a foolish goal, I'd add—and all the while you've forgotten that your life is the true blessing. You're dirty, you're tired, your muscles are about to give out, and for what? You're that much closer to your death."

The old man shifted on the ground. "Life is beautiful and fleeting, and it is beautiful *because* it is fleeting. You wouldn't appreciate it otherwise. Yes, the gods took your brother, but life is meant to be taken. It's meant to end. And yet you build, you create, you fight, you love, as if it would go on forever. Death is a river that floods its banks and takes fallen cherry blossoms down its current." On cue, a breeze picked up and took a few willow leaves away over the hill and into the river.

Tarlos listened to the Ageless man, and as he listened a small seed of betrayal grew in his bosom. He was finally in the Ageless country, and he was actually speaking to an immortal man—and what was the man telling him? That his entire journey had been a waste of time. No, not just a waste of time. A waste of life.

Tarlos said, "Then how is it that you and your kind are immortal? Why can't I be like you? Shouldn't that be my choice?"

The man shook his head. "Listen, my young friend. It's a different matter for me and mine. Before the world was created, Shar and Moresh came from the void and created the cosmos. They had children, who became the other gods. They created animals, and they caused them to live and die because it was good for the earth to have a cycle of regeneration. The animals ate what the earth gave them, and when the animals died the earth took their bodies and became more fruitful.

"After a while the gods decided to make people, and they formed them from stardust. The people looked like the gods, had thoughts and desires like the gods, and they were powerful and immortal like the gods. These people were created especially to be caretakers of the earth while the gods were the caretakers of the rest of creation—other worlds and other peoples. And these first immortal people were the Ageless, and the Ageless cared for the earth for countless years.

"But Ablis, who was once the god of balance, thought that the Ageless were redundant. Why have god-like beings taking care of the earth when there are already mortal animals aiding the earth in its regenerative cycle?

"Ablis took some of the other gods, and they created a new people from mud and wind and fire, and Ablis breathed life into them.

*"Because I have breathed life into them, Ablis told the other gods, these people shall know the balance of things, and will know good from evil, and their lives will be two-sided: they will spend some years on Earth tending it, and then they will die as animals do. That is the way of things. Life is a cycle, and Mankind should not be above the ways of nature.*

"But when Shar and Moresh discovered what Ablis and the other gods had done, they rebuked him and cast him out. The other gods fell at their parents' feet and begged forgiveness for creating without permission, and they were forgiven.

"Shar and Moresh looked at this new mortal people and said, *We cannot destroy this creation, for all life is sacred. Therefore, we will take our original people, the Ageless, and place them in a safe place, away from these mortals—for the mortals know both good and evil and will surely fight one with another, and they will hate and destroy and steal as they love and laugh and sing.*"

The Ageless man finished his story and nodded with a smile. "That's basically what happened. So, as you can see, there's just nothing to be done. You were created as a mortal, and you will die as a mortal."

The blood in Tarlos's face drained, and he felt it pool warm and then cold in his feet. He stumbled, feeling several things at once. Anger at the gods. Betrayal from the Ageless. Sadness for Krastos. Hatred Ablis for creating mortal Man in the first place. The old man had explained it well enough for Tarlos to understand, and now Tarlos knew that there was no hope.

In a fit of rage, Tarlos spied a large boulder at the bank of the river, and using every iota of energy he had left, ripped it from the ground and hurled it across the valley. He watched it soar through the air, and then land in a crater as it created a mushroom-shaped cloud of dirt.

The Ageless man stared in horror at Tarlos, and Tarlos stared back with tears in his eyes.

"It should be my choice," Tarlos squeaked, then felt that familiar tear in his head that signaled the last of his mental energy. He winced, felt the blood rush from his head, and he collapsed.

The next day, Tarlos wondered at the fact that no one knows they are asleep until they wake up. He lay in a soft bed, softer than he had ever slept in before. The sheets were white and softer than

cotton or silk, and the blankets were thick and fluffy. His pillow was plump and firm, not at all like his own pillows back in Kesh, which tended to become lumpy or flat.

Pale morning sunlight came through a window beside the bed, and Tarlos saw that the window was made of a transparent material he did not know. At first thought, he guessed it was the glass that the woman at the tavern gave him to drink from, made into a flat shape. But he touched it and felt that it vibrated ever so softly, and light colors danced around the spot where his finger met the window. The room was an off-shade of white, accenting the bed, and the sunlight coming through the window made the walls look yellow. Beside the bed was some sort of chest, and on the chest were pictures of the Ageless man and a woman beside him. Tarlos stared in awe at the details of these pictures. Whichever painter had depicted the man and woman was a god of art. He could not believe how realistic they looked—like a moment in time had been captured and stuck to paper.

Tarlos sat up in the comfortable bed, and the blanket fell to his waist. He was wearing a blue shirt, made of a strange but soft material. Someone must have changed him as he slept. This thought unnerved him. He stepped out of bed and walked to the bedroom door, which had a carved picture of a large sprawling tree on it, and he twisted the brass knob. The door opened without a sound, and the smell of food wafted through the place. Tarlos's stomach growled and his mouth watered.

He followed the smell of food down a hallway into a room where a woman stood over a stove, or what he guessed was a sort of stove, as there was no fire coming from it and no smoke to be seen. On the stove sat a pan, and something in it sizzled and popped with grease.

The woman turned to Tarlos as he entered the room, and she beamed at him.

"Oh, good morning! You woke up just in time for breakfast, albeit four days late. Did you sleep well?"

"I didn't even realize I was asleep," Tarlos said. "I didn't even dream. I feel more rested than I have in a long time."

"Good!" She smiled even wider. Her hair was long and grey, and it was pulled back in a single tail behind her head, and it reached to her waist. She was thin, and her skin stretched over her limbs giving evidence to her old age. Her eyes were a stark icy blue, and wrinkles surrounded them and continued down her mouth. "Pancakes are already on the table," she said. "Bacon is almost done. My husband is already eating; go and join him at the table."

Tarlos remembered the French toast from the tavern in the dead country, and the thought of such a sweet breakfast made him cringe. He hoped that these pancakes would be different and more suited for breakfast food.

The Ageless man he had met under the willow sat at a small wooden table. He was reading a book, and Tarlos thought it was a different book than before. In the middle of the table was a plate stacked high with flat round cakes.

The man looked up as Tarlos sat down. He smiled, but the smile was not as genuine as his wife's. Tarlos wondered if there was something bothering the man.

"Sleep well?"

"I did, thank you. What are you reading today?"

"It's called *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It's a story from a world not so much unlike your own in many ways. The story you told me about yourself reminded me of it, and I thought I would revisit it, along with some other thoughts."



Before Tarlos could inquire further, the woman with the grey hair and blue eyes came to the table with a steaming pile of bacon on a plate. She set it next to the pancakes, and she helped herself to a few strips.

"Go ahead, dig in," she told Tarlos, and he did. "Do you like syrup on your pancakes?"

"I don't know." Tarlos poked at his pancake with the metal prong. *Fork*, he reminded himself, remembering the tavern.

The man said, "I've always preferred peanut butter on mine. Have you ever had peanut butter? No, I guess you couldn't have. Here, try some."

He gave Tarlos a jar with the word *Jif* written in bold red letters on the label. Tarlos scooped some on his pancake—first a small bit, and then a heap after he tasted it. They ate, and Tarlos's stomach finally stopped growling after four pancakes and nine strips of bacon.

"You passed out after throwing that rock," said the man. He used a finger to lap up the last bit of peanut butter from his plate, then licked it from his finger. "I figured you could use a soft bed and a meal. After what you've been through, my goodness."

Tarlos set his fork down on his plate and pushed it away. He closed his eyes and sighed. "What am I going to do now?" He was speaking to himself, but the question came out of his mouth anyway. "Go back to Kesh? To being a king?"

The man said, "Yes, why not?"

"What's the point? If I'm going to die anyway, why even live?" Tarlos felt a lump in his throat, and his breath staggered. "Everywhere I turn, I see death."

The woman and the man looked at each other, and for several seconds they said nothing. Tarlos swore that they were communicating with each other through their ageless eyes. At length, they looked away and turned to Tarlos.

"I mentioned that I had to consider other things," the man said. He folded his hands on the table, interlacing his fingers. "There was one thing about our conversation the other day that I couldn't stop thinking about. You claimed that it should be your choice whether or not to be immortal, if that possibility existed. As the Ageless, we're endowed with every attribute of the gods, but confined to this world only. I hold all four Powers, as does every other Ageless. I can hear the thoughts of your mind and heart, and I can feel the pain that you feel. I think it's only right to give you that choice. Or rather, a chance to make that choice."

Tarlos's eyes popped open wide, and he stood from his chair. It fell backwards and clattered to the floor. "A chance for immortality? But you said it was impossible for a mortal to become immortal!"

"For most mortals, yes. But you're a Holder, and that means you carry a small bit of god blood in your veins. You also mentioned to me that your mother was thought to be descended from the Ageless. It's not impossible, as some of us choose to have children, but it's rare. If it isn't true, you still have a chance. If it is, you have a greater chance. But it's only a small one. And it's...rash."

"What is it?" Tarlos put his hands on the table and leaned close to the man and woman. "Whatever chance there is, I'll take it. I don't care if I have to swim to the bottom of the ocean."

"Oh, it's nothing like that." The man smiled, and the woman smiled with him. "Nothing that easy. Sit down, Tarlos."

He sat, and the atmosphere of the room became reverent, and the air was thick and solemn. The smiles on the man and woman's faces faded, and they grasped each other's hand.

"Tarlos," said the man, "who created Earth?"

He paused for a moment, only to consider that this might be a trick question. "The gods."

The man nodded. "And mankind?"

"The gods."

"Animals? Plants? The stars and moon and sun and everything in the cosmos?"

"The gods."

Another nod. "And who created the gods?"

Tarlos's eyes narrowed, and he sat back in his chair. The question made no sense to him, like asking what color hunger was. He shook his head and shrugged. "I don't understand."

The man continued, still holding onto his wife's hand. "Your world is one of many, Tarlos. You've met people from another world on your way here, yes?"

He was right, and Tarlos nodded. "They spoke of things I didn't understand. Places I've never heard of."

"There is an infinite number of universes that lay beyond the veil of this one. The gods Moresh and Shar, and their children, all the gods you worship, they created and care for this universe. But as the Ageless care for this earth while the gods care for this universe, there are other entities that care for *all* universes."

Tarlos frowned as his eyes widened again, and there was a funny buzzing sensation in his throat and belly. "Do you mean...are you saying...the gods...have gods?"

The man tilted his head and shrugged one shoulder. "I guess that's one way to say it, simple enough. The Old Ones created the gods, just as the gods created mankind."

"Do they ever speak to mortal men? Do they give blessings the same as gods?"

Both the man and the woman shook their heads. The man asked, "Have you ever sat to watch ants crawl in the dirt?"

Tarlos nodded.

"They're so tiny, compared to you. And so stupid. They have no idea what goes on in the minds of humans, if they could even comprehend your presence. And you only wonder in passing what they think about, or if they even think at all. Imagine two ants walking opposite directions around a rock, and you are looking down at them so that you can see them walking around the rock, but from the ants' perspectives they don't see each other, and so you know that they will bump into each other before they do. They know nothing of the man watching them, who to them would appear as far away as the sun. They know nothing of the world outside a few feet of their colony. They know nothing of astronomy, predicting the weather, adding and subtracting numbers, or that there are billions of colonies just like theirs around the world. And yet, from their perspective, they are intelligent, they are loyal to their family and to their queen, they hunger, they protect, they live and they die, and that's enough for them. It's a simple existence compared to that of a human, but it's all they know.

"As an ant is to a human, that is how a human is to an Old One. You are one ant in a colony of trillions throughout the universe, which is only one of an infinite number of universes, and you understand the mind of an Old One just as well as an ant understands you."

The man finished, and the room was cut into silence. Tarlos realized his mouth was gaping slightly, and he licked his dry lips. He took a few seconds to drink in what the man had told him before croaking, "So why would one speak to me?"

The smile finally returned to the man's face. "That's why it's important that you're a Holder, and a possible descendant of the Ageless. You have a small piece of the gods in you, and therefore are more closely related to the Old Ones than other men. There may be a chance—although it is a small one—that you could have an audience with one of the Old Ones. After all, it was they who created the concept of immortality in the first place, long before the gods were created."

Tarlos had a thousand questions, but he ignored them all in favor of the only one that mattered. "Where can I find the Old Ones?"

The man made a gurgling noise in his throat, part groan and part chuckle. "They don't live in a *where*, exactly. They're all around us, everywhere at once, beyond the realm of this physical universe, in the same way that a person lives outside a pond full of fish. But there are certain places within our worlds that act as doorways to their realms. I know of one. It's a book, and the book is inside a mountain to the south-east of here. Read from the book, and you will be taken to the realm of the Old Ones, if they choose to acknowledge your existence at all. I'm not sure which one you'll meet, though I have an idea, but whichever it is may be able to help you. A small chance, remember."

"But they care for humans?"

"As I said before, no more than a man may care for a specific ant that lives in a hole four thousand miles from his house." The man laughed. "But they have a deep connection to all things, because everything in creation—all worlds and universes—came from them. And as I also said, you are a Holder and have a stronger connection to their children, who are the gods of this world. I think that gives you a better chance than most. But the chance is still small."

After the pancakes and bacon were all eaten, and the dishes were washed and put away, the Ageless man brought Tarlos outside. Now that Tarlos could see the house from the without, he saw

that it was small and modest; not at all what he would have imagined for an immortal being. It was one story, with only a few small windows, and the roof was low and covered with black tiles. The door was slender and red, and it bore the same carving of a tree that was on the door to Tarlos's room.

The yard around the house was green grass with small patches of flowers of every color. Fruit trees stood scattered around the place, and bees buzzed from flower to tree, coming from and going to a series of man-made beehives several yards from the house. Small wooden birdhouses hung from the tree branches, and swallows and sparrows fluttered around the place, bringing food to their young and singing in the sky.

"Is this all of yours?" Tarlos asked.

"It is. And it takes more work than you'd think."

The man led Tarlos around the back of the house. There a large flat field spread out in front of a large barn or stable, and various animals wandered the field. Tarlos recognized swans and geese and even an ibis or two, and there were horses and cows as well, lounging in the noonday sun.

"Where are the other Ageless?"

"They have their own homes elsewhere. This way." He opened a door on the side of the large barn-like building and followed Tarlos inside.

It was musty and smelled like dung and straw and mud, and it was a smell that Tarlos was used to. It reminded him of Kesh. Tools hung on the walls, equipment sat on the dirty straw-covered floor beneath them, and saddles and harnesses sat on wooden stanchions.

To the right of the door was a row of stalls, like those where the stable master of Kesh kept his horses. But these stalls were enormous, large enough for a person to live comfortably with his family and not want for room.

"Now don't be shocked," said the Ageless man. "She's big, but she's gentle and friendly. Give her a minute to get the smell of you before you go petting her. And don't touch her around the eyes, if you please."

He opened one of the enormous stall doors, and it swung backwards into the main room of the barn. Tarlos took a step inside and craned his neck around the corner of the stall. There in the corner was the largest black horse he had ever seen, laying on the dusty floor with her legs folded up beneath her. She was more than three times as big as any horse in Kesh.

"What is..." Tarlos whispered. He was not afraid of the giant horse, but he would rather it did not awake until he knew exactly what it was.

"This is Calliope," said the man, and at the sound of her name the horse raised its enormous head and shook the sleep from it. "A pure descendant of the first horses that Poseidon created, from a world parallel to yours." He reached into his pocket, produced a large carrot, and held it out. Calliope stood, made a humorous backstretch like a cat after a nap, and sauntered over to them. She ate the carrot in one chomp. "She knows the way to the mountain."

"You want me to ride that thing?" Tarlos asked, still whispering. The horse towered above him, all muscle. Her legs were thick and heavy, and the joints around her shoulders were wound tight with rope-like tendons that made small hills beneath her skin. She was a powerful creature, Tarlos could see, and he did not want to offend her.

"I told you, she's gentle. Hold out your hand. Here." The man gave Tarlos another carrot, and Tarlos held it out to Calliope. She lowered her massive head to the carrot and sniffed it with huge black nostrils. The air blew Tarlos's hair back, and he swallowed his nerves down.

She reached at the carrot with her lips, careful not to bite Tarlos's hand, and she swallowed the carrot. She raised her head and shook it again, lowered it down to Tarlos once more and gave him a sniff and a huff, and then nuzzled her nose against his forehead. Tarlos could not help but smile.

The Ageless man smiled as well. "There now! What did I tell you?"

Tarlos rubbed Calliope's cheeks and patted her thick neck. Her man was grey and had been trimmed close to her neck.

"Let me just get her saddled and ready to go, and you can be off as soon as you're ready." The Ageless man walked across the stall to a door on the other side and pulled out a cart carrying a large seat with straps hanging from it everywhere.

Tarlos said, "You don't have to do this, you know."

"Do what?"

"Let me use your horse." Calliope nuzzled against Tarlos's shirt, searching for another carrot. "I mean, I appreciate your help. I do. But I don't understand why you're helping me."

With the help of a crane-like device that leaned against the stall wall, the Ageless man lifted the saddle into the air, and like a well-trained animal, Calliope positioned herself below it.

The man asked, "Do you think the world is mostly good, or bad?"

"I never thought about it."

"Yeah, I'm not sure myself. I've never been to any other world in the Continuum, so I can't really compare humans on our Earth to others. But I think for the most part they're good. Are you good?"

Tarlos considered it for a moment, thinking about his life in Kesh. He was a good person, wasn't he? He had done good things, right? Thinking hard, Tarlos was surprised and disappointed that



he could not remember a time when he went out of his way to do a good deed, to help someone in need, to give a compliment, to raise the spirits of a sad friend.

*And I killed my father. And caused the death of Krastos.*

He frowned and felt heat rise to his throat and burn at his eyes. "I think...I'm...I don't know."

"A good answer," said the man. "A bad man thinks himself to be righteous; a good man is not so sure." He strapped the huge saddle around the horse. The saddle was built like a padded chair, with a raised and rigid backrest. There were loops in which to place the legs and straps to hold the rider down around the chest and lap. There were no reins.

"Oh, before I forget." The man reached into a small pocket at his breast and took out a small green capsule. "Calliope knows where to go, so you don't have to steer or give her directions or make sure she isn't going to crash into a mountain or anything. She's very confident in her ability to get anyone anywhere, and she sprints at near supersonic speeds when she has a mind. I'll give you a coat. The wind screaming past you tends to get mighty cold. Now, this capsule is a type of medicine, you could say. Nothing magical about it. Swallow it and you'll fall into a sleep so deep you'll wake up thinking you'd gone back to the womb. You're going to want to take it after she picks up speed."

Tarlos pocketed the capsule and felt the tooth in his new pants. "Oh, did you...? Thanks. For the tooth."

"I didn't know what it was, but it was in your pocket, so I saved it for you. Seemed important."

The man checked all the straps on the saddle one more time, then gave Calliope another carrot, gave her a pat on the neck, and ruffled her short mane. He left Tarlos alone with her while he went back to the house, and he came back with a heavy coat made from a material thick like wool, although Tarlos doubted that was what it was. The woman with the grey hair and blue eyes came as well,

carrying a small sack of food. Bread, cheese, apples, and water. Tarlos thanked her, and she brought him in for a hug.

"Good luck to you," she said. "I hope you find what you need, and not just what you're looking for."

Tarlos gave her a kind smile. The man helped him climb the several feet onto Calliope's back, and he helped Tarlos strap in. When all the straps were in place, Tarlos could not move his legs or bend forward. He felt secure and comfortable.

"Got your pill?"

Tarlos nodded.

"You can back out any time."

Tarlos shook his head.

"Any last words?"

Tarlos snapped a wide gaze at the man, about to ask what exactly he meant by that, but the man was laughing, and his eyes were kind.

"Kidding. Good luck out there."

Tarlos nodded. "Thank you. For everything."

The man and the woman held hands, and with his free hand the man slapped Calliope on the rump. "Get on with you," he said, and Calliope galloped at full speed from the barn.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Otherwhere

Tarlos had never flown this fast on his own. The ground beneath him was a colorless blur, and he clutched at the saddle and closed his eyes against the momentum. His knuckles were white, and his stomach was in his bowels. All the blood in his head rushed to his feet, and he thought he might be sick. The wind screamed past them, and Tarlos's ears popped, and he felt his stomach lurch. Calliope was an arrow shot from a bow.

He had no idea how far away this mountain was or how long it would take to get there, regardless of the bone-snapping speed at which Calliope ran, but he knew he wanted to experience the ride as little as possible.

He used his Power to pry his stiff grip from the saddle and took the capsule from his pocket. He flicked it into his mouth, swallowed, and his mind fell through itself as he pummeled into sleep.

Calliope eventually woke Tarlos with a loud whinny, and she hopped so that he shook in the saddle. He woke, looked around him, and panicked for a moment as he could not move his legs. Then he remembered he was strapped in, and he calmed down enough to undo the straps and slide off the horse's back. It was a long drop, and he landed on his bottom.

He stretched, feeling his spine pop in several places, and it felt wonderful. He did not know how long he had been riding Calliope, but he was surprised that he was not sore at all, as it what always happened to him after riding a horse for more than a few hours.

"Are we here?" he asked the horse, and she did not respond. "Where are we?" he asked both Calliope and himself, and he looked around.

It was nighttime. The stars were bright, but the constellations were unfamiliar. He was still in the Ageless Country, or a country neighboring it in this Otherworld. The moon was full and bigger than he was used to, and he could see the faint outlines of Moreshe's smiling white face. They were in a forest, and there was no end in sight to the trees.

Years before, an emissary from an eastern land came to visit Kesh and pay homage to the king. He brought gifts from his homeland, which he called Nis. Among these gifts were trees that the king tried to have planted in the gardens, but they did not survive. The trees were strange to Tarlos and all who lived in Kesh, as they had no leaves but thousands of tiny green spines. The emissary called the tree an evergreen because they stayed green even in the cold winter. The forest that Tarlos found himself in now was nothing but evergreen trees. They gave off a pleasant, musky smell, and the air in the forest was sweet because of it.

Tarlos turned around to see behind him in the dark, and he had to crane his neck to see a looming mountain, the base of which Calliope had landed at. The mountain cut a black triangle from the starry night sky, piercing the clouds with its towering height.

"So, this is the place?" Tarlos asked the horse. She did not acknowledge the question. She simply walked behind him and gave him a gentle nudge with her nose, pushing him to a small dark spot at the base of the mountain a few feet away.

Tarlos had to move a few fallen evergreen branches aside, and he felt his adrenaline escalate when he saw a small cave entrance. Calliope nudged him again.

"Down there?"

Calliope whinnied, stomped at the ground with her foreleg, and then turned around and galloped away. After only a few seconds, Tarlos could no longer see her through the forest. He held up a hand in thanks to the empty air.

Tarlos stepped into the cave entrance, which was almost straight down into the ground. He climbed down the rocks that made the opening, and after a few feet the cave leveled into a stone tunnel with an ancient dirt floor. The ceiling was low, and he crouched as he walked.

The tunnel reminded him of Shar's Mountain. He shook his head at himself, thinking about how it had only been about a decan since he was there. A decan since he had been in the land of the living.

Tarlos was not sure if he walked through the narrow tunnel for hours or for days. In the darkness, time was almost impossible to keep track of. The ground beneath his feet crunched with small broken bits of rock for the first several hours, and it changed to soft sand during the last stretch, when he was not sure how long it had been since he slept.

The air became thin and vibrant. It prickled his skin and made his lungs sting and his throat sore. He had to stop four times to catch his breath and coat his throat with fresh saliva before continuing.

The narrow tunnel ended at a small crevice, and Tarlos sucked in his chest and belly as much as he could to squeeze through it, and the rock tugged at his clothing as he came through. On the other side was a large round room, with the ceiling perhaps three yards above his head. Dotting the walls of the cave room were tiny shells of all shapes. Some were conical, others spiraled, and others were pointed and shaped like many-armed stars. All these shells were embedded in the walls as if placed there in mortar by some ancient mason, and every shell glowed faintly with an eerie green light.

The ground was hard and smooth stone, and it sloped downward slightly. Tarlos followed it down. In the distance, he heard the faint drip of water, and the sound echoed throughout the room.

At the far wall of the cave room, at the bottom of the sloped stone floor, there was a small door about half of Tarlos's height. He bent low to squeeze through, and he came out the other side into a huge cavern. More shells were planted firmly in the walls here, and their green glow was not enough to see the cavern ceiling, which was impossibly high, and neither could he see the far wall. He kept his right hand on the wall beside him and began to walk the perimeter of the cavern.

He stopped when he came to a large pillar, and he ran his hand over it. It was not rough and bumpy like the cave walls, but smooth. The soft glow of the shells provided enough light for Tarlos to see that this pillar was not natural, but carved by people—or at least intelligent beings. This entire cavern must have once been a building. *Maybe even the entirety of the mountain*, Tarlos thought, shivering at the idea.

As he continued around the wall of the cavern, he encountered a dozen more pillars, and it was only on the last three or four that he noticed the pillars were decorated with carvings. He did not understand them, as they were written in symbols unfamiliar to him. This confused him; he had been able to understand all languages since he entered the dead country. But this writing was alien, and he could not make sense of it.

Finally, Tarlos came to a doorway, carved from stone and fitting the dimensions of a proper door. He entered, and immediately the hallway shrank to a size so small that he had to crawl on his hands and knees. The hallway sloped downward and wound in a spiral, and his feet were always at a higher level than his head. The glowing green shells remained in the walls and lit his path, but they did not help his intense feeling of claustrophobia. On several occasions his body wanted to stop and take a break, but he forced himself to keep going lest he panic in the tight space.

At last a faint orange glow appeared ahead, and Tarlos hurried after it. The tunnel widened, and he stood at his full height, grateful to be free of the tiny tunnel. He stretched and continued toward the orange light.

The stone tunnel ended, and it opened into another spacious cavern. Sharp bulging stalactites pointed from the cavern ceiling, and stalagmites rose from the floor to meet them. A smooth level path led through the pointed rocks, and Tarlos followed it as far as it would take him.

The path took him around several bends of stalagmites that obscured his view from whatever lay ahead, and all the while the orange light grew brighter. And then the path ended, and Tarlos was in awe.

The cavern was empty, save for a stone arch about the height of a person. It was a natural arch, not built by intelligent people, but slowly carved by nature through eons of erosion and water running through it. There was no water in this cavern anymore, and Tarlos wondered how old this place was.

What filled Tarlos with such amazement was that the arch glowed orange, like a fire, and the light flickered in different shades of yellow, orange, and red, like flames lapping up wood. A faint humming came from the arch. Tarlos swallowed to relieve his sore throat. He walked around the arch, inspecting it from every angle. It was just a stone arch, standing free from any structure on a flat piece of smooth ground.

Tarlos could not see through the arch, although he could see that there was nothing in it. There was only black. Walking around to the other side, it was the same. The arch was hollow, but he could not see through it. With curiosity outweighing his caution, he extended a hand and poked a single finger through the arch. He yanked it back.

His finger tingled, like a limb after blood is restricted. It did not hurt, but he did not like the idea of his entire body feeling like that.

And then, without warning, Tarlos erupted in laughter. He doubled, holding his belly, as he shook all over and wiped tears from his eyes and choked on his spit and coughed and laughed some more.

"I'm here," he told himself. "Bring on the tingles."

He walked through the arch.

He emerged on the other side, feeling intense sensations like pins from his hair to his toes. Looking around him, he was a bit confused. He was still in the same cavern room as before. This made



logical sense to him, but he expected the strange archway to at least transport him somewhere—to where the Old Ones were.

He turned to look back at the arch and paused. On the other side of the arch, there now stood a stone podium with a book on top. A tiny pinprick of light a hundred feet above him came through a small hole in the cavern ceiling and fell on the book, enveloping it in yellow light.

Tarlos approached the book, feeling the tingles rush out of his system, and his throat soothe, and his lungs relax. Behind him, the arch continued to hum.

The book was made of a fashion that Tarlos had never seen before. The pages were not papyrus, but smooth and white, and the cover was thick and covered with something resembling leather. Drawn in gold on the cover was a symbol that Tarlos had no words to describe, and even his own mind could not make sense of what he was seeing. It was completely alien, shapes that no human would have ever thought to create or imagine. He turned his head in every which way, looking at it from all angles, trying to decide what it was. When he squinted his eyes and the picture went blurry, he thought it almost looked like the tree carving at the Ageless man's house.

Tarlos reached out with a tentative hand and lay a finger on the brown cover. Nothing happened. Using his first finger and thumb, he slowly, slowly, lifted the cover and opened the book.

A shock thundered through his body, and he felt it in his bones, in his mind, and in his soul. His teeth rattled and his brain turned to jelly in his skull. His fingernails rotted and fell from his fingertips, and his bones turned to dust. His skin liquefied, and the cavern around him became an inside-out globe made purely out of space and time and thought. The cavern turned itself even more inward until the walls tore with a sickening slurp and the universe around him was made into a mobius strip. Tarlos's consciousness was taken through the third dimension, where he beheld Earth and all the

planets in his own solar system, and then all the stars and planets in the galaxy, and he saw nebulae of every color—not just in the visible spectrum—and he continued through the third dimension until he could see the entire universe as a small marble. Beside the marble there were other marbles as Tarlos was dragged up ever onward into the fourth and fifth dimensions, and he could see that his universe was not the only universe and *he* was not the only *him* and infinity was a number he could count to if only he knew how to treat infinity as something finite and he was dragged upward or downward or inward or outward or all at the same time.

He had no idea whatever where or when or other thing was happening and he wanted to scream and he saw all of creation and not just the one he lived in but every conceivable reality that had happened and is happening could happen will happen and then everything was once again reduced to a marble and the marble shrank until it was an indeterminate point without length or width or depth and everything around it was orange and smelled like burnt almonds.

And then...

...there was the Old One.

Hello, Tarlos

He did not hear the voice. The voice existed, and it was inside him and everywhere.

"Who is that?" he asked. He did not have a voice, and he had no mouth with which to speak.

He was an essence, floating in the orange. "Where am I?"

The short answer to that is 'no'

"What's happening to me?"

Be still, Tarlos

You're safe

That's all you need to know

"Who are you?"

Yes

Tarlos tried to close his eyes, but he had no eyes to close, and he tried to swallow, but he had no throat, and then he tried to cry, but he had no tears.

"Did you bring me here? What is this place?"

You read from my book

There is no here

It is everywhere

And nowhere

Location is meaningless in the eleventh dimension

"Why is—"

You have many questions

I cannot answer them in ways you would understand

We must do what needs to be done

What you came to ask of me

"Why can't I see you? Where are you?"

I have no physical form that you could comprehend

Would it be easier for you if I did

"Yes. I don't know. Maybe. I'm so confused."

The orange melted away, but the smell of burnt almonds remained. Around him on the canvas of space-time, colors dripped like rain and painted the nonmaterial walls around him. Colors swirled, and depth was given to pictures, and it seemed to Tarlos that he was standing on a sandy plain and mounds of sand were rising up and given shape, so that before long he was back in Kesh, in the palace, in his bedroom. He had a body once more, and he was sitting on his bed. He could feel his silk sheets, the cool breeze through the open window, see the yellow light of the sun outside and the red and yellow dirt of the desert beyond.

He touched his arm. He was solid, real.

There was a knock on his bedroom door.

"Don't be afraid," called a familiar voice. "I'm coming in. Are you ready?"

At the sound of the voice, Tarlos began to weep. He stood from his bed and crossed the room to the door. Before he reached it, the door swung open and a man walked through.

The hair, the muscles, the brown eyes and the smile. The huge hands and feet. The way he swung his arms as he walked through the bedroom and stood beside the bed, and the way he placed his weight on his legs and he leaned against the bedpost and wore that smirk on his face.

"Is this better?" Krastos asked.

Tarlos sobbed, choking on his own breath, and he wiped tears from his eyes and cheeks and spit from his lips.

"You...you aren't..."

"I'm not Krastos," the Old One said. "I thought this would make it easier for you, talking to a familiar face. Come on, you need this." He extended his arms outward, and Tarlos ran into his embrace.

Tarlos held his brother and hugged him tightly, not able to reach fully around his massive chest. It was so real. His voice, his smell, his demeanor and energy that he carried with him. Tarlos wanted to talk to him, to tell him what he had been through these last few decans, to tell him about the dead country, the tavern, the Ageless, the giant horse, the boatman, and the House of Dust. He wanted to sit with Krastos and vent, to be happy that he was back, to apologize.

But this was not Krastos, and Tarlos understood that. He hugged the Old One tightly just the same, and he snuffed his cries away.

"Okay, alright, you're fine." Krastos drew away from Tarlos and ruffled his hair. "Would you rather me change into someone else?"

"No!" Tarlos said. "It's fine. Stay like this. I...I miss seeing him. It feels like so long..."

Krastos nodded and sat on Tarlos's bed, then beckoned for him to sit beside him. Tarlos did, never taking his eyes from the likeness of his twin.

"The man," Tarlos said. "The Ageless man. He didn't think there was a good chance that you would speak to me."

"I usually don't speak to your kind," said Krastos. "It's nothing personal, I just have a lot to worry about. That's why we created your gods, to handle the details. But you're a special case."

"Because I'm a Holder? Because my mother was descended from the Ageless?"

Krastos smiled from the side of his mouth and shook his head. His long hair fell over his face and he tucked it behind his ears. "No. It's because of the part you're playing in the Continuum. You're a very important character. The one who starts a very long narrative."

Tarlos focused on Krastos's eyes, and he noticed that they were different from his brother's. These eyes were unfathomably deep. He feared that as he stared into them too long he might go mad. There was multiple eternities' worth of knowledge in those eyes.

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't. You don't have to. Now, please ask me what you need to ask."

Tarlos swallowed and gripped the silk sheets in a fist. "Will you make me immortal?"

Krastos tilted his head in consideration. "Immortality and the power to be a god go hand-in-hand, Tarlos. The Ageless are immortal because they hold all four of your gods' Powers, and they hold the Powers because they are immortal. In order for you to become immortal, you must hold all four Powers. Do you think you can?"

*Is it that easy?* Tarlos thought.

"No, it's not easy at all, but that's the price."

"Yes, I can. I think I can. Can you give them to me?"

Krastos shrugged. "Yes, of course I can give you the Powers. The question you need to answer honestly is if this is what you really want. If you honestly think that by gaining this trait and these Powers, your life will be better because of it."

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Can't you just look into the future and tell me if I turn out okay?"

Krastos shook his head. "There is no future, Tarlos, just as there is no past. There is barely a present. I can see every outcome of every universe, every possible choice and every path that each subatomic particle and vibrating string of energy might take, and I know the probabilities of taking

those paths. By your definition and perception of time, yes, I know the future. But I know *all* futures, and they are all happening right now, and they have already happened, and all of them will happen, and none of them will."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Things don't have to make sense to you in order for them to be true. You have free will, Tarlos. All of your parallel selves have free will. I'm asking you to choose whether or not to take these Powers. With the Powers comes the understanding of how to use them. I advise you not to, as using a Power you were not born with can drive a person mad. After four days, if you feel that you can handle being a Holder of all four Powers without using them, you may call me and choose immortality or mortal life."

Tarlos stood and shrugged with his hands. "I've come too far to say no. Give them to me. This has been my goal since you—...since Krastos died."

"All right, then." Krastos stood, and the bed creaked as his weight came off of it. "Give me something."

Tarlos looked around. "From here?"

"No, none of this is real. Something back on your world, with your body if possible. Anything will do."

"I don't think I have anything but my clothes. I had a sack full of food but I guess I left it with the horse..."

"Your clothes will do."

"Wait!" Tarlos remembered, holding up a hand. "I have a tooth in my pocket. You can have that."

"I don't want to keep it, I just need something to help you hold the Powers. You're going on a bit of a trial run, and you'll be holding the Powers without immortality, which is usually not allowed. You need some kind of...shall we say *talisman* to hold the excess energy that you'll be wielding. You can also use the tooth to call me."

"How do I get it to you?"

"It's already done. The cow's tooth will now be your personal physical incarnation of me. It will act as a connecting point between us and will help you hold all four Powers. When the four days are over, hold the tooth and think of me."

Tarlos nodded and looked around nervously. "What happens now?"

"Now, you go home." Krastos placed a huge hand on Tarlos's shoulder, and Tarlos felt his emotions well up once more.

"Just like that?"

Krastos nodded. "Just like that."

The room popped out of existence, and Tarlos woke as if from a dream. He lay in the desert, and the high walls of Kesh greeted him a short walk away. The tooth was at his neck, having been made into a necklace, and it vibrated with life.

A cricket hopped onto his leg and chirped once.

"H...hello," Tarlos tried.

"Good luck," said the cricket, and it hopped away.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Kesh

The moon was at dark-face, and the stars were veiled. The night was thick, and the air was cool. Tarlos stood from the sand, feeling like all his muscles and blood vessels had been taken apart and put back together. The great walls of Kesh stood not far off, a blacker shape than the night sky behind it.

The world was silent. The gates were closed, which was normal for the nighttime, but it was not normal for there to be no lit torches lining the walls. A small breeze pushed at Tarlos's back, urging him onward to his kingdom. He obeyed, and he approached the gate.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Hey up there!"

Two helmeted heads popped out from a small window above the gate. "Who's there?" called one of them.

"Your king! I'm back!"

There was silence from the guards, and the same one asked, "Who did you say?"

"Tarlos!"

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"What are you talking about? Hurry up—it's cold out here and I'm tired and hungry."

The other guard said, "If you need shelter and a meal, we would be happy to provide for you for the night. But you must tell us who you are. That is our law."

"Dammit, open the gate!" Tarlos yelled. "You know I can open it myself, but like I said, I'm exhausted and I'd rather you just help me out. Is no one glad to see me?"

"Is that a threat to Kesh?" the one on the right asked. "You dare speak of breaching our walls?"

"They're my walls! This is my kingdom!"

Another guard, standing on the wall to the left of the guard tower, stepped from the shadows. He pulled back a bow, and a sharp arrow glinted on the string, ready to fly.

"That's enough of that," said the archer. His voice was familiar, but Tarlos could not place it at that moment. "Turn back the way you came, stranger, and do not come back. Leave, and no harm will come to you."

Tarlos picked up a small stone on the ground and hurled it at the archer. The man dodged it, and he let loose the arrow. It flew at Tarlos, whistling, and Tarlos stopped it in midair a few inches in front of his face.

The two guards on the tower gasped, and Tarlos thought they sounded horrified. A strange whispering echo sounded through his head, in that same spot that allowed him to move objects with his mind.

*gods gods did you gods did you see what he did you see what he did he stopped he it he stopped it in midair demon in midair he stopped it in midair it's a demon a demon demon*

Tarlos shook his head and rubbed at his tingling temples. The guards disappeared into the window, and Tarlos waited for them to come down the stairs.

There was a series of clicks and a thud behind the gate, and Tarlos sighed in relief. He was finally home, after decans of traveling through the desert and the Nether.

The gate swung open, and four guards ran through—two brandishing spears, two with swords. The spears fell to point at Tarlos, and the swords were lifted in defense. The captain of the guard stepped forward with his own sword extended. His bow was slung over his shoulder.

"Who are you?" the captain asked. The voice was familiar, and now that Tarlos could see his face, he did recognize him.

"Lugal?" Tarlos said. "You have a beard! How?"

Lugal stepped closer and brought the tip of his sword to Tarlos's chin. "How do you know my name, demon?"

*could could it could it be oh please gods please gods gods*

"It's me!" Tarlos said, his voice breaking. "Lugal, look at me. I'm Tarlos. How can you not see that? Has everyone gone mad?"

Lugal put his sword away and said, "You do bear a certain resemblance to the king, although not perfectly. Your tricks are clever, demon, but not clever enough. Guards."

At the word, the three other guards each pulled a chain from their belts. The chains had fetters on the ends.

"What is this?" Tarlos asked Lugal. He was no longer merely annoyed. He was becoming furious.

*if if it's if it's you please you please forgive forgive me if it's you forgive*

"The High Priestess will know what to do with you," Lugal said as the guards cuffed Tarlos and locked the chains tight.

Tarlos's hands were bound together and his ankles chained a few inches apart. One of the guards kicked him behind the knees and he crumpled to the ground. Tarlos winced in pain as his knee landed on a pebble.

"You're all going to feel so stupid..." Tarlos mumbled.

"Quiet." Lugal turned to one of the guards, the other with the sword. "Go and fetch the High Priestess and tell her that there is some sort of demon or jinn outside the gate. Tell her to hurry. We don't know how long we can hold it."

The guard said, "Can we not bring it to her? Seems like a waste of time—"

"Jinn can enter an enclosed set of walls only if you bring them in or invite them," Lugal interrupted with a stern tone. "I don't want it in my city. Do as I say."

The guard saluted and took off through the gates of Kesh.

"You two," Lugal said to the other two guards. "Run upstairs and get more chains. I don't think these are enough."

The two nodded and jogged up the steps to the guard tower.

Lugal wrapped a strong hand around Tarlos's upper arm and pulled him toward the gate.

"Come on. Don't say anything."

"What are you—"

"I said don't talk!"

He led Tarlos through the gate, keeping an eye out for the two guards he sent upstairs. He made light steps, and Tarlos followed his example. Once through the gate, Lugal picked his pace up to a jog, and Tarlos struggled to keep up with his fettered feet.

"Can you unlock these?"

*wish wish I wish I could could yet not yet*

"Not until I know for sure. I won't tell you again to be quiet."

Kesh was dark and silent like the desert that surrounded it. Tarlos understood that it was the middle of the night, but the streets were usually alive with teenagers and stray animals, and there was always someone who liked to stay up all night in their house. But no light came from any windows, there were no dogs or cats running through the dirt roads, and not a single person was walking about or sitting beneath their porch roof.

"W—" Tarlos caught himself before he spoke. He wanted Lugal on his side, so he obeyed his wish to remain silent. *Where is everyone?* he wondered. Hopefully this would all make sense soon.

As they made their way down the main street of the city, the stench of rotting meat filled the air, and Tarlos gagged. He looked every which way, expecting to see the streets lined with dead putrefying animals. When he saw nothing on the ground, he looked up.

There were dozens of thick ropes and chains crisscrossing the city, attached to buildings and tall wooden poles. Hanging from the ropes were metal cages, and inside the cages...

*Oh gods, no. What in Shar's name...*

Dozens, perhaps a hundred bodies rotted away in the cages above the city, and their sour smell wafted through Kesh. Tarlos stared at them in awe and disgust, grateful that it was nighttime and he could not see their dead and detailed faces.

Lugal pulled him onward. They wove between small buildings and thatch-roof houses, into small alleys and places that even Tarlos was not familiar with. At last they came to a squat cottage with a straw roof and mud walls. Lugal, his hand still on Tarlos's arm, walked to the wooden door and knocked twice.

A deep voice shouted, "Trying to sleep, thank you!"

"It's me," said Lugal.

A silent moment passed, and then there was the sound of something heavy being dragged along wood, and the door clicked open. There stood Nekhte, the royal blacksmith. Tarlos craned up to see the giant man, wondering how his beard had gotten so much grey in it since he had seen him last, why his eyes looked so tired, and what was he doing here in the lower city and not at his palace apartment?

Nekhte pointed a meaty finger at Tarlos. "Who is that?"

*please gods please please gods maybe could maybe could it be maybe*

Lugal said, "Let us in; they'll be looking for us."

Nekhte stepped aside for the two of them to enter the house, and Nekhte closed the wooden door behind them. He moved a large bronze chest in front of the door, and it scraped the old wood floor beneath as it moved. Inside, the house was black and smelled of mildew.

"One moment," Nekhte mumbled, and Tarlos heard him shuffle around the room. There was a spark, and Nekhte lit an oil lamp. The room was bathed in a soft orange light.

Nekhte squinted at Tarlos, holding the lamp above his head to give better light. He took turns looking at Tarlos and Lugal, and after five or six takes he asked Lugal, "Is it him?"

"I think so," said Lugal. "He stopped an arrow with his mind."

"You shot at him?"

"That's my job."

"Jinn can stop arrows."

"I know, but—"

Tarlos lifted his chained hands, calling for silence. "Would someone please tell me what's happening? And take these off me!"

"Not yet," said Lugal. "Tell us something only the real Tarlos would know."

"What?" Tarlos looked back and forth between the two men. "This is all getting a little too—"

Nekhte boomed, "Will you stop wasting time and do what we ask?"

Tarlos's mouth snapped shut, and he nodded. "What kind of thing would you like me to say?"

"First of all, what's my name?"

"Nekhte. You're my family's blacksmith. You live on the grounds. Or at least you used to. What are you doing out here?"

Nekhte continued, "I gave Tarlos something, not long before he disappeared. What was it?"

"A few things. A sword, some armor, some words of caution..."

"Were you alone?"

Tarlos shook his head. "No. My brother was with me."

Nekhthe nodded. He raised an eyebrow at Lugal. The guard took a turn.

"What was my position when Krastos was alive?"

Tarlos licked his lips. "You were his door-guard."

"Did I have a partner?"

"Yes. Marhemnu." The chains were beginning to rub his wrists and ankles raw. "Anything else?"

Lugal nodded. "Two more. Who is the only woman Tarlos ever loved?"

Tarlos frowned. "Katla."

"Fine. Last one. Who was Krastos's father?"

Tarlos took in a deep breath. "That has two answers. Everyone thinks it was Moleg. But I know the truth."

"Say it."

Tarlos stared into Lugal's brown eyes, and then into Nekhte's. "It was Ablis. But there's no way you would know that, so what does it prove?"

Lugal took a silver key from his belt and undid the cuffs around Tarlos's arms and legs. With a few clicks, the chains crashed to the floor. Tarlos rubbed at his wrists.

"Now," Tarlos said, "can one of you please explain—"

Lugal wrapped his arms around Tarlos and held him tight for several seconds. When he came away, he looked at Tarlos and said, "You have been missed, my king."

Before Tarlos could respond, Nekhte grabbed him and spun him around to face him, and he too squeezed Tarlos in a bone-bending hug.

*thank thank the thank the gods the gods thank the gods*



He let Tarlos go, and Tarlos panted for air. "What in the name of Shar is going on!"

Tears formed in Lugal's eyes, but they did not fall. "Where have you been, Tarlos?" he asked. His voice was a whisper. Any louder and he might cry, Tarlos thought.

"I've been..." He searched for an answer they would understand. "I've been away. There were questions that needed answers, and I was looking for them."

"And did you find what you were looking for?" Nekhte asked.

"I don't know yet. Anyway, I've only been gone for a few decans. What's all this fuss about?"

Lugal shook his head and placed a hand on Tarlos's shoulder. "You haven't been gone a few decans. It's been three years."

Tarlos almost laughed. He looked from one man to the other, searching for a hint of humor in their faces. He found none. "You aren't serious."

*wish wish we wish we weren't weren't*

"Everyone thought we were crazy, didn't they?" Nekhte said. "Still do. But we knew. We knew all along. You were still out there, and that thing on the throne is a hoax."

"The thing on the throne—what do you mean?" Tarlos's voice was rising now, and he felt his heartbeat quicken. "And why are there...the cages..."

"Wait here," Lugal said. "Nekhte, keep an eye out."

"Hurry back," Nekhte said. He moved the bronze chest from the door, and Lugal disappeared into Kesh.

Nekhte smiled at Tarlos beneath his huge beard. "I'm sure glad to see you, king. Sit down, I'll get some tea. By the way, what happened to your hair?"

Tarlos ran a hand through his shoulder-length hair. It was dry and tangled. He brought a lock from above his ear in front of his eyes and blinked at it. He was not sure if it was a trick of the light or not.

"My hair is white," he said evenly.

Nekhete nodded. "Looks good on you."

Within an hour, the small house was filled with people. Most were slaves, including Patnu and Basmem, who used to wash his and Krastos's hair and trim their beards. They looked at Tarlos with silent wonder, and Tarlos looked back at them with sorrow in his eyes. Basmem had always been missing his thumbs, but now the small bones at the ends of each finger were missing, and the wounds had already scarred over.

Palace guards arrived as well, ones that kept watch over Tarlos's bedroom door or escorted him through the lower city. They all looked tired and saddened, even as they looked relieved to see Tarlos there with them.

The priestess Shala also came, and she was taller and more mature than Tarlos remembered. She was dressed in a yellow robe, paint on her eyes and beads in her braided hair. She made one glance at Tarlos and then looked away.

The last to enter was a huge man that Tarlos had never seen before, standing at least seven feet tall with shoulders like a ship's anchor, and skin as black as obsidian. Around him was wrapped a purple blanket, and sitting in the blanket like an infant child was a crippled Kamhat. Tarlos felt his breath catch in his belly when he saw her, and when their eyes met he expected her to cry at the sight of him. Instead, she smiled warmly.

"Well," she said. Her voice was softer than it had been before her injuries, but it still carried with it the tone of sass and flirtatiousness. "He decided to come back, after all. Did you miss us, Tarlos?"

Tarlos now stood in the center of a large group of people, all of whom stared at him with confusion, some with happiness added to that. A few had expressions of betrayal.

Tarlos asked Lugal, "Where is Katla? And Mez?"

All around the room, eyes glanced at each other in sadness.

Lugal adjusted his belt. "Mez is dead," he said.

The blood fell from Tarlos's head as water from a cliffside, and he stumbled. "No. No. How?"

"This is why we meet in secret. The new king—who poses as you—doesn't tolerate shaking faith that he is in fact you." Lugal looked at the floor, then at the palace guards. "Mez was the first of us to notice that something about the false king wasn't right. He spoke out against him, refusing to serve anyone but the real Tarlos. The king made an example of him." Lugal swallowed and stared through Tarlos with a reminiscent gaze. "His bones are still in the cage that hangs over the city square. He was loyal to you until the end."

Tarlos tried to swallow, but there was no moisture in his mouth or throat, and he coughed on the dryness of his tongue. His voice squeaked, "And Katla?"

This time all eyes were cast to the floor, and the air was filled with a knowing tension.

Nekhthe broke the silence. "She is still queen. She lives with the king. She and her son."

Tarlos stammered. "She and this false king...?"

Nekhthe shook his head and held up a hand to reassure him. "She was pregnant before you left. The boy is your son."

Tarlos did not feel his knees give out, but he crumpled to the floor just the same. His head fell into his hands, and he thought he might cry. He could not. He looked at each person in the room individually, seeing the hurt in their eyes. He could hear their thoughts with his new Power of Mind, and they were sad and many. He could not make out individual words. His head was filled with a buzzing white-noise of echoing voices, and no matter how much he tried, how much he wanted to, he could not look away from these people.

"Why are you all here?" he asked.

Kamhat smiled and said, "We're the only ones in this whole city with brains, it turns out. The only ones who knew that the king who claims to be you really isn't. And we all held hope that you would return someday."

Tarlos frowned at Kamhat and felt his eyes burn. "Kamhat, I'm so sorry about—"

"Don't you start that," she interrupted. Her voice cracked in half a sob. "Only the gods understand what you've been through, and I forgave you long before tonight."

Tarlos shook his head. "And the empty streets? Is that the king's law?"

Lugal nodded. "Curfew is sunset. Anyone caught outside after dark is placed in solitary for three days without food. The second offense is banishment or death. The offender gets to choose."

"And how many have been banished?"

"None. Being banished means being set free in the desert, naked, with no supplies or water. Death is easier."

"Tarlos," Nekhte said, stepping toward him. He placed a large hand on Tarlos's shoulder.

"You're back. You're the king. Take back what's yours, for all our sakes."

Tarlos wiped his nose, which was beginning to drip as his emotions welled up in his throat. "It's all my fault, isn't it? If I was here, Mez would still be...oh gods..." And the tears came, and Tarlos sobbed for a minute or two, and everyone in the room waited with patience and understanding until he caught his breath.

Tarlos wiped his eyes and cleared his throat, then stood. His eyes stung, and his hands shook with anger—anger at the false king, anger at the gods for allowing any of this to happen, anger at himself for blaming anyone but him. This was his doing, and he would have to make it right.

"Take me to him," he told Lugal. "Let me see this false king."

Lugal nodded. "We'll have to be sneaky. Can you pretend to be a jinn for a while longer?" He picked up the cuffs and chains on the floor. "And you'll have to put these back on."

It was difficult for Tarlos to know how long he was in his cell. He was beginning to get used to being in dark spaces for an unimaginable length of time. But at least in Shar's Tunnel and the cave beneath the mountain, he was always moving. This cell was small, and there was nowhere to go. He counted the drips of water from the stone ceiling that splashed onto the damp stone floor. So far, he had counted over four thousand.

Lugal had chained him up as before and led him through the city toward the palace and dungeons. On their way there, they came across a group of a dozen guards, and all of them were in a frantic search for the jinn and their missing captain.

"He got through the gate," Lugal told them, "but I caught him. Help me take him to the dungeons, and then we'll see what the king has to say."

That was hours ago. Tarlos sat on the cold hard floor and leaned back against the freezing stones of the wall. The guards had not given him a cell with a bench or stool, or even a bucket in which to relieve himself. It was miserable, he was hungry, and he rubbed his arms and listened to his stomach growl. Even his father had never denied prisoners food.

A small scurrying sound tapped up the floor toward Tarlos. He straightened and strained his ears to hear. The tiny little steps came up to him and stopped.

"Hey," said a small, hissy voice. "Hey, hey you, you, you, hey you."

"Who is that?" Tarlos asked, trying to see whatever was sitting in front of him, but it was too dark.

"Got food?" the weird voice asked again. "Food, huh? Where is food? You got any? Bugs? See any around? I'd like a bug. You got food? Doesn't have to be a bug." Whatever it was spoke very fast, and Tarlos had a hard time keeping up with it.

"Tell me who you are first," Tarlos said.

The thing ran around him once, dipping under his bent knees and circling his feet, then jumped into his lap. Tarlos cried out in surprise. It was a large black rat.

"Oh yeah, I can understand you." A smile came to his face, and he let out a small chuckle. "A lot of good that will do me down here, though. Do you know what's going on up there?"

"You got food? I'm hungry. Hey, why don't you answer me? Food?"

"Who is king up there?"

"I don't smell food. No bugs. No food. Thirsty. I'll have water. Fill my belly. Can't find food."

The rat pounced from Tarlos's lap and ran away with the tiny pitter-patter of paws that sounded through the stone halls.

*What's the use of being able to speak to animals if animals are stupid?*

Tarlos leaned against the wall and sighed. He tried closing his eyes for a nap, but his roaring stomach would not let him sleep.

Deep in the dungeon halls, a heavy door opened and thudded against the wall. Light flooded the place for a moment, and then it was dark just as before. Footsteps sounded through the halls.

Tarlos stood and grasped at the metal bars around his cell. He waited patiently as three figures came forward. Tarlos could not see them in the darkness, although the one in front carried a torch. The light from the flames silhouetted them.

When they came near, Tarlos saw that two of them wore armor. They were guards.

"Have you come to bring me dinner?" Tarlos asked. "I hope it's boar. I haven't had that in decans. Years, apparently."

"You will remain silent in the presence of the king unless asked a direct question," spoke the guard holding the torch. The light glimmered on his helmet and bounced off the walls with the dancing orange glow of the flame.

Tarlos nodded to the guard and backed away from the bars. The guard took a large key from his belt and unlocked the gate. It swung open, squealing on rusty hinges. The third figure, the one who did not wear any armor, stepped forward.

"Thank you," the shadowed figure said to the guards. At the sound of his voice, Tarlos felt the entirety of his skin erupt into cold-bumps. "You may leave us now, I'll be all right. Just wait outside."

The guards bowed, handed the torch to the man, and they left him there with Tarlos.

The flames illuminated the cell, and the man smiled.

Tarlos stammered. "What...how...who...what..." He did not understand anything that was happening. The man standing before him, smiling sinisterly with perfect white teeth, was Tarlos. It was him, down to the last detail. His thick brown hair, his straight nose, his high cheekbones, the scant beard that he could never manage to grow out fully as he was expected to, the way he stood and shifted his weight on his feet. Tarlos stared at himself as if looking into a mirror and felt his balance give way. His knees buckled, and he fell to the hard floor. He could not take his eyes from his double, although it made him sick to look.

"I know," the double said. "This must be very strange for you. I'll give you a moment to compose yourself, and then you need to come with me."

After the blood came back into Tarlos's fainting head, and he had finished wiping the puke from his chin, Tarlos followed his double out of the dungeons and through the main palace building.

"Please keep your head down," the double said in Tarlos's voice. "And don't speak to anyone. This is confusing enough for everyone as it is."

It must have been the small hours of the morning, as no one was awake and walking around the palace except for the slaves, and they avoided eye contact altogether. Only once did a slave—who Tarlos did not recognize—look up and offer a look of confusion for a moment before looking away again.

They came to the king's apartment, and the double glared at Tarlos. "Any sound from you and she dies."

Tarlos was about to respond when the apartment door squeaked open a few inches and a soft voice came from the other side.



"Tarlos?" He would recognize that voice anywhere. It was Katla. "Is everything all right? What's happening?" She locked eyes with the real Tarlos, and an echoing voice sounded through his mind.

*Tarlos Tarlos is that Tarlos what is what Tarlos is that what is this who is Tarlos that who is that*

He almost answered out of reflex to hearing his name, but he kept his mouth shut, and the double answered for him.

"Everything is fine. Go back to bed."

A small voice came from the room behind the door, and Katla turned to it. The door opened another foot, and Katla bent down and picked up a small naked toddler and held him in her arms. The boy wrapped his little arms around her neck into her white-yellow hair. Tarlos's mouth gaped and his throat dried up.

"Go back to bed," the double said again, stronger this time. Katla nodded and closed the door.

Tarlos hissed at his double, "Is that—"

"No speaking. Not yet. I promise I'll explain."

The false king led Tarlos through the palace and into the gardens that his grandmother had planted years and years before. The sun was beginning to rise, and the sky was pink in the east. The air was still cool, but it was already beginning to warm.

They walked through the gardens, and the slaves avoided them and bowed their heads to the ground. Tarlos said nothing, and the man who looked like him said nothing. The double took Tarlos to a small door in the wall behind the gardens. It was a door almost no one knew about, and it led outside the city walls into the desert beyond.

The double held the wooden door open for Tarlos. "After you," he said.

Tarlos stepped out of Kesh and into the desert, and the double closed the door behind them.

"The first thing you should know," said the man, "is that your hair is white." He pointed at Tarlos's head.

Tarlos ran a hand through his hair and pulled his bangs down to see. His hair was whiter than a spring cloud. "I know."

"Second," the man continued, "you've been gone for three years. Did you know that?"

"Yes," Tarlos said. The sun was higher now, and the pink was fading into a light blue. It would be a clear day, a hot day. "But I thought it was only a few decans."

The man laughed. The sound made Tarlos's skin squirm.

"I'm afraid not, Tarlos. It's been three years. More than that, actually, but not by much. I won't bother you with the exact time down to the second. Your son is two years old. His name is Gilmesh, if you were wondering."

Tarlos did not know what to ask first. He decided to start at the beginning. "Who are you?"

The false king shrugged. "I saw an absence and I filled it. I saw a kingdom without a king and a son without a father. I saw a future Holder with no Holder to raise him. Besides..." The man walked in a half circle around Tarlos and stared up at the sun, which now beat down on the hot desert. "I think it's only fair. You killed my son, so I took yours. Yeah?"

Slowly the mechanisms in Tarlos's mind worked out what the man was saying. Tarlos was sweating. He was tired and starving. His head was light and spinning. The bright sun only made it worse. But now he understood.

"You are Ablis," Tarlos said.

Ablis bowed sarcastically. "In the flesh."

Tarlos backed away as he stared at the cast-out god, who had taken his image, taken his kingdom, and taken his wife and son. "What happens now?"

"Hopefully a lot," Ablis answered, still circling him. Tarlos turned around to keep eye contact with the god. "Honestly, you coming back never factored into my plans. But now I've thought about it a little, and I can see how it might be better this way." The Discarded One leaned forward and took a deep and long smell of Tarlos. He felt his soul within him tug against his bones. "I don't know how," Ablis said, "but you hold all four Powers, don't you? Yes. Interesting. Well, so do I."

Tarlos remained quiet. It took all his energy to fight the heat of the sun and keep himself from passing out.

"Forget Kesh," said Ablis. "Think about the Fertile Valley. Think about Edorath. Think about Earth. Or more..."

Tarlos felt a familiar sensation of being sucked through his own body, and he heard the slurp in his head as the world folded in around him and he emerged from the other side. Before him was the cosmos in all of its glory. Planets, stars, nebulae, and supernovae. Worlds without number circling each other in circles within circles, and the universe extended forever in every physical dimension.

Tarlos had seen better.

"This could be ours," Ablis said. "Just imagine it. A god and a Holder of all four Powers. Think of what we could accomplish together. Think of what we could become."

The vision melted away and Tarlos found himself back in the blistering heat of the desert. What time was it? It was still early morning. So why was it so hot already, and why did the sun appear so high? Tarlos swayed on his feet. He spread his stance to keep his balance.

"What do you say?" Ablis asked. He smiled, and for a moment Tarlos caught a glimpse of the true Ablis in his double's brown eyes. It filled him with pity.

Tarlos gave one slow shake of his head. "Absolutely not."

The smile on Ablis's face faded to a grimace. "Think about what you're saying, Tarlos. I'm offering you the world. I'm offering you *all* the worlds. We could have them. Co-rule this universe. Join me." He extended a hand.

Tarlos stared at him. Sweat dripped into his eyes and his skin burned in the sunlight. "Why don't you go away? Nobody likes you."

This brought Ablis's smile back, and he lowered his outstretched hand. "Fine, Tarlos. Have it your way. But then, I used to be the god of balance. Now that I think about it, there really is no need to have any other Holders when you hold all four Powers. You think it's necessary that Gilmesh lives?"

This gave Tarlos pause, and he sneered. "You will not—"

"Or what?" Ablis taunted. "You might have all the Powers, but you're still mortal. I'm a god. I am eternal."

Tarlos probed inside his mind, feeling for that spot that moves objects, that speaks with rats and crickets, and hears the thoughts of others. He found something else there, and he flexed it. Suddenly all sound around him dampened as the air slowed like syrup. The sun's fiery fingers stopped wiggling in the sky, and the clouds far up in the sky stopped changing shape.

*The Power of Time.*

Ablis was caught mid-blink, and his mouth gaped open in the middle of a word. Tarlos groaned against the thickness of the air and against his own fatigue, and he launched a missile made of wind at Ablis. Normally, the blow would have knocked an opponent across the stretch of Kesh's walls.

But the air was thick, and time was slow, and the force of air barely moved. Tarlos released his hold on time, and the invisible fist of air plowed into Ablis. When the dust cleared, Ablis stood there with one eyebrow raised.

"Oh ye of little faith," said Ablis, and he motioned a single finger toward Tarlos.

A force grabbed him from every atom in his being and push-pulled him a hundred yards from Ablis. He soared through the air, trying to get control over his own Power to fly or at least slow his landing. He felt Ablis in his mind, prodding around like a fisherman trying to get the meat in a mussel. He was blocking Tarlos from using his Powers, and Tarlos fell to the hard and hot desert ground in the middle of a patch of cacti.

The prodding ethereal finger of Ablis left his mind, and Tarlos levitated out of the cactus plants. He was covered in thin little thorns, and each one burned individually. He groaned inwardly, biting his tongue until blood came from his mouth, and worked to remove the thorns with his mind. But he could not focus on all of them as a whole. He would have to remove them individually.

"I bet that feels icky." Ablis materialized beneath Tarlos. He reached down into the brambles and plucked a dried stick about a foot in length. The stick straightened in his grip, thickened, and sharpened itself to a metal point at the end.

"Like I said," Ablis shouted up to Tarlos, "no need for all these Holders." He launched the spear.

Tarlos felt pressure in his chest. It did not hurt. He fell to the ground, and it seemed to him that he fell slowly. Ablis laughed as Tarlos looked at his chest and the spear protruding from it. His lungs would not expand, and his body cried out for oxygen. Blood pooled around him.

*The tooth.*

The Old One could help him. He just had to call him.

Tarlos felt for the tooth around his neck with a dying arm, and he did not find it there. As he lay in the dirt, he turned his head as far as it would go, a few inches to the right. There was the tooth. It was caught in a cactus.

With the sound of Ablis's laughter fresh in his ears, Tarlos stared up into the sky and was comfortable. The day was hot, but not anymore. He was quite cool. All the blood that had been in his body only moments ago was now soaking into the thirsty ground, but Tarlos felt fine.

*So this is it, he thought. Sort of like falling asleep, except...*

Tarlos's eyes closed, and he died.

CHAPTER EIGHT

O, Death

*Sort of like falling asleep, except...except I...*

*...I'm...*

*...what was I saying...*

*...what is...*

He floated. He drifted. The space around him was clad in silver, and there was no apparent source of the silver light.

His sense of balance was not working. No, it did not exist altogether. He floated and drifted, but he did not know in which direction. He felt a sort of current around him, and the silver light rippled in shafts. It was like the sun shining through a clear pool of water.

He went onward, knowing he was moving, but not knowing where. Perhaps there was no *where*. Perhaps he was drifting through the dimensions, like that time he spoke to the Old One. How long ago was that? Days? Centuries? Seconds?

There was no linear movement. The shafts of silver light did not move or break as he drifted onward. There was a lack of time, no limits of time. He drifted for centuries, and yet it was less than a moment. A moment, and a thousand years. Both and neither. This was not time or space as he knew it. Every second happened at once, and his human mind attempted to sort them into sequential events.

Something brushed his arm, and he was intrigued. It had been an eternity since he had felt the touch of something. The something wrapped around his arm and dragged him upward, or what he

assumed was upward, and the silver shafts of light widened and brightened as he neared the nonmaterial edge of this in-between place.

A strong arm pulled him from the Styx, and Tarlos sputtered as he came from the water. He felt solid surface supporting his body, and he rolled over and panted.

"You're fine," said a soothing voice. It was a voice that was old, kind, and calm. A voice that belonged to someone who had been doing the same job for an endless epoch of time. "Try to sit up. You'll regain your balance faster."

Tarlos tried. He leaned against the wall of the small boat. His vision was blurry, and the sun was bright, and it took several moments for his eyes to adjust and for his sight to clear. When his eyes finally went back to normal, he looked up at the tall thin man next to him.

The man was pale, his hair was white, and his eyes were blue. He stretched over Tarlos more than seven feet, and his limbs were thin and stick-like. He was draped in a billowy cloak from neck to ankle, and the color seemed to shift between shades of black and purple. The tall man held a long pole in his hands, and he used it to push the boat forward. Tarlos thought the man resembled an ibis.

The boat itself was made from reeds and thin branches lashed together in a canoe shape. It felt sturdy, if not a little wobbly, and Tarlos settled himself on the edge, facing the man.

"Who are you?" Tarlos asked. "Where am I?"

"I am Ilshu," the tall man answered. His voice was wind through a cavern, not a whisper but not fully voiced. It was oddly comforting. "You are dead. I am taking you to your place."

"Oh." Tarlos looked around inside the boat. The river was calm, and it moved at a steady rate eastward. On the banks of the river were reeds and weeds and flowers, and beyond those were trees of every kind. All of this seemed familiar.



"Have I been here before?"

The God of the Dead nodded slowly. "You have, though you were not supposed to. Your memory will return shortly."

"That's good. I don't even remember my name."

"I am afraid that will stay lost."

"Oh." Tarlos felt that this should worry him, but he was not bothered by it. He waited patiently as Ilshu pushed the reed boat along the Styx, and the trees and landscape crawled by on the shores.

"So where is my place?"

"Down the river. Almost at the end. You passed it on your adventure with that friend of yours."

Tarlos nodded, and short shadows of memory ghosted through his mind. There were shapes and feelings, but nothing substantial, so he decided to wait patiently until his memories became solid.

He sat in the boat and leaned against the wall and watched the landscape drift by. The boat ride lasted for several hours, and they passed many villages on their way downstream. Wooden signs lined the river at each community, and Tarlos could understand the strange foreign words as they passed by.

*Streetlight District*

*Watertower District*

*Searchtower District*

*Lighthouse District*

At this last village, a man sat on the bank of the Styx, skipping rocks across its surface. He was a man of average height, with short brown hair that was thinner on the top. He wore simple clothes, and his shirt buttoned down the front. As Tarlos and Ilshu floated by, the man stopped skipping his rocks and he lifted a hand in greeting. Tarlos waved back, and the man smiled.

"Who was that?" Tarlos asked the god.

"He does not matter," Ilshu replied.

Tarlos frowned. "That's not very nice."

Ilshu turned his head at Tarlos. "He does not matter to you. He is not from your world."

"And you're taking me to mine?"

"I am taking you to where you belong. At the end of the river."

A shock of memories cascaded through Tarlos's mind, and they were like ice dripping down his spine. He remembered Kesh, he remembered his brother—though he could not remember his name. He remembered the journey across the desert and the dead country and floating down the Styx with the boatman. He remembered the blue flower and the House of Dust—

"Oh no," Tarlos said. "No, please not there." He stood and placed his hands on the reed railing of the boat.

"It is not for me to decide," Ilshu hummed. "My duty is to ferry souls to their place; it is not to judge them."

"And who will judge me?" Tarlos demanded. "When?"

"He Who Judges. And in Time." Ilshu did not slow or speed his pace, and the long pole dipped in and out of the water, and the boat floated down the Styx.

"I'm not going to that place." Tarlos approached the god, and he felt a static force around him. It made him sick to get too near. "Take me anywhere but there. Anywhere."

"That is not the way of things."

Tarlos looked across the river, over the banks and into the trees beyond. He saw tiny houses along the way, and smoke came from the chimneys. There were lights in the windows.

"Why can't I go there?" Tarlos asked.

"That district is not for your world." Ilshu continued to push, and he did not turn as he spoke to Tarlos.

Tarlos leaned over the railing to get a better look, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand. A familiar landmark was ahead, and he gasped.

"The bridge!" he shouted at Ilshu. "It leads to the Windmill District! Drop me off there!"

"No."

"They know me! I have friends there! Ilshu, please, don't do this to me..."

Ilshu did not respond.

Tarlos looked into the Styx. *It's poison*, he reminded himself.

*But I'm already dead. And I was just in there.*

The bridge approached. The boat would slip right beneath it, and Ilshu would have to duck to clear it.

"I can hear your thoughts," said Ilshu. "If you do it, I will not be there to pull you out again."

The boat reached the wooden bridge, and Tarlos jumped onto the edge of the boat. The boat rocked in the water, and Ilshu threw his arms outspread to balance himself. He turned to Tarlos.

Tarlos leaped as the boat came under the bridge, and his fingers grazed the edge of it. He grasped for a hold on nothing, and he fell backwards into the Styx. The boat passed on without him.

The water was cold, colder than he remembered, and foggy white shapes drifted past him like seaweed. He kicked upward, trying to reach the surface. The white shapes floated past him, and one brushed against his leg. It sent electric prickles up through his body, and he seized in surprise. He swam upward, and the white cloudy things drifted by.

The surface was near, and he could see where the river met the shore just a few yards away. He turned his body in that direction, and his lungs began to pain for air.

One more white shape wafted toward him, and something made Tarlos stop and watch. The cloud came near, and it swirled and turned around as the formless wisp took shape. The face of Lakaeus appeared in the thick white mist, and his body formed below it. Tarlos's eyes opened wide beneath the water as his father's soul reached out for him. Lakaeus's eyes were sad, apologetic, and filled with regret. He reached to Tarlos with ghostly fingers, and Tarlos could almost hear his father try to speak.

*My son...come with me...let me make it right...*

*Remember me...*

Tarlos used his mind to force a current at the ghost of his father, and the force also propelled him toward shore. He collided with the ground, and he grasped for purchase above the water. He lifted himself out and fell on the dirt, sputtering and coughing.

He looked to the river, half expecting to see Ilshu in his boat waiting to take him away. But he was not there, and Tarlos was alone.

He was wearing the same clothes he had died in, and he took them off and squeezed as much water as he could from them before putting them back on. The clothes were freezing and damp.

Up ahead was the Windmill District, and he needed a drink.

His hand was on the round brass door handle, but he did not twist it. There were voices inside—many voices. He heard laughing, the sound of glass clinking, and loud conversation. He smelled meat, pastries, coffee, and beer. There was a party happening in the tavern, and Tarlos hesitated before easing the door open.

The noise hit him like a wind, as did the smell. The tavern was packed with at least a hundred people, and none were sitting; there was no room for tables or chairs. Some people had plates of food in their hands, and they ignored the food as they talked and laughed with each other. Those who did not have a plate of food held a glass of foaming beer, and they drank gladly.

Tarlos inched over to the wall beside the fireplace and leaned into the corner. He had no idea what was going on here, and he did not want to interrupt.

A voice in the crowd yelled out, "Ladies and gentlemen, I'd be ever so grateful to have yer attention!" A short man jumped up onto the counter, and Tarlos caught a glimpse of the brown-haired woman behind it.

The man had a strange accent, one that Tarlos had never heard before, and he wore a funny flat hat. After he was balanced on the counter, the man took off his hat and waved it in the air.

"Now listen, you lot! I need your help with this one!"

Another voice, a woman, called out, "Oh please, not another one! We're already queasy from drinking."

The crowd laughed, and so did the man. He put his hat back on, one hand on the bill in front and one hand on the back. He secured it tightly on his head and adjusted his pants, which were sagging off his hips despite his suspenders.

"Now I know ye all know this one. 'Twas one of his favorites, and I think it's only right that we end the party tonight with it. Ye all know which one I'm talking about."

"Wild Rover!" yelled a man.

"Aye! And you'd better belt it this time so he can hear you from wherever he is!"

The man began to stomp a beat on the counter, and everyone else in the tavern joined in by stomping on the wooden floor. Those who had no food or drink clapped along. After a few sets of beats, the man on the counter took in a deep breath and began to sing, and when he sang the others sang with him, and the place was filled with joyous song.

*I've been a wild rover for many a year*

*And I've spent all me money on whiskey and beer*

*But now I'm returning with gold in great store*

*And ne'er will I play the wild rover no more*

*And it's no, nay, never*

*No, nay, never, no more*

*Will I play the wild rover, no, never, no more*

*I went into an alehouse I used to frequent*

*And I told the landlady my money was spent  
I asked her for credit, she answered me "Nay,  
Such a custom as yours I could have any day."*

*And it's no, nay, never  
No, nay, never, no more  
Will I play the wild rover, no, never, no more*

*I took from my pocket ten sovereigns bright  
And the landlady's eyes opened wide with delight  
She said "I have whiskey and wines of the best  
And the words that I spoke you were only in jest."*

*And it's no, nay, never  
No, nay, never, no more  
Will I play the wild rover, no, never, no more*

*I'll go home to my parents, confess what I've done  
And I'll ask them to pardon their prodigal son  
And when they caress me as oftentimes before  
Sure I never will play the wild rover no more*

*And it's no, nay, never*

*No, nay, never, no more*

*Will I play the wild rover, no, never, no more*

The tavern erupted in shouts and whoops and applause, and the man on the counter applauded his audience, then flipped off his flat hat and bowed theatrically. He jumped off the counter and received several slaps on the back. Tarlos remained in the spot by the fireplace, and he did not smile.

After the singing, the party grew quiet and the atmosphere became tired. People began to leave, slowly at first, and then in great groups. They said goodbye to each other on the way out, and they yelled goodnight to the woman behind the counter. A few stayed behind a few minutes more to bring out the tables and chairs and set them out as they were before. Every person in the tavern, before they put on their hats and flipped up their jacket collars, spoke to the same woman and gave her a hug.

The woman was small and short and very thin. Her hair was black and straight, her skin a light olive, and her eyes the color and shape of almonds. She wore a simple black tunic trimmed in white, and somewhere in Tarlos's mind, a small voice—like that of a memory—whispered, *Kimono. It's called a kimono.*

Tucked behind the woman's ear and threaded through her black hair was a blue sun orchid. Tarlos's frown deepened when he saw the flower that he had helped the boatman find, and he turned his head in every direction. Had he seen the boatman since he arrived? It was a large crowd, but surely he was there. Tarlos must have just missed him. He stood on his toes to see over heads and around chairs that had been stacked on tables to make the sweeping easier.



When there was no sign of the boatman, Tarlos relaxed on his feet and slumped against the wall. The party was over, and everyone was leaving. What should he do now? This was not his after-world. Ilshu had not meant for him to be here. Would there be a place for him to stay? Would he fit in with these people from an alternate Earth? He looked over to the tavern woman and wondered if he should ask her for help. Perhaps he could stay in the bedroom upstairs.

"Hey!" called the tavern woman, and Tarlos snapped from his thinking and focused his eyes on her. She smiled and waved at him, then came over to the other side of the counter. Tarlos met her halfway, and she gave him a friendly hug. "What the heck are you doing here?"

Tarlos shrugged. "I died."

Her eyebrows shot upward, and she tried to hide a laugh behind a hand, disguising it as a cough.

"It's not funny," Tarlos said, and his frown was now a scowl. "It's all over. I failed. This wasn't how it was supposed to end."

The woman nodded sympathetically and took a calming breath to relax her face. "Of course. I'm sorry. I guess that's why I don't remember your name."

"Ah, I was hoping you would remember it. Oh well."

The woman motioned for Tarlos to take a seat at a table, and she walked away for a moment. She returned with the woman with the flower in her hair, and the woman smiled a greeting at Tarlos.

"This is my friend," said the tavern woman. "I'd introduce you properly, but I don't know either of your names. She knew the boatman when they were both alive."

Tarlos stood to greet the small woman, and she gave him a polite bow. He nodded in return.

The small woman said, "He told me that you helped him find this." She touched her orchid reverently. "Thank you." Her voice was soft, and it made Tarlos want to lean in to hear her better.

"You are very welcome," Tarlos said. "So, you knew the boatman in life?"

"I did. We were close friends. He was a wonderful person. One of the most selfless I've ever met."

Tarlos made one more glance around the room and asked her, "Where is he tonight? Does he not like parties?"

A solemn silence crossed her face, and the tavern woman rubbed the back of her own neck.

"Did I say something wrong?" Tarlos asked.

The tavern woman answered, "He's gone."

"Gone? What do you mean?"

"Like, he's dead. It happens. People die, they come here, and then after a while they disappear again."

Tarlos frowned. "Where do they go?"

"No idea. Just like no one knew we'd end up here this time, either."

Tarlos sat back down and scratched his head. The flower woman bowed. "If you'll excuse me, I'm very tired. It was lovely to have met you. Goodnight." She gave them both another full bow, and Tarlos watched her tiny slippered feet shuffle beneath her kimono as she exited the tavern.

A silence passed between Tarlos and the tavern woman. At length she sighed and said, "We got a lot of leftovers. Want some chocolate cake? It's amazing. Devil's food."

"Sure," Tarlos said. He did not care about eating, but he had nothing else to do, and he needed something to distract him from his disappointment in himself.

The woman nodded and patted Tarlos on the shoulder, then disappeared into the room behind the counter.

Tarlos studied the grain in the wooden table. He picked at it with his fingernail.

*How can the dead die?*

"Excuse me," said a voice behind him. Tarlos turned and met eyes with a pale bald man. "Do you mind?" He gestured to a chair opposite Tarlos.

"Not at all." The man thanked him and took a seat.

The man had two steaming mugs, and he handed one to Tarlos. "You looked like you needed something hot to drink. Go ahead. It's just tea."

Tarlos sipped the hot tea and felt warmth spread through his body from his throat and stomach. "Thanks," he said.

"You're going to love this cake," the bald man said. "It's my favorite."

The man had a peculiar look that Tarlos could not figure out. It was not that the man looked strange or deformed. He appeared normal enough, except for his eyes. They were a rainbow of green, blue, grey, and brown, with every shade of each in concentric circles that faded into each other so that the eyes looked natural and ancient. His skin was smooth without wrinkles, except for around his eyes and mouth, and his mouth stayed in a permanent smile. His nose was not big, not small, and Tarlos could find no fault in the bridge of it. His skin was pale but no more than the skin of the woman he left in the living world. His fingers were nimble and still, and they grasped the mug of tea like it was his best friend. His clothing was simple, grey and perfectly tailored. His shirt had no buttons, and his pants had no belt or fasteners. Tarlos could not make up his mind about the man. Did he look

different than any other human, or did he look like what a man would if all humans in existence were combined into one person?

"Ah, here it comes," said the man, and he smiled as the tavern woman brought a plate out and set it in front of Tarlos, along with a fork and a paper napkin.

"I suppose you want a slice, too," she said to the man.

He smiled. "You know it's just a waste of breath when you ask."

The woman stuck her tongue out at him and went behind the counter once more.

"Eat. And be amazed," the man said to Tarlos.

Tarlos scooped a bit of the chocolate cake with his fork and brought it to his nose for a sniff. It smelled sweet, filled with too much sugar. But he took a bite anyway. As soon as the dark and rich chocolate touched his tongue, he paused and stared at the man in disbelief.

"What..." he tried to say around his mouthful.

The man laughed, and his vibrant eyes sparkled. "Told you. Isn't that the best chocolate cake you've ever had?"

Tarlos swallowed. "I've never had chocolate cake before."

The woman brought a slice for the man, and Tarlos devoured his before the woman could walk away. He touched her wrist as she was beginning to turn. "Cah ha s'more?" he said with his mouth full.

The woman laughed. "Well dang. Yeah, there's a little bit left. I'll just bring it out and you two can finish it off. Save me a few trips."

As Tarlos waited, he cleaned his tongue with his teeth and savored the aftertaste of the cake and the chocolate frosting. The tavern was all but empty now, and Tarlos looked around at the quiet place.

"So, this wasn't a party after all," he said. "It was a funeral."

The man tilted his head in consideration. "Can't it be both?"

The rest of the cake was placed on the table, and Tarlos and the man each took a slice.

"But he was already dead," Tarlos said. "Why die again?"

The bald man shrugged. "Just the way of things, I guess. There's always an ebb and a flow. Always needs to be opposition, yin and yang, that sort of thing. Nothing stays one way forever. When it's time to move on, you move on. The journey is never over, I think."

"But..." Tarlos waved a hand. "He was already dead. You can't die again."

"Oh, but you can. It's happened many times before, and it will continue to do so. It will happen to me, and you, and her." He pointed to the counter. "All of us. Some take longer than others."

Tarlos shook his head and put his cake-covered fork down. "What's the point, then? Even death isn't the end, so why even do anything? What's there to live for?"

"Everything!" the man said, his voice suddenly loud. Tarlos started at the sound of it. "We have everything to live for. Do you have a family?"

Tarlos licked his teeth. "I did."

"Did you love them?"

Tarlos nodded.

The man said, "But you still love them."

Tarlos shrugged. "Yes."

"The ones we love never really leave us. I'm sure you've heard that before, but that's not the point." The man sighed and took another bite of cake, and he chewed thoughtfully. "I don't think life has an objective meaning. You have to find your own. It's like winning a game. Winning isn't really the fun part. Playing the game is."

"But aren't you sad when the game is over?"

The man shook his head. "Sometimes, I suppose. But the point of something fun is that it doesn't last forever. Just like life. Life is beautiful and fleeting, and it's beautiful *because* it's fleeting."

Tarlos felt like he had heard that before, but the memory of it was hidden in his brain and covered with a depressing fog. He shook his head. "I'm still..." His gaze drifted to the table in the corner, where he met the boatman. He could almost see him there, face hidden beneath his wide-brimmed hat. "I don't understand how someone can die twice."

"Well, I have a theory about that," said the man. He pointed his fork at Tarlos. "But it's just my theory, so don't take it as gospel. But it's this: We all die twice. The second time is when someone says your name for the last time."

That sent a cold shudder up Tarlos's shoulders, and he felt tears burn at the corners of his eyes. He took another bite of cake.

The bald man let out a small chuckle.

Tarlos asked, "What is it?"

The man swallowed some cake. "I was just thinking about this story the boatman told me once. He was always telling me funny stories about his family in Oklahoma, but this one always stuck with me."

"Can I hear it?"

"Sure, just let me put it together in my head real quick." The bald man closed his eyes in thought for a moment and then began speaking with a half-grin.

"The boatman had hammer toes—grew up with them and suffered near his whole life with them. Finally, when he was thirty or forty, somewhere around that time, he went to the doctor.

"'Doc', he said, 'I need you to fix my toes. I can't hardly stand em no more.' So the doctor takes him to the operating room, cuts each of his toes down the middle, breaks the bones, resets them, and sews them back up.

"He was laid up for a while, not able to walk or work. He said he could barely hobble over for his necessities every morning and evening. Then finally, a few months later, his toes were healed and he went out in the cotton field to do some work. And wouldn't you know it, he stepped in a gopher hole and broke his foot!"

Tarlos smiled. The man chuckled and continued.

"Anyway, fast forward some years, and he's about sixty, his wife died about twenty years earlier, and he'd been living alone ever since. This old woman starts to come calling near every day. She brings him beans and cornbread, 'and boy-o do I love me some beans and cornbread,' he told me. 'But whoo-ee! Was she ugly! And old! And she was always wantin to kiss on me.'

"But she was only a year or two older than you, I told him.

"'Well sure,' he said, 'but who wants to kiss an old lady?'

Tarlos and the man laughed, and the man took a swallow of tea.

"Well, this went on for some time. He gave her enough attention to keep the beans and cornbread coming, but not so much attention that he'd have to kiss her.

"I asked him, Well why didn't you ever kiss her in a friendly way?

"He told me, 'If I'd-a done that much, before you know it we'd be sleepin together, and I can't be sleepin with a woman like that.'

"Why not?—I asked.

"'Because, I'd like as not wake up one morning and see that old hag in my bed and take off running and prob'ly break my damn foot again!'"

Tarlos laughed into his cake, and the bald man laughed into his tea. The story made Tarlos feel a bit better about his situation, and he took another slice.

"This is really good cake," he mumbled.

"It sure is," said the man, shoveling in another huge bite. "It's a shame that it'll be gone once we eat it all."

Tarlos paused with the fork in his mouth, and he set it down on his plate slowly and carefully. He looked up at the man, and the man was staring at him with a subtle and sly smile.

"Same goes for life."

"Oh," Tarlos said, and he smiled and ate the rest of his cake.



## CHAPTER NINE

## Back Again

The sun was setting on the dead country, and soon Shar would enter the tunnel in the mountain to rise in the east of the living world. The air was still and warm, and the brightest stars had already begun to poke through the purple sky. The Styx was steady, gurgling over rocks at its banks, and insects buzzed at its surface.

Tarlos took a deep breath of air that seemed so fresh despite belonging to the dead. He smiled as his lungs filled, and he let it out slowly. This might be the last time he would be in this place, and he wanted to savor the feeling. Some distance away was Shar's mountain, and the sun was nearing the gate.

The bald man stood beside Tarlos. He wore a grey hooded shirt with a large pocket on the belly, which he kept his hands in. The hood was up over his bald head, and as he faced west the red light of the setting sun illuminated his kind features. He watched Tarlos enjoying his last breaths of the dead country and smiled.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked Tarlos.

Tarlos nodded. "I'm dead, but my friends in Kesh aren't. They have their whole lives ahead of them. Especially my son. I won't be able to rest until Ablis is gone. It's my fault he's there to begin with." He made a nervous sigh. "So I have one last thing to do. After that..." He shrugged. "Whatever happens, happens."

The man nodded and patted Tarlos on the back. "Best of luck to you. I don't think we'll be seeing each other again, but in the grand scheme of eternity I guess anything is possible."

Tarlos shook the man's hand, and the man's grip was firm and warm.

"Goodbye," Tarlos said. "And thank you."

With a blast of air, Tarlos launched himself into the sky toward the mountain. The bald man watched from the ground, using a hand to shield his eyes against the sunlight. A small green cricket pounced on his shoulder and chirped.

The man said to the cricket, "I'm glad I got to help someone one last time," and the cricket chirped once more before jumping off the shoulder and into the foliage to the side. The man waved to Tarlos, knowing Tarlos could not see him, and then he turned back to the village.

The sun had entered the tunnel a few minutes before Tarlos neared it, and he slowed down to give the sun a head start. As the sky darkened and the stars came into full bloom, Tarlos counted to one thousand before he decided that he had waited long enough, and he flew through the hole in the mountainside.

This time it was not so dark. He kept pace with the sun, leaving a thousand feet or so between it and himself. The sun lit the tunnel with a red and yellow glow, and Tarlos saw for the first time just how mind-numbingly enormous the cave was. Even with the light, Tarlos could hardly see the stone ceiling above him, and it was just as spacious to the left and right.

But he had no time to appreciate the magnitude of the sun or its tunnel. He focused, speeding on through the mountain with the sun just ahead, and he did not count how many seconds passed before the sun squeezed through the other side.

A cool morning breeze brushed Tarlos's face as the sun rose into the sky and the Scorpion Gate opened before him. Only moments after the sun passed through, the gate began to materialize back into the mountain, and Tarlos pushed harder to make it through in time.

The morning air of the living world slapped him to attention, and the shock made him stumble and drift to the ground. He took a moment to catch his breath and give his mind a rest.

"Hey!" called a voice.

Tarlos turned and saw a young boy with black eyes and black hair standing beside him. He was not there a moment ago.

"Hello again," said Tarlos. "Remember me?"

"You can't just leave," said the boy. He grimaced, annoyed and angry.

"I promise I'm coming back. I just have to do something first."

"You had your whole life to do something," cooed a different voice, and Tarlos looked up to see the girl hanging upside down from a tree branch. "No second chances."

"Sorry." Tarlos raised himself a few feet into the air. The children screamed painful screams, and Tarlos drew back farther into the sky.

Below him, the jinn twins twisted into sick caricatures of their young and innocent selves. Their mouths grew wide, splitting their faces across the middle. Their small white teeth rusted to a dark red and grew and stretched into sharp fangs. Their brows protruded over their black eyes and their hair receded back to reveal wrinkled scalps, which were covered in sores and dark spots. Their arms grew long, and their fingers became claws, and they reached upward toward Tarlos as he put more and more distance between him and the demons.

The jinn spoke in unison, and their voices were the wails of Hell. The words were screeches and growls, and Tarlos did not understand what they said. The jinn tried to reach him as they stood as high as they could on their long extended legs and stretched clawed arms.

It was their job to keep anyone from going into or coming out of the dead country, and Tarlos understood that. The jinn twins were frightening and disgusting, but Tarlos held no ill will against them.

"I promise I'm coming back," he shouted down to them from his vantage point. "Today, tomorrow, someday. But I will come back."

The demons cried as Tarlos flew west, and they shrank back to their common forms of young children. The girl lowered her head in defeat and sat beside her climbing tree. She brought bended knees to her chin and rested her hands on them. The boy kicked a rock, and it skidded along the yellow grass and landed in a bare patch of dirt.

"What will he do to us?" asked the girl.

The boy followed Tarlos with his black eyes and licked his lips. "I have a feeling we won't have to worry about him anymore."

The desert was a blur beneath him. Wind in his hair, on his face, and stinging his eyes. How long had it been since he had flown like this? In the open air, the ground as far below him as the sun was above?

After a while the sound of the wind faded into the background of his mind, and to him the world was silent. Peaceful. He would return to the dead country. But first, one last thing.

Kesh was a small circle, a red coin surrounded by yellow sand. Tarlos positioned himself above it and enjoyed the sight of his kingdom. He studied the brickwork of the walls, the ancient roads, and the stone temple that reached so high. He saw the fields of grain and corn just beyond the wall, and the

lush garden beside his cedarwood palace. This would probably be the last time he would see Kesh, and he took his time.

Gently, slowly, he lowered to the city, and the walls and buildings came up to meet him. He stopped as he became level with the top-most floor of the cedar palace, where the royal apartments were. The shutters were closed, and the curtains did not move in the calm noon air.

Tarlos did not speak with his mouth, but thought loudly, *Ablis*.

The curtains drew back, pulled by an invisible hand. The shutters opened, slamming against the walls inside. A child cried. Tarlos swallowed.

The being who called himself king floated out of the window, sneering at the real Tarlos as he came closer. His hair floated in the air as if underwater, and in his eyes was a burning of annoyance and anger and hate.

"I cannot believe," said Ablis, "that you would be this stupid." His voice was no longer the voice of Tarlos. It was the sound of rocks grinding together in an avalanche, the sound of lightning cracking over a storming ocean, the sound of a tornado in an empty plain.

"I need to finish this," Tarlos told him. His voice did not shake or tremble. He was past the point of fear or worry.

"You're dead already," Ablis howled, "so I won't harm you. I will destroy you. Your spirit will not return to the dead country, nor will it suffer in the House of Dust. I will wipe every memory of you from your family and the world, blot your name from every record, and I will make it a sin to even utter your name, and soon there will come a day when Tarlos son of Lakaeus might as well have never existed in the first place. Then you will truly be dead."

Tarlos did not respond, and he turned to the wall behind the great garden in the courtyard and flew. Ablis followed behind him, shouting curses in languages Tarlos did not understand.

Tarlos led Ablis over the wall and to the small area where he had died. He landed there in a small crater of sand, and the sand erupted over him in a plume. His body was nowhere to be found. At least Ablis had the decency to keep it from being scavenged by birds and desert wolves. Nearby was the patch of cacti, and Tarlos ran to it.

"There is no use in running," Ablis said behind him, and Tarlos turned to meet the hellish voice. Ablis grabbed Tarlos by the throat and squeezed. Tarlos tried to cough or wheeze, but no air was allowed to escape. "Tell me, before I destroy all memory of you," said the god, as his face rippled and his eyes blazed. "What did you hope to gain by coming back?" He loosened his grip just enough to allow Tarlos to answer.

Tarlos took a swallow of air and coughed. "Needed...to...fix...what I...did," he panted.

Ablis smiled, and his teeth were sharp. "I am eternal. You cannot kill me."

"Maybe not," Tarlos said. He held up his hand, and wrapped around his fingers was the necklace, and the tooth dangled in front of Ablis's face. "But I can get rid of you." Then in his mind, he thought as loud as he could.

*OLD ONE!*

Something pulled behind his stomach, and Ablis's eyes widened in horror. The god tried to pry his grip from Tarlos, but an unseen force kept them glued together. There was that too-familiar slurp sound, and the two were pulled upward and inward through the dimensions. The physical universe turned inside out and back again, folding in on itself and unfolding into the next dimension,

over and over, and all the while Ablis screamed. Tarlos brought both hands to the hand on his throat and pulled. The fingers came loose, and he and Ablis were separated.

"NO!" Ablis cried.

Tarlos pushed at the Discarded One, and Ablis drifted away into an unknown dimension. He cried out at himself and to the other gods, to his parents Shar and Moresh, but they were far beyond that now, and no god heard his pleas. As the multiverse became a series of small marbles around them, Ablis floated away between them, and the multiverse became one again. Ablis was gone—a being lost in the void of voids, the space between spaces, the collective of universes, the tide and current of the Continuum.

Orange.

The smell of burnt almonds.

Hello again

"It's done," Tarlos said. "I did what I meant to do. Ablis can no longer harm my world or my family or my kingdom."

Is that what you wanted

"If I hadn't left in the first place to fulfill a selfish desire, none of this would have happened. I'm satisfied."

Good

Now what

If Tarlos had a face, he would have knit his brow in confusion. "I'm dead, aren't I? Aren't you going to send me back to the dead country?"

If that is what you wish

But you have also earned your immortality

Will you not take that

"I..." Tarlos searched for the right words to explain his change in perspective. But surely this god of gods understood. Knowing the thoughts of Tarlos's heart and mind would be effortless.

So Tarlos said instead, "Kesh needs a king. Katla needs a husband. Gilmesh needs a father. Send me back to Kesh. Let me live the life I should have been living all along, and when the time comes I will embrace death." Tarlos smiled to himself, although he had no mouth. "Life is beautiful and fleeting, and it is beautiful because it is fleeting."

It is your choice whether or not to wear the tooth

Remember the responsibility that comes with it

Keep it safe

"Tarlos!"

He felt a few light slaps on his cheek, and he opened his eyes. He lay on the sand, where he had died, staring up into the blue cloudless sky.

"Oh, thank the gods, he's okay!"

A series of gasps sounded all around him, and Tarlos lifted his chin to his chest. There was a group of people surrounding him, including half a dozen guards, several slaves, and Katla holding Gilmesh. Lugal stood over him, his face inches from Tarlos's.

"That was some hit you took," Lugal said. "Try to sit up."

He helped Tarlos to sit on his backside, and he gave Tarlos a bag of water to drink.

"What happened?" Tarlos asked, then took a drink. It was delicious.



"We saw you fight with Ablis," Lugal said. "We thought he was going to gut you with that spear, and there was nothing we could do about it." He wiped his sweaty forehead and laughed. "But I guess he changed his mind and left. We ran out to get you as soon as he was gone. You've been out for a few minutes."

Tarlos felt at his belly where the spear had gone through before he died, and felt nothing. He was clean and rested.

"How long have I been gone?" he asked Lugal.

"What do you mean? You mean the three years you disappeared?"

"No, just now, I..." *I died. No... The Old One must have taken me back to that day.* "Never mind."

"Can you stand?"

Tarlos nodded. Lugal helped him to his feet, and Tarlos took another drink of water.

The group parted, and Katla stood there with her young son in her white arms, and Tarlos stared at her. After a few silent moments, Tarlos approached her and looked at Gilmesh. He was sucking on his fingers.

"I hope," Tarlos told Katla, "that in time you'll be able to forgive me for leaving you."

A single tear fell down Katla's cheek, and she smiled at Tarlos. She handed Gilmesh to him, and he held him awkwardly at first. Gilmesh wiggled uncomfortably and wiped his wet hand on Tarlos's face before finding a comfortable position, and then he laid his head on Tarlos's chest. Tarlos felt a lump in his throat as he held his son for the first time, and he looked up to see everyone looking at the two of them with approval and happiness.

"Welcome home," said Katla.

Tarlos grinned at his wife, his queen, and looked to the east. His family was out there somewhere, waiting for him with love in their hearts. Holding Gilmesh now, with Katla smiling on, he realized that he had never fully known how much a person could love another. He wiped a teary eye.

“I hate to ruin the moment,” he said to his friends, “but my father never had a proper funeral. I think it’s due time we gave him one.”

Somewhere in the east, a light breeze blew over the desert and wrapped itself around Tarlos as if in a hug, and then dissipated just as softly as it had come. Tarlos looked forward to the day when he would be with his family again, when he would make that last journey beneath the mountain that stood at the end of the lone and level sands.

<<<<>>>>