      Hey, hi. Now that you've opened this book, read it. Read it to the very end and trust me, you'll thank God that you did, because as you're reading it, your destiny is being changed. The world that you live and believe in is not the whole truth. In this world, knowledge is power. Literally. And what I'm about to tell you is the ultimate knowledge. You'll see.

     How inappropriate of me, I'm Aman. Aman Shah. If I could stick my hand out of this book to shake yours, I would. Then again I probably can, but it would freak you out. I'm an alchemist.

     I live at an apartment in Kalyan, near Mumbai in India, at least I used to live there. I still remember the fateful day, the day when I first saw a dragon. Hmph, 'fateful'. Poor choice of words.

     Me and my friends were coming back from school. It was a normal day and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The evening traffic was, as usual, zooming by screaming their horns out, the almost torturing life-giver, the sun scorching all our skin. Normal. There were five of us, Saurabh, Ashish, Supriya, Sakhi and me. Saurabh, Ashish and Supriya joined the group only last year, but Sakhi and I knew each other since first grade. She was my best friend, but as strange as it sounds, I didn't know much about her. Well, I pretty much knew about her life, she lived with her aunt Simran, who was never there for her, and my parents pretty much raised her. But she wasn't my sister... well, my point is that she never talked about herself. Always cloaked her emotions in humour.

     Just then, a shadow shot through the ground. I looked up just in time to notice a... *something*fly by, too fast to be seen clearly. I noticed Sakhi's shoulders tense, perhaps she had seen it too.

"What was that!?" I asked.

"What was *what?*", replied Ashish.

"I have to go...", Sakhi said, and took off. She ran towards the thing.

"What's wrong with *her*?", asked Saurabh.

"No idea, man", I replied.

     No one else noticed it, but I had sensed a tension in her posture. Something was wrong. So as soon as I got back home, I called her. No one picked up. My parents weren't home, so I thought of doing some homework to divert my mind. Just then, a faint glimmer in the window caught my attention. I went to the window to check it out, but was met by a blinding glitter of the summer sun reflected by a giant... *something*in the society compound. The second "something" in less than fifteen minutes. As I recovered from the glare, I looked down only to be greeted by an empty compound. Weird. I decided to go down and check it out.

     I went there, but the compound indeed *was* empty. Well, except for some random strangers scattered here and there. No sign of anything out of the ordinary. Suddenly, something swooped down the sky and plucked me off the ground. I was terrified, screaming all the way.

*"Oh,* *please",*said a voice in my head. *"I had expected you to be a little more mature"*

     I wish I could say that I said something brave like "who are you?" Or "let me go!", but unfortunately, my reaction was something like " huh? What? Who? Ahhhh!"

"*Do you want to die?"*The voice said. All this time, I didn't have the nerve to look above to see who was talking.

"NO!", I replied.

*"Well then, think 'FLOAT'"* the thing suddenly dropped me. As the ground came nearer, all that I could think (except screaming) was  
"Why is this happening to me? "

     Suddenly, time seemed to slow down, which seemed normal at the time because I had read about this happening in a life or death situation.

"*You can do this. Believe in yourself",*the voice said.

     As I fell with my back to the ground, I could see the shadow of the thing that had thrown me, it had huge wings and shiny... *something* on its skin.

     As my thoughts became clearer, I understood what the thing wanted me to do. *'Float',* I thought. Obviously, nothing happened. I realised how stupid it was. I spun in mid air, and saw the ground comming towards me. Time became normal and I got jolted back to reality. "AHHHHH!", I screamed. Just about an inch from the ground, the thing swooped in and caught me.   
"*You are going to be a lot of work*", it said with a hint of disappointment. It flew towards an alley between my house and the next and put me down against the wall.

     As it landed on the concrete floor, I saw how majestic the creature was. About seven feet high and twice as long, it had beautiful silver scales that shined brightly in the dimmed evening sun, with dark black and deep eyes that could stare straight through you.

     I tried to find a way to escape, but there was none. I picked up a stone, which was quite hopeless, but it was the only thing I had at the time.

"*Calm down, mortal. I have no intention of harming you."*

*"*What do you want?", I asked, finally finding my nerve.

"*I know that you are not going to believe me if I tell you, so I will show you. Climb on."*

     She (its voice was gentle and calm, so I assumed that it was a *she)* bowed slightly, an unmistakable gesture that she wanted me to ride her.

"No way! ", I said. "There is no way you can get me up there again."

"*There is nowhere else you* can *go",*she said. She had a point.

     Unwillingly, I climbed on her back, and no matter how uncomfortable the pointy scales looked, they were inclined at just the right angle to make her back comfy, but they still looked quite immune to any pointed weapon. She extended her wings, which were at least 10 feet long each, and she had to curl herself with the wings pointed along the alley to fit there. She took off quite softly, and kept on adjusting her flight pattern to make me more comfortable. That didn't make me any less terrified. Then I happened to notice something. She was flying really low, but no one seemed to pay any attention, like they were used to seeing a 14 feet long silver flying dragon. She took me to an open field just outside the city.

     What I saw there blew my mind, and considering what I had been through that day, it would've taken a lot to do that. There was another dragon, almost as big as the one I was riding, but it was completely black, and had no scales, kind of like the shadow of an eel with wings. It was continuously breathing fire on something, or *someone* near the road that curled around the field. What was stranger that the road was full of traffic and people, but no one seemed to be bothered by a dragon barbecuing a guy on the side of the road. They only gave the dragon a second glance when the fire seemed to come closer to the road. Whenever that happened, the dragon's target, whoever it was, jumped away from the road, trying to save the people. As it jumped, I could make out a vague, short figure with dark, flowing hair. So it was a girl.

"Who is she?", I asked to the silver dragon I was riding.

     Silver flew away from Shadow and its target, towards the roof of my apartment. As she landed, I slid down from her back. As I got down, my heart rate increased again. I realised that Silver's scales were more than comfortable, they were magical, soothing my nerves as she flew. I realised that I was still holding the stone I had picked up in the alley. I dropped it, hoping the dragon wouldn't notice. I didn't want to make her angry, maybe because she had talons as big as daggers, but most of all because I wanted to impress her. I didn't know why, but I somehow found her presence intimidating, like she knew a lot more about the world than I did (which she probably did).

*"So, I guess that you would have some questions for me",* she said,*"you deserve answers."*

*"How rude of me!",*the dragon said. It seemed strange, the way she used to speak into my mind without actually moving her lips (or whatever dragons have instead of lips). *"I am Moonscales. And you must be... "*

"Aman", I heard myself saying. I didn't want to reveal my name to her, but I couldn't resist.

*"Well, Aman, do you know who you really are?"*

"I'm Aman shah, 17 years old, and in 12th grade. I don't have much friends, and most of the friends I have are the school's outcasts, except Sakhi, who is good in almost all sports and gets better grades then I could ever get, but for some untold reason, sticks with us...", I found myself spilling out my personality report and life records in front of her. I shouldn't have, but her eyes sort of hypnotised me, like she was pulling it all out of my mouth.

"*That's what your body is. Your soul is something a lot more. Don't you ever get a feeling that you are destined for more than this? Don't you ever feel like you can do things that others can't? That you can achieve more than them? That you are above them?"*

"Uh, no"

*"Hmm, well, you are definately a first"*

"Wait, you are treating me like I'm some sort of special, superhero-type person they show in movies, *what am I?"*

*"Aman, you are an Alchemist."*She waited for my reaction. I was thinking about what to say, I didn't even know what to think. I mean, how can I be an ancient mad scientist trying to make gold from lead, when I can't even titrate a simple solution in the chemistry lab?

"*Alchemists are not what you think they are, Aman",*she said, as if reading my mind. "*Let me tell you a story..."*

*"A long time ago, before the world was made as it is now, the Gods first decided to bring life to earth. The very first beings that came into existence were the dragons, followed by the humans. These humans had no limitations on their souls, they had the same powers as the Gods, they could do everything the Gods could and some things that even they* *couldn't, they could change destinies. The Gods used to decide a destiny for each being, except the humans. These humans could, hence, also affect the destinies of others. For almost a million years, dragons and humans coexisted peacefully. Then, suddenly, something unexpected happened. A human killed a dragon."*

"Why?", I asked.

*"He had no good reason, maybe he didn't like the dragon, who knows? All that we know is that when that happened, the dragons were outraged, and that changed their destiny and made some of them evil out of envy. The Gods cursed the human's soul, imposed some limitations on it, gave it a destiny. He became the first dragon slayer, someone who is destined to obey the Gods and slay any dragon causing trouble on earth. The rest of the humans came to be called as alchemists, some of whom forgot their powers in time, and were then given destinies to make them the humans we see today. The dragon slayers still keep the dragons at bay, but there hasn't been an alchemist soul for ages."*

*"*But you said that I am an alchemist. Why me? I mean, what has this story got to do with me?"

*"Not long after the first dragon was slayed, the dragon king, the dragon that was given charge of the dragons by the Gods, declared war on the humans. In those times, the humans were a lot more powerful than the dragons, hence all the dragons protested. Enraged by this, the dragon king layed waste to the entire dragon community. Some of the dragons fled and asked the alchemists for help, but they denied, saying that they preferred to be neutral. When all hope seemed to be lost, the dragon slayer, the one that had started all of this said that he wanted a chance to make things right. With an army of dragons by his side, he attacked the dragon king and slayed him. Pleased by this, the Gods decided to bless him, saying that whenever he or his kind would slay a dragon, they would inherit its strengths, and hence the first dragon slayer became the dragon king."*

"You still haven't answered my question, what has this got to do with me?"

*"About fifteen* *years ago, the original dragon king's soul escaped the Gods and came back to life, and the few dragons that remain faithful to him have sided with him, looking for revenge. A soul has been chosen by the Gods to be the one to slay him, but the problem is that after the dragon king is slayed, the slayer will have the ability to rule, or destroy the world."*

"And what has this got to do with me?", I repeated, and as soon as I said it, I felt sorry to be so impolite. I could feel the dragon's magic coursing through my nerves, steadying my heart rate and making me feel glad, or maybe honoured by her presence.

*"You see, all souls are made in pairs. I was made as the dragon King's pair, you could call me his counterpart. Paired souls influence each other, and can change their choices. You are meant to be the slayer's pair, and that's why the Gods took off all limitations from your soul, let you make your own destiny. They made you an alchemist."*

"It's all a little hard to digest, if I'm meant to be the slayer's pair, then why haven't I met him yet? When will I meet him?", I asked.

"*You have already met*her.*She is your best friend."*

"Sakhi?!", as soon as she mentioned Sakhi, I got pushed a little towards reality, and realised that I shouldn't blindly trust a dragon.

"So you're telling me that my best friend is going to turn evil, and I will have to stop her? How do I know that *you're*not the one that's evil?"

*"You're just gonna have to trust me",*I could feel the magic being pushed harder into my brain, simulating emotions of trust and respect, but I wasn't going to be fooled again.

*"Trust you?* You have been trying to manipulate my mind since we first met! How do you expect me to trust you?"

*"Hmm, you are much stronger than I thought. I apologise for trying to do so, but I thought that it would be better if you listened to what I said while in a trance, in case you overreacted."*

"You just told me that dragons exist, my best friend is a dragon slayer, and I'm an alchemist. Why would I overreact to that? Look, moonlight, whoever you are, my parents are going to be back home any second. I don't have any more time for your lies. It's getting late, I need to sleep."

"*Your parents aren't comming, Aman. They have been kidnapped by the dragon king."*

*"*WHAT?!", it snapped me right out of the trance. "This is too much. I...I don't trust you, I..."

*"It's Okay, Aman. You just need some time to think. You were right, it's getting late. Get some sleep. I'll protect you tonight."* She flew away.

"Wait!", I wanted to talk to her. I wanted answers. Why would the dragon king take my parents? The answer was obvious, he wanted *me.* He was destined to die by Sakhi's hands, and I was the one who could change that. All of this seemed to blow my mind. I went back to the apartment, and lied down on the bed, hoping that my parents would return. My father was a businessman, used to trade, which caused him to come home late sometimes, but my mother was only a school teacher. There was no reason for her to be late. Maybe she was stuck in traffic. I waited for them for about an hour, until my sleepiness overpowered my mixed emotions of fear, anger and confusion. When I finally went to sleep, I had nightmares.

     In my dream, I was in an abandoned warehouse, completely dark, except flashes of red light coming from a corner behind a wall, like someone practicing on a flamethrower. Sounds of a battle echoed throughout the warehouse, making it sound like I was surrounded by an army, except that the sound was only of two people. I went towards the light, only to find Sakhi there. She had her foot on a dragon's neck, and had the tip of her sword on its chin. The sword itself was very strange, it was made of some kind of bronze-gold alloy, with intricate designs on its handle. The blade was sharp on the side that kept the dragon at bay, and the other side of the blade had teeth. One side used for slicing and the other for ripping apart. The teeth side was smeared in blood.

     She noticed me, and before I could say anything, she said, "I'm sorry, it's the only way." Then the dragon said in my head, *"you can save your parents. All you have to do is stop her."*  
Suddenly, on the far side of the room, lights flickered on. My parents were tied to a pole. They were unconscious and beaten half to death. I could tell that they were poisoned. I can't explain how, but I could feel the poison coursing through their veins. Sakhi lifted her sword to kill the dragon. If the dragon dies, there would be no way to save my parents. "NO!", I tried to stop her, but it was too late. As the sword hit the dragon's neck, I woke up with a start.

     Moonscales didn't come personally to meet me the next day, but I could feel her presence in my mind, like she was close by but didn't want to face me yet. I thought about calling the police to find my parents, but what would I tell them? "Hey, officer! My parents are missing, probably kidnapped by a dragon, but another dragon told me that, so I can't be sure. I think I'm an alchemist but I'm more probably just losing my mind. "

     Instead, I decided to continue my routine and go to school. As I approached the spot where I was supposed to meet my friends, I saw Sakhi there, standing alone, waiting for everyone else. Her thick black hair flowing in the wind, she looked towards the sky with the dreamy look she always held, her stormy blue eyes staring at the clouds like thinking about a million things at the same time. She was wearing a red top and blue jeans, red being her favourite colour. She was fiddling with her necklace, which was made of fake sabre toothed tiger's teeth, although considering last night's incidents, I doubted they were fake. As I have mentioned before, I have known her since first grade, her parents had died in a car accident when she was six years old, and my parents had paid for her education ever since. My mother even wanted to adopt her, but her aunt who had her custody would not allow that. I was glad that we didn't adopt her, as then she would be my sister. Did I mention that I had a crush on her? Anyways, she lived in her aunt Simran's house, but her aunt was usually away for business, though everyone knew about Simran's boyfriends all over Maharashtra. No one mentioned that in front of Sakhi, of course, but that explained why she didn't talk much. The trauma must obviously be too much for her, and I was the only one she would open up to sometimes, but now I thought that she was hiding a lot more than her sorrows.

     As I came closer, I saw the band aid on her arm. My mind put the pieces together, remembering the girl who fought the shadow-eel dragon. So it was her. She noticed me and waived, and I froze in my tracks.

     Should I talk to her about last night's events? If it wasn't true, then she would laugh at me saying that it must be a dream. Even if it *was* true, how was I supposed to tell her that I was supposed to stop her from whatever she wanted? I couldn't risk our friendship to be broken for that. And then the question was, did I really *want t*o stop her? If the dragon king had really kidnapped my parents, I wanted revenge. And anyways, there was no way to be sure that Moonscales could be trusted, but if what she said about Sakhi was true, then Sakhi could tell me more about the dragon king, and would even help me to find my parents. But I couldn't tell her about the alchemy thing, not yet. But maybe I could talk about my parents.

*"I know that you don't trust me, Aman",*Moonscales said in my head, " Go and talk to her. Clear your doubts. She knows about alchemists and dragons so you can mention that, but be careful while mentioning me. She doesn't trust dragons much"

*"I can see why she doesn't",*I replied in my mind. I figured that if she was linked to my mind then maybe I could even talk to her.  
"*You plucked me off the ground when we first met."*

     I slowly went towards her, trying to form the words on the way. She smiled at me, probably wondering why I took so long to respond.

"Hi!", she said.

"Hey", I replied."what happened to your arm?"

"Skin got pinched in the door", she said, "nothing major."

"Was the door 14 feet long, had large wings and talons?", I asked.

That took her off guard.

"I... I don't..."

"You know exactly what I mean. I saw you on the field yesterday."

     She sighed, then said, "I hoped that I never had to do this with you.*What you saw yesterday was only a dream, Aman. When I snap my fingers, you are not going to remember any of it."*I realised that she was doing the *trance*thing I had experienced yesterday, only that this particular magic wasn't meant to calm me, but to hypnotise me into forgetting everything.

"Yeah, that doesn't work on me", I said. She stared wide eyed, then said, "follow me." She started walking.

"Where are we going? ", I asked.

"Where we always do".

     Many times, we used to flunk school and go to a special place near the river. Sometimes we also went to other places like some random coffee shop, but usually there. No, I wasn't dating her (although I wanted to, but never had the guts to ask) and usually we went there along with all our friends. But this time, we were alone, thankfully, none of our friends had come yet, but then again if they had, Sakhi would handle them with the *trance.*

     We reached the spot sometime later. The wind, that usually came with the feeling of freedom and a need to take a break from the daily torture at school, now held a palpable tension. I could feel the soft grass under my bare feet (we liked walking barefooted on the grass, so as we approached, we almost instinctively took off our boots), and I wished that I could just lie there for a while, forget all my troubles. But I couldn't do that. I had to save my parents.

   "Tell me everything", Sakhi said. I could not recognise the look on her face. I had expected her to be confused, or maybe angry, but she seemed strangely calm, like she was used to such things. She must have seen a lot of weird things in her adventures as a dragon slayer, but I wasn't used to it. I told her everything from the start, except that I was meant to stop her. She didn't know anything about alchemists except that they used to live many years ago. When I told her that the dragon talked to me, she wouldn't believe me. She wanted proof.

     Unwillingly, I called Moonscales. As she landed, Sakhi was startled, and hastily tried to pull something invisible. At first, it didn't work. When she tried again, a sword materialised from thin air. It was the same one I had seen in my dreams, the one with the double blade. As I now had a closer look, I could see that the designs on the hilt were that of a warrior being attacked by a giant dragon, and then slaying him. If I wouldn't have been preoccupied by the sword, I would have noticed that Sakhi was hovering a few inches above the ground. When I finally noticed, I said," You can fly?!"

     But she was too busy in staring the dragon than to answer me. I realised that she was about to kill the only hope I had in understanding whatever that was happening to me.

"STOP! WAIT!", I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen.

"Dragons can't be trusted, Aman! They are vicious and evil!"

"She is the only hope that I have in finding my parents, Sakhi! "

"I will help you find your parents, but you should *never*trust a dragon!"

"What is it that you have against dragons?", I asked. It was a stupid question. Obviously, who would trust a 14 foot long serpent with wings?

"Aman", she replied, "my parents didn't die in an accident. They were killed, by the dragon king."

I was shocked. "*Is this true?"* ,I asked Moonscales in my mind.

"*Yes, but I told you, I*don't *work for the dragon king. I am against him. Tell her that."*It appeared that Sakhi couldn't hear her like I could. So I told her.

     "You are all the same to me", she said, and then suddenly flew towards her, sword pointing outwards. She was moving faster than a bullet, and the time-slow down thing that had happened to me before happened again. I reacted instinctively, and jumped in between them, and that too, faster than Sakhi. I waived my hand, and Sakhi flipped in mid air, like she had hit an invisible wall. She fell about 20 meters away. As my blood cleared of adrenaline, I began to realise what I had just done. *I killed her*?!, I thought.

*"No, she's merely unconscious",*Moonscales replied, suddenly the roar of a wild beast, probably a dragon, broke the silence. "*Dragon King's scouts are searching the city. It's not safe for us anymore. We must get out of the city as fast as we can. Pick her up and climb on."*

     I went towards Sakhi. Her forehead was cut, so she probably hit a sharp rock. It didn't look too serious, but I couldn't have been sure . I had to take her to a safe place as soon as I could. I picked her up in my arms, and took her to Moonscales. Making sure that she was seated comfortably, I climbed on behind her.

"Where are we going again?", I asked.

*"Where* *you can start learning*", she replied.

     We flew east for about two hours, until we reached the Sahyadri mountain range, after which we followed the range to the north. We flew till sometime in the evening, when Moonscales suggested that we stop for a minute to eat.

     We landed on a strip of flat land covered by forests, which seemed strange, considering the endless continuous hills we had seen on the way. Moonscales hovered towards a thick growth of trees, probably to hide us from the locals. Although as I had noticed before, the people could not have seen her due to her magic, but no harm in being careful. And now that someone without a destiny was riding her, she would obviously be careful, none of us could be certain what would happen next.

     After resting Sakhi's head on my lap, I told Moonscales in my head, " *It's been almost 5 hours, she's still unconscious*." I was really worried.

"*That's because she wasn't knocked out by the wound on her forehead, but by your will to stop her. You can bring her back, if you concentrate. "*

*"*I did that?! *Wait, and you*knew*that I could bring her back? Why didn't you tell me? "*

*"I wasn't sure if it was magical or just a normal wound. I decided to wait...",*the tone of her voice suggested that she had done it on purpose, maybe Sakhi wasn't the only one who hated dragons. Apparently, *obviously,*the dragons hated dragon slayers.

     I focused on the wound on her head, and imagined her as she was when she was better, and the colour started returning to her face. Suddenly, she jolted up, gasping for air. She summoned her sword, which I had forgotten to pick up from the river but had still somehow appeared here hundreads of kilometres away.

"You!", she said, pointing the sword towards Moonscales. "You knocked me unconscious, but why didn't you kill me?"

"Sakhi, relax. It wasn't her", I said, " it was me. I didn't mean to hurt you, but I just reacted. I'm sorry."

     Her arms relaxed a little, as she tried to put the pieces together. Then she lowered her sword.

     "I still don't trust you", she said, "But it appears that you were saying the truth about him being an alchemist. And you had a chance to kill me, but you didn't, so I can presume that you are on our side. I hope, for your sake, that I'm not wrong"

     Suddenly, she held her head and started to collapse. I caught her just before she hit the ground.

"*She needs rest",* Moonscales said, and I laid her with her back against a tree.

     After we had eaten the fruits Moonscales had plucked from the trees using her tail, Sakhi kept her head on my shoulder and started snoring. Apparently, she was fighting the Shadow-eel for almost the entire night, and was tired enough to sleep on broken glass.

     Seeing this, Moonscales laughed (which seemed weird, as her mouth didn't actually move, but she laughed in my head), and said, "s*o, I guess we are staying here for a while. Until then, lets practice some more. The most basic strength of an alchemist is reading destinies. As you can influence a destiny, it usually changes as soon as you read it, but a destiny can still tell you a lot of things about a soul. Try reading mine."*

     As I focused on her, I could feel like my mind was digging deep into her body, towards her soul. As I reached her soul, I could see how it was made, the Gods' thoughts and emotions when they wrote her destiny. But I still had trouble reading it. I told her this.

*"What you can feel from my soul, is what I like to call*cause.*I don't exactly know how alchemy works, but my power is logic. And common sense, along with a million years of free time has given me a basic idea of destiny. Everything that happens, happens because something else has happened before it, something that caused it to happen. Physics predicts that the very first cause was the big bang, ant it lead to a series of events like making of matter, planets, and eventually life. It appears that in their immortal lifetime, the Gods have understood the relationship between cause and effect. Alchemists can predict the future and read destinies by doing the same. You can, too, if you focus."*

*"Wait, is alchemy magic or science? "*

*"Nothing defies the rules of science ", she replied. "When you fly, when*Sakhi *flies, with a speed faster than that of a bullet, you follow the laws of motion",*she said 'Sakhi' like it was the most disgusting word in the world. "*You only use the energy your soul gathers from your environment, in the form of heat, light, et cetera."*she sounded like my physics teacher giving me a lecture. "So, students, that is how an alchemist makes his gold. Simple elemental physics. Any questions? "

*"Try again. Read my destiny".*

     I focused on her. This time, I tried to imagine what would happen *after* the vision I had got, of the Gods writing a destiny. Suddenly, I could see her entire life. She was born at the same time as the dragon king, in fact, she was his sister. Her powers were exactly the opposite of him, so was her nature. His was to use his strength to always get what he wanted, hers was to use her intelligence to know when and what to sacrifice for the good of everyone. *She* was the one who deserved to be the dragon king, and every dragon knew that, but she gave up her position for her brother. She still thought about the other dragons, as even though her brother was actually king, she was the one who took care of the dragons' affairs. When her destiny was first changed, she had to face a choice- her brother, or all the other dragons in the community. She chose her people,but had to face the consequences. When her brother died, the dragon slayer took charge of the community, and she, out of the pain of the loss of her brother, fled into the woods. When alchemists started losing their powers, using her understanding of the universe, she decided to help them remember.

     When she heard of the revival of her brother, she was overjoyed, but her joy didn't last long, because soon she heard that he was going to try to rule the world again, and a dragon slayer would slay him. She tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen. He insisted that his destiny could be changed, and that broke her. She knew that he had to be stopped, so she pulled herself together and started searching for me, the one she knew could mean the salvation, or slavery of the world.

     My mind was sort of *inside* her, so I could fell all her thoughts and emotions, and she could feel mine. When I linked my mind to hers, I felt vulnerable. Considering that alchemists had powers equal to Gods, I thought that I could block my thoughts while reading others' , but it needed practice. Even before Moonscales  suggested me to read Sakhi, I knew from her thoughts that she wanted me to, and she knew from mine that I couldn't. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to hide my thoughts from her, I was afraid that if Sakhi found out that I was meant to stop her, even if I didn't want to, she would be mad at me. She could be hurt, and I would lose any chance that I had of winning her heart. Thankfully, Moonscales understood, and didn't force me.

     About half an hour later, Moonscales told me to wake Sakhi up. *"We can't stay for long",* she said. "*We have to keep moving. "*

     After non-stop flying for 3 more hours, Moonscales finally announced, "*we're here".*She was hovering over a mountain not unlike the countless ones we had just passed. She flew towards a cave that was easily large enough for a dragon with a wingspan twice as that of hers. She made about a million confusing turns in the labyrinth of caves, after which the cave snaked into a central cavern twice as large as the previous one. She set us down in front of a huge entrance that was covered with leather that looked suspiciously like dragon skin.

"*I can't go through this door. When you get in, lay low and meet me at shop number 13 A.",*Moonscales said.

"Wait", I asked loudly so even Sakhi could hear. It seemed rude to talk in my mind when she couldn't listen.  
"How are you going to get in?"

*"There are other ways inside, secret passages. I don't trust her enough to show her",* saying so, she turned and flew away.

"What did she say?", Sakhi asked.

"We have to get inside and find shop number 13 A", I replied,  "And lay low".

     We stared, bewildered towards the vast expanse of dusty streets zig-zagging through shops made of bamboo sticks and cloth, kind of like the ones shown in *Arabian Nights.*But more dumbfounding then the shops were the shopkeepers. All kinds of beings that we had ever heared in any fairy tale that ever existed, including fairies, magicians, vampires, werewolves and whatnot. And the things they sold included strange vials with stranger liquids, some shops had displays that showed bright, glittering gold and bronze weapons, including swords like, maybe even better than Sakhi's, spears, arrows, axes and stranger ones like staffs, and even guns and missile launchers. As we walked through ther streets searching for shop 13 A, we saw a lot of shops with weird signs, like:

SORCERY CENTRE: ALL SORTS OF POTIONS AVAILABLE.

another one said,

BROOMS CENTRE OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY   
SALE 50 percent OFF ON ALL BROOMS WITHOUT FAIRY DUST BOOST

Also,

INSTITUTE OF MAGIC  
WELCOME, INITIATE NECROMANCERS!   
IMPORTANT NOTE: NO RAISING THE DEAD WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION FROM THE DIRECTORS

    The creatures buying the things were just as weird. Not only by looks, but even their behaviour was like a typical robber's market, with everyone looking like a wanted criminal. Us being the only human in there, everyone gave us suspicious looks, but kept their distance. Apparently they knew better than to meddle with the affairs of humans.

    After almost an hour of searching, we finally found shop 13 A. It was one of the only buildings in the market made of concrete, an was also bigger than the others.  
The sign said:  
ALCHEMIST'S ABODE!  
THE LAST ALCHEMIST LEFT IN THE WORLD!   
ALL KINDS OF MAGICAL AND NON-MAGICAL PRODUCTS AVAILABLE.  
There was a list of things below it that said:  
CELESTIAL WEAPONS-  
Swords, spears, knives, daggers, and all kinds of long ranged weapons  
POTIONS-  
Healing, poisons, curses, special potions.

fatal curses come with no guarantee

The list was really long.

     Moonscales was inside talking to someone in her mind. She didn't notice us. Neither did the person she was talking to. He had his back towards us.

"What are they talking?", Sakhi asked. I didn't know if I could eavesdrop into someone's mind, but I tried anyway.

"*...will not help you."*The guy said.

*"The fate of the world depends upon it."*Moonscales replied.

*"No it doesn't. It depends on your precious alchemist and his girlfriend. Not on me."*I flinched when he said *girlfriend.*

*"You are an alchemist too, Barebeara."*

*"I*was *an alchemist. And don't call me that. They call me Bear now. I will...",*the man jerked his head upwards. "*Someone's listening. "*

Moonscales saw me. "*Hello, Aman",*she said.

"What do you mean you *were* an alchemist?", I asked loudly for Sakhi to hear.

"Don't you think you must first apologise for eavesdropping? ", Bear said.

"We're sorry, we didn't mean to", Sakhi said, although she was the one who had suggested me to. Bear ignored her, but probably it was just for show, as if he *really*wanted to ignore her, then he would have talked in my mind.

"I'm not an alchemist now. I chose to have a destiny.", Bear said.

"Wait, you can do that? Why would you want to?", I asked. Even though I was a bit confused about the alchemy thing, I thought that it was sort of cool.

"You can, just like the first dragon slayer did, by killing a dragon. It gave me a destiny. I didn't get the dragon's powers, of course. I already had all of them. I can't *tell*you everything. Read my destiny".

     I did so, but his destiny felt... *different.*It wasn't elaborate like Moonscales', the part of his life before the market seemed more like memory than destiny, like it wasn't meant to happen but it just happened. A clear sign that he was an alchemist. He knew he was an alchemist as soon as he was born, and he was born about a million years ago. His parents were alchemists, then again was every human that wasn't a dragon slayer. His family lived in peace among other alchemists, away from the dragons and slayers. He grew up there, but soon started to lose his powers. Among the first humans, he was thrown out of the settlements at a very young age. Forced to live in the forests, he, unwillingly got involved in the fight between the dragons turned evil, and the slayers ordered by the Gods to stop them. He was on the slayers' side, helping them in any way he could, like providing them with food, intel on the whereabouts of dragons, et cetra.

     There, he found Moonscales. Seeing his troubles and that of the other humans, Moonscales decided to teach them, help them remember. In a way, this helped her tackle the depression from the loss of her brother. In a few years, Bear could remember everything again. But instead of going back to the alchemists, he decided to stay there in the forest, protecting the humans who cared for him, and still helping the dragon slayers.

     Once, a girl came searching the forest for him. She was a slayer, and wanted his help in killing a dragon who was terrorising a goblin horde near the hill range that would be the Sahyadris in the future. The goblins were willing to pay a huge fee, and she was willing to share. Of course, being an alchemist, he didn't need gold. when he showed her the gold that he had and told her he could make gold (which led to the rumour thad alchemists are sorcerers who make gold), she ofrered something else. Something that Bear had always wanted. The sence of certainty, of being sure of the future, feeling secure. She offered him a destiny.

     Moonscales was unaware of his want for a destiny, but adviced him not to trust her. Maybe that was because the first slayer had killed her brother, but Bear paid no heed to her. Bear fought the dragon, but before he could kill it, the slayer came there claiming the dragon. She wanted to be praised for killing the dragon herself, and it was her plan all along, to let him capture the dragon and then slay him (the dragon). Obviously, it was a stupid plan. Bear was an alchemist and much stronger than her. But that day, something broke in him. His trust was broken twice, once by the people he knew his entire life, and then by a slayer. He killed the slayer. He didn't mean to, maybe he did, that part in his memory was blurred, like he didn't want to remember it, or maybe he didn't know it himself. He killed her, and then the dragon. After that, I could feel his destiny. It said 'he lives in the goblin market'. Nothing else. No beginning, no end. It meant that if he lived in the market that was made by the same goblins that he had saved by killing the dragon, he wouldn't die (yup. Alchemists were like Gods, but they weren't immortal. They age like normal humans, and die). Gods gave him such a destiny to teach him a lesson. No alchemist should ever kill a dragon. That is just *wrong.*

     But he took this curse like a boon. Living here forever was a small price to pay for immortality. He asked the goblins for a shop in this place in return for killing the dragon, and has lived here ever since.

     "How was it?", he asked. Being an alchemist, he could tell that I had finished reading. I looked at Sakhi. She was brutally calm, almost smiling. One thing was clear, even *she*didn't know about the goblin market, or even about the existence of all these creatures. She could be used to slaying deadly fearsome dragons, but there was no way she could be used to this. This was too much. She gave me a puzzled look, then raised her eyebrows, a clear sign that she wanted to know what happened. I thought that interrupting Bear and talking to a slayer in front of him, not a good idea. I suddenly had a feeling, a kind of intuition about my capabilities. I imagined linking into Sakhi's mind, still too afraid to see her destiny. I managed to link, and told her everything in my mind. I was shocked seeing all the confusion in her head. So the calm look was just a mask, in reality she was even more confused than I was. Before leaving her mind, I had a thought, of reading her mind and finding out her feelings about me. Bear twitched his eyebrows. Of course, he was in her mind too. He would want to know if this slayer was thinking any stupid plans. He probably found my thoughts about her amusing. I wouldn't read her mind with him watching. This was getting too personal.

"Excuse me!", someone was on the door. A witch, but her voice (being harsh and witch-ly) was too polite.

"Customer", Bear said," I have to attend her. Excuse me", he went to her.

"Ah, mister Bear", the witch said. "The bone powder you had given me was wonderful"

"Glad you loved my service", Bear answered. Both of them were being extremely polite, if I closed my eyes, then I could imagine the scene happening in a normal market.

"I am in need of your excellent services yet again. You see, the handle of my current broom is very rough, it hurts while trying to get a good grip. Could you suggest something that suits me?"

"Anything for your beautiful hands", he kissed her wrinkled, red hand full of warts. Sakhi acted like she was going to vomet. I almost laughed out loud, but decided against it. Still, Bear shot me a glance. Apparently, he could also feel unspoken laughs that were thought in minds he was linked to. He gave the witch a broom from a closet marked 'Rosewood Brooms'.

"This would do", he said. It was a normal looking broom with a red handle. He exchanged the broom from the witch for gold coins. Although he had no use of coins, he probably did business here to return the goblins' favour of letting him stay.

When the witch had left, Sakhi said," I see that you still do alchemy. I don't understand, I had thought that alchemists were souls without a destiny. If your soul has a destiny, then how are you an alchemist? "

"I'm not an alchemist ", he said facing me and ignoring her. "I am neither a human nor a slayer. My soul still has no limitations except that the Gods have me contained now. The Gods are cruel, Aman. They don't want unpredictability in their universe. They first made alchemists as a sort of experiment, and now they made you because they were forced to..." I was afraid that he would reveal the fact that I was meant to stop Sakhi, but he didn't. He was in both our heads, so he probably knew that he shouldn't. "But they will not let you free. After they've got what they want, they will find a way to stop you. Be careful in the future, and remember this".

"But the board outside says that you are the last alchemist", Sakhi said. Bear ignored her, so I repeated the question.   
"It's good for business", he said. "*Alchemist*sounds really catchy".

"*Enough talk. It's getting late. Lets all go to sleep. Tomorrow, we start your training",*Moonscales said. I directed her thoughts to Sakhi (yes, I could do that. Better than telling her everything Moonscales told me), and she agreed. Bear gave us rooms no bigger than my closet. Sakhi and I were in the same room with a double-decker bunk bed, and Moonscales slept somewhere on a ridge on the cavern walls. I had the dream again, but this time it was a bit different.

      I was in the same warehouse, my parents were tied under a flickering bulb in a corner, poisoned. I realised that this wasn't like my previous dream, this wasn't the future. This was happening *now.*Somehow, my conscience found a way to get to my parents in a dream. Or maybe it was just a dream, and I was going crazy. Suddenly, a tall figure, a dragon, emerged from a dark corner. His features weren't clear, but I could tell that he was the king. I could hear his voice loud and clear in my mind.

"*You can save them",*he said. "*Just bring the slayer to me, and I will let them go".*I tried to move, but I couldn't. It was a dream, I wasn't physically there. Sensing my helplessness, the dragon laughed in my head. His laughter started becoming slow and echoing in the back of my head.Suddenly, the dream changed.

     I was in a forest, and in a distance, I could see two dragons talking, in their mind, of course. I was on a small hill, and the dragons hadn't noticed me. One of the dragons was holding a... *something*covered in white cloth in its talons (although its talons weren't like hands and didn't have an opposable thumb, so it was more like its arm was on the thing). The dragon was almost as big as Moonscales, its colour was red, but not bright. More like the colour of blood. The other dragon was bigger, almost 16 feet long and 8 feet tall, it was black, but not like Shadow. It had shiney sleek-black scales, and stood elegantly, like he was some sort of prince. I tried to listen to their talk.

*"It will. I assure you",*the red dragon said.

*"It better. The lord has paid a huge price to get this."*

*"He had to lose his sister. So what? She would hardly affect his plan."*

*"She meant a lot to him. You wouldn't understand. Anyways, you didn't have any problem while getting this here?"*

*"Night stalker was sent to get this, but the slayer killed him. Thankfully, that was before Night could get this. I've myself brought this from the Himalayas. It*will*contain him."*

Suddenly, a loud voice boomed over everyone. I realised that it wasn't actually a sound, but we were hearing it in our minds.

"*You fools!",*the voice said. *"The alchemist is here. He has heard everything!"*

     An invisible force pushed me out of the dream. I woke up with a start. At first, I thought it was the middle of the night. Then I remembered where I was. It was always dark here. I checked my watch. It was 5 a.m.

"Good morning, sleepy head", it was Sakhi. She was already dressed and ready. She was wearing a strange, but sort of pretty red top lined on the folds with brown leather, and had small ornamental dragon scales on the shoulders. She had yesterday's jeans on.

"Bear has called us behind the shop in fifteen minutes".

"He talked to *you?*", I asked.

"Not exactly. He just came in and said it to no one in particular."

"And that doesn't bother you? I mean, he has been ignoring you since we first came. Doesn't that make you feel bad?"

"You have shown me his life. I know why he doesn't trust slayers. I understand."

I still found the fact that she was a slayer unbelievable. "So, how many dragons have you slayed till now?"

She sat down and sighed. She got the dreamy look back in her eyes, staring at the ceiling. "Forty six. But everyone of them worked for the king. The king kidnapped your parents, didn't he? Don't worry. We will avenge it."

I didn't react to that statement. Instead, I asked her another question. "So, forty six limitations have been removed from your soul. What things can you do?"

"Many things. Flying, speed, I can move through solid objects, but all of that is very tiring. I have to eat more. What about you? Your soul has no limitation, right? Supposedly, you are as powerful as the Gods".

"Only things I can do till now are communicating through my mind and resisting the *trance*. Nothing else." I didn't mention knocking people unconscious by waiving my hand. She didn't need to remember that.

"I'm sure that when you find out your true potential, we will slay the king easily and rescue your parents". That made me feel guilty. I hadn't helped her in her mission. I had actually risked it. She was meant to kill the king, but now her destiny had changed. She could lose now. She could even get killed. I had risked her life by being in her life. The thought made me feel so bad, I tried no not think of it. I remembered that I still hadn't read her destiny. Her destiny was the most important, since I was meant to influence it. I focused on her soul.

     Her parents were both slayers, but she didn't know that at first. They always protected her from the life of a slayer, but it wasn't meant to be like that. She was meant to kill the king, and he knew that. As soon as he found out about her, he sent a dragon to kill her. Her parents managed to save her, but got killed while killing the dragon. She knew that a dragon had killed her parents, but no one would believe her. Her friends called her a freak. She lived in her aunt's house, who was never home. She was ignored by everyone she knew, except my family. She got so used to being ignored, that she stopped getting bothered by it. She distanced herself from everyone she knew. Friends, family... no one mattered. She had to fight alone in this world. If she wanted revenge, she would have to be strong. No one would help her. Then she found me. Her emotions regarding me were mixed, care, affection, maybe love? Of course, these emotions emerged a lot later. At first, I seemed to be just like the others. Mean, cruel, not caring for her emotions, but as time proceeded, she saw that I was different. I cared for her, always tried to make her feel better. She knew that I had an important place in her life. She didn't know what, but she knew that it would be important. When she found out that I was an alchemist, it just confirmed her thoughts. She still couldn't be open with me, she didn't trust me. She...

As soon as I found out that she didn't trust me, I realised that I was actually breaking her trust by reading her thoughts. I shouldn't.

"Get dressed. Your training starts today."

"Okay. Are you gonna watch while I change?"

"I changed in front of you, didn't I?"

"I was asleep!"

"Ha ha! I know. I'm just kidding. Get dressed quick.", she left.

     After I got dressed in Bear's old worn out t-shirt and ripped jeans, I went behind the shop and joined Moonscales and Sakhi. Bear was in the shop, managing customers. Sakhi was busy practicing sword fighting in a corner. She flashed a smile when she saw me, but continued practicing.

*"How did you sleep?",* Moonscales asked.

*"I had a dream...",*I told her about my dream, and the dream I had yesterday.

*"That's strange",*she said, *"I have never heard of such an ability of an alchemist. No alchemist can do anything involuntarily, except during emotional outsurges. Perhaps the Gods wanted you to see this."*

*"But I can do everything the Gods can, right? So how is it that they can direct my conscience and I can't?"*

*"The fact that you are as strong as the Gods is just theoretical. The Gods will never willingly let anyone get stronger than them. As Barebeara said, you shouldn't trust the gods. They are immortal beings. They know much more about the universe. Don't meddle with them."*

*"One more thing, the dragon king is, you know,*normal, *right? I mean, dragons can't do the stuff alchemists can, so how can he pull me out of a dream?"*

*"In his first life, his soul had limitations. But when his soul escaped the Gods, obviously it had no limitations. How could it? The Gods didn't send it here. He wasn't supposed to live. That is why the Gods had to make Sakhi's soul. They couldn't kill the king themselves. "*I noticed that she used to call her brother ' the king '. I didn't think 'the king' was his name. I remembered the dragon in my dream saying that the king had lost his sister in exchange for the thing covered by the piece of cloth. If he was talking about Moonscales, why didn't I get that while reading her destiny? Was there another sister that even Moonscales didn't know of? Or maybe, she was hiding that part from me. It was possible. She knew magic. She could do it. But if I try, I could overpower her cloak and read her entire destiny. But should I do it? That would mean breaking her trust. Then again, she hadn't earned *my*trust. She lied about her destiny. At least she didn't show me the entire truth. I had to read it completely, if I had to be sure that I could trust her. I searched her mind, and finally I found it. A piece hidden and blocked from my reach. I tried to push in, and that got her attention. She jerked back in shock, but didn't try to stop me. She was linked to my mind, and could tell that I didn't trust her anymore. She knew that if she wanted to gain my trust, she had to show me everything. She let me in, and I saw it.

    She was in a forest at night, it was raining. It was the year 2001. I can't say how I knew that, probably memories  are stored in a mind with date tags. Suddenly, a dragon came in from the trees. It was the king, the same dragon I had seen in my dreams as well as in Moonscales' destiny before.

*"You are... alive!? How?"*, Moonscales asked.

"*I have learned many things about the universe in afterlife. I am not the same stubborn egoist soul anymore. I am wiser, more powerful. I know things you can never imagine, sister. I have come to ask something of you."*

Moonscales had heard rumours about her brother comming back, but actually *seeing* him in person, it was too difficult for her. Especially after seeing him die. *"What?", she asked.*

The king told her about a soul being chosen as a slayer meant to kill him, about an alchemist being born as the slayer's pair, and about his plan to rule the world again.

"*I have a plan, sister. I can capture and kill the alchemist. All I want is the kingdom that I deserve. It was my destiny, sister. I need you by my side. I need your help."*

*"I know that what happened to you shouldn't have happened, but it was an accident. It was no one's fault. The world has went beyond the age of dragons, brother. You can't rule it now."*

*"I CAN! And it was no accident. The Gods*meant *to do it. After they had made the dragons and alchemists, they realised that the world was too uncontrolled. They wanted a system without variables. Without alchemists and dragons. After the first slayer killed a dragon, the Gods saw an opportunity. They ordered the slayer to kill me, as after my death, the dragons' kingdom wouldn't survive for long. Unlike dragons, the slayer was mortal. His time on earth was limited. As he died, so did our community. It was all*their *plan to take everything from me. Now I want it all back."*

Something clicked in her mind. *"You said you can capture the alchemist. Did you... did you find the trap?"*

     The information flooded into my mind from hers. The trap was a device made by ancient alchemists, more like a cage. It imposed temporary limitations on its prisoner. Once inside, no soul can escape. It was the second most strong prison for souls since the afterlife, which was actually a place where the Gods kept used souls.

"*Not yet, but I will have it soon. My soldiers are searching for it."*

*"But a human village is over the place where it was hidden..."*

*"Its taken care of. We have burnt the village"*

*"You did*what*? Brother, you have to stop this madness. It's not worth it."*

*"It's not madness. You must understand, I'm only fighting for what's rightfully mine."*

*"The humans were innocent, brother."*

*"So what? Everyone's got to die someday. Look, sister, I need an answer. Are you with me or not."*

*"Brother, please."*

*"If you are not with me,  then don't call me brother."*

*"Brother please, don't make me choose."*

*"Everyone has to make the choice some day or the other. Like it or not, sister, there are going to be more who will have the courage and strength to protest the Gods' cruelty. Everyone will have to choose which side they are on."*

Saying so, he went away, leaving Moonscales just as she was the day he had first died, heartbroken. Still, parts of her memory weren't clear, they were too distorted by emotions. I didn't know the dragon king's name as it hurt her to remember it.  Nor did I know how he looked like. Ever try to remember the face of a loved one you have lost long ago? You can't. Me seeing all of this in her mind refreshed the painful memory of her brother. A tear formed in her eye, but she blinked it away.

     I tried to change the topic. *"So the king is going to use the trap to capture me?"*

*"Maybe, but it would be better to kill you, so I think the trap is for Sakhi. He will try to use her as bait."*

I was linked to her mind, so I could tell that she regretted saying this. Again, I had put Sakhi's life at risk just by being alive. Me and the king were equally powerful, so it would be difficult for him to kill me, but if he managed to capture Sakhi, he could get to me easily.

*"Actually, that might save her life, as the king will now only try to capture her and not kill her."*She was trying to make me feel better, but I felt worse. All of this wouldn't have happened if I wasn't an alchemist. Sakhi would've killed the king like she was destined to, and all of this would be over. Moonscales had told me that Sakhi would then try to conquer the world, but the only villon I could think of at the time was the king.

     Moonscales tried to change the topic. *"Lets start your training",*she said.

*"First, you must understand how alchemy works. Don't think that you are doing something magical or divine, because you are not. You fly, but you need more energy to fly higher. You can also decrease wind resistance to increase speed, but that, too, will make you feel tired.",*she said.

     I tried to remember my science lessons, my mind linked flying to rocket science and aeronautics. "*But what makes me get thrust? I don't have, like, a turbine or something."*

*"Don't think in terms of force, think in terms of energy. What keeps an electron in an orbit? Why doesn't it fall down? That's because it is stable at that energy level. Don't think that you are flying, think that you are climbing very small imaginary steps."*The confused look was clear on my face, so even if she wouldn't be linked to my mind, she could've told that I needed an example.

*"If you couldn't fly",*she said, *"can you reach to a height of, say, fifty feet?"*

*"Of course, not",*I replied.

"*But you*were *standing at a height of about fifty feet when we first met, on your apartment building's roof."*

*"But that's solid ground. That doesn't count as flying".*

*"How did you get on the roof?"*

*"You flew me there."*

*"Yeah, but how do you*usually *get on the roof?"*

*"Through the stairs"*

*"When you climb the stairs, you gain potential energy. You can directly use energy from your soul to counter gravitational potential, so you don't actually*fly, *but you fly. Get it?"*

I remembered some of my science lessons on gravitation, feeling glad that I had paid attention. What she said was maybe correct theoretically, but practically it still seemed impossible.

*"What about the reading destinies part?",*I asked.

"*As I have already explained, it's cause and effect. The Gods have kept track of and recorded everything that has happened in the universe since it came into existance. They send this information to you, and every piece falls in its place in your mind, but most of it is just the person's memory. For reasons unknown, the Gods don't trust any soul with information regarding another soul except its memory."*

*"So if the Gods send this information, the dragon king doesn't get it, right? I mean, the Gods are on our side, so why would they send him the memories? "*

Her thoughts wavered for a moment when I mentioned the king, but then she focused on my question.

*"It doesn't work that way. Souls are designed so that they get the information about whoever they want, except, of course, if limitations are imposed upon a soul. But as I said, the king's soul, just like yours, has no limitations. You can read destinies now, so you must practice flying."*

*"Are you sure? I have tried before, and failed."*

*"Now you know how it works, try it."*

     I tried to imagine floating. Nothing happened. I had tried that before, I needed to try something else now. I focused inside me, I could feel the energy flowing through me. Instead of letting it flow, I tried to force it out. I closed my eyes to concentrate, and when I opened them, I was hovering a few inches above the ground.

"G*ood. Keep practicing",*Moonscales said, and flew away to God knows where. I saw her fly to a dark corner of the cavern, which was probably one of the "other ways" she had mentioned in and out of the market.

As soon as Moonscales had left, Sakhi threw a sword towards me. It was a plain blade with a leather handle, steel, not bronze like Sakhi's. It fell near me, barely missing my feet. I picked it up.

*"What?",*I asked her in my mind, trying to get more practice of mind talk.

"*I don't know about alchemy, but being a slayer, as soon as you get your first power, I mean as soon as the first limitation is removed from your soul, handling weapons comes naturally to you. Since you have no limitations, you can probably do it too."*

*"Yeah, but then again slayers are*meant *to fight, whereas alchemists were, you know,*normal *at the time. Maybe the Gods send to your brain the skills of fighting as you kill dragons for them. Maybe It's not the same for me."*

"Only one way to know", she said loudly. Suddenly, there was a sonic boom. She flew towards me with the speed of a bullet. Not enough time to slow down time (how ironic, 'no time to slow time', and I probably wasn't slowing down time at all, only increasing my brain function), I instinctively raised my sword, and had expected my hands to cover my face and look pathetic, but instead they slashed the sword in a sort of blocking move, and that, too about ten times faster than Sakhi was, and deflected Sakhi's sword. *Now*time slowed down, and this time it was much slower than before. Sakhi was just a few inches in front of me, moving so slow that she was almost still.

     I knew that I should focus on getting out of the way, as I had only deflected her sword, she was still on a collision course with me. But I couldn't get myself to focus. She was even more beautiful in slo-mo. Her hair was floating slowly behind her, like waves of the sea in a painting. Ser face looked perfect, almost sculpted, and her eyes. She had the most beautiful blue eyes. But her eyes had an intense look, like someone clicked her picture just before she was about to hit someone (which she was), and that look was enhanced by the stormy electric shade of blue in her eyes, and her sabre-toothed necklace. Her top which was lined with leather made her look like a dragon rider instead of slayer. I spent about five minutes staring at her (which was a few milliseconds in normal time), too late, I realised that I should get out of the way. As soon as her hand touched my stomach, a sharp pain shot through my abdomen. I remembered how fast she was actually moving, and time became normal. She slammed into me, and we both fell.

     We spent the next few minutes laughing about what had happened. Thank God she didn't know that I *could've*avoided that, but she made me lose my concentration. She was just too pretty. I tried to take my mind off it, and think about defeating the king. I was only learning, whereas he had already gotten stronger than the Gods. Sakhi was the one who was supposed to kill him, and she was determined to, but I had my doubts. Her destiny was changed now, and she could die easily. She wasn't even meant to be here, she was meant to chase and kill some other adversary, some follower of the king. That being said, I didn't even know who or which dragons were on the king's side.

"You said that you had killed forty six dragons, right? How many have left? I mean, how many who have sided with the king?"

"Seven major ones, along with others. His general is called The Knight, others are Bloodshed, Misery, Pain-striker, Fury, Razor and Death strike".

"Charming names", I said.

"They are not actually their names, I think, that's what the humans used to call them. Look, my dad had given me this"

     She took off her necklace and cluched it in her hand. She suddenly held a dreamy look, and tears formed in her eyes. I looked into her mind to find out what was wrong. In her mind, I saw that she was perceiving two dimentions at once, as if the necklace was showing her something imaginary. I tried to see what it was, and suddenly found myself in a small room. A man and a woman, Sakhi's parents, I remembered their faces from her destiny, were standing in the middle.

"Sakhi", the man said, "if you are seeing this, it means that the king has found out about us. About *you.*You may not realise it yet, but you are special. Sakhi, dragons exist, and it was a dragon who killed us..." he told her everything about dragons, slayers, alchemists, also that they were both slayers, about the dragon king, et cetra.

"The dragon king will not rest until he finds you, dear", her mother said, "which means your life is in danger. The king has an army of four hundred faithful dragons by his side, along with other beasts like ware wolves, monsters, vampires... he is planning on conquering the world. But 10 of them are the major ones. They are called the Knight, Night stalker, Misery, Frenzy, Fury, Boney, Bloodshed, Pain-striker, Razor and Death Strike."

"They are not actually their names, of course", dad said, "the humans who have seen them call them that."

"Whatever you do dear", mom said, "do *not*try to fight the king. Revenge doesn't solve anything."

"But I will show you our current lead on the king, just in case" the room started spinning, and the scene changed.

     We were in a mountain range, much bigger than the sahyadris. I saw the outline of a large snow clad mountain far away, and it looked similar to the mount everest wallpaper on my dad's phone. I could be wrong, but we were probably in the himalayas. We were on the base of a mountain, and about 80 metres uphill, two figures could be seen on a ridge. One of them was so huge, it was obviously a dragon. The other looked human-like, but not exactly human. Sakhi's parents were crouching near the steep mountain wall, spying just out of view.

     Suddenly, a voice could be heard. It was Sakhi's father's voice. But her father was still near the mountain and his lips hadn't moved, and the voice was comming from the background in surround sound.

"That dragon is called Bloodshed. The creature talking to him, the elf, her name is Serrah. She is giving him information about something he is searching for. If we find her, we can get to Frenzy and Boney, they work for Bloodshed,  who in turn works for general Knight. Best of luck, Sakhi"

"Stay well, dear, and stay alive", her mother's voice said, and the scene disappeared.

"Of course, it all makes sense now", I said.

Sakhi blinked away her tears, which I cursed myself for not noticing first, and asked, " What makes sense now?"

I showed her my dream. "The red dragon I saw in my dream was probably Bloodshed, and the black one was general Knight. They found the trap"

"Wait, what's the trap?" I showed her Moonscales' memory.

"The king had told Moonscales that he had found the trap in the Himalayas. Maybe he had sent Bloodshed there to get it. The elf Serrah told him about it, and he found it. But what next? I mean, what did you do once you , you know, *knew"*

Her face looked grim and expressionless. "I found Serrah, made her talk. She told me about Boney and Frenzy. I killed her, and them too."

     I trained till late at night ( I knew that it was night only through one of Bear's magical wall clocks, which didn't need a wall) and finally went to sleep. I was planning to wait for Moonscales as I wanted to talk to her about whatever Sakhi had told me earlier today, but Bear said (or thought, in my mind) that she wasn't going to come today, that it would at least take her a day to come. So I went to sleep. Thankfully, I had no dreams.

     The next day, I trained sword fighting, spears, rifles and archery with Sakhi, also flying, and I discovered that I could also control other things around me, make them fly too. I found that a human mind was the most complex thing in the world, but it was also the most predictable. No wonder the Gods could read destinies so well, and so could I. Along with reading minds, I could also control them. Make them do anything, think anything. I could create fake memories, even fake feelings. All I had to do was to realise that no matter how complex feelings like love or care might seem, they were only the body's chemical responce to certain stimuli. Of course, I didn't try that on Sakhi, I was still too afraid to even read her mind, much less control her. Although I did make a dwarf hit an elf, leading to an epic fight on the market street. I also tested the emotion control thing by trying to make a sorcerer kiss a vampire girl, and by the end of the day they had already lived their love life, right from first date to breakup.

     Moonscales came back sometime in the evening. As soon as she came, she called Bear in his mind and had a deep discussion with him in the store, while Sakhi and I were told to wait outside. Bear was blocking both our minds so I couldn't hear them. About half an hour later, they called me inside.

*"What happened?",*I asked, *"where had you gone?"*

*"I went to meet some friends, creatures who are on our side in the war"*

*"Wait, what war? I mean, I know that the king has an army, but I thought that me and Sakhi were meant to k-",*I was going to say (think, whatever) "kill", but then I remembered that I was somehow supposed to stop Sakhi from killing him, but stil manage to stop him. *"We were meant to stop the king, and once the king is defeated, so will his army. But now you are saying that there is another army... frankly, when you had said that the king has an army, I thought that it was more like his personal guard. Not, like, an actual*army, *but how can there be a war? The king is stronger than the Gods, what hope does an army have against him?"*

*"We have you. Anyways, the war is nowhere soon. The king wouldn't risk it while you are alive. He is stronger than the Gods, but he was born later, and unlike the Gods, he doesn't know the events that have happened in the universe before his birth. So he can't create a destiny, he can't give the proper cause. The Gods have a leverage there. You know that it was Sakhi's destiny to kill the king, have you ever wondered that if the Gods can't control the king and whatever he does, how can a person's destiny involve him? He can change destinies just like you can, so how is it that*your *actions affect Sakhi's destiny but the king's does not?"*

*"How?",*I asked.

"*The Gods have studied his behaviour, they know his reactions to every situation. Given enough data, everything can me predicted, everything can be controlled"*

*"So they can control me too?"*

*"Hmmm, I don't think so. I don't think they could find any pre determined fate that involved the king killed and the slayer not trying to conquer the world. Hence, they decided to make a soul without control. They made an alchemist."*

*"So, the Gods can't control alchemist souls? Are you sure?",*I asked.

Suddenly, Bear spoke (thought). It seemed strange, because he was so silent like he wasn't even there.

*"Of course, they can't. Why else do you think would the Gods trap me here?"*

*"Uh, you are free to leave, aren't you?"*

*"I am immortal in here. If I leave, I'm sure that the Gods would twist some fate for killing me. Alchemists like us are unwanted variables in the Gods' equation. They wouldn't even have made your soul if they didn't need you. Once you have done what they need, they would surely try to somehow eliminate you"*

*"I know",*I said *"you have told me that before"*

*"Because I mean it",*he said.

"*Anyways",*Moonscales said, *" I told them about the king's plans with the trap. "*

*"And what did they say?",*Iasked.

*"Nothing much. What can they say? Anything that we think, the king knows. And as Bear is not with us..."*she gave Bear a murderous look, apparently they had this discussion many times, *"there's no one to shield our thoughts from him"*

*"You call him 'the king' ",*I said. *"I didn't get his name while reading your destiny, too. What is his name? Also, a question has been bugging my mind, I know that you have been searching for me since a long time, but how is it that you found me only two days ago? How did you find me? And if our army hadn't said anything, what were you discussing with Bear for so long?"*

     Moonscales sighed. *"We were discussing whether to tell you or not... The thing is, I haven't actually told you the entire truth yet."*

*"I knew it",*I said. *"You haven't even showed me your entire destiny yet. Not even your memories."*I was linked to her mind, and could sense that the part in her brain regarding her brother was still shrouded. Bear wasn't doing it, if he were, then I wouldn't even know about it. Moonscales didn't want me to read that. It could be something realted to our, uh, *mission,*but it could also be that she only needed some personal space and couldn't share her thoughts about her brother with me yet.

"*Being immortal, we dragons have to measure our words over consequences stretched to millions of years.",*Moonscales said. *"You must understand that".*

*"The first slayer",*Bear said, *" His name was Schen, by the way. Schen had killed the dragon for a reason. When he was an alchemist, he was different than the others. He was...*unique. *Stronger than others. Almost as strong as a God, just like the king. It's still not clear how, but he had once told Moon that he had realised something about the Gods. Truth about the universe, I don't know. He had also mentioned meeting the Gods, but no one believed him. How was that possible?"*

*"The point is"*Moonscales interrupted him, " *He was stronger, but felt too uncertain about his life. He surrendered to the Gods by killing a dragon. The Gods were hence allowed to write him a density. I still don't know how it all works exactly, but it appeared that Schen knew. He started all of this. He caused everything to change. It appeared that he did it for a reason, something we don't know, yet."*

Moonscales was in my mind, so she knew how impatient I was feeling. "And, what has that got to do with me?"

*"When the king, you know, came back, the Gods wanted someone who was at least as strong has him in the world. Of course, Sakhi would have.*.. killed *him* *easily",*she hesitated while saying 'killed', and it was kind of wierd how all features of normal conversations like hesitation, interjections, et cetra could also be heard in thought-speech, and were amplified by the emotions felt by being in someone else's mind.*"But then all the limitations would get lifted from her soul, and all the dragons, if not all, then at least the ones on the king's side would obey her. She would've led the army and conquered the world-"*

*"No, she's not like that. She wouldn't do that",*I interrupted.

*"Yes, she would",*Bear said. *"Believe it or not, with that much hate in her heart, I think she would rather destroy the world."*Of course, Bear had been in her mind. He was probably still in her mind. In a way, he knew her better than I ever could, unless I, too, read her mind. I would never do that. One reason was that I still didn't think that my mind was strong enough to hide the truth from her. Also with everyone reading her mind, it felt that she was being abused, treated as an object, as a piece on a chessboard. I would never treat her like that. She was my friend.

*"So anyways, that's why the Gods brought Schen back to life"*

*"Wait, so Schen is alive now? So we could just ask him the truth, whatever, that made him stronger"*

*"No, we can't. He himself doesn't remember it. The Gods have set his soul free, but have sent it without any memory"*

*"But where is he? If he has no memory, it means that he is weak right now. Has the king kidnapped him too?"*

*"No, he is right in front of me"*

It took me more than a moment to digest that. *"What? But how?"*A million different questions were floating in my mind. I asked the one that felt more appropriate.

*"You told me that souls are made in pairs, and that I am Sakhi's pair. How can I be her pair if my soul was made a million years before hers?"*

*"Your soul was remade. I don't know how that works, I told you. Your soul was, uh, you can say that it was recycled from Schen's and sent here as Sakhi's pair"*

*"And how is it that you know all of this?"*

*"I have known Schen since his birth. And as for the other things, I got some idea from the alchemists I knew, others from rumers, and some from my-", she hesitated again, "the king told me about your and Sakhi's birth, and you being her pair"*

     I trained in the goblin market for three more days, and had started getting as strong as Bear. There came a point when I could sence the king's mind trying to penetrate Moonscales' and Sakhi's, but Bear kept him at bay. I helped him in that as soon as I got strong enough.

     Alchemy was a lot easier when I had more knowledge on how the world works. Bear suggested me to search for human minds with more knowledge on science and learn from them, so I did just that. I realised that distance didn't matter. I could read someone's mind as well as destiny if I knew who I was reading. Of course, I couldn't read anything if I didn't know who to read, if I didn't know the mind, then I have to physically be present, I have to *see* my target.

     I had more conversations with Moonscales about how she found me, how the king found me. The king was searching for me since I was born, but it was only about a week ago when Sakhi killed Boney, that the king could track her. As I told you, to find a particular mind in the world, you have to first know who you are looking for. The king is always linked to his best warriors, and he was linked to Boney when he died. That's how he found Sakhi, and through her, me. But before he could get to me, Moonscales found me as the creatures in our side always had an eye on most of the king's closest followers, also Boney. They found Sakhi, and Moonscales found me. Of course, the king wouldn't come himself to get me. There was no way to be sure if I had actually changed Sakhi's destiny, and if he came himself then Sakhi would probably kill him then and there. So he sent the knight to my house, but Moonscales had been protecting me. He waited till I went to school and Moonscales followed, and then went in to take my parents. Moonscales had a couple sorcerers and a slayer guard my house, but the knight killed them and took my parents.

     Everyday, Moonscales used to go out and speak to "our army", but come back with... nothing. There was no news about the king, what he was planning, how he was going to try to kill Sakhi or me, nothing. But on the third day, as soon as she landed, she announced, "*We have found Bloodshed. He is somewhere in the konkan reagion, near the Arabian sea"*

*"It's a trap",*Bear said. *There is no way Bloodshed would give himself up so easily. Especially after losing the slayer in kalyan. I bet it was Bloodshed who you heard in kalyan"*

    I noticed that Bear still called her "the slayer", but Moonscales was more casual with her now. She called her by name, and didn't take her name with disgust. *"How do you know it was Bloodshed? It could have been the knight. After all, he was the one sent to kill me"*

*"No, I don't think so. Moonscales had already found you, and was protecting you now. I think Bloodshed was sent to kill Sakhi before Moonscales found her. I guess the king thought that Moonscales was destined to find and protect Sakhi, but with her occupied with you, he thought that Bloodshed might be able to kill her"*

*"And anyways, we don't have a choice. Even if it*is*a trap, Sakhi must start somewhere. We know what her destiny was meant to be. If we have any hope of defeating the king, then we must try to do what she was originally meant to do."*

     So Bear had seen her destiny, and had shown Moonscales, too. I feared that Bear would tell her that I didn't know Sakhi's destiny, but he didn't. He probably wanted me to read it at my own time, he waited for me to make up my mind, and if Moonscales found out, she would probably force me to read.

     I joined Sakhi in the conversation by linking her mind to ours. When I tried to link her to Bear, he resisted. But, now I wasn't as weak as before. I nudged his mind a little, and he let her in. I told everything we had just discussed to Sakhi, except the part involving her destiny and me changing it.

     "In that case, we must go right away", she said, and summoned her sword. I now knew how she did it. She remembered the exact structure of her sword, which was made by sorcerers for slayers (sorcerers' soul had some limitations lifted, not all). The sword was made such that if the slayer has a particular limitation lifted, he or she would be able to feel each and every particle of the sword along with it's position. Then, the slayer would be able to know wherever the sword was, then he or she would turn it into particles that would always hover close to the slayer's hands, and materialise whenever needed. It was a very sophisticated kind of magic (or science, whatever).

*"Keep that away, we are not fighting Bloodshed here",*Moonscales said. She made her sword dissappear again.

*"And if you need a good weapon...",*Bear waived his hand, and one of the cupboards opened. In the cupboard, there were weapons which should've been too big to go through the door.

"No, thanks. I have my own."

*"I wasn't talking to you",*Bear said, and signalled me to go to the cupboard.

     As I went near, I saw that the cupboard was a lot bigger from inside than it looked, it was actually a small room. There were steel swords in special kind of wooden stands, spears stacked in a corner, rifles hanged on walls above tables full of smaller hand held weapons and ammunition, including hand grenades and pistols. But the one weapon that caught my eye, was a sort of a magician's staff, a long stick painted red, and decorated with gold. I mean *real*gold, not gold paint. There was a solid gold dragon curling through the base, and a man hovering just above him. Near the top, in more polished gold and a more blurred effect, were humanoid figures merged into each other, depicting the Gods. Above them, was a small golden spearhead. Apparently, it depicted the might of the Gods and why we should not oppose them. I picked it up, and felt the smooth gold surface merged with the wood. When I came out with it, Sakhi was already near the shop entrance waiting for me, and Moonscales was already gone.

"Come on", Sakhi said. "Bloodshed would get away"

     It took us three hours to get to the southern end of the konkan coastline, after which we followed the beach to the north, searching for him. Moonscales was nowhere to be seen, probably because her flying speed was a lot less than ours. It would have taken us less than an hour, but we had to stop periodically to catch our breath and eat something to replenish our energy.

     After about half an hour of searching, we finally saw him. He wasn't exactly hiding, just curled on the sand. Seeing him in person seemed different than my dreams. The blood red colour had a more matt-like finish, like it depicted the exact opposite of "bright". Yet, his skin wasn't dull, it seemed elegant in it's own evil way.

    Without a moment of thought, Sakhi lunged at him, her sword materialised mid-way into her hand. But Bloodshed extended his wings, pushing her away. Before she could recover from the attack, Bloodshed was flying and had caught her in his talons.

    "No!", I yelled, ane went towards her. I somehow forgot to slow down time, and Bloodshed threw her towards me. Both of us fell into the shallow water near the beach.

     Before I could get up, Bloodshed had his tail near Sakhi's throat, which had a pointy spike on it that I hadn't noticed before. He flexed his tail, an unmistakable gesture that he was going to pierce her neck.

     "NO!", I yelled. I remembered that I could slow down time, which didn't happen instinctively anymore now that I was trained. Time slowed down just before the spike was about to hit her, and I shot a shockwave towards Sakhi. Big mistake. The force knocked her out of Bloodshed's aim, but she landed 50 metres away, and just lied there, probably unconscious. I flew with my spear towards him, and was about to kill him, but before I could, I heard Moonscales in my mind.

     "*Don't do it, Aman".*Wait a second, I was in hyperspeed, and had increased brain function. So from Moonscales' point of view, I should have killed him in just half a second after throwing that shockwave. This could only mean that Moonscales had faster brain function, too. Another strange thing was that I figured all of that out in just less than one tenth of a second in normal time.

     I realised what Moonscales meant, and shifted my trajectory so that I flew over him, but then I collided with Sakhi, who also had hyperspeed. She didn't see me comming to kill him, and had got up and shot herself towerds him. I was supposed to be the one as strong as the Gods, but so far I had only come in between. I got snapped back into normal time.

     For the second time in less than three seconds, we fell on the beach. Now, I decided not to interfere. Bloodshed was hovering above us before we could get up, and had his talons curled to reach down and grab her, but she summoned her sword and slashed one of his nails out. She flew up to his level, and was just about to cut off his head, but he snapped on her arm, and bit her shoulder. She yelped, and blood started dripping off her shoulder.

     Bloodshed looked at me, and said *"Do you know why they call me 'Bloodshed', Aman Shah? I never kill my victims in one stroke. I make them bleed, and make them regret the day they saw me. I hang them with the wound facing upwards, so that they lose blood slowly, just fast enough to kill them. And they don't die easily"*

     Sakhi was too dazed in pain to move. He dug his talons into the wound, which made Sakhi scream in pain. He was about to fly away. I *had*to do something. I threw my spear towards him. Not exactly *threw,*but I willed it to go there. You can say that I gave it kinetic energy. The spear hit the leg which was carrying Sakhi, and it went right through. Bloodshed roared in pain, and dropped her into the water. He shot me a murderous look, and flew away.

    I dived into the sea, and brought her back to the shore. The wound on her shoulder looked very bad, and the colour started to drain from her face. This wasn't happening. Our first fight was a disaster, and we were nowhere close to killing the king. But of course, we didn't have to kill the king, but still somehow figure out a way to stop him.

     Moonscales was hovering just above us. She would land in seconds. I realised that I hadn't read Sakhi's destiny, and from what happened today, it became important for me to know what Moonscales was talking about before comming here. Also, if I read her while she is unconscious, she wouldn't be able to know my secret. I made time slow down again, and started reading her destiny, what it was meant to be after killing Night.

    Sakhi had tortured Night and made him tell that Bloodshed was meeting the Knight in the himalayas five days ago, and she was meant to go there, if she hadn't been in the goblin market with us. The Knight flies away as soon as he sees her, and she kills Bloodshed. She tracks the Knight down, and in his lair, finds and slays Misery and pain-striker. Today, she was supposed to kill Fury, Razor and Death strike. She killed (or *will kill,*whatever) the Knight tomorrow, and finally the king in four days. I noticed that this wasn't the actual destiny made my the Gods, as in the Gods' version, the Knight didn't have to find the trap. But this was the destiny if I hadn't met her. This was the one that mattered, as if I tried to manipulate her destiny to be like this one, then we would kill the king without me dieing. As in her original destiny I wasn't meant to live, we didn't need that one.

     So we had to kill Bloodshed, Misery, Pain-striker, Fury, Razor, Death strike and the Knight by tomorrow, and the King in four days. No, not kill, *stop*the king in four days. I had no idea how we were going to do that.

     Moonscales landed next to me, and I healed her shoulder. The colour returned to her face.

*"How is she?",*Moonscales asked.

"*She is fine, but weak. I am tired too, due to the healing. We can't fly"*

*"I know that you must be feeling depressed, but don't lose hope. We will figure out something."*

     I really wished to believe her, but I couldn't see any hope. Killing Bloodshed, or better yet, making him talk about the Knight's lair today was our only shot at getting the king. We flew on Moonscales, and reached the sahyadris at about four in the evening. After resting Sakhi on her bed, I collapsed on mine. Today was a disaster. And it was all because of me.

     Sakhi woke up at about midnight. I wasn't able to sleep after whatever had happened. Suddenly, she sat up straight and said "What happened?"

"Nothing", I said. "We sucked"

"That's alright. Maybe we'll do better tomorrow"

"We don't have much time. According to the destiny in which you kill the king, we have to kill Bloodshed, Misery, Pain-striker, Fury, Razor, Death strike and the Knight by tomorrow. Only four days to kill the king"

"Do you trust me, Aman?"

     That took me off guard. Maybe she was referring to the part of her memories where she didn't trust anyone but me. I had just told her that I had read her destiny. Broke her trust. I couldn't bear that thought.

"Of course" I replied anyway.

"I can kill him. I *will*kill him. I will avenge my parents, and bring back yours"

     She probably said that to make me feel better, but I felt worse. I also had to stop her from killing the king. I had to affect her destiny in such a way that she doesn't kill the king, but he dies. I couldn't hide it from her anymore. I *had*to tell her.

I was on the top bunk. I climbed down and sat next to her.

"There's something I want to tell you", I said. She didn't reply, waiting for me to continue.

"It's about the king... I, uh, I mean, Sakhi, after you kill the king, you will be the true king of the dragons. You will have an entire army by your side. Not to mention, all the limitations lifted from your soul. What will you do, once you have all of that?"

"I don't think the Gods would let me have all of that. I would still have a destiny, wouldn't I? A destiny pre determined by the Gods. So, finally it's only their will"

     But she won't. If she succeeds in killing the king, *she*would be a threat to the Gods. That's why I was made. Or *remade*, whatever. Although it seemed unlikely for the beings who so flawlessly controlled the universe to rest the fate of the world in the hands of a single soul, but I guess they didn't have a choice.

"Why did you ask?", she said.

"Ask what?", I was lost in my thoughts, so took some time to respond.

"About me being the king"

"Oh, nothing. It was just a thought. The thing is, I think it's probably best that *I*kill the king. Your destiny is altered now. If you try to kill the king, you will die. Theoretically, I am as strong as the king. Plus, if he were to capture you in the trap, I would have to surrender." I didn't mention that in that way, she wouldn't be the dragon king.

"Are you saying that only because you are my friend, or after what happened today, you don't want to be an alchemist any more. You want certainty in your life, just like Bear did."

"No! Well, yes, sort of. But it's not *my*life I want to be certain of, it's yours."

     She smiled, and neither of us talked for a few minutes. This was the first time I had seen her sit silently without the dazed look in her eyes. Then she leaned forward, and kissed me on the lips. I stared at her, clearly surprised.

"What? I wanted to.", she said. I gave her back a smile.

"Hey, I have an idea", she said, "The king is surely going to use the trap to capture either me or you. So why don't we capture him instead?" She said it as if it was as easy as pulling him by the tail and throwing him inside.

"I don't think so. Even if we somehow manage to trap him, he has escaped from the afterlife. He can escape from the trap easily."

"Yeah, you're right. Anyways, lets go to sleep. We've got a big day tomorrow. Got to kill seven dragons in a day."

"Yeah, good night"

"Good night", she said, and I climbed back on my bunk. That night, the Gods showed me the Knight's lair.

     It wasn't anywhere near, in fact it was somewhere in Rome. No, not *somewhere*, it was in the biggest amphitheatre in Rome. The colosseum.

     In my dream, I was underground. I wasn't too far below the arena, I could hear the buzz of tourists overhead. I don't know how I knew that I was below the colosseum, perhaps the Gods sent dreams with GPS data. The cave I was in was as big as the arena, and as tall as the roof of the goblin market, which is about twenty storeys. All the seven dragons were gathered there. It was obviously a trap, why else would the king let everyone still be together for me and Sakhi to find? Why did he even let us find Bloodshed? There was no way he could've already known that we would lose. In fact, we were more likely to win. Perhaps he wanted us to kill Bloodshed and get closer to him as we were supposed to as per Sakhi's destiny, then he would use the only thing that could turn the tables on his side. The trap. If he captures Sakhi, there's no hope of killing him. And if he gets me, win or lose, the world will be in someone's rule except the Gods, just what he wants. All I could get was a glimpse of Knight, before the king pulled me out of the dream.

The next day, I told my dream to everyone.

*"So both of you will have to go there today",*Moonscales said.

*"We didn't do so well yesterday. I was wondering, we have an army on our side, don't we? Why don't you send, like, a unit with us? We can't fight six dragons along with the Knight alone."*

*"Yes, you can. And no one can accompany you. It's her destiny to kill all of the dragons herself, and since you are her pair, it seems logical for you to go with her. After all, the Gods chose you for a reason."*

*"You have to leave now",*Bear said. *"Only then will you reach till the evening"*

     He raised his hand and slightly opened his palm, as if he was holding an invisible stick. Suddenly, my spear appeared in his hand which I had left in the Arabian sea.

*"The weapon you chose came with a lifetime warranty",*he said, *"which means that I remember it's exact molecular structure, and I can remake it exactly like it was, even if it's lost, scratched or broken. I recommend that you remember that, too"*

     I focused on the spear, and could feel my gaze penetrating the gold and wood surface into the sandalwood core, I could sense my thoughts resonating throughout it's structure until I remembered every detail, every piece of gold and wood exactly the way it was.

About fifteen minutes later, we were on our way to Europe.

     We made about seven stops on the way in various restaurants and coffee shops. We didn't even have to pay, thanks to my ability to control minds of normal humans. It felt wrong at first, but Sakhi insisted that we didn't have a choice. She was right. It was a long and tiring flight. At every stop we had to eat almost as much as we eat in a day, and at the next stop we felt hungry again.

     When we finally reached Italy, we landed outside a coffee shop in Rome. No one noticed us, of course. Thanks to the Gods' control over their mind. I had learned that only the normal humans' mind was feeble enough for the Gods to control all at once. Even if they saw anything that wasn't meant to be seen according to their destiny, they immediately forget it. Of course, it was possible that the Gods were erasing our memories too and we were seeing only what *they*wanted us to see, but why would they do that? If they wanted total control on the world, they could. For all I know, even if I somehow manage to stop the king *and*Sakhi, the Gods would erase my memory immediately and I wouldn't know that my parents were ever gone. But maybe that's what I wanted. All these people, they were actually lucky that they don't have to go through all this. It would be nice to just keep living in my house with my parents not knowing anything about dragons or slayers or alchemists or magic or anything else.

     We sat down on one of the tables outside the shop, and Sakhi ordered an Italian dish I had never heard of. When the order arrived, it turned out to be pizza.

"So", Sakhi said almost as soon as we started to eat, "If we don't want whatever happened yesterday to repeat, we need a plan"

"Yeah, we need to coordinate our moves. I only keep the dragons occupied, and you do the killing. I also need to know what powers they each have."

"The knight is a hypermind, which means that he can move and think really fast, that means that he has a lot of time to think of blocking or striking. That's why the slayers consider him impossible to defeat. But, if you have already killed a hypermind dragon, that means you have inherited it's powers. I mean not *you,*I mean slayers. I have never seen a hypermind slayer in my life."

"What about Bloodshed? I didn't see him use any power yesterday."

"Bloodshed is a brainjacker. I have slayed brainjackers before, and most can't control any brain except a human's, but Bloodshed is different. He can control sorcerers, werewolves, and even slayers. But not brainjacker slayers like me. And obviously not alchemists like you. That's why he couldn't use his power yesterday. Misery is a pyro, can control fire, Pain striker's telekinetic, can move things around him just by concentrating, Fury and Razor are both twins, hypominds. They can fly very fast just like the knight, but their brains are normal-"

"How can they be twins? Aren't dragons immortal? How are they born?"

"You're the alchemist. You're supposed to know. Anyway, Death strike is Night stalker's godfather, a shadowflo. Can move through solid objects."

"But I had seen Night stalker throw fire at you. Wasn't he a pyro too?"

"He was a hybrid. Those are really rare, with more than one limitation lifted. By the way, when you are keeping the dragons occupied, watch out for Death strike. He will want revenge of his son's death."

"Don't worry", I said. "I've got your back".

"This time, if a dragon has it's talons on me, hit *him*with a shockwave and not me"

"Yeah, sorry. I didn't know that the wave would be so powerful"

"Anyways, it's getting late. We must go". She was right. It was seven thirty. I mean seven thirty in Rome, so about eight in India. So we had four to four and a half hours to kill seven dragons.

     We landed in the colossium arena, and no one noticed us. Not even the security guards at almost every two metres.

"What now?", Sakhi asked.

"The lair is underground. Exactly below the arena."

"Ok, lets go" suddenly, she just went through the ground, like, just collapsed.

"Okay", I said, trying to figure out how to do it. I had a few theories on the science behind it, and figuring out the right one would mean the ability to do *that.*

     One of them was that probably her entire body atomised. But that would mean that so did her brain. I didn't know how exactly a soul worked, but I knew all about the brain. At least I knew whatever the human race has found out till now. If her brain atomises, it means that her conscience doesn't exist. *She*doesn't exist. Then she couldn't form her body back. Another way is to move the atoms of the ground around her, just like water in a swimming pool. Yes, that was it. I tried, and fell to... definitely not the dragons' lair. I was in some sort of a tunnel flooded with tourists. Maybe I needed to go lower. I fell again, on Sakhi.

     I realised that half the battle was over till I came. Of course, the knight, Fury and Razor fight in hyperspeed. I went into hyperspeed too, and just in time as the knight was about to hit us with his talons. I ducked, but he, too had increased brain function. His talon shifted course midway, and I barely managed to save Sakhi. I lifted her and started to fly away, but something hit me on the back, and we both fell. It was either Fury or Razor, that was obvious. Unlike the knight, it was a wild strike. In the dragon's point of view, it could be that something fell from the roof and he just wildly lunged at it.

     This wasn't going to work. We can't fight three dragons in hyperspeed together. I could keep the knight occupied, but then Sakhi had to fight the other five alone. *Other five*. I hadn't even looked around the cavern, how did I know that Bloodshed wasn't here? The information was just comming into my mind. Probably the Gods were sending it. They also told me that I, being as strong as the Gods themselves, could prohibit a dragon's powers, impose temporary limitations. Just like the trap. I pushed the knight's mind out of hypertime, and tried to stop the hyperspeed. But my power wasn't focused, it was like my mind was searching around for souls without the hyperspeed limitation, and imposing it. That meant Sakhi was out of hyperspeed too. And I was too weak and preoccupied to even move normally, much less in hyperspeed.

     But now that no one was in hyperspeed, we had six dragons to deal with. I told Sakhi about the hyperspeed in her mind, and she suggested that as I was now incapable of fighting, I should put my back against the pillars while she protected me. I didn't even know there *were*any pillars.

     The cavern, it was more like an underground ancient cultural hall or something, didn't look like Roman architecture. There were pictures of magicians, elves, dwarfs, dragons and many such creatures on the tiles on the walls and pillars. The pillars themselves were as broad as a bus, and near the central pillar, which was twice as broad as the other ones, was the thing we were all fearing, the king's secret weapon. The trap. It was nothing like I had expected. Frankly, I had expected a box which radiated magical powers supressing every soul around it, or something like that. It was actually a cast iron cage, no bigger than Bear's secret weapon store room.

     Sakhi was fending off five dragons at once, and Misery was the one bothering her the most. Although she was apparently fire proof, but every time Misery barbecued her, she became weaker, more tired. Even fire proofing took energy. Death strike was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, something leaped on her from behind. Of course, Death was a shadowflo. The pillar didn't matter. Sakhi fell, but before Death could do anything, I threw a shockwave and he got thrown on another pillar. But Sakhi was dazed, and before she could get up, knight clutched her in his talons, and flew towards the trap. I was too weak to move, and fortunately, the other dragons were too occupied with Sakhi to notice me. He threw her into the cage and locked her inside, then flew away with her.

     "NO!", I said, but I probably shouldn't have. The other dragons noticed me, and lunged for me. I let go of the hyperspeed limitation, hoping that Fury and Razor wouldn't notice, and slowed down time again. Now I had time to think, but I couldn't get out even in hyperspeed, I was surrounded. I could go through the pillar, of course, but then Fury and Razor would follow me, and I was too weak to fly for long. I could feel the lack of energy inside, like I was running on fumes. This wasn't normal hunger or weakness, I could feel my soul sort of shrinking, and I somehow knew that if I used too much energy, I would die.

     There had got to be a way out. Maybe if I could distract them somehow... What if I break the roof? That would also be my way out. I didn't think of the tourists in the tunnels above at that time, that was the last thing I was concerned about. But I didn't have enough energy to break a part of the roof large enough to slow them down, well, I had *theoretically,*but practically, more variables come into action. The roof isn't completely rigid, and there were also tiles and big rocks. I had to find a way... of course. *Resonance.*I could send weak pulses of energy through the pillar to set the roof in vibration. That should break it.

     I touched the pillar and concentrated. Soon, the pillar and the roof started to shake. It fell on them, and so did the tourists. That's when I realised what I had done. I kad *killed*these people.

     Little rivers of blood were snaking through the rubble, and pooling on the floor. Suddenly, something strange happened. The flow of the blood reversed, and their bodies began to reform. Of course, the Gods had total control on these people's life. Their soul was completely covered with limitations, their destiny was completely controlled. The control was so perfect that even if they die, the Gods could just remake their body and they would just get up like nothing had happened. Then the rubble started to fly, and rejoin with the roof. I remembered about the dragons, and flew out of the hole in the roof and through the arena ground that hadn't broken, but I couldn't fly for long. I landed in the same coffee shop we had been in before. As I sat on the chair, I let the horrors of whatever happened settle in my mind. We hadn't killed a single dragon, and most of all, Sakhi was gone.

     Although I was feeling like burying myself alive in a coffin, I didn't. Instead, I reluctantly went back to the goblin market. No one liked the news I brought, and Moonscales tried to console me and convince me that we would find her, but Bear's response was completely unexpected. I had expected him to be angry at me, or maybe somewhat happy that Sakhi was gone, but he said "It's okay, I understand." How can he possibly understand? He had lived in a cave for thousands of years with trolls! What did he know about love, about caring for someone?

     I was in the room the entire day, and only came out the next day for breakfast. Bear had made me some... I don't know what, exactly. Some sort of fruit mashed with some herbs. It tasted good, but nothing made me forget Sakhi.

"*We can get her back.",*Moonscales said. *"The information about the knight's lair was obviously not sent by the Gods, it was sent by the king to kidnap Sakhi. Although you and Bear are shielding our brains, he can touch our brains enough to send us a dream. And with you two seperated, he has a greater chance of winning. But he has revealed something else to you. All of his closest comrades' minds. You can now track them each. But be careful. He probably meant for you to track them. But there is a chance that he revealed them all as he didn't have a choice. It was the only way to get Sakhi. But before you get into another fight, you must train first. And this time not just magic, you must train in combat. It's not enough to be able to do anything scientifically possible if you can't harm your opponents with it."*

*"But what's the use? I can't fight dragons without Sakhi. Not if I am not allowed to kill them."*

*"I can kill them",*she said. *"I didn't come with you before as I thought it best to let you two go together, as she was destined to kill them, and you were her pair."*

*"And we don't have time. We were supposed to kill the knight two days ago. Only two days left to kill the king."*

*"Time is on the king's side now. In the destiny where he dies, all of the ten dragons are already dead by now. Which means that now he has a greater chance to live. But that also means that we are not bound by time any more. Hurrying would do no good. We will not engage in any battles until two days."*

*"Why two days?"*

*"My spies say that the king plans to do something in eleven days, something that would somehow prevent the Gods from stopping him and his army from taking over the world. So we have eleven days to do something. We can spare two days for training, after which we have a day to kill each dragon and on the eleventh day, get Sakhi back."*

*"Lets hope that the king doesn't kill her by then", Bear said.*

     Moonscales flashed him a murderous look.

*"No he won't",*she said. *"He wants to kill both of you. He would hold her for leverage. You said that your parents were held in a warehouse? That makes sense. The warehouse is obviously not his palace. I know my brother, he is used to the luxury-"*she sighed at the memory of her brother, then continued *"And he wouldn't stay close to your parents with the slayer meant to kill him on the lose. And he will not kill your parents now. He doesn't want you to lose hope. He wants you to keep thinking that you can still get to Sakhi. Get to him, so that he can kill you."*

     Of course! How can I forget about my parents? They were poisoned. They could die any day now! We had to hurry.

*"No time to lose",*I said. *"We must start training now."*

*"Alright then",*Bear said, and summoned an axe. A *golden*double headedaxe. He had spent the morning repairing some weapons for his customers (I didn't come out of the room, but our minds were still linked, working together trying to keep the king from finding us, so I knew), and was low in energy. But as soon as he touched the axe, he looked stronger, perhaps even more powerful than he would've been with all his own energy.

*"How did you do that?",*I asked.

*"What, summoning a weapon? Don't you know about atomising and reforming?"*

*"Not that, how did you get so strong?"*

*"Oh, well, you can store energy in weapons specially made for the purpose, and then use it whenever required. You can do that with your spear, too."*I summoned my spear, and Bear floated out to the training ground behind the shop. I followed him, and on the way stored some of my energy in the staff-cum-spear. Though soon after that, I regretted doing it.

*"Lesson 1",* he said, *"you are going to fight in hypertime. You have enough time to think of the outcome of every move, so don't waste that time.*Think*! Think before you act. Especially when your opponent, too is in hypertime. And you should always be ready for jumping in and out of hypertime, because in a fight, the one who goes into hypertime first, gets a huge head start."*

     Suddenly, there was a sonic boom and his axe was on my throat. He did it so fast that I didn't even have time to think about reacting. *"Get it?",*he said. His face was so close to mine that it was creepy.

"*Yeah",*I said, "*can you put that away now?"*

     He removed his axe and floated back to his place. I sighed, partly in relief, but mainly because I couldn't breathe with the axe on my throat. I pulled my energy back from the staff (I decided that it was more a staff than a spear)

*"You should go in hypertime now. That would be easier",*he said, and I did. I noticed how he called increased brain function as "hypertime", which was a word that I had coined together. Another reminder that he was in my mind. I decided that from now on, I would continuously read his mind, too.

*"Lesson 2. Don't rely only on only your weapon. You can control the things in your surroundings, so use them".*A spare knife came out of his pocket and flew towards me too fast even in hypertime. I barely managed to stop it before it could pierce my eye.

*"Whoa",*I said. "*At least give me a warning"*

*"I knew you would catch it. Besides, I did give you a warning. The knife came out of my pocket and stayed still long enough for you to notice it, so that you could brace yourself."*

*"That doesn't count as a warning"*

*"Your enemy isn't going to give you even that opportunity"*

*"Ok. What's lesson 3?"*

*"Survive",*he said.

*"What?"*

     Another sonic boom, but this time it sounded longer and slower, like a recording played in slow motion. Although during our conversation, his thoughts didn't sound slower. Obviously, his brain function was faster, too. So with respect to that, both our thoughts were equally fast. Then I realised that I had forgotten lesson 1, and wasted my hypertime extra time in thinking about thought speed. His axe was en route to my throat, and I barely managed to block it with my staff. The wooden stick was a lot stronger than it looked, and blocked easily, but Bear had already anticipated my move, and hit my chest with the handle of his axe. He had used all his time to think about his moves and what mine would be, and I hadn't. I fell and got jolted out of hypertime.

*"So, where did you go wrong?",*he said, also out of hypertime.

"*I forgot lesson 1",*I said.

     As soon as I said it, there was another boom. This time, I didn't think. I just reacted. And before doing anything else, I went into hypertime.

     I saw him comming towards me with his axe, and the first thing I did was block him out of my mind. Then, I tried to break into *his* mind, but of course, in vain. This time, I forced myself to think about his moves. He would probably go for my throat, like he did the last two times. I also had to look out for his handle after blocking. Still, this fight wasn't fair. I had never been deep inside his brain except once while reading his destiny. I had no idea of his moves and way of thinking. On the other hand, he was constantly inside my brain without me even noticing. I had to think of something extraordinary, something innovative, something I would not normally do. Time for lesson 2.

     I looked around me, but there was nothing much I could use. But of course, I didn't need a weapon. I only needed something to block and distract him. I concentrated on the tiles inside the shop, and they flew out of the open door towards his axe. He was in hypertime, but was too preoccupied in trying to chop my head off to notice flying tiles comming towards him. The axe got knocked out of his hand, and while he had momentarily lost his concentration, I willed him to stop, and put my spear (staff, but I would call it 'spear' whenever I use it like a spear) against his throat.

*"How was that?",*I asked.

*"Not bad",*he replied. *"Can*you *put that away now?"*I took my spear back.

      We trained for two days, and I couldn't see how the people in the market could tolerate all the booms and clings of weapons. As our fights went to extreme limits, we flew all over the cavern in almost twice the speed of sound, and to any onlooker, if would have looked like a giant 3-dimensional superhero pinball game.

     Finally, on the third morning, we were ready for our dragon hunt.

     After much thought, I figured that I had to find Bloodshed first. If he wasn't there in the knight's lair to capture the girl meant to end all his plans, that could only mean that he was doing something more important. Probably part of the *plan*through which the King was planning in stopping the Gods from stopping him from conquering the world. Damn, how complex would all of this be if it wasn't for increased brain function. Alchemy is even more complex than it seems, but alchemy itself makes alchemy easy to understand. Alchemy would've blown my mind, if it wasn't for alchemy.

     Anyways, finding him wasn't as easy as I thought, the king was shielding his mind. But, in a few minutes and with Bear's help, I finally managed to track him. Just then I had a thought... if the king, even though being so strong, could not hide his soldiers from us, how is it that we were hidden from him?

*"We're not shielding our minds to hide us from him",*Bear said, as if reading my mind (which he was). *"He can easily find anyone as long as he manages to just touch the person's mind with his own. We're shielding us from his mind control. So that he can't make us kill ourselves or something like that. Also, we are hiding our memories and any information that could help the king in his plan. He already knows that we are in the goblin market. But he didn't attack us before because of Sakhi, as he was destined to die by her hand. And now, he wouldn't get out of hiding until he somehow incapacitates the Gods. That is why*that *shouldn't happen. As soon as the Gods are gone, our army counts for nothing. Numbers wouldn't mean anything. He could kill, he*would *kill us all in the blink of an eye. You and me wouldn't be as easy, but in front of a power too strong even for the Gods, I guess together we would last for about fifteen minutes. If you don't remember the truth, whatever, you knew in your previous life."*

It felt weird talking to Bear when he wasn't in front of me. I was in my room and he was in the shop. I had found out some time ago about this, distance doesn't matter. As long as I knew how a mind was, which was like identifying a face, I could communicate with, influence as well as control that mind. Even halfway around the world.

*"You know what",*Bear said, *"you are just like Schen. I mean, I know that you*are *Schen, but even though you are not him in this life, you remind me of him. You have his curiosity. His sense of logic, analytical skills. Whenever something unique or strange happens near you, no matter how subtle, you are the first one to notice. Just like Schen. And I am not praising you, I mean that you are losing your focus. Don't think about long-distance communications, think about getting to Bloodshed"*

He was right. We had tracked him in the Abujmarh forest in Chhattisgarh. Bear said that it would make sense if he was looking for another old alchemy relic like the trap, most of them are right here in India. Indian alchemists were more into experimentation. The only problem was that we didn't know where exactly he was. It was a huge forest, and the king was shielding him. We had to go there and search for him. Obviously, Bear wouldn't come. Me and Moonscales would have to go. Bear would be in my mind the whole time, but still, two alchemists would have been better than one.

     I went out and saw Moonscales seated in front of a wierd artificial light source in the training ground. Her scales reflecting the red light giving her a more majestic look. For the first time, she looked more than a million years old. Not *old,* but ancient. Like a being of power. I told her about Bloodshed.

*"I'm surprised that you didn't try to find the knight first.",*she said in an amused tone.*"After all, he has Sakhi. I mean he took her. You have a greater chance of getting to her if you find him."*

I had never noticed it before, but her every word, though it seemed natural, was actually calculated and measured to the alphabet. So was her penetrating gaze. She was studying me like a test subject. Millions of years of experience masking her calculated words so that they sounded genuine.

*"I know",*I said. *"But Sakhi is alive and safe inside the trap. I don't know exactly how it works yet, but one thing I could understand that if the door of the trap is opened, then the person inside gets his or her power back. That means the king or his men wouldn't trouble her while she is inside. And getting to Bloodshed is more important while he is still in the forest, at least that could give us some idea at what the king is up to"*

*"Interesting",*she muttered to herself (I couldn't help but notice how even talking to oneself could be done in thought speech. Of course, it wasn't much use as I was in her mind. Then again I wasn't forcing myself too much inside like Bear as I respected her privacy, but that also meant that she could shield her thoughts to a certain extent. Judging from her thoughtful and calculating nature, she probably meant for me to hear the word "interesting", as if trying to make me think about her thoughts. Funny how a single word could make someone think so much)

     She got up and turned her gaze back to me, which I hadn't even noticed wandering off towards the dark cavern roof. *"By the way, we have a small unit ready as you had requested. But we will have to go with your hyperspeed first, as we can't risk him getting away. I will tell the soldiers to leave immediately, and they should reach the forest before nightfall. We mustn't waste any time. We have to go now"*

     Moonscales flew too slow. I had to drag her along in hyperspeed (not like, *drag,*it was just like launching those tiles towards Bear. Controlling stuff around me with my mind, telekinesis of sorts). After periodic breaks on the way, we reached the forest at about one p.m.

     We landed in the heart of the forest where the canopy was thickest, as Bloodshed was more likely to be there in hiding. Of course, he wasn't there. The chances of him being in the exact spot we landed were like one in ten thousand. But instead of starting to search for him at once, we decided to stay and rest for a while.

     After a quick fruit meal and a few minutes of awkward silence, I said, *"Why do you think he is here? Bloodshed, I mean."*

*"What I find most picular is him being in this very forest, the one in which you, I mean Schen supposedly met the Gods. He was more observative than the other alchemists, and hence the Indian alchemists used to call him here for alchemy experiments now and then. It was after comming back from one such experiment that he started behaving wierd."*

Suddenly, we saw a blinding light somewhere in the northeast. It's glow lasted for a second before fading out.

*"*That must be Bloodshed", I said aloud. Something that I would later regret.

     We flew towards the light, to a sort-of temple like building whose brown stone walls were so dulled out and covered with moss that they were almost indistinguishable from the surrounding trees and bushes. It wasn't exactly as big as a temple, more like an entrance to an underground dungeon.

     The entrance was just wide enough for a dragon to fit, but only if it folded it's wings. The ceiling was not as forgiving. Moonscales had to walk with bent knees and kept her head low while crawling inside, so she looked more like a giant serpant instead of a dragon. I followed her inside, illuminating the corridor that followed by emitting photons from my skin (not as cool as it sounds, I probably looked like a freak. I even forgot that the parts of my skin covered by clothes wouldn't be of any use, so I ended up looking like I was wearing a t-shirt woven using photoluminescent plankton). After a few steps, Moonscales said, *"Maybe you should lead with that light. I can't see a thing"*

So we switched places, and don't ask me how. Ok, I'll tell you. Well, I actually went through her like I did in the colosseum. But I regretted it. Of course, atomising her brain didn't kill her as I reformed it again, and I don't know how the soul thing worked, but I suppose as long as she had her soul, she would be fine. What I hated was the stench and the gross liquids in her digestive system. Ugh!

     Anyways, it was good that I illuminated the way, because soon after that we encountered a flight of stairs leading underground. So it *was* an underground dungeon.

     Even with the light, going down those steps was dangerous. They were short and had just the wrong height, as if they were made to make someone slip. Then I remembered that I didn't have to actually walk on them, I could simply hover over. As I hovered down the last step, I found a sword on my throat.

"It's him! It's the alchemist!", someone said on my right.

"Kill him!", said a voice from across the room. Remembering Bear's training, I went into hypertime. Thankfully, that was just before another sword from the person who had spoken from my right tried to poke through my stomach.

     Summoning my spear, I blocked that sword and hit it's wielder on his chest using the back end of my spear. Then I pushed the sword on my neck aside and hit the other on his head. Then I tried to register the scene around the room. The two people guarding the entrance were elves, and the guy who had given the order of killing me looked human. Spread across the room were more elves, humans wearing long velvet robes - sorcerers, and... ninjas?

     I remembered what Moonscales had said, that the king was constantly in the mind of only his seven special dragons, and no one else. So even if these creatures were on the king's side, there was no way he could protect so many minds at once. I tried to enter into the minds of everyone, but something stopped me. I saw the human wince ( in slow-motion, weird!) as I pushed further inside. So the human was shielding their minds. A dragon slayer, and a brainjacker no less!

*"How is it that slayers, who are meant to obey the Gods and slay dragons too have switched sides? Does their destiny even allow it?",*I asked Moonscales.

*"Wwwwhhhhaaaatttt?"*, she replied in slow-motion. I keep forgetting that she wasn't in hypertime. So she probably heard my question like a fast-forwarded tape.

     About the slayer, the answer was obvious. As long as the king exists, destiny didn't matter. And considering the amount of, well, non-dragons that had now joined the king's side, I guess he is very persuasive. I also found it strange that we hadn't encountered any other dragons till now. He was a *dragon* king after all. I guess he was keeping his best soldiers reserved. He wouldn't reveal them until he somehow stops the Gods, and then use them for the war. Or more like the massacre, as that's what it will be without the Gods with us.

     The slayer should have been the most powerful person in the room, but he was too preoccupied in protecting everyone's minds. But even I was fighting him in my mind. How is it that I am strong enough to fight in my mind, be in hypertime *and* physically fight? If our abilities are simply limitations lifted from our souls and if everyone's soul is equal, what determines the strength of one being over another?

     Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain on my abdomen in the right. As if on instinct, I launched a shockwave around me just before the pain forced me out of hypertime. First, I tried to recognise my attackers. The ninjas, who apparently had hyperspeed too, but obviously not hypertime. What was the word... hypominds. Yeah, they were hypominds. The element of surprise didn't allow them to use their hyperspeed at first, but I gave them enough time to overcome their initial shock by thinking about the slayer and his power. Again, I forgot lesson 1.

     Then I inspected my wound. A weird looking three-blade ninja knife was dug into my skin. I pulled it out and healed the wound, which took a lot of my energy.

     The sorcerers shot at me with all sorts of elemental projectiles including wind, water, earth, heat (*Heat,*not fire. I guess controling fire was just a myth. Fire is just an illusion created when both heat and light are emitted together and the light refracts from the hot air. I guess I  could control fire if I wanted, but no use creating both heat and light when only one of them is needed) but Moonscales flew over me and extended her wings. At first I thought that the projectiles would pierce through her, but even her wings seemed impervious to them.

     Mustering my energy, I flew over her and threw a shockwave at the sorceters, who stupidly stood in a group. Before I knew it, my spear was on a sorcerer's chest.

"Please! No!", the sorcerer said, almost crying.

     What was I doing? I wasn't a murderer. Sure, these people were on the king's side, but what gives me the right to decide whether they deserve to live or not? Maybe the Gods wanted me to kill, but just because they have given these people life doesn't mean they have the right to take it, does it? Maybe it does. Maybe, for the Gods, the life of these soldiers is insignificant. They wouldn't care if these people lived or died, but neither would the king. For the first time I realised how hopelessly stuck I was between two immortal unstoppable forces willing to do anything it takes to destroy each other. My train of thought was broken as the sorcerer I was about to kill threw a blast of heat at my face. I could sense it even before it came close and dissipated the blast by just thinking about it. This pushed all the doubts out of my mind. I pushed my spear through his chest and pulled it out.

     The gold spearhead was smeared with blood, and blood was dripping from the fuzzy gold figures near the tip which was supposed to represent the Gods, giving it an eerie look as if the Gods were satisfied from the blood. Like they were thirsty for more. What was I thinking? Why would the creators of life want more death? I pushed all those thoughts aside as the ninjas started recovering from the shock. I willed the pebbles on the floor to shoot at them at the speed of a bullet, piercing through everyone's brain and killing them instantly. I noticed that Moonscales had taken care of the elves with her teeth biting through their armour like a knife through butter. I was about to kill another sorcerer when suddenly, from the other end of the room behind the slayer, someone said, "*ENOUGH!"*

Bloodshed came out of a doorway that I hadn't noticed before and curled around the slayer in a serpent-like manner, eyes trained on me. Just then, the slayer collapsed from the mental strain of holding me back, but Bloodshed caught him on his neck before he could fall.

*"You have done enough, Ankit. Rest now. I'll take care of this."*

He slowly set Ankit aside, and as he turned I saw something tied on his side, a staff almost as big as mine with it's both ends tied to two loops of rope, one wrapped around his waist and the other near his neck. It too had designs carved on it, but I couldn't make them out from this far away.

     I tried to go into hypertime, but I didn't have enough energy. Moonscales flew towards Bloodshed, but he looked at her and suddenly she froze in midair. I was in her mind, so I could tell that she felt a force on her body, probably from Bloodshed's staff. I could sense something wrong in it, in it I got the feeling that I get when I am near people, as if I could sense it's mind, it's presence. It was in Bloodshed's control, but *something* was wrong. As of it had a soul of it's own.

*"Yes, you recognise it, don't you?",*Bloodshed said as he faced me, as if it was reading my mind. But how was that possible? I mean, I know that Bloodshed was a brainjacker, but reading an alchemist's mind? Does that mean that the king was somewhere near? Was *he* reading my mind?

"*You made it, after all",* he continued.

*"Wait, what do you mean*I *made it? Did Schen make it? Is this the thing the Indian alchemists were working on?"*

*"Aahhh"*, Moonscales said,  *"it's hurting me".*Sure enough, Bloodshed was willing the staff to squeeze her. I forced it to stop,  and it did. Moonscales fell, and Bloodshed winced as he tried to crush her again. So the staff only removed his limitations, in the end he was only using his own energy. I was still too strong for him.

*"What is that? ",*I asked.

*"I know that you can feel it, the energy in this staff. Doesn't it feel different?"*

*"It feels alive",*I replied.

*"You are aware that souls are made of energy, right? Then what makes them different from normal energy?"*

*"What?"*

*"They are programmed."*

     Bloodshed looked at the ceiling and it exploded, with tons of stone and rubble crashing just in front of us. Among the dust, I realised that he was about to fly away and if he did, then the King's plan would be successful. On instinct, I willed some of the dust and rubble to disperse, making a hole in the wall of rubble. I willed the ropes to break and the staff fell. Before Bloodshed could react, I threw some stone and rubble towards him. It missed him by a hair's length, and he probably decided that it was best for him to leave the staff and fly away. After he was gone and just before I was about to will the staff to come to me, someone said, "There they are!"

     A zombie jumped in from the hole in the ceiling at the other side of the rubble. Not exactly a *zombie,*more like a decayed body without a soul. I could tell that electrical signals were induced in it's mind by someone else. Also the decayed parts were temporarily healed by regenerating those cells that would live until the brain had signals in it. Suddenly the hole that I had made in the rubble wall collapsed and I feel on my knees. I had already used to much energy and holding up tons of rock took it's toll on me. And Moonscales was in no shape to fight. Well, at least the zombie was trapped.

     Then I noticed a hooded figure at the doorway behind us. Perhaps the one who was controlling the zombie. It was wearing a robe similar to the sorcerers only it was black. It took off its hood and the face I saw was so scarred and blackened with soot that he probably lived right here in this forest. Then five more hooded figures came down the stairs. Five of them, including the one who had come in first raised their hands, and five zombies followed on the stairs.

"You wanted a body, didn't you Raai?", the one in the front who had come first, probably their leader said.

"Yes, chief", the one who hadn't called a zombie said.

"How about this one?" He pointed to me.

"Will do, chief", Raai took off his hood and smiled. His face was also blackened like the leader, but wasn't as scarred.

*"Get out of there",*Bear said in my mind, "*these are necromancers of the Abujmarh forest. You are in no shape to fight them. Get Moonscales and get out of there"*

But I couldn't. I didn't have enough energy to even stand up. I braced myself for death as a zombie picked up a dead elf's sword and was about to cut off my head, but a blast of heat burnt through it's skin, and it collapsed.

"Ah", one of the necromancers was about to fall, but their leader caught him.

"Who dares?!", the leader shouted.

     A sorcerer came from behind the necromancers along with a group of soldiers of various species including slayers, other sorcerers, some civilised necromancers and a dragon behind them. The dragon blocked the view, so I couldn't tell if there were any more soldiers behind.

"Ah, Tror. My old enemy."

"Get out of here, Ras. You have no business here", the sorcerer said.

"No business? This is my forest!"

"Not today. Get out before I order them to kill you"

      Ras, the leader of the necromancers grunted as he and his team climbed up the stairs. He snarled at Tror as he passed him and squeezed past the dragon, which was a little smaller than Moonscales.

     Two slayers came from the group and helped me up. I motioned them to walk me towards Moonscales.

*"Are you alright?",*I asked.

*"I'm fine",* she replied as she tried to get up.

*"So, is this the army that you spoke of?"*

*"Yes. That is lieutenant Tror. An excellent warrior and the leader of this unit. After me, he's second in command."*

     The slayers took me to the entrance where lieutenant Tror helped me climb.

"Pleasure to meet you, lieutenant", I said.

"The pleasure is mine", he replied.

     The dragon walked back out of the stone entrance in the forest followed by Tror's soldiers, then me and Moonscales. I was surprised to find all sorts of creatures working together, werewolves were guarding when slayers were cooking for the sorcerers and necromancers. This unit was at least twice as big as the King's unit we had just encounterd. As the crowd saw us coming out, a lot of talking started and people started to croud around the entrance trying to get a glimpse of the very first and only alchemist they would ever see.

"That's enough", Tror said. "Let him rest now"

     We rested in makeshift tents made by the unit which were obviously meant for the army and hence were the farthest thing from cozy. As I laid on the army style bunk bed, I couldn't help but wonder about that staff. What did Bloodshed mean by 'souls are programmed'? If the staff was programmed similar to a soul, the implications of this could be limitless. Did the king plan to use the technology to create a new soul? If so, what did he mean my incapacitating the Gods? Was the purpose of that staff only to remove limitations on a soul and nothing else? If the Indian alchemists were experimenting on this, they wouldn't have stopped here. They surely would've tried to make a soul. I was almost tempted to tell Moonscales or Tror to dig through the rubble and take it out for studying. But if it was important for the King's plan, then maybe it's better if it stayed there. Maybe someone should stay here to guard it. After about half an hour of thinking, a slayer came to ask me if I was ready to go. I nodded and followed him out.

    I found Tror near one of the tents almost randomly blabbing names and orders for the soldiers to pack their bags and take all the stuff.

"How are you feeling now, sir?", he asked.

"Better. But don't call me sir"

"What do I call you then?"

"Call me Aman. And I was thinking, whatever the king wanted to find is still here. So wouldn't it be better if someone stayed to guard that?" I pointed to the brick entrance.

"Hmm, you are right. I will appoint someone right away." He looked towards the sky and shouted, "Aurum!"

     The dragon I had seen earlier flew towards us and landed on a clear space among the trees, one of the few left after putting up the tents. As it walked towards us, I saw that he had glittering golden scales, probably why he was named Aurum. He stood in front of us and bent his neck in a bowing gesture.

"What do you have to report?", Tror asked.

"*Nothing, the King's men can't be seen anywhere near the forest, so the unit inside was probably the only one. The necromancers are regrouping, but have stopped at a safe distance. They are no threat to us."*

I could sense Bear in Tror's mind translating Aurum's thoughts for him. So that's how dragons used to communicate.

*"*Ok, good. I want you to bring back supplies from the Chhattisgarh base and set up a guard post here. Then stay here along with Suraj's squad"

*"Yes sir",*he replied and flew away.

"I should go back to the goblin market to plan my next attack", I said.

"Yes, of course. But before you go, Suraj!"

     A slayer came from a nearby tent with a large plate in his hand. On the plate was food. *Real* food, not the herbs or fruits I was eating these few weeks. And on top of that, the food was Indian. *Roti* with vegetables and some rice.

"Not everyone here was born a soldier.", Tror explained. "Some soldiers, mostly slayers were not told about the existance of other, you know, fairy-tale creatures until they reach a certain age after which their parents start their training. Until that day, these slayers live like humans and most of them, including Suraj here are extremely good cooks. I know that you are Indian and would want to eat Indian food, so I asked Suraj to make some for you. You must get your energy back for the long journey."

     Not that I needed the energy, as I had to make the return journey on Moonscales' back. No need for hyperspeed now. But I gladly accepted the food. Suraj directed me to a tent where I sat down to eat. I was so engrossed in the food that I hadn't noticed that Suraj stood at the entrance the whole time. When I was done, he asked, "How was it sir? I hope you enjoyed it".

"Yes, thank you. But don't call me sir. I must go now."

     I went out and called Moonscales in my mind. She walked out of a large central tent built behind some trees which was hidden from my sight due to the camouflaged cloth.

*"I see that you have enjoyed the stay",*she motioned to the oil stains on my, I mean Bear's t-shirt.

     I tried to wipe them off, but couldn't. Then I remembered about my powers, and willed the oil out of the fabric. It got sucked out and vaporised.

*"What were you doing?",*I asked*.*

*"Talking about what our spies have found out about that staff. No one knows much. It appears that this plan was known only to his most trusted dragons."*

*"Spies? I mean, you have mentioned them before, but if the king is linked to everyone's mind, how can someone double cross him?"*

*"He can't keep track of everyone's thoughts at once. Also, all our spies are either brainjacker slayers or dragons. If they lay low, they can silently shield their thoughts from him."*

*"And what of this unit? What will they do next?"*

*"Tror leads this unit with the aim of finding and taking down the King's bases around the world and slow him down until we, I mean you and Sakhi succeed in your, uh, quest."*

*"But we have won, haven't we? Whatever this staff was, it was an important part of his plan of stopping the Gods. We have the staff now. Game over."*

*"I really hope so, but that is just wishful thinking. The king could already do whatever that staff could and you saw that yourself. Most probably we have only slowed him down. Soon he will be strong enough to keep the Gods at bay. Protect his army from them. Judging from the rate at which he is gaining power, we only have weeks before the war. He is already strong enough to send you dreams, something only Gods can do. I have never seen any alchemist do that."*

*"It's getting late. We must go now",*I said. It was five thirty. More than four hours since we arrived. I climbed on her back and we flew back towards the Sahyadris.

     On the way, as I sat on her back feeling the wind on my face and thinking about today's events, my eyes felt heavy and I slowly dozed off.

     I dreamt about the warehouse, but this time it was bright. The windows were opened and I could hear the chirping of birds outside. The king wasn't here, but then again he probably never was. All my other dreams were designed by him so that he could communicate with me and could blackmail me over my parents at the same time. The knight was at the centre of the room facing my dream conscience. My parents were still tired to the pole, but their condition was much worse. Their pulse was weak, and I could sense the King's presence in their body trying to keep the poison at bay, and if he lost concentration, they would die instantly. Near them was a newer object. The trap with Sakhi still in it. Her condition wasn't any different from my parents. She was unconscious, but I couldn't tell what was wrong with her. I couldn't sense anything inside the trap.

*"What have you done to her?",*I asked.

*"Nothing. We haven't troubled her since we caught her",*knight replied.

*"Liar! Why is she unconscious then?"*

*"We also didn't have to feed her", h*e replied with a devious smile that also resembled a snarl on his dragon face.

"What do you want from me?!", I said aloud.

*"My king wants to eliminate all obstacles in his path. You and Moonscales' army are the biggest ones. We want to make a deal."*

*"What deal?"*

*"Your parents in return for your life. Also the guarantee that Sakhi stays alive."*

     The offer seemed appealing for a moment, but when I thought about it, only the king benifited from it.

*"But you will keep her in the trap. And with me gone, no one would be able to stop the king. And even if I give my life, what guarantee do I have that he wouldn't kill my parents or Sakhi once he rises to power?"*

*"What choice do you have? Even without the staff of creation, my king would figure out the truth eventually. Then it's only a matter of time before he is again the king of the world. But your parents would be dead by then, and he would kill you* and *Sakhi. At least this way, you are the only one who dies."*

I gave it a thought. He was right. Except knowing the dragons' mind, I had no solid lead on him. And I was going to find the knight's mind next anyway. This way he would tell me where he is himself and save me the trouble.

"*Ok. Where are you? How do I find you?"*

*"You don't. All you have to do is drop your mental shields, and let my king kill you. Once he knows that you are dead, he will heal your parents and let them go."*

*"NO! Definitely not. I want to see my parents healed first. After that I will do whatever he wants."*

He had a mental conversation with the king. I noticed that the king wasn't talking to me personally this time. He was telling everything to the knight. And even during their conversation, I felt the poison surging deeper into my parents' veins. So keeping the poison at bay was draining his strength. Probably why he didn't face me.

*"Ok. But your parents are in no condition to be moved. Come to this place. And come alone. If my king finds anyone else coming with you, your parents die."* Just like my previous dream, the address of the warehouse automatically came into my mind. Before I could reply, I heard Moonscales' voice saying *"we're here.",*and I woke up.

     As soon as my vision cleared, I heard Moonscales scream, *"Aaahhhh",*but I interpreted the scream in two ways. One, a dragon-like growl, and the other a distinguishable "Aah" in my head. I tried to locate the source of her pain, and saw cuts near her left wing,  as if something had dug it's nails in her. I looked back and saw nine zombie dragons on our tail. Each dragon had two necromancers riding it.

*"Are you all right?",*I asked while healing her wound.

*"I'll live"*she said while dodging another attack. *"They followed us all the way from Chhattisgarh."*

*"But why didn't they attack us before?",*I asked as she dove down to dodge another attack.

*"It's one of their strategies",*she replied, *"Whenever they are hunting for dragons, they let the dragon fly for as long as they can so that he or she becomes tired, but when the necromancer controling the dragon on which they are following gets tired, the one sitting behind takes it's place. Ahhh!",*she winced as another dragon bit through her leg. She pushed the dragon away and both the necromancers fell towards the mountains below. The one controlling the dragon tried desperately to bring it down and get back on it, but they were falling too fast. As soon as they hit the ground, the dragon collapsed and it's lifeless body followed it's dead controllers.

*"Now if you are done asking questions, kill them please!"*

I went into hypertime and tried to acknowledge the situation. The eight dragons left were organised into a formation. Two of them were above us, diving down whenever Moonscales dropped her guard. Three of them were circling just ahead of us blocking our way towards the market. Two were on our sides limiting her maneuvers to diving and pulling up. The last one had their leader, Ras, riding at a safe distance behind us. An excellent strategy, except they were fighting an alchemist. I was about to shoot a shockwave at Ras when something hit Moonscales from the front. I turned around just in time to see Fury fly away. Thankfully, it was a wild lunge and Moonscales suffered no serious injuries. I cursed myself for not noticing him, but it wasn't actually my fault. Fury was in hyperspeed and was flying normally with respect to my faster brain. And *normal*dragon speed was too fast for my eyes. I imagined holding Fury's throat and he jerked his head upward as if he was suffocating. Then I threw him towards the ground.

     Just then I noticed Razor attaccking from above, about to dive towards us. I imagined squeezing his heart planning to kill him. Then I realised something. *I had killed a dragon!*

If Fury was really dead, did that mean that I had a destiny now? But if destinies are made by the Gods, would they make my destiny that I stop the king? But then again if they could do it, they would've already done it. So does it mean that I'm allowed to kill dragons without changing my destiny? I looked below and tried to find Fury's body. I saw it in a crater formed by the force of him falling in the speed of a bullet. But among the dust settling, no, not settling, *blowing.*I was in hypertime. So the dust had just left the crater in normal time. Anyway, among that dust, I saw his wings moving in slow motion. So he was alive. I guessed that I would never get the chance to test my theory.

"AAHHH" Razor hit us. My hesitation with Fury had cost me two seconds of distraction. I guess two seconds are enough for a hypomind dragon.

     One of his talons hit my leg causing a sharp pain that jolted me out of hypertime. Me and Moonscales fell. Thankfully, she wasn't wounded except for the bite on her leg and some scrapes on her scales (They used to heal and grow like skin, so I guess the scrapes count as a wound), but I was seriously wounded. I could tell that healing that wound would take a lot of my energy, and I wouldn't have enough left to go back to hypertime. With Razor still in hyperspeed, not being in hypertime was suicide. But the pain made me lose my concentration. I couldn't be in hypertime for more than a few seconds. And that's few seconds in hypertime. So only about half a second actually.

     The necromancers turned their heads in confusion as I noticed a wisp of wind below us where Razor stopped his dive, and I could make out a chocolate-brownish red mass, the colour of Razor's scales. I knew that he was going to strike again, and I only had a millisecond to do something.

     Almost instinctively, I threw a shockwave at the blurry outline of Razor, and I hit him. He got knocked out of hyperspeed and crashed on the ground. We were still falling, and I willed us to slow down just before we were about to hit the ground. We slowed to a halt hovering just an inch above the ground. I set us both down, and winced as I tried to land on my feet. I almost fell, but Moonscales caught me on her neck. She knew that I had no more energy left, and the necromancers were just about to attack again. So she took advantage of the distraction due to Razor's attack, helped me on her back with her neck and swiftly flew us into the cave. Apparently the necromancers were reluctant to enter. She flew into the maze of tunnels but this time into a much larger entrance which opened near the roof of the goblin market, and landed in the training area of Bear's shop.

*"What did he think would happen?",*I asked as Bear healed me.

*"What do you mean?",*he asked.

*"He sent Fury and Razor. They had no protection from my mind control. They were only hypominds. They weren't supposed to be any challenge at all. What did he think* *would've happened by sending them?"*

*"It worked, didn't it?"*

*"Yes I know, but it wasn't supposed to."*

*"I guess he figured that Moonscales would get wounded by the necromancers, which she did, and then there would be no one to kill them, as you can't. Plus, they were hypominds. That puts Moonscales out of the equation. Wait, what do you mean they had no protection from mind control? They have the king, don't they?"*

*"No, no, he's too preoccupied with that poison."*

*"What poison?"*  He looked at Moonscales with a puzzled look.

*"That part even I don't know.",*Moonscales said.

*"The poison he has used on my parents is too powerful. He had to use all his concentration to keep them alive. We only have about twelve hours, and even that's pushing it."*

*"And how do you know that?",*Moonscales asked. I showed them my dream.

*"Giving your life is not a solution. If anything, it will only make matters worse.",*Bear said.

*"Except...",*Moonscales said in a thoughtful tone, *"You don't plan on giving your life, do you?"*

*"Not if everything goes as planned."*

*"So what's the plan, and where has he called you?"*

*"It's an abandoned warehouse somewhere* *on Washington street near Hudson river in New York. Before I tell you the plan, I need to ask something of you, Bear. Will you..."*

*"No!",*he said.

*"I haven't said anything yet..."*

*"I'm reading your mind. I know what you want. And my answer is no. I mean, it's a good plan, but you can do it without me."*

*"Yes, but what if he doesn't do it himself? What if he asks me to?"*

*"Ahem",*Moonscales said (cleaning your throat in your mind. Weird). *"Would someone tell me the plan, too? I can't read minds, you know. Well, not of alchemists at least".*Bear told her.

*"Hmm, it might work, but Aman is right. He will certainly ask him to. You have to come."*

*"I can't leave, you know that Moon."*

*"Don't call me that! And you*can *leave. We need you in this fight, Bear. I mean, I know you are helping us by shielding is from the King's mind control, but we also physically need you."*

*"We've had this discussion before Moon, I mean Moonscales. I am not leaving. I know that as soon as I keep one foot out of the market, the Gods would kill me."*

*"The Gods are on*our *side, Bear. They know that we need you in the fight against the king."*

*"No, they have chosen Aman and the slayer for that. They don't need me. They want me either trapped or dead."*

*"So you're not gonna come?",*I asked.

*"No".*

I sighed. "*Anyways, I'm tired. Let's go to sleep."*

I went to the room, but the double-decker bed reminded me of Sakhi, of our first kiss. When she kissed me, I had thought that it would be the most cherished moment of my life. Now, thinking about it hurt a lot. If my plan worked, then I would have her back. I looked at the wall-less clock. Ten forty five pm. I had to get some sleep. I needed all my energy and concentration for tomorrow.

     Thankfully, I had a dreamless sleep. But I couldn't sleep for long. Worry and excitement made me wake up at about three  am. As I went out to the shop, I saw that Moonscales was still awake.

*"Why did you wake up?",*she asked, *"We still have an hour to leave."*

*"I know, but... wait, weren't we supposed to leave at four thirty?"*

*"I know, but while I was out giving your orders to the slayers, I saw that the necromancers are still outside. I guess their previous victory gave them a lot of overconfidence."*

*"And Fury and Razor?"*

*"Nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they went back as soon as they heard about our deal. This proves that you were right. The king isn't connected to anyone's mind right now. Their communication system seems to be slower. Anyway, I thought it would be better if we kill the necromancers before we leave."*

*"Oh, come on Moonscales. You underestimate me. I could kill them all in seconds."*

*"I know, but seeing how you hesitated in Chhattisgarh..."*

*"I was confused, then. I needed time to absorb and process whatever was happening. Not anymore. Now, I'll kill anyone that comes in the way of getting my parents and Sakhi."*

*"Hmm, you never fail to surprise me. Sometimes you remind me of Schen, but sometimes it is as if you are a different person entirely."*

I didn't know how to react to that, so I asked her about the plan. *"So what did the Slayers say? And the sorcerers?"*

*"Well, they can't deny your order..."*

*"You make it sound as if*I'm *their leader, not you."*

*"Well, they do consider you as their superior. You are a lot more powerful than everyone in our army. You are their only hope. They'll do anything for you. By the way, now that you are awake, eat something. You'll need all your strength."*

     Although I was full and had a lot of energy left (and not to mention, sick of those fruits), I figured out would be a good idea to have some backup energy in my staff. Although knight would almost surely disarm me as soon as I get in, no harm in trying. So I summoned my staff and charged it, then ate some mangoes to counter my weakness. I could feel the energy stored in the staff, in fact I could even control it. It reminded me of that staff in Chhattisgarh, the staff of creation. Only this energy was random, and not moving. The energy in that staff was flowing as it was used, exactly like the 'bits' in a computer. I *had*to study that staff. Perhaps after its all over. Assuming I survive the day I come face-to-face with the king. Assuming I survive*today.*I had to focus on today, the rest will come later.

An hour later, Bear said, *"The slayers are there, they found the warehouse and are waiting in a safe distance. The sorcerers will be there in a few minutes."*

*"Ok then",*I said, "*We'll leave right away".*

     In spite of our last efforts of trying to convince Bear to come with us, he didn't. So I and Moonscales left.

     Standing on the peak of the mountain, I could sense the necromancers scattered on the nearby mountains keeping an eye on the cave through which we had entered after our dogfight (or dragon fight). Obviously they didn't know that there were at least a dozen more entrances to the market. They hadn't noticed us coming out, and even Moonscales going out to the slayers. So naive, so useless. Seeing them made my anger come out. Fighting a pointless battle when they have the choice to be neutral, in fact even now they are on no one's side. Fighting for stupid things like revenge and vengeance. I no longer felt hesitation, only anger and hatred. I went into all of their's minds, which they had revealed to me on our first fight. So they hadn't even bothered to call for reinforcements. They never knew what hit them. I willed their brain to stop, and they just died. Moonscales looked at me with concern, but I didn't regret killing them at all. On any other day, the power to kill anyone only by thinking it would've terrified me, but not today. I was cursing my fate till now, but now I wanted someone to blame. I wanted revenge.

     I didn't want to waste energy in going all the way to New York in hyperspeed, but I had no choice. I was out of time. But I couldn't take Moonscales with me this time, dragging her with me halfway around the world would literally consume me. I had to do this on my own. I hoped that the sorcerers would do their job till I get there. I said goodbye to Moonscales, who I couldn't help but notice was getting more, well, natural with me. More candid and less calculating. I guess she had me completely figured out, or maybe had stopped trying to figure me out once she made sure that she could trust me. Whatever the reason, she talked to me as a friend.

      After a few quick stops in China, Japan and California, I finally reached New York at about 2 pm. IST. It was still dark there. As I landed on the street where the sorcerers and slayers were waiting for me about two blocks away from the warehouse, I summoned Bear's axe and absorbed it's energy. But even then I wasn't full. You can say that about eighty percent. It will have to do.

     The soldiers were on the other side of the road, and the scene before me was weirder than anything I had ever seen before, which is a lot considering all the things I had been through these few weeks. I had never been to New York, but the busy streets with busier people indifferent to their surroundings were just like Mumbai, albeit cleaner and a lot less congested. What was weird was the group of sorcerers clad in robes and garments of silk leaning over their staffs and chit chatting with slayers that looked normal, wore normal clothes but held weapons that *definitely*did not match with their attire. And the humans just walked past them without giving a second thought to the skinny and tall Indian kid who flew towards them at the speed of sound and landed in a busy street so early in the morning.

     I crossed the road and was greeted by Suraj, apparently the only Indian in the group.

"Is it done?", I asked.

"Yes", he replied. "The sorcerers finished the tunnel only about half an hour ago."

"And the slayers? Do they have the skills that I had requested?"

"Or best hypomind, brainjacker, shadoflo slayers. Most of them are even telekinetic."

"Good. Do they know what to do?"

"Yes. Moonscales have explained us all. We were only waiting for you. When do we go in?"

"Now"

"Right now? Are you sure you don't want to eat something first? You have flown all the way from India."

"So have you.", I pointed out. "And you probably didn't get any sleep too".

"We're used to it. Besides we had a lot of time to eat. And you are the one who needs the energy the most."

"I know, but we don't have time. Tell them to take their positions. The sorcerers can go now."

"Are you sure, sir?", one of the sorcerers asked. "Me and my pals would be happy to stay and help." He had a British accent, so it took me some time to figure out what he meant.

"You can't do anything. Sorcerers can't move through walls. There is no way you can enter the warehouse unseen."

"Ok sir, as you wish."

     He turned towards the rest of the sorcerers, did a gesture with his finger as if he was making a cyclone with his hand and said, "C'mon mates, time to go. Um, how do we go back?"

"How did you come here?"

"The telekinetic slayers gave us a lift." He turned to Suraj, "you're not givin' us a ride back home, are you mate?"

"No, sorry", Suraj said. "Not enough time."

"Guess we'll have to take the jet then" He made a slab of earth rise on the street which blocked the path of a bus and all the sorcerers got in. In their robes, they looked like they were characters of some play and were going to their performance. Then the British sorcerer put the earth back inside and the bus left. Soon after, the Gods repaired the cracks on the street and I left.

     The warehouse looked normal from the outside, but I could sense the knight and two other minds, my parents inside. It was a building smaller than nearby ones, and a bit broader. There were a few closed shutters throughout the front of the building, and a large open door in the centre. I entered through the door into a dark room relatively small compared to the one in my dream and illuminated only by the light from the street lamps outside, there were no windows and the bulbs weren't lit. There was a lot of dust on the floor, and the light revealed large tracks on the dust that indicated that a dragon had passed through here. As I went further inside, I found the room in which the knight was waiting for me.

     The room itself was huge, its height revealed by incandescent bulbs hung from the ceiling at least two storeys high. It was probably meant for storing either something huge, or something in a large quantity. The other 'room' I had seen in my dream, where Sakhi killed the king was actually only a wall built to separate the goods. My parents were tied at the opposite end of the room, and their condition looked worse than my dreams. With my, well, dream sense I could tell that they were beaten, perhaps tortured even, but their wounds were hidden or blurry in my dreams. Now, I could see a dragon's claw marks on my father's face and on both his arms, and so was the condition of my mother. They were also beaten by other species, and that enraged me even more. If the king would've come in front of me then, then I would have killed him myself. To hell with destiny.

      Near them was the trap, and Sakhi was awake this time. She sat with her back supported on the bars, and was too weak to even move. She flashed a smile, but it turned into a wince. I noticed cuts on her shoulder and forehead, even her dress was torn from many places. Did that mean that the knight could harm her even when she was inside? I hoped that it doesn't affect my plan.

     The knight was standing between me and them so that I had the view of both Sakhi and my parents on either sides of him. His scales dimly reflected the light from the bulbs, and sounds of traffic and chirping of birds from a nearby pet shop seemed to make the scene almost normal, but at the same time realisation of its seriousness and importance gave it an eerie effect. He was not in hypertime as a symbol of peace, just as I had expected. Any sign of aggressiveness or hostility from either of the sides, and the deal was off. Things were in his favour anyway. Why would he risk being in hypertime?

*"Summon your spear",*he said, and I did.

"*Throw it here",*I rolled it towards him, and he picked it up by his tail.

*"You do realise that even an hour of delay would've cost you your parents' life."*

*"New York is on the other side of earth. I came as fast as I could."*

*"What, you came by a plane? You are an alchemist!"*

*"You asked me to be here, I'm here. Now tell your king to heal my parents."*

*"Heal them yourself".*Damn it! This is what I feared. If I use all of my energy in healing them, then I won't have energy left for anything else.

*"But I have just gone halfway around the world in hyperspeed! I have no energy left"*

*"It doesn't look like it.*Yo*u look as if you were in no hurry at all. Had some breakfast on the way, did you? Was it more important than your parents' life? Heal them yourself, or the deal is off. Both about your parents' life..."*he slowly moved towards the trap, put my spear through the bars and on Sakhi's throat *"And hers."*

*"No, wait, don't. I'll heal them"*

As I concentrated on their wounds, I realised that I needed a new plan. My original plan was that knight was supposed to hold my parents on his blade, not Sakhi. It was based on the wrong assumption that anything that goes through the bars of the trap losses it's power, so no one would trouble Sakhi. Well, I wasn't completely wrong, I could tell that even as only a part of his tail was inside, he lost his ability of hypertime. Then, when the king heals my parents, I make them fall through the ground into the tunnel, or should I say cave-in where slayers were waiting to catch them. These, to, were all brainjackers and shadoflos. Their brainjacking ability combined with King's momentary weakness hid them from him. Then they were supposed to come out of the ground and assault knight, the element of surprise mixed with my restrictions would prevent him from going into hypertime and no matter how strong he is, without his power he is only a normal dragon and no match for a dozen slayers. Even if he had asked me to heal my parents myself, there was a fifty-fifty chance that the slayers manage to save my parents and kill knight and everything goes according to plan. But now, no matter how many times I play the next few minutes' scenario in my mind, there were only three outcomes to this situation- if I call the slayers after I heal my parents and they manage to save them, then knight kills Sakhi. If I engage knight and manage to kill him, my parents are dead. If I do as he asks, then I die. I had to think of something else, quick.

     I needed time to think, but going into hypertime was not a good idea. I needed every electron volt of my energy. So I had no choice but to start the healing. I concentrated, and the scratches and scars on their body slowly began to fade. I focused all my efforts on the poison, and it started to break down in their blood. I wished that I could heal only the poison, but I didn't know how. Even Bear or Moonscales didn't know. Healing, whether done by healing-dragons, slayers, sorcerers or alchemists, is only boosting someone's metabolism. We can't manipulate anything at the cellular level, which also prohibits more sophisticated operations. But researching about it was on my to-do list. I was really close at figuring out a faster and more precise way to heal, but I hadn't gotten anywhere except a few theories I never had the time to test. I'd think about it later. Right now, I had bigger problems at hand.

     There was energy in my staff, but the knight had it. What if I could somehow transfer that energy to Sakhi? A part of the staff was out of the trap, and I tried to slightly nudge the energy inside, and it worked. The energy outside the trap pushed the part inside and a little colour returned to her face. The knight didn't notice it, but she felt it. We shared a gaze for a moment, and she understood. She nodded as much as she could with the spearhead on her neck. Suddenly, my knees buckled and I fell. My parents were healed, but I was out of energy.

*"Good",*knight said, *"Now let my king kill you"*

     I lifted my head and looked at Sakhi, then yelled with all my might "NOW!" both aloud and through brain-talk to the slayers. I willed the energy into her body, and suddenly she gripped the spear and yanked it out of knight's hold. At the same time, the slayers came in and Suraj was the first to attack. He tackled knight in hyperspeed and both of them crashed into the seperating wall. The king wasn't going to die there now. Sakhi used the spear to break open the lock, which was magic-proof but apparently not Sakhi-proof. The door opened and she went out to join the slayers.

"Don't kill him!", she shouted, "I need to be a hypermind if I hope to match the king."

     I looked at the open door of the trap, and thought about all those times I had put her life in danger. She was supposed to kill the king easily, and all of this wasn't even meant to happen. But I changed all of that. Knowingly or unknowingly, I put her in harm's way. So maybe, just maybe, if I get out of her life, then everything would be back to what it was supposed to be.

     I couldn't resist thinking... what if I was trapped instead of her? Her original destiny was that she kills the king for revenge over her parents. But her destiny was changed, so if I was trapped, she would want revenge for me too. She would come to save me, and hopefully kill the king. It doesn't matter if I don't survive, as long as she was safe. And of course, the world was free. I knew that she was meant to rule the world herself then, but it was the last thing I was thinking about at that time. It was worth a shot.

     I crawled towards the trap and inside. I turned and saw that the knight had overcome our surprise, but he was too wounded. A sword was sticking out of his back along with multiple cuts on his face, compliments of Sakhi. He was too disoriented to go in hypertime, but was still putting up a good fight. He was the first to notice me inside the trap, and smiled. With a loud growl and powerful push of his wings he thrust himself towards me, held the gate closed with his talons and flew away with me.

"No!" Sakhi yelled and threw my spear towards him, but it missed. Suraj and a few other slayers shot themselves in hyperspeed but he dodged. The telekinetic slayers tried to stop him, but they were too weak. Even together, they were no match for him. He flew towards a closed glass window and folded his wings before smashing through so that his reptilian body could just fit, and we were gone.

     If everything went according to plan now, then I had no other role to play in this story. From now on, the fate of the world rested on Sakhi's shoulders. My part of the story was over. The rest of the story was hers.

Or so I thought.