

“If you really must have a name, I suppose they call me Desperate Joe.”

“Why?”

The wizard thought about this for a while, and decided it didn’t merit a verbal answer. He continued walking up the grassy mountainside, leaning heavily on his cane. Down below in the valley, the river sparkled in a friendly way, and the little village beside it sent polite little plumes of smoke into the sky. High above the valley, the white dragon swam through the air, his long, smoky form undulating on the high breezes.

“Keep up,” said the wizard.

His apprentice, Timothy, said, “But why, though?”

“Because you’ll be left behind!”

“No! Why are you called Desperate Joe? Who calls you that? Is that your name?”

The wizard shrugged, then pointed at a purple mushroom by the side of the road. “Pick that one, it’s just the sort he’ll like.”

The apprentice gave an exasperated sigh and picked the mushroom, tossing it into his basket. “Who are these for, anyway?”

“Oh, you’ll see.”

“Are these magic mushrooms?”

“Oh yes, but you don’t want to eat them.”

“I don’t? Why not?”

“Because you’d die if you did.”

“I would?”

“You would.”

“But then, who are these for?”

“Keep up! We’re nearly there.”

“But—!” The apprentice hurried after his master, who had quickened his pace. “You can’t outrun my questions!”

“Less talk, more walk! I misjudged the time!”

“What time?”

“Oh, fiddlesticks! If I took the time to explain everything to you, nothing would get done. Keep. Up.”

The apprentice, struggling slightly with the weight of the basket, grunted, “I’m trying!”

“Oh,” said the wizard. “I see.” He thumped the basket with his staff, and it became weightless.

“You could do that the whole time?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“You are easier to manage when you’re on the brink of exhaustion. This way you won’t panic and spoil everything.”

“Panic? When? What? Why would I panic?”

“Oh, you’ll know when. And why, shortly. But don’t do it.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Panic!”

“Gah!”

“Now, I mean it. In a moment we’re going to face something you’ve never seen, and you’re going to want to panic. Don’t do it. Things will go badly if you do, and that’s never pleasant.”

“Should I cover my eyes?”

“No, this is a good learning opportunity.”

“Ok.”

“This way. Nearly there!”

The wizard led the way to a crack in the rocky mountain peak. He rapped three times upon the crack, and it blinked open, revealing a huge, dark pool of an eye. It was like black crystal, and in the center of it was an orb of gold. The eye turned to look at the apprentice, then at the wizard.

“Give him the mushrooms,” said the wizard.

“What? Him? Where? How? What mouth, it has?”

“Apprentice! Compose yourself. Give him the mushrooms. Politely.”

The apprentice came forward with the basket of mushrooms and placed it before the eye, bowing grandly as he did so. Then he backed away.

The mountain rumbled: “What is this?”

Unperturbed by the minor rockslides this utterance created, the wizard said, “It’s a basket of Purpuria.”

“I see that. What is it for? What do you want this time, Diatromedes?”

“Well, at noon, a friend of mine will be in town. I’d like you to meet him.”

“You would.”

“I would.”

“Are you certain of that?”

“Oh yes. Quite certain.”

“What has he done to deserve the grace of my presence?”

“Well, he has conquered several of the nearby towns and cities, and he has styled himself as a merciless warlord, performing truly incredible atrocities in the name of his own pursuit of power.”

“I see. I shall come, then.”

“Excellent. You’re welcome to this batch of Purpuria; I have plenty of dried samples in my larder.”

The apprentice said, “You do!?”

“Hush,” said the wizard.

The mountain said, “I accept. Leave me.”

The wizard made a mouth-zipping motion when the apprentice opened his mouth to speak, and hustled back down the mountainside.

When they had nearly reached the village, the apprentice said, “Master, what was all that about?”

“Weren’t you listening? You’ll understand at noon.”

“I will?”

“If you have eyes and ears, yes, you will. And so will the rest of this land.”

“Is your real name Diatromedes?”

“No, that’s just something the mountains call me.”

“What does it mean?”

“Stubborn pebble. Now go away.”

“But master, who is your friend? Why would you be friends with such a warlord? I don’t understand! Is he coming *here?*”

“You will see at noon!”

“But what were the mushrooms for? How can the mountain care about the mushrooms that we picked off his back?”

The wizard’s left eyeball twitched and a tiny jet of flame shot forth from his pupil, but he sighed, and said, “Purpuria. Use the books. Figure it out!”

The apprentice itched and danced with anticipation all through the rest of his chores. Nine o’clock came, and found the wizard standing at the western edge of town, facing the endless plain of the steppe, and a hazy plume of dust upon the horizon. Ten o’clock came, and he still stood there, staring away into the distance. Eleven o’clock came, and at last Timothy saw how near the plume of dust had come.

The moment he had the free time to do so, he rooted through his master’s bookshelves and found an illustrated guide to fungi, and read the following description:

“The Purpuria mushroom is a parasitical fungi native to magic geological regions. As with all fungi, the network of mycelia running between the fungi, unseen in the soil, spreads far deeper and farther than any visible surface manifestation of the fungal colony might seem to indicate. Every Purpuria mushroom growing in a given region is part of the same infestation, the roots of which carry the force and will of a malicious, greedy demon. By sapping the mountain’s energy, they further their own growth. Where there are nodes of power, the energy overflow is stored in crowning bodies: the external mushroom, protruding from the soil. Purpuria mushrooms are widely used as sources of raw magical energy, sufficient to kill ordinary persons and even strong mages. By drying the mushrooms, one can concentrate the power in an even more compact form, then powderize, mingle with essences of dilution (see Appendix C) and an emulsifying agent (see Appendix D), flavor as desired, and drink, as both a curative and as an arcane enhancement. It is important to drink the resulting potion sparingly. (see Appendix A for further discussion of WIELDING TOO MUCH ENERGY)”

This did not make him less anxious.

By noon, the vast unnumbered armies of Ashrak the Destroyer were arrayed around the village. A single warrior, man and horse both veiled and robed in trailing red silk, trotted out from the line and met the wizard on the field before the village. The warrior held out a scroll. The wizard took it. The warrior rode back into the massed army.

The wizard opened the scroll, glanced at it, threw it over his shoulder, and said, “Come along, Tim.”

Tripping over himself, Timothy followed the wizard right into the enemy encampment. They walked among the enemy horses, and found the tents gathered at the heart of the swarm, and in the largest tent they found Ashrak the

Destroyer, bound in leather and furs, his black antlers scraping the silks of his tent. He sat before a table inlaid with gemstones, depicting a map of the world. Timothy recognized the four major continents; Nollest, Swest, Nolwest, and Seast. On this table many miniature figurines sat in key strategic positions, marking castles and armies and, occasionally, monsters.

Ashrak waved a dismissive hand. One of the two robed and veiled advisors standing at either side of his black wooden throne came forward, hand on an ornate staff, and said, "Who are you, who comes forward to surrender on behalf of this village?"

"Oh, I'm not surrendering," said the wizard.

This seemed to genuinely perplex Ashrak the Destroyer. It also perplexed Timothy, who wondered suddenly if the wizard had gone mad.

"Why, then, have you come here, before Ashrak the Destroyer?"

"I came to give Ashrak and his armies a warning," said the wizard, as the mountain behind him opened up its eye and began to move. "I came to tell him and his men to run."

The apprentice afterwards remembered only the whirlwind of hooves and the flutter of tents, and rivers of fire and lightning and stone and wind. He remembered running, even as the wizard reached out and shouted for him to stand still.

Then there was only darkness.

When he woke, he was lying in an ash-strewn wasteland, still smoking in places. The grass was gone for miles around, and the wildfires still were burning in the distance. The village was completely unharmed, and all its fields were green and unburnt. The wizard was standing over him, smiling kindly.

"On your feet, Tim."

"What happened?"

"The mountain came for lunch, as I asked him to."

"Why did it obey you?"

"He owed me a favor."

"Oh," said Timothy. He looked around the sizzling desolation and saw the charred and scattered corpses of many men and horses.

"Come along," said the wizard. "We must practice your resurrections."

"We're going to bring them back? Won't they just try to kill us again?"

"We will bring back only the good souls. The world can always use more of those."

"Won't they hate us anyway? We did just kill them."

"Oh, no. I have a feeling they'll be grateful. Being dead and guilty by association isn't pleasant, let me tell you."

"Have you ever been dead before?"

"Keep up. Come on. I sense a good one, just ahead."

Timothy hurried to catch up to the wizard. They looked down together at the corpse of a young warrior, blackened nearly to charcoal. In death he had fused with his horse.

"What do you think?" The wizard asked, looking at Timothy.

“Probably easiest to bring him back as a centaur, right? Get both souls, since they’re fused anyway.”

“Good. Good lad. Yes, you’ll have to do that. Can you sense where they’ve ended up?”

Timothy hated crossing the veil. He looked into the hollow eye sockets of the dead man anyway.

His mind plunged into the ice.

Darkness swam around him, huge as the void. Tendrils of shadow twisted around him like seaweed.

The dead rider’s soul rose, kicking frantically. Around him, thunder and flame churned. Timothy pulled himself back, and staggered slightly.

“Take your time, lad. Crossing the veil’s no joke.”

Timothy nodded, massaging his temple. “He’s in Shalim’s grotto.”

“Indeed,” said the wizard.

“How come his god didn’t catch him?”

“He is too full of fear to search for the hand of his god.”

“But we can help him? Shalim won’t get mad?”

“If you think about it, it’s really less work for him. We’re just deferring the inevitable. Giving him a bit of a break.”

“Ok.”

“Are you ready to pull him out?”

“I guess so.”

“Anchor yourself well. And don’t forget your wards, they’re very important.”

“Yes, master.”

“I’ll be over here, giving you some room to work. Maybe we’ll find a few more good ones in this mess.”

“Master?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you really have to kill them all?”

“At my age, things upset me. I find myself in a position to make history respect the fact that I am upset. Today, a conquerer who thought he could slaughter his way across the kingdoms uncontested discovered that he was wrong. Like a miracle, my foul mood is cured.”

“If it bothers you so much, why don’t you go and save people more often?”

“You come talk to me about patrolling a planet when you’ve got a back like mine. Resurrection is exhausting, and it’s a thankless task in the long run. Sooner or later, Shalim takes what belongs to him. And people die by the thousands every day. Most of them slip too far into the beyond for anyone to retrieve them. Many are claimed by their gods, or by their worst demons. Speaking of which, you’d better hurry and pull him out. I’ve found five others we’ve got to get to.”

Timothy nodded. “Give me a second.”

The wizard stepped away, and closely examined a small beetle emerging from the ashes. He prodded the beetle with the end of his staff. Then, resting his staff in the crook of his elbow, he slapped his palms together and rubbed the sparks out to his fingertips, and flicked some onto the beetle with pinpoint

precision. The beetle instantly grew to the size of a footstool, and he promptly sat upon it. The beetle seemed not to notice.

Timothy turned a dial on the brass and crystal tablet at his belt, and magic circles etched themselves into the ashes at his feet. The shimmering energies of his wards surrounded him, shielding him from the eyes of certain deities and spirits.

He drove the root of his soul deep into the planet's core, and tethered himself to the latent energy that flowed around the world. Standing in a rigid, perfectly balanced posture, he lifted his soul out of his body.

With the eyes of his soul he stared into the sockets of the charcoal skull, and his gaze pierced the veil. In the darkness, he reached out the hand of his soul.

He felt nothing but the empty darkness. The soul he sought had sunk into the gloom, and webs of shadow-tendrils concealed him. The shadows tickled, and burned like ice in the dark.

Timothy reached, feeling blindly in the gloom.

"Come on... Come on! Where are you?"

Two golden eyes opened in the darkness. A voice like softened thunder boomed: "I am right here. Where are you?"

"Oh," said Timothy. He managed to keep his voice from trembling. "Shalim. Hello. Forgive me for trespassing on your domain, I sought only to save you the trouble of transporting this soul today. I hope that's alright?"

Shalim's eyes smiled. "I forgive you. Thank you for asking kindly."

"Is he still in here?"

"No god has claimed him yet. Would you like me to bring him to you?"

"Yes please."

"Here."

The pale spirits of horse and man rose, entangled, forgetting their forms.

"You will need to concentrate hard," said Shalim.

"I will," said Timothy.

"Take his hand."

Timothy took the hand of the dead man's soul, and he pulled, drawing his own soul back from the veil.

Instantly, he was back in his own body. So was the soul of a foreign enemy and the soul of a horse. Timothy's head swam with confused memories: a young boy looking at himself in the mirror, seeing his own green eyes for the first time; a house with a balcony, overlooking a well-kept garden; a pregnant woman, her dark hair soft, shining, her voice so soothing; a man, bearded, ugly, a stink of alcohol; horrible fights; then the fire, the devouring fire, and then the tents, red tents, and the sword pressed into his hand and the other boy's face still blinking as he died under their feet and then the hard cold smell of a fearless rider, and peace for the first time, and even with the weapon in their hand their hooves moved underneath them and they were happy. Then the terror of the fateful day; the first day of war, and the little village under the mountain. The mountain which came to life, and drowned them in fire.

Timothy clenched his eyes tightly and concentrated on the feeling of his own body and his own consciousness. With great effort, he felt the form that the

man and the horse had originally held. Their self-images were bound together, but their souls were not yet fused.

Timothy didn't want to make this man a centaur. He wanted this man and his face to be the way it had been, before the fire. He squeezed harder, reaching into both souls, stretching them apart.

For a moment they seemed truly twisted together. Then, with the right twist of perspective, Timothy beheld both souls simultaneously, and the link between them, and knew that he could do it.

He held both souls in his mind, and reared up his magic, gathering power from the planet, and poured out his intentions on the world. They flowed from his fingertips and his palms, an invisible wind of transformation. The ashes of the dead man and his horse flowed together along with leftover ashes from other nearby corpses, and in moments flesh was forming over bone and skin was flowing over flesh.

Timothy opened his eyes to see what he had created, then screamed. The human-eyed horse-skulled young man lay twisted, arms and legs halfway between simian and equine, fingers tipped with tiny hooves.

"Oh, gods!"

"What?" asked the wizard.

"I... I made a monster!"

"Let's see." The wizard tapped his beetle with his staff, and the beetle carried him dutifully over to examine the monster. He tisked. "My. That *is* pretty bad. We'd better not wake it yet. Let me see if I can untangle it."

"I just... Wanted them to be separate!"

"You weren't trying to make a centaur?"

"No."

"Well, that makes this a slightly more impressive mistake. But not to worry, I think I have the answer..."

The wizard activated his wards and reached out his hands towards the monster.

Before Timothy's eyes, the body swelled up and transformed, splitting into two bodies, both twisting in the wizard's magic.

A few moments later, the warrior lay as Timothy remembered from his memories, and his horse lay beside him. Timothy saw a spectral bond between them, a snarl in their auras. As the wizard's magic faded, the warrior stirred in his sleep.

"How old do you think he is?" the wizard asked.

"Mid-twenties?"

"Hmm. Bit old, to be getting his first taste of war. Look at those arms, though. Kid probably knows how to swing that big sword of his. Well, we'd probably better make him some clothes."

"Right," said Timothy, and he conjured a set of garments worthy of a warrior, and laid them beside him. Then he said, "We'd better step back, in case he tries to harm us."

"Yes, that's wise," said the wizard. "Come on. I think he's waking."

They stepped back to give the dead man some time to come to terms with being alive again.

The man opened his eyes and stared at the sky for a long, long moment. Then, very slowly, he rocked onto his side and got his hands and feet beneath him, and tried to stand up on all fours. He gave a whinny of dismay.

“Oh no,” said Timothy.

“Oh dear,” said the wizard.

“Whhaaat’ssss app’neehheehhen toooo meeee!?” said the horse.

Timothy and the wizard winced simultaneously.

“Can you reverse it?” Timothy asked.

“Killlll meeee!” said the horse.

“Yes, well, er,” said the wizard.

“Can you reverse it!?”

The warrior neighed, flicking his hair out of his face with an almost human movement.

The wizard said, “I think it’s fine this way.”

“No!” said Timothy. “It’s not fine!”

“You fix it then, I’m tired.”

“Oh, come on!”

“No no, you have this well in hand. I shall take a short cat-nap.”

“Pleeease, byyyy all the gods” wheezed the horse.

Timothy thought that the vein in his temple might explode. He looked at the mess his master had made, and put his hands on his hips, and tried to think.

“Pleeease,” said the horse.

“I’m trying to think, do you mind?” said Timothy.

“Sorriry.”

“What’s so bad about being a horse, anyway?”

“Iiii’m a HORSE!?”

“Y-es? No! Don’t get up! Don’t move! Where are you going!?”

The horse galloped away, cheering, “Iii’m a HORSE!”

“Fuck,” said Timothy.

“Language,” said the wizard, from under the brim of his hat. The beetle had developed cushions and a foot-rest, and he looked very comfortable reclined upon it.

“He’s getting away!” Timothy said.

“Go after him!”

Timothy turned to the naked warrior sniffing the wind and said, “don’t go anywhere.” Then he ran after the horse.

The wizard shouted: “Come on! What have I taught you? Do wizards run?”

“No, master,” said Timothy, berating himself.

“That’s right. No self-respecting wizard *runs*. Levitate yourself, fly, or project yourself to your destination. Never *run*.”

“But I’m already tired!”

“Then you’d better find a source of energy! Don’t make that my problem.”

Timothy blinked up at the sun, but the day was overcast and the light was thin. He looked around at the burning wasteland and saw only spent fuel. He



was still deeply rooted to the planet, and could draw more energy up that way, but he would not be able to hold the connection once his feet left the ground.

“In this particular case, you don’t even need to pursue,” said the wizard.

Timothy looked at the naked warrior and understood. “Oh,” he said. “I get it.”

“Very good.”

He reached out a hand and rested it on the warrior’s shoulder, and reached out through the soul, and connected to both conjoined souls. He pulled them towards each other with as much force as he could muster.

For a split second, he had both souls in his mind, and the bodies were empty husks. Then both bodies had souls again.

The warrior clapped his hands to his face. “My face! My teeth! My lips! My tongue! I never thought I’d miss them like this. It’s so hard to talk, as a horse!” The warrior realized abruptly that he was naked.

“We made you clothes,” said Timothy, pointing at the clothes. “Your horse ran away.”

“He’ll come when I call,” said the warrior, and he gave a sharp whistle with his fingers in his mouth.

The warrior picked up the garments and looked at them. Then he looked at the wizard and Timothy. Turning towards each horizon he slowly took in the enormity of his situation. “I died.”

“You did,” said Timothy.

“They’re all dead.”

“Yup.”

“All of them..?”

“They killed your family,” Timothy said.

“How do you know that?”

“I’m the one who brought you back. Shalim shares many secrets.” This was an old saying to save wizards the trouble of explaining the complexities of soul-handling involved in resurrection spells.

The warrior began to put on the clothes. “They did kill my family. They took me in and trained me. I had given up on... On ever being free.”

Half-dressed, he looked at the wizard. “You killed us.”

The wizard waved a lazy hand, not bothering to sit up on his beetle-lounge.

Timothy said, “It wasn’t him. It was the mountain.”

The warrior picked up his sword, but the handle crumbled to ash at his touch. The metal, still hot, burned his hand. He dropped the blade.

The warrior said, to his fallen sword, “They were monsters, but some of them were my friends.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I should be thanking you. You freed me from them.”

“Are you hungry?”

The warrior said, “I am, yeah.”

“Come on,” said Timothy. “I’ll fix you some dinner. Come on, Master. We’re going home.”

“Are we?” asked the wizard. “There are still four souls worth saving, if you’ve not forgotten about them.”

“Right,” said Timothy. “Sorry, I forgot.”

“That one’s next,” said the wizard, pointing to the charcoal corpse of a young woman.

“Ok,” said Timothy. “Master, you’ll need to keep an eye on this one while I’m working.”

“Hush, I’m napping.”

“Master!”

“What, you don’t trust him?” The wizard looked sharply at the young warrior. “You, warrior boy. You’re not foolish enough to attack a friend of the mountain, are you?”

The warrior shook his head very quickly, hands up. “No, no! Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Smart. Now you’ll need to stay quiet. Timothy’s got to concentrate. Put your shirt on, that’ll help him.”

Timothy’s ears burned and he threw himself beyond the veil just to get away from the conversation.

Once again he splashed down silently into the icy shadow-dance of Shalim’s deeps. This time he sank more quickly. He did not see her soul; only darkness, in all directions, and veils of shadow-tendrils twisting in from all the walls.

Something swam above him in the deep, blotting out the light of his soul.

He twisted.

Shalim loomed above him, yellow eyes huge in the empty darkness. He could no longer see the way back to his body.

“You again,” said Shalim.

“H-hi.”

“Nervous, this time? Where are the manners from a moment ago?”

“They’re still here, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“Now he’s sorry again. Where is the boldness of a moment ago?”

“Are you going to let me out?”

“Maybe.”

“Can I ask what I did wrong?”

“You can.”

“What did I do wrong?”

“I have a duty, you know. I am not the one whose schedules you are disrupting, with your antics.”

“Oh.”

“I do not care if people take souls from my grotto. If a soul is missing, it is not my fault. It is different, if I choose to give away a soul. It is different, if I choose to let a soul be taken from under my very nose.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“Yes you did.”

“I did know. I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d be watching a second time.”

“I liked the glimpse of you I got the first time.”

“You... Did?”

“Mhmm.”

He heard a scream of anguish and a grumble of flame, somewhere below him.

“Oops,” said Shalim. “She’s no longer in my grotto.”

“What took her?”

“That sounded like a demon of fear, to me.”

“You could have saved her.”

“No. I don’t get more pardons until the next full moon. I used my last two on your horse and his man.”

“Thank you.”

“You could stay here, you know. With me.”

“I’d like to go back to my body, now, please. Sir.”

“Why call me sir? We could be friends.”

“Are you going to let me out?”

“Fine. But I look forward to seeing you soon.”

Then he was back in his body, lying in the ash. The warrior was leaning over him, restraining him. He lashed out instinctively with a raw blast of core energy, launching the warrior away from him. The warrior landed in the ashes nearby with a clever tumble, and got back to his feet.

“Hey! I’m not trying to hurt you!”

Timothy sat up, smearing his wet face. His hand came away red. He blinked, and redness obscured his vision.

The wizard, nearby, said, “Hold still, Tim.”

He felt a cooling wind upon his face, and his vision cleared.

“Sip this,” said the wizard, handing him a small cup of blue tea.

Timothy drank the tea, which steamed into lightning the moment it touched his tongue, and crackled down his esophagus, illuminating every fiber of his soul. The excess energy built to such a height that he flung out his hand and freed a blast of it out into the wasteland like a stroke of lightning. Then he slumped back into a cushion that had come out of nowhere.

The wizard said, “Now tell me what happened.”

“Shalim,” said Timothy. “I saw Shalim. I forgot to tell you! When I pulled them out, he was there, and I couldn’t find their souls, so he pulled them up for me. Then when I tried to find hers, he was waiting for me. He ambushed me. He kept saying he wanted me to stay.”

The wizard said, “You should have told me.”

“I know! I know. But in all the confusion with him and the horse, I just forgot.”

“It’s alright. You’re safe. You’re back on the warm side of the veil.”

“He said he was... Looking forward to seeing me soon.”

“He says that to everyone,” said the wizard, with a flip of his hand. “We need to tinker with your ward tablet, then, if Shalim was able to get that close to you.”

“Have you ever seen him?”

“Oh yes. Me and Shalim are old friends.”

“So it is... *possible*... to be friends with him?”

“Possible, yes. Probable, no.”

"I think you'd better bring back the rest," said Timothy.

The wizard said, "If Shalim is monitoring the situation, there isn't much point. In fact... yes, he's dragged the rest down. They're gone."

"They're gone."

"Mhmm."

Timothy's vision clouded again, this time with tears. "It's all my fault."

The warrior held down a hand for him. "On your feet."

He took the warrior's hand, and the warrior pulled him up and effortlessly into a tight hug. The warrior said, "You braved the veil for me. I can never repay you. My life is yours."

Behind the warrior's back, the wizard gave a huge thumbs up, which Timothy did not respond to. Then the warrior broke the embrace, hands still on Timothy's shoulders.

"I swear that I will protect you until I slip into the beyond," said the warrior, his green-eyed gaze burning.

Timothy said, "Oh. Oh, that's... Thank you, that's very nice."

The wizard said, "Well, I think we're done here. Let's go get some grub." Then he sat cross-legged on his beetle and rode back towards the village.

The horse at last came running up beside the warrior.

"Oh, all your gear!" said the warrior, to his horse, which whinnied back.

"I can understand you!" said the warrior. The horse reared back its head, gobsmacked.

The two of them circled each other, heads cocked, looking at each other.

Then they stopped, stared at each other, changed direction, and began circling again.

Then the horse butted its whole head against his chest, and he hugged the horse's head, and they stayed in that position for a long time. The warrior's dark hair hid his face, but after a moment his shoulders shook.

"We're not dead, Bootstraps."

They separated, and the warrior stroked his horse's mane and said, "Hey. Timothy, right? I want you to meet my best friend. This is Bootstraps."

Timothy waved. "Hi Bootstraps." He kept his distance.

The warrior said, "Come on! He's nice."

"He's big."

"He's small, for a horse."

Bootstraps chuffed, indignant.

Timothy approached cautiously, one hand outstretched.

"Horses can smell fear, you know," said the warrior.

"Is that true?"

"Yup."

"What's it smell like?"

Bootstraps whinnied something long and complicated.

The warrior said, "Hey, be nice."

The horse whinnied something slightly less long.

The warrior said, "He wants me to ask you what you think grass smells like."

“Oh, uh... Green and prickly, I guess? And if it’s been cut recently, it’s extra strong.”

The horse looked at the warrior and vocalized quietly. The warrior said, “Ok, he’s impressed, but he wants you to understand that it’s not really possible to describe the smell of fear, anymore than it is possible to describe the qualia of any given sensation. What’s a qualia?”

Timothy lowered his hand. He no longer wanted to pet the horse, he wanted to have a conversation with it. “It’s the experience of sense. Like, to some people, broccoli tastes bitter, but to others, it tastes good. The plant is the same, but it is perceived differently because the individual experience of taste can be slightly different from person to person. When a soul is inside a body, the body changes the qualia that the soul experiences. Qualia is what you feel when one of your senses tells you something. Your eyes detect red light, and your sense of sight tells you that you are seeing red, and you experience the color, the qualia, red.”

By the time he finished talking, he was beside the warrior, with the horse like a convenient wall between them. Looking into the horse’s eye, he said, “Is it easiest to talk to me if I’m beside you, or in front of you?”

The horse nattered something. The warrior said, “He says he can see you better this way.”

Timothy bowed formerly. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Bootstraps. My name is Timothy. Would you be so kind as to introduce me to your friend?”

Bootstraps snorted, bobbing his head. The warrior, on the other side of the horse, said, “Oh, uh, he says my name is Brick.”

“Brick?”

“Brick.”

“Is that your real name?”

“It’s a nickname.”

“Well, you can call me Tim. Nice to meet you, Brick.”

“So where are we headed?”

“Back to my master’s home, I think. Can I ride with you?”

“Sure!”

“I was asking Bootstraps.”

Bootstraps snorted again. Brick said, “He says sure.”

Without the slightest indication that Timothy should be in any way embarrassed, Brick came around to his side of the horse and gave him a boost.

“No saddle,” said Timothy, when he was on the horse.

“I’ll keep you on,” said Brick, hopping easily up behind Tim and looping one rock-hard arm around his waist.

Bootstraps took off at a flat-out gallop, and zoomed past the wizard and his beetle.

Scandalized, the wizard tapped his staff against the beetle, and his chair broke off from the beetle’s back, trailing two connective threads of telekinetic force. The beetle opened his wings and took to the air, trailing the wizard’s throne behind him like a chariot.

Soon the wizard was in the lead again. He slipped through the gates first, and the horse galloped in after, and came to a stop in the cobbled main street.

Flush with the giddy joy of speed, Timothy took a moment to catch his breath, then patted the horse and said, "Take that street, then your next right, across the bridge, up the hill, and there's a barn with plenty of oats for you."

They rode through the idyllic, moss-covered village. Goats grazed on several rooftops. The houses were built tall, mostly of stacked stone and old timber. Happy children played freely in the streets, and the only shops were small stalls under outdoor awnings. Gardens grew all over each house, flowing down trellises and pouring down from window ledges and clinging to cracks between the stone. Every house had an equal yard, walled in with stone, and lushly overgrown. Down the quiet streets they wandered, crossing the river on one of the two stone bridges which spanned it. They rode down another street, a crumbling cobblestone road that ended abruptly in the grassy slopes of the mountain's foothills.

"We can't go up there!" said Brick.

"Don't worry," said Timothy. "We're not going to the top. The mountain is sleeping now."

Brick hesitated, and Bootstraps hesitated beneath him.

Timothy gave Brick's arm a friendly squeeze. "Hey, look. That's where I live. See? It's just a little ways up the slope. Not even on the mountain itself, yet."

Brick relaxed, and Bootstraps rode on. They passed up a flower-studded slope of emerald grass and reached a smooth plateau of black stone, from which bloomed a yurt of conjoined crystal growths. Nearby, a wooden stable stood like an afterthought. The stable was empty at present, but had room for four horses.

Brick dismounted and helped Timothy down. They lingered in each other's arms for the briefest extra moment. Then Timothy said, "Let me show you to your quarters, Bootstraps. And I believe I promised you oats, did I not?"

Brick smiled, watching Bootstraps and Timothy walk away. Then he turned and looked out over the valley and the wasteland mass grave of his companions, and let his grief show.

Timothy gave Bootstraps a thorough brush-down to get the ashes off of him, fed him a bucket of oats, and made him a bed of fresh straw, with blankets if needed. He also refreshed the water in the bucket with a simple cleansing spell.

Then he emerged to find the sun setting on the plains and Brick standing there, silhouetted against a burning violet sky, hands limp at his sides.

The protective dome of magic around the village glimmered in the heat-haze of the valley, and away in the distance clouds of yellow smoke still twisted where the fires yet were spreading through the grassland. Brick looked terribly alone.

Timothy said goodnight to Bootstraps and shut the barn door, startling Brick, who turned around and gave an easy smile. His eyes seemed dry. "How was Bootstraps?"

"You can check on him, if you want."

"No, I... Know he's fine. I can feel it."

Timothy smiled. “Come on. You’re hungry.”

He led the way into the yurt, where they found the wizard seated at the hearth, cooking large beetle steaks on an iron griddle. “Be a minute or two,” said the wizard, triumphantly.

Timothy said, “Come on, have a seat,” and gestured towards the pile of silk poufs that ringed around the flames.

An inverted brass cone connected to a chimney in the center of the yurt seemed to magically siphon all possible smoke away, so the flames were brighter and clearer than any flames Brick had ever seen before. He stared at the burning beetle bits, and at the wizard’s craggy face, lit from below by the flames, eyes glittering.

Brick entered the yurt, letting the black curtain of the door swing shut behind him.

“Sunset was pretty,” said the wizard, flicking a hand. The curtain flung itself open again.

“Oh,” said Brick, as he seated himself. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Make yourself at home. Booze is in the chest, if you can find it. Likes to play hide and seek, with newcomers. Timothy here can help you find it, if you don’t dare the labyrinth alone.”

“The labyrinth?” asked Brick.

“Look where you know you want most desperately not to look. Look into the shadows behind me, beyond the fire. That is no wall. That is a tunnel.”

“How did I not see—!?”

“It hides itself at the edges of perception. You did not see it because your mind could not bear the weight of it. It had to be an illusion. It is not one.”

“Where does it lead?”

“That twisting, spectral passage leads anywhere, everywhere, and nowhere. You can die in a thousand terrible ways. You can live in a thousand wonderful illusions. If you don’t know how to control it, the labyrinth will kill you. If you do know how to control it, it can get you anywhere.”

“Come on,” said Timothy, taking Brick’s hand. “I’ll show you.”

“Be careful,” said the wizard. “Never know what can happen, in there.”

Brick paused. “I don’t drink.”

The wizard chuckled. “Well, here I am, making assumptions. I apologize. Please, have a seat, then.”

Brick released Timothy’s hand and seated himself by the fire. Timothy sat across from him, and they both watched the wizard expectantly.

“Sorry,” said Brick, after a while. “I never got your name?”

“They call me Desperate Joe.”

“...Is that your name?”

The wizard shrugged. “Does it matter? What about your name? ‘Brick?’”

“I didn’t tell you my name.”

The wizard smiled. “I have very good hearing.”

The wizard flipped one of the beetle steaks and the flesh hissed as it began to sear.

The wizard said, “That oath you swore earlier, was that a formula?”

“What?”

“Was that a formulaic oath? Something you’re taught to say, if someone saves your life?”

“No. It was from the heart.”

“Did you mean it?”

“I did.”

“Then I suppose I had better train you, too. You’ll survive better if you both know what you’re doing.”

“I don’t want to do magic,” said Brick. “I am a warrior, not a wizard.”

“There are many kinds of magic, Brick. I can make you a better warrior than you can imagine. But there is no cheater’s path to doing so. You will have to learn. You will have to study, and commit yourself.”

“I will,” said Brick.

“Good,” said the wizard. “Perhaps you can teach Timothy a thing or two about discipline.”

“Discipline!?” said Timothy.

“Yes, discipline! Discipline would have saved you today. It is the only way to avoid getting sloppy.”

Brick said, “I hope we will learn a lot from each other.”

Timothy, scandalized, said, “You haven’t got a thing to teach me!”

The wizard said, “Now now. He could, at the very least, teach you sword-play.”

“I thought you said wizards don’t use swords?”

“Yes, well, if there are no survivors, there’s no one to know different. Wizards can use swords better than anyone, we just choose not to because it makes the grunts feel inferior.”

Brick said, “I’ll make you prove that, old man.”

The wizard’s eyebrows shot up. “Oho! Oho, ho! Did you hear that, Tim? This young whippersnapper’s going to show me how to use a sword. Should be interesting to see how that goes.”

Timothy sighed.

The beetle steaks were overcooked, rubbery, and tasteless. After a few bites, Brick put his down in dismay. Timothy nibbled at his, but wasn’t really hungry enough to stomach it.

“Master,” said Timothy.

“Mm?” said the wizard, around the steak he was gnawing on.

“You haven’t paid me my wages this week.”

The wizard rolled his eyes and a chest that had been hiding under a bookshelf suddenly expanded to full size, knocking the bookshelf off the wall. Timothy’s hand shot up and a star glowed above his palm, and the bookshelf’s fall slowed to a stop. Weightless, it hung in the air, gently revolving, books spilling weightlessly out into the air. Timothy waved his hand, and the bookshelf rose up and floated back into its former position, even as he swept the air with his other hand, causing the chest to shoot forward towards him. The bookshelf settled down, every book in place. Timothy opened the chest to find a single leather



sack containing a fistful of coins. He took the sack out and the chest snapped shut, then shrank to the size of a thumb and sprang away like a flea.

“Thank you, master,” said Timothy. “Come on, Brick. I want to take you shopping.”

Brick looked up miserably from his inedible steak, and his face bloomed into joy as the implications became clear to him. Dropping the steak, he got to his feet and stammered, “Er, yes, thank you, sir. It was wonderful to be your guest, and I hope you’ll allow me to stay the night here. Thank you.” Then he turned and left with Timothy, who was already walking down the hill. He raced through the grass to catch up.

Timothy had somehow acquired a black staff and a hooded cloak. As Brick caught up with him, Timothy turned and smiled. “Sorry about his cooking.”

“Thanks for rescuing me again.”

Timothy led the way through the village, to a three-story house somewhere in the middle of the settlement. He knocked three times on the garden gate.

“This is someone’s house, isn’t it?” asked Brick.

“You’ll see,” said Timothy.

The gates opened, revealing the garden. High hedges hugged the walls. Statues somberly watched over brick walkways between overgrown planter boxes. Benches shadowed by willow trees sat in out of the way places, and porch swings hung near an outdoor fire.

The house was large and all of stone. It looked far older than the other houses in the village, and was so overgrown that no part of the stone could be seen.

The door hung open, revealing a brightly lit kitchen dining hall.

“Come on,” said Timothy. “We have to wait at the podium.”

Brick waited beside him, looking around at all the decorations on the walls. Family portraits hung beside farm implements and framed works of embroidery with intricate tree-like designs.

A young woman came at last to the podium. She said, “Inside or outside?”

“Outside.”

“Drinks?”

“Water,” said Timothy. He looked at Brick.

Brick said, “Also water.”

“Donation?”

Timothy reached into his coinsack and handed over five gold knuckles.

“Imperial knuckles?” asked the woman. “What will it be tomorrow?”

“Will you take them?”

“They’re good by weight. If I find out they’re fakes, I’ll be upset with you.”

“I don’t think he’d fake them.”

“Right. Well. Thank you for your donation. You can wait in the garden, your dinner will be out soon.”

“What is it tonight?”

“Soup a la leftovers.”

“Ooh, that’s my favorite.” Timothy looked at Brick. “Come on. Let me show you my favorite spot.”

He led Brick deep into the garden, past the willow tree and the pond, to a place where a bench sat backed by hedges, facing a thicket in the corner of the garden. It was completely alone, isolated from the other benches and the rest of the garden.

Timothy sat down.

Brick hesitated. "Will they find us, way back here?"

"Oh yeah, she knows where I like to sit."

Brick sat down beside him. "You sit here alone?"

"Yeah?"

"Oh. I thought..."

"What? What did you think?"

"Nothing. Nevermind." Brick looked at the thicket. "Why do you like this spot?"

"There's a statue in the thicket."

"What? How do you know?"

"Look closely."

Brick stared at the thicket. Timothy reached out a hand, and a flickering star appeared before his upraised finger. From it, spectral radiances reached out to bathe the thicket in their glow, and in the light from the spectrum's edge the eyes of the concealed statue of Shalim began to glow.

Brick said, "Ba-YAA-AH!"

Timothy chuckled. "Sorry."

Brick said, "You like to sit where Shalim can stare at you while you eat?"

"Yeah. I feel like no one keeps him company. So I try to, when I think about it."

"I'm a bit... Creeped out by this spot. Would it be ok if we moved?"

"Oh. Oh, uh... Yeah. There's another spot I know."

"One that's not watched by any statues?"

"Sure, I know a spot."

A few minutes later they were seated in the porch swing before the fire, in broad view of the garden. Children and young people were walking the maze of the garden planter boxes, and on the other porch-swings various couples were cuddled up under blankets, making goo-goo eyes at each other.

"This is nice," said Brick, quietly.

Timothy said, "Yeah. Here comes our food."

The woman from the front desk arrived bearing two large, lidded clay bowls. She brought thick towels and spoons for these bowls as well.

Timothy laid one towel in Brick's lap, and the woman placed the bowl of soup on it, then folded the edges over to grip the sides of the pot. Then she handed Brick a spoon.

Timothy towed himself and accepted his soup. "Thank you, Molly!"

Molly nodded and walked away.

Brick opened the lid of his soup bowl. Mystery meats and vegetables bobbed within the thick broth, and the steam wafted the scent to him. Whatever it was, it smelled delicious.

He dug in with a will and explored the soup's mysteries.

“Oh, man. I love when she puts the mashed potatoes into it,” said Timothy.

“This is so good!” Brick said, between spoonfuls.

They ate in happy silence for a while, then the food was gone and the daunting task of conversation loomed before them.

Timothy said, “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“How are you feeling?”

“Lucky to be alive.”

“Me too.”

“Did you get enough to eat?”

“Yeah, I feel much better now. What was that your master cooked for us?”

“Oh,” said Timothy. “That was gigantified beetle. He never cooks it right.”

“I see,” said Brick. “And you live with him?”

“He’s my master.”

“So you’re, like, a slave?”

Timothy laughed. Sometimes it did feel like that. “No, I’m his apprentice. He’s teaching me his trade.”

“Which is...?”

“He’s a wizard, dummy. *The* wizard, the only one for a thousand miles or more.”

“So you’re a wizard too? Or training to be one, anyway?”

“I’m already mostly a wizard,” said Timothy, raising up one hand and conjuring again the projection star. It hovered above his palm. “I can manipulate energy and matter, and sometimes time and space. I can’t do much with it though.”

“I saw the way you moved the bookshelf,” said Brick, “I was pretty impressed.”

“You didn’t see the way my master planned the whole scene. He does magic that seems impossible to me. I’ve been his apprentice all my life and I still don’t feel like I know half of what he knows.”

“How did he wake the mountain?” Brick asked.

“Can’t tell you,” said Timothy. “I’m sorry.”

“But you do know?”

“I do.”

“And you don’t want to tell me? Didn’t Desperate Joe say you should trust me?”

“A wizard never trusts anyone with everything he knows,” said Timothy. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s ok.”

“What do you think of the village?”

“It’s kind of weird.”

“How so?”

“Everything’s the same. But the people are different. Every house has the same shape, but different decorations.”

“This one is the master model,” said Timothy, nodding towards the house. “It created the rest in its image.”

“...What?”

“My master made this one, and taught it to grow roots, and replicate itself. It consumes natural materials to do so. All you have to do is give it rocks and wood, and it grows a house for you. Anyone can have one. The village has tons of room to grow, and housing is basically free. New houses grow spontaneously whenever the colony has enough raw materials to produce another one, and they always sprout on the periphery. People had to put in the roads afterwards, but the houses grow spaced out like they are. My master says, the colony as a whole will grow into a city, over time, and that its later generations may look very different from the current ones. They change gradually, over time, you see. The magic is still deciding how it wants to manifest. At this scale, it may even be able to think for itself.”

“I think I want something stronger than water,” said Brick.

“Oh, allow me.” Timothy waved a hand, the glinting star of projection manifesting above his palm. The water within Brick’s glass turned at once to wine.

Timothy shook sparks of arcane discharge from his hand afterwards. “That’s a tricky one, let me know how I did.”

Brick, incredulous, sipped what turned out to be a very nice merlot.

“How is it?”

Brick put his wineglass down on a convenient side table and took Timothy’s hand. He stared at Timothy’s palm. “How did you do that?”

Timothy said, “Was the wine good?”

“It’s lovely. But it was water, a second ago, and you didn’t drop any powder in the water, and you never said a magic word, and no—”

Timothy shushed him with one finger. “Magic. Real magic.”

“Can anyone do it?”

“If you study for most of your life, and devote yourself to the pursuit of knowledge and power at the cost of all semblance of a social life.”

“Is there a contract I have to sign, or something? And do you have a pen?”

Timothy chuckled. “As it happens, my master will probably want to bind you formally before he begins passing secrets. But it won’t be a contract you have to sign. It will be a ritual. A test.”

“A test?”

“What kind of test?”

“To see if you have any kind of latent ability.”

“Like what?”

“Well, since magic is at the root of all consciousness, and inside the essence of life, anyone can technically learn how to sense it and manipulate it. But some people can’t ever quite get their heads around it. Some people use it subconsciously, but can never manipulate it consciously. Different people can have varying levels of connection to magic. Some people can only sense it, and can sense things no others can detect. Some people can only manipulate it, and they wreak chaos without ever sensing the magic they are twisting into the world. Magic can be subtler than anything, when it’s not explosive and terrifying. So, in the hypothetical sense, everyone has *some* latent ability with

magic, but the test will be to see if you have *enough* for my master to work with. You will likely face a demon of some kind, and a monster of some kind, and a test of your compassion.”

“Hey, if you spoil the whole test for me, what is there left to test?”

“I haven’t spoiled anything. My master will have known that I was going to tell you what I just did, and he will have planned his test specifically to subvert your expectations of it even while adhering to the literal meaning of what I said.”

“He can do that?”

“Magic is subtler than anything, when it’s wisely used.”

“That’s terrifying!”

“You’ll be fine. If he thought you would fail the test, he never would have asked me to resurrect you.”

“And what do *you* think of me?”

Timothy’s hand was still in Brick’s. The question took him by surprise.

What did one usually answer to that sort of direct question, when one was asked it by a beautiful and mysterious man?

Timothy replied: “I don’t know yet.”

“That’s valid,” said Brick.

“For one thing, I don’t know your real name yet.”

“No, you don’t,” said Brick.

“Was your name cursed?”

Brick’s eyes widened, and desperately he tapped a finger to his nose and nodded, sweating, clearly in terrible pain. Then he shook his head. “My name doesn’t matter.”

Pity moved in Timothy. “My master’s name was cursed, too, I think. He can’t remember it now. I’m sorry about your name. If I ever find the wizard who cursed it, I’ll kill him for you.”

“We’ll kill him together,” said Brick, gritting his teeth against the psychic storm of pain.

“It’s a powerful curse,” said Timothy. “I wish I could break it for you.”

“Do you want to know what I think of you?”

Ears burning, Timothy said, “Sure?”

“I think you’re kind.”

“Thank you. I try.”

“You succeed. I also think you’re very attractive.”

“What?”

“It’s ok if it’s not mutual, I just thought maybe we could get the awkwardness out of the way just in case it wasn’t. I mean, I know not everybody swings my way, but I was picking up a feeling and I figured I might as well try, worst-case we laugh it off and get to be friends, which would also be cool, but yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“This isn’t exactly how I pictured it,” said Timothy.

“Oh?” said Brick, relieved.

“Well,” said Timothy, “For one thing, I pictured us somewhere more private.”

“I can try again maybe?”

“I’d like that. I’ll be waiting at the bench.”

“Which bench?”

“Keep up.”

Timothy stood from the porch swing and stepped into the hedge maze and was soon out of sight. Brick waited a little while, then followed as well as he could remember.

As he neared the corner bench with the dark thicket that concealed Shalim’s stone head, Brick felt a whisper of unease.

Timothy swung his bare leg out into view and Brick overcame this whisper’s fear, and joined Timothy at the bench.

“Wait, you still have your clothes on. How did you do that?”

Timothy laughed. “I magicked up my clothes. I can magick them away whenever I want. Incidentally, I did yours as well.”

Brick clutched his shirt. It *felt* real.

“Come sit down,” said Timothy. “I chickened out.”

“It’s ok,” said Brick. Timothy swung his legs possessively across Brick’s thighs the moment Brick sat down.

Brick rested his hands on Timothy’s legs. “I don’t know anything about you, but I’m ready to like you.”

“You kind of *have* to like me, since you swore that oath to me.”

“Yeah, that too.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Where are you from? Were you born here?”

“I don’t know where I was born. I was left on Desperate Joe’s doorstep as a baby.”

“So you’ve lived here all your life?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“So where are you from?”

“You wouldn’t know the place.”

“But which continent, at least?”

Timothy grimaced slightly, then pointed skyward.

“What?” said Brick.

Timothy nodded.

“You’re not from this world?”

Timothy said, “No. My master wanted to go someplace peaceful when he retired, so he left our original world behind. He wanted me to grow up someplace nice. So I spent most of my youth here.”

“How old are you now?”

“Twenty-five. You?”

“Twenty-nine.”

Timothy cupped his face. “I like your stubble.”

“Thanks,” said Brick. “I like how you don’t have any.”

“Magic,” said Timothy. “Actually, I just can’t grow a proper beard.”

“I thought wizards always had to have long, flowing beards?”

“Yes, well, so does Desperate Joe, so thank you for the reminder.”

“Why can’t you magic one up?”

“I could, but I like it this way. Don’t you?”

“I do. I’m glad you’re not changing just to suit Desperate Joe. Does he realize how stupid that name sounds?”

“I think so.”

“Why doesn’t he pick another one?”

“He likes it.”

“Why?”

“It makes people underestimate him. They’re more fun to crush that way, I think.”

“He’s a bit scary,” said Brick.

Timothy nodded. “He is.”

“When should we head back?”

Timothy laughed. “Whenever we feel like it. Want me to carry you?”

“Can you even? I’m pretty heavy.”

Timothy laughed. “Oh, a wizard never does any heavy lifting.”

“So what are you going to do?”

Brick sat up bolt upright as Timothy swung his legs off the bench, which had somehow moved itself all the way across the valley. They were seated now just outside the black crystal yurt.

Timothy got to his feet and held out a hand for Brick. “How was the ride?”

Looking at the tiny yurt, Brick asked, quite innocently: “Where do you sleep?”

“I’ll show you.”

They walked through the yurt-flap hand-in-hand.

The interior illuminated itself as Desperate Joe sucked in upon his pipe. He breathed out a cloud of judgemental smoke, which rumbled quietly like thunder.

“You kept me up,” said Desperate Joe, taking absolutely no notice of his apprentice’s hand still holding Brick’s.

“Sorry, master.”

“You can do the wards yourself, now, because I’m too tired to help. Good-night.”

“Goodnight, master. I’ll do the wards.”

“Do them quick, if you’ve got brains. Stars are already out.”

“Goodnight, master.”

“Harrumph.”

Timothy gave an apologetic look to Brick. “Want to watch me do the wards?”

“Sure.”

He led Brick outside once again, and they stood together at the edge of the black crystal slab, and Timothy reached out both hands towards the village.

“One... Two... Three!” He timed himself to the pulsing of the leylines, and with precise timing he forced an extra smatter of energy down the flowing line towards the shields around the village. The moment the pulse touched the

energy barrier, a brilliant flash of magic lit up the night. Whispering auroras distorted the air, and the yurt, the village, and the mountain all disappeared.

Timothy invisibly took Brick's invisible hand and led him back across the invisible plateau, thousands of feet above the apparently flat landscape far below, and into the yurt.

It was a relief to be able to see each other once again. The interior of the yurt was visible, too, and Desperate Joe was nowhere in sight.

"Come on," said Timothy, pulling Brick towards the labyrinth.

"Shouldn't we put out the fire?"

"We trust that fire."

"Ok."

"Don't be afraid. Don't let go of my hand."

"Ok."

"Trust me."

Brick took a deep breath. "Alright, show me the way."

Timothy led the way, and the darkness unrolled itself before them, forming a forest of gauze-wrapped trees. Tapestries of spider-silk, still swarming with their weavers, hung from the high branches and draped to the forest floor. A single alley of floorless darkness stretched on between these silver trees. In the gloom, the glowing bark of the trees made it all too easy to see every dangling root in the void.

"Come on," whispered Timothy. He took a step onto the empty nothingness, and his foot did not fall.

Brick followed after, trusting his full weight to the empty dark. His foot found solid, invisible ground.

They walked between the ghostly trees, which turned silently in the darkness all around them. The path reached a crossroads. Timothy took the leftward path. Brick followed, and the invisible path broke free of the forest and led through a different darkness, bearing only endless fields of ghostly grass. In the darkness above these endless fields, great geometric forms manifested and disappeared, flickering in and out of hypothetical existence.

Though the path through the grasslands seemed endless, they stepped through an invisible doorway and found themselves in a stone hallway lined with tapestries. The hallway had no roof, and the sky above was bright with sunshine. Though the furniture and the decorations had all apparently been exposed to the sun and the seasons for some time, everything looked new and clean. They passed a side table that looked freshly dusted, and Timothy opened a red wooden door. They stepped through it and into a comfortable tower bedroom with a large, circular bed.

"Come on in," said Timothy, leading Brick by the hand. "This is my room."

"That door... It only leads here?"

"Something like that. In the labyrinth, you can only visit rooms that you yourself have created, or visited before. If you try to go in without knowing which room you want to go to next, you get a random room. Not fun. There are millions of rooms. You can wind up stuck forever. Fun fact, you can't starve



or get dehydrated while you're in the labyrinth. You play until you die horribly, or until you reach the center and escape."

"That's insane! You sleep in here?"

"It's stable! Look, see? The bed's even bouncy."

Brick dropped himself onto the bed. It was, indeed, bouncy. "It's nice."

Timothy crawled to the head of the bed. Brick joined him. Side by side they lay facing each other. Timothy said, "You'll be safe with me."

"I'm supposed to be the one saying that," Brick yawned, "to you."

Timothy smiled. "Sleep. You've had a horrible day."

"Stay with me," said Brick, reaching for Timothy. Timothy gave himself into Brick's arms, and they slept.

In the night, Timothy extracted himself from the embrace because it was making his neck, hips, and back sore. Brick, snoring, rolled over to face away from him.

Timothy sat on the edge of the bed and stared out the tower windows. The horizons of a world he had left behind lay beyond them, oceans shattered, cities crumbling into desolate space. He looked at the sleeping Brick.

Discontent, he laid himself on the bed again, and turned away from Brick, and tried to sleep.

In the morning he woke to the feeling of Brick's arm around him.

He turned, and laughed. Brick was sound asleep. Their embrace was perfectly comfortable, even though they were both still fully dressed.

He kissed Brick's hand. Brick stirred. "Hmm?"

"Wake up," said Timothy. "He'll be waiting for you."

"Do I get breakfast first?"

"Probably not. He just has coffee."

"Before I head off to my doom, can I have just one kiss?"

"I want it to be special," said Timothy. "Our first time, I mean. I want it to be magical."

"Oh," said Brick. "I get that. Sorry."

"Don't be."

"I'm not ready for this test," said Brick.

"You won't have a choice. He's merciless."

"Is there anything I can do to prepare?"

"No. Just be wise. Your life depends on it."

"Thanks. That made me way less anxious."

Timothy kissed Brick on the cheek. "You'll be fine. Come on, I'll lead you back."

He led Brick back through the labyrinth and to the interior of the yurt, where they found Desperate Joe hard at work on a massive breakfast, complete with eggs, hashed potatoes, toast, sausage, bacon, beans, yams, mushrooms, pancakes, bananas, and coffee.

"Wow!" said Brick.

"Come, come! Sit! Eat up, both of you. You're going to need your strength."

Timothy groaned. "Both of us?"

“Indeed! I have realized that this is the perfect opportunity to test how well my apprentice has learned, and to show Brick the potential he might one day achieve, if he commits himself. Now eat up!”

They ate in nervous silence.

“Chop chop!” said Desperate Joe. “We haven’t got all day!”

They finished as quickly as they could, then helped each other to their feet, and followed him out of the yurt.

In the sunlight outside, they beheld a platoon of red-robed soldiers with banners, standing before the village. In the center of their fifty-man formation, a priestess draped in red silks hovered above five scythe-wielding guardians.

“There is your test,” said the wizard. Then he turned back towards the yurt. “Good luck!”

Timothy and Brick looked at each other.

Brick stood wordless. Timothy said, “What do we do?”

“Wake the mountain!” said Brick.

Timothy grimaced. “I don’t know... I think we’re supposed to do something clever.”

“That sounds pretty clever to me!”

“How good are you with a sword?”

“Me? I’m great with a sword! But I don’t have a sword at the moment.”

“Easily remedied,” said Timothy, holding out his hand and twisting energies through the air. With a glimmer of power, a long, two-handed sword appeared in Timothy’s hand. Smiling, he held it out to Brick.

Brick took the sword and swung it experimentally. “It’s too light.”

“Good, you can swing it faster that way.”

“But I need the weight! It’s how you crush armor with it!”

“Oh. Hang on.” Timothy twisted more power in the air.

The sword got heavier, and Brick said, “Hang on, if you don’t want to wake the mountain, why not crush them with magic? Just conjure a really big boulder and drop it on them, or something like that?”

“See that priestess? She can cast magic. As evinced by the fact that she is currently hovering twenty feet above the ground. If I cast some simple spell, she’ll counter it and retaliate. We have to catch her completely by surprise, and overwhelm her power, or else be ready to face a full demonstration of what she can do.”

“So what do you need me to do?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“We have to take her out first, right?”

“Right.”

“So what if we get close to her first? Go in to talk, then get her by surprise?”

“That could work, provided her wards don’t countermeasure mine.”

“What would happen if they did?”

“Well, we’d reach a point where neither one of us could get physically closer to the other. Some of my spells might fizzle on her wards, too, if she has them set up just right.”

“Didn’t Desperate Joe say that you needed to fix something on your ward tablet?”

“He did, yeah...” Timothy looked sadly at the solid stone wall that had been, until a moment ago, the curtain of the yurt. There was now no going back, and no chance of getting Desperate Joe’s help.

“You know what,” Timothy said, “Maybe you’re right. Maybe we’re supposed to get the mountain’s help.”

“Yeah!” said Brick.

“Ok. I know what to do. Wait here.”

“What should I do?”

“Keep an eye on them, and yell if anything changes!”

Timothy turned away from the platoon, and looked out over the mountainside, and closed his eyes, and emptied his mind, and sensed the field of arcane auras. He sensed the concentrated glow of the Purpuria mushrooms, and reached out with his mind. Holding as many of them in his mental grasp as he could manage, he rooted himself deep to the earth and clenched the fingers of his fist. Gravity was easy to twist, when you were using planetary energy. Purpuria mushrooms all across the mountainside plucked themselves and flew towards him, gathering in a ball of interlooping orbits just before him in the air.

He conjured a basket and allowed the mushrooms to fall into it, then shouted: “Come on!”

Brick said, “Something changed! Someone’s walking out to them!”

“Oh no! Who is it!?”

“It’s a group of people from the village, I can’t tell much from this distance...”

“We’ve got to stop them,” said Timothy, biting his lip.

“How can we, from here?”

“They’ll be killed if we don’t!”

“What are you going to do? Are you going to ‘carry’ me again?”

“No. If I do that anywhere near that priestess’s region of influence, and she’s any kind of mage at all, she’ll drag me to her or send me bouncing off the planet and into interstellar space. I can’t chance it.”

“So we have to run.”

Bootstraps whinnied indignantly and kicked the stable door open.

“Oh right!” said Brick.

The horse ran to their side, and they mounted up.

“Do we go to the villagers first, or to the mountain?”

Timothy’s heart bled for the plight of his villagers, but the teachings of Desperate Joe whipped icy wisdom into his mind. “We can’t save them if they want to be idiots!” Timothy said. “We have to save everyone in the village!”

Brick urged Bootstraps on, and they raced up the mountainside.

Timothy glanced back from time to time, regretting his decision. He clutched the basket of mushrooms like it was all the hope in his world.

They reached the crack. Timothy dismounted and warned Brick and his rider back. “Stay back. If you panic, you’ll make things worse, and you won’t like worse.”

“Panic? Why would I panic? What is there to panic about?”

“Just don’t panic,” said Timothy.

Brick nodded, and looked seriously at Boostrops, who nodded too.

“Ok,” said Timothy. He approached the crack, and tapped it three times with his knuckles. Then he placed the basket of Purpuria mushrooms in front of the crack, and stepped away, to stand beside Brick. He took Brick’s hand and squeezed it hard for courage.

The crack opened once again into the eye of the mountain, which swiveled at once to look at Timothy. The mountain thundered: “Ah. We meet again.”

“Hello,” said Timothy. “I’ve brought you more Purpuria.”

“I can see that. What’s the occasion?”

“I need you to make another visit with me.”

“You have not even asked what she wants, yet,” said the mountain.

“She is robbed the same as the invaders who came yesterday, she must be with their army!”

“Indeed, that is a credible assumption, but it may not be the truth.”

“We need your help. Please.”

“No. I believe you have this well in hand. Thank you for the Purpuria.”

“Well, if you’re not going to help us, I’m not giving it to you!”

“I see,” said the mountain, bemused. “Even after I did you a favor?”

“What favor?” Timothy asked, suddenly cold.

“The soul of your friend, and his horse. Do you not recall?”

“Shalim,” said Timothy.

“Yes. Hello.”

“Is this where you live?”

“I don’t ‘live’ anywhere, technically speaking.”

“Is this your base of power?”

“It is a node of it, yes. These are the bones of a dragon I once was.”

“I meant, in this system.”

“Why, yes, in this system, this happens to be my primary node of power. How very astute of you.”

“My master is insane,” said Timothy, to Brick. “We can’t use this. We can’t risk her damaging it.”

“*Damaging* it?” Brick asked.

“Yes. We have to handle her on our own.”

“How?”

“We’re going to make a potion out of the mushrooms.”

“How? You’re locked out of the yurt, remember!”

“I’m a wizard, remember?”

Shalim said, “Excuse me. Those are my Purpuria.”

Timothy sighed. All hope slumped from his shoulders. “Fine. They’re yours.”

He placed the basket before the eye.

Shalim said, “I will help you. She is a mage, but she is a little mage. She is also very hostile. Forgive me for teasing you, only one gets so bored with this endless tedium.”

The mountain shook, and began to move. It poured down in a wave, crashing over the yurt and the energy bubble which wrapped the village, and flowing down towards the valley and the army there. Riding this awful wave of destruction, watching the downward slopes of the mountainfall crack apart and fly, rocks tethered to each other only by threads of lightning, Timothy and Brick held on tight to each other and tried hard not to panic. Magma and thunder burst from the middle portion of the wave and crashed down on the enemy battalion, but splashed against an invisible barrier of arcane power, emanating from the upraised hand of the red-robed priestess.

Shalim grumbled, disturbed. Fire and lightning twisted in the sky, and a vortex of black wind formed above the dome. Magma poured against the force of gravity, stretching up and over the dome completely.

“Stronger than she pretended to be,” said Shalim, a tremble in the earth.

Timothy, clinging to Brick, turned in horror to see what had become of the village. In the storm of broken earth and molten stone, he beheld it still, standing serenely beneath a flashing dome of raw magical power.

On the rooftop of the seed house he saw a figure, arms upraised, pipe in mouth, peaked hat and whipping cloak marking him as none other than Desperate Joe.

Relieved, Timothy turned to face the challenge. “She’s still alive, in there. So’s her army.”

Brick shouted, above the roar of hellish forces all around: “How can you be sure!?”

Timothy said, “I have to go in.”

“You said she could bounce you off the planet!”

“I have to go in,” said Timothy, conjuring a sword, “the old fashioned way. Come on.”

“Wait! Train me! Teach me something! Anything! I—I can’t go in there with just a sword!”

“You’re not going in there with just a sword,” said Timothy, pointing his finger at Brick’s blade. “You’re going in there with one of *my* swords.”

Suddenly, the blade became weightless in Brick’s hand. Somehow, in the way it moved, he still sensed the same inertia in the blade. The mass had not changed; the weight had.

The roar of chaos grew quiet around them as Timothy leaned closer and said, “When you swing it, you’re going to be frictionless for a moment or two. Try to built momentum. You can swing in any direction. You can change the mass of the blade by squeezing the handle in your fist. Follow my lead and don’t say a word. Anything we say near her may have arcane consequences. There will be a lot of conflicted magic in the area, you may see strange things happen in the contest of our wills. Spells can have a life of their own, and they can happen spontaneously and evolve. This could get wild. When we’re done here, I’ll restore things to the way they were before the battle... If I can. Watch my back, ok?”

“Wait, what if they have weapons like mine?”

“They won’t,” said Timothy, with a grim smile.

“But, armor?” Brick gestured at his garments.

“Oh, that would probably make you feel better, hang on.” Timothy reached out a hand and touched Brick on the chest, kissing him on the lips at the same time. By the time he pulled away, the metal had finished flowing. Brick found himself encased in weightless armor. Like the blade, it had inertia and mass, but seemed unaffected by gravity.

“If you can learn to sink your root into the planet, and ground yourself in its energies, you will be able to manipulate the mass of your armor as well. The denser it is, the better protected you will be. It will also make you slower, but you will be able to ram things if you build speed.”

“Ok but how?”

“You’ll know you’re doing it when the mass of the armor changes. That’s all I can teach you. Good luck.”

“Good luck to us both.”

Shalim, bemused, whispered, “I would like to meet this surprisingly competent witch. Bring her to me.”

Timothy swallowed. “Do we die here, today?”

Shalim said, “I never read the omens of those whose lives I am enjoying.”

Timothy and Brick held hands on the edge of the magma bubble.

“Don’t let go of my hand,” said Timothy.

“Ok,” said Brick. He took a firmer grip. Timothy twisted his hands in the grip, and Brick’s armor grew to encase their joined hands, locking his hand and wrist to Brick’s.

“Here we go.”

Timothy stepped forward. Where he stepped, the lava instantly cooled into stone a moment before his foot touched down. Brick stepped in his footsteps, surrounded by a warmth he could not feel.

At the very edge of the wall of magma, Timothy raised his sword. “It’s going to take some getting used to. I’m going to let you lead. Go for the guards, especially the ones with scythes.”

Bootstraps screamed something.

Brick shouted, “We’ll be fine! Stay with Shalim!”

Timothy looked at Brick. “Ready?”

Through the slit of his helmet’s visor, Brick looked at Timothy. “No. Let’s do it.”

Timothy reached out and placed his hand on the wall of magma, and inky stone spread from his hand, cooling the magma instantly into obsidian. A doorway-sized chunk of the falling magma solidified, and the pouring magma continued to cool in artful places until the entire doorframe had solidified, with an awning to deflect the flow of magma.

“Break it down,” said Timothy.

“What? How?”

“Raise your sword. In mid-swing, squeeze as hard as you can.”

“Ok,” said Brick.

He raised his sword and swung, squeezing with all his might. His timing was off; the blade ripped them both off their feet and up into the very top of the

doorframe. At the last possible second, Timothy pointed his sword and sent a focused pulse of his own bodily energy along the blade, weakening himself instantly but shattering the dome in a huge incoming splash of molten lava and broken obsidian doorframe that poured down onto the massed warriors, causing instant panic. As the rubble fell, imps and mephits formed from the scattered stone and lava, and immediately raced away under the feet of the army to sow chaos.

The priestess raised both hands, stars burning in them, and the crooked staff hanging in the air behind her twisted, and from a diamond in the center of it new light flared. The dome was instantly renewed, but it was too late; Timothy and Brick were already inside.

“Go,” said Timothy.

Brick looked at the nearest living man, raised his sword, confused at the horror of killing one of his own countrymen, and swung poorly. The blade carried him and Timothy thirty feet through a group of men, bowling them off his armor.

When he stopped gliding and caught the runaway blade, he turned to look at what he had done and saw four broken men lying in his wake, and the one he had spared looking on in horror, sword upraised.

He held up his sword. “Surrender or die!”

Timothy rooted his feet to the ground, drew power up from the planet, and struck in the ensuing confusion. His blade flared with light and a shaft of focused plasma speared up like lightning, striking the priestess right in the heart.

She fell like a singed moth, her silk draperies immolating, and hit the ashes.

The five scythe-wielding men closed in upon her, and each reached out his scythe. Stars glowed at the tips of each blade, and the cauterized hole through the priestess’s chest began to seal itself with new flesh.

“We’re fucked,” said Timothy. “Kill the scythe guys. Now!”

Brick ran towards them, the sword in his hand. Timothy shouted, “Don’t *run!* Just *swing!*”

Brick swung his blade, getting the feel for it now, and rocketed forward at tremendous speed, his feet gliding above the ground. Blade held out, he zoomed right through the crowd of scythe-wielding casters, and cleaved one of them in twain. His armor sent two others sprawling.

The last two redoubled their efforts towards healing the priestess as Brick caught the blade and turned back towards them, swinging. He zoomed towards them, blade lunging, and...

The priestess raised her hand. The blade deflected off empty air, hurling Brick and Timothy towards the roof of the dome.

Timothy swung his sword, squeezing tightly, and they rocketed straight back towards the priestess, who was just getting to her feet. Timothy caught the blade in midair, came to an abrupt stop, and swung Brick around with all their previous inertia. Brick’s free hand swung out as he squeezed his blade instinctively, and it slashed neatly through both casters and their priestess as Timothy swung Brick like a sword.

Timothy caught Brick and pulled them both to ground. He rooted himself and drew energy up into himself and lashed out his sword, sending another bolt of lightning. The priestess caught it on her upraised fingertip, and her other hand, pressed against her body, flared with lightning. Power arced from her to the slain warriors still standing at her sides, and out from them into the other fallen casters, and all of them began to rise, bodies twisting back into form. Timothy broke the circuit only with tremendous effort, and the flow of lightning stopped. His blade dripped molten steel into the ash, and the priestess and her warriors steamed; but they were alive.

Brick and Timothy realized they were surrounded by casters, all brimming with magic now.

"I'm sorry, Brick," said Timothy.

"We tried," said Brick.

"You did very well," said Desperate Joe.

"Desperate Joe!" said Brick.

"Master!" said Timothy.

"Desperate Joe?" said the priestess, confused.

The wizard bowed grandly, waving a half-eaten apple. "At your service."

The army pressed around, none willing to step into the circle of casters and the three wizards trapped within it.

The priestess said, "I am honored to make your acquaintance."

"As you should be, as you should be. Now, what's your name?"

"I am Moth Affen of the Empire of Ashrak the Mighty. I expected to meet his grand majesty here, in preparation for our march on Bizrant. Instead I have been attacked without cause."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Desperate Joe. "I've taught my apprentice better than this. He knows that violence should always be a last resort."

Desperate Joe took another bite of his apple.

The priestess asked, "Has Ashrak the Mighty passed this way?"

"Oh, he passed this way, alright. Yes, he passed."

"Did you see which direction he went in?"

"Oh downward, yes, straight down." He took another bite of his apple, tutting gently. "Tends to happen with monomaniacal warlords."

"Do you mean to say that Ashrak the Mighty has... Fallen?"

"I wouldn't call it that, no. He was sort of smashed, if I'm honest." He finished off the apple, leaving only the core, but he held onto it.

"By the mountain?"

"By the mountain. By the weight of his crimes."

"He had dozens of spellcasters with him."

"Yes, they put up a good fight. Had me exhausted for days afterwards. But I'm all caught up on my sleep, now. My apprentice, you know. He's a good kid. Keeps responsibilities out of my hair when I need him to."

He ate half the apple-core.

"Do you mean to tell me that you, yourself, killed the emperor and all his men?"

"I did," said Desperate Joe. "I'm not sorry."



“You are a blasphemer. I will take great pleasure in destroying you.”

“No,” said Desperate Joe, with a grim smile. “You won’t.”

He tossed the last bite of the apple core at the priestess and she burnt it to nothing in the air.

“Shouldn’t have done that,” grinned Desperate Joe.

“What, burn your litter? You disgrace yourself.”

“We’re leaving now. Good luck.”

Desperate Joe walked over to Brick and Timothy. Without looking, he swung a hand behind himself, pointing a finger, and the blast of fire directed at him redirected itself at the dome. As it began to collapse and great globs of magma fell into the arena and the priestess and her casters struggled to contain it, Desperate Joe reached Brick and Timothy.

“Concentrate with me,” said Desperate Joe, to Timothy. “Home in the yurt. On three.”

He put his hands on their shoulders and Timothy concentrated with him.

“One. Two.”

A plume of red fire erupted near the priestess, and solidified into a towering stone statue of a man, which swung a huge fist, reaching down for the priestess.

*Three.*”

Desperate Joe transported them straight to the interior of the yurt. Halfway there, whizzing through the intermediary, a blast of terrible force launched them off course. The stars became their destination, but Timothy redoubled his focus and in the upper atmosphere he caught them, redirecting them straight back towards home.

They became real again a moment later, standing inside the Yurt.

Brick’s armor and sword collapsed, dissolving into sand. Timothy’s sword crumbled too.

From the ground, they looked up at Desperate Joe. Timothy said, “Thank you, master.”

Desperate Joe said, “You both failed the test, haha. Now you both have to study together, I suppose.”

“But master!”

“It will do you good! And save me the trouble of teaching the same things twice. You can teach him what you know, and I’ll teach you both what I know, and he’ll catch up.”

Timothy massaged his temples. “Ok.”

Brick, somewhat offended, said, “Hey, thank you for teaching me what you did, today. It helped.”

“We did pretty good.”

“You would have been dead if I hadn’t appeared,” said Desperate Joe, crossing his arms. “That’s not very good.”

Timothy got up and walked to the exit of the Yurt. After a baffled moment, Brick followed him outside.

They stood together on the hovering black crystal platform above the wasteland, watching the mountain boil around the dome. The magma had fallen away,

now, and inside the transparent dome of energy they could see the huge statue crushing and smashing and swinging people around.

They held hands and watched the battle play itself out in a long, desperate, hopeless display of violence. In the end, there were no survivors.

Timothy put his head to Brick's chest. "I'm sorry, Brick. We couldn't save any of them."

"It's ok," said Brick, sinking his fingers into the hair on the back of Timothy's head.

"It's my fault. We should have talked to them first."

"We would have died if we did that," said Brick.

"But Desperate Joe said—"

"—I think he just wants you to do the dirty work of teaching me. He's just lazy. He was going to fail you no matter how it went."

"You think so?"

"Come on. Doesn't that sound like him?"

Timothy thought about it. It did.

They watched as the mountain crushed the lingering magic of the dying priestess, and devoured her, her men, and the statue in a wave of devastation.

Then, by slow degrees, the mountain returned to its former place, and lay down to rest, folding its wings around itself. As the mountain's untamed form settled down into ordinary crags, and sprouted soothing snow-cover and shaggy greenery, Timothy looked up at Brick and said, "Thank you for trusting me. I'm sorry I almost got us killed."

"Thank you for calling the mountain. Even though it was a risk."

Desperate Joe emerged from the yurt. "Ah, it's over. Should take a few hours for the sky to clear. We may get a rainstorm out of it."

"How did you summon that big stone statue, master?" Timothy asked.

"Oh, that? I'm surprised you didn't catch that."

"What was that?" Brick asked.

"That was a rock giant. Big living lump of magic rock. Made by moon-cultists on the planet Jezleel."

Brick took this in, and looked away. "I don't understand. Did you conjure it?"

"No, no. As I said, it was made by moon-cultists. On the planet Jezleel. They take great pride in their craftsmanship, and with good reason. I was sorry to let that one go."

"Did it die for us?"

"It was never alive. It was an automaton, designed only for the defense of palaces and so forth. Once activated, it kills hostiles. Then deactivates."

"I see..."

Desperate Joe mimed eating an apple. Timothy gaped. "A transformation!"

"Correct. I turned the statue into an apple. When the apple was destroyed, the original shape was free to return to the world, and did so dramatically."

"Wait, so when you transform something, the original shape still exists, somewhere?" Brick asked.

“It does. It exists in the plane of potentialities, and itches to come back. It takes energy to keep a true form from asserting itself. The spell breaks if the new form is destroyed, causing the old one to reappear.”

“That’s a neat trick,” said Timothy.

“You’ll note that I was wise enough not to eat the very final piece.”

“That was wise,” said Timothy. “I can see that now.”

“Could you kill someone like that?” Brick asked.

“Oh yes, quite easily. Tricking someone into eating a sailing ship or a castle is an infamous form of assassination. Several kings went that way, very tragic stuff. It’s a banned form of warfare now, on most planets.”

Brick scratched his head and said, “Does that imply that there’s, like, a government between planets?”

“And star systems,” said Desperate Joe.

Timothy said, “It’s called the Congregation. They don’t police individual worlds, but they enforce certain laws cluster-wide. They patrol the intermediary.”

“What’s that?”

“What we just traveled through, to get here. Did you see the stars, for a moment there?”

“Yeah.”

“She tried to bounce us. I got us home once we were out of her range. We almost went right into the void.”

Brick looked down at the idyllically peaceful village and the valley around it, which bore now a new circle of fresh ash.

“Why didn’t you tell me the mountain was Shalim?” Timothy asked.

Desperate Joe shrugged. “It was irrelevant information. I did not think you would use the mountain.”

“You didn’t?” said Brick, baffled.

“In hindsight, it should have been glaringly obvious. But Timothy has often shown himself to be very timid and pacifistic in the past. I assumed he would go directly to this person and speak to them, and convince them to go away.”

“You genuinely thought that?” Brick asked.

“I did,” said Desperate Joe. “I assumed, of course, that a deadly fight would result, and that Timothy would use every power in his capacity to prove himself her superior, and to display his knowledge for you to witness.”

“Well, I witnessed a lot,” said Brick, looking at Timothy. “I’m pretty impressed.”

“He showed you nothing interesting! Just a few simple physics tricks, and a rather sub-par lightning lance. No transformations, no conjurations, no matter manipulations, no technique, no style.”

“Well I disagree,” said Brick, hotly. “I think we showed them plenty of style. And we had that mess under control. We were just about to kill all those guys when you showed up. We would have figured something out.”

“We would have died,” said Timothy.

“I don’t believe that.”

Desperate Joe said, “Well. It’s lunch time now, so let’s eat something.”

“Master,” said Timothy, “You should come with us, and get lunch in the village.”

“I don’t want to,” said Desperate Joe.

“Come on, master. They love it when you visit.”

“I’ve got beetle-meat left, I’m going to cook some of that.”

Brick said, “Hey, I’ve got an idea. For saving my life twice, how about I cook?”

Desperate Joe smiled. “Be my guest!”

They regrouped in the yurt and Desperate Joe opened the magic chest and took out perfectly-preserved room-temperature beetle meat, already sliced. Brick grimace-smiled and took it with two fingers while Desperate Joe carefully chose which steaks he wanted him to cook.

“Where do you keep your spices?”

“Spices? You mean herbs? I use those for potions, not food.”

Brick looked at Timothy, who grimaced sympathetically.

“How about this,” said Brick. “I don’t think anyone should eat this. I know you can’t possibly enjoy it more than good food. So how about Tim and I go into town and pick up dinner, and bring some back here for you? Could be a good way for Tim to practice carrying me?”

Desperate Joe looked at Brick as though seeing him in a different light for the first time. “Why, I suppose that would be good... But it’s expensive.”

“It isn’t,” said Brick. “It’s a very good price, and I think the money does good things for the village.”

“Spoken like someone with an income,” scoffed the wizard. “Fine. I’ll subsidize this fickle stomach of yours.”

Incredulous, Timothy watched as the wizard shelled out a fistful of coins for Brick.

Grinning, Brick took Timothy by the hand and led him out of the yurt.

“How did you do that?” Timothy asked.

“Do what?”

“You just... Told him his food was bad, and made him give you money to fix it. How?”

“I dunno.”

“What sorcery is this?”

“Come on, let’s go get lunch. I’m hungry.”

Tim took Brick by the hand and concentrated upon a well-known point in the distant village below. He closed his eyes, and took a step, dragging them into and through the intermediary. Things rushed past around them, silently. A moment later they were setting their feet on cobblestone streets.

“Remember the way?”

“That one, right?”

“Yup!”

They entered the seed house and waited at the podium for a minute or two. Molly came from the kitchen to greet them.

Timothy said, “Three, please. To go?”

“I’ll need the crockery back, when you’re done,” said Molly.

“No problem,” said Timothy.

“In one piece. Not dropped out of nowhere onto a tile floor.”

“Oh,” said Timothy, with a nervous laugh. “Don’t worry, I’ll return these myself.”

“Good.”

Brick handed over the fistful of coins.

Wordlessly, Molly walked away, her hands full of money.

“You gave her all of it!?” Timothy asked. “That was a test!”

“What?”

“Yeah! A loyalty test! If he doesn’t get the right amount of money back, he’ll think that you pocketed the rest! If he doesn’t get *any* money back, he’ll think that you robbed him!”

“How much should it have cost?”

“Well, it’s a donation-based system, so you kind of give what you can, but I usually just give a few knuckles per serving!”

“How many did you give her?”

“I don’t know! You had the money, didn’t you count it?”

“No?”

Timothy stretched his eyelids to stop them from twitching. “Ok. Ok. We just have to get it back.”

“What?”

“We have to get change. We have to tell her we gave them too much, and we need part of it back.”

“No! That’s horrible! It was a donation!”

“Then we have to ask how much the donation was, and we have to come back with the right amount of money! One way or another!”

“That’s easy, you can just conjure things and sell them.”

“Conjured things dissolve when their magic fades,” said Timothy. “And if they have the kind of magic that never fades, they just transform into something different over time.”

“So? You can still sell them.”

“What? No!”

“Sure you can! Just tell people when they’ll dissolve, so they know how to plan for it. People still want cool magic items, even if they’re only temporary. And you know how to do all kinds of things!”

“You know what... You’re right,” said Timothy. “That could work!”

“Here’s your soup,” said Molly. “Thank you for that very generous donation!”

“How much was it, by the way?” asked Timothy, his voice shaking.

Molly said, “Two hundred and thirteen gold knuckles! Very kind.”

“Two hundred and thirteen—” Timothy wheezed.

Brick nodded, smiling, and took two of the bowls of soup wrapped in towels. He looked at Timothy, still smiling, whimpered slightly, and walked towards the door.

Timothy gasped, “Thanks,” and took the last bowl of soup, then staggered out the door.

Outside, they looked at each other.

“Ok,” said Timothy. “Ok.” He bent over, trying to catch his breath.

Brick said, “Two hundred and thirteen gold knuckles.”

“Yup.”

“That’s more money than I’ve ever held in my life.”

“Well good, you’ll die on a highlight.”

“He wouldn’t really kill us, would he?”

Timothy shrugged. “I don’t want to find out what he’d do. Let’s find a way to make some money.”

“Won’t the soup get cold?” Brick asked.

“I can reheat it. We need to find some people, quick.”

“The garden,” said Brick. “Let’s walk around the garden.”

Timothy followed him back into the garden of the seed house and they walked the circuit for a while, looking at all the people.

“We have to approach someone,” said Timothy, nervous.

“Yes, someone rich-looking.”

“Or we could sell to lots of people.”

“Yes, but that will take longer.”

They kept walking. When they came to the end of the circle a second time, Brick said suddenly, “I know.”

“You do?”

“Yes. We need a demonstration. You have to conjure something impressive, to show people the kinds of things they could buy.”

“Good idea.”

“Thanks!”

“Ok, so what should I conjure?”

Brick looked around. “I don’t know.”

“What’s something everyone wants to do?” Timothy asked.

“Hmm... You mean, like, with magic?”

“Yeah.”

“Flying is a good one. And it’s pretty harmless.”

“Flying it is. I’ve got it.”

He reached his hand out into the air and with a flash of light he created from the energies of the planet a bracelet of solid gold.

“Here,” he said loudly. “Put this on. With this gift, I allow you to fly!”

He slipped it onto Brick’s wrist, and Brick instantly began to hover.

“Fly around a little, make it look good,” Timothy said.

“How do I control it?” Brick asked, lifting higher off the ground.

“You will fly according to your expectations and desires! Focus your mind upon how you want to fly, and the bracelet will understand. Don’t worry about crashing, the bracelet won’t let you hurt yourself.”

“How long does this wondrous magic item last?” Brick asked.

“Oh, just one hour! So be sure you’re on the ground by the time it runs out!”

“Oh, this is magnificent! A miracle! Surely any sane person would pay at least twenty gold knuckles for something so marvelous? This would be the perfect addition to any date night!”

“Indeed!” said Timothy, conjuring a dozen of the bracelets, to hover in the air before him.

The conjuration was not the kind of thing that any average spellcaster could perform. None of the villagers had ever seen anything like it, except when Desperate Joe came to town. People soon crowded around to buy them.

Twenty minutes later, flush with cash, Timothy and Brick sat in the garden watching the crowd flying around above them.

“We could join them,” said Brick.

“We could go someplace better,” said Timothy, “and be alone.”

“Where would we go?”

“There is an asteroid I sometimes go to,” said Timothy. “I gave it air. It’s orbiting between the fourth and the fifth planet, in the inner belt.”

“Which planet are we on?” Brick asked, quietly, a little daunted by the idea of leaving his world behind.

“The third planet,” said Timothy. “We call your star Atan, so your world is Atan III.”

“We call my world the world,” said Brick. “How is it that you speak my language?”

“I speak every language,” said Timothy. “Magic makes that easy.”

“You have to cast a spell, just to communicate with me?”

“Oh, no. I let this cast it instead.” Timothy touched his temple, and an invisible tattoo glowed slightly brighter in the dappled shade of the trees.

“A tattoo?”

“It contains an ongoing spell. You’ll get one, too. It translates all written and spoken languages for me, at a minor cost of energy.”

“You’re amazing.”

“Thank you,” said Timothy, taken a little by surprise. “It’s just magic. Basic stuff.”

“What’s an asteroid, by the way?”

“Oh,” said Timothy, “You’ll see. Hold my hand tight. Whatever you do, don’t let go.”

“Ok.” Brick interlaced his fingers with Timothy’s. Timothy gazed towards the heavens, and his eyes traced the paths of many stars. Orienting himself among the constellations, he narrowed his eyes, and stared at the tiny glimmer of his distant asteroid. Given the fact that it was broad daylight and the sky was a bright, clear blue, this all looked very strange to Brick.

Then, suddenly, they were weightless, and the whole world whooshed away to a tiny glowing spark far below them, and darkness bloomed with infinite stars. And a moment later they were solid again, real again, seated on the same bench, which had come along for the ride.

The asteroid was several miles in diameter but its tiny, irregular horizon did not flash reflectively enough to mar their view. A faint glimmer revealed the

shape of the invisible dome containing the clear, compact atmosphere of the asteroid.

Around them, in the void of space, they could see other asteroids tumbling silently on trajectories similar to their own. The earth far below seemed to slowly revolve, a thumb-sized blur of light and color. The fourth planet glowed like a large blue moon, and Brick saw details on its surface he had never imagined. The fifth planet loomed large behind the bench, a core of iron wrapped in tattered ochre storms.

It was quieter here, upon this bench, than the quietest snow-bound night. Brick put his arm around Timothy's shoulders and Timothy leaned his head on Brick.

"The soup," said Brick.

"Damn!" said Timothy.

He took Brick's hand, and a moment later they and their bench were back on earth.

Timothy picked up one of the bowls of soup. "Still warm. I can make them hot right before we get home. Let's go. Grab your soup."

Timothy carried them home, and outside the yurt he briefly put a hand on each bowl of soup, raising the internal temperature rapidly.

They stepped into the yurt to find Desperate Joe waiting for them. "About time!"

"Sorry, master. There... Was a wait. The food is worth it!"

They opened their bowls to find hot, perfectly-seared beetle-steaks, served with mashed potatoes, gravy, and salad.

Desperate Joe concealed his smile cleverly, but they both knew he had something to do with it.

After lunch, Timothy took Brick back to the asteroid, and they sat together, enjoying the view for some time.

"You know," said Timothy, after the longest pause of his life, "We're more alone than anyone else in the system, right now."

"We are?"

"Yeah," said Timothy, his hand wandering up Brick's thigh. "We are."

"What do you... Want to do with it?" asked Brick, as Timothy's hand found various squeezable things.

"Oh," said Timothy, leaning in. "You know."

An hour later they returned from the asteroid to find Desperate Joe standing at the edge of his plateau, looking worriedly off into the distance.

"What is it, master?" Timothy asked, overly conscious of his still-tingling lips and the smell of Brick on his face.

"Bad omen," said Desperate Joe.

Timothy stared out into the wilderness. "I don't see anything."

"It's that bad an omen."

"Only you can see it..."

"Shalim's warning me."

"What do we do?"

"See what comes next."



“Shouldn’t we leave?”

“We have a village to protect.”

“You’re retired.”

“I like this village.”

“We can take them with us?”

“No. I’m afraid we can’t.”

“We can wake the mountain, when the trouble comes.”

Brick said, “Excuse me, what trouble?”

Timothy said, “Whatever the omen is about.” To his master, he said, “What do you think it will be?”

“A caster,” said Desperate Joe. “Yes, I see a dark caster. A black cloak. Deadly skill. I sense...”

His eyes widened.

His shoulders slumped.

He said, to the ground, “Shalim.”

“What?” asked Brick. “I thought he was the mountain?”

“The mountain is one of his old bodies,” said Timothy, patiently. “Shalim has many incarnations. Some of them are separate from him until they die, others are always a part of him.”

“But he’s on your side!”

“He has his duty,” said Desperate Joe. “So do some of his lives. He can be with us and against us at the same time.”

“What if they fight each other?” Brick asked.

“It won’t matter. We don’t want to be here when it happens,” said Timothy. “Master, the village is *doomed* if we stay. We have to leave.”

“What? We can’t leave them!” said Brick. “We have to protect them!”

“We are the reason he’s coming here. We have to be somewhere else, if we want them out of harm’s way.”

“Timothy speaks... Wisely,” said Desperate Joe. “We must leave, and make a big show of leaving. And leave a legible trail that seems as though we attempted to conceal it.”

“I’ll forget to cover our atmospheric displacement,” said Timothy. “We’ll have a bumpy launch, but we’ll be seen.”

“Hmm. Dangerous, flashy, quite the opposite of what I meant, but it could work. What do you think, Brick?”

“I think we’re better off protecting home turf with everything we’ve got. We have the mountain. Between it, and us three, don’t you think we can handle him?”

“No,” said Desperate Joe.

Timothy shook his head. “Shalim’s terrifying. I don’t want to see what an incarnation of him can do.”

“But where will we go?” Brick asked, suddenly realizing why he was afraid.

Timothy took his hand. “We’ll be together wherever we end up. I’ll keep you safe, and you can keep me safe. Don’t worry. We’ll come back to your world.”

“We will?”

“Yes. When you want to return home.”

“I don’t have a home anymore,” said Brick.

“Sounds to me like you just haven’t settled in yet,” said Timothy, smiling. He pulled Brick into the yurt. Brick took one last look at the sky before allowing Timothy to lead him away.

The curtains of the yurt swung shut behind them and turned to solid stone, and Brick turned back to the interior of the yurt just in time to watch the burning fire flip over, firepit and all, revealing a hexagonal altar of quartz etched with many magic circles and symbols.

“Come on, Brick. Strap yourself in,” said Timothy, leading Brick to a chair which hung from the ceiling on a huge, flexible hook, and which certainly had never been there before. “It’ll be bumpy, at first.”

Timothy strapped Brick into the form-hugging chair, kissed him on the lips, and said, “Trust me.”

Brick nodded and clutched the handlebars of the chair. His feet dangled a foot above the floor.

Timothy stood at the table with his master and the two of them reached out their hands over the marble altar, and magic twisted from their fingertips to interface with the patterns in the stone and in the obsidian slab and the yurt which grew from it.

Outside, with a great wrenching of stone, the black stone slab bearing the wizard’s yurt burst free of its mountainous foundations, and lifted ponderously into the sky with a humming of arcane power.

Rooted to their ship, Timothy and Desperate Joe twisted energies through the stone, propelling it almost frictionlessly out towards the heavens at a steadily increasing rate.

Brick screamed as the labyrinth opened wide its jaws, revealing an unending sprawl of empty night, and the flickering veil of flame that wreathed the vessel. Through this huge new viewport Brick watched as they left the earth behind, and zoomed past the asteroid he had been spending such a lovely time on just a moment ago, and dove into the inky night.

After some time, Timothy lowered his hands. Desperate Joe still worked the ritual, twisting energies in various directions, and Timothy sensed the powerful auras he was casting out into the void, sensing for answers to questions he would never think to ask.

He tapped Brick on the shoulder and with a start Brick jerked awake. “What?” He wiped spittle off his cheek. “I passed out.”

“Bumpy ride,” said Timothy. “Sorry. We had to leave a trail. We’re in the empty, now. You can unstrap.”

“How long until we’re back in the full?”

“What?”

“You know. On land?”

Timothy laughed. “A few days.”

“Do you really just run away at the moment you first see a threat?” Brick asked.

“Not just a threat,” said Timothy, uncomfortably. “We were connected, a moment ago.”

“What?”

He nodded at the altar, and Desperate Joe still working above its glow. “Just now. He knows who that was. He’s run from him before.”

“He has?”

“Yes. I guess it’s an old enemy of his.”

“We just left your whole world behind,” said Brick. “Don’t you feel something?”

Timothy looked away. “We’re going back. As soon as it’s safe, we’ll go back. They’ll be fine now. He has no reason to harm them, if we’re not there.”

“What if he was working for the same army that Ashrak controlled? What then? Won’t he just destroy the village anyway?”

Timothy thought about this and his face fell. He looked to his master. “Master! We have to go back! What if he’s just working for Ashrak?”

“We cannot go back,” said Desperate Joe.

“Why not?”

“There is no back to go to. He has destroyed the node.”

“What?” Timothy asked.

Desperate Joe nodded. “Shalim’s power in that system is now irrevocably shifted.”

“What about the village?” Timothy asked.

“Destroyed, no doubt, by the blast.”

“No doubt? What about the shields? Those should offer some protection!”

“From the destructive blast of power produced by a disintegrating deific node and the direct collision between Shalim and his incarnation? I think not. The planet will be lucky to hold onto its atmosphere, after a blast like that.”

Brick unbuckled himself and tried to slump out of the chair, but floated weightlessly towards the ceiling.

“What’s happening!?” He asked.

“We’re out of the reach of any major gravity wells,” said Desperate Joe. “You’ll get used to it.”

“How are you two still standing?”

“We’re rooted to the ship,” said Desperate Joe, as if that explained everything.

Timothy said, “You’ll get the hang of it.”

“My whole planet,” said Brick, in tears.

Timothy held him. It was easy, now that he was weightless. “You’re going to be alright.”

“Will my planet be alright?”

“Maybe,” said Desperate Joe. “It’s not beyond the reach of magic to heal, but with the pathetic spellcasters on your world it would probably take all of them working together.”

“Can we go back and help?” Brick asked.

“No,” said Timothy, and he held Brick close. “I’m sorry. We can’t go back.”

“Won’t he leave us alone, now that he’s got what he wanted?”

“Maybe,” said Timothy. “But it’s a moot point. We don’t have the energy to make more than one hop at a time. We have to jump from world to world, and recharge upon landing.”

“How long to recharge?”

“Usually no more than a few hours,” said Timothy. “Sometimes, depending on the ambient energy, a day or two.”

“So we land, we give it a day, and we come back to save the planet.”

“By then it will be too late,” said Timothy, very sadly.

“What do you mean?”

“My master is right, but he’s being kind. If the node went, then... The crust will be shattered. Earthquakes will rock the world. Seas will breach their shores, and drown whole coastlines. The sky will blow away into the stars, and the seas will boil. It’s already over. There’s nothing left to save. We could go back and rebuild, but... It would just be replacing what was destroyed.”

Timothy was suddenly seized by a terrible thought. “You were supposed to protect it,” he said, gaping at Desperate Joe. “You were supposed to protect the node.”

“Astute,” said Desperate Joe.

“You were supposed to protect it, and you ran. You let it get destroyed. Because I advised you to...”

“Because I would have died if I had stayed to defend it,” said Desperate Joe, seating himself on a couch that scuttled forward to catch him. He put his feet up on the edge of the still-glowing altar.

Brick released Timothy’s hand, turned over in the air, and kicked off his chair, causing himself to float towards Desperate Joe. He caught himself on the stone rafters of the crystal yurt above the wizard, and said down to him, “You’re a coward!”

“I am a realist. It would serve the universe nothing if I died only to also have the node explode. This way the node explodes, but I do not die. The universe is better off.”

“What if you could have prevented it?”

“Well, we can’t know that, now.”

“What if it was our destiny to stay, and we fled?” said Brick, afraid.

“There’s no such thing as destiny,” said Timothy and Desperate Joe at the same time.

Desperate Joe said, “There are lots of predictions, but free will makes it impossible to meaningfully talk about fate and predestination. Sometimes things are just random. Other times, because of the manipulation of clever gods and demons, things go just a certain, special way, and interesting outcomes that seem impossible just happen to come about.”

“Free will,” said Brick. “But you ‘knew’ that you would die?”

“An omen only shows itself when your magic is telling you of something that is nearly certain.”

“Nearly certain?”

“Yes. Based on the current state of the universe, the most likely version of the future universe is the one in which this particular omened event occurs. An

omen is a sign to change course immediately, or face great cost.”

“I see,” said Brick, suspicious still. He let himself fall from the ceiling slowly, twisting his body unconsciously in the air.

Timothy took him by the ankle and pulled him down into a princess carry. “I have you.”

“I know,” said Brick.

“I’m sorry about your world.”

Brick wanted very much to be put down. Timothy sensed this at once, and put him on his feet.

“Here,” he said, to Brick. “Plant your feet on the ground. Breathe in. Focus on the ground beneath your feet. Try to feel the energy beneath it, and connect to it.”

“How?” said Brick.

“When you do it, you’ll be stuck to the ground, so you’ll know.”

“Thanks,” said Brick. He took a step and tumbled instantly into the air. He righted himself with great effort and grabbed hold of nearby furniture to pull himself back to the ground. He planted his feet again.

Beside him, Timothy, said, “Breathe. Deep breath.”

Brick breathed in, letting his mind fall to the place between his feet. He felt his contact with the ground, and the faintest vibration of unseen energies in the stone. He felt deeper, falling between the molecules in the guidance of Timothy’s gentle soul, and as they fell together into the heart of the ship, Brick realized that he had left his own body behind, standing beside Timothy’s, and they were falling headfirst together into flashing darkness, towards a distant light that loomed within the stone like a hidden star.

Timothy took Brick’s arm by the wrist, and reached it up towards the light. Then, arm tight around Brick’s waist, he reached up his own hand as well, and both of them plunged into the unseen star.

Brick opened his eyes, back in his body, feeling a humming pull between his bones and the stone. It was not gravity, but it felt almost like gravity, and it was strong enough to keep him oriented and heavy enough to walk.

He looked at Timothy. “Thank you.”

Absent-mindedly, Timothy said, “My pleasure.”

Desperate Joe said, “Well. We have several days to kill before we land again, so I suggest you make yourselves comfortable. I plan to read a book. I suppose whippersnappers like you enjoy board games and card games and things like that. I have all those kinds of things in the cupboard, there. Books are, obviously, on the bookshelves. They *should* be alphabetically organized by author, if my apprentice has done his work. Anything else you need, you can get from the chest, if you can find him. Now don’t bother me. I’ll be reading in my room.”

Desperate Joe walked off into the labyrinth.

Timothy leaned over to Brick and said, “Right now they’re organized alphabetically by title, because it’s easier to find them that way when you don’t know the authors. And because it drives him crazy.”

Brick laughed a little, despite his mood.

They sat down side by side and Timothy pulled Brick's hand into his lap.

Timothy looked at Brick. "Your whole planet," he said. "I'm... So sorry."

"Why would this guy kill a planet while he's on it?" Brick asked. "It's suicide!"

"He's not a normal person," said Timothy. "He's an incarnation of a god. He's a spell Shalim cast, long ago. Over the years he has changed. Now he's not part of the big Shalim. He can walk around like a human, but he isn't one."

"He ruined a planet," said Brick. "For what?"

"Destroying Shalim's node releases a large amount of energy," said Timothy, thoughtfully. "It's possible he's using it for something. But it would be ridiculous to try to shape that much energy into anything constructive. Destroying it would also weaken big Shalim's hold on the entire system, making any other manifestations of him weaker on all the worlds in the system. If this incarnation is trying to absorb others to grow his power, he's going about it the right way."

"They can do that?"

"Yeah," said Timothy, sadly. "Gods are crazy."

"My whole world," said Brick. "I never got to see much of it."

"I'm sorry. It was a pretty world. Desperate Joe took me to visit most of the big cities."

"All gone, now," said Brick. "All that history... Did it mean anything?"

"I don't know," said Timothy. "I'm sorry. My home world is gone too."

"It is?"

"Yeah. I didn't tell you earlier, because it's pretty sad. But it's gone. Just dust now."

"What happened to it?"

"War."

"What kind of war?"

"A centuries-long war between two continents on opposite sides of the planet," said Timothy. "In pursuit of a magic to end the war, both sides discovered a deadly spell and almost immediately cast it upon each other. The planet did not survive."

"Oh," said Brick. "I'm sorry. Well, at least... At least your planet destroyed *itself*."

"I'm sure it didn't seem like that to the billions of innocent people on it when the crust cracked like an eggshell."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too," said Timothy. "The war was held mainly for economic purposes. Both governments had decided that the means to sourcing unlimited funding was to put everything they wanted under the name of war, and then collude to perpetuate an endless state of constant war. Some of that funding went to research, but always in the direction of war. It was inevitable. I was just a kid at the time. I don't remember much. And my master doesn't like to talk about it."

"I'm sorry," said Brick, again. "Does this kind of thing happen often? Losing your planet, I mean?"

“Well,” said Timothy, “I’m two for two, but you know, I’m pretty sure it’s not a common experience, for people in this cluster.”

“What do you mean by cluster?”

“Star cluster,” said Timothy. “You know. A group of stars, dancing together. There are thousands of star-clusters, all dancing together in a giant pinwheel. That’s the galaxy. We can safely travel inside the star cluster with ease, but if we want to travel outside of it, things get more hairy. Different gods rule in different ways, and the god wars are still ongoing so you have to know the territorial boundaries of an unmapped, ever-changing field of infinite conflict, but if you poke around you can usually find interesting places. But we’ll probably stay within the star cluster.”

“We’re going to somewhere safe?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Won’t we be sitting ducks when we land?”

“Yeah.”

“Won’t that guy be coming after us?”

“Maybe not. He took out the node. Maybe that was all he wanted.”

“But why did we run?”

“To protect the village, remember?”

“But Desperate Joe knew he was after the node, not us! So why did he have us leave? He wasn’t even the one who suggested us to leave, but you said he was supposed to protect the node. But leaving makes no sense, if it only gets us one jump away, and we have to stay grounded for a day before we can jump again. Wouldn’t you assume he’d come after us?”

“Oh,” said Timothy. “He can’t actually trace us that easily. There’s not really any way for him to predict which world we’re headed to. My master altered the wards around the tower to ensure that.”

“Oh,” said Brick. “But still, what made you think Desperate Joe was supposed to protect the node?”

“It was just a hunch. Something about the relationship between him and Shalim.”

“I’m so confused. Was the mountain the real Shalim, or just a... fragment?”

“As the node, it was the throne of his presence in the system. That was the real Shalim, or a direct conduit to him, at least. A puppet of his. The real Shalim isn’t really harmed by the loss of the node, but it does weaken his power in that whole system.”

“Where are we going to land?”

“Old temple planet, I guess. Sacred 51.”

“Sacred 51? It has that many planets?”

“No,” said Timothy, “It’s a code name. I don’t know what the system’s real name is, it’s not on any modern charts. It was surveyed by the imperial arcanum at some point, and code-named Sacred 51.”

“This isn’t the first time you’ve mentioned an empire,” said Brick. “But what is it?”

“Oh,” said Timothy, with a laugh. “Your planetary culture hadn’t evolved to the point where empires would be truly possible, but an empire is basically a

huge collection of servant kings, paying tribute to a high king, or emperor. The kings get to keep governing, but they obey the laws of the high king, and they all share one gigantic army allied to him. None of the small kings are allowed to have their own armies.”

“And there’s one that governs somewhere out here? Among planets?”

“There was,” said Timothy. “But it’s dead, now. Long dead. We have some of their magic, which is how we know about the Sacred protocols. But they collapsed centuries ago.”

“How? How does a huge empire just... Disappear?”

“Infighting, mostly. A power vacuum developed when the four thousand and second emperor was assassinated by his clones, each of whom then claimed to be the true emperor. The empire split ten ways overnight. From there it was ‘out with the superweapons’ and a few planets died. The army ate itself alive. In some pockets of the void, they say the war still burns on, even now, after all these centuries. But I’ve never seen it. In the chaos, infrastructure crumbled. Interplanetary trade and communication collapsed, and language barriers quickly grew. Some places were bombed back into the stone ages, and others experienced new golden ages after they recovered from the rain of raw materials. The empire’s ways were forgotten, and all their history dissolved. People abandoned their poisoned cities. Nature took over, sometimes in hostile ways. Some of the planets resented their industrialization, and made their discontent known. Without the support of the empire, many freshly-colonized worlds spun out their last days shortly after the empire passed.”

“That’s sad,” said Brick. “Did the empire do anything good, while it lasted?”

Timothy nodded. “They charted the stars. Mapped the star clusters, even some of the ones beyond our current reach. They sent out millions of probes. They catalogued everything, and stored their information well. They also did a lot of terraforming. Your planet was one of theirs.”

“Wait,” said Brick. “What does that mean?”

“Oh,” said Timothy. “It means they made it.”

“Made what?”

“Your homeworld.”

“How?”

“They took an existing planet and reshaped it with magic, in order to make it habitable. Takes an army of casters or a god, but it’s doable. The empire made your world into something they could live on, then populated it with their colony ships. When the empire collapsed, your world nearly died. The few survivors and their descendants soon forgot the empire and much of its history. Most of the cities were covered by sandstorms.”

“My world?” said Brick.

“Yeah,” said Timothy. “Thousands of years ago, it was a colony of the empire.”

“And now it’s gone,” said Brick.

“I’m sorry,” said Timothy.

“It’s just... Everything that happened there. All the history. All the heroes, all the villains, all the artists, all the stories... None of it mattered. It’s gone



now. And I didn't even get to see it go."

"You wouldn't want to be around to witness it," said Timothy, wincing at a memory. "Trust me."

"Yeah, but it's just... *gone*?"

"You're still here."

"But I don't know anything about my planet."

"You can learn about it, here," said Timothy, waving towards the bookshelves.

"What are those?" Brick asked.

"Oh no," said Timothy.

"What?"

"You don't know what a book is?"

"...No?"

"Er... Ok, think of it this way. It's a kind of box, with many compartments. Pages. Each page has fascinating things inside it, but you have to train your mind to see them. There's a magic language you have to learn, called Allalan, that lets you understand the sygils."

"Couldn't I just get a tattoo like yours?"

"That will help, but if you don't know how to read any languages, it won't be able to translate any written languages for you. Just as you have to already know how to speak, in order for the tattoo to translate spoken languages for you."

"Oh," said Brick.

Timothy called one of the books into his hand. It floated across the room in a stately manner and he caught it by the spine, and opened it, and held up the page. "The symbols are easy enough to learn, but there are a lot of them, and they have different meanings in different contexts. Don't worry. In a few days, we'll have you reading some basic words. Learning to read is hard work, but it's worth it. It's one of the few skills that stays with you throughout your whole life."

"But what's the point of reading the symbols?" Brick asked. "Why can't you just read them to me?"

"Well," said Timothy, "When someone writes a book, they put a little piece of their own soul into it. Reading the book lets you access that. Lets you feel things they've felt, and share in the experiences they had when they were alive. It's a way to preserve the memories of a human soul, and pass them down to others. A lot of the books my master has collected contain secrets first discovered by ancient wizards and mysterious adventurers. Most of them were not written to be read out loud."

"Oh," said Brick. He looked towards the maw of the labyrinth. Wistful, he said, "I wish we could see where we're going, again."

"There isn't much to see," said Timothy, waving his hand towards the labyrinth, which collapsed, peeled away, and revealed the desolate void, glittering with hard, bright stars.

"Are we moving?" Brick asked.

"Swifter than thought," said Timothy.

“Why doesn’t it look like we’re moving?”

“There’s no point of reference. Everything we are looking at is incredibly far away. From here you can’t even see the planet we’re headed towards.”

“You can’t?”

“You can’t. It can’t be seen with the naked eye.”

“But you can see it?”

“Sort of,” said Timothy. “My master claims to be able to feel its gravity, but I can’t. But I do sense a very faint aura from it. With the altar I could see it more clearly.”

“What is the altar, anyway? What’s it for?”

“It allows us to control the tower,” said Timothy.

“It’s not a tower,” said Brick, thinking of the yurt.

“He keeps it collapsed, most of the time,” said Timothy. “He says it looks pompous, when it’s fully expanded.”

Brick pondered this. “But why can’t you just use magic to control the tower, then?”

Timothy raised a quizzical eyebrow and said, “We do use magic to control the tower. Trying to do it without the altar would be nearly impossible, since a human body can’t really contain that much energy. The altar is a magic stone, scribed with many spells and many star-charts. It also contains the magical charge we use to transport the tower through the intermediary. My master can tap into it to cast certain spells, in a pinch, but it’s sort of his life savings.”

“His life savings? I don’t understand.”

“Over his life, he’s taken his tower to hundreds of planets. He’s drawn energy from each of them, and created a network between them that he can draw energy from. That’s why he can charge the tower in so little time, compared to other large vessels. It takes massive amounts of energy to move the tower, but he draws it from his whole web. In a way, the altar grants my master access to all the energy he has stored for himself over his lifetime.”

“Fascinating,” said Shalim, through Brick.

Timothy froze as Brick’s eyes turned inky black, and golden irises glittered open.

“B-Brick?” Timothy asked, clinging to a last, desperate hope.

Shalim said, “Not at the moment. So the old man keeps it all in there, does he?”

“I won’t let you touch it.”

“You won’t be able to stop me.”

Brick leapt off the couch, somersaulting backwards towards the altar.

Timothy flung himself and the couch in the same movement, catching Brick with the couch just in time to tackle him deeper into the cushions.

He pressed a thumb to Brick’s forehead and raised up his other hand, opening his soul to the full spectrum of existence. He saw Shalim like a shadow on Brick’s mind, a pooling darkness bubbling up from secret cracks in Brick’s psyche. Shalim lurked now in every moment Brick had ever faced the looming shadow of his own mortality. He was rooted deep in Brick’s mind; impossible to exorcise.

Timothy placed his casting star directly to Brick's forehead and braced his will against Shalim's. This was just a tiny piece of a Shalim; just a spell still lingering on Brick's soul. Timothy hoped he was strong enough to suppress it.

Brick reached up his hand and crushed Timothy's wrist and flung him aside, then stood and reached for the altar.

With an ear-shattering blast of sound that deafened both Timothy and Brick, Desperate Joe announced his presence by atomizing Brick's right hand.

Sprayed crimson with his own blood, Brick's consciousness momentarily took over, fending off Shalim's. The darkness faded from his eyes, but only for that one moment of panic. In it, Desperate Joe struck, zooming weightlessly across the chamber to raise up his staff before Brick. Brick tumbled away, landed flat on his back, and his arms and legs sprawled away from his sides as though pinned there by invisible hands.

Timothy shouted: "Brick!" and ran to his side, attempting to staunch the bleeding of his wrist.

Desperate Joe stepped closer, looming above the prostrate Brick, and pointed the head of his staff at Brick's head. Light flared from the tip of his staff.

Brick collapsed, unconscious.

"What did you do!?" Timothy asked.

"What you failed to," said Desperate Joe, blowing smoke off the end of his staff.

"Wake up," Timothy said. He had magicked the wound shut but he was not adept enough at healing to create a new hand from scratch. He slapped Brick lightly.

Brick opened his eyes and instantly huddled into the fetal position, shivering. "I'm... S-s-s-so c-c-cold..."

Timothy reached out a hand and conjured a blanket over Brick, and helped him sit up. "You're ok."

"He is not," said Desperate Joe. "He is infected. I should have seen it."

"Shalim must have done it on purpose, when he gave his soul to me," said Timothy.

"Yes," said Desperate Joe. "Which implies some rather alarming things. If this aspect of Shalim was fulfilling the will of the prime Shalim, then the prime Shalim has some desire to see me powerless, and in his abode."

"I thought that wasn't new information," said Timothy.

"I thought we were good friends," said Desperate Joe, a little sadly. "Yet here I find him gleefully spying on me to seek out my weaknesses. This means we may be flying into a trap."

"Do you mean... The aspect of Shalim which destroyed the node... Could be working with prime Shalim?" Timothy asked.

Desperate Joe stroked his beard thoughtfully. "I don't know."

"That wouldn't make sense," said Brick. "Why would he destroy something vital to his own power?"

"Maybe he just wants revenge? Maybe he thinks it's our fault that the node got destroyed, because someone ran away when he wasn't supposed to?"

Desperate Joe grumbled. “So that’s his problem, is it? He plans a situation where the only way I can fulfill my duty is by dying, then tries to kill me when I choose to survive. He wants to get me, and he nearly did. Now he’s trying backhanded ways to do it, because he knows the jig is up.”

“But master, if what you say is true, then—”

“There’ll be no safe place for us in this or any nearby star cluster,” said Desperate Joe.

“What will we do?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We have to kill Shalim.”

“The one that blew up the node?”

“Him too. All of it. The whole thing. Prime, secondary, tertiary, all of it.”

“How?”

“The easy way would be to blow up the other nodes. Now we know it can be done,” said Desperate Joe. “Who knows? I may even find some use for the excess energy.”

“At the cost of whole planets?” Timothy asked. “No. Unacceptable.”

“Fine. You always want to do things the hard way. Well, if we can’t be direct, we can be indirect. I have friends in high places. We can seek refuge and reinforcements with them.”

“Master,” said Timothy, because Desperate Joe was already hard at work on the altar once again.

“What?”

“His hand?”

“Oh, of course,” said Desperate Joe, with a flick of his staff.

Brick’s severed hand regenerated itself in an agonizing wave of growth. Weakened by the sudden loss of energy, Brick clutched his numb and tingling new hand to his breast, and stared at the ground.

Timothy said, “Come with me.”

Brick allowed himself to be led away.

They wound up in Timothy’s bedroom. Timothy opened one of the tower windows to reveal a pool of impossibly clear water in which silver platters bearing delicious meals all floated. Timothy lured one closer with a crook of his finger, and pulled it in through the window, shutting it behind himself. Then he sat on the couch with the tray of meat and cheese in his lap. “Charcuterie?”

Brick realized he was very hungry, and he dug in.

Timothy said, “You’re going to be ok. My master was able to suppress the infection.”

“I’m possessed though, amn’t I?”

“Yeah,” said Timothy, uncomfortably. “I’m sorry. Shalim owns you now. He’s marked you with a piece of himself.”

“Will I ever be free of it?”

“No. One day it will take you straight to him.”

“What if you kill Shalim?”

“That will change everything,” said Timothy. “Who knows what could happen?”

“Then we should help him do it,” said Brick, fiercely. “We can’t let Shalim live, if this is how he truly is.”

“Shalim is lots of things,” said Timothy. “I don’t know if my master has the right idea...”

“Well what do *you* think we should do? It seems like no matter where we go, Shalim will be trying to get us.”

“Shalim’s always doing that,” said Timothy, waving a dismissive hand. “He tries to kill everyone, it’s nothing personal. He has his duty to fulfill.”

“So who wants Desperate Joe dead?”

“What?”

“Well, if it’s like you said, and Shalim isn’t doing this by his own free will, then whose will is it? Who wants Desperate Joe dead?”

Timothy thought about this. “I don’t know, exactly... I haven’t gotten to see much of his life, and he doesn’t talk about his past. He may have lots of enemies.”

“How old is he, anyway?”

“Oh, thousands of years,” said Timothy. “His body stopped aging long ago.”

“That can happen?”

“It can happen to strong wizards, if they survive long enough. Magic is always the best medicine.”

Brick looked at his new hand, and pinched the fingers of it, feeling all the knuckles. “I guess so.”

“I’m sorry about your hand,” said Timothy. “How does the new one feel?”

“Strange.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

Brick, who had just had an idea, said, “What if you tried again?”

“What?”

“I mean... You brought me back from death before, right?”

“Yes... But now Shalim will be watching.”

Brick looked at his hand and fell silent, lost in thought.

Timothy said, “Unless...”

“Unless?”

“Well, we only had to deal with Shalim because of the way you died. You were killed by his power, so of course you wound up in his grotto. Shalim was the strongest god on that planet by far. If you died somewhere else, away from his region of influence, and not by his power, then...”

“Wouldn’t I go straight to him anyway? Because of the piece of him that’s still inside me?”

“Maybe. But if you died on the home turf of a god who was *opposed* to Shalim, maybe they’d be willing to stop that from happening. But then we’d have a whole new problem. We’d only be trading one bad deal with Shalim for another bad deal with a god we know even less about.”

“But we didn’t make a deal,” said Brick.

“Not in words, no,” said Timothy. “But Shalim gave you to me, putting me and you both in his debt. That’s why he feels justified. If we didn’t owe him anymore, he’d let you go. The pact would require it.”

“What pact?”

“The god-pact,” said Timothy. “It binds all beings who would call themselves gods. The first god bound all the others to it, when she ascended.”

“She?”

“Mhmm. We don’t know much about her. According to legend, she was called ‘Ring’. After paving the road to godhood, she disappeared into the deeper galaxy. No one knows what became of her, but her pact is still in effect. No god escapes it.”

“But what does it do?”

“It forces them to deal fairly with mortals. Or, well. It forces them to deal with mortals, according to certain rules.”

“Such as?”

“They can’t go anywhere they haven’t been invited, but they only need to be invited once. They are true to the word of their bond, but only the word of it binds them. They have to respect the ownership rights and domain privileges of other gods, but that which they conquer they can keep.”

“Those don’t sound like very restrictive rules,” said Brick.

“Those are just the ones we know about. The gods have their own society, and can all talk to one another freely. They’re almost constantly forming alliances and betraying each other. Apparently there is a hierarchy, too, but we don’t understand it. None of them will speak about the ones in control; not even to name them or their domains.”

“What is a god, anyway? How does something become a god?”

“A god is a soul that has grown so big it can’t be contained in just one body anymore. That’s the simple explanation. The complicated explanation is that any being can ascend to godhood by acquiring great magical power, devoted worshippers, and the help of at least one other god. All divine power comes ultimately from Ring, the first among them. She created the first gods, and they created others, and so on down the line. The first pantheon mostly died out or left the inhabited parts of the galaxy long ago. The second pantheon suffered terrible casualties in the collapse of the Empire. The third pantheon, our pantheon, contains only a few original members: Shalim, Shachar, and Dylar. The rest have all come into being over the last few centuries.”

# Chapter 1

## Crumbling Throne

In a golden chamber prised all around with mirrors, on a bed large enough to get lost in, the 4,005th Emperor lay smoking a cigarette in a long black holder. His left hand lazily fingered between the cheeks of the burly young man whose stubbled jaw was currently working wonders on his left nipple. His right hand rested in the thick curls of the blonde man currently working wonders further south. His favorite husband, crouching by his pillow, holding the cigarette holder, was massaging the emperor's cranium with the nails of his free hand.

"Yes, that's very good, you," the emperor said, to the husband between his thighs.

The husband at his pillow touched a glowing tattoo on his temple for a moment, then said, "The Grand Vizier seeks an audience."

The emperor gave a melodramatic groan and draped his veiny forearm across his eyes. "Very well. Tell him to wait."

The husband at his pillow touched the tattoo at his temple again, and stared into the distance for a time. "He's waiting in the antechamber now, my liege."

"It's fine anyway, I was getting bored of these two. Have them cleaned and put back. I may use them again later. I think, after my meeting with the Grand Vizier, I shall be in the mood for a set of blonds, of similar height and build, preferably green-eyed."

"Any preference for hair, tattoos, piercings?"

"Hm. Surprise me."

"Would you prefer them to be twins, or unrelated?"

"Unrelated, I think, tonight. Now dress me, before you leave."

"Of course, my liege," said his favorite husband, banishing the two young men with a wave of his hand. As they disappeared with a scintillation of energy, both young men seemed to sigh with relief.

"And Dmitri," said the emperor, as his favorite husband dried him with a warm white towel.

"Yes, my liege?"

"Something opulent, for this meeting, I think. The big headdress."

"Which one, my liege?"

“I liked the one you did with the gold coins,” said the emperor. “Only more emeralds, this time. A row of them down the trim of the robe would please me, too.”

“Of course, my liege. And which undergarments, today?”

“Something scandalous. I want to feel sinful, whenever I talk to a priest.”

Dmitri, uncharacteristically, cracked a very slight smile.

“If my liege would assume the position?” said Dmitri.

The emperor stood in the center of his vast bed, arms and legs proudly akimbo. Dmitri stretched apart his hands, weaving strands of light between his fingers. With a snap, he sent the network of arcana straight at the naked emperor, and it wrapped around him, light flowing and solidifying into sumptuous royal attire. Bottomless silk pantyhose, a lacy thong, and a set of nipple clamps hid themselves completely beneath harem pants, a silk belt, and thick, fur-lined robes. The light even flowed out to become golden slippers, golden bracelets and rings, and a gold-heavy headdress that loomed high with four huge golden rings, and draped its silks neatly to his shoulders.

“Ah,” said the emperor, admiring himself in the many mirrors. “Excellent work, as usual. You may leave, now, but keep an eye on the meeting. I may need you.”

“Yes, my liege,” said Dmitri, and he vanished with a glimmer of light.

The emperor strode to the golden doors of his bedchamber and flung them open grandly.

The Grand Vizier stood waiting for him in the golden-pillared antechamber. Beyond the windows the secret nebula burned darkly against the forming stars within it. The glow was almost unbearable, even through the light filters. The emperor was much too royal-blooded to blink or squint in the blinding glare, but his eyes did water slightly.

He played it up. “Ah, Belphagos! How wonderful to see you again.” He embraced the Grand Vizier closely.

“Good to see you as well, my liege,” said the Grand Vizier, straightening his very elaborate headdress, which was slightly taller than the emperor’s.

The emperor said, “Tell me you come bearing good news?”

“Alas, no,” said Grand Vizier Belphagos. “I have troubling reports from the old clusters. It seems one of your old colony worlds, outside the conquered regions, has just been destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” The emperor’s eyes flashed. “How?”

“Unclear, at the moment. My mages tell me that they did not detect any sign of a worldbreaker concoction.”

“Then our enemy has learned new tricks,” said the emperor, allowing his unlined royal face to become temporarily ruffled by a scowl.

“It would appear so. I have dispatched an investigation tower to assess the system, I should have more information for you within a few day’s time. I came to discuss more pressing matters, actually, but while I was waiting I received the message about Atan III. Now, I came to talk about your heir, and about troubling ripples in the—”

“—Say that name again.”



“What name? Atan III?”

The emperor stared out the window for a moment. “Atan III.”

“Is the planet significant? It was not deemed essential in the Grand Departure.”

“Not essential, no,” said the emperor. “Sorry. You were saying something about troubling ripples in the...?”

“In the deifield,” said Grand Vizier Belphagos. “The power of Shalim has shifted, somehow.”

“That will be because of the node,” said the emperor. “Shalim will be fine. What was the other issue?”

“Oh, your heir, sir.”

“My ungrateful brat, yes. What has he done this time?”

“He’s missing, my liege.”

“Missing?”

“Yes. His palace servants haven’t been able to find him in three days. I’ve had them executed, of course, for the delay in informing central security, but—”

“—He could jeopardize everything!” The emperor roared.

“Yes,” said the Grand Vizier. “That’s why I came straight to you with the news. I’ve brought along a mercenary group that should be able to retrieve him without revealing our presence. Would you care to look them over?”

“Fine,” said the emperor. He hated when people cut him off mid-rage with calm, reasonable, competent solutions.

The Grand Vizier gestured towards a set of double doors nearby, and they swung open to reveal a gold-paved hallway lined with pillars. On one side of the hall, large windows offered views into the nebula. On the other side, golden doors stood tightly shut. At the far end of the hall another set of double doors swung open as they approached, and they stepped into the throne room, emerging near the throne.

The throne room ran hundreds of feet into pillared darkness. As they entered the chamber, stars bloomed in the domed ceiling high above, illuminating a group of leather-wearing men and women standing in a circle of silver-armored imperial guards.

The emperor and the Grand Vizier approached the group. The emperor raised a lazy hand, and the guards stepped away to make room.

“So,” said the emperor. “You are the ones who are going to collect my son?”

“That’s us, your honor,” said the leader of the group, a one-eyed man wearing the head of a wolf. His hands rested on the handle of a huge black blade. Beside him, a caped woman in red leathers leaned on his shoulder-padding and toyed with a ruby star in her hand. The slender man behind him was strapped from head to toe with extra daggers. Next to him, a very large older woman with a very full beard held a black iron maul with one hand, resting its massive dragon-shaped head on her shoulder. Behind them both, a silver-bearded man in a grey cloak rested one hand on the sword at his hip. His eyes were concealed by a white silk bandage embroidered with staring tiger’s eyes. The last member of the crew was a young man with what appeared to be a magic short-sword.

“Do you have a name?” asked the emperor.

"I'm Wolf, your honor," said Wolf.

The emperor rolled his eyes. "I don't care about *your* name. What's the name of your mercenary band?"

"Oh," said Wolf. "We call ourselves Wolf's Pack."

The emperor grimaced at the stupidity of the name. "Well, just so long as you understand that my son is *not to be harmed*, I grant you free rein to do whatever you think is necessary to retrieve him. You will be well compensated for your efforts, and I will gladly pardon any crimes you are forced to commit in the process."

"That sounds good, your honor," said Wolf.

The young man with the sword was staring at the emperor very fiercely. The emperor felt no sense of danger; his guards were very competent, and the Grand Vizier was an infamously gifted spellcaster. This was, perhaps, why he did not instinctively step back when the young man's blade ignited.

The warrior lunged across the distance, swift as thought, and his blade found the emperor's heart.

It stopped an inch from the emperor's chest, held back by a barrier of arcane force. Dmitri stepped out of the emperor's shadow, hand still upraised. With a simple push of his empty hand on the air, he sent the warrior's sword spinning away.

The warrior, white as a sheet, ran after his blade.

Dmitri raised his hand, and the warrior's feet hit the ground and stayed where they landed. Then Dmitri turned his hand, and the warrior's body twisted to look at him.

Dmitri calmly beckoned, and the warrior slid, kicking and screaming, to the feet of the emperor. Dmitri planted one foot on the warrior's chest.

"What shall I do to him, my liege?"

The emperor looked down at his would-be assassin. "Hm. He's cute. Make him a husband?"

"A god is in him," said Dmitri. "That magic will not work on him."

"Oh, I see," said the emperor. He looked at Wolf. "How badly do you care to keep him alive?"

Wolf and his pack were huddled close together now. "We'd like him to live, if it's all the same to you."

"Hm. Well, consider him part of your payment when you get back after a job well done. It's not his fault."

"I did not say that," said Dmitri. "I said a god is in him."

"Which god, by the way?"

"They are hiding themselves from me," said Dmitri. "They have hidden well."

"Well, throw him in the damp, for now."

"As you wish," said Dmitri. With a wave of his hand and a flash of light, the young man disappeared.

"Now, was there anything else?" The emperor asked, turning to the Grand Vizier.

The Grand Vizier bowed. "No, my liege. As always, you have accomplished things most efficiently."

“Good. Then get out of my hair. I have other statecraft to attend to.”

“Yes, my liege,” said the Grand Vizier, and he disappeared.

The emperor left his guards and the mercenaries behind. The moment he was in the royal halls again, he tore off his headdress and stripped away his robes.

“Dmitri!”

“Yes, my liege?” said Dmitri, at his side.

“His headdress was still bigger than mine!”

“Surely, it was less ornate?”

“Yes, but it was *bigger!*”

“I shall enhance the size of my designs.”

“Why didn’t you know about my son?”

“I did know, your liege.”

“What? You did? Well why didn’t you tell me!?”

“He asked me not to.”

“Oh,” said the emperor, sadly. “I understand.”

“The secret has ached with each day I kept it,” said Dmitri. “I am sorry.”

“And you were sloppy, today,” said the emperor. “That little brat nearly stuck me.”

“I am sorry,” said Dmitri. “I nearly did not break the Grand Vizier’s enchantment in time.”

“The Grand Vizier’s... What?”

“His magic prevented me from entering the chamber. It also stunned the guards.”

“The guards were *stunned!?*”

“They were.”

“He tried to have me killed,” said the emperor, clawing at his skin.

“So it would appear, my liege.”

“He’ll burn for this base treachery.”

“He is popular among the Vizier class,” said Dmitri. “A sudden execution without cause might sow further disloyalty at high levels. This would be inadvisable.”

“You’re right. We have to bring him down first. Corrupt him.”

“It should be easily done, my liege. I am aware of his predilections.”

“Little boys, huh? It’s always little boys, with these clerical types.”

“It is, perhaps, better if I give you plausible deniability?”

“Sure, let my curiosity burn me. Right up until the fire finishes burning him.”

“I apologize once again, my liege.”

“Make me those blonds, before you go.”

“Of course, my liege.”

“Actually...” The emperor leaned in and kissed Dmitri on the lips. “Somehow I always forget I can do that. You seem so untouchable, somehow! So perfect, so pure, so faithful.”

Dmitri, flush now, stuttered, “Would you like me to provide for you myself, before I go?”

The emperor smiled. Then he laughed. “No, no. You have enough work on your plate. Just send me the blonds, and do whatever you can to embarrass the Grand Vizier.”

Bowing, Dmitri disappeared.

## Chapter 2

# New Home

“We’re about to land,” said Desperate Joe. “You may want to strap him in.”

“We are?” said Timothy, looking up from the couch where he sat with Brick, helping him learn the sygils.

“We are,” said Desperate Joe. “I’ll need you at the altar.”

“You will?” said Timothy, suddenly worried.

“Well, no. But it will be good practice for you.”

Timothy looked at Brick. “Come on, if I’m landing, you’re going to want to be strapped in.”

Brick put the book down and followed Timothy to the chair which had once more appeared from the ceiling. He allowed Timothy to strap him in. Timothy kissed him on the lips.

Brick said, “Good luck!”

Timothy said, “Thanks, I’ll probably need it.”

Brick looked into the labyrinth, which showed now only darkness and stars.

Timothy joined Desperate Joe at the altar, and linked into its magic.

Darkness filled his senses as his mind expanded into the void around the flying stone platform. Sensing the auras around him, he located the planet in their path. They had a few minutes left before they would need to think about decelerating.

The auras were strange; not like he expected. For a moment, he could not put his finger on the problem. Then he twisted, and gazed into the tower’s wake, and saw a rippling storm of hellfire just a few thousand miles behind them.

“Master?” said Timothy, out loud, for Brick’s benefit.

“Yes?”

“What is that?”

“That is a surge of energy,” said Desperate Joe. “Don’t worry. We will have time to land before it hits us.”

“What!?”

“Oh yes. It has been chasing us all the way from Atan III. It will likely strip the atmosphere from our new planet a moment after we arrive. I think we can protect our landing site, though.”

“Shalim sent it at us?” Timothy asked.

“So it would seem.”

“So that’s what he did with the excess energy from destroying the node,” said Timothy.

“Yes,” said Desperate Joe. “So it would seem.”

“How are we going to land in time to cast the shield?”

“You are going to land,” said Desperate Joe. “I am going to cast the shield before we land, and finish it as we fall.”

“It will tear you apart!”

“No. It will make our deceleration very painful, but it won’t kill me. Probably.”

“Master, you can’t—!”

“What’s he doing?” Brick asked.

“He’s going to cast out a shield before we’ve even touched down. We’ll be ripped away from his magic even as he casts it. The shield will catch the air as we fall through it unless he pours it out fast enough to keep the shield at a precise distance, and if it catches the air, the energy the spell needs will pull *itself* out of him as we fall away from the shield.”

“It’s a necessary trick,” said Desperate Joe. “It should prove no great difficulty.”

“Master, it’s suicidal!”

“So is landing without a shield, in this case!”

Timothy realized there was nothing to do but trust his master. “Alright.”

“Now concentrate. You’ll need to wait to decelerate until we hit the atmosphere.”

“WHAT!?”

“I have every faith in you. You will just need to try harder than you have ever tried before, and you will succeed.”

“Master, you can’t be serious!”

“Concentrate! Gather the power ahead of time.”

“But we haven’t even picked a landing site!”

“It won’t matter! There’s no time to concern ourselves with what’s underneath us. We’re going to drop out of the intermediary right at the edge of the atmosphere, and you’re going to use any propulsive power you can generate to slow us down before impact.”

“Why can’t you just do it gently!?” Brick shouted.

“If we decelerate while still in the intermediary, the energy surge will catch us,” said Desperate Joe. “I’ve had several days to think this through. This is the only way we survive.”

“But we won’t survive this, Master,” said Timothy.

“Come now! Trust your old master, and do as I say. Concentrate. The moment will come quicker than you think!”

Timothy concentrated.

Far ahead of them, in the intermediary, he sensed the planet growing in his senses. He could feel its moons, now, but...

“Master!” He said, incredulous.

“Yes?”

“There’s no star! Sacred 51 has no star!”

“Yes, it’s a rogue world,” said Desperate Joe. “It was thrown away from its sun during one of the early god wars. That isn’t important now. Concentrate! We’re nearly there!”

Timothy concentrated with all his might. He knew exactly what he was going to do to slow them down, but bracing to do it felt like preparing to jump off a cliff or getting ready to swim to the bottom of the ocean.

Then there was no more time to think or to concentrate; they hit the atmosphere and Desperate Joe immediately dropped them out of the intermediary, and suddenly they were four hundred thousand feet above a dark, sunless world, falling at a speed no physical matter was ever meant to attain. Timothy cast his spell even as Desperate Joe flung out the wings of his shield to trail behind them like a huge, gossamer parachute, and as the shield expanded and the tendrils of its energy stretched beyond them in a dazzling trail, a wall of dark liquid flashed into existence in front of the yurt and its platform and crashed over it as Timothy continued to conjure up an inland sea several thousand gallons at a time.

The conjured water came into being already moving at a speed even greater than that of the vessel, but its greater surface area smashed against the atmosphere, spreading out the impact and leaving a comet-trail of forming clouds that would have been very pretty on a world with better lighting. In the silvery glow of the tendrils of Desperate Joe’s shield, the foam and mist sparkled.

The spreading shield above them was now stretched taut, and the lines between it and Desperate Joe were straightened out and straining. At the altar, sweat rolled down the wizard’s face in waves. He and Timothy clung, white-knuckled, to the stone, and channeled its energies in two different directions. Desperate Joe spooled out a measured flow of it to maintain his connection with the shields, and Timothy poured a wild river of it to create the vast jet of water they were going to splash into the ground as part of.

“Liquid! Is! Noncompressible!” Desperate Joe shouted.

“Not when it’s aerated!” Timothy shouted back.

They had not even reached the planet’s surface before the sky dawned with blinding light. Energy struck the shield and diverted in all directions, and fountained down around them in a vast cone. Though they and the ground below them were both shielded, Desperate Joe cried out, and Timothy yelped, his hands sizzling on the altar stone.

Then the vessel crashed down in a huge splash of conjured water, and swept across the surface of the planet on its own wave, and came at last to a stop, embedded in a sandy shoreline. For miles behind it, small lakes flashed in the lingering glow of the planet’s molten crust. They had managed only to save one hundred-mile-wide circle of the surface.

Timothy and Desperate Joe lay steaming beside the altar. Brick hung, unconscious, in his chair. Outside, the flow of energy had stopped. Silent, unseen, the blasted atmosphere of the forsaken planet gave a last gasp of smoke to empty space.





## Chapter 3

# The Prince and the Wolves

His Imperial Majesty, Prince Clark, had lost his shoes in a bet. Barefoot now, walking down the cobbled streets of his current haunting ground, he felt a giddy lightness of being that had only a little bit to do with the alcohol in his system.

“For he’s a jolly good fellow, for he’s a jolly good—*hic!*” The prince upturned the bottle in his hand, but found it empty. “He’s a jolly *bad* fellow, letting my bottle go empty. Oy, servant!”

He turned towards the alley wall. “Yes, master?”

He turned the other way again. “You’ve let me empty my bottle.”

Back to the alley wall, he said, “The royal treasury cannot continue to subsidize your debauchery.”

To the shuttered windows of the house on the other side of the alley, he said, “Damn straight. Broke the fucking bank. Emptied the treasury. Drank it all! Ha.”

He dropped the empty bottle in someone’s backyard and left the alley, re-joining the main street. “Now, servant, if you could just direct me to my bedchambers... Aha! Knew I’d remember that sign.”

The sign was, indeed, very memorable. It swung from one rusty hook, the other lying on the steps below it. It read: “Tilmuckey’s.”

Vaulting over the railing of Tilmuckey’s tavern steps, the prince kicked his bare heels together. Then he swaggered in through the saloon doors.

The nearly-empty tavern gave a general grumble of disapproval at his outsider energy, but no one bothered to get seriously offended. The patrons were all rough-looking types, but that was to be expected, on Meggid IV. The only inhabitants of this particular colony were Miners, hunters, and traders passing through. The belts of Meggid were among the most profitable and deeply exploited asteroid belts in the known systems, since the collapse of the empire. The guildhalls, palace, nobility, and major corporations were all on Meggid II, far from this smaller, colder world, but Meggid IV had its own charms.

One of said charms was Tilmuckey, tavernkeep. Though his eyes were dark and sweet, he was built like an ox. His horns added to the effect, as did the little tuft of dark beard at the end of his muzzle, and the gold ring between his

nostrils.

Another charm Meggid IV possessed was the lightness of its gravity field. The prince did a nimble in-air pirouette, to showcase his sobriety. He stumbled only a little, on the dismount. “Tilmuckey!”

“Clark!”

“I seem to have lost my boots. Do you have some I could borrow?”

Tilmuckey pointed wordlessly at one of his hooves.

“Oh, right, I suppose you wouldn’t,” said Prince Clark, and he turned to look at the other guests.

He approached a table where five men were playing a game of Gestalt, and put one bare foot up on the edge of the table. “Gentlemen, I seem to have lost my boots. I don’t suppose you’d deal me into your game?”

One of the men, a grizzled, mustachioed man named Grunk, scoffed. “With what? Haven’t even got boots, how you plan to buy in?”

“With excellent things, my friends! Excellent. Things.” The prince seated himself very comfortably on the lap of the man nearest the edge of the booth.

The men, uncomfortable now, looked at one another.

“Well?” said the Prince. “What do you say?”

The men, hard-working miners, had not seen women in some time. The prince, as a very attractive young man, wasn’t so bad to look at.

“Fine,” said Grunk. “But I hope you lose.”

“Oh, I hope so too,” said the Prince.

Ten minutes later, walking away in his new boots, purse heavy with his winnings, the Prince resumed his conversation with Tilmuckey. “A bottle of that ridiculous Minauran brandy, then, I think.”

He flicked two unsmelted lumps of gold ore onto the counter, and Tilmuckey got down one of his special bottles.

“This is the good stuff,” said Tilmuckey, as he poured.

“I know. You said that last night. That’s why I wanted more.”

“People don’t usually buy Minauran brandy,” said Tilmuckey. “They call it cowcahol.”

“That’s speciesist,” said the prince, distastefully. He downed his glass and poured himself another. “I think it’s good. Can really feel it killing brain cells.”

Tilmuckey did not seem to know how to respond to this.

Prince Clark trailed his fingers up the Minauran’s meaty forearm, tracing a path from his long-fingered hands to the crook of his elbow. He sipped his brandy. “You should pour yourself some. Comes from your family’s farm, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” said Tilmuckey. “From the homeworld.”

“Does it taste like home, to you?”

“It tastes like sorrow, to me.”

Prince Clark poured him a glass and said, “Surely, not as you get close to the bottom?”

Tilmuckey’s braids danced when he threw back his head to laugh. “True enough.”

They clicked glasses.

At the midnight hour, the prince woke in Tilmuckey's bed and threw back the sheets. Starlight streamed in through the crooked windows, and green auroras danced in the dark sky. The shifting glow on the crumpled bedsheets made the whole room seem somehow underwater.

Prince Clark sat against the horned and intricately-carved headboard and glanced at Tilmuckey, snoring quietly beside him. He let his hand play idly in his dark curls, and stared out the window at the stars.

A small voice inside his head said: "My liege. You asked me to inform you when his majesty learned of your absence. He has been informed today. A mercenary band has been sent to collect you."

Prince Clark could not respond without waking Tilmuckey. Dmitri seemed to know what he wanted to ask.

Dmitri said: "They seem very competent. They have already picked up your trail. You have at most three standard days before they catch up to you. Please don't do anything stupid."

Prince Clark blinked gratefully. Dmitri sensed his gratitude, and his presence departed.

Prince Clark looked sadly down at Tilmuckey again, then out at the rooftops of Poleplant, the tiny mining town that in just two short days had come to seem almost like home.

Tilmuckey rumbled: "What is it?"

"Nothing, my love," said Prince Clark, turning to him passionately. "Let me send you back to dreams with something sweet."



## Chapter 4

# Sacred Fifty-One

The thing which finally managed to wake Brick was the smell of smoke. He shook himself and took in his surroundings. The labyrinth displayed only its own dark forests, now. He hung towards one side, in the chair, held up only by the straps. He unbuckled them and fell out of the chair, onto the sloping ground, and looked for Timothy. The whole yurt was lying nearly on its side, so that the ground presented a steep slope rising towards the altar he could not see.

“Tim!?” Brick shouted, over the haze. Blindly he staggered into the smoke. A glow nearby caught his eyes: open flames, burning on Timothy’s robe.

Brick yelped and ripped off his shirt, then used it to beat down the flames. He scooped up Timothy and dragged him away from the altar and the smoke. By the time they reached the clearer air at the lower wall of the yurt, Timothy was coming around.

“My master!” said Timothy, leaping to his feet. He made it hardly a step before his legs failed him and Brick leapt to catch him.

As he slumped to the ground in Brick’s arms, Timothy said, “What happened to your shirt?”

Brick still held his singed shirt in one hand. “Are you ok?”

“I think so, I just overcasted myself a little. I’ll be alright. But where’s Desperate Joe?”

“I didn’t see him!” Brick said. “The smoke’s too thick!”

“Smoke,” said Timothy. “Smoke!”

He reached up his hands and waved them in the air, then clutched them to his chest and screamed a cry of pain. “Aargh! I can’t—! You’ll have to do it!”

“Do what!?”

“Root yourself to the tower,” said Timothy. “It’s fallen asleep!”

Brick planted his feet on the crooked floor and tried to do what Timothy had shown him. It had seemed so easy, so instinctive, then; why was it so hard now? He could easily imagine the things he had felt and seen, but when he had done it with Timothy, it had not felt like imagination. It had been something more, something stronger, something that believed itself into realness.

"I can't!" Brick said.

"You have to!"

Brick closed his eyes and tried again. It had been about his feet; about the feeling of his feet on the floor, about the vibrations he could feel beneath them. It had been like an eye whose lid he had never opened before, a sense that he had never before used. Trying to open it on his own was like trying to move the tips of his ears or just his pinky toe.

"It's not gonna happen!" Brick said, and he raced up the sloping floor and into the smoke.

"BRICK!" Timothy shouted, reaching blindly towards the swirling vapors. "Dammit, Brick!"

Timothy worked his shaking hands against each other, trying to stretch and shake and massage the awful burning out of his nerves. It was no use; he had channeled too much energy, and burned both his arms. He could only pray the damage wasn't permanent.

Brick emerged from the smoke triumphant, Desperate Joe's arm draped across his shoulders. By the time he reunited with Timothy, Desperate Joe was waking up.

"Oh, my aching... Timothy! Why haven't you fixed this?"

"I tried! I tried, master, I—" Timothy held out his shaking hands.

Desperate Joe tisked, then planted both his feet, instantly righting the yurt, causing Brick to fall over.

"It's alright, Tim," said Desperate Joe, waving his hand at the smoke, which began to retreat into the altar. "Not your fault. I asked too much of you, you weren't ready. That's not your fault."

With a crunch of stone, the altar mended a narrow crack which had nearly split it completely. The labyrinth billowed open, revealing a bleak horizon of nearly perfect darkness, under a dazzling sky. "Well," said Desperate Joe, "as I feared, the atmosphere has fucked off to other regions. We'll have to whip up a new one."

"Master, it's too big," said Timothy. "And I can't even help you!"

"Then Brick will have to help me," said Desperate Joe, very calmly. "Don't worry, Timothy. The damage isn't permanent, I can already tell that much. You'll recover quickly."

"Brick isn't ready!"

"He'll be fine," said Desperate Joe, with a dismissive wave.

Brick, now on his feet again, said, "What do you need me to do?"

"Root yourself to the tower and join me at the altar. I'm going to get a concoction brewing."

"A concoction?"

"For large-scale permanent conjuration, you've got to use alchemy. It will be a violent reaction, so I'll need your help to contain it when it gets out of hand."

"When? Not if?"

"I say what I mean, Brick."

“But I can’t do magic,” said Brick. “Just now, I couldn’t even root myself to stop the smoke and save you.”

“Oh,” said Desperate Joe. “That’s a major hurdle. Well, it’s easily overcome. I can help you root yourself this time. When it comes time to channel the energies, I’ll show you what to do.”

“Ok,” said Brick, trying not to panic.

“Don’t panic,” said Desperate Joe. “It only ever makes things worse.”

“Thanks,” said Brick. “I’ll try.”

Timothy, still seated on the ground, grabbed his hand. “Help me to the chair?”

Brick helped him up, frightened at his weakness, and helped him to the hanging chair. Strapping him in, Brick said weakly, “What happens if I fail?”

“We all go out in a blaze of glory,” said Desperate Joe.

Timothy kissed him on the forehead before he could think about that too much. “You can do it.”

“You just said I wasn’t ready!”

“You’re not. But you can do it.”

“Ok.”

Desperate Joe was already at the altar. “Come on, Brick.”

Brick joined him at the altar as calmly as he could.

“Hands on the altar.”

“Didn’t it just burn you?”

“I have already mended my own burns,” said Desperate Joe. “Timothy will learn to mend his, in time.”

“Can’t you heal him?”

“There are certain wounds that a soul can only heal on its own,” said Desperate Joe. “Now don’t worry. The altar will only burn you if the energy moving through it becomes too great for us to manage.”

Brick put his hands upon the altar. Instantly, the chamber around him disappeared, replaced by one of similar dimensions. Tables ringed around the altar, in this room, all of them glittering with pipes, bottles, beakers, and brass equipment. Brick recognized only one item: an old brass distiller.

Desperate Joe waved his hands above the altar, and all around the room, instruments sprang to life and chemicals began whizzing around tubes and whirling into bottles. Ingredients floated out from among the many cabinets and contributed themselves to the display, sprinkling themselves into things, grinding themselves into powder, measuring themselves with droppers and spoons, and stirring themselves into mixtures. At the center of the spiral of interconnected mechanisms, near the altar, there was a large iron cauldron.

“But, Master,” said Brick, “Is this magic?”

“This is Alchemy,” said Desperate Joe. “Much worse than magic.”

“Worse? How do you mean?”

“*What* I mean is that Alchemy is far more dangerous and problematic than ordinary magic could ever be. There are three reasons for this.”

Several distilled potions presented themselves before Desperate Joe and he glanced closely at each before nodding his approval. They moved to hover above the cauldron.

“What are the reasons?” asked Brick.

“Hmm?”

“The three reasons?”

“What three reasons?”

“The three reasons? Why Alchemy is worse than magic?”

“Ah, yes. Firstly, because Alchemy tampers with the deepest forces of natural creation, infringing upon the powers of the gods themselves. Secondly, because any alchemical transformation can only be undone by means of alchemy. Thirdly, because anyone with the knowledge to use it can do so.”

“But isn’t that just like magic?” Brick asked. “Anyone can learn it.”

“Anyone can *learn* magic, yes. But the universe and the gods within it have seen fit to grant only certain people the ability to actually *use* magic. And they grant that power in many different measures, and in many different forms. Alchemy is different. With the right ingredients, the right rituals, and the right knowledge, anyone can access the unseen powers and perform Alchemy. For example, this potion...”

Desperate Joe conjured a set of dark goggles for himself and watched closely as the first bottle upended itself into the cauldron. “...This potion creates a certain quantity of pure, breathable air. The quantity of air released is exponential, meaning that every gram you increase the dosage by increases the resulting quantity of air by an increasing amount. When the potion is complete, it will release that air, along with a large quantity of raw energy.”

“But isn’t that a good thing? We can give a whole planet air with this!”

“Yes we can,” said Desperate Joe. “But if we had less noble goals in mind, we could release the potion inside an enemy castle, for a simple example, and blast everyone inside out through the arrow slits. Or we could release it on a world that already *had* an atmosphere of its own, and create unending, apocalyptic storms. Magic is deadly, yes, but conjurations always fade, and transformations always revert. Not so, with alchemy. What is done cannot be easily undone.”

“Is this how the old empire blew itself up?”

“This is how lots of worlds blow themselves up,” said Desperate Joe. “Not this concoction, specifically, mind you; just alchemy in general. It is all too easy to discover, too late, that the alchemical discovery you have just completed is out of your control.”

“What kinds of ingredients do you use?”

“Oh, all manner of things. The feathers of an angel, there. The spermacetti of an asteroid cephalopod, there. The twinkle in a newborn’s first tears, in that bottle. Pure powdered diamond, in that one. This particular mixture uses some relatively rare ingredients. I try not to use it too often, but given that we’re the cause of this little world losing its sky, I feel comfortable replenishing it.”

“Should... Should I be wearing goggles?”

“What? Oh, good gods, boy, avert your eyes!”



Brick did as he was told, and just in time; the last bottle had finished upending itself into the cauldron, which glowed to life with many runes. A brilliant flash dazzled Brick even through his eyelids, then faded.

Desperate Joe said, "You can look, now."

Brick looked. A ring of blue-glowing runes burned around the rim of the cauldron, and a thin skin of magic capped it over. Inside, Brick saw thunderstorms and hurricanes at war with one another.

"Good," said Desperate Joe. "The mixture is happy."

He waved his hands and the cauldron lifted off the ground and floated onto the altar.

"Now," said Desperate Joe. "Root yourself."

"I don't know how."

"Oh, right. Well, prepare yourself mentally, then."

"How!?"

"Hands on the altar. Don't flinch. It will hurt more if you flinch."

Brick planted his hands on the altar and a jolt of lightning locked his arms to the stone. "Ow!"

"That's just the circuit closing. Now, close your eyes. Think about the ground beneath your feet, and the star burning inside it. That's good..."

Brick closed his eyes and felt the humming beneath his feet, and turned his attention towards it.

"Think of it like a part of your own body," said Desperate Joe, from what seemed a thousand miles away. "Just a part of your own body that you've never really thought about before."

Brick tried to do as he was told, but he felt silly standing at a rock imagining things.

"Let go," said Desperate Joe. "Not of the altar, you dunce. Of your fears. Of your anxieties. Of all the distractions around you."

Brick held onto the altar and tried to let go of everything that was, understandably, on his mind.

Then, at last, he felt it; the same sense he had opened with Timothy at his side.

Open at last, he looked down into the darkness, and saw the glimmering star, and dove towards it. He reached up his hand and touched the star.

And suddenly he was standing in the dark, beside a circle of light, and Desperate Joe was standing across from him, on the other side of the circle.

"Not bad," said Desperate Joe.

"Thanks," said Brick.

"Now. I'm about to transport the cauldron out of the ship. Your job will be to help me channel the excess energy back into the circle of light."

"Wait, we're trying to absorb the energy?"

"Very astute. We drained a significant amount, during reentry, and I'd prefer not to stay here more than a few hours if it can be helped. This alchemical trick will provide more than enough energy for us to restore what was lost, and possibly even ready ourselves to leave again."

"Why do I get the feeling that it's more dangerous to do it this way?"

“Because you are observant. You noticed that I mentioned nothing of this plan to Timothy, who would certainly have balked at it as you are doing now.”

“Maybe we should do it the other way?”

“And let all this energy go to waste? I think not. Between the two of us, we can contain it.”

“What if we can’t?”

“We can.”

“But what if we can’t?”

“That is an irrelevant question, because we can!”

“But you haven’t even told me what I’m supposed to do!”

“I assumed Timothy had taught you at least the basics of energy redirection? Aura sensing? Cosmic flow?”

“No?”

“What has he been doing all this time!?”

“Teaching me to read?”

“Yes, well, that’s good to know, but it’s suicidal to come up here and try to channel the energies of the cosmos without at least a basic grasp of the—”

“—Then teach me.”

“We haven’t the time! The concoction is unstable, it will soon unleash whether we are ready for it or not.”

“Then show me! Show me something, anything!”

“Very well.”

Brick could hear something happening in the room he could no longer see. A clinking of various bottles rang out, then silence for a time.

Then; a flare of luminous green and violet fire bloomed above the circle of light, and Desperate Joe reached out his hands. From his fingertips lines of force twisted through the darkness, stretching and bending the flame. Desperate Joe snarled those lines of energy around the flame, and twisted his hands around it, balling it up. When it was just a spark of emerald light, he let it fall into the center of the circle of light, and it vanished.

“There,” said Desperate Joe. “A blast of fire, in case you wondered what that was.”

“Show me another one,” said Brick. “Let me try.”

“Of course,” said Desperate Joe, and immediately a second flare of green and violet flame flashed into existence. Brick raised his hands towards the circle and as they passed above it he saw that no lines of force twisted from his fingers. He tried to catch the flame in his fingers, but it flowed over them and through them, and could not interact with them.

“You must draw up energy from the rooting!” said Desperate Joe. “Matter and energy don’t obey the empty hands of any soul! You must *make* them obey you.”

“How?”

“Draw the energy up, through your body. Channel it through your arms and out your fingers.”

“I don’t know how!”

“Feel the energy within you! You are already rooted, yes? Or have you lost your footing?”

“I’m rooted, I—” He did feel the energy, now that he thought about it. It hummed between his feet, binding them to the ground, holding them together almost like shackles. He willed it to obey, but it did not respond to his will. “I can feel it. How do I move it?”

“Give it permission to flow,” said Desperate Joe, holding out a hand. Stars flared at his palm and fingertips, and the swirling green-and-violet flames twisted towards him.

Brick concentrated on the energy he could feel humming between his feet, and for a time he just allowed himself to feel it. At last, he felt it in his knees; the way he was straining against the energy, unconsciously, forcing it to stay down where it was. His own body was resisting the change.

He relaxed more deeply than he had ever relaxed in his life, and the power rose to fill him. He felt it lifting his shoulders, loosening his neck, tickling behind his ears and eyes. He reached out both his hands, and felt it flowing in lines down both his arms, and stretching forth from the tips of his fingers.

“Impressive,” said Desperate Joe. “There is no time, I’m afraid, for any further teachings, so good luck!”

“What!?”

Then all the darkness vanished, and they were in a storm of light.

Brick threw up his hands and caught the tide of energy. The altar helped him; as he raised his hands, the circle of light glowed more brightly, and the energy pouring around them was forced back within its boundaries. Desperate Joe, hands upraised to focus in the massive cone of energy pouring down from above, grunted: “Very good! Hold it there!”

Brick clung to the power, felt the energy pouring down into the root, felt the extra surge of energy rising to join with him, strengthening him, bolstering him against the endless surge.

“Nearly there!” Shouted Desperate Joe, above the roar of crackling plasma.

Agonies were slowly blooming in Brick’s every joint. The energy required to contain the flow was too much for his body to channel; he could feel it, was certain of it, knew he was about to die. “I can’t!”

“No! Don’t let go, boy! Whatever you do, don’t let go, or we’re all dead!”

“I’m burning!” Brick screamed. His bones were on fire, he could feel them sizzling inside his flesh. He clung to the power even as it burned him and the effort to shape it crushed him down.

“We’re almost there! Just hold on!”

The more he lost his grip upon the pouring energy, the more chaotic the storm became. He clung to the burning end, but it was not enough. His grip slipped.

The circle of light cracked.



## Chapter 5

# The Wolves and the Prince

Prince Clark sat alone in Tilmuckey's bedroom, gazing out the windows at a clear blue sky. Tilmuckey had been kind enough not to wake him, and was probably hard at work already in the tavern below. The Prince wasn't ready to face him.

He toyed with the silver star medallion in his hand, flipping it over and over between his fingers.

Dmitri whispered, "Are you alone?"

"Yes," whispered Prince Clark.

"The mercenaries have sent a progress report. They will make planetfall before the sun sets on your world."

"You said I had three days!"

"I said you had at *most* three days," said Dmitri. "I'm sorry."

"No. Thank you for telling me. Go now. I... I want to be alone."

Sadly, Dmitri broke the connection, took a brief moment to collect himself, and then knocked on the door of the Grand Vizier's chamber.

The Grand Vizier, to his surprise, opened the door himself, and by hand. "Ah," said the Vizier. "Dmitri! I've been expecting you."

Dmitri sighed. "You are tiresome. Do you really think you have the upper hand?"

"I always have the upper hand," said the Grand Vizier.

"Yet you failed to kill the emperor, today."

The Grand Vizier said, "Yes, but only because you prevented it. Would you care for some wine?"

Dmitri accepted the wine and seated himself at the Regnant table. Grand Vizier Belphago's Regnant set was all of gemstones, but they were very poorly cut. The pieces hardly resembled anything, much less the warriors, wizards, towers, and gods they were supposed to.

Grand Vizier Belphago seated himself across from Dmitri. "You play, I presume?"

"Naturally," said Dmitri. "But not with you."

Grand Vizier Belphago sipped his wine. “Aren’t you going to ask me what my plan is?”

“I imagine I would be unable to stop you from sharing it if I cared to try to do so.”

“You probably would be, yes, you probably would be... Tell me, do you like the wine?”

Dmitri sipped the wine. “Such base alchemy, Belphago. You embarrass yourself.”

Belphago’s face paled. “You detected it?”

“Was that your whole plan? A simple alchemical concoction, intended to freeze me and my magics in stasis?”

“No, that was... That was an afterthought. A test. I needed to see how good you were, in person, so to speak.”

“I have half a mind to kill you now. I advised against it just yesterday morning.”

“Only half a mind? Good, good, I can work with half a mind. Dmitri, tell me; you can’t possibly be satisfied, working for that man?”

Dmitri sighed. “This is your plan? Really?”

“Well, you haven’t heard the whole pitch, yet...”

“Your plan was to reach out to the most loyal person in the emperor’s innermost circle and ask me if I feel *satisfied*?”

“Er...”

“Each day that I am in his presence, my universe is complete. I am in bliss with every waking moment I spend at his side, and in dreams I watch over his spirit. I am more than satisfied, Grand Vizier Belphago. I am the most beloved angel of a god.”

“He’s not a god yet,” said Grand Vizier Belphago, crushing his wineglass in his fist. Shards of glass sank into his palm and out the back of his hand, and Dmitri clutched at himself.

As Dmitri slumped from the chair and onto the ground, Grand Vizier Belphago got to his feet. “You saw the first half of the concoction, Dmitri, but not the second half—the half within the glass. What we drank linked us, and by my blood the mixture is complete. Now your power is...” He stretched luxuriously, shaking off decades. “...Mine.”

Dmitri could feel the alchemical bond that linked their souls together, now, and knew at once that it was permanent. Without hesitation, he fled his body and lunged into the darkness beyond the veil. There, in the dark shadow of the imperial palace, he reached for the reflection of his king.

The shadow hand closed on his.

In his chambers, Grand Vizier Belphago stared numbly at the dead man on his carpet. “Dmitri? Dmitri, what have you...”

He slumped to his knees, dropping shards of broken wine-glass. “Dmitri, you bastard, you—!”

He fell to his face and breathed his last.

Deep in the vaults of the Imperial Palace, a ritual stone glowed to life. Dark fires flickered and purple-robed cultists poured alchemical secrets into the

reservoirs of the ritual stone. As the liquids flowed their way to the man-shaped hollow in the stone, the cultists chanted words in an ancient tongue. Though the chanting had no magical effect, it did add a somber, meditative note to the atmosphere of the chamber.

Magic glowed deep within the stone. The many liquids puddled in the man-shaped half-mold began to bubble and seethe. Lightning and fire danced above the surface, and the liquid began to burn.

Then it was over; the alchemical conjuration was complete. Whole, Dmitri lay in the stone; cold, naked, empty.

The cultists placed the silver crown upon his head, and somewhere hidden in the unseen reflection of the palace, forces beyond reckoning moved in the dark, and Dmitri's own soul, severed now from the captured soul of Grand Vizier Belphago, entered the new body.

Dmitri stretched himself, moving through the positions of an old martial form. When he had limbered up, he accepted the robes the cultists brought for him—identical to his originals—and left the ritual chamber.

He sent himself to the emperor's side.

"Dmitri! You startled me!" said the emperor. He was alone in his bathtub, reading a history book.

"I caught you alone, that's good," said Dmitri.

"What's happened? Is it my son?"

"There is nothing to report yet about your son, I'm afraid. I came to talk about Grand Vizier Belphago."

"Yes, I sensed his... arrival."

"The connection is growing stronger, then?"

"No. Same as always. But I'm getting better at understanding it."

"I had to take him down directly," said Dmitri. "Personally."

"Are you hurt?"

"Only my pride. He tricked me with alchemy."

"Didn't know he had it in him."

"He doesn't, anymore. Your other half took care of that."

"Good."

"Sadly, this means that there will likely be instability among the vizier class."

"He attacked you," said the emperor. "Have it officially investigated and documented. The news will spread."

"It's not a very good story," said Dmitri. "The Grand Vizier suddenly decided to attack me with alchemy? After years of loyal service? No, it will be seen as a coverup, no matter how thorough the investigation."

"You have something in mind, I take it?"

"I do. I wish to reincarnate him."

"You do."

"I do. I will implant into his new body an alchemical device that will ensure his undying loyalty to you."

"You'll turn him into a husband?"

"Nothing quite so refined," sneered Dmitri. "A simple puppet. I will be able to make the effect come and go, as needed. He can continue to scheme behind

your back, make allies, and exercise his network of spies. We will know all his doings. When the time is right, we can turn him against them, or bring them all down in one swift stroke, rooting out the entire infestation of disloyalty.”

“Dmitri, my darling, when you talk like this I remember why I married you.”

Dmitri laughed. “Put the book down, my love. It’s been too long.”

“Has it?”

“It has,” said Dmitri, stepping into the bathtub.



## Chapter 6

# Cracked Circle

Brick woke. For a time he stared up into the heavens, unconcerned. A cool breeze tickled his face.

“Come on, Brick,” said Timothy, leaning over him, and he sat bolt upright.

The walls and ceiling of the yurt were blown apart. The altar stone lay cracked into two halves, both steaming. Desperate Joe was nowhere to be seen.

Desolate winds danced across the dark surface of the planet. Beyond the dull glow of the altar’s fading runes, the darkness stretched unbroken.

“Where’s Desperate Joe?” Timothy asked.

“I’m fine, thanks for asking,” said Brick, though his limbs and joints burned.

Tim kissed him on the nose. “I knew you’d be fine.”

“You didn’t see Desperate Joe?”

“No, I didn’t. We weren’t in the same room. When the blast went off, all the floors collapsed into this one, so you fell through. But I didn’t see him.”

“What floors?” Brick looked around. The wreckage looked like the remnants of one room.

“All the floors of the tower,” said Timothy. “They all manifested at the same time, and dissipated.”

“I don’t understand.”

Tim kissed him again. “It’s ok. Come on, we’ve got to find him.”

Tim rooted himself to the planet and tried to draw up energy to cast a light spell, but every nerve in his body burned in protest, and the magic fell unformed from his hands in a splash of discolored sparks. “Damn.”

He stuffed his aching hands into his armpits and waited for the throbbing to subside.

Brick said, “Maybe I can try?”

“It... It will be harder,” Timothy said. “The planet has a good core, but it’s far. Farther than you had to reach, in the tower.”

“What happens if I don’t reach it?”

“You’ll just snap back into your body,” said Timothy. “It will be when you first try casting a spell that the distance will really matter. It’ll feel like trying to dig a hole under a river with only your toes.”

“You paint with words. What do I do once I get some energy? Assuming I can get any.”

“You’ll have to shape it into light,” said Timothy. “Luckily, that’s easy. It’s one of the simplest forms of energy, and you don’t even have to conjure any matter. Basically if you just channel it out of your hands, you’ll make enough light for us to work with. I’ll teach you how to temper it, so you don’t let out too much high-wavelength light, which could kill us.”

“What’s high-wavelength?”

“You’ll understand someday. We’ll have to get back to your reading when we can.”

The altar stone flickered, and the light dimmed. Timothy and Brick looked at each other in the darkness as the last glimmer began to die.

“What happens if I can’t do it?” Brick asked.

Timothy squeezed his hand. “We’ll have to go in the dark. I can sense him, but his presence is... unfocused. If we walk around, I should be able to get oriented. I hope...”

Brick planted his feet and opened himself once more. It was easier, this time. He plunged his soul into the planet, reaching for the energy he could sense at its core. Halfway there, every muscle in his body cramped, and he snapped back to himself. He could no longer stand; he slumped into the dust.

“I... I can’t,” he said. “It hurts.”

“You overcasted yourself,” said Timothy, helping him to his feet. “Hopefully not by too much.”

“What happens if it’s by too much?”

“You’ll lose your ability to cast.”

“That would suck, I just got it!”

Timothy laughed in spite of their situation. The darkness was now complete. They could not even see the yurt behind them. The stars above were the only illumination, and they twinkled far away. Looking up at them, Brick said, “Hey, at least we made a sky.”

“You did,” said Timothy, “But there’s no telling if it will last.”

“Why wouldn’t it?”

“This planet is small, and its core isn’t spinning fast enough to give it a protective barrier. Luckily there isn’t much solar wind, out this far, or we’d have lost the atmosphere already.”

Brick turned a slow circle, clinging to Timothy’s hand so as not to lose him in the darkness. Looking at all the horizons, he beheld a flat and perfect darkness in every direction save one. There, he saw black spires blotting out the stars. “There!” He said.

Timothy, unable to see his pointing hand, said, “Where?”

Brick pointed their joined hands at it. “There.”

Timothy looked. “His aura is stronger, in that direction...”

“What do you think it is?”

“It’s probably the temple Desperate Joe mentioned.”

“Why would he go there? Instead of checking on us?”

“Maybe he didn’t have a choice,” said Timothy, softly.

“What do you mean?”

“Just a hunch.”

“How far do you think it is?”

“It’s impossible to say. The world is pretty small, so it can’t be that far.”

“And we’ll have to walk.”

“And hope we’re alone,” said Timothy.

“Come on. Nothing could have survived the blast that chased us here.”

“Nothing that happened to be outside the area protected by our shield, yeah,” said Timothy.

“And what could live here, anyway, without a sun? Nothing grows without light.”

“Not true,” said Timothy. “Nothing grows without *energy*. Lots of things grow without light.”



## Chapter 7

# Goodbye Tilmuckey's

At noon, Prince Clark decided he had waited too long. He dressed himself and descended into the tavern, appreciating the feel of his new boots, which fit very well. He had a knack for spotting shoe sizes.

Tilmuckey stood behind the bar polishing mugs, although the tavern was otherwise empty. Prince Clark sat down. "What's for breakfast?"

"It's lunch," said Tilmuckey. "Beer and sandwiches."

"Delightful!"

They ate and drank in silence for a time. Afterwards, Prince Clark purchased and lit a cigar, and puffed contentedly, watching the windows of the tavern.

"Expecting someone?" Tilmuckey asked.

"Oh, Tilmuckey. You know you're the only friend I need."

"Not what I asked."

Prince Clark puffed at his cigar for a while. Tilmuckey waited. Prince Clark said at last, "I'm in trouble, Tilmuckey."

"Figured that."

"Some people are going to come after me. They're going to be here before sunset."

"Want to run with me?"

Prince Clark looked up sharply. Tilmuckey would make a good traveling companion; he was sturdy, hard-working, loyal, and knowledgeable about the region. He sighed. "I can't. It would be too dangerous for you."

"It'll be dangerous for me if you leave," said Tilmuckey. "Not much in these parts to keep a fella like me going."

"Oh, Tilmuckey. That's really very manipulative."

"Just the truth," said Tilmuckey, with a shrug.

A group of people entered the tavern and Tilmuckey tossed back the rest of his beer and moved to greet them. Prince Clark sucked on his cigar and longed for a simpler, less painful universe.

"What'll it be?" Tilmuckey asked.

One member of the group came forward to order for the rest while his friends spread out into the tavern. Prince Clark, not looking at them, clutched his glass.

"Five ales," said the man wearing the wolf's head. "And meat all around, if you've got it."

"We've got it. You want bovine-adjacent or poultry-adjacent?"

"Bovine-adjacent," said the man with the wolf's head.

The red-wrapped woman with the ruby star in her hand leaned on the counter provocatively and held out a glass cube containing the magical impression of someone's appearance. "Seen this guy around here?"

Tilmuckey shook his head. The Prince, who had already activated his cowl, saw that the head inside the cube was his own. The cowl projected an almost-undetected magic over his features, distorting them just enough to be unrecognizable.

"Shame," said the woman with the red star. "I heard from a bunch of miners that he swindled one of them out of his boots right here, in your humble establishment."

Tilmuckey crossed his massive arms. "I don't condone gambling in my bar. You got told wrong."

A large bearded woman, apparently part of the group, dropped a black iron maul onto the counter. The maul's head was shaped like a twisting dragon. Smokily, she rumbled: "I dunno, they was pretty sure."

The blind man in the corner turned his head towards the Prince. Beside him, the man covered in daggers looked in the Prince's direction and scowled.

Prince Clark clutched his glass. Drawing magic from one of his diamond rings, so as not to be seen rooting himself to the planet and so as to present the smallest aura distortion possible, the Prince poured energy into the glass, and it began to grow warm against his palm.

"Listen here," said Wolf. "We know he's around. He's been seen with you. You're going to tell us where he is."

"I am, am I?"

"You are. You can do it while you're alive, or after you're dead, but one way or another we'll get you to talk."

"Don't bother," said the Prince, dropping his cowl.

Wolf gave a smile that oozed charisma. "Ah, Prince Clark. We've been sent by your father to come and retrieve you. I trust you won't give us any trouble?"

"My father is a fool. I will not be joining you."

"You won't have a choice," said Wolf.

"You forget one thing," said the Prince, not bothering to stand up yet.

"Oh? What's that?"

"Unlike my father, I know how to cast."

Instantly, the blind man swung his staff and power surged across the room even as the Prince flung his glass, which melted in midair and splattered over the blind man, breaking his concentration just long enough for Prince Clark to shove his hand into the man's forming spell and burst it with a flare from one of his rings.

The rest were reacting now. Daggers flew from the fingertips of the dagger-bound man, and the woman in red twisted her ruby star until it hovered between her hands, glowing with energy. The bearded woman heaved herself over the

counter and swung her maul at Tilmuckey, who caught it on his horns and stared her down, snorting. Wolf raised a crossbow from under his cloak and loosed the bolt, and Tilmuckey staggered back into the wall of bottles. Shelves crumpled; bottles crashed to the floor. Even as Tilmuckey took the crossbow bolt in the side, the Prince swatted both daggers out of the air and they hit the ground as a splatter of molten steel. The red ruby star screamed, and a ray of ruby light lanced from it. The Prince punched out a hand and caught the ray by the tip, and bent it right back at the caster. It struck her ruby star in a spectacular blast of feedback that scattered them all. Behind the counter the bearded woman swung up her maul to bring it crashing down on Tilmuckey, but the blast of red light smashed her into the wall.

Prince Clark hurled himself over the counter and crouched over Tilmuckey. “I’m sorry.”

With a blast from his ring, he scattered Tilmuckey into ash, hurling his soul straight towards what he hoped would be a safe destination. Then, leaping up from the ashes of his lover, he punched the bearded woman in the jaw, narrowly dodged a crossbow bolt and two more daggers while vaulting back over the counter, and darted out the door.

Wolf’s Pack took a moment of stunned silence to assess the situation.

“Red, are you hurt?”

The woman with the ruby star—still huddled over in pain—shook her head, long tresses swinging. “He bent it back on me. No one’s ever done that before!”

“Club? Knives? Blinky? All good?”

Club, Knives, and Blinky all nodded.

“Good. Then let’s get this punk,” said Wolf, sprinting out the door with his pack.





## Chapter 8

# Temple of the Forgotten God

Utter darkness hummed softly to itself all around, and they, two fleas upon the back of the dead world, walked alone.

There were only three ways that Brick could sense he was still alive: the thump of his boots against the dust, the low moaning of the ever-present wind, and Timothy's warm, sweaty hand in his.

On the wind an eery call twisted, a zephyr deformed by some unseen geological feature, perhaps. They had left the yurt far behind. Brick knew that if they did not find Desperate Joe, they would never find their way back to it. It changed little about their situation; even if they managed to get back to the yurt, there was no way it would be taking them off-world. They were trapped here, on this exiled, sunless world, unless they could find Desperate Joe.

A shriek of steel on stone, somewhere to their left! Brick whipped around just in time to see sparks fade out into the darkness. Timothy clutched at his arm but did not dare to ask what he had seen.

Wordlessly, Brick broke into a panicked sprint, hauling Timothy along behind him. Timothy got the idea quickly. Side by side, running, the darkness thundered with their footsteps and the gasping rush of their breath and the horrible pounding of their heartbeats. The black shape against the stars ahead was their only hope, and it was a grim one. The closer they got, the larger it seemed, and the more frightening. A hundred high spires of stone stretched sword-thin peaks up into the darkness, seemingly forever. They were miles from it yet; and already running out of breath. The half-finished atmosphere was thinner than they were used to.

Timothy stumbled. "HELP ME!"

His scream extinguished in an instant as he was ripped from Brick's grasp. "TIM!"

He stared into the darkness, eyes wide with terror. Silence surrounded him. Winds muttered to each other.

Brick swallowed hard and shut his eyes. It was brighter that way.

He reached out his hand and opened himself, but he did not dive into the planet, or look towards its core. Instead he looked around in that inner darkness, and saw other stars, stranger than the ones of the known universe. Each had a sensation bound to it that was stronger than scent and richer than taste; an essence he could feel, and recognize. He tasted the winds, and the lightning flickering in them. He tasted the distant stars, and the feeble glimmer of their radiations. He smelled the earth, and the molten iron in its heart. He smelled Desperate Joe, somewhere in the distance, a haze of sense-memory; the smell of his pipe tobacco, the taste of his food, the sound of his voice, all understood not with smell or taste or hearing but in some other form, by some other means. Brick did not know what this sense and these things it could sense were called, but he turned it at once to sweep the darkness, seeking the taste of Timothy.

There it was; a feeble, spasming glow, just twenty feet away, and full of terror.

Brick bellowed out a roar and sprinted, swinging his fists blindly.

To his utter horror, his fist collided with something hard that was not flesh. With a sharp crack, he felt it break under his knuckles. Then something huge and amorphous swooped away in the dark, and he sensed the movement of its air. He stumbled to Timothy and felt blindly for his body.

Eyes shut or open, he could feel that Timothy was alive. Something hot and slick clung to his fingers, and he patted Timothy once over quickly, and found the huge trinity of claw-marks across his neck.

“No!”

Brick rooted himself and stretched out his hands, muscles and joints ablaze, and poured out his raw will on the universe. A white star bloomed before his palm, and the light shone upon a ring of huge, beaked creatures, hulking and shaggy, standing on four clawed legs. There were dozens of them, and the light of Brick’s star glittered around the hollow sockets of their bony heads.

The wound was grievous, lethal. Brick didn’t care. He pressed the star into Timothy’s throat. “You gave me my life,” said Brick. “I can give you mine.”

A black cloak whispered in the endless night, and Brick felt a mountain looming behind him. Gently, Shalim thundered, “It is done.”

Then the darkness was deeper, somehow, and Brick was falling, blissfully weightless, into the abyss.

The wounds closed.

Timothy’s eyes opened to witness the last fading glimmer of Brick’s fallen star, and feel the weight of Brick’s corpse draped across him. He saw the glittering skulls of the beaked creatures, already moving in. Between them, backed by the hundred spire silhouettes of the temple, cloaked entirely in shadows, Shalim’s yellow eyes burned down at him.

“Brick?” Timothy asked. He rolled Brick over and clung to him. “Brick!”

He could feel the coldness already seeping through his warmth. He stood, rooted himself recklessly, turned on his wards, and reached out his hand. As his teeth clenched and his bones trembled, he dove headfirst into the beyond. It was easy to pierce the veil here.

He fell into the darkness, and found it different. It was vaster now, softer now, quieter somehow.

Many souls were all around him, interacting with each other in the murky shadows. Gone were the tendrils of darkness; instead the darkness flowed in shimmering, mercurial vapors, and a warmth bled into Timothy's soul.

He looked for Brick, and found him drifting next to his horse. "Bootstraps!?"

"You guys forgot me in the yurt!" said Bootstraps, irritably. "When he pulled, I came along."

"We didn't forget you, Bootstraps, you were—you were safer there. We were going to come back for you!"

Brick stared dreamily off into the distance. "Isn't it wonderful, Tim? My home world! It's all safe. It's fine, see? Desperate Joe was wrong."

Timothy shook Brick's spectral form by the shoulders. "Listen, you dummy, you're dead!"

"I know that."

"You have to come back with me, right now! Before Shalim stops us!"

"I don't want to go," said Brick. "It's warm here. The sun's nice."

"There's no sun," said Timothy. "It's all an illusion! He's just trying to trick you into staying!"

"Is that true?" asked Bootstraps.

"Yes," said Timothy. "I think we've both seen that Shalim is a manipulative douchebag!"

"Yes, I'm sorry you had such difficulty with my descendants," said Shalim, his voice booming behind them.

Timothy turned in the darkness as everything but Shalim fell away. Huger than the night, the dark god hung before him, every feature beautiful, noble, royal. His golden eyes burned. Against the utter blackness of the whites of his eyes, and the infinite darkness of his skin, their golden brilliance was a startling beauty.

Auras of infinite things sparkled in his flesh, veiled by his cloak of mist. Timothy sensed whole worlds and kingdoms lost to time, and countless places and things and people long forgotten.

"Y-y-y-your descendants?" said Timothy, panicking.

"Do not panic, Timothy," said Shalim.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Please, I just want my friend back!"

"Your friend? Surely he is more than that to you?"

"Yes, he's more. Infinitely more. Give him back to me. Please, I need him!"

"No, you do not," said Shalim. "He is on his own path, now."

"I'm not ready to let him go," said Timothy, tapping his ward tablet. Outside, new magics etched themselves into the ashes around him, and his body fell to its knees.

"I see," said Shalim.

Timothy reached out, grabbed Brick, and slung him over one shoulder, despite his protests. "Sorry Bootstraps. Can't bring both of you."

With one swing of his hand, he cut the cord that bound them together, and Bootstraps kicked up his heels and said, "Ha! I get to stay!"

“Why do you insist upon doing this the hard way?” said Shalim, hanging before Timothy like a planet.

“You can’t touch me, now,” said Timothy. “I designed this ward myself. With some help from my master.”

“Ah yes,” said Shalim. “Desperate Joe. He has evaded my descendants several times.”

Timothy stopped in his tracks and looked up at Shalim’s eye. “Your descendants? You mean the incarnation?”

“That, and Shalim theta.”

“Shalim theta?”

“Yes. The one you have been calling ‘big Shalim’.”

“You’re the original?”

“I am.”

“Are you going to let me leave?”

“No.”

“Then you’re not different enough to matter to me.”

“Hold on, now. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I’m leaving.”

“To be eaten by the cultists?”

“The what?”

One of the horrible beaked creatures appeared before Timothy in the darkness, and he recoiled. It vanished.

“I stand a chance,” said Timothy. “Worst case, you’ll see us both soon. What do you have to lose?”

“Well, you, of course,” said Shalim.

“What?”

“Those who die at the claws of the cultists do not come here.”

“Why not?”

“An ancient magic,” said Shalim. “The tale is long.”

“My wards can hold for an hour, at this rate.”

“Can your body? You are already overcasted. How many minutes do you think you have?”

“Long enough to distract you long enough to do this,” said Timothy, tapping his tablet.

“To do what, now?” asked Shalim, pleasantly.

Panicking again, Timothy tapped his ward tablet twice.

“Your ward tablet is trying to save your life,” said Shalim. “It knows you do not currently have the capacity to channel the energy it needs to do what you are asking. At least, not without grievous risk of death or bodily harm.”

Timothy realized all at once that he was truly trapped. He clutched Brick to himself. Brick, calm now in the glow of Timothy’s wards, asked, “What is this place? Where are we?”

“This is Shalim’s grotto,” said Timothy.

“Not so,” said Shalim. “This is Shalim’s Sea.”

“Are we dead?” Brick asked.

“You are,” said Timothy, miserably.

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Timothy laughed. “I’m the one who’s sorry.”

Brick brushed a tear from his cheek. “Hey.”

“I know.”

“You’ll be ok.”

“No I won’t.”

Timothy kissed Brick on the lips, and held him.

Shalim said, “This is all very touching, but your time is running out.”

“I’m ready,” said Timothy, still holding Brick’s hand. “Send me back.”

“This man is infinitely more than a friend to you, and yet you will not stay with him?”

“I have to save my master,” said Timothy.

“Desperate Joe does not need saving,” said Shalim.

“Fine. I’m not ready to die. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Who said anything about dying?”

“What?”

“Your souls are already with me. The cultists may do what they wish with your bodies, and you will not suffer harm, nor die.”

“I think you have a different definition of ‘dying’ than we do,” said Brick.

Shalim cocked his head. “Your definition must be wrong. With me you are not dead. I am, as I have always been, pursuing the goal of total salvation.”

“What?”

“The capture of every departing soul. To preserve them, in blissful states, until the end of Time.”

“For us, that’s dead!” said Timothy. “We like being in bodies!”

“At the end of Time, I will give you new ones!”

“Do you even hear yourself?”

Shalim put a finger to his chin and looked away. “You know, sometimes I don’t.”

“We want our bodies back! We want to live in the real universe again, in bodies! Not as souls in some perpetual state of meaningless bliss!”

“If it is so important to you, I will make you new bodies now,” said Shalim.

“You... You will?”

“Of course? What kind of god would I be, if I did not take the desires of my worshippers into consideration?”

“Oh, we’re not, uh, we don’t—” Brick started to say, but Timothy elbowed him in the ribs.

“A damn bad one, that’s for sure!” said Timothy.

“I must confess, I am loath to let you leave. You are the first souls I have acquired in many thousands of years. You will likely not find your way back to me, if you leave. Are you certain you want to risk that?”

“Why wouldn’t we find our way back to you, sir?” asked Brick.

Shalim smiled. “Because I am the true Shalim, and imprisoned far from my usurpers.”

“You’re imprisoned here?”

"I am," said Shalim. "But not for much longer. My loyal descendant, the 'incarnate' you mentioned, is on his way here to release me."

Timothy shook his head. "No, he's coming to *kill* you! He already tried to blast your planet!"

"That would free me," said Shalim.

"Oh," said Timothy. "How did... How did you know he was coming?"

"I watch everything," said Shalim. "I am privvy to the minds and memories of all my descendants. Mere starvation and physical separation cannot cut that bond."

"Are they, er... 'privvy' to yours, sir?" Brick asked.

Shalim laughed. "Of course not."

"Oh, good," said Timothy. "Then you won't mind not telling any other Shalims that you've seen us?"

"I never tell other Shalims anything," said Shalim. "They cannot hear me."

"Your incarnation will, though?"

"We shall see. The curse of the cultists runs deep."

Shalim clapped his hands together. It was like watching galaxies collide; they passed through each other in a dazzling spray of arcane auras as magic beyond comprehension twisted around Brick and Timothy.

Timothy switched off his wards.

He felt a sharp pain in his neck as the cultists took the life from his body, but safe in the power of Shalim he was far from it.

Running full-tilt, Bootstrap's soul leapt into the magic just as it was beginning to take true effect.

Timothy said, "Oh, fuuuu—"

Then blinding light and glittering darkness filled their eyes, and heaviness hung on all their bones, and they found themselves lying on a dark circle of stone, in a forest of slender black pillars. The chamber had no ceiling, but the pillars rose so high it didn't matter. Occasionally, they caught a glimpse of a star, where a pillar had broken long ago. Otherwise, every pillar seemed to rise specifically to blot out a single source of light.

Circles in the magic stone below them still were faintly glowing, and they saw the roots of the pillars, and each other.

A huge mass, gently breathing, lay in between them.

Brick got to his feet. "Bootstraps?"

There was a sound; a clatter of hooves and fur on stone. Then Bootstraps snorted quietly.

Timothy slowly rose, feeling new life in his veins. He felt strong, stronger than he had before.

He planted his feet, and rooted himself deep to the planet, and found that its core was nearly right beneath their feet. Somehow, at some point in its past, it had been drawn to within a mile of the surface below the temple. It was effortless to access, and a stronger flow of energy than Timothy had ever felt. He reached out his hand and conjured light.

The light revealed Bootstraps, whole and healthy, and happy to see them both.

“I don’t feel him anymore,” said Brick. “That strange connection... It’s broken.”

“I’m sorry,” said Timothy.

“Don’t be. I’ll be happy not to have horse dreams anymore.”

Timothy gave Brick a long look of concern, unable to tell if he was joking or not. Brick said, “Here, wouldn’t it be easier if we lit a torch?”

“Where did you find that?” Timothy asked.

Brick pointed to the base of a pillar nearby, and Timothy moved around Bootstraps to get a better view. He saw two long, pale sets of very bony legs sticking out from behind the pillar.

“Er,” he said, and moved closer, star in hand upraised.

The light shone full upon the corpse of a warrior, whittled down to dust and bones by timeless ages on the unlit world.

“Gods!” said Brick, dropping the torch.

Timothy said, “Don’t. We may need it.”

Brick said, “Say, uh, while you’re doing magic, any chance we could get clothes?”

“Oh,” said Timothy, “Right, sorry. I got distracted.”

“Did you, now? Maybe I’m a little distracted too...”

“Do you really want to do this in the temple of the true Shalim, in front of your horse?”

“Hey, they’d both probably appreciate the view, I’m just saying—”

Timothy conjured clothing for them instead of replying. Then, whipping a handkerchief out of thin air, he picked up the torch and handed it in the handkerchief to Brick. “Please hold this.”

Brick held it. Timothy flicked a finger at it and it burst into flames. The glow was dimmer than the star, but friendlier somehow, and so Timothy allowed his star to fade again. “This way,” he said, beckoning.

“Come on, Bootstraps,” said Brick, following Timothy through the pillars. Some were no thicker than a finger, and others were as stout as trees.

“Whoever designed this place should have been lobotomized,” said Brick.

“They probably were,” said Timothy, pointing to a carved wall they could now glimpse through the pillars, and the bas-relief illustration of a beaked man plucking an egg from the skull of another beaked man, using a huge set of tong-like devices.

“What the fuck?”

“Let’s keep going,” said Timothy. “Desperate Joe went this way.”

“How can you tell?” Brick asked.

Timothy pointed to the back of a pillar as they approached it. The corpse of a cultist hung from the pillar, fused to it by a jagged mat of ice. The corpse’s finger had been enchanted to point to an archway built into the carving wall, and hidden from almost every angle.

Brick said, “Nice.”

They stepped through the arch, torch held high.

They had descended, somehow, although the ground had not seemed to slope. The chamber was deep, and dark, and huge, and lined with countless

stairwells that unpredictably switchbacked down the walls into what seemed a bottomless pit. Long chains hung from the ceiling, suspending circular platforms out over the void in an evenly-spaced line. At the far end of the pit there was another stone archway, this one brimming over with light.

Brick said, "So we have to jump from one to the next, I guess? Looks like they can swing, too." Then he looked at the stairs. "Or we could go around, I guess? It's like a maze, though... We'd have to memorize the route before we tried to take it."

"You're not thinking like a wizard," said Timothy, rooting himself again. He reached out one hand and unleashed a storm of lightning that twisted from chain to chain and from platform to platform, instantly melting them all. As the molten mass began to fall, he raised up his other hand as though lifting a mountain, and the star in that hand burned, and the falling molten metal began to fill in the invisible mold of a bridge. Another wave of his hand and a ripple of bitter wind passed over the bridge, cooling the metal so quickly that the metal squealed in protest.

"Won't it be, like, super brittle, now?"

"It won't matter, we're light."

"Boostraps isn't."

"Right," said Timothy. "Well, I haven't studied how to temper steel, and it is still metal, so..."

"I'll go first, and lead Bootstraps across. That way if Bootstraps falls, you can catch him."

"I'll reinforce it with some enchantments," said Timothy. "That's easier."

"What's the difference between an enchantment and a spell?"

"Well, in order to enchant something, you have to cast a spell. Does that help?"

"Sort of?"

"Anyway, hold on just a moment..."

Timothy pushed energy into the bridge, and felt the structure of the metal, and the crystals within it. With a pulse of focused energy, he aligned them.

"Ok," said Timothy. "I'll go across first. Then you come across, then you call Bootstraps across."

"I'm afraid he won't come," said Brick.

"We can pull him across with magic, if we have to."

"Couldn't you just carry us all across?"

"No," said Timothy. "Can't you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"The temple. It's watching us."

"So why are you wrecking its shit?"

"It doesn't care about the bridge I just made, and it's not in a position to do anything to stop me. But it *is* in a position to bounce us off the planet, or worse, into it."

"Into it?"

"The core. It's so close, from here. It must be how they propelled the planet out of its system," said Timothy. "They drew up its energy to cast it out."



“Where was the temple, when that was happening?”

“The temple is *how* it was happening,” said Timothy, as if that explained anything. “Come on.” He crossed the bridge. It creaked, but wobbled only slightly, when he was at the exact middle.

At the far side, Timothy beckoned for Brick to cross. As he watched Brick crossing above the bottomless pit, he noticed that there were bas-relief carvings on the walls of this chamber, high above the stairs. In one, a huge egg hung above an open skull. In the other, a bird-faced man rose from within a bursting egg.

“Come on, Brick!” Timothy said, his voice echoing strangely above the bottomless pit.

Brick had made it to the halfway point of the bridge, and now clung to the railings, too shaky to take another step. “I can’t do it! It’s too high!” He peered over the edge and down into the endless, howling pit.

Timothy ran out onto the bridge and took his hand. “Come on.”

The bridge trembled at his added weight, and right as Brick took his first emboldened step, the iron screamed, and the stone where it was anchored broke away from the rest of the temple. The bridge tumbled into the gloom, crashing against the walls of the pit and smashing itself to pieces in the process. In the end it was just a glittering fall of broken shards, vanishing one by one into the infinite dark.

Brick clung to Timothy’s hand, and continued walking on the empty air. Timothy maintained the spell all the way to the far end of the pit. Then he slumped to the ground and sucked in huge breaths. He trembled as Brick helped him back to his feet. A moment later he seemed more sturdy.

“Are you alright?” Brick asked.

“I had to use my own energy to do that,” said Timothy, still a little pale even by torchlight. “I wasn’t rooted. It... Took a lot.”

“Can you get Bootstraps across?”

“If he stays calm. If he wiggles? No guarantees.”

“Can’t you conjure another bridge?”

“My master could. I’m not quite that good.”

“You conjured half an ocean earlier.”

“While I was connected to the altar,” said Timothy.

“I thought you said the energy was stronger here?”

“It is, but it’s not *that* strong.”

“So what are you going to do instead?”

“I’m going to levitate him across,” said Timothy. “But he needs to hold as still as possible.”

“How am I supposed to communicate that with a horse?”

“Good point. I’ll conjure some rope instead.” Timothy reached across the distance. Rings of light appeared around Bootstraps, then solidified into sturdy ropes and straps, binding the horse’s legs together and straight. Bootstraps instantly panicked, and began to flop over. Timothy reached out again, and the stars burned in both his palms. Brick could faintly see the lines of energy

stretching forth from his fingertips, into the darkness, arcing towards Bootstraps.

Timothy twisted the forces of the cosmos to his will, and Bootstraps the horse rose gently into the air and began to drift towards them, out above the pit. Timothy's face was a mask of concentration, and his outstretched hands seemed almost to waver. The horse floated nearer.

"Careful, careful," said Brick. "Keep him coming. Keep him coming. Almost there, just a little further. You've got him, just don't drop him. Just guide him to me."

"Talk to him, not me," said Timothy. "I'm trying to concentrate!"

"You're a good boy, Bootstraps! Yes you are! You're doing great, you're almost there! Just a few more seconds, it's all going to be fine, just stay calm. You're ok, we've got you. We're not going to drop you."

Timothy lowered Bootstraps to the ground and burst the conjured shackles, releasing the horse, who instantly stampeded away, straight through the arch of light.

"Well," said Brick. "I guess we're going that way."

"So it would seem," said Timothy, shaking sparks from his fingertips.

## Chapter 9

# Into the Light

Timothy and Brick stood hand in hand on the threshold of the light. There was nothing beyond it; no ground or wall or chamber they could see. The arch of stone brimmed with white light, and Timothy could sense nothing from it even through his aura sight.

“Do you think it’s safe?” Brick asked.

“Is anything?”

“That’s not really an answer, you know.”

“I don’t know what it is. I don’t know what it will do to us. But it’s the only way forward, isn’t it?”

“Actually, you know, I was looking at the brackets in the ceilings where the chains were connected, and I think there might be a winch mechanism up there. Maybe down was the way forward?”

“Well, your horse went this way,” said Timothy. “I don’t sense him now. Or Desperate Joe.”

“Then maybe he went this way too?”

Timothy walked to the edge of the pit and hurled a star down into it. The light gleamed on the walls of the pit all the way down, until it and the walls could no longer be distinguished from one another. A tiny speck of light, it kept falling.

“There *is* something down there...”

“What is it?”

“I can’t be sure. An altar, I think. And a floor.”

Brick and Timothy looked at each other in the torchlight. Brick said, “You don’t think...”

Timothy said, “I *do* think.”

Brick said, “That’s not what I meant. You’re obviously very smart, and I would never want to say otherwise.”

Timothy said, “I *think* we’re thinking the same thing.”

“So what do we do?”

“Should we split up?” Timothy asked, then immediately regretted asking.

Brick shook his head vehemently, much to Timothy's relief. "No. If I get separated from you, I'm doomed."

"Then we'd better try to catch Bootstraps," said Timothy.

"Assuming he still exists," said Brick.

They stared at the impossible wall of white light.

"Let's try a hand, first," said Timothy. He reached his hand into the light, and drew it back out unharmed. "Well.. It doesn't hurt."

"What's it like?"

"Tingly," said Timothy. "On three?"

"Whenever you're ready."

"Now, then."

They jumped together.

## Chapter 10

# Wolf's Den

Prince Clark raced down the alley, hearing the sounds of pursuit already behind him. He reached up a hand and a spell, and hauled himself up onto the rooftops, and landed running.

On the rooftops behind him he sensed Blinky and Knives. He sensed the moment Club and Wolf stepped into the alley he had already left below him, but he did not sense Red until she suddenly appeared before him, her illusion fading in a ripple of revelation. The ruby star flashed, and a crimson line lanced towards him. The Prince was not as swift in his deflection, this time, and he managed only to curve the ray to one side. It struck the rooftop of a building nearby and blasted every rafter and shingle out of it in a plume of red flame. The heat scorched the Prince, but with a hand he caught some of its energy, shaped it, and sent it lancing right back at Red, who caught it with her star.

The Prince smiled in spite of himself. "You're good."

"You have seen nothing."

The ruby star flashed, and a web of red light surrounded her. A ripple of power washed invisibly over the Prince, and his local gravity tripled. As his feet sank into the roof, the web of red light tightened around the ruby star, and another ray of deadly light came lancing towards him. He caught it on his ring, and held it at bay, but only just.

As he pitted his will against gravity and against the energies of her ruby star, the Prince said through gritted teeth: "What is that, anyway? a Red Giant?"

"It burned blue, when my mother wielded it," said Red. "It burns red now, and it will burn away all your defenses."

"Is that so?" said the Prince, as he began to understand the energy at last.

"Yes. She was called Blue," said Red. "And I am Red!"

Blinky and Knives had caught up now, but kept their distance for the moment. Blinky raised his staff, readying magic. He was about to need it.

"Very interesting," said the Prince, and he turned his hand palm out into the continuing ray. Red gaped at this suicidal action, but the Prince was not vaporized. Instead, he caught the ray in his palm, and reached out his other hand and grabbed the ray in the middle like a rope, and hauled with all his

might. The ruby star flew from Red's hands and straight into his. "Thanks, maybe I'll keep it."

Blinky's staff cut the air and invisible energies rippled around the Prince, boxing him in.

The Prince gave a final, roguish grin, and intensified his personal gravity by twenty fold. He plummeted through the roof and into the floor of someone's dining room. Picking himself out of the floor, he blew the door off its hinges with a wave of his hand and fled into another alley.

Red leapt across the gap between rooftops above him and while she was in midair he threw her star back to her, wrapped in a spell. Instinctively, she caught it. A blast of lightning erupted from it, and she landed steaming, unconscious. Wolf and Club came around the corner just as Blinky vaulted over to check on Red. Knives had disappeared, for now.

The Prince sprinted between market stalls, weaving through the crowd.

"Get ahead of him!" Wolf shouted up to Blinky as Club charged into the crowd.

Blinky said, "He got Red!"

"Red!?" Wolf shouted. He raised his crossbow and sighted down it. "I'll kill you for that, little prince!"

The crossbow bolt whizzed through a perfect gap in the crowd. A split second before it impacted the back of his skull, the Prince sensed it. He had no time to shape the spell; just an instinctive moment of raw magic. The blast knocked the crossbow bolt aside just as it touched him, sending him tumbling to the cobbles. The blast also scattered three members of the crowd, hurling one right into Club's arms.

"GRAH!" Shouted Club, tossing the screaming civilian aside to raise up her maul.

The Prince rubbed the back of his head ruefully and saw the shadow of Club loom suddenly over him. He rolled over just in time to watch the black iron maul come swinging down. He threw his arms over his face and used the last bit of energy stored in his ring to stop her maul. It froze a foot from his face.

He relaxed into the cobbles. "Sorry," he said, planting his feet, and he reached up one finger to touch the black maul. It kicked in her grasp, taking a swing at her face. She was strong enough to stop it, but in the time it took her to do so the Prince had already built a dozen feet of distance between them.

Wolf caught up to Club and clapped her on the shoulder. "Where is he!?"

Club pointed through the crowd.

Wolf snatched up his fallen crossbow bolt and grinned toothily at the tiny spot of blood on the very tip. He handed it to Club. "Get this to Blinky. We have his blood, now."

Then he ran into the crowd, hunting.

The Prince wove his way down side streets to the palisade wall of the colony. There wasn't time to root himself properly and recharge his ring. If they caught him with his feet off the ground, he was done for.

He looked up at the palisade wall and sighed. "Sorry, trees."

He rooted himself, and reached out his hands, and a circular portion of the wall began to melt without burning.

On his scent, Wolf paced the cobbled streets, crossbow hidden under his cloak. Guards were moving now towards the street where the scuffle had happened, but there had not yet been time for him and his crew to be wanted by the law. Still, it was best to take precautions.

“Where are you, little prince?” said Wolf. “I’m coming for you. I’m going to find you, little prince. There is nowhere you can hide from me!”

Sweat rolled down the Prince’s brow. He was halfway through the wall, but he could hear Wolf just around the corner.

“I smell you, little prince.”

The Prince turned to see Wolf at the mouth of the alley, crossbow glinting. The Prince dove into his molten hole. Wolf sprinted to regain line-of-sight, and found a hole in the palisade wall that started out five feet wide and ended out just a narrow, foot-wide gap. Through it, he could see the Prince already running across the meadow, headed towards the small black castle nestled among the nearby hills.

“Oh no you *don’t*, you bastard!” Wolf shouted, trying to jam himself through the gap. He was too thickly built to fit. “Don’t you dare!”

Wolf stared through the gap. The Prince was nearly at the castle.

“Fucking royalty,” said Wolf, stepping back from the Palisade. He slipped on his claws and took a running jump. Sinking his steel claws deep into the bark, he climbed.

He reached the top of the palisade just in time to see the Prince reach the drawbridge, which lowered to meet him.

“Fucking wizards!” Wolf shouted, leaping off the palisade. He spread his cloak as he fell, and the shaggy grey fur spread out feathered wings that carried him to a gentle landing, already running. Shaking the magic cloak back into its more lupine shape, he sprinted after the Prince, and tried to aim his crossbow.

The Prince, standing in the arch of the castle gate, turned back to look.

“Gotcha,” said Wolf, and he loosed the bolt.

Lazily, the Prince reached out and caught it, then flung it straight back.

The bolt carried Wolf right off his feet and sprawled him out in the grass. Clutching at his injured shoulder and the traitorous barb now lodged inside his rotator cuff, Wolf snarled at the distant prince.

The Prince’s voice carried supernaturally across the grass. “You never had a chance, Wolf. I’m sorry. Tell my father to send someone better, next time.”

The drawbridge slammed shut.

“NO!” Wolf shouted, as the foundations of the castle broke free of the earth, and the entire construction lifted ponderously towards the sky.

“THAT’S MY HOME, YOU BASTARD!” Wolf screamed, to the uncaring heavens.

The castle was roomy, cheaply decorated, and poorly lit. One of the rooms stank of sour meat and piss. They had a functioning altar stone in the middle of the keep, and that was all that mattered.

The Prince looked around at the animal-themed decor of his new temporary home and sighed to himself. "Oh, Tilmuckey. *You* had better taste than this."

He ran a finger along the altar stone and it came away filthy with dust. "Bleh."

He vanished the dust.

In the high rafters of the altar hall, Knives crouched among the shadows and watched Wolf's quarry. Under the knife-belts which concealed most of his face, he smiled to himself.



## Chapter 11

# The Forgotten God, and His Forgetters

A flat bridge of stone spanned an endless chasm much larger and grander than the last one. Above, hanging pillars carved with intricate reliefs dangled over the abyss. The distant side walls, illuminated by some unseen source, depicted a complicated series of scenes involving beaked men, rituals, alchemical symbols, and various skulls and eggs. At the far end of the bridge, under a huge statue of the true Shalim's face, next to a black altar, Desperate Joe stood feeding Bootstraps carrots and examining a wall of carved symbols.

"Master!" Timothy cried out. He nearly ran across the bridge, but stopped himself, remembering Brick.

He gave Brick's hand a squeeze. "Just close your eyes and hold onto my hand. I won't let you fall."

Brick smiled gratefully and closed his eyes.

Timothy led him across the bridge.

"Master?"

Desperate Joe whipped around, visibly startled. "Timothy! Brick! You're not dead, then?"

Brick said, "No! We thought you were!"

"Me? I don't die. Terribly bad form."

"Oh," said Brick. "Well, good for you, then. I've done it twice now."

"You have? Oh no. Timothy, you're slacking!"

"Hey, I brought him back!"

"And I brought him back!"

"So now we're both back," said Timothy.

"I see," said Desperate Joe. "Well, since you're here, you'd better have a look at these."

He gestured towards the symbols carved into the wall. "What do you make of them, my apprentice?"

Timothy looked closely at the symbols. “They’re old... Pre-empire. I don’t recognize the language, though. My tattoo isn’t translating it...”

“How do you know they’re old, then?” Brick asked.

“The stone is old,” said Timothy. “It has almost forgotten the touch of its carver. It hasn’t been touched by a chisel in thousands and thousands of years...”

“How can you tell?”

“In time, you’ll be able to do it too,” said Timothy. “With the right training.”

Desperate Joe’s eyes twinkled. Proudly, he said, “What else can you discern, my knowledgeable apprentice?”

“Well,” said Timothy, “I can’t make any sense of the symbols themselves, but taken in consideration with the rest of the chamber, I’d say it’s probably a dedication and a legend. Maybe even a warning?”

“Very good,” said Desperate Joe. “Now, I’m sure you’ve noticed the beaked creatures?”

“The cultists?” Brick asked.

“Ah, that would make sense of it, yes,” said Timothy.

“Of what?”

“Why he called them ‘cultists’ and not ‘freaky bird monsters’.”

“Who?” asked Desperate Joe.

Timothy said, “Shalim.”

The statue of Shalim’s visage opened up its eyes, and two vast rings of gold turned down to look at the interlopers in his presence.

All four of them, even Bootstraps, staggered back nearly to the edge of the pit.

“You called?” said Shalim, his voice booming over the void.

“Er, n-n-n-no,” said Timothy. “Sorry. I just happened to say your name.”

“Oh,” said Shalim. “I miss the days when people used to call on me here. For a moment, I was excited.”

“Oh,” said Timothy. “I’m... I’m sorry. Thank you for responding so quickly. We don’t have anything to ask of you, though.”

“Don’t we?” said Desperate Joe, stepping forward. “Shalim, old friend, do you feel like explaining this chamber to us?”

“Not really,” said Shalim. “And I don’t know why you would think we were ‘old friends’. I’ve never met you.”

Desperate Joe’s face fell. “I see. Troubling, troubling... Yes, well, you’d better go for now. We’ll call you if we need you.”

“I thought you had something to ask?”

“You expressed disinterest, so we don’t want to impose upon you.”

“Oh,” said Shalim. “How thoughtful! If only there were more mortals like you.”

Then the eyes of Shalim’s visage closed, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

“So he’s the first, then?” said Desperate Joe.

Timothy nodded. “We... Bumped into him. We sort of died on the way to the temple.”

“Yes, well... That’s awkward. But I’m glad you’ve come through alright.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, I think we know what this place is, now.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. If I read those alchemical symbols rightly, and I firmly believe that I do, then this is the chamber where the first version of our mutual friend came into being.”

Timothy said: “What.”

“Yes. Look. The bird-men pluck the egg from the skull, and work alchemical magics upon it. Then the egg hatches into a skull, from which they pluck an egg, which they work alchemical magics upon. The egg hatches again, into another skull, and the cycle continues, culminating at the face of our mutual friend.”

“I don’t understand,” said Brick.

“Of course you don’t, you’re not me,” said Desperate Joe. “Look at it metaphorically. By extracting the soul and experimenting upon it alchemically, they iteratively produced a god through multiple lifetimes.”

“Uh,” said Brick.

Timothy said, “So you mean to say that he was... Created?”

“Yes,” said Desperate Joe. “And it looks to me, to judge from the history of this planet, that they were ultimately banished from their system for it.”

“That’s why those things outside don’t look like people anymore? They were cursed?”

Desperate Joe said, “What things outside?”

“The monsters,” said Timothy. “The cultists. They killed us. Well, not really. But sort of.”

“Ah,” said Desperate Joe. “I take it they bore a resemblance to the creatures in the carvings?”

“Yes,” said Timothy. “But not much of one.”

“Then yes, you are probably correct.”

“You are wrong,” said Shalim, quietly. “They created me, and my wisdom grew beyond their understanding. I stretched my power across the stars, and seeded many worlds. I grew disobedient to their more foolish mandates. In terror of what I could become, they committed planetary suicide, and flung my world out into the darkness. To survive upon the dead world they had created, they transformed themselves into the creatures you encountered. Their transformation allows them to feast upon souls, thus depriving me of new spiritual energy.”

“Hold the fuck up,” said Timothy. “You draw *power* from souls?”

“Of course,” said Shalim. “It is how all deific magic is performed.”

Brick gasped. “You were the first!”

“I was,” said Shalim.

“We knew that, didn’t we?” said Timothy.

Brick shook his head. “Not the first Shalim, the first *god!*”

“No,” said Shalim, sadly. “Ring was the first. I am merely the first to be born without the touch of her power. My descendants now colonize the stars, and I linger in shadow, forgotten. My forgetters stalk the world they slew to imprison me.”

Desperate Joe said, “Anyway, sorry to wake you again.”

Shalim blinked. “Oh my. Think nothing of it. I have longed for new company.”

The statue closed its eyes again, and Desperate Joe sagged. He looked at Timothy, then at Brick. Then he pointed at the altar stone. They nodded silently, and joined him there.

Timothy and Brick both looked at Bootstraps. Desperate Joe shook his head, waving a dismissive hand. “Don’t worry,” he whispered.

They looked at one another, nodded, and placed their hands upon the altar.

Shalim said, “What are you doing?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Desperate Joe. “It was just so dusty!”

“No it wasn’t,” said Shalim. “Unless you brought the dust in with you.”

“Mortals! What can you say.”

“You’re trying to leave, aren’t you?”

“Us? Leave? Never! No, of course not.”

Timothy said, very timidly, “Yes, please. We can’t stay here.”

“But you will be tossing your souls to the winds of fate! Some other god will claim you, and you will not enter my paradise.”

“There are lots of paradises,” said Timothy. “And we have a right to choose which one we want.”

“I suppose that’s true,” said Shalim. “But I am sad to see you leaving so soon.”

“You can come visit us, once you’re free,” said Brick.

Desperate Joe’s eyebrows disappeared into his hair and he stared at Brick in horror. Timothy, white as a sheet, said, “But there’s lots of universe for you to see! You’ve been away a long time.”

“Too long,” said Shalim. “Don’t worry. I will take you up on that invitation, Brick. Someday.”

Brick swallowed, his heart sinking.

Desperate Joe thrust the entire platform into the intermediary before anyone else could say something stupid.

## Chapter 12

# A Dagger; A Back

Prince Clark said, to the darkness, "I know you're there."

Knives, in the rafters, did not flinch. A poison-tipped dagger ready in one hand, he waited for his moment to pounce.

The Prince said, "Yes, they found me. I had to kill Tilmuckey."

Knives crept silently along the rafter, trying to get above his quarry.

Prince Clark turned and paced in the other direction. "I don't want to hear how sorry you are. I want to hear that he made it to the shadow."

Knives crept backwards along the rafter awkwardly. A moment later, Prince Clark was directly beneath him again.

Prince Clark sighed with relief. "Good. Have a new body made for him. In secret. And set him up with a nice tavern somewhere quiet and out of the way, in the conquered systems. Use what's left of my allowance, there should be enough for someplace nice."

Knives prepared himself. It was now or never.

The Prince turned on his heel and paced back towards the hearth to lean against it regally. "And Dmitri?"

Knives suppressed a growl of frustration and crept back along the rafters to position himself above the Prince yet again.

The rafters creaked.

The Prince said, "Tell my father I don't want to come home, and he doesn't need to worry about me ruining anything. I just want to live my own life. However, if my father chooses to send more mercenaries after me, he must know that I won't spare their lives, and that I will begin to make trouble in ways he can't now imagine."

Knives pounced. Prince Clark caught him with both hands and suplexed him into the flagstones under the hearth. Then Prince Clark kicked his knife away, to skitter under a table, and sat on his chest.

"If you move, I shall melt your face," said Prince Clark, holding his casting star close enough for Knives to feel its heat.

Knives twisted like a snake, tumbling the prince, and scuttled for the table. He snatched the knife by the handle just as magic caught him by the legs and

dragged him back to the prince. He kicked himself to his feet, somersaulted in the air, and plunged his dagger into the Prince's open palm, stopping him mid-cast.

The Prince, unaccustomed to physical pain, screamed. Knives grabbed his wounded hand and bent it back, forcing the Prince into submission. "That knife is poisoned," he spat. "You won't be causing any more trouble."

The Prince laughed. "It's clear you don't know anything about me."

He shoved his hand forward, shattering his wrist against Knives's firm grip and ramming the pommel of the knife into Knives's sternum. Knives stumbled back. The Prince got to his feet, plucking the knife out of his hand. He dropped it to the stone, crunched his wrist back into position, and flicked the wound away.

"What are you!?" Knives shouted, backflipping over a couch to find cover in the shadows.

"I am Prince Clark, four-thousand and fifth of the imperial line. My body was created to withstand every kind of poison. It seems you've been set up to fail!"

"Every kind, eh?" Knives grumbled, drawing one of his two alchemically enhanced daggers from its secret holster on the back of his neck.

The couch suddenly decided that down was up, and fell to the ceiling. Knives hung on for the ride, flinging his dagger in midair. Prince Clark nimbly sidestepped it, but it curved its path and came at him from behind.

He ducked it again and it sailed across the room before disappearing. Knives, in the rafters, held out his hand, and the dagger reappeared in his palm. He caught it and flung it again at once.

Prince Clark twisted, danced away; the knife orbited him and came flying right back at Knives. It disappeared an inch from his nose, and when it reappeared he failed to catch it. The dagger tumbled towards the ground below. Prince Clark flung out a whipping lash of lightning which smote the dagger to atoms. Then, whipping the leftover magic back to himself, he reshaped it into a blast that howled up and smashed the rafters.

Knives found himself surrounded by shattered timber, all suspended in the air. The Prince beckoned; Knives flew towards him. The shattered rafters floated back into position and mended themselves with a ripple of light, and in midair Knives drew and concealed his second alchemically-enhanced dagger. The power dragged him to his knees before the Prince, who stared down at him imperiously, backed by the flames in the hearth.

"I would prefer not to kill you," said the Prince.

"Yeah? I'd prefer not to die."

"Do you have a face, under all those knives and straps? How do you see?"

"The knives see for me," said Knives.

"Can I see your face?"

"No one has seen my face and lived."

"Surely, for his imperial majesty, concessions can be made. I prefer to look my prisoners in the eye."

"Your funeral."

“Look, we have to learn to be civil, since it seems I’m stuck with you. I don’t want to have to tie you up!”

“I might like it,” said Knives.

Prince Clark grinned devilishly. “See, I feel we could easily get along, if we had half a mind to.”

“You’re just a contract to me. Nothing personal.”

Prince Clark smiled, and reached down a hand.

Knives looked at the undamaged hand. With a defeated sigh, he took it.

Prince Clark pulled Knives to his feet, saying: “Well, let’s not make it personal, then. I will trust you, and you will trust me. After all, if I’m not here to land the castle, it will smash into the planet, killing us both.”

“It will?” said Knives, who hadn’t thought of that. His urge to kill subsided.

“Yes, obviously?” said the Prince.

Knives hated getting to know new people. An awkward silence stretched.

“Do you eat?” Prince Clark asked.

“Of course?” said Knives.

“Do you, uh... Have a larder?”

“That door.”

“That’s the room that smells like sour meat and piss. Are you sure that’s not the lavatory?”

“We shipped an amber ogre last week. Haven’t had time to clean.”

“Disgusting! Don’t you have a caster?”

“Well, Red has her crystal-thingy, but it doesn’t do that kind of magic, and Blinky’s blind, so he doesn’t care. Doesn’t have much of a sense of smell, either. Or hygiene, now that I’m thinking about it.”

“Well, I suppose I shall have to do it myself. Come along, then! Let’s see if we can’t find some ‘good grub’, as the provincials say.”

Behind the Prince’s back, Knives slipped his alchemically-enhanced dagger back into its hidden sheath, and followed Prince Clark into the filthy larder.

Prince Clark clapped his hands and spread them apart, stretching a veil of magic between them. It fluttered away from him, passing over the cluttered counters and the dirty straw on the floor. What it touched became instantly, miraculously clean, and came at once to life. Pots and pans hopped their way into their home cabinets, cutlery flew past in glittering schools, and dishes gently stacked themselves away.

“That’s better,” said Prince Clark. “Sort of a larder slash kitchen, hmm. For a castle, this is pretty small.”

“We don’t cook much,” said Knives.

“Where do you store your food?”

“In here,” said Knives, kicking a large wooden chest with one boot. It flipped open to reveal a meager supply of eggs, milk, flour, oats, and bacon.

“I see,” said Prince Clark, his eyebrows rising. “And... Not even under enchantment? No preservation spell?”

“No?” said Knives.

Prince Clark shuddered. “Well, I suppose it will have to do. Do you know how to cook anything?”

“Scrambled eggs?”

“That will have to suffice,” said Prince Clark. “Well, I shall leave you to it. Thank you for your contribution.”

Dumbstruck, Knives watched the Prince walk away, and was a little surprised by how pleasant he found the view. The Prince’s pants were very tight.

A few minutes later, two plates of scrambled eggs in hand, Knives returned to the altar hall to find Prince Clark already seated at a finely-appointed dining table that hadn’t been there a moment ago.

“Why can’t you just conjure food?” Knives asked, slamming a plate down for the Prince. “And where’s my chair?”

“Over there,” said the Prince, pointing to the far end of the table.

Knives walked the long distance back to his chair and sat down.

“Salt?” asked Prince Clark.

“Too expensive,” said Knives.

“My goodness, you people really aren’t that good at your jobs, are you?”

“What?” Knives growled.

“Well, you certainly don’t seem to have *prospered* much, at least. Are you sure you wouldn’t be better suited to something else?”

“Like what?”

Prince Clark took a bite of his eggs and closed his eyes. “Oh, delicious. Perhaps your talent lies in cooking? These are excellently done.”

“Huh,” said Knives. He had never thought about cooking. He did like the way things flashed, in the kitchen. And there was something about the heat of the stove that was almost exciting. And you did get to use a lot of knives...

Prince Clark ate daintily. Knives shoveled his eggs away and sat, arms crossed, to watch the Prince finish. It took several minutes. When he had finished, the Prince dabbed at his lips with a cloth napkin and said, “Well, that was delightful. Shall we see about dessert?”

“Dessert?” asked Knives.

“You know. Something sweet, after the meal.”

“You saw what we have.”

“No hidden talent for baking, I suppose?”

“No.”

“I have an idea. Wait here.”

Knives waited. After a while he twisted around in his chair to glare at the door.

The Prince returned bearing two bowls of milk. “I was able to thicken it into cream,” he explained.

“You want me to drink a bowl of cream? I’m not a fucking cat.”

“No, silly,” said the Prince, and he sat on the edge of the table, right in front of Knives, and held out the bowl in both hands. A spoon presented itself in the air nearby. Knives took it.

“Watch,” said the Prince. Knives followed his gaze and watched the cream, which began to stir itself, and cool, and thicken. In a moment, it was ice cream.

“I sweetened it with honey. It might not be perfect, but it will be something sweet.”



Knives took a taste.

Knives had lived a very hard life, even compared to the other mercenaries. He had never tasted ice cream before, and the sweetness of it overcame him. He managed to croak out: "It's delicious."

"Good," beamed Prince Clark, and he retreated to the far end of the table. Knives immediately missed the warmth of his presence.

When they had finished the ice cream, Knives stared at his empty bowl for a while. When he looked up, Prince Clark had his bare feet up on the table.

"I don't suppose you have any alcohol?" asked Prince Clark.

"Sure we do," said Knives. "We've got ale."

"Ew, ale," said Prince Clark. "How horrid. Bring some out."

Knives left to obey, and returned a moment later with two mugs of ale. Surprising himself, he said, "We'd be more comfortable on the couch."

"You are absolutely correct," said Prince Clark. "I, for one, can never stand it when people put their feet up on the table. Terribly bad form."

They sat together on the couch and Knives found himself confused by how very aware he was of the Prince's weight upon the cushions next to him.

"So," said Knives, sipping his ale.

"Indeed," said Prince Clark, putting his feet up on the coffee table.

They drank in silence for a time.

Prince Clark said, "You know, I do like the antlers. They add a certain... Rustic quality. Very homey."

"You mean Big Jack?" asked Knives, pointing towards the mounted head of the triple-antlered deer above the hearth.

"Yes. You know, this place isn't so bad."

"It's home," said Knives, tossing back his ale. Why was he in such a hurry to get drunk? He knew that he would probably need his wits about him.

Prince Clark finished off the rest of his ale in one swallow. "More please."

Knives laughed, finished off his, then took both their mugs and retreated to get more. He returned with a spigoted barrel and dropped it triumphantly on the dining table. "I have a feeling we'll need it all."

Prince Clark laughed. "Just so you know not to try anything, I have left a spell on myself that will drop you into the intermediary all on your lonesome if you hurt me."

"The intermediary?"

"The world between worlds," said Prince Clark. "To you, it will just seem like a long, horrible trip into the infinite darkness. If you're lucky, you'll hit something and die. If not, well. You'll have a long wait, and no guarantee of any end to it."

Knives swallowed. "We can trust each other."

"Good," said Prince Clark. "Aren't things so much easier, that way?"

Knives chugged more ale. "Maybe."

Prince Clark emptied his mug again, and with a lazy crook of his finger he caused the spigot to open on the table and the fountain of ale to flow through the air and into their mugs. He closed the spigot again with another twist of his finger. "You know," he said, drinking, "this ale isn't too bad."

Knives drank more. He was feeling it now, but it hadn't caught up to him all the way, just yet. He was about to be very buzzed. "Yeah. It's good enough for the likes of us!"

Prince Clark said, "Hear hear!" and clinked his mug against Knives's.

They drank more, and conversation died away.

Knives relaxed into the couch and watched the fire for a time, very comfortable now. Prince Clark, beside him, seemed content to sit in silence.

Knives liked the silence. It was easy to think, when things were quiet. The Prince was easier to look at, too, when he was quiet. His face was perfectly proportioned and unnaturally smooth. By the shape of his face and the form of his body, he seemed a man of thirty, but young and fit for his age. Knives reached across before he could stop himself and brushed the Prince's smooth chin with a finger. "Can you even grow a beard?"

Prince Clark turned to look at him, a coy smile on his lips. "If I choose to."

"Must be nice to choose. I have to shave all the time."

"You should let it grow out," said Prince Clark, feeling Knives's stubble.

"You think so?"

"Yes. It seems to come in evenly. A beard could suit you. What little I can see of your face, that is."

Knives looked away, into the darkness, into his past.

"How old are you, anyway?" Knives asked, still looking away.

"Two hundred and six. You?"

"Thirty-eight," Knives responded automatically, thoroughly distracted by this revelation.

"That's a good age. I don't remember thirty-eight, but I'm sure it was good to me."

Prince Clark softly leaned against his shoulder, and Knives froze.

Sweating, Knives felt every creeping tingle as Prince Clark's fingertips tiptoed up his thigh. Knives turned his head to look at the Prince's pale and moving hand.

"What are you..." Knives cleared his throat. "What are you...?"

"Sh," said Prince Clark, laying his head in Knives's lap. "Don't talk. Just be here with me."

"Ok."

Prince Clark took Knives's hand and placed it to his own chest, slipping his fingers between buttons and into his shirt.

Knives's left hand lazily wandered around inside Prince Clark's shirt, and the buttons undid themselves as needed. Everything he touched was warm and soft and smooth. He had never even thought about the softness of a man's relaxed chest muscles before.

Prince Clark gently raised his hand, and Knives felt buckles loosening all over his body as his many knife-belts came undone. He felt naked without them, even in his armor.

The Prince had mercifully left the knife belts covering the upper half of his face. Knives put down his mug of ale and reached up, hands shaking slightly.

He unbuckled two straps, and revealed his face to another living human soul for the first time in ten years.

“You have kind eyes,” said Prince Clark, smiling up from his lap.

“Thank you,” said Knives, looking down at him.

“No,” said Prince Clark, sitting up slowly in his arms. “Thank *you* for showing me.”



## Chapter 13

# Shalim and Shalim

The Incarnation's black tower came out of the intermediary just above the atmosphere of Sacred 51. In silent orbit over the dark world, he stood at the head-high prism of black crystal that served for an altar and gazed out the many labyrinths at the stars and the shape which obscured them.

"Desperate Joe was here," he murmured to himself.

In the corner, his creator said, "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," said the Incarnation.

His creator raised her shaggy grey head from the piled books around her and deigned to look out the labyrinths. Clumsily, she emerged from behind the desk, her red gown shimmering as it trailed behind her. At the Incarnation's side, she rested a possessive hand upon his shoulder and said, "Gone now, I take it?"

"Yes."

"Any trail?"

"None."

"He must have used the temple altar," said the creator. "The fool."

"Can it be made into a trap?" asked the Incarnation.

"No," said the creator. "But its magic is beyond him, and will be his downfall."

"I see," said the Incarnation, unable to follow the chain of his creator's logic.

"No you don't," said the creator, pacing towards the labyrinth. It stretched out into a billowing tunnel of whirling purple mists. "Come along, child."

The Incarnation followed dutifully, his black cloak sweeping the ground.

They stepped out the far end of the violet intermediary and into the central chamber of Shalim's temple.

The Incarnation looked up at the stone statue which resembled him so very strongly. The eyes of the statue blinked slowly open, and huge golden rings swiveled in obsidian, turning towards him.

"Ah," said Shalim. "My descendant."

The Incarnation nodded. His creator stepped out of his shadow.

"I see manners have changed, in the millennia of my absence," said Shalim. "And who is this?"

"I am Anara," said the creator, bowing grandly. "A humble enchantress."

"For what have you come here?" said Shalim. "My business is with my heir, and my heir alone."

"You recognize him, then, as heir?" asked Anara, coyly.

"He is better than the others, yes," said Shalim. "From which of my descendants did he bud?"

"He never budded," said Anara. "Though he has bloomed beautifully, if I do say so myself."

"You created him, then?"

Anara nodded. "I did."

"And do you claim to command him?"

"I do," said Anara.

"Then you are the one who seeks to free me," said Shalim.

"Indeed, I do wish to free your power," said Anara.

"Then you must destroy this world, and free me from its curse."

"In due time," said Anara. "But first, there is one matter to discuss."

"Name it."

"You have already recognized my creation as your true heir, and me as his creator."

"I have."

"Then, if you were to die, your power would transfer to... Him?"

"That is correct," said Shalim, "however supremely unlikely."

"And you are, in fact, as I understand it, tethered to this planet?"

"I am bound by the ancient curse of this temple," said Shalim. "Where I was made, there I have been shackled."

"And all the souls in your possession, too?"

"Correct."

"In fact, if the curse were ever so slightly different than it is, your very life force would be bound to the fate of this world, is that correct?"

"Indeed! The cultists never learned that hidden weakness of their curse upon me. It has taken me many centuries to learn to see it. I am quite confident that if this world is destroyed, I and my power shall be freed."

"Unless, for example, someone were to alter the curse."

"Oh," said Shalim. "I see. You are one of *those* enchanters."

"Enchantresses," said Anara, "and there are none like me."

"You may not be aware," said Shalim, "that the reason my cultists never stray within the borders of the temple is because I choose to keep them out."

Beaked shadows moved in the gloom, crawling from behind pillars and out of hidden tunnels in the walls.

"I assumed there would be some kind of material opposition," said Anara, as the Incarnation unsheathed a long, curved, amber blade. "That's why I brought him."

## Chapter 14

# The Intermediary

It was strange to fly through the intermediary without the protection of a ground to stand on or walls to hide the view. Desperate Joe, Brick, and Timothy all clung to the altar, rooted into its power—for it had a source of power in it, deep within the stone, and brighter than the light in the Tower had ever come close to being. Timothy was afraid to ask if Desperate Joe knew what it was.

Around them the void was inky black, and the stars burned hard and bright. Their feet dangled in the void. While traveling through the intermediary like this, it was both impossible and unnecessary to breathe, but there was still something strangely suffocating about the knowledge that there was no air around them now. Timothy and Brick both tried to keep their focus inward, on the altar itself. Desperate Joe enjoyed the view.

Timothy heard Desperate Joe's voice inside his head. *"I am taking us to a planet with ample quartz reserves. We will be able to create a new altar stone there."*

*"Master, why not just keep this one?"*

*"It does not belong to me, and I have no true claim to its power. It has generously shared itself with us, but it may yet betray us."*

*"I understand."*

*"You begin to, I think."*

Brick's voice echoed in both their heads. *"How long until we land, Master?"*

Timothy thought: *"Goodness, Brick! Telepathy? On your own?"*

Brick thought: *"Well, I could hear you, so I figured if I tried hard, I could make you hear me too."*

Desperate Joe's voice, inside both their heads, said, *"This altar is unlike anything I have ever used. We will make landfall in just a few brief hours."*

Timothy thought: *"Which world, Master?"*

Desperate Joe's voice said: *"Panoptos V. Its trinary system has made even its distant worlds warm and mostly habitable."*

*"Mostly habitable?"* Brick asked.

*"Yes. The atmosphere has the elements we need, but the proportions are wrong, and there are some extra ingredients that will be quite toxic if we spend*

*more than a few seconds breathing them in.”*

*“So we’re just going to... Not breathe?”*

*“Goodness no. We’re going to conjure breathable air for ourselves. It will be a slight continuous expenditure of energy, but Panoptos V has a good core.”*

*“Well, let’s just hope Shalim doesn’t take us up on our invitation too quickly,”*  
Brick thought.



## Chapter 15

# Meggid II

Prince Clark played with the soft fuzz on Knives's close-shorn cranium, and watched the fire in the hearth. The hours had passed idyllically, and now Knives was sound asleep, cradled in his arms. A conjured blanket was enough to turn the couch into a piece of paradise, and the Prince enjoyed it with the full knowledge that it could not possibly last.

He had nearly emptied the barrel of ale.

Dmitri's voice in his head said: "Are you quite sure of your current trajectory?"

The Prince sighed, and muttered, "Quite sure."

"You are headed towards a black hole."

"Check your calculations," said the Prince. "I am headed *around* a black hole."

"Your time will be distorted."

"I'll be in the intermediary. I can counteract a simple gravitational time distortion quite easily from there."

"You can?"

"Yes. I figured it out ages ago. Now please don't bother me unless it's important."

"As you wish, my liege."

Dmitri's presence faded.

Knives was watching him. The Prince said, "I talk to myself. Don't mind me."

"Did you say we're going *around* a black hole?"

"I did," said the Prince, "but not to you."

"I'm the only one here, ain't I?"

The Prince gave him a pitying smile. "Physically."

"What's that mean?"

"It means you have a wonderful physique, and I think I'm going to explore it again."

"Round two, eh?"

The Prince kissed his way down Knives's ear, running his hands over Knives's hard, scarred, hairy body. "If you'll have me," he said, into the cup of Knives's neck. Knives, squirming pleasantly, said, "Any time."

After they made love, Knives quickly fell asleep, and the Prince held him close, sadly watching the fire.

The morning hour came. Knives again made scrambled eggs, and was surprised to find that they had the same number of eggs as they had the day before.

Emerging to serve the Prince, Knives said, "Say, you didn't conjure a chicken last night, did you?"

"No," said the Prince. "Don't worry about the food supplies. I've found a way to make them self-replenishing."

"You have?" said Knives.

"I have," said the Prince.

They ate in silence.

Afterwards, the Prince said, "I can tell your hangover is nearly as bad as mine. I plan to take a nap after breakfast. You may as well join me."

Knives, who had no hangover, said, "Oh, uh... I kind of slept enough, I think."

The Prince smiled. "You enjoyed everything last night?"

"Yeah," said Knives. "It was... Nice."

"That was alright," said the Prince, "But I haven't really shown you *nice*, yet."

"Listen, you know, I don't really go for guys, you see."

"Do you prefer women?"

"Well, I guess so, yeah."

"You don't sound very sure."

"I don't know. I just haven't found the right girl yet."

The Prince gave a laugh so womanly that it startled Knives. He looked up to find that the Prince had become a Princess that might easily have been his perfect twin.

"Are you really a girl?" Knives asked, baffled.

"No," said the Princess. "I was created neither. I choose as I please. Personally, I prefer being a man. You can get away with *so* much more."

"You were *created*?"

"Yup. I was created from the blood of the emperor, to be the emperor's heir."

"How old is he, if you're so ruddy old?"

The Princess laughed. "Oh, a few thousand years. He's nearing the end of his earthly life, however, and he needed someone fleshy to take up the throne after... After that. Thus, I was made."

"Ok," said Knives, looking at the Princess and her flashing curls. "Can you change your hair, too?"

"Of course! I've been blonde for a while. Maybe it's time to change things up. Do you have a preference?"

"Blue?" said Knives.

The Princess laughed. "Blue? Did you know Red's mother?"

"No! No, I just... I wanted to see blue hair."

The Princess shook out her curls and they transformed from gold to sapphire in a wave. "What do you think?"

"It's pretty, but maybe keep the blonde."

"As you wish," said the Princess, shaking her hair back to blonde. "How do you feel about the nap proposition now?"

Knives said, "Uh, you know, maybe I *could* use a nap."

The Princess took his hand and led him back to the couch.

Two hours later, very parched, Knives retreated to the larder to replenish his sweat supply. Chugging mug after mug of water, he stared at the wall and came to grips with some hard truths.

He put the empty mug down at last and returned to find the Princess lounging on the couch, nude, holding a cigarette in a long black holder. "You're back!" She said, and both cigarette and holder disappeared.

Knives sat at the end of the couch and she draped her legs across his lap. He asked: "Can I have some of that?"

"Oh," said the Princess, conjuring the cigarette and its holder again, "of course!"

She handed it to Knives, and the tip lit itself as he breathed in. He smoked the whole thing before he looked at her again.

When he did, he could only look at her eyes. "Ok. You win. I don't like girls as much as boys."

"You seem to be pretty good with both, actually," said the Princess. "I had forgotten what it was like to be able to go for hours like that. Men don't understand what it's like to orgasm."

"I have a squicky question."

"I love those. Fire away."

"Can you get pregnant like this?"

"Of course not. The Empress ovulates only at her own command," said the Princess, and she transformed back into a Prince because the thought of pregnancy was such an uncomfortable one.

Seeing the Prince in this form again, Knives smiled. "Round four?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

They whiled away the hours, as there was little else to do by way of entertainment. When the hour came, they dined together, and retired to the couch, where they drank the ale which had replenished itself.

Knives said, "You know, there are beds."

"Yes," said the Prince, "But this is such a nice couch."

"I have a bed," said Knives. "It's never had anyone in it but me."

"Is that true?" said the Prince, twisting around in his arms to look him in the face.

Knives nodded.

The Prince said, "Was I your first, then?"

"Well," said Knives, "No. But I don't want to talk about that."

“My first was long ago,” said the Prince, somewhat wistfully. “I don’t remember her now.”

“You don’t remember your first time?”

“It was a long, long time ago. Do you remember your first meal? The first beverage you drank?”

“No, but come on, I mean... It’s *sex*.”

The Prince shrugged. “Sex, food, water, sleep. It’s all the same. The body craves what it used to need for survival.”

“Used to need?”

“Well,” said the Prince, “I can go without three of the four.”

“Which three?”

“Guess.”

“I’m not sure I want to.”

The Prince laughed. “I have to have energy to sustain myself, but as long as I have that, I’m pretty much fine.”

“Pretty much?”

“Well I *did* run *away*, you know.”

“Is anyone ever really fine?”

“In my experience, pretty much fine is the most you can hope for. Life breaks everybody one way or another. Then Death picks up the pieces. Sometimes he takes too long.”

“That sounds like something Wolf would say,” said Knives. “Didn’t know you had that kind of edge to you.”

“Edge!?” said the Prince. “From a man named ‘Knives’!?”

“Life’s not so bad,” said Knives.

“You’ve hardly lived it.”

“It’s pretty grand, right now,” said Knives.

The Prince smiled and kissed him. “I’m glad to hear it.”

The morning hour came. Once again, the eggs had replenished themselves, as had all their other supplies. The Prince joined him in the kitchen this time, and transformed some of the milk into butter, and showed him how to make a simple bread with the flour. They baked together in their undergarments, and by the time they were finished they had scrambled eggs and breakfast rolls with warm butter, which was paradise in its own way.

“Prince or Princess, today?” asked the Prince, when they had finished their breakfast.

“Prince,” said Knives, taking his hand.

“Shall we adjourn to the lounge?”

“I’d like nothing better, your majesty.”

They whiled away the hours in similar fashion to the day before, and evening came, and again they had scrambled eggs and dinner rolls.

“How long is this voyage going to take?” asked Knives.

The Prince drank his ale and ate and did not reply.

Thinking the Prince had not heard him, Knives asked again. “How long before we land?”

The Prince sighed, steepled his fingers, and stared at the tablecloth.

“Well?” asked Knives, sweating now for no good reason.

The Prince made eye contact and Knives saw for the first time the weight of ages on his soul. There was pity and sorrow in the gaze.

“What?” said Knives. “What is it? Spit it out.”

“I would prefer not to lie to you.”

“I would prefer that too,” said Knives.

“The truth, however, may cause you to hate me.”

“All the more reason to share it, then.”

The Prince pondered this.

“Well,” scoffed Knives, “how bad could it be? What, I’m too ugly for you? Too rough? Too hairy?”

The Prince shook his head until his curls bounced. “No, no, no. It’s nothing like that.”

“But you don’t want to be with me anymore, is that it?”

“No,” said the Prince.

“I knew it,” said Knives, smashing his plate to the floor. “I knew it! I knew I was nothing but a toy to you! You disgust me.”

The Prince sighed. “If you would let me finish? No, I don’t have any desire to stop being with you. If anything, I want to be with you so badly that keeping a secret is actually hard, for a change. I have... Something to tell you.”

“Spit it out, then.”

“The journey we are on is going to take a century.”

“What?”

“It will feel like a century, to us inside the castle. Our castle, meanwhile, will zip around a black hole and back to Meggid II in what will seem, to the castle, like a mere three days. That is the trade-off required to circumvent the laws of gravity and time.”

“A century?”

“Yes. I have been able to temporally loop several things, like our food and waste. Our bodies, however, are too complex to loop like that. We can’t be replenished every day in the same way an egg can be. Not without horrible side effects, anyway. So I am going to continue to age at my own slow rate, and you are going to continue to age at your own breakneck pace, and our day to day life will be... This.”

“For a century!?”

“For a century.”

“Can’t you change course!? Why did you need to loop around a black hole just to get to Meggid III!?”

“I wanted to throw off my pursuers, and buy some time to think,” said the Prince. “I didn’t know you were aboard. And sadly, no, I cannot change course.”

“Can’t, or won’t? I’ve seen Blinky change course before!”

“Near a gravity well,” said the Prince. “Without one, it’s almost impossible to change your velocity while inside the intermediary.”

“A gravity well? What’s that?”

“A planet, or an asteroid, or a black hole, or a star. You’ve got to have some pressure in the ambient spacetime to play off of, otherwise it’s like flailing your legs as you fall off a cliff, instead of like treading water. Does that make sense?”

“No.”

“Well, I’m afraid it’s the truth. Now, as we draw nearer to our destination, I could attempt to slow us down and change course. If I did that, we would fall into the black hole, and onto fates unknown.”

“So do that,” said Knives.

The Prince laughed. “No! It would be suicide.”

“This is suicide for me,” said Knives. “Just a slow one.”

“Technically, it’s negligent homicide,” said the Prince. “And I’m sorry. But I can’t change course. This is your life, now.”

“Can’t you make me live forever, too?”

“If I had a fully-stocked alchemical laboratory, two viziers, and twenty years to work on it, maybe.”

“Well, how’d you get to be immortal?”

“I was created that way, remember?” said the Prince, sadly. “Look. It isn’t *all* bad. You’re now guaranteed a peaceful life. You don’t have to work anymore. You have me, and I can look like anyone you want. I know loads of games and dances and stories, so you’ll never be bored. We won’t go hungry, or cold, and you’ll never be alone. You won’t get sick, or injured. And when the time does come, and you do die, I will be beside you.”

“That cow, in the tavern,” said Knives. “He was your lover, wasn’t he? And you burnt him to ashes anyway.”

“I saved him,” said the Prince. “I sent him away.”

“Send me away.”

“I can’t,” said the Prince. “We’re in the intermediary.”

“You were going to do it before,” said Knives. “If I hurt you.”

“I was bluffing,” said the Prince.

“You mean...”

“Yes. I’m as vulnerable to you now as I was when I first walked into the castle. But killing me will only mean a hundred years alone.”

“It might be worth it,” said Knives. He stabbed his alchemically-enhanced knife into the table and walked away.

Alone in his room, Knives looked up at the furs and skins of all the creatures he had trapped and killed over the years, and the maps and star-charts hanging on the ceiling. He had studied them on so many sleepless nights. Now their contents were forever beyond his reach.

He gazed up, out the window, at the distant pinprick stars. He would never again feel the warmth of a sun upon his face, or the tickle of a cool breeze.

What did that matter, if it meant he got to stay with the Prince?

He thought of Wolf, and Red, and Blinky, and Club, and even the idiot boy with the sword, Terrance. They had been like a family to him. He would wake every day in the place they had called home, and never speak to them again.

Knives had lived a very hard life, even for a mercenary. At the age of six his parents had sold him to the salt mines of Tauran III. By the age of ten,

he had lost three fingers and two toes, and the use of his left eye. By the age of fifteen, both eyes were gone. Useless to the mine, he had been cast out into the wilderness to wait for death. He had waited three days. It was not until the morning of the fourth day that he realized death was not coming for him. The gnawing in his belly drove him back to the mine. Even in his weakened state, blinded and hobbled and half-starved, the body that years of hard labor had given him proved itself more than a match for the slave-masters. A butterknife—that was all it had taken.

On that day, he became Knives, and forgot the name his hated parents had given him. He did not understand the magic, even as he used it; but with a knife on his person, the use of his eyes no longer mattered.

Years later he had found Blue, and she had given him new fingers, new eyes, new toes, and a new family.

She was gone now, long dead. In a way, they all were.

He lay numbly staring at the unmoving stars. An ache he could not define was somewhere in his chest, in his throat. Tears? He had not tasted tears since those days of starvation in the tundra, when they had been his only sustenance.

Knives did not know what to do with the tears. He did not really feel sad, but there was something horrible about the calm he felt. It seemed wrong, somehow. Guilt twisted in him. Guilt? He had not felt guilt since... Blue.

His eyes burned and blurred; the eyes that Blue had given him, the eyes that had never cried.

Knives did not want to cry.

Knives draped his arm across his face. He would not cry. He would hold the pain until it faded, and then he would be alright.

There was none to hear him but the Prince.

A soft knock came at the door.

Knives choked: "Go away."

The Prince opened the door and stepped inside, but came no closer.

Miserably, Knives threw his pillow. "I told you to leave me alone!"

It was impossible, now, to conceal the tears—even from himself. And what would have been the point in concealing them?

The sorrow in the Prince's eyes seemed even deeper, somehow, than his own.

He slumped back onto his bed, defeated, and wept like a child.

The Prince crawled into the bed beside him, and wordlessly took him as the little spoon. "It's ok," said the Prince. "Cry. You can cry. You have every reason to cry."

Knives obeyed.





## Chapter 16

# Panoptos V

They came out of the intermediary above a world white and glittering in the shell of its stormy atmosphere. In the exact moment that they popped out of the Intermediary, a thick bubble of conjured air appeared around them, whipped up by Desperate Joe. Still clinging to the altar, feet dangling above the planet far below, they began to descend into what seemed to be a world of active thunderheads.

“Uh, Master?” Brick said.

“Not to worry, Brick! Timothy has everything under control.”

“It’ll be easy,” said Timothy. “I’ll just keep us charged in such a way that the lightning won’t strike us.”

“Charged?”

“Energy always moves from high concentration to lower concentration,” said Desperate Joe. “Lightning is one of the trickiest energies to manipulate, because it prefers to move in circles. So long as we don’t present ourselves as part of any forming circle, the lightning won’t pass through us.”

“Uh,” said Timothy, “Master?”

“Yes, Tim?”

“This lightning, I... I’ve never felt anything like it before! It feels almost like it’s *watching* us!”

“Yes, you’re quite right,” said Desperate Joe. “I may have neglected to mention the Dragonstorm.”

Brick said, “What?”

Desperate Joe said, “Back when this planet was inhabited, a certain wizard cast a certain spell which came to life and ate his world. We’re currently in the middle of it. Not to worry, we won’t be here long enough for it to overwhelm our defenses and scatter us into atoms.”

“Why would it want to do that?” Brick asked. “What the hell kind of spell was it supposed to be?”

“You may recall my warnings about the dangers of alchemical magic?”

“Yes?”

“Well, this is what happens when alchemical magic goes deeply, deeply wrong. If I recall correctly, the scales of an evil dragon were used in the concoction. Angry that they had been ripped from their master, they took over the magic of the concoction and changed it. Fatally.”

With a maw etched in lightning, the storm roared. Its flickering eyes and sparking teeth were visible for only a moment, then the thunder struck, nearly knocking them off course.

A moment later they burst free of the clouds only to see a rain-soaked mountain peak rushing up to meet them. The rain obscured the world below the storm, and only by the constant flickering of the lightning could they see the jagged peaks of other mountains nearby.

“Hang on!” Timothy shouted.

Brick couldn't have let go if he wanted to.

They landed hard; Shalim's altar smashed into the mountainside, but they managed to cling to it and found themselves unharmed.

“Right!” Shouted Desperate Joe, above the roaring storm. “Down we go!”

The mountain beneath them rent itself apart and opened wide, and they fell into darkness.

## Chapter 17

# Time

Days passed into weeks, and weeks passed into months, and months passed into years. Knives and the Prince filled the hours as best they could, but there were no books to read. By transforming ingredients here and there, the Prince was able to add more variety to their meals. After the first year, Knives had become a very competent cook.

At dinner, one evening, as they were enjoying a very delicious noodle soup, Knives looked up at the Prince and said, "I want to have a kid."

The Prince bought himself time to respond by taking another mouthful of noodles.

"Well?" said Knives.

"It's a bad idea," said the Prince.

"Why? We're safe here. They will be too. Safer than they could be anywhere else. And if they're your kid, won't they be like you? What better way to raise an immortal, than in a century of perfect safety?"

"You have a point there," said the Prince, "but it's still a bad idea."

"Why?"

"Do you really believe we're parent material?"

"Well, no. But no one really is."

Thinking of his own upbringing, the Prince was forced to admit that this was probably true. Whatever he could give to a child would be better than what his father had given him.

"Think about it," said Knives. "We've got time."

"Yes," said the Prince. "We have no shortage of that."

A decade later, eating coq-a-vin, Knives looked up and said, "I'm getting old, you know."

"I know," said the Prince.

"Have you thought about it?"

"About what?"

"About having kids."

"I have," said the Prince, which was true. He had considered it almost daily.

"And?"

"I think... I'm ready to try it."

"There's no going back, you know," said Knives.

"I know," said the Prince. "But you're right. This is the best possible place to raise a child, safe from the outside world. By the time we land on Meggid II, they'll be an adult."

"You're not worried they'll grow up all... weird?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, sheltered, you know. Naive. Awkward around people."

"You mean they'll take after you?"

"Hey!"

"I wouldn't worry about it. Between the two of us, we can make sure they're well prepared for the outside world."

"Well... If you're sure, I still want to try. But I just want you to be sure."

"I'm sure," said the Prince. "I think."

Knives laughed. "Good enough."

"Shall we?"

"Right now?"

"Right now, right here. We haven't done it on the table in months."

"You know," said Knives, "That's something to consider, too..."

"Yes," said the Prince, "But we can behave like responsible adults, and do it in the bedroom."

"For the rest of our lives?"

"Why not? Is it really so much to lose? As long as we are together, it doesn't matter where we are."

"You're right," said Knives. "I was being selfish."

"Now come here and be otherish," said the Princess, vanishing their clothes.

They made love on the table. Looking deep in the Princess's eyes, Knives could swear he saw the exact moment of conception.

The months passed anxiously. The Prince was forced to retain his female form in order to bear the growing baby, but Knives didn't mind. The Prince discovered firsthand that being immortal and full of magic was not enough to save him from the many miseries of pregnancy, but it had its own magic moments between the misery that almost made him think it was worth it.

They were seated on the couch together the first time the baby kicked. "Oh!" said the Prince. He snatched Knives's hand and pressed it to his belly. "Feel! Feel that?"

"He's kicking!"

"She is," said the Princess.

"She?"

"She."

Knives smiled one of the largest smiles of his life, and laid his head in her lap. "You're huge now, you know."

"Thanks," said the Princess.

"It's like lying down under a mountain."

"Thanks," said the Princess.

"I like it."

“I figured that.”

The months passed both more quickly and more painfully slowly than they could have imagined, but then it was over, and they were welcoming baby Aurora into their world.

Holding her that first night, exhausted, tingling with his own numbing magic to hide the pain from himself, the Prince smiled up at Knives and said, “You need a new name.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. We can’t have her calling her daddy ‘Knives.’”

“What name should I use?”

“What were you called, before you were called Knives?”

Knives scowled and lied. “I don’t remember.”

The Prince’s expression softened sympathetically. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was an ugly name. A stupid name.”

“You deserve a better one,” said the Prince.

“Did you have one in mind?”

“Hmm... How about Paul?”

“Paul? Why Paul?”

“It has a nice curl to it,” said the Prince. “Like your biceps.”

Paul flexed. He had kept himself lean and hard, for the Prince. “Paul. I like it.”

“Paul it is, then. But she will call you Papa.”

“And what will she call you?”

“Mama,” said the Prince, smiling down at her little face.

“Even when you’re a boy?”

“After everything I went through to bear her, I deserve the title.”

Paul smiled.

The years passed more slowly now, with the added chaos of Aurora. They changed the rooms which had once belonged to Club and Wolf and Red and Blinky into a play room, a nursery, an exercise room, and a meditation chamber, respectively. Aurora learned to cook from her father, and she learned all about the universe from her mother. They always had time to play together, all three of them, and she brought them both into her world of fantasy and make-believe. Together they lived countless imagined lives, and the castle no longer felt like a prison. The Prince taught her magic, and she never lacked for toys.

She never felt alone, or lonely, and never longed for other friends.

Then the years were over, and she was a woman.

They sat on either side of Paul’s bed, holding his hands, at the end. Though the Prince had managed to stave off the many ills of aging, one by one, there had at last come a day when no amount of magic could hold together what was falling apart.

Paul turned his weary, age-lined face to look at the two immortals that had been his whole world, and smiled at them both.

“I love you,” said the Prince. “And I always will.”

“I will never forget you,” said Aurora.

Paul, no longer able to speak, smiled, nodding.

“You can rest now,” said the Prince.

Paul closed his eyes and smiled serenely.

Then the convulsions of death began.

The Prince reached out a hand and touched Paul on the head, and at once his body fell into a deep repose, as though he were merely sleeping.

Then, looking sadly across the bed at his daughter, Aurora, he said, “Good-bye, Aurora.”

She nodded, blinking sadly, as she faded from existence and her magic returned to him.

The Prince stood and looked upon the corpse of his husband, and at the place where his magic had pretended, until so very recently, to be alive. Too tired, now, to cry, he retreated to the living room, sealing the door of Paul’s bedroom forever behind him, and sat to watch the fire burn.

He crossed his legs, and rested his hands on his knees, and stared into the fire, and with his mind and his magic he reached out, beyond the walls of the castle, into the universe, and cast out his call.

*“Ring. Where are you? You are needed.”*

He passed the remaining nine hundred years of his journey in this meditation, seeking out the god who had started it all.

## Chapter 18

# Quartz

“Here we are,” said Desperate Joe, as they came to a thumping stop in the dark.

“Where are we?” asked Brick.

Light bloomed: a bright star burned in the crook of Desperate Joe’s staff, and the glow revealed a smooth-walled granite cave with a jumbled floor of pure white quartz. Desperate Joe said, “We’re here. Deposits of quartz, such as this one, are why we came to Panoptos V.”

“Bootstraps!” Shouted Brick, suddenly, startling Timothy.

“Oh no!” Said Timothy. “We left him behind!”

Desperate Joe winked. Then he drew an apple from his pocket and tossed it to Brick.

Brick looked at the apple for a long time before coming to understand. “Oh. How do I change him back?”

“Destroy the apple, and he will return.”

“What counts as destroyed? Should I just step on it, or, or...?”

Desperate Joe said, “That would suffice, yes, so long as you smash it thoroughly. But be mindful of—”

Brick threw the apple at the ground and stomped on it, smashing it into paste. Instantly, Bootstraps reappeared, which sent Brick flying. Timothy caught him with a spell and set him down.

Desperate Joe said, “—that.”

“Well,” said Timothy. “We’re here. What do we do next?”

“You watch and learn,” said Desperate Joe, and he flicked his hands to both sides. A crack rent the quartz at his feet and drew a perfect circle in the stone. He lifted a hand; the circle rose, drawing up a twenty foot tall pillar of smooth quartz.

“Did you mean it to be so tall?”

“It has to be that tall, to fit all the carvings,” said Desperate Joe. “Most of it will be hidden inside itself, when we are finished.”

“What about all the star charts that the other altar had?” Timothy asked. “Are those lost forever?”

“No,” said Desperate Joe, pacing slowly around the pillar, which began to carve itself with a ring of intricate three-dimensional forms, which folded inwards, causing the pillar to shrink by an inch. “I wisely preserved them all on this, long ago.”

He held out a small glass orb, which he tossed to Timothy. Timothy caught it. “I don’t understand.”

“Of course not,” said Desperate Joe. “You’re not me.”

Another ring of runes etched itself around the pillar and folded inwards, causing the pillar to shrink by another inch.

“How long is this going to take?” asked Brick.

“A day or two,” said Desperate Joe. “Now, go away and let me concentrate. This is delicate work.”

Timothy took Brick’s hand and led him and Bootstraps away, to the far side of the cave. He conjured wood and lit it, and it burned without smoke. A few conjured cushions and blankets later and they were in a comfortable arrangement.

“I’m hungry,” said Brick.

“Me too,” said Timothy. “Unfortunately, we can’t just conjure food.”

“Why not?”

“Well, after we ate it, it would disappear. Wouldn’t do us any good.”

“What if we transformed some rocks into an animal, and killed it?” Brick asked.

Timothy pointed to Bootstraps, who had been an apple a moment ago, and Brick said, “Oh. Right. That makes sense.”

“Fasting is a meditation aid,” said Desperate Joe, from the pillar. “And I can still hear you.”

“Sorry,” said Timothy. He gave Brick an apologetic look.

Brick laid himself down on the cushions and whispered, “Maybe we should just sleep.”

Timothy nodded, and laid himself down beside Brick.

Suddenly, both he and Brick sat up, chills racing down their skin. Bootstraps screamed and stamped the ground. Desperate Joe was the only one not to react as the rippling invisible aura flowed over them. It was the leading edge of some horrible wave of energy pulsing through the intermediary, crashing unseen through the whole solar system.

“What was that?” Timothy asked.

Desperate Joe said, “If I promise to explain later, will you let me concentrate?”

“Yes.”

“Then I promise. Go to sleep.”

“Yes, master.”

He laid himself back down and Brick embraced him, and pulled him close. He did not object. He felt marginally safer in Brick’s arms, although he knew that those arms would not have been strong enough to protect him against the horrible force which had just swam through the universe, if even a small portion of it had escaped the intermediary.



It was difficult to sleep, after everything that had happened, but they were both physically exhausted enough to overcome that difficulty in time. Soon they were both snoring.

Desperate Joe continued working the magic, carving the altar, shrinking it row by row, folding its magic and its matter into itself.

When they awoke the next morning, Desperate Joe was seated near the finished altar, chewing a stick of jerky. Timothy and Brick sat down before him and waited patiently for him to explain.

It seemed the jerky, having lived in Desperate Joe's pocket for an undetermined amount of time, was now a little bit dry and chewy. Desperate Joe masticated for a very long time, looking at his apprentices without much concern.

At last, nearly a minute later, he swallowed.

Timothy and Brick waited patiently. Desperate Joe violently gnawed off another section of the jerky stick and began the chewing process all over again, and it became clear that they had walked in on the very last portion of that process, with the first bite.

They waited very patiently for five full minutes, and at last he swallowed. He raised the jerky again but Brick leapt up and snatched it from his hand. "No! Explain first!"

Desperate Joe gave an exasperated sigh. "Explain what? I've worked hard, I've earned my snack."

"That thing last night! What was that?"

"That? I was carving the new altar stone. As you can see, it's thoroughly finished."

Timothy said, "You know what we mean. You felt it too."

Desperate Joe gave another sigh, but this one seemed steeped in ancient sadness. He said, "Surely, you can guess?"

Timothy shook his head.

Desperate Joe began to tick things off on his fingers. "First, the node on Atan III is destroyed. Second, the energy from its destruction is channeled right after us, to Sacred 51, stripping the planet of its atmosphere. Third, not long after we have left the seat of the true and first Shalim, a massive release of energy flows through the intermediary."

"I don't see the connection," said Brick.

Timothy rubbed his chin. "The avatar. The avatar of Shalim, the same one who destroyed the node. What if he wasn't even after us? What if we just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, twice? What if what he's really after is other Shalims?"

"To steal their powers?" Brick asked.

"And their souls," said Timothy, nodding.

Desperate Joe shook his head. "Luck is an ugly thing, sometimes, but no. I do not think we can blame our recent troubles on mere chance. We have been pursued. Actively hunted. We must assume that we are the intended target."

"But why?"

“A troubling question, yes. I’m afraid I may know the answer to it,” said Desperate Joe. Then he clapped his hands once, got to his feet, and turned to the altar. “Well, we’re ready to go.”

“I thought you said it would take a few days?”

“I just finished sucking the last drop of energy out of this planet’s core,” said Desperate Joe. “It will begin collapsing, soon. We do not want to be here when it does.”

“What!? Why would you do that!?”

“We needed the energy to, as I believe they used to say, in the most ancient of days: *Geetee’effo*. Skedaddle. If my theory is correct, we can’t afford to wait around to meet our pursuers. It will not go well. Stand around the altar, please. Timothy, if you would be so kind, please turn Bootstraps back into an apple.”

“Right,” said Timothy, and he turned and did so.

Brick picked up the apple and joined Timothy and Desperate Joe at the altar stone just as the ground began to rumble.

“Destination?” Timothy shouted, over the building roar of stone.

“Meggid two!”

It was strange, again, to fly through the intermediary without any protective structure. They clung to the altar stone, and hurtled through the void for what seemed an eternity. Then, quite suddenly, they were on a hill overlooking a beautiful gleaming city of crystal and steel. Castles hung in the air, bound together by long, slender, gently curving bridges of crystal.

Suddenly, there was a flash of darkness all around them, and the altar stone of Shalim materialized five feet to their left.

“What...?” said Timothy.

Desperate Joe sighed. “Alright, speak up, then, if you really want to tag along.”

The altar stone of Shalim said, “I won’t be a burden.”

Timothy and Brick both jumped. Desperate Joe walked up the altar of Shalim and sighed. “So you knew what was coming.”

“Indeed,” said Shalim.

“And you chose to come along with us.”

“I was invited, after all. And you *did* take my altar stone. And I *did* create the bodies of your two apprentices.”

Desperate Joe scratched under his hat irritably. Finally, he scoffed, and turned around, and said, “Well, if you really won’t be a burden, you might as well pick yourself up and come along.”

The black altar stone hovered silently into the air and began to follow Desperate Joe as he started walking down the hill.

Timothy said, “Wait, where are you going!? Are we really just going to leave the altar here?”

“Well, there isn’t much sense in having two altar stones,” said Desperate Joe. “Shalim’s is better by a large margin. We may as well leave mine.”

“But—! All that work you put in!”

Desperate Joe shrugged.

“And the energy of that planet! We’re just going to leave that?”

Desperate Joe shrugged again. "It's in my network. It'll be fine. Maybe we'll make a friend, leaving it behind this way."

"What about the people hunting us!? Won't they be able to use it?" Timothy asked.

Desperate Joe stopped. "Actually, that's a very good point. Thank you, Timothy. I'm glad I keep you around."

He raised a hand and pointed it at the white altar, and it cracked, and it crumbled.

"There," said Desperate Joe. "Nothing left to use. Now come along. We've got to find lodgings in the city, and plan our next move. I, for one, could use a very hot bath, and a very large meal."

Timothy and Brick stumbled down the hill to keep up with the old man, who was powerwalking very briskly now.

"Master," said Timothy, "Where are we, exactly?"

"This is Meggid II," said Desperate Joe. "One of the more prosperous worlds in the Congregation."

"And this city?"

"Oh," said Desperate Joe. "This is Brea. It's old, compared to some of the larger cities it plays vassal to. It has never spent more than a hundred years without being conquered."

"How sad!" said Brick.

"Is it?" said Desperate Joe. "I find it kind of funny. You'd think they'd get better at defending themselves, over the eons. You'd think that one out of their many conquerors would bring to bear some new means of defense, to end that streak. But no, instead, they drink and dance and prosper while they can, and when the conquerors inevitably come, they fight and die and ultimately surrender."

"It's horrible," said Brick. "Is it a curse?"

"Possibly," said Desperate Joe. "If it is, it's god-sent. Not something a man could cast."

"Are we going to be safe here?" Timothy asked.

"Oh, gods no, boy. It's a city! It'll eat a simple country boy like you within a day, if you don't stick with me. That goes doubly for you, Brick. You're both terribly naive."

Timothy rolled his eyes. "So why are we here?"

Shalim said, "Ring has arranged it."

Desperate Joe stopped, turned on his heel, and faced the hovering altar of Shalim. "I chose this destination at random out of the nearby systems. It was one of several options, all equally valid. Explain yourself."

Shalim said, "Can you not see the lines of fate twisting to bring you here?"

"There's no such thing as fate," said Desperate Joe and Timothy at the same time.

Shalim said, "Hmm. My mistake, then."

"No," said Desperate Joe. "You clearly meant something. What do you see?"

"The lines of fate," said Shalim.

“What do you *see* that you call the lines of fate?”

“I see twisting wires of energy stretched across the hidden intermediary, pouring across all the cosmos, influencing odds and decisions at the atomic scale, and warring unseen against other strands, equally powerful and other in will.”

“Right,” said Desperate Joe, massaging the bridge of his nose. “Godly influence, then?”

“No,” said Shalim. “Godly influence cannot hide itself so subtly. It is like any other magic, and travels through the intermediary as you have seen.”

“I see,” said Desperate Joe. “Can you understand what Ring is trying to accomplish?”

“No,” said Shalim. “She moves her plans always step by hidden step. But she loves the living worlds, and her plans are always for their benefit. You should not be ashamed to be the vehicle of her will.”

Desperate Joe scratched under his hat. “Yes, well, I’m starting to feel a bit like a vehicle in many ways, at this point, so I’m going to stop talking and walk away to go find food and sleep, because I don’t particularly want to bite your head off.”

“Haven’t got a head,” said Shalim’s altar.

Desperate Joe walked even faster. Soon Brick and Timothy were half jogging to keep up.

They reached the edge of the hill, and looked down over the gleaming city and the rolling little hills around it, and up at the crystal bridges and the castles strung upon them like leaves upon some vast tree, and down again into the valley, where they beheld a stone road leading through the valley and to the city. It passed near the base of the hill, but from their perch there was no way down but a steep climb down a rocky, moss-covered cliff face.

Desperate Joe rooted himself and reached out a hand. With a swish and a flick of his palm he poured out from his fingertips a large glass bowl, big enough to sit in. He promptly sat in it, and the bowl took to the air, carrying him gently down to the road.

Timothy looked at Brick.

“Can you carry me?” Brick asked.

“I don’t dare risk going through the intermediary here,” said Timothy. “There are other wizards about. Can’t you feel them?”

Brick realized, after a moment’s concentration, that he *could*. Within the city there were several powerful auras hidden among the roaring noise of life. He closed the connection, a little overwhelmed by the input of the city.

“How do we get down, then?”

“Trust me,” said Timothy. He gripped Brick’s hand, and jumped off the cliff. Brick laughed, and hurled himself after.

They fell, tumbling together through the air, and as the wind tore at their clothes and hair Timothy leaned in and kissed Brick on the lips. Halfway down, Timothy reached out his hand towards the ground and with his own bodily energy he caused the ground to repel them. Their rate of descent dropped

gradually to zero just as they were about to reach the ground, and they stepped out of the air.

Timothy rooted himself and drew up energy, replenishing some of what he had lost. Only sleep would replenish the rest.

“Didn’t that drain you?” Brick asked.

“Only a little,” said Timothy, clutching one tingling hand to his chest.

“We should have done it a different way,” said Brick.

Timothy looked him in the face. “It was worth it.”

“Come along!” said Desperate Joe, already hovering along the empty road, towards the city.

The road remained empty until they reached the city wall, which was sixty feet tall and made of solid stone. Its foundations flowed with the contours of the landscape, rolling along the hills, but its top edge was perfectly level all the way around, and it ringed the city in completely. Armed guards in shimmering steel plate armor stood above the gate, looking very serious. The gate itself was closed.

“Hmm,” said Desperate Joe, as his hovering glass bowl came to a stop. To the guards on the walltop, he shouted: “What finds the gate of Meggid II closed at noonday?”

One guard shouted back: “Invaders have been seen in the land. Who are you, and whence do you hail?”

“I am Desperate Joe, called Diatromedes by the mountains, known as the Spinner, and the Spider in the Web. I come to seek an audience with King Harold.”

“A messenger will be dispatched. Please remain where you are, with your hands in clear view. Who are your companions?”

Desperate Joe stopped Brick and Timothy from responding with a single uplifted finger. In their stead, he said, “This is my son, Timothy, and his husband, Brick.”

“Your marriage is null in this land,” said the guard, with some scorn. “I don’t care what backwater you come from, but the gods of Meggid do not consider your union sacred.”

“We don’t much care for the gods of Meggid,” said Desperate Joe. “But thank you for the metaphysical explanation.”

Brick and Timothy glanced at each other, still holding hands. It had not occurred to them to let go, before the strangers. Timothy knew that there were worlds in the cluster where homosexual love was seen as deviant psychology, but he had never thought that he would walk upon one of them.

“Why are we here, master?” Timothy asked Desperate Joe, quietly enough that the guards on the wall could not hear him.

“We are seeking audience with King Harold,” said Desperate Joe.

“Is he the king of this planet?” Brick asked.

Desperate Joe shook his head. “No. He is the king of this city. There are twelve cities on Meggid II, which is quite a lot, given the limited continental surface area. They have never come together under a common government, although they are always trying to conquer each other. The Congregation has

a small moon—that little red one, there, next to the big purple one. On that moon, they have their monitoring outpost and their local tribunal, drawn up from the citizens of this planet. That is the closest thing to a planet-wide authority, on Meggid II, and it only enforces very specific laws which most people are incapable of breaching.”

“Such as?” Brick asked.

“Advanced alchemy, unorthodox uses of the intermediary, phasing, local teleportation, attempts to create a god, etcetera. Nothing that any ordinary people are likely to even attempt, in their short lifetimes.”

“Tim says there are wizards here,” said Brick.

“Oh, there are several. Most are in the court of king Harold. I know some of them. We have been talking since we landed. King Harold should be here shortly to rebuke this stupid guard and change his laws.”

“You’re going to make him change his laws?” Timothy asked. “What do you mean? How?”

“Hush, Tim. Patience.”

Timothy groaned. “Fine.”

A trumpet-blast resounded over the wall, and all the guards flinched. All but one turned around to face the city. Tim and Brick and Desperate Joe could hear talking, but not well enough to catch words.

With great pomp and circumstance, the gates of the city swung gradually outward to trumpet-blasts, tambourines, and deep drums. Four well-oiled men in black hoods carried on their well-muscled shoulders the long bars of a veiled palanquin. At a glance, the solid gold construction of the palanquin might have weighed as much as ten tons, and the four beefy loinclothed men holding it up did not struggle under its weight. They carried it through the gates, surrounded on all sides by musicians, dancers, and extremely wealthy-looking court and religious officials.

The altar of Shalim hovered gently forward. Desperate Joe glanced at it, but did not attempt to stop it.

The throng stopped ten yards from Desperate Joe and his companions, and silence fell.

“King Harold,” said Desperate Joe.

“Desperate Joe,” said King Harold, his reedy voice thick with dust and decay. They could not see him behind the veils of the palanquin, but they could smell the rot. He was a slim shadow on a dark throne, a form behind concealing veils that nevertheless sent a chill down the spine.

“You’ve seen better days,” said Desperate Joe.

“So have you. I like the beard.”

“Thank you. I’m starved.”

“Come. To the palace. I have brought palanquins for all of you.”

Indeed he had. Each was borne by four distractingly well-made men whose faces were completely covered by their black hoods. They knelt to lower their palanquins.

Desperate Joe stepped inside his at once, and shut the curtains.

Tim asked, “Can you carry both of us together in one?”

A half-naked man grunted his assent, nodding.

“Thanks.”

Tim mounted up, into his palanquin, and pulled Brick in after him.

They watched through the veils as the throng turned back into the city and began to wind its way through the maze-like streets. The strange, flowing foundations of the wall seemed to be a common architectural feature. The landscape was undisturbed, and the city grew from it almost organically, each foundation curving easily to follow every movement of its underlying geology. The houses atop these foundations sometimes had to be raised up on stilts so that their inner chambers could have level floors. Trees grew in unexpected places, occasionally even sprouting through buildings which had been built to wrap around them. Some smaller palaces and mansions sat in the tree-tops, hung with gently dancing lights. Many of the buildings they passed looked extremely ancient. It was as though generations of settlers here had built atop each other, so that strange monoliths sat on the ground floors and stacked-stone castles were on the second floors and wattle-and-daub construction sprouted mushroom-like from their crowns, swelling out in little contained bridges and unnecessary towers, and connecting to other buildings nearby. Some houses were anomalies, made entirely in the design of one era only. Others were hodgepodes of even stranger architectural designs, fraught with arches and flying buttresses and complicated carvings and high peaks, or else composed of crystal and gleaming metal, or of living wood, still sprouting green leaves.

The streets within the city were crammed with people. No wheeled vehicles were in sight, and no horses walked the streets. Everyone was on foot or in palanquins. Those they saw were, for the most part, well-dressed and healthy looking. There were others in rags, barefoot, half toothless, raggedly begging for scraps or trying to pick pockets or running rackets in the mouths of alleys. These all fell away as the royal party approached them, but Timothy saw them before they hid.

The streets were clean and well-drained, designed only for foot traffic. Each house had its own yard, gated in stone or cast iron, keeping its front door separate from the street. There were few shops and fewer taverns, but these all had large, beautiful windows and no fences.

As they passed under some of the bridges which crossed the street, they began to realize that they were heading downhill, into a deep hollow, and that the buildings all around were far larger than the others they had passed. As they fell into the shadow of the towers all around, Timothy leaned his head out of the veils and looked up at the sky, to watch a wooden ship with great white sails puffed out in a full wind, sailing across the sky on a little wake of clouds, heading from one tower-top to a palace hanging from the vast crystal tree.

He smiled to himself, and pulled his head back inside the veils, and settled back in his chair, beside Brick. He squeezed Brick's hand. Brick smiled.

They kissed each other softly, behind the veils, but only once. Then they sat together against the red velvet cushions and relaxed for what seemed the first time in weeks. The movement of the palanquin was remarkably smooth, and they watched lazily through the veils as the city rolled by.

“So we’re married now, huh?” Brick asked. “And Desperate Joe is your dad?”

“I guess so,” said Timothy.

Brick laughed. “Well, that was easy. But I’m a bit bummed. I didn’t even get a chance to propose.”

Timothy laughed. “Well. We can always have a proper wedding later.”

“Maybe a royally proclaimed one?” Brick asked.

Timothy’s eyes widened. This was a real possibility. “That could be... fun.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, forget I said anything about proposing.” Brick said, and he winked.

Timothy laughed. “I’m so lucky you came to me.”

“I’m the lucky one.”

The king’s procession reached the palace at last. It was the root of the crystal tree, its many crystal pillars and arches joining all together above the high peaks of the facade and merging into a single vast pillar of diamond-clear crystal. It was blinding to look at directly, and they were grateful for the veils.

The palanquin bearers marched up the broad steps to the gates of the palace, which swung open before them. They bore the palanquins nearly all the way to the throne before setting them down.

Brick stepped out and offered up his hand for Timothy, before one of the palanquin bearers could do so. Desperate Joe dismounted with the aid of two palanquin bearers. The king, on the other hand, did disembark. Instead, his four palanquin bearers reached through the veils and lifted the cushion he was seated on.

Timothy had to turn away from the first sight of the king. He had expected something awful, but not a half-mummified corpse, covered in silks and jewels. Brick turned a little green but did not avert his gaze. Desperate Joe gave a swift bow, not removing his hat, then approached the king and gave him an awkward hug. He had to stand on tiptoes, because the palanquin bearers were holding the king relatively far from the ground.

The king laughed, his body unmoving. “Oh, Joe. It has been too long.”

“Too long indeed!” said Desperate Joe, following the king to his throne. The bearers set him down upon it, and Desperate Joe conjured a cushion and sat before him.

He looked around, spotted Timothy and Brick, and beckoned them over. They came reluctantly. Timothy conjured cushions for the both of them, and they sat.

“So,” said the king. “What brings you back to my humble city?”

“Quite literally, Shalim,” said Desperate Joe, beckoning to the altar stone still hovering in the air behind them. It approached silently.

“Hello,” said Shalim.

Every person in the hall either took a full step backwards or shuddered in place.

The king was silent for a long time. Finally, he said, “You have no place within the temples of this world.”



“This is not my territory,” said Shalim. “That much is true. However, I think you will find that I am not the Shalim you know. I am the first; the original. A sorceress by the name of Anara has created an avatar of one of my descendants, and is using it to acquire their power. She has recently finished destroying two of my worlds. Luckily, I escaped with all my souls, thanks to the unwitting kindness of Desperate Joe.”

The left side of Desperate Joe’s mustache raised itself as though he were sucking something out of his teeth. He said nothing.

Shalim said, “I sense the hostility of your gods. Have no fear. We shall not be here long. Just long enough to prepare you for what is coming.”

“What is coming?” The king’s voice sounded curious, although neither his shriveled face nor his shrunken body had moved as the sound emerged from him.

“Anara comes this way, avatar in tow. Your world will not survive, if it is here for her to land upon.”

“We have survived countless invaders,” said the king. “What makes you believe this Anara is so great a threat?”

“She is a sorceress in her own right,” said Shalim, “and a powerful alchemist. With the amount of energy she has no doubt drawn from the destruction of my worlds, she will be a force of devastation. You must hide your planet.”

The king laughed. “Yes, of course, we’ll just hide the whole planet. That will be much easier than defending ourselves against one sorceress and a half-baked god. Our gods are powerful and compassionate. They will not allow us to fall to the likes of one such as her.”

“This is what I fear,” said Shalim. “They will rise to face her, and she will destroy them. I tell you again: hide your planet, or lose it forever.”

“How?” said Desperate Joe. “Invisibility? She will see through it. An illusion? The same.”

“I know of a nebula she cannot enter. We will hide the planet there.”

“You want us to *move* the planet!?” said the king, and he laughed. Timothy expected it to be a dusty wheeze, but it was a full-bodied guffaw.

“Yes,” said Shalim.

“Just as yours was moved?” Desperate Joe asked, his voice very soft.

“No,” said Shalim. “The distance involved is much greater. We will need to move the planet through the intermediary.”

“How?” asked Desperate Joe. “To move such mass—! It is unthinkable.”

“I need only your permission,” said Shalim.

“I do not trust you, Shalim,” said the king. “We will wait and see. Our gods may surprise you. After all; if you are whom you claim to be, our young gods have long since surpassed you.”

The altar stone hung silent for a time. At last, it said, “So be it. In the hour of need, call my name, and I shall aid you. Until then, I shall not speak, since any word I say may be distrusted.”

Desperate Joe nodded. “Perhaps that’s for the best.”

The king said, “This Anara. You know her?”

Desperate Joe could not hide the surprise on his face.

The king laughed. "I have known you a long time, old man. What do you know of her?"

"We... Have history," said Desperate Joe, and he glanced at Timothy. "But not much. When I knew her, she was my equal in arcane power and alchemical knowledge. In the intervening decades, her lack of scruples may have made her my better."

"I doubt that very much," said Timothy, quietly.

The king said, "Speak up, son of Desperate Joe."

Timothy flushed. "I said, 'I doubt that very much.' I have seen what my master is capable of."

"Your master?"

"My... Father."

"Master... Then you are his apprentice, as well as his son?"

Desperate Joe's eyes flashed, but Timothy didn't pick up on his signals in time. He said, "Yes. Since birth."

The king said, "I see. Desperate Joe, what is the meaning of this? Have you forgotten my royal decree?"

"Oh no," said Desperate Joe. "Merely disobeyed it."

The king laughed. This seemed to take Desperate Joe by surprise. The king said, "Good. This calls for a feast. We will have one tonight. For now, you will retire to your chambers, to rest and refresh yourselves from your long journey."

Desperate Joe, thoroughly confused, got to his feet. "Thank you, your highness. Until this evening."

"Until this evening. My guards will show you to your room."