

Aggression

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This book is dedicated to Charles “Chuck” Smith, whose Role-Playing game these stories are based upon. From both of us, thank you for allowing us a little creative license with your creation.

Jon & Rob

To my father, Jon Jesse, and my sister, Jessica Burgess. Thank you for believing that I could actually create something out of nothing.

Jon

To my father, Robert Levanowitz, Sr., for your support, opinion and love.

Rob

Introduction

The old man looked upon his child and asked, "Are you sure you want to hear about my life, child?"

The child, no older than ten, replied, "Yes, father, I do. I want to know where I came from."

"The stories will take many years to tell, my son, and there is much information that you will find distasteful."

"Do you not want to tell me?" the boy asked, disappointed by his father's gloomy tone.

"Actually, I want to tell you more than anything in the universe. I have been waiting patiently for this day since you were born. I just want you to know that not everything you hear will be to your liking."

"I want to hear all you have to tell."

"Then it shall be." The old man sighed. The man and his son were next to each other, relishing the heat from the roaring fire before them. They had been traveling through the woods for several days, having left their hometown behind. The old man wanted his son to know the world and to be a part of it. Staying in town would've limited the boy's education and experience. The old man had much life experience in the real world, as was evidenced in his tired, hazel eyes. The man's long, black hair was streaked with gray and his face was weathered with age. His voice remained soothing throughout the years and belied his age to all listeners. "You must understand something, my son. What I have to tell you goes all the way back to the Ancients themselves. I know quite a lot about the Ancients and even more about the Aseraphim. Yet I believe it is the Immortal Siblings and their comrade in arms that you'll be most interested in. That will be the easiest part since I have stood with all of them at one time or another, offering them my assistance, my knowledge and sometimes my life. But that is for later.

"In the beginning, evil won. A being known as the Darkness, along with his allies in evil, conquered the forces of good led by the Light. All that was good and pure in existence was vanquished. The only remaining vestiges of good to survive the purge were ten beings that would become known as the Ancients.

"The Ancients were present when time began in the universe. There are ten Ancients and they are generally paired up according to their respective tasks. First are the Will Cosmic and the Power Cosmic. They are the creators, the very reason the universe we reside in exists.

"Then there are Propheteus and Styx, the judges. Zaron and Genepool, givers of life. Gilmore and The Hunger, the destroyers.

Finally there are the watchers, Each and The Beholder. The Ancients were here when time began in the universe, along with the Darkness and the other evil beings. These dark essences viewed the Ancients as a threat and many battles were fought between them. Eventually, the Ancients were able to kill five of the Titans. All that remained were the Darkness, Pak, Zomb, Nin-Gauble and Bedlam. The Ancients were at a loss as how to vanquish their remaining foes. As options were being discussed, Propheteus whispered the following prophecy to the Will and Power Cosmic: 'You will create a magnificent universe. This has been prophesied. Every rock, every stream, every planet known to all who shall come to pass will owe its existence to you. All Ancients will play a roll in keeping the universe stable. One planet among the infinite will be as a home to the Ancients and this planet will be under your feet upon creation.' There's more to it, Propheteus can get very long-winded at times, but you get the general idea. More to the point, the Will and Power Cosmic did in fact create the universe, and the planet where they stood was Earth. Unfortunately, sensing their demise was imminent, the Titans followed the Ancients to this planet and the planet of Haven, wrecking havoc whenever possible.

"The first beings created by the Will and Power Cosmic were Tag and Nacht. Tag is the bringer of Light and good tidings. Nacht is her polar opposite as he is the father of Darkness and the bringer of evil. These two were drawn to each other with disastrous results. They were banished to the planet Haven and there set up the realms we now know as Haven and Haedes. This planet exists on the other side of the sun, invisible to all on Earth. Where our planet rotates on an axis that is almost vertical, the axis of Haven is perfectly horizontal. This has the effect of casting one half of the planet in perpetual light while the other half remains forever in total darkness. It is here that the realms of the afterlife were created. All those deemed by Styx to hold evil in their souls are damned to Haedes, just as all deemed to be good are blessed with eternity in Haven. The torment and pain in Haedes is beyond description and all who are sent there are doomed to suffer. In Haven, the ever-present light heals the wounds of your soul, and joy and happiness abound within its gates.

"With Haven and Haedes firmly established, Limbo was created by Styx to separate the two for eternity. Limbo does not actually exist on planet Haven, but as a separate dimension created from Styx's mind. You cannot see Limbo unless you are in it. It exists simply as a line of shade running around the planet along its equator. From Limbo, the Aseraphim were born. The Aseraphim are the children of Tag and Nacht, born to do

their deeds on the Earth. The coupling that brought forth the Aseraphim would be the last time Tag and Nacht would ever be near each other.

“The four Immortal Siblings were born of the union of the first child of Tag and Nacht, the Aseraphim Starz and The Beholder. This endowed their children with not only the blood of an Aseraphim but the blood of an Ancient as well. The four would represent order, chaos, love and hate in this world and all others. For ages they did not exist on Earth but only in the ethereal.

“You see, son, this is where it gets complicated. I can tell you about the adventures I’ve been on with these immortals but that would not be an accurate picture of what they truly are. I believe it would be best for you if you learn of the siblings from their own words.”

“How is that possible, father?”

“The clerics. You’ve seen their works before back in the village. At one time or another, every one of the siblings has told his or her story to the clerics to be recorded for posterity.” The old man withdrew a book from his satchel and opened it to the beginning. “This is the first, the book of Aggression, told in his own words to the clerics of Earth. Listen well, my son, for much will be made clear.” The old man looked down at the book and began to read aloud.

Chapter 1

To say my life began at age seven was both accurate and inaccurate at the same time. I was born centuries ago as nothing more than an essence, an ethereal being with no shape or form. Then I was known simply as Order and was joined by three other beings. These three were my siblings, Chaos, Love and Hate. We remained in stasis, in the ethereal, until the Earth was prepared for our coming. We were to be born onto the earth as humans yet so much more. Much to my chagrin, the other that was to be brought to the Earth was Chaos, my polar opposite.

When we assumed human form, I was created as a male and Chaos as a female. She and I shared many similar physical characteristics. We both had blonde hair. Mine was a darker shade that lay in neatly aligned rows of curls, hers a bright blonde, straight and always moderately messy. We also both had green eyes. Valencia's eyes were a bright, radiant green while mine were a shade or two deeper in color. The main difference between us physically was our respective heights. My sister was a good deal shorter than I. Since we took on the human traits, this included emotions as well. A by-product of this was, since we looked like small children, we behaved like children. As ancient as we were, our very nature and spirit were overridden by human instinct and habit. Our father, The Beholder, named us Vincent and Valencia. He was a tower of a man, over six feet tall and powerfully built. A shiny silver mask covered his face, hiding all but his eyes and mouth.

To the unknowing, we were mere children. Our father explained to us that since we needed to learn how to live on the planet's surface, we had to grow naturally, hence the decision to bring us to bear as children. The three of us appeared in ancient Egypt outside settlements built along a riverside. Other than the water of the river, all there was to see was sand.

"Why here, father?" I asked.

"It is here that you will have room to grow, my son," he replied.

"With your gifts, you will need it."

"What gifts are those?"

He patted me on the head and reassuringly said, "You will find out soon enough."

We set up residence along the Nile at the edge of a small village. Homes were nothing more than crude huts of mud and straw. I found the scattershot way everything was laid out absolutely appalling. Being a child of seven, there wasn't much I could do to change it. The Beholder

noticed my unease.

"What is the problem, Vincent?" he asked me.

"Nothing is organized," I said, pouting.

"That will all change soon enough," he said with a smile. "This is where you will learn to use your natural abilities. You will end up helping these people simply by being here and nudging them in the right direction. You won't need to talk like an adult. You won't need to act like an adult. All you'll have to do is be present, and others will come to you. Do you understand?"

I peered up at my father, trying to grasp what he was telling me. I shrugged and shook my head, denoting a total lack of comprehension. He laughed and told me it was all right. He knew what would happen, and that was the important part.

We settled into a nearby empty hut. Our father told us that the Will and Power Cosmic created this particular domicile for us. It resembled just about every other home in the village. Constructed from large, solid slabs of hardened mud with straw for the roof, it appeared quite sturdy. It only had three rooms, yet was fairly large. The ceilings were ten feet high, maybe more. From the outside, it looked as if a grown man would have trouble standing upright once inside. As I was thinking it, The Beholder told us this hut was actually much larger inside than it looked from the outside. To keep from arousing suspicion, it was made to appear normal sized. Sensing we'd need the room, and time apart from each other, our father had asked the Will and Power Cosmic to make the hut more spacious. This pleased me to no end. While drifting through the ethereal with my siblings, we had no physical form but we did have consciousness. My sister's proclivities for chaos were in full bloom from inception and I'd never been able to tolerate her antics. Hate found her amusing most of the time and Love simply put up with it. Sharing a room with her was not how I wanted to start my life on Earth.

My entire first day in human form was spent with my sister, listening to my father talk about the Ancients and the Aseraphim. When we existed merely as essences, we knew a little about our history and the history of our family. Our father was going over some of the finer points. I was captivated by his every word. My sister could barely sit still long enough to concentrate on anything he was saying. For hours, The Beholder enlightened us as to the nature of the Ancients and their specific purposes for being. He spoke at great length about the Aseraphim and how our relationships with them would drastically change in the centuries to come.

"You will be guided by these children of Tag and Nacht all

through your lives," father explained. "Most of the time, Ancients such as I will not interfere directly with the course of events on the planet. We have the Aseraphim for that task. Since they control Haven and Haedes, you and your siblings can deal more easily with them than you can with us."

"Where are Love and Hate?" I asked.

"They are still in the ethereal. It is not their time yet."

"Why not?"

"Because the world is not yet ready for them. In time, that will change."

"Will they know us?" Valencia asked, paying attention for the first time in hours.

"It's doubtful. By the time they arrive, they will have spent millennia as ethereal beings. Just as the two of you have forgotten details about the Aseraphim you once knew so well, their time in the ethereal will undoubtedly cloud their memories. When they do come into being, the two of you will have much more experience than them, so you will need to lend them aid at times."

"Aren't they going to be immortal like us?" I asked.

"Yes, my son, they will be and just like you they will be born to this realm as children. You need to keep a close watch on young children for they have a tendency to either get into trouble or get hurt."

"Will we get to meet the Aseraphim while on this realm?" I asked.

"Most certainly. I do not believe, however, it will always be under the best of circumstances. This is important for the both of you to remember. You are both neutrals. You do not fight for the side of light, nor do you fight for the darkness. You can choose to, if you like, but it will only hamper your efforts. Because you can choose a side if you so desire, the Aseraphim from both sides will attempt to get you to do their bidding. You must decide if it helps your goals before you accept. Do not judge things as good or evil. You, Vincent, must base your decisions on whether or not helping in their requested tasks will bring order. If it doesn't, you must decline. Even if you think what they want you to do is a good thing, if it does not help establish order, you mustn't help. The opposite is true for you of course, Valencia. If you are asked to do something that you think will bring order, you should refuse."

"I can do that," she gleefully replied.

"It's well past nightfall," our father said as he glanced outside.

"The two of you should get some sleep."

"We don't need to sleep. You told us that," I reminded him.

"I know, but the people of this village would think it strange if

they saw the two of you awake at all hours. You must learn to sleep."

"How?" I asked.

"You must gain control of your mind and relax. Clear your mind and sleep will find you. Now go."

Valencia took off for her room and I went to mine. I lay down and concentrated on shutting off my mind and sleeping. I had succeeded more easily than I'd imagined and felt myself drift off. Just as I was about to achieve sleep for the first time, Valencia entered my room.

"Vincent, you still awake?" she asked, and not quietly.

"I almost wasn't," I angrily replied.

"I can't sleep," she continued, ignoring my surliness. "Why should I?"

"Because father said so."

"I know, but it doesn't seem right. We don't always have to do what he asks us to, do we?"

"Why shouldn't we?"

"Maybe he's not always right," she replied. She had done this sort of thing in the ethereal quite often. There wasn't a subject she wouldn't debate.

I leaned up, locked my gaze with hers and said, "He is our father, Valencia, and he deserves our respect. If he says we need to learn to sleep, then it's for the best that we do it. Now go away." I resumed my previous position and tried to sleep again as my sister exited my room. My first day on this realm ended with no fanfare for a son of the Aseraphim. There was no one honoring my father. There was only my sister, proving to me that she was going to be just as aggravating on this realm as she was in the ethereal.

I awoke as morning arrived and the new day brought with it unbearable heat. The Beholder was standing in the doorway to my room. I had some difficulty in getting certain parts of my mind to wake back up and said so to my father. He informed me this was normal and that it took mortals even longer to become fully awake.

I heard Valencia stirring around in the other room. "Did she sleep?" I asked my father.

"No, she did not. I don't believe she even really tried. That is her nature, Vincent. Many times, she will do exactly the opposite of what is asked of her. It is something you will have to come to terms with eventually."

"Why is she like that?"

"She is as she was meant to be, just as you are."

"Can't she be normal?"

The Beholder laughed at my innocent question. "To your sister's way of thinking she is normal. You are the abnormal one."

"I am not!" I stated defiantly, leaping to my feet.

"But to her, you are. Remember, you are two parts of the same equation."

"But she's a pain," I pouted. "I don't want to have to spend my life with her."

"You won't. Be patient, my child. Once I get your sister under control, the three of us will venture into the village. I will try to keep Valencia away from you so you can see things for yourself. Don't try to talk to the villagers however. You do not speak their language yet and any confusion brought on by our arrival may lead to dire consequences."

"Shouldn't we leave Valencia here then?" I was smiling at the prospect.

"No, we shall take her with us. I do not want to leave her here alone. She could wander off and wreak havoc. It's for the best if we keep an eye on her at all times. I'll take her with me while you observe the goings-on of the village."

He left to tend to Valencia and I began to wander around the hut. I ventured over to the opening of our domicile and was assaulted by the sunlight. Once my eyes adjusted, I saw villagers mulling around, doing various chores. Everyone was doing one task and only one task until it was completed. It seemed awfully inefficient. I could hear Valencia and my father approaching and turned to face them.

Valencia's hair was a tousled mess. It hurt my head just to look at her. I could tell by the expression on our father's face that he noticed my displeasure. He led us out of the hut and into the village proper.

We were just starting to mingle amongst the local inhabitants when The Beholder directed me to the riverbank. He told me to wait there for him while he took Valencia to pick up some supplies. Seeing as how this would get my sister away from me for a bit, I happily complied.

There were several locals washing their clothes in the river when I arrived. They were pounding their clothes with rocks, which made little to no sense to me. My clothes were still clean, since I hadn't really done anything yet. My outfit was red and yellow, making me stand out among the villagers and their drab garments. My sister was even worse as her outfit was bright white. I couldn't figure out how our clothes would get any cleaner by hitting them with rocks. I theorized rocks would only make the clothes dirtier, seeing as how you had to pull them out of the mud.

I leaned down and did just that, freeing a large rock from the muddy bank. I washed it off in the water and noticed no significant difference. I returned to the riverbank and pulled more stones out. Each time I washed one off, I became more disappointed with the outcome. I wanted to discuss this with The Beholder. There had to be a better way to clean our clothes.

I had loosened up a good deal of mud by pulling out all those stones. The mud was scattered all over the place and the sight of it bothered me. I swept all the loose mud into one big pile and started making blocks. The blocks weren't perfect cubes, but elongated to twice their width with only half the height. After finishing up a block, I'd set in on some reeds I'd gathered. I worked in this fashion for quite some time until my father appeared with my sister at his side. By that time I had made almost fifty blocks, all of them the exact same size and shape.

"What have you got there?" The Beholder asked, studying the pile.

"Blocks. There was mud everywhere, so I scooped it all together and made some blocks. Was that wrong?"

My father's eyes lit up with my response. "No, Vincent. In fact, this is what I'd hoped you'd do. This will help the villagers immensely."

"How?"

"Tomorrow, you will see. Now come, you've been out here long enough. It's time to go home. You two have a lot to learn this evening."

"Like what?" Valencia asked.

"I'm going to teach you the local language."

The three of us walked back to our residence as my father told me of the day's events. Apparently, while he was looking over some things in the market, Valencia got away from him. He told us he could've easily just disappeared and then reappeared wherever she'd run off to, but he again stressed the point of remaining incognito. Valencia seemed to like the winding pathways and odd corners in the village.

Back home, our father made us a small dinner since there wasn't much need for us to eat. This was another habit we'd have to get used to if we were going to remain anonymous. The Beholder said we wouldn't always need to remain anonymous. It was just a good idea to be able to blend in if needed. After we'd eaten, he taught us the language of the locals. Since there was no written language it was not easy to learn. Our father was very patient with us, but what really caught me off guard was Valencia seriously concentrated on learning. It was the first time she'd seemed interested in anything. We both picked it up fairly easily. As we departed for our sleeping quarters, we said goodbye and good night in our new tongue.

Overflowing with anticipation of the coming day, I could not force myself to sleep. I crept over to Valencia's room and she was out cold. Maybe father told her she had to. That's what I would've done. I wasn't one hundred percent sure that approach would work with her. I left her alone, lest she suddenly decide to wake up. I found I could tolerate her presence a lot easier when she was sleeping.

I moved into the main room of the hut and spied my father kneeling on the floor and chanting. I dove for the shadows in the corner to avoid being detected. After watching my father chanting for another minute or two, I was tempted to sneak back to my room and try once again to sleep. As I thought this however, The Beholder removed his mask and set it on a table in the corner. Once the mask was out of his hands he began a transformation that made me shiver. My father, the Ancient, was becoming a beast. I watched as he finished his transformation into what looked like a human mixed with a feral, wild member of the feline family and darted out of the hut.

I was utterly transfixed on the mask. The fact that The Beholder could change into different creatures didn't shock me as much as the fact that he'd removed the mask. I remembered my father saying his powers were drawn from the mask itself. The legend of the mask was that anyone who wore it instantly became The Beholder. I stared blankly at it from across the room and didn't notice I was slowly making my way over to the table it sat on until I was halfway there.

The Mask of The Beholder, one of the legendary artifacts of the Ancients, lay before me unattended. I had a flash of panic as I thought I heard sounds coming from Valencia's room. With a clear line of sight to where she was sleeping, I quickly put that belief to rest. She was still sound asleep. I reached up for the mask and, as I touched it, I could physically feel its power.

An overwhelming urge to put the mask on entered my mind and I had difficulty fighting it off. I grabbed the mask with both hands and felt a surge of power course through my body. I raised the mask to my face and attempted to put it on. The mask seemingly grew heavier as I lifted it to my face. I had the mask up and in front of me, but I couldn't move it any closer to my face than six inches or so. I struggled and fought with it, trying desperately to put the mask on but to no avail. It was as if the mask was repelled by the idea of my wearing it.

Realizing the very essence of The Beholder was contained in the mask, I wondered if he'd know I had tried to put it on. Fearing the worst, I carefully placed the mask back on the table and ran to my room. There was no way I was going to be able to sleep tonight. This being the case, I

was wide awake when I heard the thing that masqueraded as my father return. I found myself shaking, wondering if he would know I was awake and had touched the mask. I worked through my fear and silently crept out of the room again.

Hiding in the shadows, I saw the lycan clearly. It resembled a large tiger in human form. As I watched it methodically clean itself, I saw droplets of some unknown liquid hit the floor. I couldn't make out what these drops were because it was too dark and I hoped it was only water. The lycan completed its cleaning and went over to the mask. As soon as it picked up the artifact, the mask practically leapt onto the lycan's face. The moment the mask made contact, the beast transformed back into its predominately human form.

Immediately after the lycan once again become The Beholder, he stormed over to my room. He spotted me standing in the shadows as he neared the doorway.

"Why did you try to put on the mask?" my father asked tersely.

"I just wanted to see what would happen," I sheepishly replied.

The Beholder looked down at me, not as an Ancient looks at an Immortal but as a father to a son. "Vincent, if it weren't for the fact that nothing happened, I'd be much more livid. Luckily, you cannot wear this mask."

"Why not?"

"Because of who you are," he replied. "The children of the Aseraphim are immune to the mask's abilities, as are the Aseraphim themselves. It all has to do with our bloodlines."

"But you aren't human," I commented.

"Not completely, no. Lycans are extremely weak-minded creatures. My mask draws them rather easily. Thankfully, my essence renders me immune to such things as lycanthropy. Only when the mask is removed can the lycan's true nature be revealed."

I studied him for a moment as I considered how to ask the next question. I was slightly afraid of the answer but felt it had to be asked. "Am I a lycan as well?"

My father laughed and replied, "No, my son, you are not a lycan. I cannot guarantee that you won't have lycanthropic tendencies later in life however. While your true bloodline is with the Aseraphim, your human bloodline is partially lycan."

"What does that mean?"

"It could mean lots of things. You could end up with the bloodlust inherent to lycans or you could just end up being hairier than most other people. Most likely, you might grow claws or jagged, feral

teeth. Then again, maybe your Aseraphim ancestry will trump the lycan in you and nothing unusual will come of it. That all remains to be seen."

I nodded to acknowledge his words. I was still unsure about the meaning of my father being a lycan, but there was nothing I could do about it. Besides, when the mask was on he was The Beholder, not some creature that only felt a need to kill. My father tousled my hair and ordered me off to bed. I watched as he went back outside and sat in the doorway.

Before I went back to my room, I wandered over to where the lycan had been cleaning itself. I saw the drops on the floor and my suspicions were confirmed. It was blood, and it was fresh and warm.

Sleep eluded me all evening and I found myself grateful. Yesterday when I had awoken, it took me a while before I was totally coherent. Today I was energized. I glanced into the front room and saw my father had already left. I then peeked into Valencia's room and she was still sleeping. Knowing I had a few more moments of peace and quiet before she woke up, I wandered into the main room and sat down on the floor near where my father had taken off the mask the night before. In the light, I could see some scrolls under the table in the corner.

I reached for the scrolls and was amazed at how new they looked. I had a feeling that these writings were the works of The Beholder and the other Ancients, the apparent newness of the scrolls belying their actual age. I unfurled the one on top and studied it. The scroll was written in the language of the Ancients, my native tongue, so I had no problems reading it. I had many problems understanding what was written though. I rolled the scroll back up and grabbed the next one. I read that one as well, even if I didn't completely comprehend what it said. One after the other, I read all the scrolls from under the table. There were only eleven scrolls so it didn't take all that long. It only seemed like I was studying the writings for hours.

I had just put the last scroll back when Valencia entered the room. Her hair was worse today than it was yesterday. There wasn't a strand of hair on her head cooperating this morning. She was about to say something when our father arrived, sparing me from having to deal with Valencia alone.

"Are the two of you ready to go out again today?" he asked us.

"Not yet," Valencia answered, eyes still only half-opened.

"Then you should get ready," he replied.

"Will we both be going with you today?" I asked.

"No, Vincent, I want you to go back to where you were yesterday

and continue what you were doing."

"How am I going to be able to talk to anyone if I do that?" I asked.

"Fear not, my son, for people will come up to you and initiate conversation."

"Why would they do that?"

"Because of who you are, silly!" Valencia answered while making a feeble attempt at fixing her hair.

"That's not quite correct, Valencia," our father corrected. "They will talk to him because of what he is, not who he is." He looked at me and continued, "It is because of what you are, the bringer of Order, that will have people talking to you. Most of the time people won't even realize why they wanted to talk to you. Some will just watch you from a distance without ever approaching. Yet all will learn something valuable from you."

"What about me?" Valencia asked.

The Beholder peered down at her and replied, "Right now, many people will avoid talking to you and I don't want you to take it personally. You just radiate the opposite feeling that your brother does. Where people will feel relaxed while talking to Vincent, you will have a tendency to make people ill at ease. It's no fault of your own. It's just the way the two of you were created. Besides, I need you to come with me again today Valencia. Just mind whom you talk to. I'll let you know when it is appropriate."

"So my brother gets to walk around by himself and I have to stay with you? And I can only talk to who you say I can? That's not fair!" she complained.

"Fair or not, that is the way it will be. Let's talk about this no longer. We have things we have to get done," The Beholder said with finality. He turned and headed back out the door with Valencia and me giving chase.

As soon as we exited the hut I ran straight over to the riverbank to continue my tasks from the day before. The first thing I noticed was that the blocks I'd made yesterday were now extremely hard. They seemed harder than the surrounding rocks. I picked one up and took it over to the riverside. I placed it squarely on the ground perfectly parallel to the river. I retrieved a few more blocks, twenty total, and lined them up end to end in a long line. I then scooped up some mud and spread it evenly over the blocks. Once a thin layer of mud was evenly applied I went to get more blocks. I noticed a child, no older than my assumed age, standing near my pile of bricks. He was looking over at me with a look of

confusion on his young face. I strolled over and greeted him in his native tongue.

"Hello. I'm Vincent. What's your name?" I asked.

He jumped when I spoke to him, shocked to hear me speaking in his language. He regained his composure quickly and answered, "My name's Alipha. What are you doing?"

"Stacking blocks," was all I could think to say. I wasn't sure why I was arranging the blocks as I was. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

"What are you making?"

I thought about it for a second and honestly replied, "I don't know."

He giggled and said with a smile, "How can you not know? You're the one doing it."

"I haven't decided what I'm making yet. I may make a little building."

"A building? With these?" he asked in disbelief.

"Sure! I bet it'll be really strong too. Want to help?"

"What do I have to do?"

I knelt down and scooped up some mud. Then I started shaping it just as I had done the day before. After I'd done two blocks, my new friend tried. It wasn't as evenly formed as mine but he did a really good job for his first time. I showed him how to make them the same size and shape every time by using reeds for measurements. His third block was perfect and I asked him to make a few more while I built up the wall I was working on.

When I returned to Alipha after assembling more of the wall, I was pleasantly surprised to see he had made almost twenty more blocks. He had them arranged on the reeds much like I had done the day before, all in nice, neat little rows. The blocks were all uniform in length, width and height. I was quite impressed. I knelt down beside him and began making blocks as well. By the time my father returned, Alipha and I had made almost a hundred blocks.

"I have to go now, Alipha, but I'll be back here tomorrow."

"I'll meet you here. Can I help you stack the blocks tomorrow?"

"Sure you can. You were a great help today, my new friend. Be well."

"You as well, Vincent. Take care!" Having said his farewell, Alipha cheerfully skipped back to his family's hut.

We reached our domicile and all three of us sat on the floor of the main room per our father's instructions. We were going to learn another

language tonight and The Beholder informed us that we were only to speak this language between ourselves. We were to practice by talking to each other often in this new language since we would need it later in life. Valencia picked up this language quicker than I did, probably because it was an intrinsically confusing language. At least she was gracious enough to help me along when I fell behind.

When our lesson was finished, The Beholder sent us off to our rooms. I had made up my mind that I was not going to go wandering around this evening, not after what I'd witnessed last night. This was not a problem as Valencia came into my room no more than ten minutes after I'd settled in.

"Why does father let you go off on your own while I have to follow him around all day?" she asked immediately upon entering my room.

"Why do you get to spend all your time with our father while he leaves me by myself along the river?" I asked in return.

"I don't want to be with father all day! I want to be able to go out on my own."

"Maybe he doesn't think you're ready for that yet."

"And you are? We're the same age!" she yelled at me.

"Keep your voice down. Father will hear you."

"No he won't. He went off into town as soon as he sent us to our rooms."

"I don't see why you have to yell at me about it. I'm not the one dragging you around everywhere."

"I can't very well yell at our father now, can I?" she sarcastically responded.

"I don't see why not. He might actually take it as a positive sign of progress for you."

"You just want me to get into trouble."

"Valencia, what trouble could you possibly get into by doing that? Is he going to keep you inside and never let you out? It wouldn't be a smart thing to do if he expects you to learn anything."

"So you think I should tell him I don't want to go with him in the morning?"

"I'm not saying you should and I'm not saying you shouldn't. I just think it's what he's waiting for from you."

My sister was confused. "What do you mean?"

"Well, what did the two of you do today?"

"Nothing!" she replied in frustration as she paced around my room. "He talked to some of the leaders of the village, stopped in some

shops, that sort of thing. He didn't let me talk to anyone or go anywhere without him."

"You did run away from him yesterday, so I can understand why he kept a close eye on you. Did you try to talk to anyone?"

"I tried, but he wouldn't let me. After a while I gave up."

"So you didn't?"

"No, I didn't."

"Well, just keep trying. You'll succeed eventually. Then there won't be any way for him to stop you from talking to whomever you want. I think father wants me to be alone to see how others interact with me. I think he wants you to be with him so he can see how you interact with others. Maybe the people you saw today were not people he wanted you to accidentally influence towards chaos. Do you understand?"

"Not really," she replied honestly.

"Just do it," I said, "And you'll see."

Valencia stared at me to try and sense if I was leading her down a dangerous path. I think she realized, finally, that I was being honest with her. She stopped pacing and went to leave. In the doorway, she paused and turned around. "How did you figure all that out, by the way?"

"It's what's known as reasoning." I paused and smiled at my sister and concluded, "It's probably why you couldn't figure it out."

She returned my smile with a smirk and left my room. I couldn't help but feel like today had been very productive. I learned another language, I got some of my building started and I met someone new. I knew sleep would not find me tonight and I made no attempt to search for it.

Daylight couldn't come soon enough, and upon its arrival I was ready to greet it head-on. I heard Valencia stirring all night so I knew I wasn't the only one ready to go this morning. Father stepped into my room and, without a word, waved his hand to call me out. I leapt off the floor and was out of my room in a heartbeat. When I got to Valencia's room, I noticed I was actually in front of The Beholder. I shook my head, confused by my current position. My father looked down at me and his face bore a smile brighter than the sun. Before I could ask him anything, he raised his head and called my sister out of her room. I was right in believing she'd be eager to start the day. She was bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, bursting with excess energy. I noticed her eyes were a little brighter green today than they had been yesterday. I got the feeling our talk last night had some effect. I was oddly proud to see it.

We left the hut and I departed for the riverbank. I was

enthusiastic about getting back to building blocks and walls. I also wanted to see if Alipha would return. A helping hand was always welcome and besides, he was a nice kid. When I broke free of my family, I glanced over at Valencia and she did the strangest thing. She wore an honest, purely joyful smile on her face and winked at me. I wasn't sure what was going to happen between those two during their rounds today, but I almost felt sorry for my father.

I jogged over to my familiar spot along the river and saw Alipha already hard at work making blocks. And he wasn't alone. There were two other children assisting him. One was very nearly identical to Alipha but obviously slightly older, so I naturally assumed it was his brother. The other one was about the same age as Alipha and must've been a playmate. They all had naturally dark skin and as I joined them I couldn't help but notice how much I stood out.

"Alipha," I called out as I approached.

I must have startled him because he jumped when I spoke.

"Vincent! Sorry, I didn't see you."

"It's fine, my friend. When did you get here?"

"About an hour ago. I brought my brother Ihmo and my friend Kalim with me. Is that all right?"

"The more the better. How are they at making blocks?"

Alipha shrugged and said, "Kalim is about as good as I am, but Ihmo isn't as patient as we are. He did mention that he'd like to help you with the wall and designing a structure. Ihmo isn't much of a hands-on person but he's very smart."

"Then I'll have him help me over there." Alipha introduced me to his companions and I thanked them for offering to help. Then I spoke with Ihmo and invited him to assist me with the assembly of the wall.

Ihmo examined what I'd done so far and finished with a troubled expression on his face. When I asked him what was bothering him, he mentioned that the wall would never hold up if the river decided to crest. He said that if we were to dig a trench around the wall, put some of the blocks below the level of the river and then pack mud around these blocks the wall would be more stable. Before I could ask him to elaborate, he was on his hands and knees digging alongside the wall. Once he had extended this trench the entire length of the wall, he asked me to help him slide the wall into the trench. Once the wall was settled in and aligned, Ihmo started packing handful after handful of mud into the trench. He packed it tightly against the wall on both sides, always checking to make sure the wall was still perfectly vertical. He stepped back from his finished task and admired his work.

"Now if the river decides to crest, the wall will have a better chance to survive," he said with pride.

"It looks great, Ihmo. It really does. We'll need to dig out more mud for the other walls before we can continue building the first wall though."

"The first wall? What are you going to build?"

"Just a little place to play in. It will also serve me well as a place to hide from my sister."

"You're afraid of a woman?" Ihmo asked, shocked.

"No, I'm not afraid of her. She just gets on my nerves sometimes."

"Would it be possible to have a place of my own as well?"

"I don't see why not." I knelt down on the ground again and started extending the trench that we'd built. Ihmo quickly realized what I was doing and joined in. When we finished, we had dug out a trench extending several yards down the riverside, long enough to fit at least ten small playhouses.

Ihmo ran over to the pile of blocks when we finished the trench and started building a foundation for his own sanctuary. Alipha and Kalim were making blocks at a rapid pace as Ihmo and I worked on the walls and foundations. The four of us continued our respective undertakings throughout the day. I was making good progress on my project, and Ihmo's building was off to a very good start as well, when my father showed up. I ran over when he called to me and I couldn't help notice the look of exasperation on his face.

"Vincent, I need you to find your sister. She ran off," he ordered.

"Where did she run off to?"

The Beholder peered down at me, disfavor radiating from his eyes, "She took off towards the far end of town. That's all I can tell you."

"Can my friends help me?"

"No. I want you to go alone. When you find her, bring her back to the hut."

"But I want to work on my buildings!" I pleaded.

"You can continue on that tomorrow." The Beholder then cocked his head to the side and asked, "You know what you're going to build now?"

"I sure do!" I cheerfully replied. "I'm going to build a small playhouse. It will be my sanctuary from Valencia."

"Speaking of, be on your way. And find your sister," he ordered as he made off for home.

Chapter 2

I had yet to actually venture into the village itself so Valencia was starting off with a decided advantage. I strode quickly down the main path of the village, peeking down every off-branch of the path for any sign of her. I saw a few villagers but that was all. The sky was clear as the sun was beginning to set over the dunes in the distance. It suddenly dawned on me how long I'd been at the riverside working with Alipha, Kalim and Ihmo. We had worked most of the day, time evaporating like a puddle in this barren desert. With the sun now setting, I figured I'd better find my sister before it got dark or I might never be able to spot her.

I quickened my pace, going from a fast walk to a steady jog. Still, there was no sign of Valencia. Eventually I asked some of the villagers if they'd seen her. Describing her was easy. Considering she was the only young girl in the area with pale skin and long, blonde hair, most of the villagers recognized her immediately. Unfortunately, none of them had seen her in a while. I gave up on this approach and figured I'd just have to track her down myself. Increasing my speed every passing minute, I ran through the village, stopping only to check around corners for my elusive sister.

I felt the warm breeze flowing around my face, blowing my hair back as I ran. I was barefoot so my traction wasn't great. I easily compensated for this by slowing ever so slightly as I neared a turn. The breeze around me had become a true wind as I accelerated even more. For reasons I couldn't explain, I knew I could run faster. This feeling of confidence grew as I ran ever faster, the exhilaration filling my spirit and my soul. I also knew now I would find Valencia. There was no way she could outrun me. I grinned at this thought and redoubled my efforts.

I blew past villagers, running around them and more than once between their legs. I ran between huts, pausing to peek into some of them to see if Valencia was hiding out inside. I was nearing the far end, having doubled back and searched every inch of the lower half of the village. I inspected every corner of town with no sign of my sister. The path I was on lead out of the village and towards the river. I assumed she had to have gone this direction since she was nowhere else to be found. Turned out, I was right.

Valencia was sitting on a log facing away from me, staring at the river as it flowed by. She gave off no sign she noticed my arrival. I slowly made my way over to her when she threw something into the water. I glanced over her shoulder in time to see a stone splash into the river,

sending up a small column of water and sending ripples outward from the point of impact. A few clouds had rolled in as the fading sunlight reflected off of the river, making the ripples glisten different shades as they faded into nothingness. Valencia threw another stone and watched as this stone had the same affect as the last. I slid up beside her and looked her over. She was depressed, the emotion clearly evident on her face. Before I had gotten close enough to see her face, I knew she wasn't happy. I could almost feel the depression radiating from her as I approached. Even though we didn't see eye to eye all the time she was still my sister, like it or not. Seeing her in this mood made me feel a bout of depression dawning in me as well. Valencia was silent, normally a good thing as far as I was concerned. This time I found it disturbing. Either she was ignoring me or just didn't want to acknowledge my presence, because she had to know I was here. Sensing that, I made the first move.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" I asked. Valencia slowly and purposefully turned her gaze to meet mine. Our eyes locked for a minute and in that stare I felt the full weight of the sadness she was carrying. She then lowered her head back down and continued throwing stones into the river. "You know, father is looking for you."

"No he isn't. You are," she replied without looking up.

"He asked me to look for you."

"Why? Couldn't he be bothered?" she asked accusingly.

"I'm sure that's not the reason," I replied, wondering if I really believed that or not.

Valencia sat quietly, throwing another stone into the river. Just as I was about to suggest we head home, she said simply, "You were wrong."

"About what?"

"Why our father takes me with him," she began and glanced at a spot next to her on the log. I sat down as she continued, "I decided to take your advice, Vincent. I tried to talk to some of the villagers. Every time I tried, he shut me down. I couldn't even get a simple greeting out before he was telling me to be quiet."

"That doesn't make very much sense. Why wouldn't he want you to talk to people? How else are you supposed to learn anything?"

"That's what I thought!" she exclaimed and heaved a rock a good distance into the river. I picked up a rock and tossed it casually into the water. The stone I threw outdistanced hers by a large margin. That earned me a nasty look. Another stone met its watery demise at her hands before she spoke again. "You said you thought our father wanted to see how I reacted with others. I'm beginning to think he doesn't want me interacting with anyone at all."

"How'd you come up with that?" I asked.

She turned to face me and starting ranting. "In the market I saw a really nice doll. It had silky black hair and amber eyes. I just wanted to get a closer look at it so I wandered off. He could still see me so I figured I could get away with it. When I picked up the doll a lady came over and asked me if I liked it. Before I could say anything, our father was hovering over us and pulled me away. That was when I decided to get away from him. I can learn what I need to on my own better than I can with him."

"I highly doubt that, Valencia. We both need our father's guidance."

"What guidance?" she shouted. "He hasn't helped me with anything but languages. I probably wouldn't even know them if it weren't for the fact that he's teaching them to you too."

"He hasn't taught me anything but languages either. Everything else has come about on its own."

"Vincent, how can I learn anything if he won't teach me and I can't get away from him?"

"You have to be more patient," I suggested.

Anger rose in her eyes, which were now a brilliant, bright green. The glow of her eyes cast an eerie glow around her and for just a moment I was nervous. Maybe this was why our father didn't want her talking to anyone. If people saw her like this they might think she was evil. She wasn't, as far as I knew. "I'm done being patient," she said past clenched teeth, the timber of her voice now drastically different. Gone was the sweet, lilting voice of a seven-year-old girl. This was the voice of one very upset Immortal; dark, brooding and menacing.

"Valencia, we've only been on this plane for four days. Give it some time," I said, trying to calm her down.

"And how much time should I waste waiting for The Beholder to get around to me? A few more days? A few seasons? Years? How long, brother?"

As much as my sister annoyed me, I had to admit she made a valid argument. I decided to try a different approach. "Valencia, do you know what I've been doing the last three days?"

"No. What?" she replied impatiently.

"All I've been doing is making blocks out of mud and building a wall. I have three local children helping me. Hopefully, the wall will become a building. Ihmo, one of the children helping out, is starting his own building as well. We may have a whole row of tiny playhouses for the children all lined up along the river. If I had to do it all myself, it

would take a very long time. A child saw what I was doing and asked to help. He brought others with him the next day. Now, construction of the buildings is underway and will probably be more organized than anything in the village itself."

"What are you getting at?" she asked, annoyance clear in her voice.

"I didn't ask any of them to help. They all volunteered. Why don't you try to meet up with some children in the village? If you're really that determined to break away from our father, do it early enough so that you can find someone your own age to talk to. Don't wait for people to find you."

"What about our father? He'll just send you after me again."

"Maybe he will and maybe he won't."

My sister was lost in thought, mulling over my new theory. She turned back to face the water and threw another stone in. "Don't you just love the randomness of it?"

"Of what?" I asked.

"When the stone hits the water and it makes a splash. Total randomness."

"I prefer to watch the ripples afterwards. They're much more orderly."

She peered at me out of the corner of her eye and said, "The column of water that shoots up always disrupts the ripples. Chaos wins." A tiny, weak smile formed at the corner of her mouth.

"Yes, but the ripples and the circles they create go on long after the column of water has disappeared. Order wins."

She turned her head to look at me and I saw that the light in her eyes had faded back to their normal brilliance. Even better, there was a genuine smile on her face. "Not always. If I use a larger rock, the column of water is so large that it totally corrupts the ripples. So, the greater the chaos, the weaker the order."

"True, but a smaller stone causes a smaller splash and more defined circles, therefore the weaker the chaos, the stronger the order." I found myself smiling as I debated order versus chaos with Valencia. Neither of us could win the argument and we both knew it. That wasn't going to stop her.

"If I take a small, flat stone, I can skip it across the water, causing irregular circles and ripples that meld into one another."

"If I take a large stone and drop it gently into the water, I can control the spray of water slightly and keep the ripples intact."

Valencia was grinning from ear to ear, enjoying our little debate. She sighed overdramatically and said, "I guess it all depends on what you

have to work with."

"And how you use it," I added. Her mood had definitely improved, so I figured now was a good time to wrap this up and get home. "So, you ready to go now?" I sighed in exasperation.

Suspicious eyes now stared back at me as she said, "You know, the last time you gave me advice I wasn't too thrilled with the results."

"Then don't listen to me. It's your choice." She nodded, finally believing I truly wanted to help her. "Can we head back now? Father probably has a new language for us to learn. I don't know much about our father's attitude, but I'm guessing patience isn't one of his best virtues."

"I guess," she replied with artificial resignation. She stood up and suddenly stopped. "Vincent, how is it we can learn an entire language in just one night? Isn't that impossible?"

"Well Valencia, we are Immortals," I answered as I rose. "Maybe we just pick things up faster."

"But an entire language?"

"I don't see why not. We'll ask father when we get back, okay?"

"Okay." We walked down the path back to the village, aware that people were staring at us as we passed by. It could be due to the fact that we didn't look like anyone else in the village. It was also possible that two children walking through town alone as night was approaching piqued their curiosity. Personally, I think what got us noticed was Valencia and I joking and laughing as we half-heartedly continued our earlier debate. Just as it was with her depression, her happiness was slightly infectious and I couldn't stop myself from actually enjoying our time alone, away from father's judging eyes.

We were still going back and forth on the topic of order versus chaos as we approached the hut. Our father was standing outside, waiting impatiently for us. I was too involved in my talk with Valencia to notice him right away. Valencia just ignored him.

"Look, if you take two stones..." she said, re-examining a point she had tried to make earlier in our walk.

"No, we are not taking two stones. I've already proven..."

"You did no such thing!" she yelled at me, all the while jabbing me in the chest with her finger to emphasize her point. There wasn't one speck of anger evident in her voice. She threw her head back in mock disgust at the idea of being wrong.

"Where were the two of you?" The Beholder bellowed as we approached.

"I found her down by the river," I replied innocently.

"And it took you this long to get back?" He was not pleased at being made to wait. Apparently I was right about my father's lack of patience.

"We were talking. You know, that thing I'm not allowed to do with anyone else," Valencia interjected.

The Beholder wheeled around to face my sister. At that moment, I feared he would hurt her. My fear almost became a reality as our father raised his hand to strike Valencia. Much to my surprise, she didn't move. The Beholder held his hand in the air and I waited anxiously to see if it would eventually come crashing down. Thankfully it did not.

"Go inside and wait in the main room for your language lesson. I'll be right in," he calmly ordered as he stayed his hand.

Valencia and I walked in, side by side. Her grin lit the room as if fueled by a thousand candles. It didn't take long to realize the light wasn't coming from her grin. Her eyes were glowing again, casting the room in that eerie green glow I'd witnessed earlier. I leaned over and whispered, "That was almost bad."

"Almost," she responded as her smile grew wider. "But it felt good."

We sat by ourselves for a few minutes until our father returned. He did not bring up the previous incident, preferring to let it pass. Instead, he told us he was going to teach us another language.

"Father, how is it we can learn these different tongues in just one night?" I inquired.

"Yeah, is it because we're immortal and smarter than everyone else?" Valencia added.

"Partially, Valencia, it is because you're smarter in most areas than mere mortals. It is not the main reason."

"Then what is?" she prodded.

"Time," was his simple reply. My sister and I shared a look of confusion and he picked up on it immediately. "When night falls, and all three of us are in this hut, time changes."

"How is that possible?" I asked.

"When the Will and Power Cosmic created this hut, they cast a spell over it that makes time slow down drastically when night comes and we are all present inside. The two of you haven't noticed the change in time because you've been preoccupied with your studies. It is also why I leave every night." The Beholder glanced at me, awaiting a comment about the night before when I saw him succumb to his lycanthropy. I wisely remained silent.

"So it only works if all three of us are here?" Valencia asked.

"Correct, child. I don't want you getting any ideas though, Valencia. This time is for learning languages and should not be taken for granted."

"Don't worry. I want to learn these things. I'd love to be able to talk to anyone I meet." Crossing her arms, she irritably added, "Actually, I'd love to be able to be *allowed* to talk to anyone I meet."

The Beholder ignored her chide, only responding by glaring at her. He brought us back to the issue at hand and began our nightly language lesson.

The language this evening was the native tongue of the Atlantians, a race of people living on a large island nation to the west. The Beholder informed us we'd be visiting the isle of Atlantia before too long. The next few nights were set aside to learn the languages of the various races native to the island. When I asked him when we'd be going there, he said it might be days or it might be years, but it was our next destination.

After our lesson, our father left the hut as my sister and I went off to our rooms. I fell asleep almost immediately, once I was able to ignore all the noise Valencia was making in her room. I actually enjoyed sleeping. It was the waking up part that bothered me. Up until that night, that was the only thing I found inconvenient.

As I slept, the parts of my mind still awake were working overtime. I had a dream. I'd never had one before and it seemed so real to me that when I woke up I wasn't sure what was real and what was not. In the dream I was standing at the far end of a large room. At the other end of the chamber, on a shimmering golden throne, sat a stunningly beautiful woman. She had long, flowing pitch-black hair and deep brown, almond eyes. This ravishing woman was clothed in an elegant, violet see-through dress. Her entire body was visible beneath her flimsy garment. This mysterious woman was no doubt the fantasy of every adult male on the planet. I knew that for a fact for I felt an emotion that was completely new to me: lust. In my mind, I wanted her for myself, to love, to cherish and to keep as mine. She simply radiated beauty and sensuality. I approached cautiously, my mind still not able to focus on anything but this woman. All the while, I couldn't help feel as if I knew her.

"Don't be shy, child," she beckoned. Her voice was like a low wind, soft and soothing. "Come over to me."

There wasn't any other option. It was as if my will was not my own and I was drawn to her. "Who are you?" I asked as I stood in awe before her.

"I am the Judge, the guardian of the doors to the nether realms. I am Styx, my dear Vincent. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Since this wasn't real, and I was having more difficulty believing that every second, I didn't question how she knew my name. There were more pressing questions. "Where am I?"

Styx laughed, and it made me want to be with her all the more. I wasn't even sure what I wanted with her. I only knew that my desire for her grew larger. "You are where you were before. I'm the one that isn't here." She smiled and I felt my knees go weak.

"What is this place? This isn't Egypt."

"No, Vincent, it is most definitely not Egypt. What you see before you is Limbo, my home."

"How did I get here?" I asked, panicked. "Did I die?"

Styx laughed and instantly I felt calmer. "No, child, you're as healthy as can be. I brought you here when you went to sleep. All I did was manipulate your dream so I could talk to you. You see, I cannot walk the planet's surface. I'm needed here at all times. I can, however, enter people's dreams and talk to them. This is what I've done with you."

"Why?"

"Because I have something very important to talk to you about. Come with me, Vincent. We haven't much time." She rose from her throne and stood beside me. When she put her arm around my shoulder I felt my heartbeat skip a beat. We walked through a large, ornate door that opened into a world of wonder. Creatures of all shapes and sizes roamed around freely, some feeding, some attacking others. There were people milling about and their actions weren't that different from the animals. The landscape was a mixture of hills and valleys, mountains and rivers, sand and snow. The sun shone down from some undetermined point to illuminate it all. "Welcome to Limbo."

"What exactly is this place?" I asked.

"Now is not the time for that, Vincent. We'll discuss that at a later date."

"What do you mean by that?"

Styx threw her head back in frustration and scolded, "Do you always have to ask so many questions?" I lowered my head at the rebuke, more ashamed than if my own father had chastised me. "I apologize for upsetting you but time really is of the essence here."

"I'm sorry," I said sheepishly.

"It's forgotten." Styx grabbed my shoulder to slow my progress and we stopped at a flower garden. Flowers of all hues and types created an explosion of colors, all mixed wildly into each other. I closed my eyes

and rubbed my forehead as I could feel a slight pain behind my eyes. "Are you okay, Vincent?" she asked.

"It's the flowers," I replied, my headache worsening.

Styx glanced at the garden, then quickly back to me. "Is that better?"

I looked up and saw that the flowers in the garden were now all lined up by kind and color. At once, my headache was replaced with feelings of relief and tranquility. "It's much better. To be honest, it's beautiful."

"I thought you'd like it." She directed me to a stone bench at the edge of the garden and we both sat down. "Vincent, you know much about your family, correct?"

"I know some things but I'm sure I don't know everything."

"I'm sure you don't either. Most of what you've learned has been from your father, The Beholder. I believe it's time you got some information from a second source. You see, you are extremely important in the grand scheme of the universe but you are not what your father believes you to be."

"What do you mean by that?" I was utterly confused.

"Your father believes that you are the one that will bring order to the Earth, and you shall try to do just that all your days. It is his methods that raise questions. It isn't all just him though. All of the Ancients watch you with intense eyes, child. It won't be long before you start to hear from them, and you'd be wise to listen to all they have to say."

"Why are they so interested in me? I'm only one of four siblings. What about the others?"

"Yes, what about them," Styx cheerfully replied. "For now, let us concentrate on you and your sister. The Ancients really don't have a use for Valencia right now, and I personally doubt they ever will. She's too unpredictable. Frankly, that's what I like about her. You, on the other hand, are not as impulsive. You feel the need to take into account all the facts and go from there. You're stable and orderly, just like you were meant to be. Because of that, you have the best chance of succeeding at your goal."

"What goal?"

"Bringing order to the world. The only problem there is how you define order."

"Order is having everything as it should be."

"But according to whom? You? Your father?" I wondered about that silently for a moment before she continued. "Your father has his own ideas of how to achieve order, as do I. All of the Ancients want the

world to be orderly. We just all have differing opinions on what orderly should be."

"What do you believe it should be?"

"We'll get to that some other time."

"What other time? Twice now you've hinted that we are going to meet again."

"And we will. I didn't bring you here to tell you my motives. I brought you here to warn you of his. You father believes that you will follow in his footsteps and do as he does. Maybe you will and maybe you won't, but it is a choice you are going to have to make eventually. What you decide will determine whether or not we meet again under favorable or unfavorable circumstances."

"I don't understand."

"What part?" she asked jokingly. I heard myself giggle before I knew I was going to.

"Are you saying I shouldn't listen to my father?"

"Not at all, Vincent," she said, her words floating to me on a cool breeze. "What I'm trying to tell you is to do what comes naturally. Take into account all the facts and make a rational, sound decision. The conclusions you draw may not always be what you want to do, yet you must do it anyway without hesitation." She caressed my cheek with one long, lovely finger and said, "Can you promise me that?"

My entire body was tingling from her touch and I would've promised her the world at that point in time. I nodded vigorously instead. She beamed at me, warming my spirit with her smile. Styx rose from the bench and said it was time for her to be leaving.

"Don't you mean I should be leaving?" I asked.

"Vincent," she chuckled, "I told you already. You haven't gone anywhere." With that, she waved her hand and was gone. Or I was. I wasn't sure exactly. I was awake now, lying on the floor of the hut. It was still dark outside so I attempted to get a bit more rest. I was sleeping again in no time, this time with the image of the lovely Ancient Styx burned into my mind and a broad smile on my face.

Chapter 3

"Where's Valencia?"

From just his tone of voice, I knew my father was upset before I opened my eyes. I had been resting comfortably until he spoke. The Beholder hovered over me like the morning sun, his burning gaze hotter than the beams of daylight now flooding into the hut. I rubbed my eyes and tried to get my mind working again before I responded. My father wasn't that patient.

"I asked you a question. Where is your sister?" he bellowed.

"I don't know. I was sleeping," I answered groggily. It became apparent right away that this was not the correct answer.

"You have to keep an eye on her at all times, Vincent. Find her. Now," he ordered.

I was still lying prone on the floor so I quickly jumped up, hoping my rapid movements would get my energy level back to normal. It wasn't nearly as effective as I'd hoped, but I felt a little better. My muscles were stiff and my eyes were slow in gaining focus but I elected to start my search right away for two reasons. First, my father was obviously upset. Second, the longer she was out there alone the worse it would get, for her and for anyone she might happen across. The two of us still didn't understand all of our abilities. More to the point, we didn't even know all the abilities we had. She could inadvertently end up hurting someone.

The Beholder was waiting just outside the hut tapping his foot in irritation. As I joined him outside, I told him I'd check by the river if he wanted to check in the village. The Beholder said he didn't think she was in the village. He could feel her essence nearby. With the intensity of his rage nearing catastrophic levels, I figured it would be best if I found her first. I talked my father into checking the village anyway in case anyone saw her this morning. Even if she wasn't in the village itself, it seemed like a logical place to start. The river was the next most logical choice since that was where I found her yesterday. The Beholder agreed to my plan and headed off.

I wanted to see if Alipha and his crew were waiting for me this morning, and that was another reason I worked hard to convince my father to go to the village. I hurried down to the riverside to tell my new friends I had to find my sister before I could do any work today. Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on your point of view, this wasn't necessary. Standing next to the ever-expanding pile of blocks, talking to Alipha and Ihmo, was Valencia. Her back was to me, so she never heard me approach.

"Valencia!" I shouted as I neared and she jumped in surprise.

"Vincent!" she cheerfully replied. "What took you so long?"

I ignored her question and threw her one of my own. "Can I talk to you alone for a moment?"

"Sure!" she gleefully replied. She turned and said to Alipha and Ihmo, "I'll be right back, guys. Don't go anywhere." Alipha and Ihmo were clearly smitten with Valencia and enthusiastically nodded. Valencia calmly strolled over and asked, with not a hint of awareness to the present situation, "So what do you want?"

"Father's looking for you again," I began.

"No," she said and drew out the word sarcastically. "Again, you are the one looking for me."

"Yes, well, this time he's looking for you as well. You should consider yourself lucky I found first."

"Why? Is he mad?" she asked excitedly.

"Very mad. And why are you so happy about it? Are you trying to get our father mad at you?"

"I don't care if he's mad or not. I just wanted to get away from him for a while. You've been on your own since we got here. This is the first time I've had the same opportunity. He can't hold me back forever, no matter how hard he tries." Valencia's eyes were starting to grow brighter as she spouted off about our father.

"Maybe he just..."

"Maybe he just' nothing! He wants me under his thumb, for some unknown reason, and I'm not going to play along anymore."

Her theory was supported by the facts. The Beholder never let her go anywhere that he couldn't keep an eye on her. He never let her talk to anyone. Now, when she finally got away, our father's first priority was to find her and keep her under wraps.

"Valencia, why did you come here?" I asked.

She shrugged and said, "Because I knew there'd be people here."

"Not because you wanted to help out?"

"Are you kidding me?" she laughed. "Everything you've done here is so neat and orderly it hurts my head just to look at it."

"Would you like to stick around a while?" I posed to her, knowing the answer before I asked.

"I'd love to!"

I was right. "Fine, but we have to work something out here first between the two of us."

"And what's that?" she asked skeptically.

"The things I'm working on, the playhouses, stay away from them."

You can work on things at the other end. Ihmo has dug out a long line for blocks to be set in, so there's plenty of space for you to claim as your own. I'll even talk to our father about letting you join me down here. I'll tell him I can keep an eye on you this way."

"You'd do that for me?"

"As long as you leave me alone."

"What about getting some kids to help me?"

"As long as they want to, you can ask anyone you want. Except for Alipha, Kalim and Ihmo. They're *my* new friends." I grinned down at her after noticing her eyes had gone back to normal. "Get your own."

She grinned back and said, "I don't know. I kind of like yours. I think they like me too." She nodded in their direction and I spun around to look at them. Kalim was still absent, but Alipha and Ihmo were staring at my sister intently. She winked at them and waved, causing them to dreamily wave back.

Our jovial mood was broken by the arrival of our father. He stormed past Ihmo and Alipha and headed straight for us. This was a man on a mission and pain and suffering would assuredly be doled out to anybody that got in his way. Thankfully, it was only the four of us here when he arrived.

"What are you doing down here?" The Beholder demanded.

"I found Valencia here, talking to my friends. We were just going to..."

"I was talking to Valencia!" he shouted at me.

"Why do you care?" she asked defiantly.

The Beholder raised his hand in anger again and this time I knew in my heart he was going to strike her. Yet once again he did not. Maybe it was the two other children standing nearby. Maybe it was that I was standing nearby. Whatever the reason, I had a feeling Valencia wouldn't be so lucky a third time.

"Father, it's all right," I said, trying my best to diffuse the situation. "She and I worked out a compromise. She can stay here if she wants. I don't mind."

Our father looked disapprovingly down at me. "I do mind. She is not supposed to be here with you while you work. She's disruptive. She's unmanageable. She's..."

"She's standing right here!" Valencia yelled.

Before The Beholder could wheel around and do anything to her, I jumped in quickly and said, "And this is where she'll remain." I looked up into my father's eyes and continued, "She'll be far enough away from what I'm doing. It won't be a problem. Besides, I can look after her."

"I don't need someone to watch over me!" she yelled, at me this time.

"Be quiet," I whispered to her. Back to our father, I said, "So, can she stay? I promise there won't be any more problems. Look at it this way. It's one less thing you have to worry about if I'm the one keeping watch over her."

The Beholder, certainly unconvinced this was the way to go, gave in. He simply turned and walked back to the village without a word.

"That was interesting," Valencia commented once our father was gone.

I grabbed her by the arm and turned her so she was facing me. "Valencia, that was not interesting. I thought he was really going to hit you this time."

"I was worried for a minute myself actually. Thanks for your help, Vincent."

"Don't mention it, and I mean that." She cocked her head and gave me a cocky little smirk. "And don't do anything to make me look foolish."

"I won't. I promise." We headed back over to Alipha and Ihmo who were still waiting patiently. I informed them that Valencia would be joining us in our project and they were both thrilled at the news. They weren't nearly as thrilled when I told them that she'd be working at the far end while we continued working here.

"You're going to make her work by herself?" Alipha asked, clearly wanting to assist her.

"I'm sure she'll find people eager to work with her," I replied as I glanced at my sister. She was smiling and looking past me. I turned in the direction of her gaze and saw Kalim walking over with a small crowd behind him. There must have been at least fifteen to twenty children with him. Alipha ran over to him and they talked excitedly. Kalim addressed his group and they all walked over in unison, lined up and awaited their assigned tasks. Several of them were looking intently at Valencia and I knew some of them would be following her around within the hour. I had Ihmo introduce me to the new arrivals as I instructed them on how to be of the most help. They all enthusiastically took to their tasks, especially the ones I told to go with Kalim and accompany Valencia. Ihmo and Alipha were upset that I didn't let them go with my sister since they met her first, but I told them I'd rather have them assist me. I wasn't sure what Valencia was planning on building at her end of the project. I wasn't even sure I wanted to know. I did know I didn't want these two corrupted by her.

There were now twenty-three children, including Valencia and me, gathered along the river working on various jobs. Some were making blocks, some were responsible for shaping blocks for the corners of the buildings, and some gathered reeds to lay the blocks on. I instructed some of the children to start thatching reeds together tightly so we could use the bundles for the roofs. We weren't quite ready to start on a roof but I want to be prepared when the time came.

We worked all through the day and were astonished to see some of the adults from the village checking in on us. They mainly just stood around with expressions of wonder on their faces. They were simply amazed their children could create something so grand in scale. Not only that, part of our site was coming together rapidly. At least two of the buildings actually looked like they would become habitable, with three more just getting started. These rudimentary structures already looked like they would be more stable than some of the huts in the village. I scanned my surroundings and saw that we'd made considerable progress, but we still had a way to go before we could call any building complete.

I didn't know what was happening at the other end of our endeavor and felt good about that. Four other children during the day opted to aid my sister in her venture. They probably didn't have anything done since all I'd seen them do all day was laugh and joke around.

As the sun began to set, many of the adults came to retrieve their children. I thought it was slightly odd that most of them were smiling proudly. Not one child was chastised for being away from home all day. No voices were raised in anger at the fact that all the children were covered in mud from head to toe. When one parent suggested his son clean up, the child looked at the others, spoke a few words and they all ran into the river, laughing like maniacs. The child that started the charge into the water, his name was Aristol, had been helping Valencia earlier, so I wasn't totally shocked by his wild and carefree behavior. What was funny was when Aristol started splashing water at the other kids. A water war broke out instantly. All the children were laughing and splashing each other with total abandon. Even some of the parents were laughing. I saw Valencia standing by the shore, watching it all happen around her. Her face bore no note of gladness at the current events and this puzzled me. I eased up next to her and stood watching the children splashing around in the river.

"Why so down, Valencia?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she mumbled quietly.

"Then why do you look so sad?"

"I'm not."

"You look like you are."

Pausing to gaze out at the children at play, she finally said what was on her mind. "I did that."

"Really? How?" I was quite interested in why she believed she was responsible for the lightheartedness taking place before us.

"I was talking to Aristol all day. He's very open to suggestion."

"And what did you suggest?" I teasingly prodded.

A tiny smile crept onto her face as she said, "I merely advised him to loosen up a little. He seemed very nervous around me. He wouldn't leave my side, but he never looked like he was completely at ease around me. By the end of the day, Aristol was beyond loosened up. He went from uneasy to relaxed to completely goofy in one day. All thanks to me." She turned her gaze to me and looked me dead in the eyes. The smile on her face was broader than I'd ever seen. I had apparently mistaken her prideful, awed silence for sadness.

I kept my eyes locked on hers for a minute and then began to examine my sister closer. She, like the other children, was covered in mud. I managed to stay clean by working mainly in stacking blocks. I gave her a grin and she understood immediately. She broke away and ran into the river to join our new companions in their revelry. She waved for me to take part in the fun but I declined. I didn't want to get any messier than I already was.

None of the parents made any effort to pull their children away. They didn't really need to as the children slowly filtered out of the river after a while. The coolness of the desert night was a welcome relief to the searing heat we'd worked under all day. There wasn't a cloud to be seen, and the sky seemed to stretch on forever. The sun had all but set and cast a dim glow onto the river. The waves flowed quietly and changed the texture of the reflection the setting sun had spread across the water. It hurt my head to see something so beautiful being disrupted. The last two people were emerging from the water and I was not surprised to see it was Aristol and Valencia. They hugged and Aristol ran off to find his parents. She walked over to me, dripping wet from head to toe. Before I could tell her we needed to get back home, she wrapped me in a big hug, almost knocking the breath out of me.

"Thanks again, Vincent," she said as she released me from her embrace. "This has been my best day yet."

"I said, don't mention it." I glanced down at my clothes and saw that Valencia had been able to transfer a good amount of dirt and mud. I looked back at her with annoyance and she got the hint right away. She let out a small yelp and ran off to the hut. I knew I could catch her if I

really wanted to. Sometimes, though, it was the thrill of the chase, not the capture.

I was laughing so hard at Valencia's antics as we weaved through the village that my sides hurt. She was in tears as well from her gales of laughter. Although I believed in order, I was still basically a child and inclined to act as one. Chasing my sister around, and enjoying it nonetheless, made me feel good. Granted, our father would've said I was being disorderly but I had to disagree. She was being disorderly, as she was prone to do, changing directions on me constantly throughout the chase. Trying to stop her, by my definition, is orderly. At least, it would've been orderly if I'd actually been trying harder to catch her.

Our revelry ended when we reached the hut. I grabbed her arm, thereby ending the chase. As soon as I had her under control physically, we were both still laughing hysterically, our father came out of the hut. His eyes burned with such intensity that our laughter ceased immediately.

"Valencia, get inside," he growled at her. She quickly scooted past him into the hut.

"What about me?" I asked.

"Wait here. This won't take long."

I did as I was told as The Beholder went back inside to have a private chat with Valencia. I had a bad feeling about what was going to happen but didn't want to disobey my father for fear of being on the receiving end of his wrath. It wasn't long before my suspicions were confirmed. I could hear The Beholder furiously reprimanding her. I decided then and there to keep an eye on the situation before it got out of hand.

I peeked inside and saw no one present, so I concluded they must be in Valencia's room. I quietly snuck inside and stood just outside her entranceway. The shouting wasn't limited to our father, much to my surprise. Valencia was giving voice to her gripes as well.

"If you'd let me actually talk to people, I wouldn't need to bother Vincent!" she screamed at him.

"You will only speak to whom I tell you to!" he shouted back.

"And that would be no one! How am I supposed to learn anything that way?"

I peered inside briefly and saw Valencia standing tall against our father. Tall for her isn't very tall at all but I admired her resolve.

"You will learn what I choose to teach you, is that clear?"

"No, it isn't. Why do you help out Vincent and not me? Why does he get to learn on his own?"

"Because he's more important than you!" Before Valencia could

respond, The Beholder continued his rebuke. "You are nothing in the grand scheme of the universe. The only reason you're here right now is because I had to bring you along if I wanted Vincent. You are nothing, as far as I'm concerned. It's not worth my time to teach anything to someone as insignificant as you."

"Insignificant? I'm insignificant?" she barked.

"It means..."

"I know what it means!" she cried out in anger. I peeked back into the room and wasn't the least bit shocked to see Valencia's eyes glowing a brighter green than I'd ever seen before. "It means you think I'm worthless. Well let me tell you something, father. You're the one that's insignificant. There are only two people like me and my brother on this entire planet, with two more waiting to arrive sometime in the future. There are ten of you Ancients. You tell me, who matters more?"

The Beholder raised his hand to strike her and I honestly hoped that he would stay his hand again. He didn't. I didn't know exactly how fast I could move until I saw my father's hand arcing downward towards my sister's face. In a flash I was in the room, grasping The Beholder's arm with both hands.

"No," was all I said as I looked into his eyes. There was disbelief in those eyes, as well as disappointment.

"Vincent, this is none of your concern," he said as I tightened my grip. I had no doubt he could've slipped out of my grasp at any time.

"My sister is my concern, as well as yours. You won't hit her." I let go of his arm and added, "Ever."

The Beholder was visibly irate. "You think you can tell an Ancient what to do, child? I think not." In one fluid motion, he again raised his hand and started to swing. I didn't know if Valencia was frozen out of shock or if she just didn't care, but she remained in place the entire time. This time someone else came to her rescue.

As his hand came crashing down, a rumbling sound began underfoot. It sounded like the charge of hundreds of visceral beasts, primal and foreboding. A pillar of Dark Flame arose from the ground behind The Beholder and from out of the flames stepped forth Wraith.

At ten feet in height, Wraith barely fit in the hut. His horns, curled and black, scraped the ceiling causing bits of reeds and mud to fall on us. I watched as he physically shrank down to about seven feet in height, thereby giving him more maneuverability. He glanced at us, and his eyes burned with the black fires of Haedes itself. I jumped back in utter fear, grabbing Valencia by the arm as I did. My sister and I crashed into the wall as I saw Wraith reach out and grab our father by the throat.

The Beholder was no more than a rag doll in Wraith's grasp. Anger, tinged with sheer madness, radiated from my father's stare. He raised his arm to defend himself as the demon spoke.

"Don't even bother!" he bellowed and threw him through the wall of the hut. The Beholder tumbled a good ten yards away and came to rest face down in the dirt. Wraith stormed out of the opening in the wall after him. "What did you think you were going to do, Ancient? Strike her? Beat her like a dog? Have you completely lost your mind this time?"

"They are my children," he replied, regaining his senses and standing. Valencia and I ran over to the hole in the wall to get a better view.

"They are my kin!" Wraith cried and charged. The Beholder instantly disappeared and reappeared in the hut behind us.

Our father spun us around and said, "Leave us. Now!"

"No!" shouted Wraith, now standing close by. "Stay, children. Listen and learn." His voice was now a low growl, fierce and overflowing with rage. "Just step out of the way."

"Okay," Valencia chirped and skipped over to the entranceway into the hall. I followed her, a whole lot less enthusiastically.

"I'm going to enjoy watching your body soak in a pool of your own blood," Wraith snarled at The Beholder. "I should've taken care of you for good eons ago."

"This isn't your concern, Fallen One," The Beholder stated with contempt.

"You should know better than anyone else what my responsibilities are. My sister asked me to watch out for them and I will not let her down again. You will not now, or ever, lay a hand on them in anger. Do you understand?" Wraith's growl had grown in veracity, his eyes burning brighter black, if that was actually possible.

The Beholder stood his ground and replied, "The prophecies are more important than your duties to your sister, Fallen One."

"Stop calling me that!" Wraith screamed at him. Black fire shot from Wraith's outstretched hands but The Beholder was able to move out of the way unharmed. "You have no right to speak of other's misdeeds."

"Maybe not," The Beholder responded, circling the demon. "But what really gnaws at your soul is that you never had any real power over me. You speak of destroying me. Me? An Ancient! You don't have the power." The Beholder looked the demon in the eyes and said, "I will do what I have to do."

"Then so will I." Instantly, hellfire rose from the ground around The Beholder's feet and quickly engulfed him. He screamed as the flames

began to sear his flesh. In the blink of an eye he was gone, reappearing behind Wraith. He raised his hands, palms out and facing Wraith's back. With a twitch of his hand, Wraith was sent flying straight up into the air. He soared through the thatched palm-leaf roof, flipped head over heels, and crashed down head first onto the dirt floor. Wraith swiftly regained his footing and raced at The Beholder before he could slip away again and slammed into his chest shoulder-first. They both went hurtling into the wall, just missing the opening they'd made earlier. Wraith once again lifted our father by the throat and said, "Are we finished yet?"

There was blood dripping from underneath The Beholder's mask. Crimson droplets fell onto Wraith's arm and around his feet. "We are," he weakly replied.

Wraith released his hold on our father and he collapsed on the floor. I started to run over to see if he was all right when Wraith bent down to him. I could hear them whispering to one another but couldn't make out what was being said. Much to my surprise, Wraith helped my father to his feet and led him outside through the opening in the wall. I carefully made my way that direction, more curious about my father's condition than before. As I neared the opening, Wraith returned, alone. Without a word, he waved for me to go back and stand with my sister. I was not going to argue.

"Your father asked me to stay here with the two of you for a while. He has some business he has to take care of."

"You protected me. Thank you," Valencia chimed in.

In a gesture that sent me reeling, Wraith smiled. "No thanks are necessary, little one. I was only fulfilling my duties." Valencia actually smiled back and, oddly, I wasn't surprised. Wraith turned to me and said, "You were right to interfere when he tried to strike your sister, Vincent. He has neither cause nor claim that allows him such measures."

"Will he be all right?" I asked.

"He'll be fine. He's out getting better right now."

Before I could ask what that entailed, my sister interrupted. "Hey! What's this?" Valencia asked from behind the demon.

Wraith wheeled around, but apparently not in time to stop Valencia from pilfering a large book from his possession. Valencia jumped to the side, avoiding his grasp easily, as Wraith was trying to stop her yet not hurt her. As big as he was, that had to be a challenge. She opened the book and as soon as she did, she looked like she may drop it. I detected a glint of anger in Wraith's eyes, but it may have just been annoyance.

"That is my book, Valencia," he growled at her, "And you would

do well to give it back."

"It's heavy," she commented, ignoring his plea. Wraith's hand moved in a flash and snatched the book from my sister's grasp as she was reading. He then strapped the book to his side where he'd had it secured earlier.

"What does 'Iolcam Coraxo Telocvovim' mean?" Valencia asked.

Wraith shook his head in regret and said, "Those are words you should not repeat aloud, little one. It is a summoning spell."

"Really?" Valencia asked excitedly. "Who does it summon?"

Wraith and I exchanged a weary glance. I whispered to him, "Remember, I have to live with her."

Directing his attention once again to my sister, Wraith informed her that the summoning spell was his and to use it carefully. "I don't want you to call upon me unless it is a dire situation. Having me appear in this realm," he said with disgust, "without good cause will severely affect our relationship. Do you understand?"

Valencia nodded furiously, just happy to have finally learned something other than languages. I was still worried about our father. Wraith assured me that when he got back, he'd be fine. In an attempt to change the topic, Wraith regaled us with stories of our family, namely his brothers and sisters. It seems that there has been infighting amongst our family since the dawn of time.

As Wraith was finishing up a tale about Loathe and his attempt to defeat Cherub's armies, The Beholder returned. There was still blood caked on his chin and there was a steady stream of droplets falling from underneath his mask.

"Wraith, you can go. I'm better now," he said upon entering. His walk was slower, as if his legs had turned to stone. There was still a marked strength in his eyes and his voice carried the commanding tone I'd grown accustom to hearing.

"I'd prefer not," he replied. The Beholder took a tentative step towards Wraith and the demon raised his hand to stop him. "I would like to do something before I go and I needed you to get here before I could."

"And what would that be?"

Without addressing The Beholder, Wraith uttered a short phrase in a tongue I didn't recognize. Instantly, the room was filled with Dark Flame. From these flames emerged several men, all small in stature and dressed in black robes. They had hoods shading their faces yet I was able to sneak a peek at one of them. I fell backwards into my sister when I saw his eyes. They held the same inky blackness as Wraith's, telling me even though these new arrivals looked passive, I shouldn't underestimate

them. Wraith made a few hand gestures and rapidly his minions got to work rebuilding the hut.

"These are the Dark Clerics. They will repair all the damage done here this evening," Wraith explained. With time barely moving now that my sister, my father and I were all present inside the hut, the repairs could take years and it would seem like seconds to the unknowing observer. Wraith's servants were well suited for the task. Since greater forces than the hand of man built this hut, majickal means were more compatible. As I watched the clerics run about, working on their assignments, I felt myself smile. Everything was getting back in order.

The clerics made short work of the repairs and the hut looked sturdier from their efforts. I mentioned this to Wraith and he informed me that their one purpose in being was to please him. He certainly looked pleased. Wraith was smiling and I assumed it was because of the clerics. I was wrong.

Wraith dismissed the clerics and they evaporated in a plume of Dark Flame. The demon then turned to The Beholder and said, "This has been your warning, Ancient. You would be wise to heed it."

The Beholder was motionless, his anger paralyzing him. When he spoke, the words oozed forth. "Your warning has been heard. Now, leave."

Wraith's smile grew wider, his face stretching to contain its unnatural expression. Without a word, he was gone, leaving nothing behind except the odor of death and sulphur.

The three of us were once again alone in the hut. Our father was still standing as he had been when Wraith departed. Valencia and I were standing by the newly repaired wall. His back was to us and my sister was making faces at him. He spun around, missing the last face she made, and said, "There is no lesson this evening. Go to bed."

"We're in my room," Valencia reminded him.

"Just leave!" he shouted.

I obeyed right away and began to leave. Valencia wasn't moving as swiftly as I was, so I grabbed her by the arm and pulled her out of the room with me over her loud objections. I dragged her into my room kicking and screaming. I gently pushed her down and told her to be quiet. To my surprise, she complied.

I paced around the room, glancing out the entranceway repeatedly to see if our father was listening. Apparently, he'd left the hut as soon as we were out of the room because he was nowhere to be seen. "Are you trying to get our father killed?"

"He can't be killed, stupid. He's immortal like us."

"Don't call me stupid, Valencia," I rebuked, glaring down at her on the floor.

"But he is immortal."

"Yes, he is. And that means he can't be killed. But did you ever stop to think that having him mad at us, especially you, might not be a good thing?"

"He can't kill us," was her glib reply.

"But he can put us down. Did you know that?" The puzzled look on her face told me that she didn't. "We can't be killed, as you said, but if you would've been paying attention that first night you would've learned that we can be put down."

"What do you mean?"

"There are ways to keep our bodies and our spirits separate. Quartering your heart and keeping each section in a blessed, silver chamber will do the trick. As long as the four parts of the heart are not reconstructed, you will be as close to dead as you can get. Do you want him to do that?" She shook her head frantically. "I didn't think so. From now on, try not to get our father so upset. Wraith won't always be able to save you. And neither will I."

Valencia stared back at me blankly, letting my advice sink in. She stood up and, without a word, left my room and went to hers. I sat alone in my room, thankful that everyone was still in one piece. Our father had taken a severe beating at Wraith's hands. He seemed to have recovered well enough. I couldn't help but wonder why Wraith deemed us important enough to protect like he did. That was never explained to us, other than to say we are his kin, his blood. We're of The Beholder's blood as well though. It was all too confusing. For a brief moment, I thought about discussing it with Valencia in the morning. She was an expert at dealing with confusion. My momentary lapse of reason passed and I tried to get some sleep.

Sleep once again did not find me. Last night's encounter had sent my mind reeling and as morning broke I still hadn't put everything together in a way I could make sense of. Preferring not to dwell on it, I got ready to get back to my daily routine. I felt better having a set agenda for the day. I would go down to the river, set the other children to their tasks and get to work. The very idea brought a smile to my face.

Valencia apparently didn't sleep last night either. She was actually waiting for me to get around. "It's about time you woke up," she said as I emerged from my room.

"I wasn't sleeping," I mumbled in reply.

"I know," she said cheerfully, bouncing on the balls of her feet as she did.

"Then why..." and I stopped. To continue on was sheer foolishness when I already knew the answer. I slowly rubbed my forehead as I felt a headache coming on. I lowered my head and muttered, "Let's just go."

Valencia enthusiastically agreed and we made our way down to the riverside. She was skipping merrily along as I trudged on behind her. As we neared the river she stopped abruptly. I wasn't paying attention and ran into her, almost knocking her over. Before I could ask what was wrong, she was pointing in the direction of the river and stammering uncontrollably. I looked to where she was pointing and saw our father sitting on a log next to the large pile of blocks.

"Why is he here?" she demanded.

"I have no idea. Wait here and I'll see."

I left Valencia and went over to our father. Several children had already gathered together and started making blocks. I even saw Ihmo directing other children on how to properly build a wall. They were working well yet I couldn't help but feel like something was amiss. As I neared my father I figured it out. The children weren't talking to each other with the same enthusiasm as they had before. Conversations were short, clipped. There was a general feeling of sorrow in their words and actions.

I reached my father and asked him what he was doing down here. "I'm just here for the lesson," he replied. When I asked him what he meant, he just said I'd find out soon enough. Realizing I was not going to get any further explanation, I wandered over to Ihmo. As soon as I left my father's side Valencia ran over to join me.

Ihmo was guiding three children in the creation of a sidewalk. The only words coming forth from him were work related. Even those words seemed like they were forced out of his mouth, a noticeable tone of sadness and loss behind them. I caught his eye as he was working and they were red and puffy. He had been crying and I wanted to know why. I glanced at Valencia and she shrugged. I assumed she noticed the same things I did and was just as confused. Lucky for her, she dealt with it a lot better than I did. We eased over to Ihmo as he watched over his helpers.

"Are you okay Ihmo?" I asked. He stared out past the work area and over the river, standing as still as a statue. I looked over at Valencia and nudged her. She got the message.

Valencia slid up next to Ihmo, put her arm around his shoulder and gently pulled him close. He leaned against her as she whispered,

“What’s wrong, Ihmo? You can tell me.”

Ihmo wiped fresh tears from his face, streaking mud across his cheeks. “A friend of ours was killed last night by some savage beast. His father as well.”

“That’s horrible!” she responded, utterly dismayed by the news.

“His mother is all alone, grieving over her lost family. I feel worse for her than I do for myself, to be honest.”

I had made my way over to Ihmo’s other side and I found myself smiling at his declaration. Here was a mere child, having just lost a friend, worrying about his dead friend’s mother. My heart was filled with pride and admiration for Ihmo and I knew then and there that I would call him my friend all his days on Earth. “We’ll see to her, won’t we Valencia?” I said. She nodded supportively. “Who was the unfortunate child?”

“Aristol,” he replied.

Valencia’s arm jumped off Ihmo’s shoulder as if his body had suddenly caught fire. “Wait. Didn’t he work with me yesterday?”

“I think he did.”

“Where’s his mother?” she urgently asked.

Ihmo gave her directions and she took off. Her concern was heartening and I knew it was genuine. Aristol was the first person she’d really established any type of relationship with, even if it was just one day. I also knew she wanted to see where it happened and try to figure out what caused his death. I already had my suspicions.

I turned around and looked back at my father. He was standing to get a better view of the proceedings. I could see his smile from where I was standing. I told Ihmo I’d be right back and ran over to my father.

“It was you, wasn’t it? Last night, when you needed to recover, you let out the lycan. Didn’t you?” I was practically shouting at my father as if our roles had suddenly reversed. I expected him to lash out at me but instead his expression never changed. Nor did he answer, not exactly.

“There was a time when I could’ve destroyed that damn demon,” he wistfully remarked. “Not in this body, however. You see my son, the sack of flesh I’m forced to inhabit limits me. Wraith is quite powerful, have no doubt, but in another time I would’ve made short work of him. Since I inhabit this lycan I am forced to deal with its limitations.”

I waited for more but nothing else was said. “You didn’t answer my question, father. Was it you?”

“Your lesson for today, Vincent, is this: Do you tell Valencia? You believe it was me. I can see it in your eyes as clearly as I see the sun in the sky. Yet you have doubts. Not many, but they are there. Valencia doesn’t even know of my unmasked form so you’d really be throwing a

lot of information at her at once. I wonder what would happen if your sister, the bringer of chaos, were to get overloaded with negative information? Do you think she could be dangerous? Neither you nor I truly know what she's capable of. If she reached the same conclusion as you and thinks I killed her little friend, she might run away. Sounds almost pleasant, doesn't it? Problem is, you would then have the bringer of chaos roaming freely about the planet. Is that going to help you in accomplishing your goals, especially if she starts out filled with darkness?" His smile never broke, remaining firmly planted on his face.

I was speechless. It was him. I knew it for a fact now. "Why did you do it? I want to know," I demanded, my voice soft but firm.

"I never said..."

"You said he was Valencia's little friend. You did it to punish her, didn't you?"

Had I been asked, I would've said my father's smile couldn't possibly have grown any wider. Proven wrong, he bared his feral teeth in a grotesque smile that distorted every exposed area of his face. "Learn your lesson, Vincent. I'm quite sure your sister has learned hers." He turned and left, walking back toward the village.

I wondered how I would be able to return to what I had been working on knowing what I knew. I felt a tear roll down my cheek as I thought of the despair my new companions must be feeling and figured maybe working would help take their minds off of the unpleasantness. I walked over to Ihmo as he was assisting three other children.

"Can I talk to you for a moment, my friend?" I asked him. The three children continued on as Ihmo and I strolled a few yards away. "I was wondering if the beast that killed Aristol was captured or killed?"

Ihmo sorrowfully shook his head. "No, my friend, it was not. No one even saw it. It moved as if made of shadow and air. Aristol's mother never even woke from sleep. Her husband was sleeping in the same room and this creature dragged him out of the room and..." He broke down and began to cry, giving in to the tremendous weight of his sadness. There was no shame, only pure despair and grief over his lost friend.

I reached out to comfort him but he stepped away. He was embarrassed and I assured him there was no reason to feel that way. "The only way you should feel any embarrassment at all would be if you didn't cry. That would be a disgrace and would dishonor your friend's memory."

Ihmo wiped away his tears, streaking more mud on his cheeks. Most of his face was caked in the stuff. "Thank you, Vincent. Your support is greatly cherished."

“And it is always available whenever it is needed. Now, shall we get ourselves back to work and build our playhouses in his memory?”

Ihmo smiled for the first time today and replied, “It will be the best built structures in all the land.”

We walked back, heads held high. Ihmo went around talking to every single child that had shown up and telling them to honor Aristol with our work. Everyone readily accepted this idea and it quickly became the most productive day of work yet. The cloudy sky and cooler air helped a lot too.

The only hitch was when Valencia came back. I caught her before she could talk to anyone else and asked her how the widow was doing. Valencia was visibly depressed by the day’s events but filled me in on her condition. She also reaffirmed what Ihmo had told me earlier about the stealth and brutality of the killer. Tears began to slowly roll down her cheek as she told me of seeing the body. The savagery she described was beyond horrific. She said she needed to see the body to truly face the fact that her friend was dead. Unfortunately, it brought her no comfort.

Dark clouds dotted much of the sky, but there was plenty of daylight left. Valencia decided to go to the other end of the village, where I’d found her the other day, and sit by the riverside alone with her thoughts. I told her I’d come for her at sunset and she set off down the main path of the village.

I never told her about our father’s role in the deaths.

Chapter 4

My first day on Earth I came down to the riverside and ended up making blocks out of the mud. I found it funny, looking back, that doing something as simple as that led to what was now being built along the river. Every day, more and more walls got started. Every morning there were more children willing to spend the day working. Most of the remaining children in the village joined our group after Aristol's death. They wanted to pay tribute to their friend.

The real surprise was when the parents showed up. At first they would only stop by to get their children at the end of the day. Once progress on the buildings was noticeable, more of them would drop by, outwardly to check on their kids but in reality to inspect our work. When the first building was finished, a few of the parents helped line the roof with thatched reeds and palm leaves.

My sanctuary was complete. The day we finished it, Ihmo proudly stood by the entrance and escorted me in. It was nothing special once you were inside. It was one room shaped in a square, ten feet by ten feet. The ceiling was flat and eight feet above the ground; making it actually lower than the hut I resided in. It wasn't the size of the room or the simplicity of it that made it special. It was that we had built it and it was solid. I heard one of the parents talking to another about how sturdy the walls looked and they were both clearly impressed by our work.

Valencia was at the other end of the project, which now stretched a fair distance along the river. I yelled for her, knowing that she was too far away to hear me. One of us was always yelling for the other, so the children in between would pass the message along. I waited patiently as she took her time.

"What do you want now? I'm working!" she shouted at me as she approached.

"It's finished."

She looked over and saw that we had indeed finished the first building. "Great. Can I go back to work now?"

"In a moment. I just wanted to tell you that this is mine. Do you understand?"

"Sure. It's yours. Whatever. Can I go back now?" Valencia seemed quite eager to return to what she was doing.

"Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I was in the middle of something when you called for me."

"What are you doing down there?" I asked suspiciously.

She grinned and lowered her head slightly, causing her hair to fall

over her eyes, blocking them from my view. “Building things,” she quietly replied.

“What kind of things?” I pushed.

Valencia straightened up and proudly stated, “You’ll see when it’s done. Now, can I get back to it?”

“Sure. As long as you remember that this place is mine...”

“Right, right, it’s yours. I told you before I wouldn’t mess with your end of the project and that included the finished product. I gave you my word and I intend to keep it.” With that, she turned and ran off to resume her project.

I found it heartening to hear my sister promise to keep her word to me. Granted, she never used the word promise but the meaning was the same. I was willing to bet she would go back on her word, without pause, to anyone in the world but me. We may differ in our goals, personalities, likes, dislikes, attitudes, the list goes on and on, but through it all we were family. There were no other beings on this planet right now like us, so we stuck together. We would probably never truly get along, but at least we had some mutual respect.

The Beholder wasn’t constantly watching us anymore and we only saw him at night for our daily language lesson. Valencia and I picked up the foreign tongues with the greatest of ease. We would practice all the time when we were alone. We didn’t like to talk in other languages around the locals for fear it might arouse suspicion. I hadn’t ventured into the village in a while, preferring to concentrate on the building project. The Beholder said he spent most of his time in the village talking up the local leaders. Maybe I was avoiding the village so I wouldn’t run into him. It was a theory I simply couldn’t discount. Ever since Wraith showed up that night there’d been an underlying tension between the three of us. The main friction was between Valencia and The Beholder with me being caught in the middle. I had ill feelings for my father ever since the day he killed Aristol. Valencia still didn’t know it was our father and if I had my way she never would.

I decided to take a stroll into the village today. I hadn’t really had an opportunity to explore it thoroughly. The only time I’d really been through the village was when I went searching for Valencia. I was moving so quickly at the time I didn’t see much of anything other than huts. This time I would be casual, examining every detail of the village. If I could get the children working together I could probably get the adults to do the same. I just needed to know how much I had to start with and how much I’d need to help them.

I was astounded by what I saw in the village. Many of the adults

that had ventured down to the riverside to observe us as we worked were using the knowledge they gained to improve the village. It wasn't just the adults though. Every time I saw an adult planning out a new home there was a child standing alongside. I quietly observed one child telling his father how to support the walls by planting the base into the ground. His father then began to do as his child instructed. I smiled as I watched this and continued on. I saw a few more children coaching their parents in the ways of construction. In every instance, both parent and child were beaming with pride.

I knew I shouldn't have felt bad about it, but seeing parents and children working together depressed me. There was no way I'd ever enjoy that feeling. I couldn't work cooperatively with my sister. It just wasn't meant to be. My other siblings weren't present on this plane of existence yet so I didn't even know if I could work with them or not. I could always join up with my father. I didn't know his intentions for my sister and me, and a sense of foreboding overwhelmed me when I thought about it. I wanted to believe my father wasn't a bad person. I just wasn't sure if what I believed and what was truth were the same.

A couple of children came running up to me as I wandered through the village. They were very hyper, jumping up and down constantly as if their feet were afraid of the ground. One of them, a tike named Shi'ial, dragged me over to his hut to show me what he and his father were doing. I went along willingly but that didn't stop Shi'ial from pulling my arm to make me move faster. If I really wanted to show off I could've run circles around him. I resisted the temptation however. Shi'ial had been responsible for thatching reeds and palm leaves together to make roofs for the buildings we were working on. He was quick for his age and very efficient. He had apparently taught his father how to make the better roofing material and he was now replacing all the old, weather-beaten bits and pieces of his old roof with new, sturdier material. I commended them both on their efforts and continued on my way.

It was good to see the villagers making improvements on their own. I thought I would have to show them how to get their community in order but they took the initiative and did it themselves. I slowed my pace as I pondered the work they'd started. Time ran away from me as I was lost in my own thoughts. In a blink, daylight turned to dusk. More time had surely passed but I had no memory of it. I found myself at the far end of the village near where I'd found Valencia many nights before. I chuckled softly and casually strolled over to where she'd been sitting that night. I looked out at the river as the sun was setting. The sight before my eyes made my worries disappear. It was the most spectacular display

of color I'd ever seen. From brilliant shades of yellow to the darkest orange, the glow of the setting sun reflected off the ripples of the river. Bright rays of sunlight flashed into my eyes as the river directed the light onto the shore. There were fish popping up out of the water to feast on the insects hovering above the surface. Whenever a fish would come up for a meal it would cause more ripples in the water. It was more chaotic than I usually preferred, but there was an underlying order to it all as well. I was watching the last throes of the day, cast by the sun onto the river in a desperate attempt to continue. As light shot off of the river in all directions, trying in vain to prolong the inevitable, it wandered into the realm of the chaotic for one final gasp. Then the light was gone. The sun had set and darkness now claimed the river as its own. Order, once again, was restored.

I sat on the log and stared out over the river. Occasionally another fish would jump up for a quick snack but otherwise all was calm. I was so relaxed that when a large fish lunged out of the water, causing a big splash as it re-entered, I almost fell off of the log. I didn't actually see the fish but it had to be huge. I watched the river intently, hoping he would make another appearance. Suddenly another splash erupted and I realized it wasn't a fish. I craned my head around and saw my sister bending down to pick up another rock.

"I thought it was a fish," I commented meekly.

"That would be one gigantic fish," she replied, grinning wildly. The look on her face made me nervous. The laughter in her eyes had me downright worried. She even let out a little giggle as she walked over to where I was seated.

"What are you so happy about? Did you get a lot done on your end of the project today?"

"Yes, I did, but that's not why I'm smiling," she said. Her voice had a lilting, musical quality to it.

"All right. I give up. Why are you smiling?"

"Because of what I get to say." She was barely containing her laughter and would burst any second if she didn't let it out.

"And that is..." I prodded.

"Our father is looking for you," and that was it. She didn't even have the last word out before she cracked.

I felt my own laughter begin to build as I replied, "No, he isn't. You are." My laughter gushed forth and flowed as easily as the river before me.

"Same thing," she retorted.

"It is not!"

"Is too!"

Both of us were overcome with laughter now. My sides were even beginning to hurt. I felt tears cascade down my face and couldn't seem to wipe them away fast enough. Valencia was shaking so badly from laughing that when she went to sit down on the log she nearly missed. It took us a few minutes to regain our composure and I was extremely thankful no one else was around. We must've looked like complete fools.

Valencia wiped the last of her tears away and said, "Seriously, he is looking for you. We should get back."

"In a moment. How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't. I just wandered around. It was just blind luck."

"It is nice here, isn't it?"

"Sure is. I didn't think you'd like it very much. That lightshow had to be irritating."

"Strangely, I kind of liked it. It was the way it ended. All that chaos giving way to the order of darkness." I glanced over to see my sister giving me a very disapproving look. "Nothing personal," I added.

"I understand. That's the part I don't care for. I usually start throwing in rocks as soon as the sun sets. That way, the chaos of the waves can soothe me."

"I find the symmetry of the waves quite orderly."

"It disrupts the stillness of the water. I like that," she said wistfully.

"Haven't we had this argument before?"

Silence settled over us as we watched the gently flowing river. After a few minutes, just as I was about to recommend that we head home, Valencia asked, "We aren't going to get along when we get older, are we?"

"Probably not," I unemotionally replied. "You and I want different things."

"Just because I want chaos and you want order means we can't get along?"

"Pretty much. Besides, we don't get along all that well now and we've only been here a short time."

"That's petty stuff though."

"Right. What's going to happen when the bigger issues come into play?" I asked.

"We can work it out."

"With you doing the exact opposite of what I'm doing? That's not going to work out well at all."

"Wait a minute. You don't like me, do you? Be honest," she

asked, pouting.

"I don't like what you are meant to do. It interferes with what I have to do."

"Do you even know what we're meant to do? You don't, do you?" She was screaming at me, upset with the truths I was telling her.

"Not exactly, but I have an idea. When our father was yelling at you a few nights ago, I heard him say how you weren't important. Before you start in on me, let me say I think he's wrong. But he was hinting that I am important. I read some scrolls..."

"What scrolls?" she interjected, slightly calmer.

"Just some scrolls. Father left them lying around and I took a quick glance at them. I didn't understand all of what I read at first. The more I thought about them, the more things made some sort of sense."

"What did the prophecy say?"

"That one of the four of us will rule the over the Earth."

"And you think it's referring to you?" she skeptically asked.

"Actually, I think I do."

Valencia was unconvinced. I could tell because she was giving me a strange look, a mixture of disbelief and concern. "Vincent, do you really think you're meant to rule the world? I mean, be realistic. Order can never be totally established."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. As long as I'm here, and I don't go away, order will never be totally established. It's the same way with me. I couldn't rule this planet if I wanted to, and I don't really think I do, because chaos cannot be complete. There will always be chaos just as there will always be order."

"But Valencia, I think the scrolls I read were the writings of Propheteus himself," I added.

"So?" Clearly, my sister did not grasp the gravity of the scrolls and their author.

"So that means they are Ancient prophecies. Prophecies come true, especially when they come from the main Seer in the known universe."

"And he's never wrong?"

"Never."

"Hmm," she mumbled, clearly still unconvinced. She stood up and motioned for me to join her.

"Are you ready to go home now?" I inquired.

"Not yet. I want to show you something. Follow me." Valencia led me to the edge of the water. She leaned over, picked up a big rock

and heaved it into the river. A gigantic spray of water shot into the air, casting a fine mist on the wind that was cool and refreshing as it fell upon my face. "What did you see? Did you see chaos or order? I saw chaos because it is what I wanted to see. I saw the random patterns of the individual drops of water. I saw the ripples get distorted as they came to shore. I saw the initial stillness of the river disrupted by that rock. What did you see?"

"I saw the ripples drift out on the water in perfect circles," I replied. "I saw the arc of the stone as you threw it and knew where it would land. I saw more ripples formed by the spray and watched as the smaller circles gave way to the more powerful ones."

"Vincent, that's not what you saw," she said softly, looking up at me, "I know, because we both saw the same thing."

"What?"

"All you or I saw was a rock being thrown into the river. Everything else we looked for, we thought about. We saw the same thing but we explain what we saw in terms we like. There was chaos in what I did and there was order. In everything, there is always order and chaos. One cannot exist without the other. The prophecies are the same way. You can see whatever you want to in them and interpret them as fits your needs. With that in mind, do you still believe that you are the one the prophecy spoke of?"

I smiled, much to my surprise. My sister could really get into your head when she talked. She did make sense and that was what worried me. "How did you figure all that out anyway?"

She smiled back at me and replied, "I've been talking to Aristol's mother lately. She's sort of adopted me since Aristol died. She's the smartest woman I've met in the village and she's taught me a few things. I'm not the dummy I used to be," she informed me, beaming with pride.

"I never said you were a dummy, Valencia. I may have thought it but I never said it." I laughed and took off running. Thankfully, I could run faster than she could throw because she tossed a rock at me in response to my comment. I wasn't even running at full speed, which I'd found out lately was incredibly fast. I was laughing the entire time she chased me back to the hut. If we weren't destined to get along in the future, the present would have to do.

Our father was waiting for us as usual. He had given up on getting upset at us for our tardiness. He did chastise Valencia on one other occasion since our visit from Wraith. Valencia stood her ground, making The Beholder seethe with anger. Safe in the fact that he wouldn't

dare hit her, Valencia verbally ripped into him as much as he was ripping into her. It ended well, no one got hurt, but we didn't get a language lesson that night as punishment. Since learning new languages appealed to Valencia, she did her best not to upset him again.

We followed our father inside and our lesson began. The language tonight was very similar to the ones we'd been learning the last couple of days. We were informed that they would be popular tongues in the future. Having already learned all the current languages there was nothing else left.

When our lesson ended, our father dismissed us and Valencia and I went off to our rooms. The Beholder, normally exiting the hut as soon as our nightly lesson was over, followed me into mine.

"Tomorrow, I want you to come with me instead of going to the riverside," he said.

"But we're making progress!" I protested.

"I know. That's why I want you to come with me. They'll be fine without you. I have something very important to teach you and we'll need to be away from the village to do it."

"What are you going to teach me?" I wondered aloud.

The Beholder laughed and replied, "You will find out tomorrow, child. Now, you need to rest." With that, he left my room and I heard him exit the hut.

I tried to sleep but couldn't. I wanted to continue my work on the project, but if my father wished to teach me something new I knew I had to go. I tossed and turned, desperately trying to fall to sleep so I would be completely prepared for my lesson. After about an hour, Valencia crept into my room.

"What do you want, Valencia?" I asked with one eye open.

"I overheard our father change your plans for tomorrow. Sorry about that," she sincerely replied.

I sat up and leaned against the wall. "Why do you care?" I asked. "Now you can do whatever you want with the project. I can't stop you. You could make the entire project your own."

"Why would I do that?" she asked, taken aback by my statements.

"Because you can. Isn't that what you do?"

"Not to you it isn't," she protested. "Besides, I've got my own thing going on. I've been too busy doing that to give you a second thought. So tell me, why would I now decide to ruin all you've worked on?"

I lowered my head to avoid her accusing gaze. A wave of guilt washed over me as I realized I may have misjudged my sister. "I'm sorry.

I'm just mad. I shouldn't have taken it out on you. But you know why I said what I did."

"Yes, I do." She sat down next to me and continued, "But you're my brother. We don't always get along, and knowing we will probably despise each other as time moves on makes that a lot easier to deal with, but I wouldn't do anything to upset you right now. We have too much to learn, too much to work out, to be in constant conflict with each other."

"In that case, would you look in on Ihmo and Kalim every once in a while? They may need some assistance throughout the day."

"What help would you have me give to them?" she asked with a wink. Even at the tender age of seven, she couldn't help being a flirt.

"Just let him use some of your people if he asks, nothing more. Do not, under any circumstances, help them yourself. One touch by you could cause an entire wall to collapse."

"That's not true!" she claimed. "I haven't had one single wall collapse the entire time I've been there."

"How many have you personally worked on?" I asked, eyebrow raised in suspicion.

She sheepishly replied, "None. All I do is direct others on what to do."

"You see?"

"Fine!" she cried out in mock anger, throwing her arms theatrically into the air as she did. "No touching, and I'll keep an eye on things. But you have to do something for me."

"And what's that?"

"The scrolls," she whispered.

"Scrolls?"

"Yes, the scrolls! The ones you read before. I want to see them."

This was a bad idea in the making. "I don't know where our father put them," I lied.

"Then just tell me what they said. I'm sure you remember."

"I remember parts of them, but not all. I didn't even understand half of what I read that night."

"But you understand now, don't you? And you remember more than you're telling me."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because you wouldn't be trying to get me to back off if you didn't."

She had me there. "Fine. I'll share with you what I read in the scrolls. But if you tell anyone..."

"Who would I tell?" she interrupted.

"I don't know. I'm just warning you. I'm putting a lot of trust in you, not just with the information on the scrolls but also with the riverside project. Don't let me down."

She jumped to her feet and stood perfectly erect. She placed her right hand over her heart and said, "You have my word and my pledge."

"Where did you learn that from?" I inquired.

"From one of the guys helping me out," she replied, spoke at such high speed that all her words ran together. "At first I thought he wanted to get married or something, and I'm way too young for that, but then I realized he was just promising to do what I'd asked. He was cute and all, and maybe if I was older and he was older, but I was mistaken in what he meant anyway, so..."

"Valencia", I interjected, cutting her off and saving myself from more of her torturous rambling. I continued slowly and deliberately, hoping she'd get the message, "Go back to your room. Go to sleep if you can. Just go away for now. Please."

She grinned at me and said, "Am I bothering you?"

"Not as much as usual, but yes."

Her smile grew before my eyes and I expected her to continue annoying me for a little bit longer. Instead, she silently turned and headed out of my room. As she reached the entrance, she turned back and said, "Everything will be fine at the project tomorrow. Trust me." The smile on her face did not instill trust in any way.

I'd been sleeping less and less lately and last night was no exception. I had discovered I was much more alert in the mornings if I didn't sleep than if I did. Waking up always took so long and I ended up feeling like my brain was filled with mud. When I stayed awake, I really stayed awake. I spent all last night wondering about what today's teachings from my father would be. Being away from the riverside for the first time and actually getting a chance to venture outside of the village was intriguing in itself. Add on that I'd be learning something more about myself before the day was done, and I had more than enough thoughts running around inside my head to keep me wide awake.

I left my room as soon as I heard my father return from his evening activities. Valencia still wasn't aware of our father's lycanthropic shell, as he liked to call it. Even stranger was that she never once asked where he went at night. I was thankful for that small miracle but was puzzled at the same time. I'd spend hours upon hours answering her questions yet that one never came up. For someone who seemed to want to know everything, and as soon as possible, to not ask about our father's

nightly strolls was peculiar.

"Are you ready Vincent?" he asked as I entered the main room.

"I sure am!" I excitedly replied. "So what are we going to be doing?"

There was no reply, just his wide smile beaming back at me. He silently exited the hut and I quickly followed him. Out of force of habit I turned towards the river but my father promptly told me that we were going to be going in the opposite direction. This confused me, as there was nothing in that direction but miles and miles of sand. Kalim told me that the desert was endless. Obviously this was an exaggeration but the point was clear. There was nothing out there.

Kalim's words proved more than accurate. As we departed the village and wandered out into the desert I assumed we'd happen upon some landmark, some sign that life had been out here before. As far as I could tell, there was nothing of the sort. The only thing I saw was sand and it stretched as far as the eye could see. The Beholder evidently knew where he was going because he never once paused to take in the surroundings. Either that or the sight of miles and miles of sand held no interest for him.

We walked for quite a while, leaving the village far behind. The Beholder hadn't said a word since we left the hut and his silence bothered me. I had almost mustered up the courage to ask my father where we were going when he abruptly stopped. I was only a step or two behind and his quick halt caught me off guard. I bumped into him, tripped and fell to the ground.

The Beholder peered down at me as I sat on the sand, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I replied, embarrassed by my clumsiness. I stood up and brushed off the sand.

"Then let us begin your lesson." The Beholder held up a hand, signaling to me that I should stay put for now. He continued walking in the direction we'd been traveling. As he walked, I saw him pull a stick out of his satchel. The stick had a piece of cloth tied to the end of it and it waved in the gentle breeze. I stood in place for what seemed like a long time as I watched my father walk away. He planted the stick into the ground almost too far away for me to see. In the blink of an eye, he was back by my side. "By now you know that you can run very fast, but do you know exactly how fast you can go?"

"Well, I beat a lot of the older children in the village. We were having races the other day and I won almost every time."

"Almost?" he asked with an air of suspicion.

I timidly replied, "I let some of the children win. I could've beaten them if I had really wanted to."

"I'm quite sure you could."

"So what are we doing out here, father?"

The Beholder pointed out towards the flag he'd placed in the ground. "Can you see the marker from here Vincent?" I nodded as he continued, "You are going to try to get to that marker before I do."

I jumped back, shocked by this statement. "Father, you can appear anywhere in the blink of an eye! How am I supposed to get there before you?"

He laughed and replied, "You're fast, aren't you?"

"Yes, but not that fast!"

"Not yet." The Beholder's smile grew and his eyes echoed his mood. "But for now, I guess I'll just have to give you a head start. Does that sound fair to you?"

"How much of a head start?" I asked suspiciously.

"We'll do it this way. I'll tell you to start and then I'll count to three. I won't move until I'm done counting."

"That's not a very long head start," I mentioned.

"But it's all you will get. I want to see how fast you truly are. Are you ready?"

"I guess so." I wasn't sure if I could reach the flag before he was done counting but I was going to give it my best effort.

The Beholder looked out toward the flag and calmly said, "Go." I took off like a bolt of lightning. I wasn't sure how fast my father was going to count so there was no way to know when he would teleport. The flag that once seemed so far away was getting closer with every step. I'd never run this fast before and the feeling was exhilarating. Alas, I was not running quite fast enough. I was only a few steps from the flag when my father appeared.

I tried to stop and lost my footing in the loose sand. I attempted to plant my feet, failed and went tumbling. I rolled past my father, who was now holding the flag firmly in his hand. He put forth no effort to stop me as I rolled by. I finally stopped after what felt like an eternity but in reality was mere seconds. When I stood up I was covered with sand. I shook out my hair and watched the grains of sand fall back to the earth. As I did this, The Beholder approached.

"I beat you, Vincent," he said with no joy or satisfaction in his voice.

I continued to brush off the sand as I replied, "It's not fair. You can teleport and I can't. I can't possibly beat you."

"Is that what you really believe?"

"Yes, it is. Even with a modest head start, you're still going to get there first."

"Vincent, my teleportation has nothing to do with it. You can beat me if you genuinely want to. All you have to do is believe."

For the first time since he almost struck Valencia, I was angry with my father. "How am I supposed to believe that I can beat you when everything points to the opposite?" My voice grew louder and I found myself practically yelling at my father, "You can be there instantly! The only advantage I have is your modest head start and that's not nearly enough time."

"Vincent, it is actually more time than you really need. If you believe you can get there first, you will." There was no anger in his voice, no disappointment. He quickly teleported off into the distance, farther away this time than the last time. He was so far away that I could barely see him planting the flag into the ground. As soon as the flag was firmly in the ground he teleported back. "Now this time, get there first."

"But how..."

"Go!" he commanded and I obeyed. This time I was determined to get there first. I sprinted off toward the flag as fast as I could muster. As I ran, I pushed myself to run harder. My legs churned faster and faster until it felt like I was flying across the desert landscape. The flag drew closer and closer and, just as I was almost on top of it, The Beholder appeared. I dove for the flag, trying to snatch it away before he could grab it. His hand was too quick and success was denied me once again.

I was face down in the sand, disappointed and angry at the same time. I pushed myself up and brushed off the sand that had, once again, accumulated in my hair and on my clothes. My feelings must have been readily evident, for when my father spoke it was as if he could sense my frustration.

"You did much better that time, Vincent. I thought you were actually going to prevail," he remarked.

"I still failed," I replied irritably.

"You only failed to get here first, my son. On many levels, you have succeeded far beyond what I'd hoped for."

"What do you mean?"

"The flag was closer the first time, yet I defeated you handily. This time, there was a greater distance but you improved so much that I barely got here first. That shows improvement."

"But not enough," I added.

"Not yet. Let's go again." In the blink of an eye, he was gone.

When he reappeared, he was so far away that he was a mere speck on the horizon. My first thought was that the flag was too far, that I'd never get there first. However, a second thought crept in that told me differently. The Beholder wouldn't sustain this lesson if he believed I was doomed to fail. In the same vein, he wouldn't have put the flag so far away if he didn't think I could get there first. For the first time in my short time on Earth, I felt my father's faith. It was like a blanket wrapped around me, comforting and secure. In a flash, I knew I was going to make him proud by the end of the day.

My father was once again by my side and I was eager to start. My feet were firmly planted in the sand, the muscles in my legs taut in anticipation. The wide smile on my father's face told me that my preparation did not go unnoticed. When he gave the word, I was gone.

The wind whipped past me as I tore a hole in the air. I accelerated with every stride and knew I could go even faster. My body responded to my mind's surging confidence. The flag was rapidly approaching, growing from its original miniscule speck to an observable presence. With no nervousness at all, I leapt for the flag and grasped it just as my father appeared.

The good news was I got to the flag first. The bad news was, since I was traveling so fast, when I left my feet I didn't consider how to land. The forces of nature took care of that as I came crashing down onto the desert floor. I tumbled a few yards before coming to a stop and made no immediate effort to get up. I glanced down at my hand and saw the flag, its cloth fluttering in the breeze.

"I got it!" I cried triumphantly as I waved the flag.

"I see that," my father responded coolly.

"Aren't you proud of me, father?" I asked. His chilly attitude troubled me.

"I'm pleased, Vincent, but not proud. You see, you were able to best me this time by the slightest of margins. I believe you can do better."

"Better?" I was stunned. I couldn't figure out what he wanted from me. "I just ran faster than I'd ever dreamed possible and you think I can do better? How fast is fast enough, father?"

My father was unfazed by my outburst. "My son, you do not truly comprehend what you are capable of. You must keep in mind that you are not yet fully developed physically. This limits what you can do. There will come a time, however, when time itself will mean nothing at to you at all."

"I don't understand," I commented.

"I know you don't. You see, I can sense the power in you. I

know what you will be able to do as time passes. Once your body has had a chance to develop, you will move faster than the wind. You will be capable of traveling at speeds mortals simply cannot fathom. To you, it will appear as if time has stood still. In reality, time continues. You just run alongside it."

I looked at my legs in wonder at what I'd be able to do with them as I got older. The words of my father rang true to me, as if he were speaking of deeds already done. I would run faster than the wind. I believed it. I would run so fast that others seemed to be standing still. I completely believed it. I had faith that no mortal would ever be faster than me. Even at this tender age, I knew I could outrun anyone and anything. I had faith in my abilities and that my abilities would only improve over time. I believed.

I jumped up from the sand, energized like never before. I was ready, willing and eager for more tests. "You want another chance, father?" I asked confidently.

A grin accompanied his affirmative reply. He teleported and this time I had no idea where he'd gone. I scanned my surrounding, trying to pinpoint his location. Before I could find him, he was back. He pointed out into the barren land and told me the flag was in that direction. Since I couldn't see the flag, he gave me until the count of four this time. The result was the same as the last time, except this time I won by a large margin. I didn't even have to dive at the flag. I had successfully uprooted the flag and was calmly awaiting his arrival when my father appeared.

This time his pride was obvious. "Very good, Vincent!" he beamed. "Now let's try something different. Take a look around and tell me what you see."

I did as I was told and was quickly sorry about it. There was nothing to see but an ocean of sand. "There's nothing out here. Is there supposed to be?"

My father laughed and replied, "No, Vincent, you see exactly what I meant for you to see. For your average mortal, we are a few days walk to the village. We are in the middle of a vast desert. Scattered about along the rivers that cut through the desert are villages. There aren't many and we won't see any of them today. Other than those villages, there is nothing, no landmarks, and no markers of any kind to guide you along.

"Now, what I am going to do is teleport. I will be nice enough to tell you what direction I'm going in to start. Once I appear I will count to five. If you have not reached me by the time the countdown is done, I will teleport again in a random direction. If you get close enough to see me you will see me point out the next direction. Your task is to catch

me."

"That won't be easy," was my surprisingly calm retort.

"Nothing worthwhile is." He raised his arm and pointed off into the distance, "I'm going that way. Find me." I blinked and he was gone.

His sudden departure caught me off guard and I wasted a precious sliver of time in hesitation. Quickly composing myself, I darted off in the direction my father had indicated. My speed increased as I silently kept a paced count in my own head. When I reached four I saw him on the horizon. I had halved the distance between us as I heard my internal countdown end. When it did, my father raised his arm and pointed to his left. In a blink he was gone.

I had not yet tried to turn when running this fast but it was actually easier than I'd imagined. My footing seemed better the faster I ran. I was concentrating on my maneuvering as I made the turn, keeping me upright and on track. Once pointed in the correct direction, I picked my speed up again. Once again, just I neared my father he teleported away.

The chase lasted for what felt like days. The sun never set though, and I kept running. Sometimes I would get so close I could almost touch him before he'd teleport. Other times, I would barely see what direction he was pointing before he was gone. I lost track of how many times I'd changed directions. I had no clue how far away from the village I was anymore either. None of this mattered one bit. I was running after my father, and when I was running the world went away. After so many close calls and near misses, I finally caught him.

"Your countdown has already expired, Vincent. You didn't catch me in time," he remarked.

"I thought so. So why did you stop?"

"Because we're home."

I looked around and saw that we were indeed back on the path to the village. "I'm quite pleased with your progress today, Vincent." With a proud smile on his face, my father turned and walked toward the village. We were at the end closest to our hut and my construction project. I gazed around in wonder, trying to wrap my mind around how far I'd run today and how quickly we were able to get back to the village. Mortals wouldn't be able to cover the ground I did if given thirty days and nights to do it. I repressed a smile at the thought as I followed my father home.

Chapter 5

The hut was empty when we got back, which meant Valencia was still working down by the river. I was exhilarated at what I'd been able to achieve today. I could tell by my father's demeanor that he was quite pleased with the results as well. My training was picking up, the project was coming along nicely and I felt like a king among men. Everything appeared to be following a long, well-tuned plan. Elated with everything so far, I asked my father about what lie ahead.

"It's funny you should ask that, Vincent," he replied. "I was going to wait until your sister returned, but I may as well tell you now. We are going to be leaving for Atlantia in the morning."

"Atlantia?" I asked, confused. "Why there? Why now?"

"I told you before that you would be visiting the Isle of Atlantia in the future. I will admit, I didn't think it would be this soon, but you are developing so rapidly that I really have no other alternative. I've spoken with Genepool and he is just very enthusiastic about your arrival. With his help, you will begin your academic studies."

"Academics? You mean things like mathematics?"

"Precisely. You will study under the greatest minds on this realm. The inhabitants of Atlantia are much more advanced than the Egyptians. I'm sure you'll find their company much more enlightening."

"I'm sure I will," I responded uneasily. I knew I was going to regret my next question, but asked anyway. "What about Valencia?"

"Vincent," he began as he knelt down to look me in the eye, "Your sister is an impediment. You, my son, are destined for great things. Your sister is a stumbling block, a fallen tree in the road to your fate. Soon you will realize you can accomplish nothing as long as Valencia walks the surface of this planet."

"Soon, but not yet." I locked onto my father's stare and met it with grim determination. "She's still only a child, father. She's also my sister, and though we will no doubt be at odds in the future, that time is not now. All she's learned, she's learned on her own with no help from you, except for languages. The least you can do for your daughter is let her get an education. Let her come to Atlantia and study. With her inability to pay attention to any one thing for more than a few minutes, it will take her centuries to learn what I can learn in a year. She'll be out of harm's way."

My father frowned at my suggestion. "I do not think that's a wise decision. How is having your sister accompany us in any way orderly?"

A sick feeling rose from the pit of my stomach. The more I tried

to find a way to rationalize my choice, the worse I felt. Finally, I just gave the best answer I could. "Because keeping the family together is orderly, and that's what we need to do. We need to at least pretend to be a family." Saying this made my queasiness fade to a tolerable level.

The Beholder stood up and now hovered over me. Displeasure etched his face as he gazed down at me. "Fine," he said, resignation oozing from his simple words. "Go get your sister." He waved me away and I wasted no time running out of the hut.

I spotted Valencia chatting with Kalim and Ihmo and was instantly uneasy. I tried to be casual as I strolled up to them. As I grew closer, I could hear bits and pieces of their conversation. They were talking about the project and, in a flash, my uneasiness changed to complete terror. Remaining calm no longer seemed possible. I hurriedly walked over and asked how everything was going, expecting the worst.

"Everything is just fine, my friend," Ihmo reassured me. Valencia was looking at me weirdly and it took me a moment to figure out why. I was standing with my fists clenched.

"Couldn't be better, so just relax," she advised. I noticed her glance down at my hands. It was enough to tell me that her advice was sound, for once.

"So what are the three of you discussing?" I asked.

"Just comparing notes. Your sister is working on a very different project than we are," Kalim informed me.

"Is that so?" I was back to being suspicious again.

"It sure is," she said proudly. "You can make all the little playhouses you want. I'm being more creative than that."

"What are you building anyway? You've never told me."

"And you've never gone down and sneaked a peek?" she asked slyly.

"No, I haven't. I told you I'd leave that end of the project for you to work on." I leaned over and whispered in her ear, "You aren't the only one that keeps your promises, dear sister."

When I leaned back up, her smile was so sunny it knocked me back a step. "Thank you, brother. So what have you been doing all day?"

"I've been with father. That's kind of why I'm here. I need to talk to you." Turning to Ihmo and Kalim, "Would you excuse us?"

I took Valencia gently by the arm and we began to walk along the river towards our favorite spot. "We aren't going to walk all the way to the other end of the village, are we?" she asked.

"Not if you don't want to."

"I don't. I've had a busy day."

"Me too." I let out a sigh and Valencia stopped dead in her tracks.

"What's wrong? You've never been this strange before." She held up her hand to stay my reply, and then added, "I mean, I've always found you a little strange, but this is different. I don't like this kind of strangeness."

After a deep breath to compose myself, I said, "I've got some bad news."

"What is it?" she asked with genuine concern.

"We're leaving."

"Leaving? Where are we going?"

"Atlantia."

"Atlantia!" she cried out in delight. "We're going to Atlantia already? I didn't think it would be this soon! There's so much to do here yet. I'll have to have Alazar finish the project while I'm gone, but he's more than capable. And I'll have to make sure..."

"Hold on a moment!" I interjected. She got quiet at once and just stared at me dumbfounded. "Aren't you upset?"

She gave me a puzzled look and said, "Am I supposed to be?"

"I would think so. We're leaving behind the only friends we have on the face of the planet and you act like it's nothing! The only people we've known, the only place we've known, how can you just toss that all aside?"

"Vincent," she began with her most soft and soothing voice, "We're immortal. This place will still be here. The people, probably not, but we were going to outlive them anyway. Yes, I'll miss my friends but I'm sure we'll make new ones on Atlantia. It's you I'm worried about."

"Me?" I asked, caught completely off guard.

"Yes, you. You're the one that's always been the leader of the building project. Now we're leaving and you won't get to finish it."

Her concern appeared genuine and that made me feel terrible. There was no way I'd be able to tell her that father didn't want her to come along. "Like you said," I forced out, "it'll still be here."

"Great! So when do we leave?"

"Tomorrow morning. Not sure when exactly, so be ready."

"No sleep tonight!" she sang out and ran off to her end of the project. I examined the area of the project we'd stopped in front of. By my estimation, and coming as no real surprise, we were at the exact middle of the entire undertaking. I had a dreadful feeling Valencia and I wouldn't be meeting each other halfway for very much longer.

I wandered back to Kalim and Ihmo and found that Alipha had

joined them. Alipha has been the most helpful person I'd met in my short time here. Where Ihmo was very valuable when it came to design, Alipha was fantastic at getting everyone to work together with the actual construction.

"Where's Valencia?" Ihmo asked upon my arrival.

I let out a sigh and said, "She's down at her end of things."

"She's nice," Kalim added.

"Try being around her all the time," I mumbled in response.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing. Look, I have to talk to the three of you for a moment."

"What's wrong?" Alipha asked.

"My sister and I are leaving tomorrow morning. You're going to have to finish the project on your own."

The three of them looked back and forth at each other, not knowing how to respond to my revelation. Finally, Ihmo spoke up. "Vincent, I promise you here and now that we will finish it and make you proud. We couldn't have done this without you."

"Thank you, my friend," I said, fighting back tears.

"No, thank you. For all you have done for us and the village," he continued. "As we speak, there are children teaching their parents what they've learned here. Our village will soon be a better place and we owe it all to you."

"Will you be back?" Alipha inquired.

"Maybe someday. I'm not sure when though," I replied.

"So what would you like to do for your last day here?" Ihmo asked.

I smiled and said, "I'd like to just spend it with my friends."

"But we're going to be working," mentioned Kalim.

"Then work it is. Shall we?"

The four of us made our way to the construction area and went to work. I caught myself looking around at all the children that had come to the riverside to volunteer their time and effort. There were noticeably fewer children around lately. Some had, no doubt, remained in the village to show their parents what they could do, just as Ihmo had said. Every time I glanced over at Ihmo, Kalim and Alipha there were broad smiles on their faces. That was all I needed to see to put me more at ease with the idea of leaving. In my heart, I knew they would be fine.

As the sun began to set on my last day in Egypt, I found, much to my amazement, that I had more friends than I'd thought. Word spread

rapidly throughout the village that the newcomers were leaving and it seemed like the entire population had come out to wish us well. Valencia decided to join me at my end of the project, thereby making it easier for well-wishers to converse with us. Most of the parents that stopped by spoke at length to Valencia, since she was the one that spent the most time in the village itself. Every child in the village approached us at one time or another. It was a very heartfelt gesture from the villagers and Valencia and I both made a point to tell them how much we appreciated their kindness. The only emotional outburst came when Aristol's mother paid us a visit. She picked up Valencia and clenched her in a hug so tight I thought my sister might break in half. However, the tears I saw in Valencia's eyes weren't from the pain of the embrace. I peeked over at my sister as she was wiping away some stray teardrops, ready to comfort her if needed. She motioned that she was fine and we continued greeting people until everyone that had lined up got a word with us. I never realized how many people lived in this village. I should've explored it more when I had the chance.

With the sun now at rest for the day, my intention was to head back to the hut. My sister had other plans. She grabbed me by the arm and led me in the opposite direction, to the village itself. She didn't need to tell me where we were going. I already knew.

I wrested my arm from her grip and walked quietly beside her. She wasn't talking, which was unusual in itself, and I assumed she was lost in thought. We continued on in silence until we reached the far end of the village and proceeded directly to our usual place along the riverside. We sat on the log and stared out over the river.

After a few minutes of peace and tranquility, she finally spoke.

"This is the end, isn't it?"

"The end of our time here, yes."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know."

Stillness reclaimed the moment, blanketing us with its relaxing silence. The primary sound was of the rushing river creating natural music for all to hear, should they take the time to listen. I had never really done that before and now I wished I had. I could hear the birds off in the distance calling out to one another. As the fish jumped out of the water, attempting to snack on the insects floating around, I could hear not only the sound of their re-entry but their exit from the watery depths as well. The humming emanating from insects themselves was audible to me. All these sounds, distinct from each other, blended together in a cacophony of musical splendor. It should've been chaotic by nature, as nature itself is

chaotic, yet all these wonderful sounds aligned perfectly with each other. I'd never been this at peace.

The tranquility was broken when Valencia asked, "What do you think we'll end up doing in Atlantia?"

"Schooling," I replied.

"What kind?"

"Academics. Mathematics, science, that sort of thing."

"Sounds boring. Maybe I'll..."

"Maybe you'll do what's being asked and learn something. Isn't that what you want?"

She snapped her head in my direction, hitting me with her hair as she did. "So now you're going to tell me what to do?"

"Yes, Valencia, I am," I responded irritably. "If you want to be able to go out into the world someday, these are things you'll need to learn. Atlantia is the best place for you to do it too. They are much more advanced than the rest of civilization and can show you things you'd never find out anywhere else."

Her gaze tore through me and her eyes were glowing mildly. "It still sounds boring," she said. "I could just stay here."

"And learn what? From who?"

"Well, Orona, Aristol's mother, is pretty smart. I see her writing things down all the time and most of the villagers can't even write at all!"

"But she won't be able to show you what the Atlantians can. Would you really deny yourself a chance to see Atlantia just because you think your studies will be boring?"

That made her eyes adjust back to normal. "You have a good point. Besides, I won't be studying all the time. I'll still get to have some fun while we're there, right?"

"Right," I replied and instantly regretted it. "Wait a moment. What do you mean by having fun?"

She smiled, winked and stood up to leave. I think I liked it better when her eyes were glowing. She didn't grace me with a response as she turned and began walking back to our hut. I sat alone for a moment, still organizing my thoughts. The more I thought about what her definition of fun might be, the more nervous I became.

"Valencia!" I shouted as I leapt up to chase after her.

I caught up to her in a flash, literally. She hadn't made it very far into the village but I wasn't going to waste any time prying a response out of her. As it turned out, I could've taken my time because she wasn't making any attempt to answer me. No matter how many times I asked her what she'd meant by 'have some fun' all I got in return was her sly

little smile.

When we arrived, The Beholder was nowhere in sight. We searched the hut and found no trace of him. Not knowing what else to do we departed for our rooms. I knew Valencia wasn't going to sleep so I figured I may as well stay awake as well. As soon as I lay down, however, I was fast asleep.

I awoke at sunrise to the sound of my sister singing in the other room. An exceptionally discordant tune with rambling lyrics assaulted my ears. I'd never heard it before, and judging from the quality neither had she. I stood up and stretched out my still tired muscles. Yesterday's activities had strained my young body more than I'd originally believed. There was a dull throbbing in my legs from all the running I'd done. I must not have noticed it earlier due to my father's revelation and my desire to spend time with my friends.

The singing continued unabated and I decided I'd had enough. "Valencia, would you be quiet!" I bellowed. She ceased singing immediately and I considered the matter settled. Apparently she did not.

"You didn't like my song?" she asked, peering into my room.

"Not really," I grumbled.

"Oh." She squinted her eyes and glanced down at her feet, then around the floor seemingly lost in thought. Her head snapped up and she looked me dead in the eye. There was no anger or rage in her eyes, as I had expected. In fact, there wasn't much emotion there at all. Without another word, she left.

I resumed stretching out when she peered in again. "Have you seen our father anywhere?" she asked.

"No. I just woke up, remember?"

"Oh. Right." And as suddenly as she had appeared, she was gone again.

Now my legs and my head ached. She'd done this before and it didn't bother me nearly as much. I understood her eagerness, but that didn't mean she could pester me until we left. Sadly, she wasn't finished yet.

Peering around the corner for a third time, she quickly asked, "You don't think he left without us, do you?"

"Valencia!" I shouted. "Would you knock that off!"

She stepped forward, coming completely into view. "Knock what off?"

"Your constant questions, that's what!"

"There's no need to yell at me!" she yelled.

“Can’t you just ask your questions all at once?” I angrily requested.

“Apparently not. And you never did answer my last one.”

I sighed in desperation and replied slowly and deliberately, “No, Valencia. I’m sure he did not leave without us. It would be counterproductive. Why would he say he was taking us to Atlantia and then go without us?”

“Because he’s not a nice guy?” she proposed.

“He’s our father!” I was shocked at her assessment of our father. He may not be nice to her, but that didn’t mean he deserved to be insulted like that.

“And he’s not a nice guy. I just call it like I see it.” She entered my room as she continued, “In fact, I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised to find out that he didn’t want me to come to Atlantia with the two of you.”

“Why would you say that?” I asked, hoping she hadn’t figured out the truth.

“Well, why would he want me to come along? He didn’t want me here. It’s you he wants.”

“Our father wouldn’t leave you here alone. He’s not that cruel.”

“First off, I wouldn’t be alone Vincent. Remember, Orona would take me in. Second, I happen to believe The Beholder is cruel enough to abandon me. He’d do it in a heartbeat.”

“Maybe he finally decided to help you along. Did you ever consider that possibility?”

“No, and for good reason.”

“And what reason is that?” I was getting tired of this game of back and forth we played all the time. Before she could answer, our father called out to us from outside of the hut. I looked at Valencia fleetingly and left the room. She followed unexcitedly.

Outside, the sun was once again shining in all its brilliance. The warmth felt good on my face and I could feel the heat loosening up the muscles in my legs. The Beholder was standing at the side of the hut facing away from the village. It looked like we were going to leave by the same path that we’d entered. I had assumed incorrectly.

Our father beckoned us to stand next to him. Once we did, he grabbed our hands and told us to hold on at all times. I saw Valencia was gripping his hand so tightly the veins in her hands were bulging. I could also clearly see the small muscles in her hands and forearms straining to make her grasp even more potent. Without a word, The Beholder bowed his head and a mere second later, the three of us were in Atlantia.

Chapter 6

At first I couldn't comprehend all I was seeing. Atlantia was so different from Egypt it was hard to believe the two places existed on the same realm at the same time. Where Egypt was primitive, Atlantia was advanced. In Egypt, the people wore shabby clothes that should've been discarded years ago. The citizens of Atlantia wore colorful, radiant garb. Most importantly, the Egyptians we'd spent our time with needed my influence. The Atlantians were far beyond the point of needing my help.

All around us were buildings of carved stone. Large stone columns supported the facades of many buildings. Giant marble archways decorated other entranceways. Intricate engravings marked the buildings as to their function and purpose. Having learned the local language, I could easily pick out the judicial building, various shops, security for the city and many others. The streets were paved with bricks that looked almost like the ones I'd made in Egypt. When I bent down to get a close look, I noticed that they were much sturdier than mine.

People didn't wander around aimlessly, as so many in Egypt had when we'd arrived. Everyone seemed to have a purpose for what they were doing. I could overhear a few passing conversations and that was enough to tell me I was going to enjoy my time here immensely.

The only thing I found odd was the fact that we'd teleported directly into the center of town and this caused no alarm amongst the citizenry. When we arrived, very few people even gave us a second glance. A remarkable occurrence such as that should've at least raised a few eyebrows. These people looked upon our arrival with nothing more than passing curiosity.

All of these things taken together made it seem like the most wonderful place imaginable, yet it wasn't the buildings, the streets or the people that made me so happy to be in Atlantia. When I saw Valencia frowning and rubbing her head, trying to excise the pain she was feeling, I couldn't help but smile. I knew right then and there I was going to like it here.

As I continued to gaze around in pure awe, our father informed us we had an appointment to keep. He directed us toward a building without an inscription on its façade. There was a crowd gathered at the entrance awaiting their turn to gain admittance and they all parted as we approached. The huge doors of the building were at least fifteen feet high. The dark wooden doors were ornately decorated with elaborate metal designs that ascended all the way to the top. Halfway up its length, the metallic artwork branched off and spelled a single word written in the

language of the Aseraphim. The word was "life".

When we got closer to the doors, I saw two men in green robes guarding the entranceway. They bowed their heads in respect to The Beholder and quickly opened the doors. What met my eyes was something I would remember forever. If the outside of this building was beautiful, the inside was astonishing. We crossed the threshold into a large antechamber that emptied into a long hallway. Along the walls were decorative lights made of a shiny, golden metal. Each lamp held three candles, giving the hall a radiant glow. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, which was at least thirty feet above the floor. The candles in the chandeliers remained unlit but it took nothing away from their magnificence.

At the far end of the hallway, barely visible, was a throne. Seated upon the throne was a man dressed in a green robe similar to what the guards were wearing. As we neared the stranger I saw my father's expression change. He no longer looked impatient, as he had as we were traversing through the throng outside the doors. He was calm, and I even caught him smiling.

"Good day to you, brother," our father said.

Valencia glanced over at me and whispered, "Brother?"

The man on the throne replied, "And to you as well." He stood from his throne and came over to the three of us. He was of average height and somewhat chubby but those were the only normal things about him. His skin had an unusual green tint matching his eyes, and his hair was a shade of brown normally reserved for tree bark. He shook our father's hand warmly and then turned his attention to us. "So these are the first?"

"They are," he replied.

"Order and Chaos. Fantastic," he said approvingly. The man knelt down and asked, "So what names are you two going by on this realm?"

"I'm Valencia and he's Vincent. Who are you?" my sister answered.

"And how do you know about our origins?" I posed to him, suspicious of his knowledge.

He rose up and laughed, "Because I've known you for a long time. Hasn't your father informed you of my identity?" My sister and I both shook our heads in response. "Then allow me. I am Genepool, the giver of life. It is my utmost pleasure to meet the both of you. And for future reference, there's no need for the formality of my full name, just Genepool will suffice."

"You're an Ancient!" Valencia exclaimed excitedly.

"I most assuredly am, my dear lady," he warmly replied, causing my sister to blush. I couldn't recall that ever happening before.

"I've made arrangements for the both of you to begin your studies right away," The Beholder interjected. "Genepool has been kind enough to recruit some teachers for the both of you."

"It wasn't that difficult, really," Genepool informed us. "All I had to say was that they'd be instructing the children of the Aseraphim and there was a line out the door. You may have even seen some of them when you came in."

"All of those people outside want to teach us?" I asked in wonder.

"Not exactly, Vincent. All those people out there are here to see you. Only some of them are teachers."

"So they know about us?"

"They know many things. Fortunately for the both of you, they are eager to impart their knowledge onto you. I have handpicked your teachers and I think you'll find them more than adequate."

"Are we starting right away?" Valencia inquired. "I'd really like to see some of Atlantia first."

"Your studies will not commence until tomorrow, so, please, take in the sights. In fact, I'd be honored to show you around myself."

"Genepool, I have a much better idea. Why don't you show Valencia around Atlantia and I'll take Vincent," The Beholder recommended.

Genepool leaned down and replied softly to Valencia, "Isn't that what I was saying?" Valencia smiled back, her face going another shade deeper into the red. She let out a small, childish giggle as well. Genepool straightened up and said to The Beholder, "I think that's a splendid idea, brother. You already know where you'll be staying, correct?"

"Correct."

"Then it's settled. Come, Valencia. Let me show you the wonders of Atlantia." He turned his attention back to The Beholder and said, "I'll have the teachers sent to your house in the morning. There are separate teachers for the both of them. Most likely, the teachers will take the children back to their homes. It's easier than carrying all their materials around with them."

The four of us walked back down the brightly lit hallway to the main entrance. There was still a crowd of people waiting to catch a glimpse of us as we departed. Genepool and Valencia went north while my father and I headed south.

"That worked out quite well, I must say," my father commented

after we'd left the multitudes behind.

"What do you mean?"

"Genepool will be able to keep your sister under control for a while. He's very good with people. I think your sister likes the attention, too. She won't be a bother while we're here."

"See? I told you." I regretted my rebuke almost as soon as it had left my mouth.

"Yes, you did," he responded, glaring down at me. "Now we just have to hope that everything continues on its current path. As long as your sister is enthralled with Genepool we should be fine."

"How long will we be staying here?"

"Many years, most likely," he replied. "There is much you need to learn and do before your time here is finished."

"I'm looking forward to it," I said smiling.

"As am I," my father remarked, smiling wide as well. "So what would you like to see first?"

"Everything," I gleefully replied as we set off to see the sights.

The streets of Atlantia were filled with people going about their daily business. The citizens mainly wore robes and togas, their colors varying from black to white and all the colors of the rainbow. My father informed me that you could tell a person's tendencies in life by what color they were dressed in. I would have to learn for myself exactly what that entailed as he didn't explain it any further. The only added piece of information was that I should avoid the ones dressed in black, for they were extremely unpleasant. I assumed these people were either evil or criminals of some sort.

We walked around a magnificent stone fountain after a few blocks. The statue in the center of the fountain was of Genepool. Standing at easily fifteen feet in height, the sculpture displayed every detail of his countenance. Small stone animals of every variety scurried around in the fake flowers at his feet. Vines climbed up his body and wrapped around his form as to accent his physique. The water of the fountain flowed from his outstretched hands, cascading into the pool below.

On the other side of the fountain, my father stopped abruptly and looked around. Before I could question him, he pointed and started off around the other side towards a man dressed in a yellow robe.

As we approached, the man stood and greeted us. "Hail, Ancient one," he said to my father. He then stooped down and addressed me. "And hail to you as well, child of the Aseraphim."

"Hail," I said in response. My father was staring down at this man

with contempt in his eyes. I couldn't figure out why. He seemed nice enough.

"I've been told by The Beholder that you are called Vincent. Is that right?" he asked.

"Yes, it is. What's your name?"

"Very good. You get right to the point." He stood up straight and announced, "I am Samir Lantarna, but you can just call me Sam."

Sam looked to be in his late twenties, with ash blonde hair falling to his shoulders and dark blue eyes that were almost violet. He was much shorter than my father, standing a mere five and a half feet tall. His broad shoulders proclaimed his athleticism and physical prowess. What I noticed most of all was his friendly smile, which put me at ease instantly.

"Sam is going to be your lead instructor, Vincent," my father informed me. "Listen to what he has to say. He may appear, at first glance, to be too young to be intelligent or experienced enough to teach someone as special as you, but Sam is wise well beyond his meager years."

"Thank you, Ancient. That was the most awkward compliment I think I've ever received." Sam was still smiling, apparently taking the praise for what it was worth.

"Will you be coming to us in the morning for the lesson or shall I send him to you? Genepool had stated that you would be stopping by, but it might be easier if he went to you," my father inquired.

"Well, why don't we let him decide?" Looking down at me, he asked, "Vincent, what would you prefer?"

"Honestly, I'd like to go to you. I like walking around this city. It's wonderful," I replied in earnest.

"Do you really think so? What do you like best about it so far?"

"Just the way everything is organized. The streets are perfectly straight and well marked. The buildings are marked clearly as well, making finding your way so easy. The people all seem to know where they're going and what they need to do. It's all so orderly."

Sam smiled brightly and said, "I am so glad it meets your approval. It's the same reason I like it here. Still, tomorrow I will have to meet you at your home, since you don't know where mine is yet."

"We should be going, Vincent," my father informed me. "There is still much you need to see before the day is done." He turned to Sam and said, "Thank you for your time, teacher. I will see that Vincent is ready on time."

"I don't think that will be a problem," Sam said, smile never fading.

The Beholder took my hand and led me back on the path we'd

been going. "I like him. He's nice," I remarked as we walked away.

"He's young and innocent, and hasn't seen much of the world outside of Atlantia. Still, he is a very smart young man and the personal selection of Genepool. I'll have to defer to my brother's judgment in this case."

We continued onward as my father pointed out certain buildings of interest, such as the library, the hospital and the temple. It was this last one that apparently held the most appeal for him. We climbed the steps of the temple to the main doors. They were locked but my father wasn't concerned.

"The temple is for the worship of the Ancients," he began as we stood at the top of the temple's steps. "Genepool is the main representative of the Ancients on this realm, so in turn he is the object of praise at their services. All of the Ancient Ones, however, have stature here."

"You're worshiped here?" I asked in amazement.

"Indeed I am, my son. In time, you too will be glorified as well."

His words sent shivers down my spine. "Me? Why will I be held in such high regard?"

"It is your destiny. As the prophecy reads, 'There will be four born of the Aseraphim sent to inhabit the realm of Man and they shall be as siblings to one another. Two then two shall be visited upon the Earth. And as time passes, one shall command dominion over all the creatures of the land, the air and the sea.' You are that destined child. You should know that all I've done, and all I have yet to do, is to assist you in fulfilling your destiny with me at your side. Together, I can show you the ways of true order and you can succeed where your siblings will fail. Keeping your sister at bay is the most difficult task right now, and I must admit your suggestion of bringing her here was wise. She will be sequestered with her own lessons while you proceed with yours. Have no doubts, Vincent, though you are both still children you should start to view your sister with animosity now rather than later. For later, you will have no choice.

"Now let us leave here. We should be getting back to Genepool and your sister so you can see where we will be living."

He descended the steps in front of me. I was taking my time as my mind was teeming with new information. I was having difficulty processing it all at once, so I decided to break things down. All he'd done, from teaching me languages, to showing me how fast I can run, to trying to keep Valencia and her chaotic influence away from me, had been to steer me down this preordained path. Considering all he had done for

me, and the more I thought about it the longer the list grew, I could be patient and learn of his wisdom in time. Having read the words of the prophecy before he told them to me, I had my suspicions earlier. He just now confirmed them.

The four of us met up again back at Genepool's temple. Genepool and my father went off into a side room for a private discussion, leaving me alone with my sister. Valencia was spouting off about the zoo and all the different animals. She said there were creatures there that didn't exist anywhere else on the planet. Genepool said he'd let her help around the zoo and with other things. When I pressed for more details, she said she didn't know. He was being very secretive about it. I tried to explain to her that Genepool was the one that populates the world with animals and, where they may not roam free now, most of those animals are simply awaiting their time. None of that mattered to her though. She just continued rambling on about this creature and that one. Her voice was starting to grate on me severely. I was never more thankful to see my father as I was when he finally emerged from the adjoining room.

Genepool wished us well and the three of us started off for our new home. Since we were going to be living here for years to come, I began to think of Atlantia as my home. Entering the section of Atlantia where everyone lived was like stepping into a whole new town. The homes were of various materials. There were grand houses made of stone and brick as well as simple wooden structures. All of the houses had one thing in common and that was their elegance. Every measure of care was taken to keep these homes looking like they were built yesterday.

The house to which our father led us was stylish in its simplicity. It was a two-story stone home with large wooden doors. Extending from the second floor was a patio surrounded by an iron railing. At first glance, I couldn't put a finger on why it pleased me so much. I should've seen it right away and was a little upset that I hadn't. The house, when looked at from the front, was perfectly symmetrical from left to right.

Our father swung open the doors and we followed him inside. Candelabras on the walls and a chandelier from the ceiling provide more than enough light for us to take in our surroundings. The floor was covered in soft, pale blue carpeting. The furnishings were simple yet inviting. Pillows were neatly placed at the end of each long couch. The cushions on the chairs were as supple as the pillows. Our father led us to the stairs at the end of the hallway and the three of us proceeded upstairs.

I glanced over at Valencia when we reached the top of the stairs and noticed that she had her sandals in her hands. I shot her a disapproving look, to which she responded by saying that I should try it before I criticized her. I shrugged off her impetuosity and continued exploring the second floor. I saw my father beckon me and I quickly obeyed.

"This will be your room, Vincent. Behind that door, your time is your own," he told me.

"Until she barges in," I replied, nodding my head back in Valencia's direction.

"That will only happen if you allow it to." He opened the door with a key and dropped the key in my hand. "This will ensure your privacy. If you lock the door, all she can do is knock. If she persists in bothering you and won't go away, I will handle her." He noticed the look of concern on my face and clarified, "I will not harm her, Vincent, have no fear. I will simply lock her in her room. She will not have the same privileges as you. She does not get her own key. It's better for everyone that way."

The thought of Valencia not being able to pester me all the time sounded good to me. Locking her away might seem a tad extreme but Valencia could be persistent and it might be the only way to get her to leave me alone. I smiled and entered my room as my father went off to get Valencia and show her where she'd be sleeping, when she chose to.

My bedroom consisted of a large bed, a couch, two chairs and some small tables. Three windows were evenly spaced around the room, allowing ample sunlight to shine in. I eased around the room, soaking up every last detail. I eventually ended up at the bed. It looked so comfortable and inviting that I couldn't just sit down on it casually. I leapt into the air and flopped down on the cushiony mattress. I sprang back up into the air slightly and crashed down for good. Getting a good night's sleep wouldn't be a problem anymore, not with a bed like this and my sister locked away. Atlantia was becoming more appealing every second.

I lay on the bed and watched through the window as the sun set behind the mountains to the west. As I was relaxing, my father entered my room and informed me he was going to take care of some business before the day was done. He asked that I kept an eye on Valencia in his absence. I wasn't thrilled with the task but accepted it. When I asked if that meant there would be no language lesson this evening, he told me that there would be no more lessons from him at all. That was now Sam's responsibility.

No sooner had our father departed for town than Valencia was at my door. "So, you're stuck with me for the evening? You must be overjoyed," she sarcastically remarked.

"I don't think I'd use that particular word to describe my feelings about the situation," I replied.

"I figured as much. But I'm not here to make your life difficult, Vincent..."

"Not yet, at least," I interjected.

"Exactly," she continued, letting the admonishment pass on by. "What I want is for you to uphold your end of our deal." She was smiling, and not in a good way.

"What deal?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"The scrolls."

My fears confirmed, I asked, "What about them?"

"Don't play stupid with me, Vincent. You and I have a deal. I kept things running on the construction in Egypt while you were out getting tutored by The Beholder. In exchange, you promised to tell me about the scrolls you'd read. It's time to pay up." She was smiling even wider now and I knew there was no way I'd get any peace until she was satisfied.

"Fine. What do you want to know?"

"Where are they?"

"Our father has probably hidden them. They were more than likely in his satchel when we teleported here."

"He didn't have his satchel on when he left this evening. That means they must be here somewhere, right?"

"I would assume so."

"So let's look for them," she said and started out of the room.

If she found those scrolls, she might learn some things that father didn't want her to know just yet. I couldn't let that happen. "Valencia, you just stay here. I'll find them."

"Why can't I help?" she pouted.

"Because you don't know what they look like and I do."

"They're just scrolls. It's not that difficult."

"And I'm sure you'd be able to identify the scrolls containing the prophecies just by looking at them. Our father probably had hundreds of scrolls. You'd be there all night and you'd get caught. Let me go and I'll bring back whatever I can find."

I left the room and ventured down the hallway to the master bedroom. It was located directly across from Valencia's room, thereby making it easier for our father to keep her under his thumb. My father's

room was almost twice the size of mine. After searching for less than a minute, I found his satchel. One quick look told me there were several scrolls inside. I pulled them out and began examining them. They were all prophecies, as I had suspected. I wasn't going to show them all to my sister, so I selected the two that would have the most meaning given our current situation.

I casually walked back to my room and dropped the two scrolls on the bed. "This is all I could find," I stated.

"You didn't look for very long," she retorted.

"I looked long enough. Do you want to read them or not?"

Without answering, she opened the first scroll and began to read it aloud, "For as it is foretold, the Ancients shall have dominion over Atlantia but not over the will of its people. Atlantians will search for Power and succeed, and this success shall be its undoing. For once the Power is brought to the surface, Atlantia shall be swallowed by the waters surrounding it. Atlantia shall survive, forever changed by its quest for ultimate Power."

"I've read that one before."

"That doesn't sound good at all, especially since we happen to be on Atlantia," Valencia commented.

"I'm sure it's a long time off."

She hurriedly dropped the first scroll and picked up the other one. I retrieved it from the floor with a groan of disgust at her disrespect. I walked over to the table near the door and set the scroll down carefully. I stayed across the room as she briefly scanned the second scroll. A quick inspection of the manuscript was all that was needed. "This is the one, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

She jumped up and down on the balls of her feet in excitement. Her voice was rapid and expressed her enthusiasm quite well. "There will be four born of the Aseraphim sent to inhabit the realm of Man and they shall be as siblings to one another. Two then two shall be visited upon the Earth. And as time passes, one shall command dominion over all the creatures of the land, the air and the sea. Born to this world, this chosen one shall lead armies against enemies great and small. Blood will flow as crimson rivers around the sibling's feet and allies and enemies shall cower in fear of the wrath that follows. A preordained aspiration shall be met, as this one shall watch over mankind to maintain balance upon the Earth."

We both stood there, her in stunned silence, as Valencia finished reading the scroll. I glanced over at Valencia and noticed she was still grasping tightly to the scroll.

"Do you want to put that down now?" I asked her.

My voice broke her paralysis and she dropped the scroll like it had caught fire. "Get it away from me."

I went over to where she was standing and gave her a dirty look before I bent over and picked up the scroll off of the floor. Standing back up, I asked, "What's wrong?" assuming it was the graphic nature of what she'd read that had her so upset. I walked back over to the table and set the scroll down with the other one.

"That's not about me, is it?"

"I don't believe so."

"But how do you know?" she asked, clearly upset.

"Valencia, I'll admit, I don't know for certain. However, if you have so much trouble with what this prophecy says, then I'd have to say you most likely aren't the one it refers to."

"Are you sure?" she asked, breathless.

"Positive." I smiled and added, "I never thought you'd get so upset about a little bloodshed."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, no anger evident in her voice, just bewilderment.

"Well, the prophecy does describe some gory events and..."

"That's not the reason, Vincent," she broke in.

"Then what is?"

"Balance. I can't handle that. The very concept is upsetting." She grimaced in revulsion as she spoke.

"Let me get this right. You don't mind the bloodshed, but the thought of everything working together in perfect balance and harmony bothers you?"

"Of course. Just thinking about a perfectly balanced and orderly world makes me sick. I actually pictured it for a moment there. You didn't honestly think it was the violent depiction that upset me did you?" I nodded enough to let her know she was right and that was all it took to get her laughing. "Vincent, if I were interested in becoming the ruler of the world I'd have no problem spilling a little blood here and there to get what I wanted. Would you?"

"I've never really put much thought into it," I honestly replied. After a moment's hesitation, and noting Valencia waiting patiently for my answer, I said, "I could do it. If it was necessary to establish order, I could lead armies."

"Now that I think about it, the first people you'd attack would be chaotic people. That's me!" she surmised.

"Well, not you personally. Just people like you."

"Right, but you'd have to kill me eventually if you wanted to succeed." Her voice was getting louder and I could see her eyes beginning to glow.

"Valencia, I can't kill you, remember? You and I are immortal. Just calm down," I reminded. Her drastic mood change caught me completely off-guard.

"You said before that we could be, how did you put it, put down. That's it. Put down." She was slowly walking towards me, her voice lower now yet more menacing and sinister. "You'd have to do that to me if you wanted to command dominion over all as is written. Could you do it, Vincent? If it came right down to it, could you put me down?" Her voice was nearly a growl as the light emanating from her eyes now flooded the room. What I found strange was that we were both standing, and I was a modest few inches taller than her, yet she was now nose to nose with me. The light from her eyes burned into mine and made her face look as if the light was radiating from her skin as well as her eyes.

I never broke the lock on her gaze as I steely replied, "If I had to, I could."

"Because you're the chosen one," she said with a sly note of sarcasm.

"I could be. If it needs to be done for me to complete the prophecy, then it'll have to be done." I grinned at her and added, "Nothing personal."

She flashed a dark, brooding smile and said, "You won't succeed. Not if I can help it."

"You can't. It's already been written. You don't have a choice."

Her wicked smile grew larger as she said, "There's always a choice." That said, she turned and departed for her room. It was only then that I realized how she had been able to look me dead in the eye as she had. She was floating, her feet dangling a few inches above the floor.

Casting that thought aside momentarily, I left the room as soon as I heard Valencia's door slam shut. I hurriedly put the scrolls back where I'd found them and returned to my room. The words of the prophecy rang in my ears. I had read it before but, with everything else going on in Egypt, never put much thought into what it truly said. I would command armies. People would cower in fear. I had to admit it all had a certain appeal. Most of all, I would have order. My father told me he would show me what true order was. Knowing violence was going to be involved, oddly enough, didn't bother me that much at all. As I told Valencia, if it had to be done, then it had to be done. It wasn't the violence that put the smile on my face however. It wasn't even the fact

that the prophecy used the word balance in describing the end results. It was the way Valencia knew I'd have to eliminate her that had me so delighted. It's not that I wanted to be rid of her for all eternity. I just wouldn't complain about it very much. As for doing away with her myself, I could do it if I really had to. What was even better was she knew it. The breathtaking image of a world without chaos filled my mind as I lie down on the bed and fell to sleep.

The sun was shining in all its glory my first day there in Atlantia. I opened my eyes and saw my room flooded with light. The next thing I noticed was the smell of food being prepared. I sprang from the bed, loathe to leave such comfort behind, got dressed and ran downstairs. I expected my father to be the one making breakfast. We rarely ate while in Egypt, but when we did father always did the cooking. The person making the food, currently eggs mixed with bits of some meat, wasn't Valencia either. I'd never seen Valencia cook. I didn't even know if she could. Even if she could, I didn't think I could trust her cooking. That aside, since this wasn't my sister, and it wasn't my father, I figured I'd better find out just who this mysterious cook was.

"Excuse me, but who are you and what are you doing here?" I asked.

The stranger was dressed in a green robe with a white sash running from his left shoulder to his right hip. He turned and smiled at me warmly. "There'll be time for that later. Help me with these onions," he offered as a reply.

Confused and not awake enough yet to argue, I strolled over to the counter he was pointing to and picked up an onion. "What should I do with it?"

He looked disapprovingly at me, yet never let the smile fall from his face. "What do you think I want you to do with it?"

"Cut it up?"

"Very good! You're a quick learner. That'll make Samir happy." He pointed down the counter and said, "Use that knife and make the pieces small enough that they'll mix well with the eggs and ham."

I retrieved the knife and set to cutting up the onion. My eyes began to water as I worked. Before I could ask, I was told this was a normal occurrence when chopping onions. I was halfway done with the first onion when the cook asked, "Is that all the faster you can cut that up?"

I looked over at him in annoyance and noticed he was still wearing that glowing smile. My annoyance quickly faded and I took the challenge,

for that's what it was. I carefully moved the cut pieces of onion from the cutting board to a small plate. The cook took the plate from me and examined my work. He nodded with approval as he dumped them into the pan, stirring them into eggs and ham. From the moment he took the plate from me until he turned back to me was less than twenty seconds. Yet when he turned back, I had the knife in my hand and the rest of the onion cut up.

His smile stretched so far across his face it looked painful. I winked at him and grabbed the plate. I handed it back after transferring the onions and he again inspected my work.

"Even better!" he burst out. He dumped the remaining onion into the pan and after a quick stir turned and said, "I'm Kiyusin Lantarna. It's an honor to finally meet you Vincent." He extended his hand and I grasped it warmly.

"Are you our cook?" I asked.

"No, my dear boy. I'm a teacher."

"I thought Sam was going to be my teacher," I replied, wondering if my father had a change of heart regarding Genepool's choice of instructor.

"He is. I'm your sister's teacher."

He was still smiling, apparently not fully aware of what awaited him. "You know, my sister is a little bit, how can I put this politely..."

"Different, yes, I know. Don't believe for a minute that I've taken anything for granted. Your sister is to be the mistress of chaos, and from what I hear she's got some interesting natural abilities."

This was news to me. "How do you mean?"

That removed his smile. "I'm confused. You've never noticed what she can do?"

"No, not really. She seems mostly harmless to me."

"That's because she isn't fully aware of her true capabilities yet. In time, she will be tremendously powerful. Has your sister ever sat and talked to you and afterwards, you just felt a need to do what she was hinting at?"

"That used to happen a lot, honestly. Not so much lately though. I guess I've gotten used to her."

"Consider yourself lucky."

"Believe me, I do." We shared a quick grin and he got back to working on breakfast. "So, if you're Valencia's teacher, what are you doing in our kitchen?"

"Cooking," was his dry reply.

"I can see that. Why?"

"I got here early and needed something to do. Besides, I'm a fantastic cook and growing children need a healthy meal to start the day." Before I could object, he added, "Immortal or not, you're still a child and you should have something to eat. Now go and set the table for four. Samir should be here soon."

"What about my father?" I inquired.

"The Beholder left a short while ago. Apparently he had some urgent business to attend to."

It took me a while to find the plates and cutlery to actually be able to set the table. These things were not included in the tour when we arrived. Sam arrived as I was setting everything up and Valencia appeared from upstairs just as I finished. Anyone else and I'd say it was good timing. Since it was Valencia, I chalked it up to coincidence.

"Good morning," I gleefully declared.

She slowly turned and bore down on me. Her gaze bespoke the extreme disfavor she was feeling toward me from our conversation last night. I felt so good this morning I had all but forgotten about it until now. One glance was all I needed. If she thought she could do it, she'd beat me to a pulp right here and now. She wouldn't stand a chance, but it wouldn't have stopped her from giving it her all. "What's so good about it, brother?" she grumbled.

"Sleep well?" I decided I was not going to let her moodiness upset my day, so I remained as cheerful as possible.

"No, I didn't, and thank you so much for asking." Her hair was standing up in every direction. It actually hurt to look at it. At the same time, I couldn't help but feel like laughing. She looked ridiculous. "Not for a lack of trying though. Every time I would be just about out, I would get all these pictures of an orderly, methodical, systematic world and I would get jolted awake. It was horrible," she spit out.

"Sounds good to me," I replied.

"It would," she grouched and went to find a place to clean up. I informed her breakfast would be ready shortly and she proceeded to completely ignore me. Sam called me into the kitchen as Kiyusin entered the dining room and began serving the food.

"Kiyus tells me you're pretty fast with a knife. Accurate too. Every piece of onion was exactly the same size," he said as I entered the kitchen.

"That's because I was being careful. He was picking on me for taking my time," I remarked with a grin.

"So you felt challenged?"

"Yes, I did."

"And you took up that challenge why?"

I looked up at him and locked my gaze with his as I replied, "Because I knew I could do it."

He smiled and said, "Very good, Vincent! Did you know your hands were as fast as your feet before this?"

"No, but I had a feeling. When he teased me about going slow, I knew I could go faster. I knew it right away. It wasn't until he said what he did that I wanted to go faster. My whole body moves that fast?" I asked in wonder.

"In time it will. At this young stage in your life, you are merely faster than the human eye. When you're older, you'll be faster than the human mind. Right now, you're still limited by your physical body. But patience is a virtue, Vincent." He leaned down and whispered in my ear, "Just wait. Before you leave here, you will be able to do things your dreams cannot conceive of." Sam stood back up and finished the conversation by saying, "Now go sit down and eat. Today we work on strengthening your mind. Your body can wait for another day."

Kiyusin was seated and waiting good-naturedly for the rest of us to join him. I sat to his left and Sam took a seat directly across from him. The food Kiyusin had prepared smelled absolutely fabulous. My mouth was watering in anticipation from the second I walked into the room. I picked up my fork and was about to start eating when Kiyusin told me to wait for Valencia.

"You do realize it could be sundown by the time she decides to come into this room again?" I pointed out.

"I'm well aware of that possibility, Vincent," Kiyusin replied, "but we shall wait anyway. It's impolite to start eating before everyone is present, especially when the person you're waiting on is a lady."

"We aren't waiting for a lady. We're waiting for my sister," I calmly explained.

"That she may be, but she's also a lady and should be treated with respect."

"If you say so," I mumbled to myself.

Valencia meandered into the room a moment later. Her hair wasn't quite as dreadful as it was earlier, but a good bit of it on her right side was now sticking straight out. I thought I could contain my laughter, and I did try. I failed, and let out a small chuckle.

As she sat down, she turned her gaze to me. Kiyusin scolding me for expressing amusement at Valencia's hair troubles cut my revelry short. I muttered a half-hearted apology and considered the matter settled. The food tasted as good as it smelled. We all enjoyed a quiet morning meal

together before setting off for our lessons.

"Kiyusin is your brother?" I asked Sam as we parted company with Valencia and her teacher.

"Yes, he is. He's my older brother."

"Does he ever get on your nerves?"

Sam leaned back and broke into gales of laughter, "Oh, you have no idea. However, I'm quite sure he'd say the same about me. It's part of being siblings."

I let the subject drop and took in my surroundings. We were still in the residential area of town, only a few blocks from my house. Elm and willow trees lined the brick streets, their green leaves scattered along the walkway. People roamed the streets, heading to the main part of town. I again wondered about the different colored robes and asked Sam why he wore yellow and his brother wore green.

"Because I believe differently than he does," he answered.

"Your color denotes your beliefs?"

"Correct. Since my brother is a follower of nature, he wears green."

"So who is represented by yellow?" I inquired.

"Why, order of course."

"Really?" I cheerfully asked. "Is that why Genepool picked you to teach me?"

"Yes and probably."

A puzzling thought popped into my mind. "Who does your brother serve?"

Sam looked at me, beaming with pride, "That was the question I was hoping you'd ask."

"Why?"

"Because it is the subject on which you have the least amount of information. The more information you have, the better chance you have of putting everything in order. Now, to answer your question, basically he worships Genepool. In all actuality, he and his kind are awaiting their messiah, their leader. He is prophesied to come, but the prophecy is extremely vague as to when."

"What about chaos?"

"They wear the black robes. You'll probably want to avoid them. I don't think you'd find them much to your liking. On a personal level, I get along with a lot of the chaotic types. They aren't bad people. They just bother you after a while. For now, just pass them by."

"My father told me to stay away from them too. He made them sound like criminals and degenerates."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far in describing them. They're more mischievous than dangerous."

"What about the others?"

Sam explained the meaning behind all the colors in our walk to his house. Citizens dressed in blue robes were followers of light and love. Those in red were believers in darkness and hatred. Sam was obviously leery of these folks and warned me that, if I did encounter one of them, to be extremely polite. Basically, what it came down to was, if I left them alone, they'd leave me alone. It sounded like a good plan to me.

It was the other colors that knocked me for a loop. The other two colors of clothing I'd seen were silver and white. Sam explained that the ones in silver were the scientists, the scholars and other elite intellectuals. Sam spoke briefly of a major undertaking currently under development outside of town. He didn't have many details unfortunately. These men weren't technically the leaders of Atlantia but they did hold significant influence.

"And last are the white robes. These are the writers, the poets, and the literati. They hardly ever speak to anyone and they seem to be everywhere at once. You'll notice them scribbling away, writing down everything they see. After you're here a while, you tend to ignore them."

"Do people get to read their writings?"

"They do allow ordinary folks like us enjoy their poems and such every once in a while. The things they write in everyday life, the goings-on of Atlantia and their part in it, we never get to see. That is between them and those they follow." He pointed to a house across the road and steered me in that direction. "You may have noticed some of them wearing a different colored sash as well."

"I was just about to ask you about that. Doesn't Kiyusin wear one?"

"Yes, he does. It is what you'd call a secondary characteristic. My brother is a follower of nature but he also subscribes to the principle of recording events as they happen. Also, you may see someone in a blue robe with a black sash. This shows that, while this person is a follower of light, they will use the forces of chaos to obtain their goals."

"So someone in a black robe with a red sash would be a follower of darkness and chaotic?" I asked, shivering at the very concept. "That has to be the worst combination on Atlantia."

"Close, but not quite. The ones you really need to avoid are the ones in white robes with red sashes."

"Evil poets?" I scoffed. "That doesn't sound bad at all."

Sam smiled as he led me to the door of his home. "Vincent,

everything the men in white transcribe is passed on to others of their ilk. Eventually, the words spread to the realms of death, both Haven and Haedes. The words of the clerics in white and red are sacrosanct in Haedes. For when these mortals die, they become known simply as Dark Clerics, under the command of Wraith, the Fallen..."

I held up a hand to stop him and said, "I've met them. They aren't that bad."

"Physically, they are insignificant. Do not doubt their power amongst the hierarchy in Haedes, Vincent. For my sake, if you happen to witness one watching you and writing, leave the area. Move away and keep moving until they're gone. It's probably more than you really need to do, but it'll make me feel better."

His eyes bore out his sincerity and I promised to stay away from the red and whites. I couldn't figure out why Sam was so worried about some silly writers. I guess he had his reasons.

He finally opened the door and waved me inside. Sam's house was similar to mine with two glaring exceptions. First, it was quite a bit smaller. Secondly were the books. Every wall, from floor to ceiling, was filled with books. I scanned the tomes as I passed by, wondering when I would get to read the various volumes on architecture and biology. Sam led me into a large parlor off of the main corridor. This room was clearly where we would be spending most of our time. Furnished sparingly, with only a large table and two chairs, the rest of the room was overflowing with books. I watched Sam walk around to the back of the table. I spotted four books on the table and as I drew near I saw they were opened. Sam invited me to sit down and I practically jumped into my chair.

He handed me the first book and began his lesson. The first subject of the day was mathematics, a topic at which I was moderately experienced. Sam gave me a test and told me he wanted to see how much I knew so he'd know where to start. The exam consisted of forty math questions and I completed it in short order. After checking my answers, he took the math book from my hands and opened it to the middle.

"We may as well just start here," he remarked. "Trying to teach you things you already know is a tad redundant, wouldn't you say?" I matched his broad smile with one of my own as we continued.

We had almost finished the rest of the mathematics book when we stopped for lunch. I reminded him I didn't have to eat and he politely reminded me that he did. When he rejected my idea of eating and teaching at the same time, I gave up and resigned myself to having to

study on my own for a while. Sam left for the kitchen and I resumed my math studies. Upon his return, I was ready for another one of his tests. So far today I had taken three and passed them all with perfect scores. He had all of the tests prepared ahead of time because he wasn't sure how far we'd get on our first day. That was turning out to be a wise decision. He handed me the next exam and I tore through it, hardly pausing to think. I finished the test in a flash and once again aced it.

The rest of the day stuck to the same format. Sam would go over a lesson in one of the math books and then there'd be a test. I'd answer every question correctly and we'd go on to the next lesson. I wasn't just learning how to do certain mathematics problems. Sam made sure to include the practical application of what I was being taught. He explained that knowing the information showed intelligence. It was putting that information to use that defined knowledge.

We finished off the first book, which was all basic mathematics, and moved on to the next in line. The next tome covered basic geometry and I dove into it with the same enthusiasm. Sam was very pleased to see me so eager for an education. The geometry lessons weren't as simple as the basic math lessons but I picked up the information easily. Three perfect test scores later and Sam was ready to quit for the day. I asked if I could take a book home with me to continue my studies privately but Sam turned me down. He didn't want his irreplaceable books leaving his home.

I left Sam's house, promising to be back tomorrow bright and early. The sun was just beginning to set and it cast a dull glow over the landscape. Long shadows formed from the trees lining the streets, making the twilight appear darker than it actually was. I walked home through the gloom of the dying day, joyfully kicking the leaves and pebbles I found in my path. I was ecstatic about the day's events and I could conceive of nothing that would dampen my spirits.

I stepped through the front door of my house and was abruptly proven wrong. Valencia was sitting at the dining room table, evidently trying to finish up some schoolwork that Kiyusin had given her. Her brow was furrowed in concentration and her head was virtually buried in the book. I decided to quietly sneak past her so I could get a snack from the kitchen. I accidentally kicked a chair sitting by the entranceway and that was all it took to get her attention.

"Vincent, come over here a moment, would you?" she asked pleasantly.

I was not going to be fooled by her passive tone. I leisurely walked over to her and asked, "What do you want? I want to get

something to eat."

"You don't need to eat," she pointed out and quickly added, "Besides, I need your help with something."

"And what would that be?"

She held out her book for me and it was a math book similar to the first one I'd studied today. Unlike me, however, Valencia was still in the very beginning of hers. "Is this as far as you got in your math lesson? What else did Kiyusin teach you?"

"Just this, now are you going to help me or not?" she angrily replied.

I tried not to, but I couldn't help but laugh a little at my sister's dilemma. This earned me a nasty, eyes-glowing stare. I simply didn't care. Her attitude only made me laugh more.

Her displeasure grew more intense when I told her, "No, I'm not going to help you." I immediately turned and headed back to the kitchen. I could hear my sister yelling at me in frustration. I ignored her and found what I was looking for. I grabbed an apple and ventured back out to the dining room. As I came into the room, Valencia stopped her diatribe and sat motionless, stewing in her own anger.

"So why won't you help me?" she defiantly asked.

"Why should I?"

"Because I need your help!"

"Valencia, you've got to learn these lessons on your own. If I help you, you won't learn anything."

"I'm not asking you to do the work for me. I just need you to show me how to do these problems correctly."

"And if you're having difficulties, you should tell Kiyusin. He's your teacher, not me."

"But you're my brother!" she cried out.

"And what difference does that make? I should be made to learn my lessons and then help you learn yours all because I'm your brother?" I was really getting frustrated and it showed in my voice. "I'm sorry, Valencia, but it doesn't work that way. If you seriously want to learn anything you're going to have to do these things on your own." I took a bite of my apple and winced in pain.

"Are you all right?" she asked, then added, "Not that I really care one way or the other right now."

"I'm fine. My tooth hurts. I think I have a few loose. Didn't father tell us that would happen?"

"I think so. I've noticed that some of mine are loose too."

"I guess I'll have to deal with the pain, just as you will have to deal

with the pain of your studies. Besides, math isn't that difficult."

"It's too orderly," she complained.

"That, my dear sister, is impossible," I remarked and left the room.

I ventured upstairs and examined the books along the walls. These weren't like the books I'd seen in Sam's house. These looked old, and by old I meant as old as my father. I gently pulled one from the shelf and opened it to the front. The first thing I noticed was it was written in the language of the Aseraphim. Needing something to do to pass the time, I closed the book and took it back to my room.

I hopped onto the bed and sprawled out. Flipping the book open again, I gave the tome a closer inspection. The title was one word, written in lavish script along the top of the first page: Legends. I stared at that word for a while, envisioning all this book might contain. The word legends could mean many things, from heroes to stories. What stories and heroes were contained in this book, I wondered. I was shaking in anticipation until I could hold out no longer. I carefully turned to the first page and began reading.

From the first words, I knew I would get no sleep this evening. This was not a book of prophecy, that much was clear right away. The opening line of the book read, "Herein lie the recorded events of the initiation of the Aseraphim Wars, chronicled for all time so as to reveal for future generations the genesis of their hostility and warn them of the bloodshed yet to come."

As I finished the opening sentence, my father called me downstairs for dinner. Regretfully, I closed the book and slid it under my bed. It would simply have to wait until after dinner.

Chapter 7

I ate quickly, eager to get back to my room. My sister was still mad at me for not helping out with her schoolwork and wasn't speaking to me. If this was supposed to be some sort of punishment, I'd take getting punished more often. My father asked me some questions about my first day of school but didn't pry too much. He seemed to want to know more about Sam's teaching methods than what I was being taught. Other than that we ate in silence. As soon as I had the last bite finished off I cleared my plate and darted upstairs.

I opened the drawer on the table by the door and retrieved the key. There was no way I was going to be disturbed while reading this book. Once the door was locked and the key returned to the drawer it was time to get back to the book. I slid it out from its hiding place and took a seat in a chair. The sun was almost completely over the horizon now and as beautiful as the sunset over Atlantia was, I was more concerned about being able to read in the dark. I lit a few candles in anticipation of the coming night.

I opened the book and reread the first sentence again. The somberness of the words weighed on my mind as did the importance of what I was about to read.

Herein lay the recorded events of the initiation of the Aseraphim Wars, chronicled for all time so as to reveal for future generations the genesis of their hostility and warn them of the bloodshed yet to come.

The impudence of Nacht, in defiance of the Ancients, caused his banishment to the planet of Haven. Tag, not wanting to be apart from Nacht, urged the Ancients to reconsider. The Ancients, in their wisdom, refused. His transgression could not go unpunished as he was responsible for the destruction of life on Earth. Tag refused to accept the judgment and asked to be allowed to go to Haven to be with Nacht. The Ancients refused to grant her wish. In retribution, Tag refused to bathe the land in light. She made clouds to cover the planet so not one single beam of light would reach the surface. The Ancients demanded that she disperse the clouds and let the light shine once again. Tag remained steadfast and the Ancients finally relented and allowed her passage to Haven.

The removal of Tag and Nacht left their children, the Aseraphim, to walk upon the Earth. Born from their union in the land of Limbo, the Aseraphim were sent to the Earth to carry on their parent's works. These children were like no other seen on Earth. They walked as humans, yet were more than any mere mortal could wish to become. To look upon

Christi Lona, she of the purest white wings, is to see kindness and beauty incarnate. Her sister Lillith had similar features, but where Christi Lona was brightness, Lillith exuded darkness. Her wings, though white, seemed to fade into the shadows around her. Her hair was dark black as opposed to Christi Lona's luminous blonde mane. Their brothers, Cherub and Loathe, each resembled one of their sisters better than one another. Cherub shared Christi Lona's pale features while Loathe resembled his dark sister.

An Ancient visited the four Earthbound Aseraphim upon their arrival. First he spoke to Christi Lona and Lillith of Tag and Nacht's fates. Christi Lona, she of the gossamer wings of light, fell to her knees, weeping for the loss of her mother. In her grief, she vowed to continue the works of her mother on the Earth. Lillith did not share her sister's compassion and fell into a rage at the loss of her father. Lillith, her dark beauty as captivating as her kindly sister, vowed to do the works of her father on the Earth. The Beholder advised them to come with him to speak to their siblings, Loathe and Cherub. The Beholder spoke to the four of them of the prophecy of the one that is to hold dominion over Earth. His words sank deep into the souls of all four children. Cherub sided with his sister Christi Lona in doing the works of their mother. Loathe stood by his sister Lillith in her aim of doing the works of their father. The animosity of the Aseraphim was born of this moment, when they learned that one of them may hold dominance over this plane. The Beholder was well pleased with his efforts to pull apart the bonds that held the Aseraphim to one another, for he had his own motivations.

The Beholder had become infatuated with the first-born Aseraphim, Starz. Her beauty called to him from the moment of her creation. Starz was the most favored of the Aseraphim by all the Ancients, all for their own reasons. Only The Beholder's admiration had driven him to near madness. Obsession drove him to plot to bear children with Starz by any means, believing it was his right as an Ancient. Starz, having been tasked to observe the events on the Earth for future generations, was unaware of the prophecy told to her siblings. The Beholder found Starz and devised a plan to accomplish his goals. Removing his mask from his current life form, he set it down in her path. Upon finding the mask, Starz was compelled to place it upon her captivating face. Once this action was performed, the essence that is The Beholder combined with the essence of Starz.

Unbeknownst to The Beholder, the child Wraith, tasked to record the events born witness by his eldest sister, was dispatched to Earth to begin his responsibilities. Wraith appeared before his sister and witnessed

her struggling to remove the mask of The Beholder from her personage. Wraith instantly withdrew his spellbook and began reciting a spell in an attempt to rescue his sister. His spell accomplished its intended function and the mask fell to the ground. The creature that had previously worn the mask crawled out of the darkness in an effort to retrieve the mask for itself. Wraith spied this creature as it found the mask and waited for the creature to wear it once more. As soon as the mask was being worn and The Beholder was in physical form once again, Wraith pulled his axe from its strap and beheaded the creature, taking its pain for the pain caused to Starz. Wraith took possession of the mask of The Beholder, taking it upon himself to see to it that he would never harm an Aseraphim again. Starz was granted an aura by Wraith at this time, and as the only being to come of the true love shared by Tag and Nacht, she is the only one of two children with an aura of gold and black. Calling upon The Power Cosmic and The Will Cosmic, Wraith asked for a way to ensure that their counterpart, The Beholder, would never again be able to mistreat his sister. The Power Cosmic and The Will Cosmic, knowing that The Beholder would likely attempt this deed again if granted the opportunity, dispersed the essence and the aura of Starz to the sky so she could keep watch over the Earth from above. They also granted her the gift of omnipresence. She knew every action taken upon the Earth as it was done. The Power Cosmic and The Will Cosmic also decreed that no one of Aseraphim blood shall ever be able to wear the mask of The Beholder again from this point in time. As a reward for his compassion and caring for his sister, Wraith was given a telepathic link to Starz so as to ease his task of recording the events of the Earth.

Upon her dispersal, Starz bore four essences into the ethereal. These would be known as Order, Chaos, Love and Hate. All four of these essences were born of the union of Starz and The Beholder. Order was born of The Beholder's goals, Chaos of Starz's memories, Love from Starz's feelings for her siblings and Hate from The Beholder's impudence. Their essences were not unknown to the Ancients as they were not new to the universe. These four were to be held in the ethereal by Wraith with the assistance of The Will Cosmic and The Power Cosmic. The Earth was not prepared for their presence. It was decreed that, when these four were born unto the Earth in ages to come, whenever the four of them were assembled together in life, one of the three of them shall emerge and offer guidance and advice. The four shall also be warned of what a true union of all their powers would produce.

Centuries of hostility between the Aseraphim leading a life in the name of Tag and the Aseraphim leading a life in the name of Nacht

fermented into aggression. Christi Lona and Cherub gathered armies of likeminded races to battle the forces of darkness. Lillith and Loathe did likewise, forming armies to do battle with the forces of light. In the ethereal realm, it was decreed by the Ancients that any and all mortals that perished fighting in these battles would come unto Styx to be judged and appointed to their proper realm. Those fighting for Nacht would spend eternity in the darkness now known as Haedes. Those fighting for Tag would spend eternity bathed in the light of Haven. Those that did not choose an affiliation of darkness or light would be relegated to Limbo until judged either ready to be born again to Earth or be banished to Haedes if found to be unredeemable. Many mortals did indeed perish in the centuries that followed. Entire races were exterminated in the fierce fighting. Rivers flowed red for ages and great lakes were formed in these waterways, their currents interrupted by piles of corpses obstructing the natural flow of the water.

The knocking at the door startled me and I jumped up out of the chair. I swiftly closed the book and slid it back under the bed before making my way to the door. I picked up the key and asked, "Who's there?"

"It's me," Valencia replied. "Who did you think it would be?"

"What do you want now?" I was annoyed at the interruption and it surely showed in my tone of voice.

"I wanted to apologize for yelling at you earlier. I shouldn't have gotten so mad. You have your studies and I have mine. I need to learn to do things for myself."

I was caught off guard by her frank admission. "That's very decent of you Valencia. Thank you."

There was the briefest pause before she asked, "Can you open the door?"

"I can. Whether I will or not depends on what else you want."

"Well," she began, trying to sound sweet and innocent.

Thankfully I knew better. "I figured you'd be bored since you didn't have any schoolwork to worry about. I thought we could sit and talk about our first day of school. You know, just chat about what we've learned and all."

"In other words, you want me to tell you how you should do your lessons."

"Not at all. I just want to know how you would do it. There's a difference."

I slammed the key into the lock and forcefully threw open the

door. Valencia noticed my displeasure and sprung back into the hallway. "Listen to me, Valencia. I am not helping you with your lessons. Stop bothering me," I growled. She opened her mouth to speak but I cut her off. "No. Not a word. Just go and figure it out on your own. I'm trying to relax and I can't do that with you pestering me. Now leave me alone!"

Valencia never looked scared or worried. Her expression of calm was infuriating. "There's no need to shout," she serenely replied. "I'll just come back later when you're in a better mood."

She turned to walk away and I grabbed her arm, spinning her back around. Now her expression changed. Her calm veneer was broken and shock filled her eyes. I pulled her closer and said, "No, you will not come back later. If you do, our father is going to send you to your room and lock the door. That will keep you away from me."

She grinned and said, "No problem. I'll just unlock it when I get my key."

"You aren't getting a key."

"Sure I am," she said confidently.

"Don't you think if you were getting a key you'd have it by now?"

She thought this over for a second and replied, "Fine. I'll leave. Just don't expect my help when you need it."

I let go of her arm and laughed at the very idea. She got mad at my rudeness and stormed off to her room. Now that she was gone I could get back to the book. I hurriedly locked the door, retrieved the book and hopped up onto the bed. Stretching out, I opened the book to where I'd been before I was rudely interrupted.

The next chapter was a graphic description of the first battle between the two divisions of Aseraphim. I was totally captivated by this story. It began with Christi Lona charging Wraith to lead the armies of mortals on Earth. He gathered up the strongest and bravest creatures to fight for the side of Light. Lillith's armies were the most vile and dangerous beings on the planet. Their evil knew no bounds and Lillith held sway over all of them. She put her brother Loathe in command of the soldiers of Darkness. The events described in the book were violent and disturbing. Yet in my mind I could see the fight taking place and was not frightened or wary. The images in my mind were strangely pleasant, as if my mind was welcoming them so I could better understand what had transpired. I saw bodies crushed like bugs, the victim's blood splashing onto those beside him. I could picture Loathe, bathed in the blood of his enemies, slicing through crowds of mortals with his halberd as if cutting leaves from a tree. I witnessed Wraith calling out to his minions to advance and watching them fall one by one to Loathe's forces. When

Wraith retreated, his army had been cut down to the tiniest fraction of what it had been.

I kept reading, fully engrossed by the first story and now compelled to read on. The next chapter was another battle played out so I flipped forward a bit to see if there was anything else of interest. As it turned out, the rest of the book was all descriptions of battles in the Aseraphim Wars. I went back to where I'd left off and continued from there. If I was going to read it, I might as well read it all. I spent the entire night reading about the battles. After their first crushing defeat the forces of Light regrouped quite well. The Light won most of the major skirmishes with only a few exceptions. Lillith didn't take her losses well and directed Loathe to seek more ways to gain an advantage. Loathe's armies had taken prisoners and he began questioning them himself. Slow painful torture was involved but he got the information he needed. Loathe then set forth to capture their forces instead of just killing them. Some he tortured for information, others he tried to bring to his side. At either task, he succeeded much more often than he failed. There was someone important on the side of Light he was able to turn to the Darkness. He sent this traitor back to Wraith and his armies, under the guise of having escaped. This person was able to create havoc from within the ranks, causing several setbacks in Wraith's plans. The forces of Darkness were able to make gains in the war again due in large part to the actions of this traitor.

Darkness gained more and more ground at every turn. The only problem was, the more they fought, the more mortals died. Entire races were being erased from existence in the fighting and many others went into hiding. Soon the Aseraphim could not recruit as many mortals as they once had. To survive, the creatures of Earth refused to acknowledge the Aseraphim. Their battles would be unto themselves. Not all mortals denied the Aseraphim but the remaining followers were few. With the numbers on both sides severely diminished, the Aseraphim were forced to resolve the problems themselves. Christi Lona extended an offer of peace to her sister Lillith, hoping to at least be able to discuss bringing an end to the war. Lillith agreed to the talks to see if they could work something out. This marked the beginning of the end.

Centuries had passed since the Aseraphim Wars began on Earth. The five siblings grew stronger with every victory and learned hard lessons in defeat. A result of this was that, separately, their powers were beyond mortal comprehension. When any of them combined their efforts they were virtually unstoppable. Consequently, the only beings

that could destroy them were just as powerful as they were. A stalemate had ensued.

Christi Lona extended an invitation to her sister Lillith with the hopes of working out a compromise that would be beneficial to all parties. Lillith, skeptical of her sister's motives and untrusting by nature, refused to come alone. She demanded that Loathe be allowed to participate in the talks. Christi Lona agreed as long as Cherub was allowed to stand at her side as well. Wraith, though aligned with the side of Light, was tasked to serve as a mediator. His impartiality was born from his being charged with recording events verbatim. A neutral site was selected and the five siblings met on the isle of Atlantia.

The inhabitants of Atlantia consisted of the Granites, a race of people whose entire countenance is of solid rock, the Magmites, like the Granites also made of stone yet their rock is still molten, and the Atlantians. All races on Atlantia had refused to choose an allegiance and remained neutral throughout. The meeting took place in the main temple. Seated at one side of a grand oaken table was Christ Lona, with Cherub to her right. Across from her was her sister Lillith, with Loathe to her left. Wraith sat between them, his great axe drawn and lying across his legs.

Flashes of bright white light filled the room as Christi Lona stared at her twin. Patches of pure darkness broke the light intermittently as Lillith matched Christi Lona's gaze. No words were spoken for many hours as they merely sat in each other's presence. Without warning, the room was cast into total darkness for a length of time. No sounds echoed in the great hall. No creature, large or small, moved an inch in the gloom. When light was finally restored, Christi Lona asked her sister if they could begin negotiations. Lillith was impressed with her sister's ability to trust her, enough to let the darkness overtake her. The fact that she did not fear the darkness impressed Lillith enough to listen to Christi Lona's proposal.

Christi Lona first surmised that the prophecy that The Beholder spoke of must not refer to any of them. Since they had all become too powerful for this realm, it would be impossible for any one of them to triumph. Lillith agreed that there was a certain logic to her reasoning but asked if there was any proof to her allegation. Christi Lona said that maybe The Beholder hadn't been completely forthright with them when he had recited the prophecy all those centuries ago. Since they were on Atlantia, the home of the Ancients, they called for Propheteus to join them in their meeting. Propheteus strenuously objected to any involvement in their proceedings and did not heed their call. Once it was made clear to Propheteus by Styx that a fellow Ancient may have twisted

his prophecy for personal gain, he honored the Aseraphim's invitation in an attempt to maintain the integrity of his prophecies. The Aseraphim explained what The Beholder had told to them as prophecy and asked simply for verification from Propheteus, and nothing more. Propheteus solemnly informed them that the prophecy as told to them was not completely accurate. The prophecy spoke of children, not of Tag and Nacht as The Beholder had implied, but of the Aseraphim themselves. Lillith inquired as to what children this prophecy truly spoke of. Propheteus was reluctant at first, but after Christi Lona reminded him of all the dead caused by The Beholder's heresy, he told them of the children of Starz and The Beholder. The Aseraphim were very displeased with Wraith, as he knew of their eldest sister's offspring and never once said a word about them. Propheteus left, telling them that this was the reason he did not want to be involved.

Cherub stood and began to argue with Wraith about the existence of these children of Starz and The Beholder. Christi Lona tried in vain to get the two Aseraphim to remain calm. Lillith and Loathe sat quietly on the opposite side of the table as chaos ensued among the leaders of Light. Lillith waited for just the right moment, as her sister leaned forward to rise from her seat, to set the room into darkness again. Caught off guard, Christi Lona had no time to cast her light to the chamber, and darkness prevailed long enough for Lillith to strike. With one powerful thrust that cut through the darkness itself, she plunged her hand into Christi Lona's chest. With her razor-sharp nails, Lillith was able to dig the still beating heart out of her sister's chest. As soon as Christi Lona's heart was exposed, Lillith let the darkness fade so that all present could witness her triumph.

The darkness had lasted no longer than a few seconds but it was long enough to stop Wraith and Cherub from arguing. As soon as a modicum of light had returned and they saw what Lillith had done, they drew their weapons and charged at Lillith and Loathe. Lillith held up Christi Lona's heart and warned them not to come any closer if they ever hoped to resurrect their beloved. Knowing that they would need Christi Lona's heart to bring her back to life on this realm, they heeded Lillith's warning. The four of them stood at the ready. Wraith was gripping his axe so tightly his fingers indented the hardwood of the handle. His gaze never left Loathe, who was standing next to Lillith with his halberd drawn and pointed back at Wraith. Cherub had drawn the Daybringer blade as soon as he noticed Lillith's misdeed and still had it firmly in hand. He did not point it directly at Lillith, but his eyes never left her. She casually ambled around the room, always staying close to Loathe. She was

relentlessly teasing Wraith and Cherub with all of the perverted things she could do to her sister's now still heart. Suddenly, she stopped her pacing and faced Cherub and Wraith. Loathe stood next to her as she clapped the heart between her hands and began to smear her blood over her face, her neck and her chest. Lillith bellowed with laughter as she desecrated her sister's very existence with her unholy act. Her exuberance echoed throughout the temple. As the blood was spread out across her skin, Lillith began to change physically. Wherever Christi Lona's blood had come into contact with Lillith, the skin was now darker than the void. Soon the inky blackness began to flow over her body until it became her body. From head to toe, wingtip to wingtip, Lillith had transformed. Looking upon her form was as if looking into the void itself. Strands of black ooze dripped from her wings. She still had a discernable form but you had to strain your eyes and your mind to be able to distinguish it from the surrounding shadows. His paralysis broken, Cherub screamed out in anguish and charged at Lillith, as did Wraith. At their first step, the room fell into utter darkness. Without Christi Lona to help cast light against Lillith, they were virtually powerless to regain control of the situation. When light was restored, Cherub and Wraith stood alone in the great hall of Atlantia. Wraith, in mourning, spoke a spell to teleport Christi Lona's body to Haven, as she could once again inhabit her body in that realm.

When Cherub and Wraith left the great hall, they encountered Propheteus waiting patiently for them. Cherub drew the Daybringer from its sheath and held it to the throat of the prophet. Cherub demanded to know why, if he knew what would happen, he did nothing to stop it, blaming him for Christi Lona's death. Propheteus explained it was not his place to interfere with the prophecies. He only knew what would happen, not why. Propheteus reminded Cherub that he did not want to attend their meeting but was instead convinced to by a fellow Ancient. His goal was only to clear up any misgivings about what had been told to them. Every other piece of information that was passed to them, and every subsequent action, was directly due to them calling on him and asking for more than was offered. Wraith asked Propheteus if he knew of any reason The Beholder would do such a thing as lie about a prophecy. The only reason Propheteus could surmise was that The Beholder believed he knew whom the chosen one was that the prophecy speaks of. His actions may speak of a plan to ready the world for that one's arrival. Cherub came to the conclusion that Lillith would most likely attempt the same ends. If she believed she knew whom the chosen one was, she may try to gain favor by controlling the world until the one arrived and was strong enough to take command. Propheteus informed Cherub and Wraith that,

before Lillith departed Atlantia, she visited The Beholder's temple and stole the Black Stone. The Black Stone of the Ancients, created by The Beholder at the beginning of time, denotes rule over Haedes. If Lillith were to be killed she would be sent to Haedes to begin her reign as queen. Propheteus, in an attempt to correct the imbalance created by Lillith's actions, departed for Haven to present Christi Lona with his gem, the Light Stone. The Light Stone, created by Propheteus at the beginning of the universe, denotes rule over Haven. Christi Lona would become the queen of Haven, welcoming all who were deemed worthy to bask in her loving embrace. Knowing Christi Lona was destined for greater things, Wraith and Cherub vowed to fight on in her memory and pledged, on Tag's name, that they would be victorious.

My father lied to them. After reading the story that was the one prevailing thought echoing in my head. He lied to them. He said he knew I was the chosen one, so maybe he lied to them to help me. It sounded possible, but so were many other scenarios. There was no way I could ask him without letting him know I'd read this book. I didn't even know if he'd object to my reading it or not.

As I mentally reviewed what I'd read, I was able to put certain facts together that led me to another possibility. Since I was in Atlantia, and Atlantia was where the meeting took place, there could be some way to get more information from the locals. Atlantia was also the home of the Ancients, so the local I need to talk to was Genepool. He may not have had firsthand knowledge of the incident, but he probably knew enough to help me fill in the blanks. For now, I just wanted to get back to reading.

The next story continued the tale of the downfall of the Aseraphim. After Lillith's slaying of Christi Lona, the forces of Darkness grew to be more powerful than ever. Cherub and Wraith continued to fight for the side of Light and while their armies were well motivated, they simply lacked the numbers and the strength to defeat Lillith. It wasn't until Cherub himself led the charge at the Battle of Eireland that the advantage seemingly began to shift back to the Light.

Cherub had gathered his forces in Eireland, having been pushed northward in retreat from Lillith's advancing army. He sent Wraith to command the forces in Egypt, hoping to marshal enough troops for an attack from the south. Az and Benevolence, the two lesser Aseraphim charged with commanding from amongst the troops, were in the east, hoping to recruit some of the more civilized lycan races to join in the

battle. Cherub knew there was very little chance the lycans would cooperate. They had always been known as races with great personal pride and phenomenal strength and agility. These proud races were also well known for their neutrality, only doing battle in self-defense and self-preservation.

Lillith had become obsessed with putting an end to Cherub and his forces. Loathe had almost done Lillith the favor in a recent battle. Loathe had met Cherub on the shores of Eireland upon his arrival. Cherub had brought with him the remaining armies from his attempt to overthrow the leadership of Normandy. Loathe, fighting alone, slaughtered most of Cherub's remaining forces as they set ashore. Cherub yelled out orders but his troops perished quickly. Cherub flew over the dead lying before him and charged at Loathe. Cherub swung the Daybringer blade at Loathe as he descended from the sky. Reacting at the last second, Loathe raised his halberd to ward off the attack and was able to narrowly escape being beheaded. Cherub's armies pulled back as Cherub advanced and he and Loathe fought each other alone. Cherub had landed next to Loathe and pulled the Daybringer back again. Loathe knelt down and swung his halberd forward with his right hand, hitting Cherub in the knees and dropping him to the ground. Loathe spun and rose up, twisted the halberd around and thrust the blade downward. Cherub rolled away and Loathe's strike caught nothing but the feathers of Cherub's wings. Cherub swung his legs around and was able to knock Loathe's feet out from under him. Cherub rose and prepared to attack when Loathe evaporated into the shadows. Cherub roared in anger at the lost opportunity to kill his dark twin.

The fact that Loathe had chosen to fight alone caused confusion among the leaders of the armies of Light. Wraith and Az wondered aloud to Cherub if Loathe believed he could defeat the three of them himself. Cherub brushed that aside as lunacy. Since Lillith was the one who would hold court in Haedes, Loathe most likely was doing her bidding to gain favor. If Lillith believed she could take over the planet in preparation for the arrival of the chosen one, she must have also believed the chosen one was going to worship the Dark. Lillith's goal appeared to Az and Wraith to rule over Haedes and Earth. If Lillith controlled the Earth and Haedes, there would be no souls going to Haven, there being no souls deserving anymore. If that were to happen, Lillith might be able to find a way to take over Haven since the numbers on the side of Light would be severely diminished. It was then that Cherub sent Az to the east and Wraith southward to gather more fighters. The only way to stop Lillith was going to be by taking the fight to her and going on the offensive.

Knowing that Loathe was still nearby, Cherub began to recruit reinforcements among the tribes of Eireland. His labors were only moderately successful as most mortals lived in fear of Lillith and her minions. Those courageous few who joined Cherub in his struggle were strong and Cherub was very thankful for his good fortune. As his army grew, Cherub encountered more and more creatures aligned with Lillith. The experience was a blessing for his troops, for though they were great fighters they had never before fought an enemy such as this. Creatures that were once so similar to these simple beings were now twisted, vile beasts. Their very countenance was transformed by the darkness coursing through their veins. Cherub and his troops slaughtered every last one they came across, considering it mercy killings to put these poor creatures out of their misery.

Lillith was well aware of Cherub's works and was pleased. Every time Cherub and his army killed one of her minions, their soul ascended to Haedes. The more Cherub killed, the more the population of Haedes grew. Lillith and Loathe planned to increase the number of denizens in Haedes while she took over Earth. This way, once Loathe was granted dominion over Earth, she could depart for Haedes and begin preparations for the invasion of Haven. Cherub was still overwhelmingly outnumbered so Lillith believed it was worth the risk to sacrifice a few soldiers. When Lillith decided enough time had passed for Haedes to gain significant numbers, she ordered an attack on Cherub's forces.

Come dawn the next day, over the hills of Eireland, Cherub marched on Lillith's encampment. Loathe had yet to fully assemble his remaining forces as they were all still in the surrounding woods searching for Cherub. Loathe still had greater numbers at his disposal and called his troops to action. The element of surprise had worked as planned for Cherub as he and his army were able to slay many enemies before a solid defense could be mounted against them. Once the forces of Darkness had gathered their numbers together, they realized they were now the ones outnumbered. The forces of Light marched onward, paying no heed to their flanks. This was unfortunate as a battalion of Dark soldiers emerged from the woods bordering the encampment. Taken unaware, the forces of Darkness were able to kill many soldiers of Light. Loathe sensed a break in Cherub's advance and ordered his troops to attack.

The soldiers of Darkness that had come out of the woods attacked in a frenzy and the reason became clear as a great army appeared behind them in pursuit. The assembled forces of Az and Wraith had driven the Dark soldiers through the woods, killing all that moved. Wraith swung his axe and cut down every creature in his path. Soon

every one of the creatures that came from the woods was slain.

With Loathe's forces advancing, they ran headlong into the combined forces of Light. There was no hope for the Dark troops from the first encounter. Loathe saw that the battle had turned against him, so he marshaled a small force to protect Lillith. The forces of Light slaughtered every last being that fought against them before hunting for Lillith and Loathe. They were found preparing to decamp and Lillith alerted Loathe to their presence. There were twenty guards around Loathe and Lillith as they faced hundreds of fighters for Light. Lillith raised a hand and told them all to leave. To Cherub and Az's amazement, all of the forces of Light, as well as the twenty guards, departed.

Lillith remarked to Cherub that this was a family matter and should be kept within the family. Wraith charged at Lillith but Loathe stepped into his path. Wraith swung his axe at Loathe's chest and Loathe jumped back to avoid the attack. Loathe, halberd in hand, stepped forward as Wraith continued his swing and stabbed at his chest. His halberd found its mark but wasn't able to penetrate Wraith's armor. Wraith brushed aside Loathe's weapon with his right hand and brought the axe back around with his left. Loathe ducked down and the axe breezed past his head. He thrust his halberd upwards into the thigh of Wraith and pressed the weapon into his flesh until the blade hit bone. Wraith bellowed in pain, grabbed the halberd and wrenched it from his leg. Loathe kept hold of his weapon and stood as Wraith pull the halberd free. Loathe went to attack again when Lillith commanded him to stop.

During the fight, Cherub never took his eyes off of Lillith. The Daybringer was withdrawn and at the ready and Cherub was well prepared to kill Lillith when the time was right. When Lillith told Loathe to cease his attack, Cherub knew the time would be soon. Lillith spoke to Cherub about having to take the advantage when it presented itself. When Propheteus told them it was going to be one of Starz's children that fulfilled the prophecy, she knew she had to remake the Earth into a place of evil and to help Hate prosper. Lillith stated her belief that only Hate could be the one to command dominion over Earth, as it was the only thing inherent to every living creature. Lillith enforced her point by reminding Cherub that, no matter how much love he was capable of, he still hated her. Lillith explained that Hate is ever present, where Love fades. Cherub mentioned Order and Chaos but Lillith only laughed at the idea of one of them controlling this realm. According to her reasoning, Order and Chaos had no chance to prevail because Chaos was inherently unruly and the definition of Order had yet to be clearly determined. Hate, said Lillith, could be directed with accuracy, again citing Cherub's hatred

of his dark sister, and it was well defined. Cherub informed Lillith he was done talking about Hate. He wanted to finish this war and to do that he needed to kill her. Lillith spread out her arms and wings and invited Cherub to do what he wished. Loathe invoked an enchantment and evaporated into the shadows, leaving Lillith alone with Wraith, Az and Cherub. Cherub smiled and plunged the Daybringer into her chest and twisted. As he withdrew his sword, Lillith smiled and muttered a departing word of appreciation. Her dark form collapsed to the floor, lifeless at last. Cherub bent down and cut into her chest again and removed her black heart. Hovering above her dead body, Cherub held the heart in his hand and violently clenched. The heart exploded, showering Cherub with Lillith's blood. He quickly reached into his satchel for a bottle of Blessed Water and washed off the offending blood.

Wraith walked over to Cherub and gazed down at Lillith's body. He spoke an incantation and banished Lillith's body to Haedes. When her physical form departed this realm, the Black Stone of the Ancients departed with it, giving Lillith dominion over Haedes. This had been Lillith's plan all along. With her armies increased in Haedes, Lillith chose to leave Loathe in charge on Earth as she readied things in Haedes. With the leaders of Darkness now split between realms, the forces of Light felt secure in the knowledge that they were in command of the situation. Truth be told, Lillith and Loathe were the ones in complete control.

All this talk of crushing people's hearts was getting to be a little disgusting. The violent images in my mind were becoming more and more disturbing. The chaos and the death involved in war awoke a sense of dread in the very depths of my soul. Knowing this was my family engaged in such brutal warfare didn't make the facts any easier to take. The forces of Darkness were the worst of the bunch. Lillith didn't seem like someone I'd want to confront. I didn't like the ends she wished to achieve but upon further consideration, I had to admit her plan was quite good. She must not have succeeded since the world wasn't an evil place upon my arrival. Not wanting to wait any longer to see where it all went wrong, I continued reading.

Cherub reunited with Wraith and Az and mapped out a plan to continue their advance on the forces of Darkness. Cherub would scour the Eireland countryside in search of Loathe. Wraith was to take his new troops and head east and recruit anyone that Az may have missed. Az was sent south to do the same. Benevolence, carrying Az's children in her womb, asked to stay in Eireland with Cherub but he sent her off with Az.

Cherub told her if he were to find Loathe, it might be too dangerous for her and her unborn children. Benevolence reluctantly agreed and departed with Az for Egypt. Az was accompanied by some of the lycans he had recruited in the east and made it their primary mission to guard his bride.

Cherub's army had grown considerably with the additions Wraith and Az had brought back. Wraith and Az only took a small band of fighters with them, leaving the rest with Cherub to continue the battle in Eireland. Days of searching the woodlands revealed no sign of the elusive Loathe. No local villagers had seen him and no indication of his presence was to be found. Believing he must have departed from Eireland after Lillith's demise, Cherub regrouped and led his men to the shores. Across a small strait was a large continent where Loathe could easily find refuge and reinforcements.

When arriving in Eireland, Cherub had docked his ships in a small village on the western shore. When Cherub and his soldiers reached the village it had been torn asunder. Every house in the village had been burnt to the ground. The dead were left decaying in the streets. Blood painted the streets in crimson. Cherub knelt to examine one of the deceased and noticed the wounds were still fresh. As Cherub rose to his feet, he ordered his men to stand ready.

Cherub sent some soldiers to check on the ships. Not long after they left to fulfill Cherub's order, Cherub could hear their anguished cries as they came under attack and were slaughtered. Before Cherub could react and send more troops to the shoreline, Loathe and his army appeared and charged through the gates of the village. Cherub's soldiers were ready but unorganized. The screams of terror emanating from the shores did nothing to enhance their moral. Though slightly unprepared, the forces of Light fought valiantly. The battle was intensely fought by both sides and both sides took many casualties. The Dark battalion that had been sent to the waterfront appeared and attacked the soldiers of Light from the rear, effectively surrounding Cherub's army. Cherub turned and single-handedly laid waste to the soldiers of Darkness advancing from behind, leaving the remainder of his troops to repel the advance.

The soldiers of Light, though outnumbered, fought fearlessly and gained the advantage as the forces of Darkness were made to withdraw. Loathe shouted orders from the rear and commanded his troops to hold their positions. Loathe emerged from the ranks and advanced on Cherub's soldiers alone. The front echelon of the forces of Light charged at Loathe as he pressed on. As the soldiers of Light neared, Loathe raised

his free hand and spoke an enchantment. The followers of Light halted immediately, their progress frozen by Loathe's words. With one well-placed swing of his halberd, Loathe decapitated half of the ranks before him. The spell he had cast was broken by his violence and he barely had enough time to enact the same sentence upon the remaining men before him. Loathe signaled for his troops to follow him as they broke through the ranks of Cherub's army. The soldiers of Light attempted to slay Loathe as he passed and all met their demise. The entire march forward Loathe was reciting an enchantment that made his enemies trust him implicitly. Once he had accomplished that feat, he was able to pass through their ranks unmolested. The forces of Light continued to battle the Darkness as Loathe searched for and found Cherub.

Cherub had dispatched of the last soldiers of Darkness to come into the battle from the waterfront. He turned and saw Loathe emerging from the throng of fighting soldiers. Cherub did not rush at his brother, but stood ready, as he got closer. Loathe slowed his pace and asked Cherub if he was ready to be reunited with his sister. Cherub replied by asking Loathe the same question. Their banter and taunting continued as they began to circle each other. When Loathe began to wistfully reminisce about Lillith and the despicable act of desecration she had performed with Christi Lona's heart, Cherub roared in anguish and charged. Cherub, Daybringer clenched tightly in his right hand, swung upwards from his hip, aiming for Loathe's abdomen and chest. Loathe was able to get the halberd up just in time to block the attack. Cherub continued to ferociously attack his brother but to little avail. Loathe was able to ward off most of Cherub's attacks and the blows that did connect were minor. Cherub pressed on, vowing to do away with Loathe or die trying. Cherub raised the Daybringer above his head and brought it crashing down towards Loathe's head. Loathe raised his halberd with both hands and stopped the blade from finding its mark. Loathe kicked out, catching Cherub in the stomach and propelling him backwards a step. When Cherub fell back, Loathe dropped his halberd and grasped the Daybringer's blade between his hands. Loathe twisted his wrists, wrenching the sword from Cherub's hands. Loathe tossed it into the melee behind him and pick up his halberd. Cherub lunged forward, slamming his shoulder into Loathe's chest and driving him into the melee. Cherub sprung to his feet and stepped away from the crowd. Loathe remained on the ground, dazed by Cherub's attack. The soldier Loathe had collided with was a follower of Light, and upon seeing Loathe on the ground, he stabbed the dark Aseraphim in the chest with his spear. Loathe gripped the offending weapon and pulled it from his chest.

Cherub was just stepping forward as Loathe yanked the spear from the soldier's hands and threw it at Cherub. The weapon flew true and pierced Cherub directly in the chest. Loathe gathered up his halberd, killed the soldier that had wounded him, and walked over to his brother.

Cherub was lying on the ground, writhing in pain. Loathe casually pulled the spear from Cherub's chest and the light Aseraphim cried out in agony. Tossing the weapon aside, Loathe proceeded to taunt his brother, chiding him for choosing the side of Light over Darkness. As a final act of mercy, Loathe promised to cut off Cherub's head before removing his heart. This way, Cherub would be spared the indignity of witnessing his own demise. Cherub slid his hand into his satchel and, unbeknownst to Loathe, grabbed a vial of Blessed Water and removed it. Before Loathe could rise to his feet, Cherub emptied the water onto Loathe. Steam rose from Loathe's body as he jumped off of Cherub's prone form. The Blessed Water was scorching Loathe's flesh everywhere it came into contact. Cherub had made sure some of the water ran down Loathe's face and into his eyes, hoping to blind his adversary. Loathe staggered around screaming and Cherub wasted no time. He chanted a location spell and the Daybringer blade flew out of the battle and fell at his feet. Cherub slowly bent over to retrieve it and dropped to one knee in pain. The wound to his chest was severe and he'd lost a lot of blood, but nothing was going to stop Cherub from finishing off his brother.

Loathe regained his bearings just as Cherub was rising with the Daybringer in hand. Loathe was still in a great deal of pain from Cherub's attack but was clearly in better condition than Cherub. Loathe thrust forward with his halberd and Cherub met the attack with his sword, knocking the halberd away. Loathe followed by swinging his weapon in an attempt to slice open the Aseraphim but again Cherub was able to defend. Cherub was notably weak as he kept his free hand pressed against the open wound in his chest to staunch the flow of blood. Loathe pushed the attack harder and Cherub was forced to draw back slightly. Loathe thrust his halberd at his brother's torso time and time again, to no avail. Cherub succeeded momentarily in defending against Loathe's attack. Loathe stepped forward again and instead of lunging forward, he feigned an attack. As Cherub lowered his sword to defend, Loathe swiftly raised his halberd and plunged it into Cherub's throat.

Cherub fell to the ground, halberd still lodged in his neck. Loathe went over to his brother, violently pulled the halberd from his neck and impaled Cherub in the chest. Cherub breathed one last time and Loathe smiled. Loathe quickly twisted the halberd so as to open up Cherub's chest enough to fit in his hand. Once the gap was large enough, Loathe

reached inside and withdrew Cherub's dead heart. He held it up to the sky and bellowed in laughter. Loathe arose from the ground, heart in hand, and progressed toward the still raging battle. When he reached the edge of the throng, he cast his trust enchantment and a path opened up for him. Loathe walked past soldiers fighting and dying for their respective sides yet remained untouched. He ordered his troops to fight valiantly and then let themselves get killed. Loathe assumed Lillith would need their numbers in Haedes more than he would need them here. As Loathe nonchalantly strolled through the intense fighting, he began to devour Cherub's heart, taking bites out of the organ as if it were a fresh, ripe apple. Blood cascaded down his chin and fell onto his body as he walked and he reveled in the sight. As Loathe ate, his physical form began to change. Horns grew out from the top of his head and his skin took on a sickly, bluish tint. His height increased, as did his muscle stature, making Loathe into an even more fearsome looking creature than he had been previously. He emerged from the fighting as a true demon, much like his sister Lillith. All that was left for Loathe was to dispose of Wraith and Az. Once he'd accomplished that task, all Loathe and Lillith had to do was patiently await the coming of the chosen one. Once the chosen one was under their thrall, then Darkness could truly conquer all.

Az and Wraith met at the shores of Eireland days after Cherub's demise. Upon returning to the village and the scene of the battle, the two Light Aseraphim found some of the remaining soldiers of Light holding vigil over Cherub's body. The remaining soldiers told them the story of the great battle and of Cherub's death. Wraith vowed to end this war once and for all. He ordered the soldiers left from Cherub's battalion to round up the rest of their group and meet back here as soon as possible. Wraith cast a spell to deliver Cherub from this plane of existence to the other. Cherub's body evaporated and was reborn in Haven at his sister's side.

Az, Benevolence and Wraith had marshaled a considerable amount of troops to fight for the side of Light in their travels. The lycans Az had gathered in the east were very helpful in persuading other races of their kind to join in the fight. Wraith also had great success in the east, as he was able to enlist the services of many other breeds of lycans that Az could not. Wraith brought along the Orinthians who were creations of Genepool combining the elements of humans and birds. Also from the east came the Taurins, another of Genepool's creations combining the elements of man and bull. Both breeds were tremendous fighters and Wraith was well prepared to use these race's natural abilities to the fullest

extent. Az, Benevolence and Wraith planned for a total frontal assault as soon as the remaining soldiers of Light arrived back at the village. The only difficulty was in locating Loathe. Believing he may have fled to the mainland, Benevolence volunteered to lead a search party to the south. She would take some of the Orinthians to search from the air and would be escorted by Pridians on the ground. Wraith agreed, since the vision of the Orinthians was extraordinary and the feline sense of smell inherent to the Pridians was likewise as sharp, they would be the perfect scouts to assist Benevolence. Az objected due to Benevolence's condition of being pregnant, but she assured Az that no ill will would befall her. Az reluctantly agreed and Benevolence and her troops set sail for the continent.

Three days past as Az and Wraith awaited the return of the soldiers of Light that had fought with Cherub. The soldiers that had remained behind told Az and Wraith of the command that Loathe had given his fighters upon departing the battlefield. Az could not understand why Loathe would issue such a command but Wraith did. Loathe was hoping to build up the forces in Haedes with the slain soldiers, so asking them to die in battle was akin to stationing them on another front in the war. Az was taken aback by the senselessness of the plan and swore he would see it fail. The remaining troops that had fought with Cherub returned just before sunset on the third day. They were able to recruit more fighters as they rounded up the ones that had fought by their side before. Wraith explained to the assembled crowd that they would fight the battle to end the Aseraphim War once and for all. Wraith split the troops evenly between himself and Az and told Az to go back inland and to the north to continue gathering fighters. Wraith said that he would search in the south and they would meet back here in five days time.

When the five days had passed, Az and Wraith met back at the seaside village. Both Aseraphim had better luck than they could have imagined and their army was now three times what it had been. The soldiers of Light boarded their ships and set sail for the continent to search for Benevolence and check on her progress in the search for Loathe. Upon reaching shore, they discovered a horrific scene. Many fighters for Light lie dead upon the sandy shores. Their corpses were butchered. Long, gaping wounds like perverted smiles covered their bodies. Heads were chopped off of bodies and set resting atop the chest of the victim with the face turned back toward where the head should've been. The sands were soaked in red from the excessive blood spilled. Wraith screamed in anger at the scene before him and ordered his troops from the ships to search for survivors. Az bolted from the ship in search

of his bride, Benevolence.

The soldiers found only one survivor, an Orinthian, weak and wounded but still alive. He spoke of Loathe and his minions, attacking as soon as the ships set ashore. The dying soldier could not surmise how Loathe knew where they would come aground until the battle was ending. The Orinthian was airborne and saw Loathe charge at Benevolence in the melee but halted his attack once he recognized his intended target. Loathe casually turned away from her with an evil smile. The soldiers informed Az and Wraith that Benevolence made no move to attack Loathe as he retreated from her. It was shortly thereafter that the Orinthian was pierced by an arrow and plummeted to the ground. He landed in this exact spot and was left for dead. Az accused the wounded soldier of fabricating his story and threatened to kill him for his insolence. Wraith stayed Az's attack, temporarily sparing the soldier's life. Wraith inquired if the Orinthian could be mistaken about what he witnessed. The soldier held firm to his story and apologized to Az for upsetting him with this news. Az refused to believe the soldier's words, claiming Benevolence would never betray the side of Light. The soldier told Az and Wraith that, during and after the battle, some of the forces of Light rushed into the woods just past the shore, their cowardice saving their lives. Those that chose to stay and fight perished, except Benevolence. She apparently made for the woods as well, hoping to reunite her troops. The Orinthian did not believe she was trying to gather her forces again, but aiming to kill them. Az grew angrier with the soldier for his supposition and lashed out at the wounded fighter, telling him he had to be mistaken. After mumbling a final apology, the Orinthian passed away. Wraith was able to settle Az's emotions as they collected their troops and planned the search for Benevolence.

The search did not last long as Benevolence emerged from the woods just as Wraith and Az were about to enter. Wraith confronted Benevolence with the Orinthians allegations and Benevolence vehemently denied the accusations. When Wraith continued his interrogation, Az angrily confronted Wraith and demanded he cease his questioning and take her at her word. Wraith turned away from Az and ordered the troops into the woods to search for Loathe. Benevolence told Wraith she knew where most of the remaining soldiers of Light were encamped. Benevolence led the troops into the woods and shortly came upon her remaining soldiers. One of the Pridians mentioned he had seen some of their enemies to the southeast. Az wanted to march off in that direction but Wraith advised against it until they could refortify their ranks. Wraith recommended going southwest and scouring the countryside in search of

those who would stand and fight against the Darkness. Az reluctantly agreed and the forces of Light set off to the southwest.

For days, the Aseraphim and the soldiers of Light recruited both man and beast to join with them in the fight against the Darkness. All races of mortals knew of the battle raging and felt the conclusion on the horizon. Although they knew that joining with either side would most likely seal their fate, the races of mortals freely enlisted. The forces of Light grew exponentially as time passed, but Wraith was worried the forces of Darkness might have had the same successes. When they could march westward no longer, Wraith led the soldiers east to search for Loathe and finish this war begun so many centuries ago.

On the march east there were scattered skirmishes with small battalions of Dark soldiers. The overwhelming numbers the forces of Light had at their disposal made short work of these renegade troops. Wraith sensed chaos and disorder among the ranks of the Darkness and grew more optimistic about their chances. Az did not share his fellow Aseraphim's attitude and became weary as time passed. When Az reminded Wraith of the soldiers left to die in Eireland so their souls could feed Lillith's army in Haedes, he surmised the troops they'd encountered might just be sacrifices for her benefit. Wraith said that, though Az may be correct, there would be no mercy for their enemies. The encounters with the soldiers of Darkness grew more fierce by the day and the Aseraphim assumed they must have been nearing Loathe's encampment. This proved correct when a Pridian scout returned one morning at sunrise and reported that he spied Loathe's armies in a valley a day's march to the southeast. Wraith readied the army of Light with a rousing address, claiming that this war would end and the forces of Light would stand victorious.

The army of Light, thousands upon thousands in number, made camp a few scant miles from a ridge leading to the valley where Loathe's army was based. That night, under the pretext of searching for food among the foliage, Benevolence broke away from the encampment and met with a soldier of Darkness. Well away from the prying eyes and ears of those suspicious of her, Benevolence spoke to the soldier about the plan Wraith had drawn up for their attack. Benevolence returned to Az's side shortly thereafter, secure in the belief that her treachery went unnoticed. The soldier went back to Loathe with the information provided by Benevolence. He was well pleased, knowing now that victory was assured. Loathe alerted his troops to be prepared for an attack at daybreak.

The army of Light was awake and alert before dawn, ready to do

battle to the death. Wraith told his troops to stand ready as he detailed the plan of attack. He would lead the army around the ridge they now sat atop and attack not out of the west but from the north. The path leading east was too exposed for Wraith's liking and he saw the forest was quite dense to the north. Also, taking the path would mean charging downhill in a column and Wraith deduced they would take too many casualties with that plan. Wraith said they would gradually lead the army downhill through the forest, thereby being on level ground for the attack. This was not the plan that Benevolence had relayed to the soldier of Darkness and she grew worried. If the army of Light attacked from the north instead of the west, Loathe might incorrectly assume she had betrayed him. As the army marched onward around the valley, Benevolence openly questioned Wraith's rationale for his battle plan. Wraith became irate with Benevolence. As they reached the staging point for the attack, he expressed his opinion that she may indeed be a traitor. Just before he left to organize his troops for the attack, Wraith told Benevolence that if she happened to survive this fight, she would have to deal with him and explain herself and her actions.

The small village Loathe had chosen to occupy with his army did not have any walls around it for protection, making it easy for his forces to overrun its previous occupants. Unfortunately, it made the village more difficult to defend. Loathe set up his defenses heavily to the west, anticipating the forces of Light's march down the ridge.

Wraith's armies watched the village from the surrounding forest as the sun crept slowly into the eastern sky. He was well pleased to see that Loathe had concentrated his forces to the west. Wraith had specifically told Az and Benevolence of his original plan to attack from that direction to verify his suspicions about Benevolence. Seeing Loathe's soldiers gathered to the west confirmed his beliefs. Wraith commanded the forces closest to Loathe's defenses to engage and the battle was begun.

Loathe was standing behind his battle lines, awaiting sign of his enemies. When the forces of Light came out of the woods on his right flank, he was caught unaware. Benevolence had said that they would come out of the ridgeline and Loathe swore to witness her death before the day was done. He ordered the troops on his left to support the defenses under attack. Loathe turned around and saw Wraith leading the soldiers of Light out of the woods. Realizing now that victory was going to come at a cost, he ordered his troops to follow him and charged at Wraith. Wraith raised his right hand and cast an enchantment on Loathe, causing the demon to burst into flames of Holy Fire; white and as hot as the sun. Loathe screamed out in agony as his flesh bubbled and dripped,

burning, to the ground. Loathe fell to his knees, writhing in pain. Shortly he fell silent and still. His armies had halted their progression, amazed at what they'd witnessed.

When Loathe rose to his feet, a sound broke through his armies like waves crashing on the shore. The forces of Darkness continued marching forward behind Loathe once again. The demon was smoldering, a wicked grin on his face, as he resumed his charge at Wraith. Loathe drew a spear and threw it at Wraith. The weapon sunk into Wraith's left shoulder and continued through, destroying meat and bone in its travels. Wraith grasped the spear and yanked it from his body, only flinching slightly as he swallowed his pain. He proceeded to toss it into the air, caught it, and hurled it back. Loathe was able to dodge the projectile but felt the breeze of the spear pass by his head. The spear sunk into the chest of a soldier behind him and his army simply marched over his fallen body. Loathe withdrew his halberd and ran at Wraith, lunging forward with his weapon aimed at the Aseraphim's chest. Wraith grabbed the halberd and stopped the blade from striking him with nary an inch to spare. He pushed the halberd back at Loathe, causing the dark Aseraphim to step back to maintain his balance. Loathe was able to loose the halberd from Wraith's grasp as Wraith unsheathed his axe. Wraith swung at Loathe's head, again barely missing his mark. The forces of both Darkness and Light surrounded them in their march to battle and soon Loathe and Wraith were separated and lost in the crowd.

Wraith took out his frustration of failing to kill Loathe by mercilessly and brutally slaying every soldier of Darkness that had the misfortune to come near him. Az had brought the remaining soldiers of Light in from the northeast, outflanking the forces of Darkness and gaining the early advantage. Those fighting for Darkness were pushed back as the soldiers of Light advanced, killing all that stood in their path. Benevolence fought and killed many dark troops herself. She attacked with reckless abandon, slicing down her enemies as if she were swatting aside insects. Wraith took notice of her actions and felt no conflicting emotions. She had betrayed them and must be punished.

Man and beast fell to the ground, their blood collecting in pools that formed into flowing streams. Both the side of Light and the side of Darkness took heavy casualties in the initial assault. Men lay on the ground with weaponry protruding from their chest, faces torn apart by savage beasts, limbs hanging onto bodies by the smallest threads of skin and muscle. The planet had never before seen such savagery, and she cried. Rain began to fall from the sky, turning the field of battle into a quagmire. The falling rain, mixed with the blood of the fallen soldiers,

made the small streams created by their lifeblood into rivers.

The weather worked to the advantage for the forces of Darkness. The soldiers of Light had been using arrows that had been set aflame and were now unable to do so in wet weather. Loathe's forces made gains when the arrows stopped flying and viciously set to exterminating all they set their sights on. The brutality displayed by the soldiers of Darkness had a demoralizing effect on the forces of Light. Several soldiers resigned themselves to their fates and were torn asunder by Loathe's minions. Oceans of blood formed before the sun set in the western sky, and the battle raged on.

Because their numbers had been seriously depleted, the one large battle had broken down into several smaller skirmishes. Both the army of Light and the forces of Darkness claimed victory in these fights and both sides lost many more soldiers. The soldiers of Darkness had greater numbers as night turned to day, yet to say there was any advantage anymore would be untrue. All those fighting, mortal and immortal, man and beast, felt the strain of the prolonged warfare. Reactions to the strain varied from elation to fatigue. All battled on until only a few hundred remained. It was then that Wraith finally found Loathe.

All day and through the night, after their initial confrontation, Wraith made it his mission to dispatch of his evil older brother. To have turned Benevolence to the darkness enough to make her betray the forces of Light fed a fire in his soul that could only be quenched with Loathe's blood. Though he knew what he must do in regards to Benevolence, Wraith did not blame her entirely. Loathe was the master of lies and his treachery came as no real surprise to Wraith. Wraith knew he would either have to kill or banish Benevolence, now pregnant with Az's children, and the anger of this knowledge got him through the battle unscathed. Awash in the blood of his enemies, Wraith hunted Loathe for hours on end, determined to take his wrath out on the dark Aseraphim.

Loathe spied Wraith approaching and readied himself for combat. Wraith drew near slowly, casually tossing his great axe from hand to hand. Loathe noted the smile on Wraith's face as he neared and promised the Light Aseraphim he would personally rip the grin from his face. With that, Loathe rushed at Wraith, swinging the halberd with a fury. Loathe's initial attack was blocked by Wraith but he pressed on. Even in Loathe's current demonic form, he was outsized against Wraith. The dark Aseraphim was using his smaller stature and quicker reflexes to great benefit. Loathe was able to connect with his halberd on a few occasions but Wraith sustained no considerable injuries. Wraith was able to fend off the assault and began to mount one of his own.

Knocking aside Loathe's weapon again, he stepped forward and was able to get Loathe turned sideways. Wraith swung his axe and it connected under the shoulder, sinking into his charred skin. Loathe bellowed in pain and Wraith jerked the weapon free of its target. Loathe stumbled away and before long fell to one knee. As Wraith approached, Loathe swung backwards with his halberd and sliced into Wraith's lower leg.

Wraith staggered backwards, reeling from the cut to the back of his ankle. Loathe had struck with precision, slicing the tendon expertly. His left leg fell numb and as he tried to step forward to finish off Loathe, he fell to the ground. Loathe slowly stood and walked over to Wraith. The pain was obvious on Loathe's face, as was the anger. Loathe bent over and began to berate Wraith as he lay in pools of blood and muddy earth, chastising him for believing he could possibly win this fight. When Loathe was done talking, he straightened up and raised his halberd above his head. Suddenly, his eyes grew wide and a scimitar burst forth from his abdomen.

Benevolence had seen Wraith fall and ran to assist him. She plunged her scimitar into Loathe's back with little time to spare. Benevolence took her hand off her weapon and Loathe tried to reach around and remove the offending object. Az witnessed her acts and ran over to help dispose of Loathe for good. Az, whip in hand, snapped the weapon and it locked around Loathe's neck. With one strong tug, Az's razor-sharp whip sliced Loathe's head from his body. Knowing this would not completely end Loathe's reign on this planet, Az retrieved Loathe's halberd and speared him in the chest. Once the weapon was in deep enough, Az twisted it in the same manner as Loathe had done to Az's father. Az pulled out the weapon, bent down and removed Loathe's heart. Of the thousands upon thousands of beings that began the fight the previous morning, only a hundred survived to witness the death of Loathe. Fewer still would bear witness to the end of the Aseraphim Wars on Earth.

The scattered troops that remained either fought with enthusiasm or ambled off into the woods. Benevolence watched the end of the fighting as Az helped Wraith to his feet. Az spoke to Wraith of Benevolence's actions that resulted in Loathe getting his due and asked that her previous transgressions be forgiven. Wraith freely admitted that she did fight with honor but he could no longer trust her. Wraith told Az if the battle plan had not been changed, they might all be dead instead of Loathe. Because of her sins, Benevolence could not remain with them. She was tainted by evil. Benevolence begged for her life and Wraith

informed her she was not going to be killed, proclaiming there had been enough killing. Her punishment was banishment, but Tag and Christi Lona would not judge her. Benevolence would be judged by the Ancient Styx, she who holds the keys to the three doors of death. Styx would send Benevolence on her path at her will, be it Haedes, Haven and Limbo. Before Az could object, for he knew objections would be made, Wraith spoke his spell and Benevolence was gone from the realm of mortals.

Az was furious at Wraith for his decision and began to scream at him. Wraith told Az the choice was hers and she made the choice to side with Darkness. If forgiveness was to be given, Benevolence must receive it from Christi Lona and Tag, if Haven was where Styx decided she belonged. Az did not relent and kept yelling at Wraith for his deeds. Wraith pushed Az aside in an attempt to walk away and remove himself from the situation. Az responded by striking Wraith with his whip, catching Wraith in the face. The whip slashed a line across his cheek. A small trickle of blood, washed in the remaining drizzle of the rainstorm, flowed down Wraith's cheek. Having had his fill off bloodshed, his own and others, Wraith again tried to free himself from Az's protestations. Barely able to stand, Wraith, raising his weapon, informed Az that he was still strong enough to hold his axe and angry enough to use it. Az said nothing and reached his arm back, looking to strike with his whip one more time. Wraith sprung at Az and caught him by the throat. He lifted Az into the air and threw him. Az was agile enough to land on his feet and ran at Wraith full speed, hoping to drive his shoulder into Wraith chest and knock him back and off his feet. Wraith anticipated this and swung the axe expertly. Right as Az was about to make contact with Wraith, he sank the weapon into the base of Az's skull. Az fell to the ground dead. More to his dismay, Wraith felt no remorse for his actions. He spoke the same words he had when Christi Lona was killed at the hands of Lillith, yet with no sorrow in his voice this time, and Az's body ascended to Haven.

Wraith sheathed his axe and noticed something amiss. The mask of The Beholder, given to him centuries ago to watch over, was no longer in his satchel. Assuming it must have fallen out during the battle, Wraith frantically searched for it. Before he could locate it he felt his body being pulled from this plane and teleported to another. Wraith found himself standing before Tag herself, her warm glowing aura healing all granted audience. Tag informed Wraith that, though he fought valiantly for the forces of Light, his brutality could no longer be permitted in Haven. The slaying of Az was also deemed impermissible and inexcusable. Wraith pleaded his case but to no avail. Tag judged Wraith to be unworthy of

Haven and cast him out. As Wraith fell, his aura turned to black, save one last speck of gold that was the love of his sister Starz.

Here ends the tale of the Aseraphim Wars as pertains to the battles fought on Earth. These words are hereby written by the Clerics of the Earth as told to them by Each, The Ancient.

Chapter 8

I read these last words and carefully closed the book. Personally, I thought Tag's judgment was a little harsh. Wraith didn't really have much of a choice. Benevolence had betrayed them so punishment was warranted. Now I also knew why he appeared when my father almost hit Valencia.

My father was a completely different subject altogether. He lied to the Aseraphim and thereby started a war. My first thought was to talk to Genepool, but now I wasn't so sure. I decided talk to Sam first. He was a teacher so I assumed he'd know something about the Aseraphim Wars and my father's role in it.

I glanced at the window and saw that the sun had come up during my reading. I jumped off the bed to get ready for the day when there was a knock at the door. After sliding the book back underneath my bed, I ran to the door and unlocked it. My father was standing on the other side, looking down at me and smiling.

"Good morning, Vincent. Sleep well?"

"Actually, I didn't sleep at all," I replied.

"I know," he replied. He leaned down and whispered to me, "I know what you read last night. These are my books after all, and I know when one is removed from the shelf. You have questions and I have answers. We will talk more this evening. Do you understand?" His voice was even and trusting and I readily agreed to his request. He patted me on the back and told me to go downstairs.

Kiyusin was already in the kitchen preparing something to eat when I arrived. He was making something different today by the smell of it. There were potatoes, peppers and a host of other vegetables I didn't recognize, all lined up on the counter.

"Would you like some help?" I asked.

Kiyusin looked down at me and replied, "No, but thank you for asking. Is your sister awake yet?"

"I have no idea. I haven't seen her yet this morning."

"Would you mind checking on her for me? I figured she'd be up by now."

"You never can tell with her," I informed him. "She doesn't exactly keep a regular schedule."

Kiyusin laughed and said, "No, I guess she wouldn't."

"Can I offer some advice?" I asked politely.

"Sure. About what?"

"About my sister. She was having trouble with the lesson

yesterday. I know because she asked me for help more than once. I think you may be going about teaching her the wrong way."

Kiyusin put down the utensils he was using to stir the vegetables and said, "She's not a fast learner like you, Vincent. If she asked you for help it's probably due more to that fact than my teaching methods."

"Maybe, but if I could offer a suggestion? Don't teach her just one thing at a time."

"Dear boy, if she had trouble learning just one subject, why should I even consider teaching her multiple topics at once?" He seemed to be getting frustrated.

"Because that's how she learns. If you stick to one subject, she'll get bored. Worse yet, she'll get distracted. You have to jump to other topics every now and then. Start the day with math, but only for an hour, then switch to science. She really likes animals, so start with biology or something. Then, after a while, switch to something else. And every day, switch the order and length of time you work on a certain subject. It may take her longer to learn one subject but she'll be learning more than one in the same timeframe."

Kiyusin was silent for a moment and finally said, "I'll tell you what. I'll try it your way today. Yesterday wasn't very productive at all, to be honest with you. I still don't think yesterday's difficulties were due to my methods, but your idea isn't bad. How did you come up with that idea?"

"Easy. I just imagined the worst possible way for me to learn something," I said with a smile.

"I thank you for your advice, Vincent, and I'll keep it in mind."

"Just trying to help," I remarked and went to leave the room.

"Why?" Kiyusin asked as I turned away, causing me to look back.

"Because if she starts to pick things up easier by herself, she won't bug me as much."

"Good reason," he laughed and waved me away to look for Valencia.

Searching for my sister was becoming routine for me. In Egypt, I would swear I spent as much time trying to track down my sister as I did working on the playhouses. Well, that might be an exaggeration, but it doesn't mean I didn't have to look for her a lot. My search of the lower floor turned up no sign of her, so I trudged up the steps to look for her there. I figured her room would be the most likely place for her to be. I knocked on the door but got no reply. Thinking I heard movement inside, I knocked again.

"Go away!" Valencia cried out from behind the closed door.

"Valencia, it's time to get up and go to class."

"I'm not going."

"Yes, you are," I argued.

"No, I'm not, now go away."

I took a deep breath to calm myself before continuing. "Can I come in?"

"No. The door's locked," she replied.

I reached out and grabbed the doorknob. It turned easily in my hand. I pushed open the door and instantly Valencia began yelling at me.

"I told you to go away! Now! I'm not going to class today!" she bellowed.

"You also told me that the door was locked. You were wrong then and you're wrong now."

"I wasn't wrong about the door. I was lying. There's a big difference."

"Look, I didn't come up here to argue. Kiyusin sent me to find you so you could get something to eat before classes begin."

"I don't need to eat and I'm not going to class!" she screamed.

I couldn't take it anymore. Her attitude was grating on my nerves. Acting on impulse, I darted at my sister, scooped her up in my arms, and ran at blazing speed out of the room and down the stairs. The entire time, Valencia was shrieking in my ear. The trip didn't last long, just long enough to make me temporarily lose hearing in my left ear.

When we reached the dining table, I let go of my sister, firmly planting her feet beside the table. "Now, you are going to sit and eat, and then you are going to go to class," I informed her with a tone that left no doubt about my seriousness.

"You can't tell me what to do!"

"But I can," came a voice from the kitchen. The Beholder slowly walked from the kitchen to where my sister and I stood. The exasperation on his face made me worry about Valencia's safety for a quick second. The feeling faded as quickly as it had come. Addressing my sister, he said, "Valencia, you need to go to class. I just got done talking with Kiyusin and he said he's going to try something different today." His voice was composed, showing none of the frustration he must have been choking back.

"Why do you care?" she shot back sarcastically. She was standing with her hands on her hips, posing defiantly in front of him.

"Personally, I don't," our father replied, shrugging his shoulders in an off-hand way. "But since I have business to attend to with the Granites and won't be here to watch over you, you have to go to class so

you aren't left unsupervised."

"So I don't have a choice, is that it?" she spat back.

"Of course you do." The Beholder stood up straight and said cheerfully, "You can either go to class or stay locked in your room until I return. I should tell you that I don't think I'll be back for a few days. My dealings with the Granites haven't been going well lately."

Valencia, realizing that she'd lost this battle, looked away from our father and back at me. Eyes glowing slightly, she said, "Don't you ever just pick me up and run like that again without my permission."

"You were being unreasonable," I said, defending my actions. "Besides, the wind straightened out your hair somewhat. It doesn't look that bad."

Valencia glanced over at the mirror and gasped. Her hair, though still moderately on the messy side, had been blown back from her forehead and was laying nicely across her shoulders and down her back. She turned back to me and growled, "Never again," before taking her seat at the table.

Kiyusin came out of the kitchen and started serving the food. I followed my father into the kitchen to clear up some confusion. As he was reaching for a piece of meat on the counter, he saw me.

"Father, are you really going to be gone for a couple of days? You told me earlier you and I would talk this evening about..."

My father raised his hand and cut me off, "Have no worries, Vincent. I will return in plenty of time to talk with you this evening. In fact, I'm looking forward to it."

"So you lied to Valencia," I said, not asked.

"You aren't surprised," he observed.

"Should I be?"

The Beholder glared down at me and said, "Listen closely, child. Do not presume things you do not yet comprehend. I have lied in the past and I will lie in the future, if it is what I need to do. Tonight, you will see that not all lies are harmful and the truth does not always set you free."

With that, my father grabbed his satchel from the counter and left the kitchen. Without pausing, he exited the house and was gone. With his words echoing in my head, I joined my sister and Kiyusin at the table for breakfast and then was off to Sam's house.

Sam was pleased with our pace yesterday and didn't see any reason to change tactics. We dove into the geometry lesson and soon the first test was coming my way. Sam had made this test much more difficult

than the ones he'd given me before but I still passed with flying colors. When we were building the playhouses along the river in Egypt, I used a lot of the concepts I was now being taught. I told Sam of my experiences with geometry in my time before Atlantia and he wasn't surprised. Geometry and architecture went hand in hand according to my teacher and there was nothing I'd found so far to dispute that notion. It made the lessons so much easier for me when I thought about things in terms of architecture. I obtained perfect scores on the first four tests of the day when Sam decided to break for lunch. I asked Sam if I could join him and he cheerfully invited me out onto the front porch.

"I didn't expect you to eat today, Vincent, so I'm afraid I don't have anything prepared for you. You were nose-first in the books all day yesterday. I assumed you'd be doing the same today," he said.

"That's all right. Kiyusin packed a lunch for me before I left," I replied and untied my satchel. I pulled out an apple and some dried meat and arranged my goods on the table next to my chair. "Hopefully tomorrow I'll have something more substantial. Kiyusin told me he's going to show me how to cook."

"So my brother's teaching you now, is that it?" he asked jokingly. "After just one day you're ready to move on."

I laughed as I replied, "Not at all, Sam, but Kiyusin did tell me about your skills in the kitchen."

"Or lack thereof," he snored as he broke into laughter as well. "Believe me, it's for the best. I've never been very adept at cooking."

"Let me guess, you take too long making sure everything is measured out correctly and everything is cut just right."

"You would know better than anyone, I suppose." Sam winked at me and added, "Now, let's eat so we can get back in and continue your lessons."

I began to munch on some of the dried meat but I wasn't done talking yet. Between bites, I asked, "What do you know about the Ancients?"

Sam was so taken aback by my question that he practically choked on his food. "The Ancients? You want me to tell you about the Ancients?"

"Why are you so shocked?" I asked amid my confusion. His reaction had startled me. "You are my teacher after all."

"Vincent, you are the child of an Ancient. It would be impertinent of me to tell you things about the Ancients that The Beholder hasn't told you himself."

"Why would you feel that way? I know the Ancients are revered

here in Atlantia, so I assume you know quite a lot about them. Am I right?"

"Yes, but..."

"And you're my teacher, right?" I was starting to enjoy his discomfort. Easing the chaos in his mind caused by my request felt wonderful.

"Yes, but..."

"And I did ask in good faith, as a dutiful pupil, correct?"

"Well, yes."

I paused for just a moment before posing my question once more. "So, what do you know about the Ancients?"

Sam's eyes met mine and I could feel the calmness in his mind. He relaxed back into his chair and said, "I'm assuming you know who the Ancients are."

"I only really know the background on them. You know, who they are, their tasks in creation, that sort of thing. What I really want to know is how Atlantia fits into it all." I picked up the dried meat and sat back and ate while Sam talked.

"Very well. When Propheteus told the Will and Power Cosmic that they would create the universe, it came to pass. In the seconds afterwards, the three Ancients were standing here in Atlantia. This is why this planet is filled to overflowing with life. They could've ended up anywhere in the universe, on any planet or any moon, but they stood here. Because of this, the Ancients claimed Earth as a sort of headquarters and made Atlantia their home. It is believed, though I haven't born witness to it myself, that every thousand years the Ancients meet on Atlantia to discuss the state of the universe. Since most of the Ancients do not roam freely on the planet's surface, this is the only time all Ancients are in one place at the same time. According to legend, the only other way to have all of the Ancients together is to open Pandora's Box."

"What's that?" I inquired.

"Pandora's Box is sort of a conduit to the Ancients. Some say the box contains the true essences of the Ancients, others say it contains the next universe. There are other rumors as to its function, but truth be told no one really knows."

"How do you open it?"

"Vincent, do you want to know about the Ancients or the box? We don't really have time to cover both topics."

"I'm sorry. Please, continue with the Ancients."

"Apology accepted," he replied kindly. "Anyway, the only Ancients that walk the surface are Genepool, who keeps watch over life

on Earth, and The Beholder, your father, who watches all activity on the planet. Your father's counterpart, Each, is also ever-present but his essence is held on the wind. When events occur that require his attention, he can assume human-like form. The rest are either in the ethereal or their essences are trapped in a talisman."

"Trapped? What do you mean by that? The Ancients are held captive?"

Sam let out a little chuckle and replied, "No, not at all. There are ten stones, one for each of the Ancients, scattered about the planet. The stones are usually the talismans that contain the essence of the Ancients. Sometimes the talisman is something entirely different. Take Zaron for example. Her essence is held in her egg, which is located miles and miles beneath Atlantia. Zaron's egg holds tremendous potential for alternative sources of power generation. The leaders of Atlantia have been trying to find a way to uncover it and tap into its energy. The problem is getting the egg to the surface without waking Zaron."

"What would happen if she wakes up?"

"Simple. She'd eat the world."

"What!" I shouted, almost jumping from my seat.

"Vincent, that's her task. Zaron is the World-Eater. Her essence is held in the egg as a precautionary measure. If Zaron were to be let loose, the world as we know it would be drastically altered and not for the better, I'm sure."

I had finished the dried meat Kiyusin had packed and picked up the apple. "So do you trust the Ancients?"

"Of course. It's a matter of faith, Vincent. I have faith that, though their methods vary, the Ancients want nothing but good things for the inhabitants of Earth. Why else would they go through the trouble of establishing life on this planet time and time again if they only wanted to see it killed off?"

I took a bite of my apple as I mulled this over. As my teeth sank in I felt a sharp, piercing pain in my mouth. I dropped the apple to the porch floor and grabbed my mouth to stifle the yelp of pain trying to escape.

"Are you okay?" Sam asked with concern.

"My mouth hurts," I mumbled back.

"Let me take a look." I lowered my hand and opened my mouth wide. Sam took one look and started smiling. "Well, you have one tooth that's hanging on by a thread and another that seems to be about ready to drop as well."

"This is all part of being human, isn't it?" I asked as Sam finished

his examination.

"You bet it is. I'm sure it must be difficult, being centuries old yet still a child."

"Actually, I sort of like it. Natural progression and all."

Sam nodded and said, "That makes sense. If you're going to be here, may as well experience it the right way." He pointed at my mouth and asked, "You want me to take care of that for you?"

"If you don't mind," I gratefully replied. I opened my mouth wide once again and Sam carefully plucked the offending tooth from my mouth. He asked if I wanted the other one out as well and I wasted no time agreeing to his request. Sam had to wiggle that one a little bit before it came out but it eventually fell free. I now had two gaping holes where my teeth used to be.

"That's a little odd. Normally, the first teeth to drop are the very front ones but they look like adult teeth," Sam remarked, his fingers still in my mouth. He ran a finger along the gum line where my teeth had been seconds ago. "Well, I can't explain it. All I will say is that those new incisors you're getting are going to be sharp." He handed me the teeth as he walked back over to his seat.

As I watched Sam gather up the remnants of his lunch, I asked, "What do you mean?" As he answered, I ran my tongue along the gaps and noticed a sharp point jutting out ever so slightly from my gums. I drew back, not from pain as much as shock.

"I think you just answered your own question." He waved for me to stand and said, "Come on. Since I don't think you'll be finishing that apple, we should get back to your lessons."

We worked the rest of the day on finishing the Geometry book. I couldn't help running my tongue around the gaps in my mouth the entire time Sam was talking. He caught me doing it a few times and admonished me to pay attention to the lessons and not my missing teeth. I tried to tell him that it wasn't the missing teeth that interested me so much. The teeth coming in were of much more interest. Needless to say, Sam did not agree with my logic. I aced every test he threw at me however, proving my newfound fascination with dentistry wasn't too much of a distraction. We completed the geometry book as the purplish tint of the setting sun was shading the white-capped mountains to the west. A few thin clouds dotted the horizon, hiding the oncoming stars. Sam bade me farewell and informed me that tomorrow we'd be starting on trigonometry.

I was welcomed home by Valencia. Maybe welcomed wasn't the best word. Valencia met me at the door and she was bouncing around

with a huge smile on her face.

“Hello brother!” she joyfully exclaimed as I entered the house.

“How was school today?”

“Good,” I replied warily. “I take it you had a better day today.”

“Much better! What all did you learn today?”

“I finished of the basic geometry book. Tomorrow we start on trigonometry.”

“That’s all?” she asked, her smile creeping wider.

“Yes, that’s all. Why?”

“I learned math, biology, anatomy and geography. I’m learning more than you now!”

“Valencia, you’re learning more subjects but I’m completing them faster.”

She was unfazed by my reasoning. “I can’t see why Sam can’t teach you more than one thing at once. You’re going to fall behind.”

“No, I’m not.” Her assumption of superiority was aggravating me now. “Believe me, when it’s all said and done, I’ll be just fine.”

“If you say so. I’m just glad Kiyusin decided to work this way. It’s so much better,” she said and skipped off to the kitchen.

“You’re welcome,” I muttered. I yelled after Valencia about our father’s whereabouts and she informed me he wasn’t home yet. I decided to wait in my room until he arrived.

I wanted to review some of the things I’d read in the book the night before, just to get the thoughts straightened out in my mind. My opportunity for review was short as I heard my father arrive downstairs only after about five minutes. I closed the book and walked out to the hallway to replace in back on the bookshelf. I didn’t hear my father come up the stairs and he spotted me in the hallway.

“Don’t do that just yet, Vincent. You may need it for reference.” He was smiling as he called me back to my room. I followed him in and he locked the door. I sat on the bed and my father took a seat in the chair by the window. “So what would you like to talk about first?”

“Why did you lie to them?”

“Good question to start with, but now is not the time to address that one.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s important that I answer your other questions first. This way, the answer to that one will make more sense.”

I was confused but pushed on. “Okay then, tell me about you and my mother.”

The smile faded from The Beholder’s face with sickening speed.

“That is a path you do not want to trod, my son.”

“It’s the path I’ve chosen.”

“Very well,” he said with a sigh. “Your mother, the Aseraphim Starz, is the very definition of beauty. Only the magnificence of Christi Lona and the dark splendor of Lillith compare to the beauty that is Starz. That she will never again be able to hold physical form is my lone regret in my entire existence. You may think my actions toward Starz were uncalled for, maybe even a violation of her person, but she and I were meant to be together. Even now, she watches me from above. She sees the works I do with you and for you and I believe she is pleased.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“I don’t.”

“And if she didn’t approve?”

“Then nothing would change,” he replied with a stern look on his face. “All I do, not just now but before the Aseraphim Wars, was for this moment in time when you would walk the Earth. Your mother and I had to come together to create you and your siblings. From that moment, I waited for this time to come. The entire time that cursed demon held me captive in my mask all that kept me from going mad was the knowledge of what was to come. Before he killed Az I was able to escape.”

“Escape? I thought he lost the mask?”

“He could not have lost that mask if he wanted to.” He adjusted the mask on his face a little and continued, “It was secured in his satchel quite well. When my essence is relegated to this mask, I cannot physically affect anything. I can only do that in physical form and someone has to put on the mask for that to happen. I can, however, affect things in other ways. I am not dormant when the mask goes unworn, just the opposite. All my energies are concentrated on getting someone to wear the mask and I can make others nearby feel the impulse to find it and put it on. This made people lunge for Wraith’s satchel in battle. They also aimed their weapons in that direction with the hopes of dislodging the satchel and retrieving the mask. All this jostling loosened the binds that held me in that bag. During his fight with Loathe, I was finally able to slide free. Perfect timing, it turns out.”

“You planned it all?”

My father laughed at this, thankfully lightening the mood a bit. “No, not at all, my dear boy. Where I’m not the biggest fan, chaos has come in handy for me more than once. Shortly after Wraith was called to Haven, one of the surviving lycans from the battle found the mask and put it on. I am that lyan, Vincent. This physical shell was near death and putting on my mask saved its life.”

“Where do I fit in?” I asked.

“After the Aseraphim Wars the population of the planet was extremely low. This, my son, was part of my plan. After letting civilization recover for a few centuries, The Ancients met on Atlantia and I was given the task of guiding you and Valencia on Earth. You were to be brought into being through me and my physical form.”

“I wanted to talk to you about that. I lost two teeth today and my next teeth look like they’re going to be pretty sharp.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me in the least if you end up with visceral fangs.”

“Fangs?” I asked, taken aback. “I’m going to look like an animal? Or worse, a demon?”

“Calm down, Vincent. Most likely, no one will think twice about your appearance. You have to remember, because a lycan wore this mask when you were created, you are technically only one quarter human. The rest is even parts lycan, Aseraphim and Ancient. You and your sister are the most unique beings in all of creation. Your fangs, if that is what come in, will only be a benefit.”

“Will Valencia have fangs too?” I asked, chuckling a bit at the thought.

“As I said before, she is more attuned to your mother, so I doubt it. Still, with her anything’s possible.”

I let the cheeriness subside before I asked again, “So why did you lie to the Aseraphim?”

“Haven’t you figured that out yet? To get to this point and continue ever forward.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Vincent, I’ve known since your creation, not on this plane but your initial creation, that you were destined for greatness. I’d heard the prophecy. I knew it was referring to you. The problem at the time was as long as the Aseraphim roamed the Earth, there was no way you’d be brought to bear. I had to get them off the planet. Having them kill each other was just a way to get it done. It may appear to be quite an unseemly way to accomplish this but it was effective in more ways than one. The book you read tells of the battles that the Aseraphim participated in. There were many more battles around the world. Entire civilizations rose and fell during the war. Populations were decimated by the bloody battles raging everywhere. There was no safe place anywhere. When the final battle took place between the remaining Aseraphim, other battles took as great of a toll on life. When it was all over, only the strongest and the smartest survived, and their numbers were few. This was the world I

wanted you brought into. With the number of beings on the planet diminished, order would be much easier for you to attain. I had to wait longer than I'd anticipated, but civilization hasn't advanced too far yet, nor has the population."

"You had all those people killed just so I could establish order easier?" He was right. I did find it unseemly.

"That was a side effect. The main reason was to eliminate the Aseraphim from the Earth. Considering the animosity between them it may have happened anyway. I just sped events along." He let this hang in the air before he asked, "Any other questions for me?"

I shook my head and he quietly stood and left the room. I got up and locked the door behind him. The Beholder had gone through an awful lot to secure my success in bringing order to the world. With this kind of head start, coupled with my inherent abilities and the education I was currently receiving, I was growing more and more convinced my father was right.

Chapter 9

My studies in Atlantia continued on for many years. Most of those years passed uneventfully and I was able to concentrate my energies on gaining an education. Sam eventually had to get other teachers to help out since there were certain topics I wanted to learn that he was not well versed in. A few elders even stopped by to give philosophy lectures. I found the differing opinions and dogmas of these philosophies to be quite puzzling. My sister and I viewed the world differently from each other. However, she and I saw the world as we believed it should be, not how it was. These elders that came to lecture spoke of seeing past and current events in varying ways. The way I saw it, the past was the past and written in stone. I defined my view of the world by what I could see and assessing the facts before me. This was not to say I disliked my philosophy lessons. It was enlightening to say the least. I just couldn't understand the reasoning behind their conflicting tenets.

That was why I enjoyed my history classes so much. History was all facts and that was much more appealing to me than people's views on those facts. Sam was a bit of a history enthusiast and I deduced he got as much pleasure from those lessons as I did. We would go in depth into varying points of history, both world and local. Atlantia was a history lesson in itself. Sam and I spent many days walking around the city of Atlantia with my teacher pointing out various temples and landmarks. Every once in a great while I was able to pry more information about the Ancients out of him. I tried not to push the topic often due to the reluctance he'd shown from the first time I'd broached the subject. As informative as Sam was, the best history lessons came from my father. Although he didn't talk about his fellow Ancients at all, I was able to find out things about Atlantia Sam never knew.

The Beholder taught me not just the history of the city of Atlantia but of the entire island. While Valencia and I were at school, he was trying to broker a peace agreement between the Granites and the Magmites. There was a rebel faction of Granites that had taken up arms with the Magmites in an effort to wrest control from General Sakoahn, the leader of the Granites. My father told me it was much more complex than that, as most of these conflicts are, and that a true peace between the warring tribes of Atlantia might never be reached. He did take me to meet General Sakoahn once. I had never seen a Granite before meeting the General and I wasn't sure what to expect. He was slightly taller than my father and was made entirely of stone. I was amazed that anyone would instigate a war against these beings. Defeating them had to take

phenomenal strength. War was exactly what eventually came to pass. The Beholder abandoned his attempt to broker a peace between the races and joined General Sakoahn as an advisor.

As for my regular studies, I passed every class with almost perfect marks. I excelled at everything that had to do with mathematics. Calculus, physics, engineering, I aced them all. I talked with the master architect of Atlantia, Minot, and he gave me a tour of the pyramids on the island. The older ones were basic pyramids with flat sides. As we traveled south, the pyramids began to show some differences. Some had steps running up their length, others had intricate carvings engraved in the sides and statues placed on pedestals at various heights. I had experimented with pyramids when constructing the roofs of the playhouses in Egypt. I figured the slanted roofline would allow the rain and sand to slide off better. Minot complimented me on this when I mentioned it and I took his praise to heart. He showed me other buildings that he'd worked on and I was in pure awe of his talents.

My aptitude at science did not go unnoticed either. From the first time Sam mentioned the Zaron's egg project, I was keenly interested in knowing more about it. Once I'd learned more about the sciences involved in not just raising the egg but tapping its power, I searched out the ones in charge of the project and offered them my services. Though skeptical at first, I was technically just an adolescent at the time, they quickly realized I had a lot to offer in the way of ideas. Within a year of joining up with the scientists we had begun to dig through the earth in search of Zaron's egg. We had designed a system that would allow us to burrow deeper into the ground than had ever previously been attempted. It was a daunting task but progress was surprisingly rapid. The struggle was going to be getting the egg to the surface without disturbing Zaron. I theorized that the egg wouldn't have to be brought completely to the surface. It would, in fact, be safer to let it remain at least partially in the ground, thereby keeping it more stable. It was the one time I was outvoted by the other scientists. They claimed that if they were going to spend years raising the egg then they were going to bring it all the way out. It was what Genepool had ordered, and my strenuous objections fell on deaf ears.

Botany became an interest after Kiyusin taught me to cook. I figured I needed to know which plants were edible and which weren't, so I studied up on botany extensively. There wasn't a plant, weed or herb on the isle of Atlantia that I couldn't identify by sight. I wasn't a bad cook either. Unlike Sam, I didn't need to take my time measuring everything out. I just naturally knew how much of everything to put in. If I needed

a cup of sugar, I could pour out exactly one cup to the grain. As for the problem of cutting everything into similar shapes, that was never a concern. With my speed and natural proclivity for order, it all just happened with minimal effort. Genepool joined us for dinner every now and again, normally when The Beholder was away working on the peace accord. Personally, I believed my father asked him to keep an eye on Valencia in particular so she didn't get into any trouble. Genepool had taken a liking to Valencia and often had her assist him at the zoo as she got older. It was an honor to cook for another Ancient and Genepool always gave my meals high praise.

My father, though pleased with the rapid pace of my education, was more interested in my physical abilities. The teeth I had lost that day on the porch with Sam had indeed grown out and become fangs. They weren't extremely pronounced but there was no denying what they were. No one on Atlantia thought twice about my appearance. According to Sam, many of the citizens of Atlantia had seen far more disturbing beings in their lifetimes. I was hoping my feral teeth would be the only lycanthropic trait I inherited and my father believed that most likely would be the case. So far, his assumption had proven accurate. I wasn't sure about that at first because of my physical strength. I was abnormally strong from day one but it was nothing compared to how much stronger I became as I got older. The muscles in my arms were large and toned, my pectorals hard as a rock and my stomach looked like a washboard. Still, my legs were by far the strongest part of my body. My father and I would go out into the farthest reaches of the island and work on increasing my speed. Our efforts were quite successful to say the least. I could outrun every living creature on the island, and very possibly the entire planet. I would run in and out of small villages I'd found scattered around the island. As I passed through, it appeared that the people were standing still. My father had told me before that this would happen. I had been on Atlantia for ten years when I first ran around the world. The Beholder wanted to see just how fast I could go over long distances. The only problem was the large bodies of water I'd have to cross. I experimented on Atlantia and found I ran so fast I could run atop the water. Also, when I was running at a good speed, if I leapt I could cross great distance through the air. Landing the first time hurt a lot but I got better at it with every attempt. So I could jump across smaller bodies of water and run across the larger ones. This was most fortunate since I didn't know how to swim. I ran eastward from Atlantia, through Egypt into Asia, across the ocean and onward until I reached Atlantia once again. When I pulled up next to my father, he informed me that it took less than five minutes

for me to circle the globe.

I didn't exactly advertise my abilities on Atlantia. I wanted to live like a normal person. For the most part, that's precisely what happened. As I got older, I made friends, played games, helped others with their studies and so forth. One of my friends convinced me to try my hand at wrestling. I was a natural, easily winning most bouts. Unlike in Egypt, where I lost a few races on purpose, my losses in wrestling were earned. I never once used my speed to gain an advantage. Not only was this because I wanted to maintain the illusion of me being just a normal person, but I didn't think it would be fair to my opponent.

The Beholder was pleased with my wrestling accomplishments and offered to teach me hand-to-hand combat. I eagerly agreed and took to it like a fish to water. We spent many nights alone working on technique and fight tactics. The best thing about being taught how to fight by an Ancient was you never had to pull your punches. I would wail on my father constantly and he'd just shrug it off. In the latter stages of my training, when my attacks had gained a little more force behind them, his attitude changed a bit. It seemed strange at first but he actually seemed to like the fact that I could hurt him if I really tried. He never said those words exactly, but it was clear as day. Within a year, I was a master at several forms of martial arts. By the end of my training, my fists could fly as fast as my feet. When my father pronounced my training complete, he presented me with two gifts. First was body armor, done in the colors of red and gold. Lightweight yet strong, The Beholder assured me this armor would protect me from all physical attacks. It could be damaged, even destroyed, but it would take a lot of effort to do it. Secondly were the gauntlets. From the moment I saw them, I knew they would be my most prized possession. Golden leather gauntlets were a beauty to behold without any modifications. These gauntlets were very modified. When I put them on, The Beholder told me to turn my wrists slightly. When I did, metallic blades sprung forth. The blades looked like claws and ran down my fingers. They fit the contours of my hand perfectly. My father told me the blades were made from metal found only on Atlantia and would cut straight through almost anything. I didn't need to worry about them breaking either according to him. This metal was practically indestructible. I wore them everywhere when I was awake, and I very seldom slept anymore.

I had been on Atlantia for fifteen years had learned all the great teachers of the isle had to offer. Sam had eventually passed my lessons on to others since I yearned for knowledge he could not adequately provide. Now the majority of my time was spent working with the scientists and

engineers on the Zaron's egg project. Day after day, I watched as the Ancient's egg drew closer to the surface. I still believed the most prudent course was to leave it in the ground but my concerns were again ignored. I kept being overwhelmed by a sense of dread whenever mention was made of the egg being uncovered. One night, I asked my father what that ill sensation could mean. He explained I was most likely becoming aware. Pressed further, he explained I was becoming more aware of all that was happening on the earth. The feeling I got at the mention of Zaron's egg being uncovered could mean that something drastic was going to happen. By drastic, he clarified, he meant something that would upset the natural order. My awareness was based around order. Whenever an event radically changed events from orderly to chaotic, I'd instinctively know. I was astonished that such a thing was possible but my father assured me it was. Events just a few days later would prove him correct.

I'd been in this same room for almost sixteen years and I had yet to put up any kind of decoration, I thought as I got ready to greet the day. Valencia's room had pictures hanging on every wall, all created by artists she'd met. Most of her paintings were abstract works that gave me a headache to look at. We hardly ever spoke to each other anymore. For the most part, I didn't mind. Every once in a while one of us would attempt to start a conversation. This normally ended in a lot of shouting and ill will. Needless to say, these conversations had become very infrequent. Where I had completed my studies, Valencia was still working on hers. She did once offered to help me with the Zaron's egg project. My laughter was not seen as a positive response.

I had on my armor and gauntlets and was ready to go. Normally I left my armaments at home. There was never a need to take them to work. Something in my mind told me to wear them today, so I heeded my own advice. As I walked downstairs I was overcome with a sense of dread. Suddenly I saw, in my mind's eye, people being tortured and killed. Soldiers were rounding up the citizenry and throwing them into prisons where the lucky ones died quickly while the unfortunate suffered immense torment. From the amount of people I pictured in these prisons this must have been going on for some time. When I saw the playhouses along the riverbank, I realized I was seeing the village in Egypt I'd lived in and it was under attack.

It took me a second to get the violent images out of my head. Once I regained my composure, I continued down the stairs. The bad feeling didn't depart however. I made a decision right there that I was going to go back to Egypt. That village was the first place on Earth that

came under my influence and I was not going to sit idly by and let it get destroyed.

I got downstairs and spotted my sister sitting at the dining room table eating breakfast. She looked up and her expression changed from her normal cheeriness to quizzical concern. "What's wrong with you?" she asked.

I didn't want to tell Valencia about what I'd seen. I was going lie and tell her nothing was wrong and abruptly stopped before a word was uttered. Valencia was as close to the people there as I was, even closer with the adults. "Something's wrong in Egypt."

She jumped out of her seat and asked, "Define wrong."

"The village is under attack. I've decided to go back to Egypt to help them and I'm taking you with me."

"Oh you are, are you?" she sarcastically asked.

"Valencia, I'm in no mood to argue."

"Then don't tell me what to do," she calmly replied.

I sighed as I asked, "Do you want to come along or not?"

She looked at me like I was the dumbest man on the planet, "Of course I'm going. When do we leave?"

"Now." I motioned for Valencia to come over to where I was standing.

"Don't even think about it. You aren't doing that super-speed thing with me."

"It's the fastest way to get there."

"It makes my ears pop," she whined.

"Fine. You can walk to Egypt then." I turned to leave but when I opened the front door she beckoned for me to return.

"Okay, you win. How are we going to do this?"

Now that we'd grown to full height, our physical differences were much more pronounced. I was a few inches over six feet tall while my sister barely broke five feet. I could've just picked her up with one arm and carried her if I wanted too. If I dropped her along the way, I would've had a hard time convincing her it was an accident. I knelt down in front of her and said, "Hop on my back and hold on."

She took my words too literally and jumped onto my back, causing me to buckle a little. I figured it would be best not to say anything and just be on our way. Anything I said would probably just start another argument. I held onto her legs and told her to hold on tight. She wrapped her arms around my neck, thankfully taking care not to choke me. I turned towards the door and was shocked to see The Beholder standing in the doorway.

"Where are the two of you off to together?" he asked.

"Egypt," we replied in unison.

"Back to the village, are you? I thought so. I felt the turmoil there as well. Are you sure that's wise?"

"That was the first place order was established by my influence. Yes, I think it's not only wise but necessary," I responded.

"And her?" he asked with contempt dripping from his mouth.

"She is going to help," Valencia replied. "Now, would you mind getting out of the way? We have to go."

Turning his attention back to me, The Beholder said, "I need your assistance here, Vincent. The war between the Granites and the Magmites is intensifying. We could use someone with your gifts in battle."

"When I get back, I'll gladly help. For now, we have to be going."

"This is more important than anything going on in Egypt, my son. You are needed here."

"And I need to be there," I angrily replied. "You won't stop me. I will not see that village come under attack by some evil bastard and just sit back and let it happen."

Valencia loosened her grip on my neck long enough to slap me in the back of the head. "Watch your language," she admonished.

"Sorry." I was sincere in my apology and she knew it. I had picked up a penchant for profanity while working with the construction workers on the egg project. I found out quickly that my sister couldn't stand profanity. The first time she admonished me for using a vulgarity, she said that you shouldn't use that kind of language around a lady. Noting that she did have a valid point, I tried to limit my profanity around her. Also, I didn't want to hear her whine and moan about it all the time.

"I see that I'm not going to be able to stop you, so I ask that you be quick about it," The Beholder said.

"I can't make any guarantees on that, father," I responded. "We'll be back as soon as everything is back in order there."

"Do you mind not using that word?" my sister asked. "And could you please not constantly remind me that I'm helping you maintain order?"

"Look at it as helping your friends in times of trouble. It won't bother you as much," I suggested. Turning back to our father, I said, "We should be going. The sooner we get there, the sooner we can get back." The Beholder entered the house, clearing the way for our departure. As I stepped onto the porch, I asked my sister if she was ready to go.

She sighed and said, "As ready as I can be. Just don't drop me."

“Don’t let go,” I said cheerfully and took off. In mere seconds we were standing in the vast desert just outside of the village.

I let go of Valencia’s legs and she slid off of my back. I turned around to talk to her and was immediately overcome with a throbbing headache. Her hair was in shambles from the force of the wind during our travels. “Could you please do something about your hair?”

“What?” she yelled back.

“I said...”

“Hang on a minute.” She stuck a finger in each ear to try to open them up again. “I told you traveling like that makes my ears pop.”

“Can you hear me now?” I asked and she nodded in reply.

“Good, now do something about your hair please.”

“What about my hair?”

Before I could respond, a voice cried out. “Halt! Who goes there?”

Without looking around for the source, Valencia shouted back, “Who wants to know?”

“I’ll ask the questions, woman,” was the reply. We both spun around to look at the village and saw a man emerge with a loaded crossbow in his hand.

“Please forgive her rudeness,” I said. “She often speaks without thinking first.” This garnered me a nasty look from Valencia.

“Why are you in armor? Are you a warrior?”

“No. It’s just a dangerous world out there. One needs to take precautions.”

“Are you a follower of Set?” the guard asked.

“Who’s Set?” I inquired.

The guard lowered the crossbow and walked forward. Locking his gaze to mine, he said, “I don’t know you but your woman looks vaguely familiar.”

Valencia and I both laughed at his presumption. “She’s not my woman. She’s my sister.”

“State your names or be on your way. Strangers are not welcome here.”

“My name is Vincent. This is my sister...”

“Valencia!” the guard shouted. The crossbow dropped from his hands and he ran over to us. To our surprise, he embraced us and said, “It’s me, Kalim! Ra be praised, you’ve returned!”

“Who’s Ra?” Valencia asked.

“And who’s Set?” I added.

Kalim released his embrace and replied, "There will be time for that later. Please, follow me. I believe there are others that will be just as happy to see you as I am."

"This is all very confusing," I remarked.

"I know. Isn't it wonderful?" Valencia replied.

Kalim retrieved his crossbow and led us into the village. The first thing I noticed was the hut we had lived in was still standing. The same could not be said for other homes. Several were torn to the ground, piles of debris marking where they had stood. Instinctively, I began to walk to the riverside but Kalim drew me away. He said he understood I wanted to see the finished project but now was not the time. As we walked, he asked us all sorts of questions about our lives over the past years. We answered his queries without hesitation, which only caused more questions. Not once did he tell us about Set or Ra nor hint that there was any turmoil in the village at all. I found this mildly suspicious considering the sense of dread I'd experienced earlier and the state of disarray of the village.

Kalim stopped in front of a large hut in the middle of the village. "Is this your home?" I asked.

"Not exactly," he replied. "Please, go inside."

We did as asked but didn't get far. The hut was packed with people. When Valencia and I walked in, a few stood up with weapons drawn. This stopped us in our tracks. The whole time I'd lived here years ago, I hadn't seen one weapon. Kalim had followed us in and told the occupants to lower their weapons.

"Settle down everyone. These two mean us no harm," he told them.

"How can you say that?" one of them answered back. "Look at the size of him! Look at the way he's dressed for battle. How do you know he isn't an agent of Set?"

The smile on Kalim's face lit up the room. "Because he's our old friend Vincent."

The hut instantly erupted with voices. The one that had questioned my intentions ran over and almost tackled me with his enthusiastic embrace. "Ra be praised!" he cried out. Without unlocking his embrace, he looked up at me and said, "It's me, Alipha!" At those words, I pulled him back into an embrace. I was so glad to see that so many of my closest friends had survived whatever was happening here.

Alipha finally let go and gave Valencia an equally powerful hug. She was smiling from ear to ear, enjoying both seeing her friends and the chaos of the moment. More people came over to welcome us back. It

was all very touching. After everyone had gotten a turn, I wondered aloud about Ihmo. The joyous mood changed at the mention of his name.

"Ihmo was taken against his will by Set," Alipha replied.

"Who is this Set person you keep talking about?" I asked.

"There is much that has happened in your absence, my friend. It will take a while to explain. Afterwards, we may ask for your help."

"Why do you think we're here?" Valencia threw in.

"But how did you know your help was needed?"

"Much has happened to us as well," I said. "Please, tell us everything."

Alipha was more than happy to fill us in. Shortly after we'd departed for Atlantia, a man unlike any they'd ever seen came to the village. The stranger walked as a man, had the body of a man, yet his head was that of an eagle. Upon entering the village, he first noticed the project along the riverside. When he came upon the villagers going about their daily business in an orderly way, he remarked to some of the adults that he was pleased to see such a place. His physical appearance made some people uneasy yet no one refused to answer his questions. After a few days he began to talk about himself. He said his name was Ra and claimed to be blessed by an Ancient. Since the villagers had never heard of the Ancients, Ra proceeded to teach them of the Ancients and their teachings. Ra told them that the giver of life had blessed him with the characteristics of both man and animal, hence his unusual form. Genepool had chosen an eagle to represent the sky and the light that beams down through. Ra claimed to be a true follower of Tag, the ultimate good. He preached to all who would listen and people lined up to hear his words. The village experienced a time of great peace and tranquility. Unfortunately, it was not to last.

Recently, another being similar to Ra had arrived at the village. His head resembled a serpent and his name was Set. Ra had warned us about Set and a band of villagers tried to expel this vile creature from our land. Alas, they failed. Set was able to convert some weak-minded villagers to do his bidding and they were able to capture Ra. After that things got much worse. Anyone found openly worshipping Ra were either jailed or killed. By all accounts, death was the ideal option. Those taken prisoner were subject to inhumane torture. Worse, they were forced to watch as Ra was tortured as well. Many attempts had been made to kill Set and all had failed. Set turned out to be a powerful majick user. With his newly formed army and the majicks at his disposal, he had been able to repel all attacks against him. The biggest problem they'd

found was although Set never seemed to carry a weapon, he was always able to conjure one. Now the villagers lived in fear for their very lives, never knowing when Set would be coming for them and their loved ones.

"When Set took Ihmo away, I was helpless to stop them. Set took a great deal of interest in Ihmo when he first arrived in town," Alipha said.

"Why is that?" I asked, prodding him onward.

"To be honest, because of what you taught him about construction. Ihmo has always been good at building things. He used to stack rocks in little piles and before you knew it there would be a tiny structure. You helped him realize his dream of building something substantial. When Ra showed up he had a great influence on my brother. When he was old enough, Ihmo and several others set out to build him a temple to honor Ra. It was completed shortly before Set showed up and now Set wants a pyramid of his own." He paused and, for the first time in a while, he smiled. "You should see Ra's temple, the both of you. I think you'll both be thrilled with his creation."

"There aren't many things that can make both my sister and me feel that way. We have much different tastes," I said casually.

"I know," he said, his smile widening. Then he did something that caught me off guard. He winked.

Kalim re-entered the conversation and whispered to Valencia and me, "We know who you are."

"Then why are we whispering?" Valencia quietly asked.

"Because the walls have ears." Valencia started to inspect the walls of the hut and Kalim added, "Not literally."

In a soft voice, Alipha continued, "Set's majicks are all around us. We have been able to stay hidden thanks to some majicks of our own. Do you remember Orona?"

"No," I answered.

"Yes! She's Aristol's mother," Valencia joyfully replied.

"She is also very adept at majick. She has been able to hold a protection spell over this hut to keep us safe. That's why there are so many of us here. Outside of this hut, we are all vulnerable to his evil deeds. Still, it is best to err on the side of caution and not speak loudly about our plans for him. You never know who is standing outside to overhear our conversation."

"Very prudent," I told him.

"With the two of you here, I'm sure we'll finally succeed where all other attempts have failed."

"Let us hope so." Raising my voice, I continued, "So where

would two newcomers be able to settle down for a day or so?"

Alipha winked again and replied, "There's an abandoned hut at the edge of the village. It hasn't been occupied in many years. You should find it to your liking."

Valencia started to chuckle and I could barely contain my own laughter. "I think that will do just fine. Kalim, would you care to lead the way?"

"I'd be honored," he replied.

The hut was almost exactly as we'd left it, just with more dust and sand strewn around. Kalim left us as soon as we got there so we could get settled in. My sister went directly to her old room while I stayed in the main room and removed my gauntlets. Sadly, Valencia wasn't gone long.

"It seems much smaller," she remarked upon rejoining me.

"Considering you're bigger, it should."

"That could be it."

"Not much to see here, is there?" I remarked.

"No, not really."

We stared at one another, waiting for the other to speak first. A full minute passed before I broke the silence. "Do you want to go down to the river and see it?"

"I thought you'd never ask!" she excitedly replied.

We darted out of the hut and ran to the riverside. I didn't go at full speed. It was more fun listening to Valencia giggling in anticipation as we made our way to the project. What we saw stopped us cold. The playhouses were complete and they were fantastic. Every one of them were the same dimensions but with individual touches to the exterior. Some had intricate carvings on the walls. Other playhouses just had the child's name inscribed above the entrance. A few had more than one name listed and some of the names looked like they had been added recently. No one was around to ask, but I assumed the second name was a child of the first. It made me glad to see the playhouses were being inherited by future generations. We casually strolled along the front of the project, taking in all the details. The closer we got to the end Valencia had been working on all those years ago, the more I began to feel a throbbing behind my eyes.

"I just realized I never did get a chance to see what you were working on," I told her as I rubbed my forehead.

"That's right. You never did, did you?" she said. When she saw me trying to massage my headache away, she added, "You probably aren't going to like it."

"You didn't just build a playhouse, did you?"

"Of course not. That would be boring."

I was going to ask more questions before we got there but her smile worried me. So I decided against it. We continued along until we finally reached the far end. My headache was pounding and now I knew why.

"It's a maze," I observed.

"It certainly is. Isn't it wonderful?" She looked up at me and said softly, "Well, it looks wonderful to me."

"It looks well built, I'll say that much. But why a maze?"

"This is not just a maze, brother. There are four open areas in the maze, one for each person working on it. To get them to help, and to give up their section, I had to convince my three helpers that I would put a place in there for each of them to play. So as you go through then maze, there are places you can rest or play with your friends. Whatever you choose to do."

"Well, it explains my headache."

"Do you want to go in?" she asked gleefully. I just glared at her. "Or not," she added from under my gaze.

"I'm going to go back to my playhouse. I never did get a chance to enjoy it."

"Will you still fit in there?"

"I guess we'll find out."

I turned and headed back the way we came. The further away from the maze I got, the more my headache faded. By the time I was three houses away, I felt fine. I reached my playhouse and had to duck to enter. Oddly, even though the sun was shining in all its brilliance, the playhouse was cast in total darkness. Before I could even begin to figure out why, a voice broke through the shadows.

"Hello Vincent," was all the voice said, yet it captivated me. The speaker was female and her voice was seductive yet cold at the same time.

"Who's there?" I asked. I was beginning to regret leaving my gauntlets back in the hut.

"Have no fear, child. I'm just here to talk."

"Show yourself!" I demanded.

"I am." I saw something move out of the corner of my eye and whirled around. There was nothing there. Again, something moved and this time a figure emerged. It was no woman, and I'd be hard pressed to call it a man. He was huge, with horns sticking out from his head. His skin was of a blue tint and he looked exceptionally strong. I went to step towards him but he raised a hand to stop me.

"Careful Vincent. You might bump into her," he cautioned.

"Who are you and how do you know my name?"

The woman answered, "We are family. The creature whose visage you're presently trying to wrap your mind around is none other than Loathe, protectorate of Haedes."

"So you must be Lillith," I said.

"Very good." The shadows moved again and this time I could faintly see a silhouette in the darkness. The shadowy form of a woman was vaguely discernable through the gloom. When I concentrated harder, I could make out her features. Although she was evil and represented all the wickedness and immorality in the world, she was stunningly beautiful. I had read the story of when she turned into this current form. Now, I couldn't help but wonder what she'd looked like before all of that happened. "I am indeed Lady Lillith, keeper of the Black Stone of the Ancients, ruler of Haedes, guide for all who choose the path of evil."

"What are you doing here?" I asked calmly. I was actually quite curious as to why she would visit me.

"The same thing that Christi Lona and Cherub are doing with your sister. I'm here to offer you some friendly advice."

"Friendly advice," I said slowly, doubt cascading from every syllable.

"Yes," she replied.

"And Christi Lona and Cherub are doing the same with Valencia."

"Again, yes. You don't believe me?"

"Well, you are a notorious liar," I pointed out.

She smiled, and that made me step back. Her beauty was only enhanced when she smiled yet the accompanying gleam in her eyes made me nervous. "Apparently my reputation precedes me. You are correct, Vincent. I am a liar. However, the advice I came here to give you is sincere. You can take my words to heart or you can ignore them. It's your choice."

To Lillith, Loathe said, "Maybe we should give him some time to think about it. We seem to have caught him off guard."

"I'm fine," I said before Lillith could answer. After the tiniest pause, I said, "Let's hear it."

"You are bound to fight for order on Earth," she began. "This is somewhat admirable. Order isn't exactly my forte. I do know how you can better establish order though. You have to choose a side and stick with it."

"And you think I should choose evil?"

"Of course. It is much easier to establish order if everyone has

the same beliefs. You don't even have to do evil works to accomplish this. All you have to do is encourage it in others. Evil is ever-present, child. All you have to do is bring it out in others."

"Evil is essentially chaotic, isn't it?" I asked.

"Actually, no, it isn't. Wars are chaotic but not all wars are started in the name of evil. Yes, most evil beings are violent, but not all. And violence itself isn't always chaotic either. It's all in how you use it."

"But I thought you liked wars?"

"I do. Hatred drives men to do awful things to each other. Love is the same way."

"But you'd rather have them fight with hatred. It gives you more souls in Haedes that way."

Lillith's smile chilled my body, and her cold, steely gaze did the same to my soul. "I see you've been doing your homework. Yes, I'd much rather have people fight and die full of hatred. In Haedes, they serve me. And I can teach them what true hatred is. Don't let that dissuade you, Vincent. Though I may seem cold-hearted, I'm just doing what I'm meant to do. Just as you will."

I let her words sink in for a moment before replying. "I'll have to think about this a while."

"Please do," she said as she smiled again. "And don't be misled by other advice you're given. Remember, I am not the only liar in our family." As she spoke her last word, she faded into the shadows, taking Loathe with her.

As soon as she was gone, the room got a little brighter. The sunlight was coming in from the entranceway and its heat was refreshing. Lillith's presence had sucked all the warmth out of the playhouse. To my surprise, the sunlight slowly began to increase. Soon the entire playhouse was filled with a light so bright I had to cover my eyes.

"Greetings, dear Vincent," came a voice from the glow. "Please, uncover your eyes and look upon me."

"It's too bright," I mentioned.

"It is no longer." When I removed my hands from my face I saw that the light had indeed dimmed. In front of me stood another radiant woman dressed in a long, white robe. It was obvious at first glance that this was Lillith's sister. The resemblance was remarkable. The differences were just as remarkable. Where Lillith was shrouded in darkness, light beamed from my new visitor. Her hair was long, blonde and luxurious. One look into her crystal blue eyes and all your worries fell away. I could only wonder if Lillith had been this beautiful ages before.

"You must be Christi Lona," I said to her. Turning to her

companion, “And you’re Cherub.”

“Indeed we are,” she said. “We have come to impart upon you some advice to help you on your preordained path.”

“I know. Lillith already told me.”

“I assume she spoke to you about her wishes for you.”

“She did.”

“I must warn you to use all caution with Lillith, Vincent. She only wants to manipulate you for her own means.”

“And you don’t?”

“I do not manipulate others. I simply tell them what I think they need to hear to prosper.”

“Prosper according to you,” I pointed out.

“Of course.”

“So what advice do you have for me?” I asked skeptically.

“Do not take my words lightly, Vincent,” she warned. “I have nothing but the best intentions. I do not doubt that my sister was quite convincing. Many times, she has made honorable men do horrible things simply for her own amusement. I will not tell you to ignore what she has said to you. I only ask that you consider the source of that advice.”

“I will.” Eager to get away and into the open air, I urged her on. “So what advice do you offer?” I asked politely.

“The same as my sister, yet opposite,” Christi Lona began. “I believe that if you truly want order on Earth, you must join forces with the side of Light. Only the forces of goodness and purity can bring about what you seek. When all inhabitants are living in peace and harmony, there will be no war, no violence and most importantly, no chaos.”

“So no follower of Light has ever started a war?” I asked.

“No follower of Light has ever started a war against another follower of Light. We only fight to defend ourselves or to vanquish evil. If all evil is cast into Haedes where it belongs, there will be no war.”

“Can’t good people be chaotic at the same time?”

“They can, but it is a rarity. If you are able to establish order with the help of good people, the chaotic ones will be cast aside as well. Order and Love are meant to work together.”

Her words made sense, more so than Lillith’s. I was having a hard time working it all out in my head and needed some fresh air. “I thank you for your words, Christi Lona. I will take your advice to heart.”

She smiled and I almost melted. “That is all I can ask.” In a brilliant flash of light, Christi Lona and Cherub were gone.

I was alone in the playhouse and couldn’t get out fast enough. As I stepped into the open air, I saw Valencia staggering towards me from

the other end of the project. I could see the blank look on her face even from this distance and wondered if I had the same expression on mine. She slowly made her way to me and that empty look remained for the entire walk.

When she reached me, she simply said, "Let's go home." Her words were clipped and had none of her usual exuberance. I could relate.

"Good idea." We walked back to the hut silently, lost in our own thoughts.

Chapter 10

My sister and I spent most of the rest of the day alone in our rooms. We both had a lot to think about. She didn't say anything about what the Aseraphim had said to her. I likewise remained silent on the topic. It just seemed strange that they would take such measures. They talked to both of us, advising both of us on how to reach our goals. At least, I assumed that was what they'd said to her. If so, I found it odd they would talk to both of us instead of choosing one. Maybe they were just trying to be helpful. Maybe they talked to both of us just to play it safe. It was all very confusing. It was so confusing it left Valencia speechless and that was a rare event.

I set out into the village to get some food, thinking a good meal would calm our minds. I saw a few of the people I'd met earlier with Kalim and asked where I could get some rations. They gladly gave me some of their supplies and told me if I needed more all I had to do was ask. I went back to the hut and prepared the food. Valencia had tried to cook once in Atlantia. To say it didn't go well would be an understatement. We had to throw out what she'd made as well as a few pots and pans.

The smell of the food drew Valencia out of her room. "That smells good. What is it?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. It's some kind of meat. It does smell good though, doesn't it?"

"Isn't that what I said?"

Ignoring her sarcasm, I finished up and served the food. As we ate, I decided to broach the topic of Ihmo. "Did Kalim ever say where they were holding Ihmo?"

"I don't think so," she replied before taking another bite.

"I guess that's the first thing we need to do. We can't exactly rescue him if we don't know where he is."

"How are we going to do that without arousing suspicion?"

"I'm working on that."

Swallowing another bite of food, she said, "I have an idea."

"And that would be?"

"Why don't we ask someone?"

"I have to assume that if Kalim knew where..."

"I didn't mean Kalim and his gang. I meant one of the guards."

"Valencia, that would definitely arouse suspicion."

"If you did it, maybe."

I was skeptical and it had to be evident on my face. "You think

you can get the information by asking a guard. 'That's your plan?'

"It's not a plan. I don't do plans. It's an idea."

"It's a bad idea."

"It's also the only one we've got."

I considered her idea more in depth. She was good at getting people to talk. I often wondered how she did it. On Atlantia, she was always telling me about things that were happening in town that no one else seemed to know. I assumed she had talkative friends. I soon realized she was getting her information by talking to anyone and everyone. Most resisted for a while, but eventually they'd tell her whatever she wanted to know. Whether or not they willingly offered up the information or just did it to get her to be quiet was still up for debate.

"I guess it's worth a shot."

"Great!" she cried out.

"We'll search out a guard tomorrow morning. I want to do it as early as possible. The less people up and around the better."

"Sounds good. Just make sure to stay out of sight when I'm talking to the guard. If he sees you, he may think something's going on."

We finished our meal and departed for our rooms once again. I tried to sleep for the first time in a long time but couldn't seem to get comfortable. Valencia was right about one thing. The room did look a lot smaller.

At daybreak, I was still awake. I ventured over to Valencia's room and saw her on the floor sound asleep. With all due stealth, I snuck into her room and tapped her on the shoulder to awaken her. When I did, she flailed her arms and punched me in the face. I jumped back as she leapt to her feet.

"Sorry Vincent!" she quickly exclaimed, placing her hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter. "I didn't know it was you."

"You hit me!" I admonished.

"I know. I said I'm sorry."

Rubbing my chin, I smiled and said, "You hit harder than you used to."

She smiled back and asked, "How long has it been?"

"Since the last time you hit me? A few years, I guess. I think I was picking on you about your math assignments one time and you got mad at me."

"That's right. You deserved that one."

Changing the topic to more pressing issues, I asked, "Are you ready to do this?"

She stretched a bit and replied, "As ready as I'll ever be."

We left the hut and made our way to the village proper. There was no one in sight. No one was out tending to their flocks. Not one person was preparing to open their shop for the day. It was perfect. We got to the far end of town without seeing one single sign of life. There we saw something that was not here before. A large building had been erected and there was a guard at the entrance. This looked to be the prison. I ducked behind a hut within earshot of the guard and sent Valencia on her way. I was still a little worried about her doing going in alone. If the guard got any hint of trouble he might lash out at her. I had to hope for the best.

I watched as Valencia casually strolled up to the guard. She acted as if he wasn't there and tried to walk right past him.

"Halt!" he screamed at her. Thankfully, she obeyed. "What is your purpose here, woman?"

"Who me?" she asked innocently.

"Yes, you. What do you want?" he growled.

"I'm just here to visit an old friend of mine."

He looked her up and down and said, "You don't live here, do you?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Never mind. It's not important. I'm just here to see my friend."

"And this friend would be...?"

"Ihmo."

"The architect?" he asked, an expression of unease lining his face.

"I guess. He wasn't an architect when I was here before."

"So you lived here before?"

"Not exactly."

He sighed and asked, "Where did you come from?"

"Atlantia," she replied.

"So do you call Atlantia home?"

"Not exactly."

The guard started to rub his forehead. I began to wonder if I looked like that when she talked to me. "Listen, if I don't know who you are, I cannot let you see the architect."

"Oh, I'm sorry." She stuck out her hand and cheerfully said, "I'm Valencia. Glad to meet you." Utterly confused, the guard did not accept her greeting in kind so she lowered her arm. "You know, it's very rude to not shake a person's hand when offered, especially a lady's."

"You think I'm rude?"

"Not exactly. What you did was rude. That doesn't necessarily make you a rude person."

"So why do you want to see the architect?" the guard asked, trying to regain control of the conversation.

"I told you. He's an old friend. I happened to be in the area and figured I'd visit."

"So you live near here?"

"Not exactly," they said in unison.

The guard, obviously fed up with the conversation, begged, "If I tell you where he is, will you please go away?"

"That's all I wanted in the first place."

"He's in the Labyrinth underneath the pyramid."

"Great! Thank you so much." She turned to leave and hesitated. "Which pyramid? The completed one or the one being built?"

"The completed one."

"Thanks again!" She skipped away from the guard, who was still trying to massage away the pain in his head. She turned the corner and saw me standing there. My smile was all she needed to see.

"Do I look like that when you're talking to me?"

"Not exactly," she merrily replied. "Come on. We're off to the pyramid. Ihmo's in the Labyrinth."

"Good job," I said sincerely as we headed off.

"So that's what Alipha meant when he said we'd both like it. A pyramid for you and a maze for me." She glanced over at me and saw the look of disgust on my face. "Not to worry, brother. I'll get us through it."

"I'm just concerned about guards."

"That guy didn't say anything about other guards."

"Valencia, as difficult as it was to get the information from him..."

"It's wasn't that tough, really," she interjected.

"...it probably means he is being guarded. I'll handle any guards we encounter. You handle the Labyrinth. Sound like a plan?"

"Unfortunately, yes, it does," she said with distaste. I knew she wasn't criticizing the plan itself, just the fact that we had one.

We exited the far end of town and made our way to the temple. As we approached the pyramid, I couldn't help but be more than pleased with Ihmo's effort. I had seen the pyramid at a distance while in town but it simply did not compare to standing at its base. It was elegant in its simplicity. All four sides were perfectly smooth, with odd yet intriguing etchings several feet high encircling the base of the structure. It was

without a doubt one of the grandest sights I'd ever seen, easily rivaling the pyramids on Atlantia.

As I had suspected, there were guards stationed outside the entrance to the pyramid. One or two guards would've been fine, but there were five of them. We continued onward as I tried to formulate a plan. My concentration was broken by one of the guards.

"Halt!" he bellowed. This guard was dressed differently than the others so I assumed he was in charge. The other guards were dressed in green with white turbans. The leader had a purple turban and a black and purple sash running across his chest. The most important difference was that, though they all carried a bow with a quill full of arrows, he also carried a spear. I stopped but Valencia did not. When she got near, he pointed his spear at her chest and commanded her to stop once again.

She swatted the spear away and shouted, "Don't point that thing at me! Just who do you think you are?"

For a split second, he didn't know how to react. "I am Scarab, principal guard of the pyramid and devoted servant of Set." He thrust the spear at her again and she jumped back to avoid his weapon. "Now step back."

This time she obeyed. She took up position to my left a few steps away, giving me plenty of room. "We are here to see Ihmo," I said to Scarab.

He laughed and said, "No one sees the architect without Set's approval and I don't believe you have it."

"True, we don't. But you are going to let us pass nonetheless." My voice was calm and my gaze steady.

"On whose orders?"

"Mine."

That got all of the guards laughing. "Do you think you are the worst beings we've encountered? You are insignificant in our eyes."

"Careful," Valencia warned, "Or you may not have eyes left when it's all said and done."

"And you may want to shut your woman's mouth before she gets hurt."

"First off, she is not my woman. She's my sister. Secondly, I don't think you or your guards could lay a hand on her."

"Is that so?"

"It is," I said with confidence. In a weird way, I was beginning to enjoy myself.

"And why is that?"

"Because I'd stop you."

The guards laughed again. Valencia and I stood silently, staring holes through them all. "Men!" Scarab shouted. "Kill this insolent man. The woman we'll save for later."

His four guards drew their bows, loaded up arrows and fired. To my eyes, the arrows traveled as if the air were made of sand. With minimal effort, I caught two arrows as they got close. The other two I swiped at in midair and sliced them to pieces with the blades of my gauntlets. I was still staring at Scarab as I snapped the arrows in my hands and threw them to the ground. I smiled at the dumbfounded expressions on their faces.

"That was impressive," Valencia whispered to me.

"That was nothing," I whispered back. Turning my attention back to Scarab, "Since my sister is here and she prefers to give people a choice, I'll give you one." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Valencia beaming wildly. Speaking slowly and deliberately, I said, "You either have five seconds to let us pass or you have ten seconds to live. Choose wisely."

Scarab and his guards still hadn't fully recovered from my exhibition and reacted sluggishly. I was counting slowly in my head when I heard Valencia quietly say, "Five" just as I thought the word. They made the wrong choice. I ran at them and they stood still. At least, it appeared to me that they didn't move. I was moving so fast that time itself seemed to stop. I went after the guard closest to me first and drove my bladed right hand into his chest and out his back, piercing his heart in the process. I pulled my hand from his body as I swung my left toward another guard. This one I sliced across the face with the back of the hand, digging my blades into his eyes, severing an ear and ripping his mouth open wider. My blades sliced open his neck and left his jaw hanging from his skull like a spider from its web. Turning my attention to the other two, I jabbed the blades of my right hand into the left side of one victim's skull. Doing the same with my left hand to the right side of the other's guard's head, I brought my hands together and watched their heads explode from the impact. This left only Scarab. I darted to the front of my last adversary and rammed my blades into his gut. There I stopped.

All four of Scarab's minions fell to the ground as one in a bloody heap. Their crimson lifeblood poured from their bodies, staining the sand in dark pools. Scarab at first did not realize I had attacked. He tried to raise his spear but he was about four seconds too late. He was too weakened by the blow to his stomach to lift his weapons an inch.

"When you meet Styx," I told him, "Remember that I gave you a choice. Pray she shows you mercy." I thrust my free hand up through his

chin and out the top of his head. "For I have none for you." I withdrew my blades from his bowels and turned to Valencia. Not surprisingly, she was bounding with excitement.

"That was great!" she screamed as she examined the fallen guards. "You were just a blur. I swear! I could barely follow you. You were just a streak of yellow and red! That was fantastic!"

"Valencia," I calmly said.

"I mean, yes, they deserved it, but still..."

"Valencia," I said with force this time.

"The sheer brutality, it was amazing! I'm serious..."

"Val!" I yelled.

"What?" she yelled back as she finally made eye contact. When she did, she stepped back a pace in shock. "Vincent, your eyes are glowing. Gold, not green like mine, but they are indeed glowing." A curious look crossed her face and she added, "And did you just call me Val?"

I made a snap decision that it would be best to just let her words pass by. "Come on. We have work to do."

"Right! Let's go get Ihmo."

"First, help me carry the bodies into the pyramid."

"Why?"

"So no one inadvertently stumbles across them. It wouldn't do well for us if someone noticed five dead guards in front of the pyramid."

We tried to carry the bodies in but Valencia was so small that she was having marked difficulty lifting one and moving it. She didn't lack the strength. The bodies were just so much bigger than her that she couldn't figure out a good way to carry them. While I transported the bodies out of sight of passersby, Valencia covered up the bloody sand. To my astonishment, she came up with that idea without my prodding.

We stashed the bodies in an anteroom just inside the entrance. Before us was a long hallway leading into the heart of the pyramid. Valencia and I walked in silence lest we encountered more guards. I didn't think any would be in the pyramid itself but I wasn't going to take any chances. After walking for a good five minutes we came to a four-way intersection. I looked left and saw Valencia looking down the hallway as well. As she turned to look right I followed suit. Turning our gaze straight ahead again, I asked, "Any ideas?"

"Only one. Take a harder look down each hallway."

I stared down each corridor for a full minute, not knowing what I was supposed to see. "Now what?"

"Which way makes your head hurt?"

I smiled and said, "Straight ahead."

"Then straight ahead it is."

We continued forward until we came to another intersection.

This time, the passage left made my head ache. We ventured deeper into the pyramid by this method until we reached an opening with the words "Labyrinth of Chaos" engraved over it.

"This must be the place," Valencia surmised.

"It'd better be. I feel like my brain is going to push my eyes out of their sockets."

"It'll only get worse from here. Shall we go in?"

"Are you sure you can find your way?"

"Trust me," she said with a wicked smile. Noticing the pained look on my face, she grabbed my hand. "Close your eyes and hold on. Maybe if you don't have to see it, it won't hurt as much."

I took her advice as she led us into the Labyrinth. After a minute, I let go and opened my eyes. Her theory didn't pan out. At least she tried. Considering we hadn't said a kind word to each other in months before coming to Egypt, it was nice of her to show such concern. Just because there was nothing between us that remotely resembled the love most siblings possessed didn't mean we didn't still care about each other.

We weaved down the corridors of the Labyrinth, Valencia never showing any doubt as to where to turn. I would never get to Ihmo by myself down here. Maybe if I went full speed I could find him in a few hours. More likely, I'd get extremely lost. After several twists and turns, we entered an open area of the maze. There sat Ihmo, nose first in a book. He was so enraptured with his reading that he didn't hear us approach. When he finally looked up, he fell out of his chair in alarm.

"Who are you and what do you want?" he demanded from the floor.

"We're here to rescue you," Valencia told him.

Ihmo seemed unconvinced. "Who are you?" he asked again as he regained his composure and stood up.

"Ihmo, I'm Vincent. Do you remember me?"

His mood changed in the blink of an eye. "Vincent! Ra be praised!" Turning to my sister, he said, "You're Valencia, aren't you?"

"You got it, sweetie," she replied.

"I never thought I'd see the two of you down here."

"Well, we heard you were in trouble, like most of the rest of the town," I explained. "And we're here to help."

"How did you find me?"

"There will be time for that later. Right now, we need to get

going."

"Are we in danger?"

"Probably. If not now, we will be as soon as Set figures out that his guards are dead."

"Then let's go!" he joyfully decreed, and not a moment too soon. My head was about to explode. As we began retracing our steps, we heard a strange rumbling sound emanating from beneath us.

"What's that noise?" Valencia asked.

"Don't move!" Ihmo commanded. We quickly halted our progress. "Set's majicks are at play down here. The walls move. If you get surrounded by them, you could be stuck here for months or worse."

"Worse?" I asked.

"You could get crushed between walls."

"That's worse, all right," my sister commented.

We stood stone still and watched the walls around us start to move. The entire complexion of the maze was changing, making escape more difficult. Well, it would've been more difficult if the bringer of chaos weren't with us. Valencia just smiled as the walls settled into their new arrangement.

"Come on, we have to backtrack a little," she said once the walls were done moving.

"Are you sure?" Ihmo asked.

"Trust me," she implored. "I know what I'm doing." We walked back the way we came for a few yards until Valencia took a left. We were on the march for about twenty minutes when I asked how much longer we had to go. Valencia smiled and said, "We're here." One more turn and we were at the entrance of the Labyrinth.

I felt so much better when we left the Labyrinth behind us. My headache faded more and more as we made our way out of the pyramid. I remembered the path we'd taken and was able to lead for the remainder of the journey. One final turn and a long straight stretch greeted us. Valencia had been filling Ihmo in on all the details while we searched for the exit. He was so glad to see us he didn't question anything we told him. When we saw the light at the end of the hallway, we were overjoyed. Our euphoria was fleeting however, for once we stepped outside we were greeted by Set and a full compliment of guards.

"Where do you think you're going with my architect?" he asked.

"Just back to the village," Valencia replied casually. Her demeanor changed, and her tone, as she added sharply, "Where he belongs."

"Really? And what makes you think I'll allow that to happen?"

"You don't have a choice," I informed him.

"There's always a choice. Isn't that right Valencia?" I was surprised to hear Set call my sister by name. She was stunned into silence. Realizing no answer was forthcoming, he continued, "Yes, I know who the two of you are. Personally, I'm glad. The villagers aren't much of a challenge to my rule but there are still elements that seek to dispose of me. Killing the two of you will send a clear message to those that still oppose me."

I detected a green glow coming from where Valencia stood and took charge before she could say a word. "Set, you have no idea what you're getting into. You will let us pass. If you do, we may show mercy on you."

Laughter issued forth from his serpentine head. "It is you that will be asking for mercy."

Before I could respond, I saw an arrow fly through the air. The arrow struck the guard next to Set in the back of the head and swiftly exited via his left eye. As the guard fell limply to the ground, the arrow continued its flight and came right at me. I caught it easily and smiled. I snapped it like a twig as I stared at my enemy. Set frantically turned around and saw an army of villagers approaching, weapons raised for battle. He ordered his minions to attack and they charged at the approaching army.

"Valencia, get back in the pyramid!" I shouted over the din.

"You've got to be kidding!" she yelled back.

"Do it!" I roared. That had the desired effect. She grabbed Ihmo and ran back to the pyramid. Set had turned away from me and was issuing commands to his guards. I spread out my arms and ran into the melee, slicing several guards to ribbons. I found Kalim at the rear of his band of soldiers. I told him to go and join the fight. I was taking control of the situation. Kalim agreed and entered the fray. I saw Set raise his hands and speak but was too far away to hear his words. When he lowered his hands, all of his fallen soldiers rose from the ground, alive once again. I'd never seen a necromancer before but I'd heard of them. This made the fight all that much more complicated.

Valencia didn't stay in the pyramid, not that I really expected her to. She ran around the edge of the battlefield with Ihmo close behind. In her hands were Scarab's spear and a bow. A quiver of arrows was slung over her shoulder. Ihmo likewise had picked up two bows and some arrows. Ihmo handed me a bow and a compliment of arrows while I sent a portion of the villagers around to the left flank. I wanted to try and force Set's minions back to the pyramid and hopefully pin them there.

Ikmo led the villagers I'd sent to the left, firing arrows with precision. I shouted out orders and the villagers willingly complied. It came so naturally to me that I didn't even need to think about what to do next. The battle plan was working perfectly and Set's men fell one by one. The necromancer couldn't revive them fast enough. The only problem was Valencia. She was firing arrows as well but her arrows didn't fly straight. Every time she aimed and fired the arrow would initially sail straight but would soon swerve erratically. It wasn't that she was a bad shot. The forces of chaos just made the arrows she used act strangely. I begged her to stop and she eventually came to the same conclusion I'd reached. She picked up the spear and started to head off into battle. I grabbed her and roughly threw her to the ground. There was no way I was going to let her join in the fray. She wouldn't last a minute.

The remainder of Set's guards were falling like rain in a downpour. One by one their numbers decreased. I marched forward as the troops advanced on Set, who was now standing with his back to the pyramid. As he raised his hands to cast a spell, I fired an arrow and caught him square in the chest. With his dying breath, he chanted one last spell. To my amazement, another Set appeared. This was no illusion, for this new version of Set picked up a sword and began to defend himself from his attackers. The villagers finished off the rest of the guards and were trying to kill Set, but to no avail. Finally, Alipha stepped forward and drove his sword into Set's stomach. As Set grabbed the sword and withdrew the blood soaked weapon from his body, he chanted the spell he'd done before and another Set appeared.

"You cannot kill me! I am one of many! I am forever!" he raged.

I sprinted at Set who, like Scarab and his guards, looked as if he was standing still. I swung my bladed hands at his neck and decapitated him. When I stopped, his eyes shone with the recognition of his demise. His head was still on his shoulders but was slowly sliding from his body. The serpentine head fell to the ground, followed closely by the rest of him. Blood gushed forth from his remains as his heart beat its last.

"You are done talking," I informed the corpse.

With Set dead, as well as the vast majority of his guards, the battle was essentially over. The villagers rejoiced and thanked me profusely for disposing of this vile creature, all except Valencia of course. She was screaming at me for treating her so roughly. I tried to explain to her that I did it for her own safety. She didn't care. She was fuming and there was nothing I was going to be able to say to calm her down. So I did the next best thing. I ignored her. I searched out Kalim and began to question him about something that had me confused.

"How did he do that?" I asked.

"You mean bring forth another Set? It's called reality manipulation. It's like an illusion but your mind makes it real. Once your mind makes it real, it is real."

"That's a neat trick," I commented.

"It's no trick. According to Orona, it's one of the most powerful spells in creation. It's also very rare. Only the most accomplished spellcasters can master it. Reality manipulation requires more concentration than most mortals can muster."

"Well, I guess I don't have to worry about my sister learning it."

"Why is that? Is she a spellcaster?"

"Maybe someday. I don't think she'll be a great warrior, do you?"

"Probably not," Kalim said with a laugh. "But why do you think she wouldn't be able to cast that spell?"

"Because she can't concentrate on anything." I couldn't hide my own smile any longer. "Now, I think there's one mission left for you and your forces."

"Rescue Ra."

"Exactly. Now be on your way and free your leader."

Kalim left to gather a rescue party and I looked around for Valencia. She was talking with Ihmo as I approached.

"Ihmo tells me that there's going to be a celebration tonight. We are going to stick around, right? I'd hate to miss the party."

Not a minute ago she was ready to rip my head from my body with her bare hands for not letting her fight. Now she was jovial and chipper at the thought of a party. Her mood swings could drive a person insane. Now that she was in a better mood, however, I planned to keep it that way. "I think we can stay a little longer."

"I'm going to head back to the village and get everything ready," Ihmo told us. "First, I have to tell the families of our fallen brethren that their loved ones won't be coming home tonight."

"They died valiantly, Ihmo. Never forget that," I said.

"I know," he said sadly. "But I doubt that will be much consolation to their families."

Ihmo left and I was alone with Valencia. I was about to ask her if she wanted to head back as well when she said, "After the party, we need to talk."

"Look, if this is about me not letting you fight..."

"It's not," she said somberly. "It's something much more important than that." She turned and slowly walked in the direction of the village, leaving me by myself. I looked around at the carnage and

decided to leave too. There was too much death here for my liking.

The party that evening was a pleasant change from the earlier events of the day. Everyone was having a good time. Drinks were passed around freely and there was enough food to feed an army and still have food left over. I met Ra, who turned out to be a very soft-spoken individual. He thanked my sister and me for helping to free the village from Set's tyranny. It pleased him to no end that two children of the Aseraphim would take such an interest in this place. I explained to him that this was the first place we'd encountered on this realm and it had a special place in both our hearts. I spent most of the night chatting with Ra about his origins and those like him. It was quite enlightening.

I didn't stay at the party long after Ra and I were done talking. It was a bit too chaotic, as most parties tended to be. I found myself walking to the spot along the riverside that Valencia and I used to visit when we wanted to be alone. The log we used to sit on was still there, much to my surprise. I sat down and stared out at the flowing river. As I expected, I wasn't there long before Valencia showed up.

"How did I know I'd find you here?" she asked.

"How did I know you'd follow me?"

"I didn't follow you. I just knew you'd be here."

"Is the party winding down?"

"Not at all!" she exclaimed. "In fact, it's really starting to heat up."

"Then why did you leave?"

"I needed to talk to you."

"Yes, you've said. What do you want to talk about?"

Valencia sat down on the log next to me. She didn't say anything right away, but when she did, her words caught me off guard. "I'm not going back to Atlantia."

I turned to look at her and I could tell right away that she was serious. "Why not?"

"Why should I?"

"To continue your education for one thing."

"I can do that here. Ra's already told me he'd be honored to be my new teacher. Orona said she'd lend a hand as well."

"You want to stay here?"

"I don't want to go back to Atlantia."

"Didn't you like it there?"

"I loved it there. But I think it would be best if I stayed here and kept an eye on things. This may be the first place you established order

but it's also special to me." She paused and looked out over the river before continuing. "When I saw the words above the Labyrinth, I knew then that I should be here. Order may be strong here, but chaos has its place too." She gave me a mischievous wink and added, "I told you one can't exist without the other."

"Where will you stay?"

"Well, tonight I'm kind of hoping to find an occupied bed to sleep in," she said with an impish grin. "After that, I figure I'll stay in the Labyrinth. I think I can learn better surrounded by chaos, don't you?"

"It's a theory. What should I tell our father?"

"Tell him whatever you want. I doubt he'll care."

I couldn't argue with her on that point. "I'll think of something." I wanted to be alone now and told her so. "I'm heading back in the morning. You should get back to the party."

"I will, but I have a favor to ask."

"And what's that?"

"Don't come to me asking for my help. You and I have different goals and I just don't think we'll be able to work as well together in the future as we did today. Before we came here we hardly said two words to each other. This was nice, but I think we'll both be better off alone."

"You may be right."

"Do this for me and I'll do you a favor in return."

"And that would be?"

"I won't leave Egypt. This way, you'll have time to try to accomplish your goals and fulfill the prophecy. If that's what is meant be, of course."

I smiled and told her that she had a deal. What she did next stunned me. She gave me a big hug. "You take care of yourself."

"You too," I replied, returning her embrace in kind. It was the first time I could ever remember the two of us sharing such a tender moment. Then again, maybe it was just one last attempt at confusion on her part. Personally, I sensed the gesture was sincere, but with her you could never be entirely sure. Without another word, she released her embrace and went back to the party, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Chapter 11

My last night in Egypt was spent alone in the hut. I rejoined the party for a brief moment to say a final farewell to my friends on the way back from the riverside. There were a lot of emotions flowing and where I cared deeply for these people, I didn't have the sentimental attachment my sister possessed. First and foremost for me, it was all about maintaining order. Now that Valencia had decided to stay here I felt a little betrayed. She knew my reasons for defending this town and now she was going to stay here and change everything. Granted, she did have a valid point when she said that chaos had its place here as well. At least I knew she'd keep a vigilant watch over these people, as they would over her I was sure. Considering the last glimpse I got of my sister was of her walking arm in arm with a young man and a young lady, I knew she'd be fine. I wondered if they owned the occupied bed she was looking for. I also had to wonder which one was going to be sharing the bed with her. Knowing my sister's proclivities, it was probably both.

I left for Atlantia the next morning, arriving on the island in a flash of yellow and red. My father wasn't home when I arrived so I went to check on the progress at the Zaron's egg project. The engineers were still bringing the egg to the surface inch by inch. The progress was painfully slow. I kept getting a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach whenever I got near to the actual site where they hoped to store the egg. There was no sense in restating my objections either. The lead engineer told me the egg was still several miles underground. The ground was getting softer now and they were making better time than originally calculated. They estimated the egg breaking the surface in only a few months. I tried to feel good about this news, but my sense of dread would not allow it.

I didn't get back to the house until late in the afternoon. My father was waiting for me this time and had plenty of questions about the events in Egypt. I told him all that had happened and he was pleased to see I was able to defeat Set. Not surprisingly, he never once asked about Valencia.

Of all that I had to tell him, he was most delighted to see that I was capable of leading men in battle. My father told me more about the war going on between the Granites and the Magmites. After filling me in on all the details, I concluded this was merely a political disagreement and should be handled diplomatically. My father explained that years of talks, which he himself mediated, yielded no positive results. I asked if I could try and he grew angry with me, saying that if he could not bring the two

sides together then I would stand no chance and would just be wasting time. His reaction was a tad over the top but in the end I had to admit he was right. After a lengthy discussion, I agreed to help my father lead General Sakoahn's armies.

We traveled together to Granatia, the home of the Granites. General Sakoahn was in the war room of his palace with his second-in-command, Titus. The general was a large specimen of the Granite people but he was a pebble compared to Titus. When I'd first met these two months ago, I wondered to myself why Titus wasn't in charge. He was clearly the strongest of their race. When he spoke, it all became clear. To say Titus was less than intelligent was like saying water's a little wet. When you're almost eight feet tall and made of rock, with jagged rock spikes jutting out from your shoulders and down your arms and back, you don't really have to say much anyway. Titus was about a foot taller than Sakoahn, so Titus was seated while the general paced the room. When my father and I entered, General Sakoahn stopped pacing and sharply called us over.

"Gentlemen, we have a problem," he began as I sat down next to Titus. "The Magmites have been able to persuade some of the spawn to help them. It's that damn portal!"

"I believe it's more likely that Terran recruited the spawn. The dark creatures haven't gotten along well with the Magmites since the Aseraphim wars," my father commented. He was standing next to the table, calmly watching Sakoahn have a nervous breakdown.

"Does it really matter?" he angrily replied.

"Actually, yes it does. You don't have to fight the Magmites, you have to fight Terran. And therein lies the problem," my father concluded.

"The Magmites are protecting Terran and Terran is commanding the Magmites. As long as they protect him, the spawn will obey." The general resumed his pacing, looking at the floor in deep thought. "So how do we get to Terran?"

"From the inside," I threw in timidly.

The general stopped and rounded on me. I was ready for him to scream at me for breaking his concentration with such a ridiculous idea. Instead, he just said flatly, "Go on."

"Well, in warfare, chaos is key. The best way to combat the inherent nature of it all is to try and control what you can and know every minute detail about what you cannot," I began. "So let's look at the obvious. This is war with an enemy that is comprised of some of your own people, correct?"

"It is," he replied, again showing neither approval nor scorn.

“Well, if you had someone on the inside they could take out Terran. Clearly, the problem is getting someone inside and having him gain their trust. Loyalties change in battle. It’s simply a fact. Another fact is, more than likely, they have someone on the inside here. It would only make sense. We’ll have to look into that.”

“Make it a priority,” Sakoahn said sharply. “Continue.”

“Do you have anyone on the inside?” I asked.

“We did,” Titus replied, speaking for the first time. His deep, gravely voice echoed throughout the room for a few seconds before fading away. “He was supposed to take control of the portal but he failed.”

“What about this portal? What is it?” I posed.

“It’s not important right now,” my father replied. “Keep going son.”

“How can it not be important if controlling it is a primary objective?” I asked in return. “I need to know what it is and what’s coming through it.”

“Not now!” he bellowed.

I stood up and got face to face with my father. I was now a tad taller than him but I was in much better physical condition. I stared a hole through him and said, “If you want my help, I need to know everything.”

Oddly, he smiled and said with a laugh, “Do you think my own son intimidates me?”

“No father, I don’t,” I replied sternly. “But I think you badly need my help.” I lowered my voice to a whisper and continued, “I just got back from fighting Set and his minions. It was the first time I ever killed someone. I even tried to avoid it. I gave them a choice, father. They made the wrong one. However, I did learn two things from the experience. I learned that I don’t like to kill. I think it’s unnecessary, not to mention messy. Secondly, I learned that I’m pretty damn good at it.” My voice was barely a breath on the wind when I finished but he heard every word. My fists were clenched and the muscles in my arms and neck were taut and throbbing.

The smile that had been on his face evaporated and I saw a brief flash of concern in those eyes behind the mask. He stepped back and said, “Very well.” He started pacing around the room as he spoke. “The portal is a doorway to the realm of Haedes. During the Aseraphim wars, it was the main gateway to Earth for various demons, imps, beasts and other monstrosities fighting with Lillith and Loathe. The Magmites struck an accord with Lillith to allow the portal to remain open and its

passengers would leave Atlantia unmolested. The Granites saw this as choosing sides on an otherwise bastion of neutrality. Isn't that correct, General Sakoahn?"

"Indeed it is," he replied. Picking up the story, the general continued, "We were upset with the Magmites for making the deal and asked their leaders to rescind their offer to Lady Lillith. They refused, thereby breaking with the tradition of all races on Atlantia. They broke from neutrality and order.

"After the Aseraphim wars were finished, the Magmites no longer allowed Lillith's followers free passage to Earth. They could use the portal at will. There was nothing the Magmites could do to stop them, really. However, now when the spawn arrives, they are no longer welcome and are killed as quickly as possible. If they are helping the Magmites now, Terran must've struck an incredible deal."

I sat back down and tried to think everything out. No one spoke for several minutes, amplifying even the smallest sound. I could hear the stone grinding as Titus shifted in his seat. He must've heard it as well since he soon sat completely motionless. It looked like I was sitting next to a small mountain. Finally, after careful consideration, I only had bad news. "I'm sorry, but I can't think of a viable plan to get to Terran without compromising too many men."

"That's not a problem," General Sakoahn informed me.

"It is for me. I don't think you should worry about the portal either. Go for the minions already here. Make them your primary target. If Lillith's minions keep dying in great numbers, sooner or later she'll grow tired of the deal and call back her forces. This isn't her fight and she's not going to invest too much time and energy into it."

"How do you know this?" the general asked.

"I don't. I'm just going on what I know of Lillith and her negotiating tactics. She's the queen of the loophole. I wouldn't be at all surprised if Loathe is the one that drafted the contract. If so, I almost feel bad for Terran."

"You and Sam talked about your family more than I thought," my father told me.

"I read more books too." I was going to mention meeting the Aseraphim while in Egypt but decided against it. "Getting back to the topic at hand, you need to alter your plans to weigh it more toward killing the spawn and make killing the Magmites and renegade Granites secondary. If there's ever going to be a chance at peace, it'll be better this way. If you show that you're more inclined to kill the spawn and leave them alone, you may even convert some of the renegades back to your

side.”

“You’re preaching mercy for our enemies?” the general roared, his deep, hollow voice echoing off the walls.

“No, I’m talking about peace. You tried for years to reach a peaceful agreement, didn’t you?”

“That was then, Vincent. Times have changed.” General Sakoahn was stomping around the room now, his stone feet kicking up dust with every step. “First, they break from the neutrality we all enjoyed as races of Atlantia by making a deal with Lillith. Then, when they try to shut the portal down, they fail miserably. They kill many of the creatures that come out of that portal but not all. They’ve somehow been able to convince Terran, once a great man and a credit to his race, to turn his back on his own. Now they get him to make a deal allowing them control over the minions of Haedes crossing over to this realm. There will never be peace with the Magmites. They cannot be trusted.”

I let his ranting fade away before I replied. “I understand your feelings about the Magmites, but since you asked for my help, you’ll follow my lead. Now, where are your current plans, maps, intelligence information, and data on force numbers, heavy hitters, anyone with special abilities. I’ll also want a list of spies working for us and a list of suspects in our own ranks.”

“Why don’t I just have Slade bring everything?” the general asked, a smile now on his face.

“Who’s Slade?”

“My military adviser. As much as I appreciate what Titus can do, I also appreciate what he cannot. I’ll send him in and let you two get acquainted.” Speaking to everyone else, “Shall we be going?”

The mountain next to me unfurled and stood up into Titus once again. He led the way, followed closely by the general and my father in quiet conversation.

Slade wasn’t the smallest Granite I’d seen but he was close. He was an inch or two shorter than me and was comprised entirely of sleek, black stone. His voice wasn’t as coarse as your normal Granite’s either, which made the proceedings much easier. Slade and I went over the current plans and I pointed out the changes I wanted to make as we went along. He was hesitant at first with some of my ideas. Once we got more in depth with the specifics he came around to my way of thinking. We got along quite well and spent many hours refining our plans.

After formulating a viable plan of attack, we took the information to General Sakoahn for his endorsement. Without a word to us, he called

for The Beholder to join our meeting. After some lengthy and often contentious discussion, I convinced my father and the general that this plan would work. General Sakoahn called on Titus to put the plan into action.

I excused myself from the meeting and asked where I would be staying. My father led me to a lavish bedroom located in the main section of the castle. I'd never been in the sleeping quarters of a Granite's home. I was ready for the mattress to be made of stone. Thankfully, it wasn't. I settled into the room, glad to see that they'd prepared it for my arrival. My father went back to talk with General Sakoahn and I was alone for the first time since I left the city of Atlantia.

I relaxed on the bed, thinking about the plans Slade and I had drawn up. It was so simple, once you assembled all the facts, to design a plan of attack. What bothered me was how easily I looked at force numbers without thinking about the people tied to those numbers. Granites and Magmites alike were going to die in the coming days. I could predict how many of each it would be if I really wanted to. I might not hit the exact number but I knew I wouldn't be far off. The thought that any life would be lost bothered me. I couldn't help it. I had killed those guards in Egypt and felt nothing. It was all in the line of duty. I believed that feeling nothing had to be worse than feeling guilty. The emptiness I felt at their deaths was as vast and hollow as the Void itself. I gave them a choice, not only to pacify Valencia, but because I didn't want to have to kill them. They were just doing their jobs and died in the line of duty. For me, it was simply something that had to be done. I understood that the soldiers that were going to die in the battles I designed would die valiantly. The point was, they'd be dead and I would have been responsible for sealing their fates.

The next two days were reserved for final preparations. Titus introduced me to some of his lieutenants and we picked over the finer details of the plan. The most important detail had to be taken care of before the soldiers could even think about leaving. All weapons were being coated with silver. If you were going to send an army off to fight against creatures from Haedes, silver was a must-have item. I got to meet most of the soldiers that would be going into battle. I had to wonder how many would come back. I pushed that thought aside and threw my energies into making sure the plan was perfect. General Sakoahn liked my ideas more and more. His enthusiasm was contagious and soon his troops were not just ready but eager to fight. The general was going to command the troops on the front lines and asked if I wanted to join him. Part of me wanted to, hoping that maybe if I witnessed the actual fighting

it might make me realize that death was just a natural part of war. The prevailing part of my mind didn't want to watch men die for any reason. I chose to stay. The Beholder mentioned that he was going to stay as well. My father and I watched from the balcony of the castle as the Granite army marched off to battle.

It was three days before we heard any word from the front lines. When news finally did arrive, it was worth waiting for. All went according to plan, as General Sakoahn and his men were able to slay a huge number of spawn. The Magmites stayed in the rear, directing the spawn from a safe distance. When the slaughter started, The Magmites weren't able to control the spawn and were forced to retreat. Only two Magmites died in the fight and the Granites only lost one. This made my plans a total success. The entire battle plan had been drawn up around the concept of minimal casualties. Taking out the forces from Haedes was to be our main concern. With the silver weapons in hand, the spawn had no chance.

There was much celebrating after the victory but Slade and I took no part in it. We were busy refining the plans for the next assault. If the Magmites were smart they wouldn't use the same tactics the next time. Our plans had to reflect any changes they might make. For days, Slade and I locked ourselves in a room and hashed out a revised version of the battle plan. Our only visitor was Opal, a female Granite and Slade's personal assistant. It wasn't always easy to tell the females from the males of this species. Opal was the exception to the rule. Other Granites found her quite attractive. I didn't entirely understand but I didn't disagree either. All that being said, she was definitely not my type.

General Sakoahn didn't voice a word of dissent about our isolation. His only act was to see the plan implemented. Another battle brought another victory, but this time with more casualties. It still pained me that soldiers were dying.

Slade and I were always working on new ideas for battles and most of them worked splendidly. After a few skirmishes our ideas became more recognizable to our enemy and they were able to put up more resistance. We still weren't losing battles, just more men. I noticed Slade's unease when Sakoahn would rant about our losses. It wasn't his fault we were losing more soldiers. The Magmites were adjusting faster than expected. Even our best-laid plans were revealed to have serious flaws. The only other explanation would be that Slade was the traitor. He was the only person other than the general, my father and I that knew every detail of the plans. Since I hadn't seen him discussing our strategy with anyone, I pushed my suspicions aside. The thought kept nagging me

though.

I had been working with Slade for three months when something happened to make my suspicions grow into concern. I entered the war room one day and overheard the tail end of a conversation between Slade and Opal. I couldn't be certain but I suspected he was giving her details of our plans. Though Opal was extremely helpful when it came to gathering information for us, she wasn't really involved in writing up the plans. I didn't really know much about her except that she was an assistant to the former ruler of Granatia. When I did press for her story, she was evasive and cryptic. She never spoke of her family, her friends or her life outside the castle walls.

I quickly came up with a way to find out once and for all if Slade was the traitor. As I approached Opal and Slade, their conversation immediately ceased. "Slade, I need to talk to you. Privately," I said with authority.

Opal dismissed herself and left the room. Once behind closed doors, Slade asked, "What can I do for you, Vincent?" A nervous gleam in his eye told me my suspicions had merit.

"I wanted to talk to you about the march around Mount Pak tomorrow. There's been a modest change of plans."

"What have you come up with this time?" he asked, his nervousness gone. He sauntered over to the table and leaned on it, relaxed and composed.

"What happens if a Magmite gets wet?" I asked.

"Well, they don't like it very much, I can tell you that," he said cheerfully. "In fact, it can be fatal in large enough doses."

"Go on," I urged.

"If you throw a Magmite in the ocean, it's done for."

"How much damage could we do with the water from the river?" I asked.

"Without a way to pump the water out, not much. If you could get them into the river, they could conceivably get stuck."

"Stuck?"

"They cool. Their lava hardens, immobilizing them. Getting a Magmite into the river isn't as easy as it sounds. They avoid water at all costs. That's why we think they'll be stationed around the base of the mountain."

"Right, but instead of staying on land, if we marched up the riverbed they couldn't touch us. Their only option would be ranged attacks and we've already seen their skills with projectiles."

"They couldn't hit a cave wall from the inside!"

"My estimation exactly. So we take the troops up the river."

"Great plan once again, my friend," he said as he came over to pat me on the back.

"Let's just hope it works. Then can we say if it was really a good plan or not."

I dismissed him and Slade took off for another part of the castle. I wanted to follow him and see if he spoke to Opal, but as I got into the hallway Sakoahn and several guards stopped me.

General Sakoahn asked me to join him on the front lines and evaluate the situation first hand tomorrow. I still wasn't sure I wanted to watch men die in battle. I finally decided that I owed the ones that had died some consideration. If I could fix the problems in our plans, maybe fewer soldiers would perish. This also gave me an opportunity to test my theory about Slade and Opal. The Beholder was eager join us as well. He said he wanted to see his son in action. My father was incredibly proud of all I had done for the Granites. In fact, it was all he talked about.

The battle was to take place at the bottom of Mount Pak, Atlantian home of the lycan race. The lycans generally stayed out of the battles. They were no match for either Magmites or Granites. The Magmites, having lost most of their spawn allies, had attacked the Granites as they were rounding the pass at the base of the mountain, thereby cutting off access to the river. Unfortunately, this confirmed my doubts about Slade and Opal.

The fighting was fierce and many men on both sides were dying. The general, my father and I watched from a cliff away from the fighting. When I asked why we were so far away, the general said something that made my blood boil. He said it was so we'd be safe from harm. Here we stood, a good distance away from where men were dying by our orders and for our cause, hoping that our best laid plans were sufficient to repel our enemy. I never felt a more profound emptiness and hollowness inside in my entire existence. For my own mental well-being, I had to leave our perch on the cliff. I wanted to inspect the battle from the front lines. I also wanted to help. The Granites were caught in a bottleneck as they rounded the base of Mount Pak. On the plus side, the Magmites couldn't break through the bottleneck either. The fighting was contained in a small area with many soldiers in reserve.

The Beholder stopped me and told me it was not my place to interfere. "They will break their lines eventually."

"And how many will die in that time?" I demanded.

"Does that still bother you?" he asked sadly.

"It always will." Before he could object again, I was gone. I ran down the side of the mountain in a flash and joined the fray. The combatants were engaged in fierce fighting. Granites and Magmites alike, moving as sap down a tree to my eye, fought and died before me. I looked upon the battle and realized the futility of their efforts, no matter how great and valiant. I had a job to do, however, and that was to fight with the Granites. I helped as I could, sometimes striking down Magmites by my own hand and other times by placing the Granites in more advantageous positions. Since I was so fast, the Granites didn't even know they had attacked before they were looking down at their fallen enemy.

The Magmites weren't very easy for me to kill. They were similar to Granites but instead of stone their bodies were composed of large deposits of lava. I could attack but would invariably come back slightly singed every time. I needed to find a new approach. I saw a small hole in the Magmites defenses and darted for it. The heat emanating from the Magmites as I weaved my way between them was intense. I made it to the river behind them and instead of leaping over it, I ran on top of it. I was moving so fast the water seemed as solid as stone under my feet. I saw the wake trailing behind me and let it build up. Once a good portion of the river was sucked into the wake I'd created, I darted toward the Magmites. Water cascaded over them, sending great plumes of steam into the chilly morning air. The Magmites were now motionless, not just to my eye but to everyone. The cooling effect of the water petrified our enemy's molten bodies, encrusting them in pumice. I was now able to get close enough to do some real damage. I dashed around, slicing every standing Magmite to shreds. Chips of stone flew from every strike of my blades as they shattered into pieces. The hot, oozing blood of the Magmites flowed freely from their massive bodies and spilled to the ground, burning a path in the weeds.

There were no Magmites left standing after my assault and instantly the remaining Granites started to celebrate. I whirled around and stared at them, putting an end to their revelry. I sensed the golden glow coming from my eyes though I couldn't see it. I was peering directly through it as if it was normal sunlight. The Beholder instantly appeared, transporting himself and the general down from their perch on the cliff.

"Take the men back to Granatia," I ordered the general. I thought for a brief moment he was going to object to my giving him an order. He wisely thought better of it.

I surveyed the scene, taking in the carnage while trying to figure out where it all went wrong. The one conclusion I settled upon bothered

me even though I had suspected as much. I knew who the traitor was. I was about to make my suspicions known when my father said, "That was quite impressive, my son. You are indeed a remarkable warrior."

I wheeled around and saw him smiling, pleased with his son's works. "I shouldn't have had to do it."

"But you did and did it well. You should've joined in the fighting much earlier. I was disappointed that you refused so many times before."

"It bothers me," I replied vacantly.

"I know. The chaos of it can be upsetting. But know that it is for the betterment of order."

"It's not that." I began pacing around the battlefield, stepping over and around all the fallen soldiers. "Why does it have to be this way? Killing isn't orderly. War isn't orderly. Is the outcome more important than the methods?"

"That depends on the outcome. In this instance, the outcome is the most important thing. Methods be damned, the proper outcome must occur."

"And what is the proper outcome, father? The elimination of every Magmite? Control of the portal? What?" My voice grew angrier with every question until I was shouting at my father.

His calm veneer never wavered. "Order, my dear Vincent, is what we are trying to achieve," he said evenly, in an attempt to calm me down.

My temper wasn't placated at all. His cool demeanor only fueled my rage. "This is not order!" I screamed. "This is mass chaos! I come up with plans, using my penchant for order to help reign down chaos. My plans fail, thanks to Slade, and more chaos occurs."

"Wait," my father interjected, holding up a hand. "Slade is a spy."

"No, Slade is a traitor. His assistant, Opal, is a spy. He's been feeding her information and she's been passing it along to the Magmites, or Terran more likely."

"How do you know this? Did you see him?"

"No, I didn't. But it's the only explanation that fits. I suspected him a few weeks ago after the first battle that went sour. This time, I told him of one aspect of the plan that only he would know. Looking around after the fact, I think it was the information I gave him that caused the overall plan to fail."

"You knew the plan would fail and gave it to Sakoahn anyway?" The Beholder's voice was shaking with anger.

"I had to find out if I was correct. It meant sacrificing more men than I wanted to, but it had to be done. That's why I joined in the battle, father. I felt I owed it to them."

My father was pacing the battlefield now, never once stepping out of the way of the dead bodies strewn about. He drove his boots into and through the small boulders that marked the final resting spot of many a Granite. "Are you trying to lose this war?" he shouted. "This isn't about spies, Vincent. It's about conquering your enemies. Even with Slade giving information to the other side, we were still winning. Now you're making plans to satisfy your own curiosity?"

"And what exactly are your plans in all of this, father?" I replied forcefully. "Am I supposed to help you exterminate the Magmites? To what ends? What have they really done that warrants their extinction? They left the minions of Haedes alone during the Aseraphim wars. Tell me, father, what were the Granites doing at the time? Were they out trying to kill the demons or did they stay home and complain about it?" My father had stopped pacing and was glaring at me with fire in his eyes.

"Choose your words with care, Vincent. You do not want to cross me."

I laughed. I shut it off as soon as I did it, but not before he saw it for what it was. "I'm sure I don't," I tried to say without sounding sarcastic. I failed. "But you didn't answer my question. I understand that you were, shall we say, indisposed during that time, but now that you're no longer in Wraith's hip pocket, I'm sure you know the full story. Why don't you enlighten me?" I couldn't believe I was being so brazenly cocky with my father. As I antagonized him, the emptiness inside that I'd been feeling since I signed on for this war faded away.

"All of that is none of your concern. It's history. You need to think about the present and the future. There can be no future for us if we do not defeat the Magmites!"

Suddenly, I was calm. Even after I took control of the conversation, I was still tense. My fists, which were clinched so tight just a second ago, relaxed and dangled at my sides. A smile sprouted on my lips, exposing my feral teeth. Personally, I think they added a nice touch of danger to an otherwise pleasant smile.

"Us?" I asked.

"Of course," he replied, walking towards me. "You are to achieve order on Earth and hold dominion over its glory. I will be by your side, your trusted and loyal advisor."

"Yet you want war? You desire chaos to achieve order. That's not what I want."

"But it is!" The Beholder said excitedly. He stood before me and placed his hand on my shoulder. "You need the trappings of war to bring about peace. With peace comes order. First you have to eliminate the

undesirables. All of the weaker races, once disposed of, will leave only the strongest and the fittest members of the planet for you to rule over. The best of the best, as it were. Seeing as how you are the strongest and the fittest, they will bow to your superiority. This is why I wanted you here on Earth at this juncture in time. There is mass chaos everywhere. Leaders come and go in every society around the world. Civilizations rise and fall in the blink of an eye. The Aseraphim wars helped to bring down many kingdoms around the globe. Thousands, possibly millions of people died, leaving the population of the planet severely depleted. With a low number of inhabitants on the planet, the leaderless societies and mass chaos, it's the perfect scenario for you. You can bring order while weeding out the weaker beings. You will be worshiped."

I didn't take long to utterly reject that notion. "Absolutely not," I responded, looking him dead in the eye.

"It is prophesied, Vincent, and it will come to pass. I have worked many centuries for this time and it shall come to be. You will lead, with me by your side. I can lead your armies if you prefer. This way, your dislike of war will not hinder your judgment."

"Stop it!" I cried. "You're already talking like I'm king of the world."

"You will be," he said bluntly.

I shook his hand from my shoulder and said, "If I am, it won't be this way." I spread my arms out, making him look at the death surrounding us. "By killing all that are deemed weaker, I will proclaim to be the most dominant being on the planet? That will inspire fear, not order. If I do eventually rule over the Earth, I want to rule with true order, not fear."

"Fear is a useful tool in maintaining order, my son. You should not brush it aside so quickly," he advised.

"It is not what I want." I had been staring into my father's eyes for so long that the rest of the world gradually disappeared. "Fear is not order. Fear is hatred. I will define what order is and your definition, in my opinion, is dead wrong."

The Beholder again placed his hand on my shoulder as he stepped forward. "I'm very sorry to hear that, Vincent. I truly believe that this is the path of the prophecy that you are meant to follow. All I've ever done has been for you."

"I understand, father. But I will not establish dominance and dominion by making the masses fear me. Where I see merit in the strongest and fittest surviving on, I believe it should occur naturally. Those that cannot survive will wither and die eventually."

"Eventually is not soon enough," he said.

"It will have to be." I stepped back and began walking away from the battlefield. "This war is over," I declared. "I'm starting peace talks tomorrow with the Magmites. I haven't figured out how I'm going to contact them to reopen negotiations so I'll need your help with that." I was yelling over my shoulder to my father but he didn't respond. I stopped and looked back. He was gone. Without a word, The Beholder had teleported out. I was now resigned to walk back alone and turned to resume the trek. As I turned, I felt a sharp pain in my chest. I looked down to see a long sword entering my side from slightly behind. The weapon was driven through my ribcage and out the front of my chest. Blood and tissue fell from the blade as I instinctively continued coming around. There stood my father, blood on his hands.

"This is the way it has to be, Vincent," he declared as he withdrew the sword. "If you shall not help me, I will wait for the next one." I could feel the blood gushing from my chest. I looked down and saw my blood was the color of polished gold. Tiny beams of light reflected off my lifeblood causing a brilliant display. If I wasn't dying, I'm sure I would've enjoyed it more.

As I felt the last gasp of life escape from my body, I heard The Beholder say, "You will not be back." My last vision was of my father, sword in hand, preparing to cut out my heart.

I awoke a short time later to the sound of birds chirping. I opened my eyes and saw the bluest sky. The clouds, what few there were, lazily moved across the sky. One of the larger clouds broke apart and the pieces floated off in various directions. I'd never seen that happen before. More and more clouds passed by from every possible direction as I lay prone on the ground. I was lost in what I was seeing until I heard footsteps approaching. I tried to stand but was too weak. The footsteps grew nearer, sounding almost delicate on the harsh ground beneath me. I tilted my head in the direction of the sound but found no one. I couldn't even hear the footfalls anymore. I looked back to the sky but my view was obstructed by the grinning face of the one of the most beautiful women in the universe.

"Hello again, Vincent," Styx said as she stood over me, "and welcome to Limbo."

Chapter 12

The clouds continued to swirl as I gazed upwards at Styx. Her long, luxurious black hair slipped from her shoulders and stopped mere inches from my face. I tried to speak but still had not found my voice. I wasn't sure if it was because I was currently dead or because her beauty captivated me. I had only seen Styx in a dream once as a child. At the time, I didn't fully comprehend many of the feelings she provoked. Having matured, I understood them completely now.

"Please, rise and come with me," she said. "We don't have all day, you know?"

Styx smiled and I watched the daylight fade rapidly and night overtake the sky. She was more accurate than I could've imagined. I tried to stand but was still too weak. "I'm hurt," I whispered.

"No, you're not. You only think you are. But then again, you probably still think you have a body."

"What?" I asked, a little stronger now.

"You are in Limbo, Vincent. Your body's still on Earth." She offered me her hand and I found I could easily raise my arm to take it. I stood up with her help and had to admit that I did indeed feel fine.

"I'm dead," I stated.

"You most certainly are, but only momentarily."

I looked down at my body, hoping to see my limbs intact. What my eyes saw was not a body at all. I still had the shape of a man, but my body now consisted of lines of gold, black and silver. My features were still apparent, making me still partially recognizable, but was now shaded somewhat by new appearance. "What's going on?" I urgently asked the Ancient.

Styx chuckled at my astonishment. "I'm not surprised you don't remember. What you see is your aura. The gold represents goodness inside you, the black is the evil, and the silver is your humanity. All three are represented in you, in equal parts. This is what you look like when you're no longer alive on Earth."

The floodgates of my mind opened at the mention of my death and panic set in. "The Beholder!" I cried. "He's going to kill me permanently! The last thing I remember was his telling me I wouldn't be coming back."

Styx, still holding my hand, squeezed gently and said in the most melodious voice, "It's all taken care of, child. Don't worry."

"How?" I begged.

"There will be time for that later, once we get where we're going."

She winked and said, "Speaking of going, shall we?" She held out her arm and I readily escorted her on our way.

We walked in silence for a while as I took in the sights and sounds of Limbo. There was mass chaos all around yet I didn't get a headache from it. There were essences milling around all over the place. Their silver auras shone all along the horizon. Styx informed me that a human soul cannot die. Once someone was killed on Earth, their essence would come to her for judgment and spend the rest of eternity in whatever realm she deemed appropriate. In any of the realms of death, the humanity of the mortal soul remained strong and could not be brought down. I remarked to Styx that I could still see the person the souls used to be. She explained to me that what I was seeing was the remnants of their mortal life. I did not truly see a person. I saw the memory that essence held and projected to others. Styx said it was necessary to be able to tell them apart. Otherwise, since they all had silver auras it would be impossible to distinguish one from another.

As we walked, I found when I concentrated on something chaotic, such as the clouds tracing random paths in the sky, my influence would make it more orderly. The flowers along the path would organize themselves by type. To my amazement and overwhelming enjoyment, I noticed the flowers were also divided by color and size. It was astonishing. Styx noticed the expression of sheer bliss on my face and began to explain.

"This is Limbo, where order and chaos prevail. Your influence is strong, dear Vincent. All you have to do is think hard and things change at your whim. It sure is a lot different than the last time we met when I had to rearrange the flowers for you."

"I remember. I also remember you saying that we would meet again."

"Was I wrong?" Styx said slyly.

"No, but you did say that you weren't sure if it would be good or bad."

"Actually, what I said was that a decision you would make would determine whether or not we met again under favorable or unfavorable circumstances." Her smile grew brighter as she added, "I remember things quite well. Just so you know, these are the favorable circumstances I mentioned."

"I got killed and that's the favorable option?" I asked. "What would've been unfavorable?"

Styx grimaced at the thought and replied, "Do you really want to know?" I answered with a simple nod. "Very well. If you had decided to

listen to your father's words and follow his version of order, you eventually would've died a dishonorable death. Had that happened, I would've had to relegate you to Haedes. To get back to Earth from Haedes, you'd have to pass through Limbo and be judged again. If I thought you weren't ready to go back, I would not have let you pass until I believed you had redeemed yourself."

"So my father was wrong about what order really is," I stated, hoping to quickly change the topic.

"Imperialism," she snorted. It was the first word she'd spoken that had one iota of anger behind it. "Survival of the fittest. Who is he to judge whose fit and who isn't?"

"I agree. He's not the best person to judge someone's character. But he does have a point. Why shouldn't the strongest survive?"

Styx released my arm and faced me as we walked. "How do you define strong? Are we talking about just physically or are you including mental, emotional, majickal and intellectual as well? You see Vincent, everyone is strong in his or her own way. Is General Sakoahn the strongest Granite?"

"No, Titus is."

"Correct. Is Titus in charge?"

"No."

"Right again. Titus, though physically stronger than Sakoahn, isn't nearly as intelligent. He would be a dismal failure as a leader. Is Sakoahn the smartest? That would depend on whom you ask. Personally, I'd vote for Slade."

"The traitor?" I asked.

"Absolutely. He was smart enough to help you draw up the plan, tell the necessary information to Opal and make sure she was able to deliver it to Terran. He kept you in the dark for a while as well, so I would think you would be in agreement with me."

I shrugged, speechless at having been so easily fooled. "If all you say is true, then I'd have to admit he is indeed quite clever."

"Oh, it's true. Above all else, I will not lie to you." The caring, compassionate look in her eyes reinforced that statement and erased all doubt from my mind. "Knowing that, I'll tell you exactly why The Beholder's vision of an ideal world is flawed. You see, he believes that only the strongest should be allowed to survive. The flaw in his logic is that he isn't the strongest. You are, in almost every sense of the word. He thought he could control you, thereby giving him reign over Earth by your deeds. Sooner or later, and I'm glad to see it was sooner, the argument you got into with The Beholder was going to happen. Since it

happened sooner you were not yet under his sway. If it had happened later, after you'd made strides in your quest to fulfill the prophecy, you would've been acting not out of order, but out of self-interest. Granted, technically it would be The Beholder's self-interest but yours would be irrevocably tied to his. Self-interest in nothing but greed for one's own purposes and that would condemn your spirit to Haedes."

"So I'm the strongest person on the planet?" I asked, amazed yet confident in her words. "There's no one that can defeat me?"

"Oh, there are many beings on Earth and elsewhere that can easily defeat you. It all depends on what you're fighting about and how. Now, had you asked if there was anyone on Earth that you couldn't defeat, that would've been more appropriate."

I took a second to reply, hoping in vain that she would answer the question without my prodding. "Is there someone I can't defeat?"

"Only one on Earth that I can think of. That would be the Ancient Each, he who rests on the wind and travels on the cool breeze." She spoke of her fellow Ancient with reverence and admiration. "As long as there is air, Each will exist."

"I've heard of him. He's a watcher like my father, right?" I asked.

"A watcher, yes. Like your father, most definitely not."

"How so?"

"Vincent, I don't have time to answer every question you have." She pointed over the horizon to a large castle in the distance. "That's where we're going and I'd like to get there sooner rather than later."

"We have plenty of time. That castle is a ways off yet."

Styx chuckled and replied, "My dear boy, you keep forgetting where you are. Distance isn't the same in Limbo as it is on Earth. It's much more flexible here."

"Flexible? What do you mean by that?"

"You'll see," was her cryptic reply.

"Do you know if I'll ever meet him?" I asked after a brief pause in the conversation.

"Each? I have no doubt. When he's ready to impart his advice to you, or more likely when you are ready to receive it, he will make his presence known."

I looked toward the castle and saw it was now much closer than it had been. We were making good time as far as I could tell. "That's something that's been bothering me as well. When I was in Egypt, Lillith and Loathe came to me, telling me what they wanted me to do to create an orderly world. Shortly thereafter, Christi Lona and Cherub showed up and did the same thing. The Beholder killed me because I didn't agree

with his version of order. Why is everyone trying to tell me their particular variety of order?"

"Because you need the help," she replied.

"Why would you think that? I haven't been around long and already I've made strides in certain areas. The town in Egypt is orderly, although I don't know how long that will last with my sister hanging around. I helped with the Zaron's egg project in Atlantia, using my skills to design a way to raise the egg to the surface. I've done lots of things to give order a foothold on Earth."

"Yes, you have. But order, by definition, is hard to define."

"Are you going to tell me how you define order too?"

"Of course I am," Styx said cheerfully.

Again I paused, waiting patiently for her to continue. When she remained silent and continued walking, I simply assumed she wasn't ready to tell me her version of order just yet. I glanced up at the castle and noticed it was now farther away than it had been when I'd last looked. Now I could see what she meant by distance being flexible.

"Aren't you going to tell me what you think order is?" I finally asked.

"Personally, I don't think you want to know."

"Is it that bad?"

Styx laughed heartily and said, "That's not what I meant. I don't think you'll overtly reject my ideals. I just don't think you want anyone else telling you how to do your job."

Her accurate description of my feelings caught me off guard. "How did you know that?"

"It's what I do," she humbly replied. "I judge people by their words and actions. Yours tell me that you want to define order on your own. Maybe that's for the best, maybe it's not. Either way, the choice is yours. I'd be more than happy to tell you what I think you should do but if you don't want to hear it, I understand. You should know Vincent, I think you're doing a wonderful job so far. Your methods for establishing order are very similar to mine."

"So what are your ways?"

"Judging. You should judge all that come before you. Not as good or bad, but if they are orderly or not. Let me worry about where they belong in the afterlife. In life, it is your place to decide if they should stay or go. So far, you've done a pretty good job at judging people. You haven't killed many of them, and you have been misled into killing some that should not have perished, but overall you're doing quiet well."

I smiled and replied, "I believe that's part of what I need to do but

not the only thing. There's more to it than that."

"I'm sure there is. But you must maintain the belief that you are the one to judge mankind. Sometimes you will be forced to dispose of people who want nothing but good to prevail. It will be distressing but necessary. If you only have good people, the moment someone speaks up against them they would need to be eliminated. That removes free will and choice from the equation. Free will is antithetical to order most of the time. However, given the opportunity, most people would take an orderly life over a good one. If you give them the choice and let them be orderly on their own, be they good or bad, you will be able to preserve order more efficiently. If they choose disorder, then you can judge them as either redeemable, and give them another chance, or not. In cases of the latter, you send them to me."

I was afraid to look for the castle, fearing it would be beyond my field of vision. I turned as saw it was only a few yards away and breathed a sigh of relief. Styx's speech struck a chord with me as fairly realistic. I had essentially judged Set and his followers. I judged Ra's followers as well. Set and his men were chaotic and had to be eliminated. Ra's disciples were orderly and now ruled unimpeded. It wasn't just that Set was evil. It never mattered to me. He was simply someone trying to upset the balance of order. I put things back they way I believed they should be.

As we neared the gate of the grand castle, I turned to Styx with one last question. The war between the Granites and the Magmites started with the portal. I asked Styx if she knew anything about them. She let the full radiance of her smile wash over me before she replied.

"Vincent, I created the portals. They are gateways to and from the various realms."

"Can anyone travel through them?"

"If they know what they're doing they can, and if they can find them. Their locations aren't exactly common knowledge. If everybody in all the realms knew where the portals were and how to use them..." Styx exhaled theatrically and shook her head as if the thought caused her pain. "So I guess the answer to that question is no."

"There are seven portals each in Haven, Haedes and on Earth. The ones on Earth are quite discreetly hidden. Centuries from now, people will marvel at these artifacts, never knowing the power they hold." She smiled at me again and added, "Amusing, isn't it?"

I matched her grin and nodded. "What about Limbo?"

"That's why I'm so glad the portals are hidden. There are twenty-one total. All of the portals in all the other realms connect to Limbo."

"What do the portals look like here?" I asked as I scanned the area around the castle.

Styx gently took my hand and said, "They aren't anywhere near here, Vincent. Besides, you could see the portals and never even know it. Now, are you ready to go through all this again?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Welcome to the castle of Propheteus. He'd like a moment of your time, if you don't mind." Styx waved her hand at the gate and I watched the stone become apple blossoms. The wall of fragrant flowers tumbled to the ground as the air was filled with their magnificent scent. "Please, go in. He's waiting for you."

I missed the touch of her skin a second after I let go of her hand. It was the first time I realized I could still feel even though I was dead. Having no body, that puzzled me to no end. I turned back to ask Styx about it but she was gone. I'd have to remember to ask Propheteus when I found him. With that in mind, I began my search for the Ancient prophet.

The great castle was a sight to behold. With enormous cathedral ceilings made of polished gray marble, the hallways echoed with every step. Even the stealthiest creature in all creation would hear their movements reverberating throughout the castle. Hung on the walls were paintings depicting various scenes, none of them seemingly related to any others. The first painting I examined was of a grisly battle. There was a demon, or what looked to be a demon, standing atop a pile of rotting corpses. At the foot of this mound of death ran a river of blood. The stream of blood emptied into a small pool near the edge of the painting. There was a man dressed in blue with an axe in his back lying face down in the pool of blood. The imagery was gruesome but the power of the artwork could not be denied. The next painting had a party scene. I only glanced over that one and moved on. There were depictions of a village under siege, a man and his son camping in the woods, a team of apparently identical lycans tearing a man apart with their teeth, a tree surrounded by fog, a woman being attacked by a gang and many more. I could've spent all day examining the artistry involved in creating such magnificent work. Unfortunately, I had other plans.

As I wandered the corridors of the castle, I could only imagine how many people had sought the Ancient prophet out and walked these halls before me in search of their true calling. By all accounts, and all that was told to me by Sam and The Beholder, Propheteus was very reclusive. Knowing he specifically wanted to see me was an honor beyond

description. I knew being a child of the Aseraphim meant I was drastically different from everyone else on Earth, with moderate exceptions of course. I never fully grasped the weight of the responsibility until now. Ancients were going out of their way to try and define order for me.

There was an extra spring in my step as I reveled in my own importance. I wasn't sure, but I was willing to bet my sister wasn't getting any special visits. I was so lost in my thoughts that it took me by surprise when I heard other footsteps in the halls. I stopped and the other footfalls continued. I spun around to find the source of the sound. There stood a man a few inches shorter than my sister, dressed in a white robe. The sash over his robe was intricately woven and contained several designs I didn't recognize. As I stared silently at him, three others joined him. All four stood stone still and mute. In unison, the four of them pulled a parchment from their satchels and began writing furiously. They resumed their trek down the hall, never ceasing their scribbling for a second. One of them did pause long enough to waggle his head at me as they passed. I took that to mean I was to follow them. When that same man looked back over his shoulder and beckoned to me with a wave of his hand, my suspicions were confirmed.

I easily caught up to the four diminutive men and tried to engage them in some light conversation. Every time I said something to them, all they did was listen intently and then proceed to write down every word verbatim. I quickly gave up. I wasn't sure I wanted everything I said recorded for posterity. The five of us wove down the winding corridors until we reached an elaborately adorned wooden door. My companions had remained silent the entire trip and showed no signs of changing now. Instead of speaking, all four of them pointed at the door.

The door swung open easily and I entered a grand chamber. Bookshelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling twenty feet overhead. Shelves of books were set up in parallel rows, filling the entire room. Dust covered most of the tomes and I had to wonder how many of these had actually been read. There was no mistaking where I was. This was Propheteus's library. I slowly walked inside and headed down one of the aisles, examining the books as I passed by. There were no titles along the spines to identify the books so I didn't really know what I was looking at. I was lost in thought as I rounded another corner. I looked up from the books to see a large open area. The floor was made of polished marble, creating an interwoven sea of black and white. There were no tables and no chairs, other than the large throne at the far end. It sat alone on a raised platform away from the ocean of books. I walked over to examine

the throne closer and was in awe of its beauty. The throne was immense, cast in gold with dark red cloth covering the cushions. Atop the throne was a large, golden eye. Its iris was a ruby a shade of red so dark it was almost violet. The light reflected off the jewel and glittered wildly. I was staring intently when a voice spoke up from behind me.

"Do not look into the eye for too long, Vincent," the voice said. "You will not like the results."

I turned to see the Ancient Propheteus before me. Appearing to be much older than Styx, Propheteus looked as ancient as his title professed. We were of equal height, but that was where our likeness ended. His long, white hair hung down over his shoulders, his eyes a bright amber. In his right hand he held a golden staff, with the same eye resting on top. Without realizing I was doing it, I bowed slightly at his presence.

"There is no need for that, Vincent," he pointed out graciously. I stood up straight and faced him. His face bore no emotion, no expression whatsoever. "Come with me. We have much to do."

"And time is short, I know," I added, remembering what Styx had said.

"Time is not an issue for us."

"But Styx said we didn't have much time to talk," I commented.

"That is because she is extremely busy. Styx's work is never ending."

"How long have I been dead?" I asked as we walked away from the throne.

"That would depend on how you're viewing time and from where. If you mean to ask how long you've been in Limbo, I would say about an hour. If you're asking how long you've been dead on Earth, it is but mere seconds. Time is flexible in Limbo, Vincent."

"Styx said the same thing about distance."

"And she is correct as well. Things run differently in the realms of Limbo, Haven and Haedes. A day spent in any of these realms could be a year on Earth, just as a day on Earth could be a year here. It is different for every person that arrives. Mortals are given the gift of life as the leaders of those realms see fit. With you and your siblings, it is not the same. In Limbo, you are only here as long as you are needed. In Haedes, it is until you are healthy enough to return to your body. In Haven, they can keep you as long as they like if they see a need for you to stay. Because of your heritage, you and your siblings are well regarded in all realms. For now, at least."

"For now?"

"There will be one that is charged with ruling Haedes. This one will not be allowed the freedom of Haven and all it offers. He has not been brought to bear upon the Earth as of yet."

"Hate," I stated.

"That is correct. His essence is too dark for the denizens of Haven."

I couldn't help but feel badly for my yet to be born brother. Part of his fate had already been decided for him. Changing the topic, I asked, "Who were those little guys that led me here?"

"Those are my clerics," he replied. "They were tasked by Wraith ages ago to transcribe all events on Earth."

"Then why did you say they're your clerics?"

"Because they are. I am the one that gave the task to Wraith. I'm sure you've seen clerics on Earth, correct?" I nodded in the affirmative. "It is the same here. When a cleric dies, his soul is sent to one of the three realms of the afterlife. If they go to Haedes, they become Dark Clerics and transcribe events in Haedes as well as on Earth. The same goes for Haven. They become Light Clerics there and write down all the workings of Haven and Earth. Those that come to Limbo are either reborn to continue their works on Earth or they stay here and work directly for me. The ones I command are the most highly regarded clerics of all."

"They don't say much," I observed.

For the first time since we'd met, Propheteus laughed. It sounded quite unnatural. "They speak when they are needed to. When they do, pay attention, especially on Earth."

We wandered around in silence for a moment. I glanced around to get my bearings and found we were deep into the rows of books in his library. Walking silently behind us was a cleric. His hand was moving at blazing speed as he wrote down our conversation. "Shoo! Go away!" I ordered of the cleric. "This is a private matter."

"That will accomplish nothing, Vincent," Propheteus said.

"Nothing I say stays private forever."

"Are they always so short?" I joked.

Propheteus stopped abruptly and turned around. A smile graced his lips as he said, "Usually, no. Clerics come in all shapes and sizes, just like your average mortal. For some reason, however, the ones that I employ all seem to be short of stature. Personally, I think Styx has something to do with it." He waved for me to continue on without any further explanation.

"You didn't ask me here to tell me about the clerics, did you?" I

asked as we resumed walking.

"Of course not. But you already knew that."

"You want to tell me about your definition of order."

"Correct again. However, now is not the time. If you don't mind waiting for just a little while longer, we're almost to our destination."

Our destination turned out to be what could only be called a reading room. Ten large, cushioned chairs were scattered about the room. Every seat was elegantly designed. Some were made of dark wood with etchings of various animals. Others were made of stone and pictured the vast cosmos engraved within. Propheteus beckoned for me to sit down and I chose a light colored, wooden chair. The cushions of the chair were gold in color and the chair itself depicted crossed swords. I sat down and instantly relaxed. Its elegance was only surpassed by its comfort.

Propheteus sat in one of the dark wooden chairs. This one was engraved with an eye. It dawned on me that there was a chair here for every Ancient. Noticing my revelation, Propheteus said, "You're wondering whose seat you've chosen?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

"That is the seat of Gilmore, the Traveler, the consumer of souls. You'll be meeting him eventually."

"Am I going to hear from all of the Ancients? And why is everyone so interested in telling me what they think order is anyway?"

"One question at a time, if you don't mind," he chided. "To answer the first, no, will not hear from all the Ancients. Zaron sleeps and the Will and Power Cosmic do not deem you worthy enough."

"What?" I barked. "What do you mean 'not worthy'?"

"Vincent, please settle down. You misunderstand me. The Will and Power Cosmic created the home we call the universe. Our actions are insignificant to them. This is but one world in an infinite universe. They observe all that happens, but they see no need to take a vested interest in the majority of our dealing on Earth and elsewhere. It's nothing personal." He could see I wasn't satisfied with his explanation, so he added, "If it's any consolation, they are very concerned with your survival and the survival of your siblings."

I was feeling calmer, remembering what I'd read about the Will and Power Cosmic, along with Wraith, watching over us in the ethereal. I decided to get to the heart of the matter so I could hopefully get back to my body. "So what's your position on order?" I asked.

"Vincent, I have no words for you. Order is already established, as far as I'm concerned."

This was not what I'd expected. "How so?"

Propheteus picked up a book from beside his chair and opened it. "The tomes you've seen here in my library contain not only my prophecies but the writings of the clerics as well. All of them are capable of being read from a single tome. If it is in here," he said as he waved his arm towards the rows of book. He then patted the book on his lap and concluded, "It is in here. All that has been and all that is to come. I can open this book and tell you exactly where you will be five years from now or five thousand."

"I've often wondered," I said, cutting him off, "how is it that you can know all that is to be? That would mean we don't have freewill and that everything is already decided for us."

"You do have freewill, Vincent. What I could read to you today about your life in five years time could be different tomorrow. But there is a difference between telling someone their future and prophesy. Your future changes because you have freedom of choice. Prophecies are not choices. By the time a prophecy comes to pass, the necessary choices have already been made."

"So the future isn't written in stone?"

"Not all of it," he replied.

"So you don't have anything to tell me about order?" I asked again.

"Only this. You have met with the Aseraphim and the Fallen. They told you their conflicting views and you brushed their words aside. The Beholder, brazen as he is, spoke his words to you and you rejected his opinion out of hand. This led to your demise. I'm sure Styx told you her ideas, as will Genepool, Gilmore, The Hunger and Each eventually. Do not listen to them with a closed mind, as you have with the others. The Ancients aren't making the effort to guide you in your quest to fulfill my prophecy. They are doing this to try and help you become who you need to be."

His rebuke stung like no knife could. I didn't believe I offhandedly ignored what I'd been told by the Aseraphim and the Fallen. The Beholder's opinion I did summarily reject. That much I freely admitted. I felt it was justified. "So what am I to become?" I asked.

"I cannot tell you that. It is written in prophecy."

"If the prophecy is about me, I should know about it," I surmised.

"Perhaps. But I think it would be best to let the natural course of events play out. Knowing too much about your own future can be detrimental as well as beneficial."

"So, you don't have anything to tell me about what you consider order. You won't tell me the prophecy about my future. Is there anything

you will tell me?" I asked testily.

"There is." Propheteus looked down at the open book and began to read aloud, "For as it is foretold, the Ancients shall have dominion over Atlantia but not over the will of its people. To raise the civilization that is Atlantia to greater heights, the citizens of Atlantia will commence a search for the ultimate source of energy and power. Atlantians will search for Power and succeed, and this success shall be its undoing. It shall be decided that the egg of the Ancient Zaron contains the energy and power sought by these peoples. A delegation shall be created to bring the egg to the surface in an attempt to harness its power, and shall fail. For once the Power is brought to the surface, the waters that surround Atlantia shall swallow it. Atlantia shall survive, forever changed by its quest for ultimate Power. Its citizenry shall live on, adapted to their new environment, but shall never see the light of day from this point forward."

I knew most of what he'd read, having seen The Beholder's scroll with this prophecy. The scroll I'd read excluded some vital information and that surprised me. "I'd seen that prophesy before, but not that version."

"You saw what I wanted you to see. The Beholder was given those scrolls to help educate you. Instead, he kept them to himself, hoping to keep you in the dark on many important matters. Any writing that leaves this realm, any prophesy spoken, is approved by me and me alone. I do not always disclose the full prophecy, for sometimes it is better if certain details are omitted. Would you have helped on the Zaron's egg project if you'd known the full prophesy?"

"Probably not," I replied.

"Of course. You don't want to see anything bad happen to Atlantia. Nor do I. But it will happen and your help was needed to make it succeed."

"You mean I'm responsible for the destruction of Atlantia?" I was appalled at the very idea.

"Not at all. But your contrary position as it pertains to how far the egg should be raised was needed to counterbalance the other scientists."

"But they didn't listen to me," I remarked.

"No, they did not. That is their shortcoming, not yours. Work has been slower than the leaders of Atlantia would like, mostly because some of the workers believe what you have to say. They are skeptical about uncovering the egg. Had you not influenced them, the egg might already be on the surface and Atlantia would have succumbed to its fate."

"What if I stop them?"

Propheteus flashed his grandfatherly smile and said, "You can try, but you will fail. This is going to happen, Vincent. I apologize if it upsets you, but you must understand one very important thing. This has to happen."

I wasn't going to question why it had to happen for fear he wouldn't answer. I got the feeling Propheteus told you what he wanted to and no more. I watched him close the book and place it back on the floor. "Are we leaving?"

"Soon. I sense you have a few more questions for me."

"Actually, I have two. First, why can I feel things here? Aren't I dead?"

Propheteus laughed and replied, "No, Vincent. Your body is dead. You are not." The puzzled look on my face caused him to explain in more detail. "You are not that shell you walk around in on Earth. You are the essence you see here. You can feel, touch, taste, hear and smell because you are in your true form. A soul in the afterlife can affect another soul. When you touched Styx's arm or sat in that chair, you thought about how it would feel. Therefore, that was what you felt. In Limbo, as it was for you in the ethereal, it is all about thoughts. If you can think it, it can be." He paused to let me digest his wisdom before asking, "Now, what is your last question?"

"When can I go back?"

"That is what I was expecting you to ask. You will go back shortly. First, would you like to know what has happened while you've been away?"

"Sure. I have to assume that The Beholder wasn't able to put me down for good."

"No, he most definitely was not." Propheteus called over the cleric, who had been waiting silently in the corner, and asked him to tell me what I wanted to know. "Know this, Vincent," he said, turning his attention back to me, "Once the cleric has finished, you will be reborn to your body. I understand you aren't quite sure what to make of our talk but I hope you take my words to heart. Listen to what they Ancients have to say. You will find it important." He rose from the chair and walked over to me. The cleric was standing in front of me, preparing to begin his story. Propheteus put his hand on my shoulder and wished me well before telling the cleric to begin.

The diminutive cleric opened his mouth and began. I couldn't hear any words coming from the cleric's mouth. What happened was much more fascinating. His mouth remained open but his form was fading away and Limbo followed suit. Before me I could see my fallen

body lying on the ground. It was like I was looking at a picture through someone else's eyes. My golden blood was pooled around me. I could see The Beholder with sword in hand. He had his arms raised and was poised to plunge his weapon into my chest as he stood over my prone form. Nothing moved as the scene was painted for me. Once everything was in place, the picture came to life.

The Beholder was standing over my dead body, about to deliver the blow that would mark the beginning of the end. Before he could strike, the shadow around my body began to grow and envelope his legs. Soon a bright light, originating from behind The Beholder, started to overtake the upper half of his body. When The Beholder noticed this, he dropped his sword and tried to step away but wasn't able. The shadow continued to grow until it reached his waistline. The light grew as well until the entire top half of his body was bathed in it. Only The Beholder's head was now visible among the light and shadow. Sparks flew from his body where the light and the shadow came together. The Beholder struggled to break free from his bonds but failed. He blinked out, trying to teleport away, but instantly reappeared in the same place. He was completely trapped.

Lillith emerged from out of the shadows surrounding The Beholder's lower half. Her dark beauty was twisted by the rage directed at her captive. The light behind him brought forth Christi Lona, sadness apparent on her lovely face. The sisters kept their hold on The Beholder as they stood to either side of him.

"Ancient one," Christi Lona began, "You have committed a grave error in judgment."

"We should kill you where you stand," Lillith remarked, her voice colder than frozen steel.

"But we shall spare you."

"This time."

The Beholder tried to respond but could not. The grip Christi Lona had on his upper half closed off his throat, seizing every one of his words and trapping them inside. The only sounds to escape his lips were grunts of pain and agony. The sisters began to circle their captive as they continued speaking.

"You were warned not to harm any of the children of the Aseraphim," Christi Lona continued. "Wraith himself came to you to deliver this warning. You have chosen to ignore his words."

"Now you have to pay," Lillith wickedly taunted.

"Ancient, your deeds on Earth have once again proven to us, as

well as the other Ancients, that you cannot be trusted. You were given another chance. You used it for your own selfish wants and desires. For this you must be punished," Christi Lona informed him.

"As well as your selfishness, you have deemed yourself superior to all creatures," Lillith said. "You, who are no more than a mask and a shell, deem yourself the future ruler of Earth, knowing full well that one of the four siblings is heir to that throne."

"By the power of the Ancients, we have been given the means to destroy you. Your crime is not just poor judgment but of actions detrimental to the survival of the many species of this planet. We have been sent here by your fellow Ancients to fulfill their request." Christi Lona looked even more depressed now.

"My sister," Lillith spat out, "has decided that, even though we can vanquish you, we won't. You should thank her." Lillith leaned close to The Beholder and whispered, "Personally, I wanted to torture you for a few millennia. You know, just until I got bored with you. Then I'd kill you. Lucky for you, I can't do it alone." She leaned back up and resumed circling her hostage.

"You will not be allowed to succeed, Ancient," Christi Lona informed him. "We are here to see to that as well as mete out your punishment." Lillith and Christi Lona were now standing in front of The Beholder, facing him as he struggled in vain to escape. Christi Lona glanced at her sister and asked, "Are you ready?"

"Very much so," the queen of darkness replied.

The shadow covering The Beholder's lower half began to climb upwards. The light was pushed up to his head and encircled his mask. As the shadow inched closer to his shoulders, the light grew brighter around his head. The Beholder was thrashing, furiously trying to break their grasp. Lillith was smiling wildly at his feeble attempt at escaping and began to laugh. Christi Lona looked on disapprovingly as she raised her hand to her prisoner. She began reciting an enchantment and The Beholder's mask started to vibrate. Slowly, the mask detached itself from the lycan's body underneath. A pulsating light emanated from Christi Lona's extended arm, drawing the mask to her. Lillith had to move to the side to avoid being caught in the beam and circled around behind her prey. The Beholder was writhing violently now. The lycan's body was changing too. It was bulging in places it shouldn't have been able. Its chest cavity collapsed and quickly returned to normal. I couldn't figure out why the lycan was in so much pain until the flames started.

The shadow now covered The Beholder's body up to his neck. The light around his neck and head was so bright I almost wanted to turn

away. In the midst of the lycan's trauma, the Beholder's mask was inching farther away from the body. Christi Lona was concentrating on the mask, never removing her steely gaze. Suddenly, bright orange flames shot from the eyes of the lycan to the retreating mask. This pillar of flame was blocked from reaching its target by the shield of light surrounding the mask. The fire grew in intensity as it ricocheted off Christi Lona's protective barrier and shot upwards to the sky. The mask continued its voyage to Christi Lona unabated. The flames turned to green and burned brighter. The lycan began to scream, only it wasn't the lycan. It was The Beholder. As the flames bursting from his body changed to violet, his screams echoed throughout the canyon. His cries caused boulders to tumble down the mountainside. Several large rocks, following in the wake of the boulders, crashed to the ground all around them. The three of them, four if you included my corpse, went untouched by the shower of stones. The mountains shook as The Beholder roared in pain once again. The flames were bright blue now and the mask was halfway to Christi Lona's hand.

"How does it feel, Ancient?" Lillith teased. "We could keep that corrupted essence of yours trapped in that lycan forever if we wanted to, you know. I don't think that sack of flesh could hold it, do you? You'd be a free floating essence, like Pak, always searching for someone strong enough to hold your sick, pompous, conceited self. Wouldn't that be wonderful? You without a talisman or a body, therefore without power? It's what you deserve. Actually, you deserve death, but we'll work with what we've got. So how does it feel being ripped away from your precious mask? Hurts, doesn't it? I damn well hope so. Could you even survive without it? I doubt it."

"Lillith, please stop," Christi Lona pleaded.

The Beholder emitted another agonizing scream. The flames flew higher and higher into the sky, rapidly shifting through every color of the spectrum. The mask was just inches from Christi Lona's hand and it was quaking ferociously. Finally, Lillith's shadow went as dark as the void in one last depraved squeeze and disappeared. At the same time, Christi Lona's light quickly faded. The flames from the lycan shot into the mask and it fell to the ground at Christi Lona's feet. The lycan, now free of The Beholder, dropped to the ground in a heap of smoldering flesh.

The lady of the Light bent down and carefully picked up the mask. She looked upon it with sorrow, moderately ashamed at their actions. "It is done," she stated. She held out the mask to her sister.

"You want me to have it?" she asked skeptically.

"I trust you to do what you think is wise," Christi replied. "I

would not, however, recommend giving it to Wraith again. He spends too much time on Earth anymore and we don't want him losing it again."

"I'll give it to Loathe. He'll make damn sure no one gets to it."

Lillith examined her sister's face. She saw a tear running down Christi Lona's cheek and laughed. "You actually feel bad about what we did, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

"Christi, he deserved it. That's what you never understood.

Sometimes, they deserve it."

"Did he?" Christi asked, pointing to my dead body.

"He made his own choices," she said casually. "Besides, he'll be fine."

"Yes, as soon as you leave. He can't heal with you here."

"Always blaming me," Lillith sarcastically sighed.

"To be honest, and I know you won't believe me, it was good to see you again. I mean without one of us trying to kill the other, that is." Christi Lona was actually smiling at her sister. "It felt good to work together for once."

Her admission made Lillith cringe. "Save the soft and fluffy talk for your followers, okay?" Even with that said, I thought I detected a tiny, warm smile on Lillith's dark visage before she faded into the shadows.

The lycan was not just dead; it was obliterated. The trauma from the episode had decimated his body. His chest had exploded, blood poured from his eyes and ears, and his face was burned away. Lesions covered his body from where it had distorted during the torture. Christi Lona looked upon this corpse sadly and mournfully walked past. She came over to my prone body and knelt down beside me.

Picking my head up in her hands, she said softly, "Dear Vincent, I cannot stay long. I am not allowed to be here without a presence from Haedes to maintain a balance. Lillith has not yet departed for Haedes but she soon shall. Know that only your physical wounds will heal from my light. Other wounds you must heal yourself. Be well." The light surrounding her pulsed down her arms and encircled my body. With one final burst of light, she was gone.

I was getting sleepy as the story went on, which surprised me. I could barely keep my eyes open. I watched the picture before me for as long as I could. The last event visible to me before I fell asleep was a Granite, followed by several others. They were coming around the mountain and did not look happy.

Chapter 13

The first thing I noticed upon regaining consciousness was the smell of burning flesh. I craned my head towards the lycan lying on the ground near me. It looked exactly like I'd seen during the cleric's recitation in Limbo. The lycan's head was still smoldering and small puffs of smoke drifted skyward, sending its foul odor into the air. I could hear the approaching steps of the Granites but hadn't yet mustered the strength to open my eyes. My chest still burned in agony from where The Beholder stabbed me. To my mind he was no longer my father, just The Beholder. My only regret was I wasn't the one to deliver his well-deserved punishment.

I slowly opened my eyes and saw that the Granites had arrived. The one in the lead was carrying a large maul. His weapon looked like it had been carved from one solid piece of stone. Delivering a blow to someone with that maul, especially someone who was in too much pain to properly defend themselves, would crush a person's bones to dust. I tried to open my mouth to talk my way out of my current predicament, but nothing escaped my lips but incoherent groans.

"Stay down. We aren't going to hurt you," the leader said. His slate gray eyes were sunk into a craggy face of orange stone. He was as tall as Sakoahn and looked about as dangerous. His voice showed no compassion for my well-being. Oddly, I noted a faint bewilderment instead.

"Staying down isn't a problem," I weakly replied.

"I'm told I should take you with me to our encampment, though I'm not sure why."

"Who told you this?" I asked, getting some of my strength back.

"I'll explain that later. Now we must be going. I want to leave in case Sakoahn orders another assault."

"You won't need to worry about that."

"What makes you think that?" he asked skeptically.

I got slowly to my feet and stood before the Granite. My balance hadn't fully returned and I could feel myself swaying as I spoke. "Because I'm the one that makes their war plans."

The four Granites standing behind their leader all took a step forward. The leader raised his hand without looking at them and they all came to an immediate halt. "And I'm supposed to take you with us," he said, mainly to himself.

"Am I a prisoner?" I asked.

"Only if you want to be." He turned around to his subordinates

and ordered them to depart. Turning his attention back to me, he said, "Come with me. I'll explain what I know on the way. Maybe you can fill in the blanks in the story for me. Then we can both know what's going on." The Granite smiled uneasily.

"Can I ask one question before we go?" I asked.

"Be quick about it," he urged.

"If we are going to be discussing why you didn't smash me into powder with that maul of yours, I'd at least like to know your name."

His smile grew more confident as he replied, "My name is Terran, true leader of the Granites and heir to the throne of Granatia."

"I'm Vincent. It's a pleasure to not get killed by you," I said jokingly, trying to lighten the mood.

"I know who you are, sort of. As for the last part, the day is still young." Terran left and started off in the direction his underlings had gone. I followed along and our conversation commenced without delay.

Terran did not explain his rationale for not striking me down right away. His story's beginning was actually much more informative. Terran's father, Granus, was the leader of the Granites before Sakoahn. Granus was one of the very first Granites in existence and had the privilege of sharing council with Zaron. A few years ago, The Beholder came to Granus with a proposal. If he would help him defeat the Magmites and take control of the portal, The Beholder would offer his personal protection to his race. Granus questioned why his people would need protection and The Beholder explained that there would be a great transformation of society on Earth, where only the strongest of races would survive. The Beholder had selected the Granites as the most deserving on the isle of Atlantia and wanted to put them in charge when his forces came to power. Terran's father refused, saying that the Magmites were entitled to control the output of the portal on their own. The Granites had no qualm with the Magmites letting the denizens of Haedes have free reign during the Aseraphim Wars, contrary to what The Beholder had said. In fact, Granus agreed with the Magmites that it was the right thing to do. There was rumored to be a portal that connected only to Haven somewhere on the planet. Supposedly, the portal on Atlantia worked the same way for Haedes. Granus agreed with the Magmites that since Haven had unfettered access at some point on the globe the forces of Haedes shouldn't be denied the same right. In the name of balance and order, the leadership of the Granites and the Magmites agreed to keep it open.

There were some Granites that did not share these feelings. A group of Granites believed if the portal was going to be open, both races

should have control over it. Sakoahn was the leader of the rebels. He preached in the town square about how the Magmites were making decisions for Granites under Granus's leadership. People began to take him more seriously after a while. His supporters soon became his army and a coup ensued. Sakoahn himself killed Granus after stealing the Earthen Blade from him. The Earthen Blade contained the orange Stone of the Ancients. Created by Zaron herself, it denotes rulership over all earthen races, Granites and Magmites included. Though members of the earthen races can live for centuries, Terran explained, one of the more spectacular gifts the stone granted was immortality. Terran watched Sakoahn kill his father with his own blade. After that, he vowed to destroy Sakoahn and claim his rightful place on the throne or die trying.

Fearing Sakoahn would target him next, Terran fled Granatia and went into exile to regroup. He was able to secure the allegiance of the Magmites, who still viewed him as the true leader of the Granites and heir to the Earthen Blade. A few small battles took place before The Beholder appeared and tried to hammer out a peace agreement. His terms, however, left much to be desired. The Beholder asked Terran to give up the throne and give Sakoahn command of the portal and Terran would be named leader of Sakoahn's army. The lives of the Magmites would be spared according to the arrangement. Terran didn't trust The Beholder to keep his word about the Magmites and swore to never give up his rightful place on the throne. Negotiations failed time and time again. The Beholder wasn't impartial at all, constantly asking for concessions from Terran and offering none from Sakoahn. When the talks finally broke down, The Beholder joined up with Sakoahn. The general had promised to give The Beholder control of the portal once the Magmites were eliminated, thereby giving Sakoahn rule over Atlantia.

"This is where it gets weird," Terran commented.

"How so?" I asked.

"For the most part, Magmites are more pacifistic than Granites. Getting them to attack instead of just defend themselves from attack was a major undertaking. We were able to recruit a few willing soldiers to join us but we needed greater numbers. I was struggling with the Magmites to go on the offensive again when I received a visitor."

"Let me guess. Lillith."

"Indeed it was. She offered me the limited services of some lesser minions of Haedes in exchange for a favor."

"Terran, making a deal with Lillith isn't the wisest move in the world. Letting her dictate the terms is worse."

"Would you say the same thing if the favor she asked of me saved

your life?"

I flashed a nervous smile and replied, "My opinion stands. Let me say, however, that I'm glad you made the deal."

"All she asked me to do was not harm you when I found you. Lillith also told me to take you back to our encampment. She didn't explain why. She just said it would be beneficial for all involved. I wonder if that meant her as well."

"Probably. Would Lillith make a deal that didn't benefit her in some way?"

"I doubt it. Anyway, as we were making our way to the battlefield today, Lillith again appeared before me. She told me I would find you around the base of the mountain and reminded me not to harm you. She said that you were not the one she was looking for and thanked me for my cooperation. She even told me she would keep me in mind if she had any other favors she needed done on Earth. The smile on her face told me I'd probably want to turn her down in the future."

"If she lets you," I cautioned.

"Of course. Next thing I know, she falls into a shadow and is gone. We continue on and find you unconscious."

"I wouldn't say unconscious. Half dead would be a more accurate description."

"Either way, I intended then as now to honor my agreement with Lillith. Whether or not you're the person she's searching for, I don't think it would be wise to go back on my word to her."

"Smart assumption."

Terran looked at me with a smile on his jagged face and asked, "So who are you anyway? Lillith seems to think you're someone important. I have to say, I'm a little beyond confused about it all."

"I thought you said you had an idea who I am?"

"I have an idea of your importance, not your identity. If Lillith is keeping an eye on you, you must be someone of value to her."

"I'd like to think I am," I said confidently.

"So who are you?" Terran asked again.

"My name is Vincent, child of the Aseraphim."

Terran stopped dead in his tracks. "You?" he blurted out. "You're a child of the Aseraphim? I've heard rumor that you were on Atlantia. Actually, I heard there were two of you."

"The other one is in Egypt now," I informed him.

Terran resumed his pace, shaking his head in disbelief. "No wonder Lillith wanted you alive."

"Do you have any idea why she said I wasn't the one she was

looking for?"

"No idea. I didn't press her for details."

"That was almost certainly a good move. I think I know why she wanted me to come back with you."

"And why is that?" Terran asked.

"To help you win." I locked my gaze with Terran's and added, "And we will."

Terran just smiled and said, "We're almost there. We'll talk more about it later."

"Terran, I don't want to waste time. If we launch a counterattack as soon as possible, Sakoahn and his men will be caught off guard. They always celebrate after a victory. You can catch them completely unaware."

I could hear the rocks that made up his body grind against each other as Terran's smile grew wider. "I'll round up my advisors and we'll see what we can do."

Our conversation turned to my background as we entered the encampment. I filled him in on the pertinent information, skimming over things I deemed trivial. Terran led me to a small stone house in the center of the camp. This was his headquarters, he explained. He was going to gather his lieutenants and meet me back here to discuss our next step. I sat down and looked at the maps and plans in the main room. There were old plans scattered among the newer ones. I was drawn to the old plans, wanting to see how well I had guessed at their maneuvers. Nearly every time, I had presumed correctly.

An hour had passed before Terran returned with his command staff. By that time I had looked over every plan in the house and was ready for our meeting. After everyone had arrived, I laid out my plan. Terran and his associates listened intently to what I had to say but the skepticism never left their eyes. When I finished, the questions began.

"Do you really think a frontal assault will work?" a large Granite called Boulder asked. He was my height and made of a solid slab of gray rock.

"I think with Terran and me leading the assault that yes, it will work," I replied.

"We'll lose an awful lot of people," another Granite commented. This smaller Granite was named Pherris and was in charge of intelligence gathering. A nervous little creature of rust-colored stone, Pherris shook so much that little pebbles fell from his brow constantly.

"Not as many as you might think. Terran and I will be taking the lead. We'll finish off most of them before the second wave advances."

"You seem pretty confident," Boulder said.

"I am." Turning to Terran, I asked, "They do know who I am, right?"

"I told them but I'm not sure they fully believe me."

I glanced over at the other three Granites in the room. They were all staring at me with doubt clear as crystal in their gaze. "You don't believe Terran about who I am?" I asked them.

"Frankly, I don't," replied Jag, the third Granite. Terran explained while introducing them to me that Jag was their fiercest fighter and proud of it. Sharp points of crystal white stone jutted out in every direction on his ash-colored body. I could see why he was so successful as a warrior. Terran also informed me that he was the least trusting Granite in history. "If Lillith was so interested in you, how are we supposed to believe anything other than that you're a denizen of Haedes?"

"Lillith is family, Jag. She was looking out for me for that reason."

"Are you sure?"

"Actually, no. No one can ever be sure what Lillith's true motivations are."

"So you could just be saying you're a child of the Aseraphim when you're really just another lying piece of garbage from Haedes?"

I smiled warmly at my accuser and replied, "Jag, if I were what you say I am, Lillith would've taken matters into her own hands and stopped everything that happened to me by herself. I believe the reason she didn't is because she wanted me to die."

"Why would she want that?" Terran asked.

"I'm not sure. Something you said earlier has been bothering me. Lillith told you I wasn't the one she was looking for, correct?"

"Correct."

"I didn't understand that before, but I've had time to reflect on it. I think she's looking for the one who will fulfill a certain prophecy and thought it might be me. Apparently, I'm not the right one according to her. Whether or not she's right remains to be seen."

"You know the prophecies?" Pherris asked.

"Only a few. Propheteus was kind enough to fill in some blank spots in the readings I'd done."

"You know Propheteus?" Pherris blurted out excitedly.

"We've met. Look, we're getting off the topic here. Can we get back to the planning?"

"No, not until you answer some questions," Jag replied defiantly. "I'm still not convinced you are who you say you are."

"Look, Jag. You're just going to have to believe me. We don't

have time...”

“Make time,” he interrupted.

I could feel the rage building inside. I lowered my head and tried to compose myself. The more I dwelt on Jag’s insolence, the more my anger grew. I snapped my head back up and glared at Jag. The look in my eye caused him to fall out of his seat and crash to the floor. Small crystals flew from his body on impact. The fingers of my hands were splayed open and I had extended the retractable blades. Flashes of light reflected off my metal claws, darting around the room in a wild display. I was staring at Jag as he sat on the floor shocked into paralysis.

“Jag, we don’t have time for this right now,” I growled. I snarled at him, exposing my feral fangs. “If you want this to be over, if you want to win, you will sit there and listen to what I have to say. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” Jag weakly replied. He had made no attempt to rise from the floor.

“Good. Now sit down.”

Jag was deceptively fast. He was back in his seat so fast I found myself honestly impressed with his speed. I flashed back to something The Beholder had said right before he drove his sword into my chest. Fear is a useful tool in maintaining order. His being right sickened me.

Terran slid over to me and whispered, “How did you make your eyes glow like that?”

“Later,” I snarled. He quickly stepped away.

Now that I had their full attention, I proceeded to lay out my plan. Sometimes, the most orderly thing to do was keep things simple. I laid out a full frontal assault to be led by Terran and myself. Jag would lead the second wave once Terran and I had taken care of the first line of defenses. The only major issue was when I mentioned that Terran and I would not be taking any others with us. Pherris didn’t think this was a good idea but I assured him it would be fine. I think it was the wicked grin on my face that convinced him more than anything I may have said.

Once everyone was in agreement on the plan, I told Jag and Boulder to gather every Granite and Magmite and have them all assemble in the center of camp. I wanted to address the masses.

It took another hour or so to bring everyone together. I was in the small house going over the last details of the plan when Boulder came in and told me they were ready. I followed Terran outside and was in awe of what stood before me. There were hundreds of flaming Magmites gathered together with a large band of Granites, standing and patiently awaiting my arrival. They were all informed of the basics of the plan as they were rounded up so they knew what was to come. I steeled myself

and stepped up onto large stone platform.

“Earthen race, hear my words!” I shouted. I didn’t need to bother. Silence blanketed the crowd as they stood at rapt attention. “The Beholder is dead.” With these words, the silence was shattered with the sounds of cheering. A deep rumbling rippled through the masses.

I let the celebration continue for a few seconds before continuing. “This is not the end you seek. General Sakoahn still holds the Earthen Blade. As long as he does, there will never be peace between you. He is not the one that deserves the throne. Terran, as we all know, is the rightful heir to the throne.” More shouting erupted at the mention of Terran and I held up a hand to silence them. “I have heard Sakoahn say he will never accept peace with you as long as you retain control of the portal. That was his master’s goal. That was what The Beholder wanted. The Beholder is gone. Now its time for Sakoahn to join him.”

A low rumble came over the crowd again. “Terran and his loyal lieutenants have entrusted me with devising a plan to end this once and for all. I believe I have done just that. Some of you will not return from this battle. To you I say, you fought not only for what was right but also for what was necessary. Order will be restored to the isle of Atlantia and you will have given your lives to make it happen. I do not wish for any more deaths. However, it is inevitable in war. Tomorrow, this war will be over and the death and loss can finally end.

“Granites, you are a proud race. Skilled fighters with exceptional strength, you are truly gifted in the art of war. Today, you will use those gifts to rain down destruction upon your fellow Granites. Do not feel grief or sorrow for these victims. They made their choices and they must live and die by the consequences. Today, the true leader of your race will once again be in command. Today, order is restored to your race.

“Magmites, you are a peaceful race. Strong as well as skilled, you have made guarding the portal your mission and have performed admirably. Today, your task becomes easier. With Sakoahn’s defeat, you will no longer need to fear him and his own evil designs. Today, your struggle ends. To see this to fruition, you must go against your pacifistic nature and fight alongside your kin, the Granites. You must take matters into your own hands to secure your future. Today, order will return to your race as well.”

I looked over the assembled crowd and saw that all eyes were attentively locked on me. Confidence filled my spirit as I continued. “All of you will be an integral part of our attack. We need to show solidarity between the races so that those that choose to live will understand that the two races will coexist peacefully for all eternity. Those that choose to

defy us shall perish. Terran and I will take the lead in this final battle. We will lead the march to Granatia and once there Terran and I alone shall commence the first wave of the assault. We will show those that oppose us no mercy. Where you once sat back and waited for Sakoahn's army to attack, today you shall take the fight to him. You will be the aggressor. You will redefine true aggression for all that stand in your way. You will charge forward at whatever cost. You will be aggressive. Follow my lead, earthen races, for I am aggression; pure, unadulterated, absolute aggression. Follow me and you shall be victorious!" My voice had risen and I found myself shouting to the crowd.

My words did their job. A thunderous roar erupted from the crowd as they readied themselves for battle. Balls of flame shot into the sky and exploded, creating a dazzling fireworks display. Terran led me back into the house as Jag and Boulder began calming down the crowd and dividing them into battalions.

Once inside, away from prying eyes and ears, Terran said, "You're absolutely sure this will work?"

"As someone I know is fond of saying, trust me."

Terran and I talked for a few more minutes, more to reassure him than to rehash the plan. When we exited the house and saw the forces split into battalions and ready to do battle, his confidence grew noticeably. I left Terran's side and walked over to Jag to ask if he had explained the plan to the soldiers. He assured me they were ready and willing to go. Knowing they were ready was good. Being told they were willing made me smile. Jag took a step back when I smiled because I inadvertently flashed my fangs. I couldn't stifle my laughter and let out a tiny chuckle. When he realized I was smiling in a good way, he joined in, albeit a bit nervously. Jag was going to be leading the second wave and I told him I had the utmost confidence in his abilities. He smiled and snapped to attention. I went back over to Terran and asked if he was ready. When he locked eyes with me and responded positively, I knew we were going to succeed. The hatred and determination in his gaze was all I needed to see.

The journey to Granatia from the encampment would take at least two hours, so we departed the encampment as soon as everything was in order. Terran and I walked alone as the entire Magmites population, as well as the band of rebel Granites, marched on a few hundred yards behind us. I was positive we wouldn't see any of Sakoahn's soldiers along the way. When there was a celebration at the palace after a battle it was attended by almost everyone. The only ones that didn't get to go were the guards at the gate. Normally, there would be between ten and fifteen of

them. I didn't care if they had a thousand guards stationed out front. I was getting inside.

We were nearing the castle as the sun began to set over the mountains. Terran tapped me on the shoulder and told me to turn around. I saw a small Magmite running up to us. Sensing trouble, I stepped toward the small walking fireball.

"How can I assist you, little one?" I asked politely.

"Sir Aggression, Jag would like to know where you want us to position the soldiers."

"Just stay back for now. You'll be out of sight of the castle where you are now." The Magmite smiled and went to leave when I asked, "Excuse me. Did you call me Aggression?"

The Magmite seemed confused. "You said that was your name," he replied softly.

I thought back to my speech. I never did mention my name while I was riling up the troops. I did, however, say that I was aggression. I think the little Magmite took me too literally. I looked down at the Magmite and guessed his age to be fairly young. I smiled and said, "Yes, child, I did. I guess that means it's my name, doesn't it?" The young Magmite was grinning excitedly. "How would you like to play a role in our victory?"

The tiny Magmite was glowing at being asked to help. He excitedly nodded and I told him his role. He quickly ran back to Jag, yelling to us that he would be back.

Terran looked at me and hesitantly asked, "Aggression?"

"Yes?" I answered, still smiling.

"So you're no longer going by Vincent?"

"If the name fits, may as well use it."

"Does it?"

I gave Terran a steely gaze and replied, "You have no idea."

I saw the young Magmite running back to us and I asked if Jag had any problems. The Magmite informed me everyone was ready to go. He was elated at being asked to be my messenger. I asked for his name and he told me he was named Molt but everyone called him Sparky. As we continued the final approach, I asked Molt how he got his nickname. He said it came from when he found out he could steal another Magmites flames and make them his own. Apparently, when Magmites got angry or stressed they became engulfed in flame. Molt said he could corral their flames to boost his own. Whenever he did this, sparks flew from his body as he tried to control the extra fire. Molt was overjoyed to see I was curious about him. I didn't really know a lot about Magmites. The

Beholder only went over the generalities of their race with me.

We rounded a corner on the path and the castle came into view. I could see about ten guards posted outside the gate. Thankfully, there were none in the towers. I didn't expect there to be. We were still a fair distance away so I ordered Sparky and Terran into the woods bordering the path. The three of us inched closer to the castle by way of the woods. I had to keep Sparky away from the trees as much as possible. I didn't want a forest fire to give away our position. Thankfully, he was able to quell most of the fire radiating from him.

When the guards came fully into view, I saw there were actually eleven of them stationed on patrol outside. I started to head out from the woods when I saw that Terran and Sparky were following me.

"No. The two of you stay here," I ordered.

"You are not going into battle without me," Terran objected.

"Yes, I am. I need to do this myself."

"Then why did you ask me to accompany you?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't let me go without you." I stared at Terran and he could see the fury in my eyes. I hoped they weren't glowing. It would give away our location. Terran nodded, coming to the conclusion that he wasn't going to win the argument.

"When you get the signal, join me. Sparky, when he comes to me, run back to Jag and tell him to advance."

"What's the signal?" Terran asked.

"You'll know it when you see it," I replied as I left the woods.

I stepped out onto the path and continued on to the main gate of the castle. As I neared, one of the guards noticed me.

"Hail, Vincent! How are you doing today?" he asked as I approached him.

"Better," I said smiling wickedly.

"Better?"

"Better than you." The smile never left my face as I extended my metal claws and cut his stone head from his body. Before his head hit the ground, I was moving.

The other guards had witnessed my deeds and moved to counter my attack. Their efforts were in vain as none of them were fast enough to catch me. I drove my claws into the chest of the nearest Granite. This guard was the largest of the contingent, almost as big as Titus. Mustering all my strength, I lifted the Granite into the air and swung at the other guards. I connected with three smaller guards and they exploded into a cloud of rock dust. I brought my arms up forcefully and retracted my claws momentarily, sending the impaled Granite skyward with amazing

velocity. Before the guard I'd thrown came crashing back to earth, I ran at full speed and decimated the remaining guards. They were no match for my agility and power. When I reached the last guard still standing, I drove my claws into him as I had done with his airborne companion. I glanced skyward and saw the Granite on his way back down. I tossed the Granite I had control of into the air. The two collided in midair and exploded. A cloud of dust and shards of stone rained down from the sky, blanketing me in grit. The whole attack had taken less than a minute. The first wave was complete.

I looked back down the path and saw Terran approaching. Molt was running in the opposite direction to pass word along to Jag. When Terran reached the site of the slaughter, I was still brushing off the dust and rock that had fallen on me.

Terran picked a small stone from my hair. He wore a tentative smile as he said, "That was quite a signal."

"Thank you," I replied without emotion.

"You really are Aggression, aren't you?"

"Now and forever more."

"I thought you told me before you didn't really care for violence?"

"I don't. I just recognize the need for it." I finished cleaning myself off and added, "And I'm damn good at it."

"You'll get no argument from me."

It only took a few minutes for Jag and the army to assemble around the gate. I explained that I was going inside to survey the scene. Jag wasn't sure about this subtle change in the plan but I was able to allay his doubts.

I went into the castle and searched out the party. As expected, I could hear sounds of celebration coming from the main hall. As I walked in that direction I ran into Slade.

"Hello there, Slade," I said cheerfully.

"Welcome back!" he replied earnestly. "Is all well?"

I leaned in and whispered, "If you want to live past today, leave. There's an army awaiting my orders just outside the castle gate. Now, I know you're a traitor to Sakoahn and there was a time when I wanted to kill you for it. But today's your lucky day. You see, I was killed and now my priorities have changed a tad. Terran knows you're on his side. If you leave now, you can join us if you choose and truly fight Sakoahn. If not, you will never see another sunrise."

I leaned back up and saw abject fear in his coal black eyes. "What about Opal?" he asked nervously.

"Find her and take her with you," I replied.

"She's at the party."

"Then I guess I'm going to have to get her. Leave Slade, and tell Terran and Jag to give me three minutes. After that, storm the castle. I'm going to a party," I said with no joy in my eyes.

I strolled down the corridor towards the sounds of celebration and revelry. I encountered no other Granites along the way and was glad to see they were all going to be in the same place. It would make the battle so much easier if we could contain it to one area instead of having to chase our prey throughout the castle. As soon as I entered, Sakoahn spotted me and made his way over.

"Vincent, it is so good to see you. Your actions today have earned my utmost respect."

"Why thank you, Sakoahn. That means almost nothing to me," I gladly replied.

My response caught Sakoahn unaware. "What did you mean by that? And where's your father?"

"My father," I spat out, "is indisposed. You won't be enjoying the pleasure of his lies anymore. We had an enlightening chat after you left, Sakoahn. Because of it, circumstances have changed drastically."

"How so?"

"I know who the traitor is. Or should I say traitors?"

"There's more than one? Who are they?" he demanded.

"Well, Slade is one, but he's gone. The other is none of your concern. I'm taking care of that problem." Faintly, in the background noise of the party, I heard the marching of heavy footsteps coming down the hallway. "As well as several others." I sneered at Sakoahn and watched as the revelation finally settled in.

"Guards! To arms!" he shouted over the din of the celebration. Without warning, he swung his arms at me. He caught me square in the chest, knocking me to the ground. I jumped back up quickly but he was gone.

Terran's army stormed the party and the battle commenced. The rebel Granites, led by Terran himself, attacked with a fury. Their enemies fell one by one in rapid succession. Many of Sakoahn's men were unable to get to their weapons in time. It was like sending sheep to the slaughter. The Magmites were setting Sakoahn's men aflame. To my amazement, this did not kill the Granites. Instead, they stayed burning and became new Magmites. The new Magmites willingly fought with their new brethren and attacked Sakoahn's men. Not all of the Granites were flammable and those that remained fought fiercely. I saw Molt at the

edge of the scrum as he soaked up the dying flames of a fallen Magmite. One of Sakoahn's men came near him and Molt burst into flame. A column of orange fire rose from his body, torching his would-be attacker.

I looked around at the madness and couldn't see Sakoahn anywhere. I did spot Opal though. She was trying to get away from the fighting. Mauls were swung and breezed past her head. Swords lunged at her but she was able to sidestep the blades. Knowing she wouldn't last much longer, I ran into the fray. I scooped her up and ran back to the entrance of the main hall. When I put her down, she was shocked to see it was me that had rescued her. I told her to find a safe place to hide out until it was all over. Her response was a scream of terror. I wasn't sure why she did this until I felt the blow to my back. I flew into Opal and we tumbled to the floor. I was up in a flash and saw Titus. I had assumed someone hit me with a maul while my back was turned. In actuality, Titus had hit me with his fist. When you're as massive as he was you didn't really need a weapon.

I leapt to my feet, picking Opal up off the floor as I did. She didn't hesitate for a second before running off. I extended my blades and charged at my adversary. I ran at him and sunk my blades into his immense body. This did not have the desired effect as my blades got stuck in his gut. His body looked like solid stone but apparently it wasn't. Titus grabbed me by the throat before I could get away and launched me upwards. My blades gave me no assistance and slipped out his body with ease, succumbing to his immense strength. My back slammed into the ceiling. Shooting pain coursed through my body briefly as I descended to the floor. There was no way for me to land safely so I let nature take its course. I hit the floor and rolled, keeping a safe distance from Titus for the time being. I shook off the soreness and glared at my enemy. My rage intensified and I could sense the glow coming from my eyes. The look on Titus's face changed drastically when he saw the golden light emanating from me. Where satisfaction had resided on his face, doubt and fear now made it their home.

I peeked at my gauntlets briefly and saw they were covered in thick, dark mud. I had assumed Titus was like the other Granites and composed completely of stone. My assumption proved inaccurate. His outer shell was hard rock but underneath he was composed of a viscous sludge. I quickly came up with an alternate plan to defeat him. Charging at him again, I drove my blades into his chest. Once the blades broke the surface, I turned the blades so they pointed upwards. I fell backwards and rolled onto my back, all the while keeping my blades inside. He fell towards me so I lifted my legs, planted my feet into his gut and flipped

him over me. He hit the wall halfway up and slid down. The act of throwing him this way ripped a sizeable hole in his chest. The mud underneath his rocky exterior was now exposed to the open air. I retracted my claws and rapidly redeployed them, effectively cleaning the mud from the metal. I lunged forward and began to strike at the gaping hole. I sliced at the opening repeatedly, widening the hole and spraying mud everywhere. Titus was in obvious pain but still very much alive. A black, oily substance had begun to seep out of the mud. It took me a moment to recognize it as blood. I had so severely decimated every Granite I'd encountered in battle that I'd never seen one bleed before. I stood back and watched as Titus tried to rise to his feet.

I examined the fight still raging in the main hall. In a stroke of luck, Molt was still where I'd last seen him. "Sparky! Come here! Quick!" I bellowed.

The young Magmite heard me yelling for him and ran right over. Titus was still struggling to regain his senses. His enormous mass slumped against the wall, black blood slowly dripping down his body. Molt stared at Titus for a second before addressing me. "How can I help you, Sir Aggression?"

"How's your aim?" I asked.

"I'm the best in my class!" he proudly replied.

I pointed at the exposed mud straining to remain in his body. "Hit him with a flame right there."

Panic gripped Titus and he tried to crawl away. Molt had his arm extended and shot a column of flame at him. The fire found its mark and Molt held the flame there for as long as he could. As small as he was, I didn't think he'd last nearly as long as he did.

Titus had stopped trying to escape. He had not given up voluntarily. The effect of Molt's flame had hardened the mud inside his body. I slowly walked over and delivered the fatal blow. The giant Titus disintegrated into nothing more than a pile of dirt and stone.

I turned to Molt and was going to tell him to rejoin the fight but he was already gone. That was one courageous tyke. I rejoined the battle as I looked for Terran. I found him as he was swinging his maul and obliterating another foe. When I reached him I told him to come with me. His objection was noted and quickly dismissed. It wasn't until I told him we were going to hunt down Sakoahn that his protestations ceased.

The two of us ran down the corridor, looking around every corner for our prey. I mentioned to Terran that he could be in either the war room or his quarters. Terran volunteered to check the war room as I ran off for the living quarters.

I reached Sakoahn's chamber in seconds. My timing was perfect. Sakoahn was just leaving. As he exited into the hallway, I swung my arms out and connected with his face. His head snapped back as he staggered back into the room.

"You'll notice that I'm brave enough to stick around after assaulting someone," I told him when I entered.

"Call it cowardice if you like, child. I call it intelligence," he crossly replied.

"I never doubted your capacity for either, Sakoahn." I was slowly walking towards him as he backed away.

Sakoahn withdrew his sword from its sheath and held it out defensively. "Do you know what this is?"

"Something that doesn't belong to you," I firmly replied.

"So you know of the Earthen Blade. I'm impressed. Whether or not it belongs to me, I have it and I will never relinquish it!" he shouted defiantly.

I sprinted at Sakoahn and wrested the sword from his hands. I returned to my previous place and began to wave the sword around at the general. "Never say never, Sakoahn," I advised condescendingly as I resumed stalking him slowly around the room.

Fear crossed his face as he knew his time was short. "If you think you have it in you to kill me, child, then get on with it."

"I have no intention of killing you, Sakoahn," I replied calmly. "It's not my place. This was never my fight, never my war. The Beholder asked for my assistance and I provided it. I didn't know I was being asked to help under false pretenses. That upsets me." I was inching ever closer to Sakoahn as we circled the room. I kept waiting for him to run for the door but he never did. He was getting closer to it now. I glanced at the door and smiled.

"You will learn that everyone lies, child, sooner or later."

"Stop calling me child!" I screamed. "My name is Aggression. Remember that as your dying breath escapes you."

"So you are going to kill me after all," he said.

"No. He is," I replied as I jerked my thumb towards the door.

The moment Sakoahn looked to the doorway he got hit with Terran's maul. I yelled to Terran to get his attention before Sakoahn could recover. I tossed the Earthen Blade to him and he caught it easily with one large hand, skillfully swinging it around as soon as hilt met hand. The blade seemed to meld to his stony hand and he wielded the sword like it was a part of him. Sakoahn tried to run but Terran was blocking his escape.

"Now, traitor, turncoat, murderer, you shall meet your end," Terran cried out as he attacked Sakoahn.

I had no doubt Sakoahn was an extremely capable fighter. This time he was simply outmatched. Terran let out all his pent up anger and rage on the man that killed his father. Sakoahn was able to retrieve Terran's maul and mount a counterattack. Terran was simply more determined. Instead of knocking the maul from Sakoahn's grip, Terran cut off his whole arm. Piece by piece, Terran cut Sakoahn apart. When it was all said and done, General Sakoahn was dead, the final blow coming when Terran decapitated his prone body. The general's head rolled to the corner where it came to rest.

The brutality of his actions didn't bother me at all. After all the lies, the deceit and bloodshed, it all came down to two people deciding the victor. All the chaos reduced to a one on one confrontation. Order was finally being established. Not only did I believe killing Sakoahn was necessary for order to be restored but Terran's state of mind needed to be settled also. I could've killed Sakoahn five times over before Terran arrived. It would have accomplished nothing. This was the outcome that needed to happen.

Terran slowly made his way to me as I sat at the far end of the room. Their skirmish never neared me so I had an unobstructed view of the proceedings. As the new leader of the earthen races neared I could see large chunks of his stony exterior had been knocked away. Sakoahn's counterattack was more effective than I'd originally believed. I stood to offer Terran a hand but he waved me away.

"I'm fine, Aggression," he said past his exhaustion. "Truth be told, I've never felt better."

"You're injured," I remarked.

"Nothing that won't heal, now that I have this." He held up the Earthen Blade. The light from the candles in the room flickered off the blade. The low flame of the candle caught the orange stone cast into the handle of the sword and sent beams of colored light in all directions.

Terran walked over to the remains of General Sakoahn and removed the sheath from his corpse. He strapped it on and slid the Earthen Blade in effortlessly. With a knowing nod, the two of us left the sleeping quarters of the late General Sakoahn and raced back to the main hall. I kept pace with Terran instead of going full speed so we could formulate a plan. Terran said he knew what needed to be done. All I had to do was watch.

The battle was still going but there were many fewer soldiers left standing. The carnage was beyond belief. Piles of rock, some still

steaming, littered the hall where a party had been taking place less than an hour ago. I was shocked to see Molt still alive. Maybe his diminutive size made him a harder target.

Terran withdrew the Earthen Blade and roared, "Earthen races! Hear me now!" Everyone ceased moving before his words had finished echoing throughout the chamber. "General Sakoahn is dead by my hand. The Earthen Blade has been returned to its rightful heir. I am Terran, son of Granus, and I hold dominion over our races. I say to all of you, let us end this war now. This is not a battle between Granites and Magmites. This is a war about good and evil. That evil has been eliminated. With Sakoahn disposed of, we can once again have peace and harmony between us. So I say, lay down your weapons. Let there be no more death today. Those that chose to side with Sakoahn can be forgiven, in time.

"Let anyone who challenges my authority or my words step forth and we shall decide it honorably. Challenge me later and it shall be decided with your death."

To me, it looked like a room filled with statues. No one moved as Terran spoke. As his words faded, a small rumbling started and formed into full-fledged cheers. Even some of the soldiers that had been fighting for Sakoahn joined in.

As the two earthen races rejoiced, Terran turned to me and said, "Thank you, Aggression, for all you've done."

"It was for your benefit as well as mine, Terran." I grinned appreciatively and jokingly added, "All I ask is that you rule in an orderly fashion. Remember, I held the Earthen Blade for a few seconds. Technically, you took the throne from me. Don't make me reclaim it."

Terran laughed, knowing something said in jest when he heard it. "You have a deal, my friend. So what's next for you?"

"I need to rest. Since sunrise, I've been killed, talked to not one but two Ancients about my future, watched another Ancient get tortured and imprisoned, formulated a plan to kill Sakoahn and helped implement that plan. I've had a busy day. In the morning, I'm going back to the city of Atlantia. There's something else I have to do. It sure feels like my duties are endless as of late. Worse, I have a feeling this is just the beginning."

"It has been a glorious beginning, Aggression. Do not forget that. It has been my honor to stand beside you in battle."

"The honor truly is mine, Terran." I shook his outstretched hand and grimaced as I felt a twinge of pain shoot up my arm, an injury caused from my skirmish with Titus no doubt.

"If you need anything, the earthen races will be there for you. All you need to do is ask."

"I appreciate that. For now, I think all I need is some time alone."

"Do you know where you'll be bunking down? It would be my honor to have you stay here in the castle."

"Actually, I already have quarters here. And it's deep enough in the castle to give me the solitude I desire."

"Then be on your way, my friend, and rest. My people will take care of clearing away the vestiges of battle."

I shook his hand again and departed for my quarters. My wrist was throbbing slightly, causing me to replay my fight with Titus in my mind. I remembered every move I'd made and couldn't figure out how I'd hurt myself. I examined my wrist closer and saw a tiny patch of my skin had turned to stone. I carefully peeled away the rock as I wandered the corridors of the castle. Apparently, the Earthen Blade wasn't meant for humans to possess. I only held it for a few seconds and it tried to turn me into stone. As improbable as it sounded, it was the only logical conclusion I could draw.

Once the stone pieces were removed, a small trickle of blood seeped from the wound. I licked up the golden droplets and laughed quietly to myself. I must've looked like a cat cleaning itself, which made me think once again about The Beholder. He had taken over a feline lycan and now I had to wonder if this was another trait I inherited from him. My laughter grew and turned slightly manic as I realized I would never be able to ask him. I re-examined my wrist when the blood was gone and saw the wound already beginning to heal. No more blood was seeping through, which I found oddly disappointing. My blood had tasted sweet and refreshing.

I made it back to my room and headed directly for the bed. I removed my gauntlets and placed them on the table next to me. I lay down to sleep, but would find no solace this night. The vision of the day's carnage constantly replayed in my mind.

Chapter 14

The remains of the battle had not been fully disposed of by the next morning. When I entered the main hall I was astounded by the amount of debris littering the room. Mounds of rock were scattered about, marking where soldiers had fallen during the conflict. I felt no sorrow for these men no matter how much I tried. I had made up my mind to come here as I lay awake in bed last night. I couldn't get the sights and sounds of combat out of my mind. I didn't enjoy it but I couldn't say I felt remorseful either. What struck me as strange was that I didn't feel anything at all. I mulled over everything that had happened during the day, from agreeing to join Sakoahn on the field of battle to bringing the battle back to him. All of it felt calculated, set out before me like a weather-beaten path. Yet I couldn't get over the feeling there were traps hidden all along its length.

Bloodshed was never the most effective way to settle a dispute. Sometimes it was the only way. You did what you must to maintain an acceptable level of order. Propheteus said I was doing a good job so far and I had to wonder if he knew the outcome of the war before it started. I could only assume he did. If I was the one the prophecy was about, as The Beholder once believed, then my fate was sealed and everything I did was another step along that path. No matter how long I thought about it, I refused to believe my life was planned out. That went against the concept of free will, against choice, and that was the trap.

I thought about free will as I surveyed the main hall. Every individual that died in this final battle chose to fight. Granted, I may have helped motivate the Magmites and thereby contributed to their deaths. Ultimately the choice rested with each and every one of them. No one was forced. No one was told that those who chose to stay behind would be punished. Everyone signed on knowing they might not return. Free will decided their legacies, not fate. As far as I was concerned, their lives were sacrificed for the greater good, for they fought with valor and without fear. They chose aggression to achieve peace, and their efforts succeeded.

Somehow Terran was able to enter the room without my hearing him. I was so focused on resolving my minor inner turmoil that I didn't hear the massive stone man arrive. He broke my concentration when he cleared his throat. The sound of gravel shifting around got my attention.

"Good morning Aggression," he said. "Sleep well?"

"Not at all, actually," I replied.

"Me neither. I kept reliving the battle over and over again in my

head."

"Same here. I wish it didn't have to turn out this way, Terran."

"It was bound to happen," he regretfully sighed.

"As are many other things." I placed my hand on his rocky shoulder and said, "I have to go back to the city of Atlantia. There's something that needs to be stopped that I helped start. I've been told it has to come to pass, but I simply refuse to accept that."

Terran carefully placed his hand on my shoulder and responded, "Aggression, your name shall forever be revered among the earthen races. You have united us as we have never been before. I promise you now, here in the great hall of Castle Granatia, that I will rule fairly and justly. Order shall prevail under my reign."

I removed my hand as he removed his. My smile was my only reply. I turned and walked out of the main hall and towards the castle gate. Several Granites wished me well as I passed by. Opal saw me and ran over to repeatedly thank me for saving her. Her effusive praise was almost embarrassing, for her as well as me. It wasn't until Slade showed up that I was able to break away. He also thanked me for my help, and for not turning him in to Sakoahn.

I left the castle to appreciative cheers. It felt good to know they would not need my help any time soon. The harmony and unity evident as I departed the castle told me all I needed to know. Order won the day in Granatia and order would hold sway for a long time. That thought warmed me as I casually strolled to the edge of the clearing in front of the castle.

What bothered me now was the Zaron's egg project. I felt a need to stop it even though Propheteus said it must happen. I could not accept that. Atlantia was the home of the greatest civilization on Earth. The knowledge that could be imparted to the rest of the world was boundless. Thinking about Zaron's egg being uncovered tied my stomach in knots. Alarm shrouded my thinking as I tried to consider the ramifications of our dealings. I had no doubt there was endless power to be withdrawn from Zaron's egg, but if something went wrong it would be disastrous. My dread grew until I felt the urge to sprint to Atlantia right then. I didn't want the Granites and remaining Magmites in the castle to sense my panic however. I managed to stay calm until I neared the mountain. Once I had rounded the path around the base of the mountain and was finally out of view of the castle, I started running full tilt for Atlantia.

I arrived in downtown Atlantia a few seconds later. I wanted to see the progress on the Zaron's egg project first but was afraid I might

find out I was too late to stop it. Instead, I settled on talking to Genepool. As the most revered figure on Atlantia he would know what needed to be done. I briskly walked to his temple in hopes of finding him there. The sooner I could track him down the better.

Upon entering his temple I heard the sounds of people talking. At the foot of his throne were the engineers and scientists from the project, along with some men in green robes. I quietly made my way towards them, hoping to catch some of the conversation. What I heard troubled me greatly. Apparently, the egg had reached the surface and was now almost half uncovered. Genepool and the workers were going over ideas on how best to utilize its power. Genepool instructed them to see that something called the Shield was taken care of first. The ones wearing the green robes fielded that question and informed him progress on the Shield was almost complete. Genepool spotted me out of the corner of his eye as I drew closer, and promptly dismissed the others. He called me over and asked how I was doing.

"I've been better," I replied from the base of the steps leading to his throne. "I need to talk to you about something very important."

"I'm sure you do," Genepool responded, smiling brightly.

"I can't help but think there's something wrong with the Zaron's egg project."

"Why would you say that?" he asked. His smile never faded and oddly I found it worrisome.

"I've spoken with Propheteus and he told me of a prophecy foretelling the destruction of Atlantia."

"That is where you're wrong, Vincent. Or should I call you Aggression now?"

"How did you know I was called that?" I asked, surprised to learn he'd heard of my pseudonym.

"Not much happens on this island that I don't know about. Take the prophecy you spoke of. It doesn't say that Atlantia will be destroyed, quite the opposite in fact. What it says is that the sea will swallow up Atlantia. That is what will happen. Atlantia will continue to exist, albeit in quite an altered state."

I was stunned at his relaxed manner. It was as if the pending doom slated for the island pleased him. "You don't seem concerned. I have to admit that surprises me. Don't you value their lives?"

Genepool laughed heartily at my question. The sound of his laughter reverberated throughout the room. "Vincent, dear boy, I want the prophecy to come to pass *because* I value their lives as much as I do."

My head hadn't hurt this much since I'd left Valencia back in

Egypt. Genepool's words made no sense. "You want the prophecy to come to pass? I'm confused."

"Vincent, the people of Atlantia will be adapted to their new environment. What will transpire will be a transformation of the Atlantian society. Let me explain what I do in detail, if I may. Every species of plant life on the planet is here thanks to me. I created each and every one of them. You know almost as much as anyone on Earth about the different types of plants. By the way, once Atlantia is gone, you really should pass along your knowledge to others. Some of those plants can kill a mortal man." His voice was relaxed, making what he was saying harder to listen to. His cavalier attitude grated on my nerves. "Intelligent life on this planet is due to both my experiments and Zaron's creations. You know Zaron as the devourer of worlds, and this is both accurate and inaccurate. Let me tell you why.

"Zaron and I are both deeply concerned about life on this planet. We want nothing more than the continuation of life but we differ on the means to those ends. Zaron devours worlds to give birth to new life from the old. Instead of allowing time and nature to run its course, when she sees a failed civilization, she erases it and starts anew. I do not believe this should be the case with Earth. I believe the varying races and species on this planet can adapt to new environments. Every creature has adapted naturally in one way or another. For example, some mammals grow thick fur to protect themselves from harsh weather. These animals, where they were created with a rudimentary fur coat, grew longer and thicker hair over time as conditions warranted. Adaptation and evolution, Vincent. That's all I believe in. Occasionally, evolution moves too slowly for my liking. That's why things like the removal of Atlantia from the planet's surface must occur.

"The people of Atlantia have great knowledge to impart to the rest of the world. The problem is, the rest of the world isn't ready for it. If evolution is pushed too fast, entire civilizations and races invariably perish. This normally calls forth Zaron, and we don't want that to happen, do we? I do not foresee any major strides occurring anytime soon, so I am forced to take these drastic measures."

A revelation hit me and I blurted out, "You planned it all."

"Of course I did," he readily admitted. "I need to continue with some experiments I've been working on, not to mention a few new ones, and I need somewhere private. If Atlantia stays on the surface much longer, other civilizations will discover it. That would lead down a dangerous path. Those who are not ready for what Atlantia holds can only find misfortune. I knew only one thing that could bring about a shift

in the very structure of the Earth drastic enough to sink Atlantia. Zaron's egg. Once her power is tapped, she will feel its loss. Most likely, she will merely stir within the egg. That will be enough. The force of her egg shifting will cause earthquakes strong enough to topple mountains. Tsunamis like solid walls of water will travel the ocean and crash over the island.

"Once underwater, the people of Atlantia will be adapted at a basic genetic level. They will be given the ability to breathe underwater, though it will only be a necessity if they choose to leave the safety of the island. Being amphibious, they will be able to survive at sea as effortlessly as on land."

"How is the island supposed to survive underwater? The people will drown before you can make any changes to them," I angrily remarked.

"I'm sure you overheard my conversation just now. The Shield you heard about is a majickal protection. That is another reason I needed Zaron's egg brought to the surface and not kept belowground. We could've easily gotten the egg to move underground, but to tap its power to create the Shield we needed it on the surface. We'll be able to generate enough majickal energy to power the Shield forever in the few seconds we'll have available to us."

"Were the people of Atlantia given a choice in this?" I demanded.

"Don't raise your tone with me, child," he irately replied as he rose from his throne. As he descended the steps, vines shot up from the floor and laced into a lush green carpet for him to walk on. Small golden flowers sprouted from the vines in perfect rows, creating a decorative border. The living carpet ended at the bottom step, just inches from my feet. I took a few steps back, deeming it wise to give Genepool some space. He stopped at the bottom step and continued his diatribe, "The people of Atlantia should be grateful I chose them. Races and civilizations around the world would kill for the opportunity to come before me and be granted a new existence. New races get created every day, and they all come from my works. Evolution is inevitable, and the people of Atlantia will be thankful, if not honored, that I chose them. Their lives will be legend, their teachings passed along forever. They will become myth as memory among mankind fades but the people of Atlantia will outlive that very myth."

I stood there, utterly speechless. Genepool was someone I had truly trusted. He was polite every time he saw me, never condescending because I was a child. As I grew, he would visit and check in on Valencia and I, joining us for dinner once in a while. Now I learned he was the

person responsible for the eradication of Atlantia. Not only that, but he apparently intended on altering the genetics of these people without their consent.

We stood there like statues, our gaze never faltering. Finally, I said, "I could stop this."

"Vincent, this is going to happen. Besides, you helped make this a reality. You're the one that developed the system to get the egg out. Without you, we'd still be trying to figure out a good way to uncover it without disturbing her on the way up. Your very presence here was part of the plan as well. Convincing that egomaniacal father of yours to bring you here for your education was a breeze. Granted, I had already sent Ra to Egypt to teach you, but it appears he made out just fine.

"I know this is painful for you to hear. I can see it in your eyes. I won't apologize for using your gifts for my own purposes. Propheteus foresaw it and I wanted it. It worked out precisely as I'd hoped. Maybe I'm being selfish, but look at it this way. Your friends in Egypt, how would they react to everyday life in Atlantia? Do you think they could handle all it has to offer? I doubt it. Their minds cannot grasp all that Atlantia has to offer. It would most likely drive them mad. So let us compromise, shall we?"

"What are you proposing?" I asked.

"You want to see the knowledge of Atlantia passed on. Believe it or not, so do I. So, if you choose to leave and impart the lessons of Atlantia to the masses, I will not alter anyone that does not wish it. If they choose to live a life as only an air breather, so be it. In return, I ask only that you pass on your vast wealth of knowledge of plant life to all peoples. You, Vincent, shall author the Book of Nature Lore. I will give you a tome of recorded plant life to get you started. Let them know what is safe to eat and what is not. Tell them which plants are medicinal and which ones are poisonous. Search out those plants you've never encountered and record what uses they have. Do this, and I will give the people of Atlantia a choice. Refuse and they evolve willingly or not."

I stood in silence, pondering the choice before me. It wasn't a bad offer, given the circumstances. Besides, writing down all the plant life couldn't be all that tough. I was still fuming inside at being used. I felt like, though I brought peace to the earthen races, my time on Atlantia was all a set up for one man's sick goals. The more I thought about it, the more I knew that was exactly what happened. Resigned to failing in my quest to save Atlantia from its watery grave, I said, "I'll do as you ask."

"Good. And I will uphold my end. Now I advise you to leave Atlantia. The Shield will be operational soon. Once it is, and Zaron stirs,

you won't have long before it gets swallowed up. You never did learn how to swim, did you?"

I wanted to knock the smile off his face and wished I had Terran's maul to do it. "Where can I get the information on plants you spoke of?" I asked, refusing to dignify his question with a response.

Genepool snapped his fingers and a man in a green robe and white sash entered the room from a door behind his throne. He wordlessly walked over to me and handed me a satchel he was carrying. I opened it as he turned and left. There was one book inside and nothing else. Before I could ask where the rest of the books were, Genepool answered my question for me.

"That book is from Propheteus's library. Open it to any page and you will see what you need. If you are looking up a certain plant, the page you open to will show that plant. If you need to record it as new, you will open to a blank page."

I placed the book back in the satchel and tied it shut. Before I left, I had one thing left to ask. "Now that you've told me things I didn't want to know, why don't you tell me what I want to hear?"

"You mean how I define order? Vincent, I was hoping I wouldn't have to tell you. It should be easy enough to figure out. Just keep life going. That's all. Help people thrive and survive. Help them learn and grow. Help them evolve."

A tiny grin appeared on my face for the first time today. "You know, that's the most reasonable definition I've heard yet."

"And from me, no less. How disappointing that must be for you."

My grin shifted into a snarl. I turned and walked out of his temple without another word. I had nothing left to say to the Ancient. Next time we met, that would change. I would never forget his audacity in using me for his own gains.

I wasted no time departing. Sprinting eastward, I ran until I reached the African shore. For the first time in weeks I had no other pressing matters to attend to. I stood there, looking out over the ocean, and I could barely see a few of the taller peaks of the island. I sat down, wondering how much longer Atlantia had left. My question was answered before the sun set. I felt an immense rumbling and watched as the water receded from the shore. I knew this was the moment. Zaron had finally been disturbed enough and had moved. Now the earth moved with her.

Knowing the water would return with tremendous force, I stood and prepared myself for a hasty exit. The whole world seemed to quake at Zaron's stirring and I had trouble keeping my balance at first. Without

warning, a giant plume of steam shot up from the island, clouding the sky and obscuring the mountains from view. Out on the ocean, I saw a wall of water closing in on the shoreline. Not wanting to get swept away, I took this as my cue to go. I saw the mountains begin to sink into the sea behind the wall. As I vacated the area, the image of Atlantia sinking was burned into my mind for eternity.

Days passed by, rolling over into weeks, months, years. Centuries passed as I roamed the Earth, dispensing the knowledge of Atlantia to civilizations everywhere. Much social advancement occurred due to my influence. Great cities sprung forth with my guidance. I witnessed kingdoms rise and fall. Sometimes I helped them survive. Other times, I caused their downfalls. Everywhere I went my teachings were heard and cherished. I found I worked best when I stayed in the background. I was the valued adviser to many leaders, always giving them my unvarnished advice. My counsel always guided these leaders, and therefore the kingdoms, in the principles of order. If I felt a leader was getting too far from what I deemed orderly, I would create a situation that would lead to their demise. These various leaders, self-centered and self-serving as they were, never doubted my words and put my advice into practice without question. I was never loyal to these men, only to order. Order, above all, must be the driving force in the world.

I ruminated over all the Ancients had told me about order during my long travels. I came to the conclusion that of all the Ancients to impart their wisdom to me, Propheteus was the wisest of them all. I wasn't exactly shocked by that revelation. It was just that he told me to listen to what all of the Ancients had to say, not just him. As I met more people and spread my influence and knowledge to all I encountered, I came to find that there was no one, easy way to establish order. Every city was different, every kingdom unique. Sometimes I would talk to the townsfolk and get them to work in an orderly fashion. Planting their crops in neat rows, having the streets in town line up parallel to one another with perpendicular intersections, making laws to govern by, all of these things had to be pushed upon people once in a while. Not everyone intrinsically leaned towards order. I worked hard to preserve life, as Genepool had asked. I recorded every plant I came across in the book he gave me and used the information repeatedly when helping raise the quality of life in towns I came upon. The establishment of empires was The Beholder's way of maintaining order and I freely assisted many empires succeed. When the time came that the empire was no longer following the guidelines I'd set, I would judge them, sometimes violently,

and let Styx sort them out. I did not judge men as good or evil, just orderly or chaotic. Good and evil was Christi Lona and Lillith's domain.

It was almost two thousand years after I'd left Atlantia before I met another Ancient. I almost walked right past him without knowing he was there. More specifically, I walked over him. I was in Asia and had just left the ruins of a village. The eerie quiet I experienced when I entered told me straight away something was amiss. The town had been wiped out, every man, woman and child killed. I had assumed they had been killed even though I could find no evidence. Since I couldn't find a body, I considered that evidence enough. The town was utterly deserted. Then I noticed the silence. There were no birds singing in the trees, no dogs barking in the distance, nothing at all. The land in front of the houses had no flowers or bushes to speak of. There weren't even any insects buzzing around. Every form of life had been eliminated. Since there was nothing I could do, I left. The mystery of its inhabitants would have to be solved by someone else.

A few miles outside of town there was a river cutting a path through the valley, creating a vast canyon. I continued in that direction and noticed a large land bridge allowing passage from one side of the canyon to the other. As I started across this massive structure, it moved. I was so startled I nearly fell off. Once I regained my composure, I examined what had moved and, although it was difficult to believe at first, came to the conclusion I was now looking at a gigantic head. The eyes of this being were bigger than my entire body. I was seriously afraid of being drawn into its lungs when it inhaled. Standing firm, I extended my metallic claws and asked this creature to identify itself. His voice was deep and raspy, but his words were clear. This was The Hunger, Ancient destroyer. I stood on his shoulder as he relayed his version of order. Again, I listened intently, hoping to glean something useful from his advice. When he finished, I asked a few questions and he gladly complied with concise answers.

According to the mammoth Hunger, order among civilizations depends on isolation. He told me that when every town was self-sufficient and able to function on its own order could take hold. If a town could not grasp the beauty of order, they would be fed to The Hunger. He explained that his mission was to devour. That was it, just to devour. The Hunger explained that he fed off the energy within every mortal body. He used the fuel from their bodies to continue devouring. It was an endless cycle. When towns were isolated, according to The Hunger, it made it easier for one to disappear. The only things left standing after a visit from The Hunger was the buildings.

I politely thanked The Hunger for his guidance and promised to take his words to heart. I had to admit that isolation did have its advantages. If every town was separated from the others, the negative influence of one could not infect the others. However, any town that remained isolated would also become stagnant. They wouldn't have anyone new coming in to help them advance as a society. So, though his words did have merit, I didn't think The Hunger's advice was very practical. At least not in every instance.

I still made an effort to put The Hunger's recommendation to the test. Over the next century I tried to keep some towns apart from others. I figured that as long as a town wasn't totally xenophobic and would allow like-minded outsiders into their village, isolation could be beneficial to certain groups. I helped one town set up in this manner shortly after my encounter with The Hunger and left believing it went quite well.

Slightly over a hundred years had passed since I'd met The Hunger and decided to check up on the first town I'd set up according to his definition. At the gate of the village, I came upon a man's body resting in a large pool of his own blood. His head had been cleanly cut from his body. I extended my gauntlets and prepared myself for battle. If this were The Hunger's doing, there would be no body left for me to find. Someone else was responsible for his death. Determined to find out who this person was, I entered the village.

It was horrific. I had to step over and around the dead bodies scattered everywhere. The streets were absolutely littered with corpses. Rodents were gnawing at some of the fresher remains. The scurried away as I approached, trailing pieces of intestines behind them as they ran. My stomach roiled at the sight but I became more determined than ever to find the perpetrator. I scanned the area and saw two men at the other end of the main street. One man was holding a sword above his head and was preparing to decapitate the other. I sprinted towards them, intent on stopping another murder from taking place. Somehow the man with the sword saw me coming and pointed his weapon at me. I came to a screeching halt, leaving the end of the sword inches away from my chest. The tip of the sword was glistening in the sun. The rest of it was coated with blood.

The stranger before me was about six feet in height and all toned muscle. He radiated strength and power. His shoulder-length black hair was matted with blood. The man didn't say a word. He only looked me dead in the eye. With a grace and speed that impressed even me, he swung his sword backwards and struck his detainee. The man on the ground was instantly separated from his head. The rest of his body

slumped over and fell to the ground as his head rolled a few feet away. The killer swung his sword around and it was once again pointed at me. What must have been the dead man's aura, for I'd seen similar things while in Limbo, left his body and entered the sword. His gaze never left mine the entire time.

After a minute of staring at each other he finally lowered his weapon and introduced himself. To my surprise, I had come upon Gilmore the Traveler, not some ordinary mass murderer. He said he must kill people to control their souls. When I asked him to explain in more detail, he told me he couldn't. All he knew was that he was Gilmore the Traveler, Ancient devourer of souls. Anything more than that wasn't from his memories but the memories of the people he'd killed. Their souls, their memories and experiences, their abilities both physical and majickal, and sometimes their personalities, were transmitted to him. Although his memory was hazy, he was convinced he wasn't the first person to walk the earth as Gilmore. He couldn't explain why he felt this way, just that he did. Maybe it was one of the souls he'd devoured that remembered and not him.

After identifying himself, he shocked me further by telling me I had been expected. My timing was a little off though. He had wanted to complete his undertaking before I arrived. Amidst all the carnage and death, Gilmore proceeded to tell me what he believed order to be. Déjà vu set in at once. His words echoed those of The Hunger. Gilmore considered isolation to be the most beneficial way of keeping things in order as well. The only difference in their motives was the personal aspect. They each wanted the citizens of these towns for themselves. Gilmore only wanted to devour their souls, not their entire bodies. It bothered me a little that he only killed for the souls. At least The Hunger didn't leave such a mess.

I let Gilmore speak even though I knew what he was going to say. It was the polite thing to do. Once he finished, I swore to take his words to heart and we parted company. My vow to him was going to be easy enough to keep. Since I had already established some towns on the theory of isolationism, I would simply keep doing what I had been all along. This time, I would not place as many towns apart from others. Two Ancients wanted me to isolate the population into tiny groups, making it easier for them to decimate. I couldn't bring myself to place so many people in harm's way. Since I didn't believe in total isolationism myself, I couldn't rationalize having their deaths on my hands. A few here and there as I saw fit, but not many.

Chapter 15

I kept my vow to the Ancients for many more centuries. Along the way I helped more empires rise and, in time, watched every single one fall. I isolated some villages and interconnected others. I taught Nature Lore to all I encountered. I even taught cooking, mainly while I lived in Europe. I had grown tired of wandering around the globe trying to directly influence everything all the time and decided to settle down for a while. Not having anything better to do, I taught the locals the fine culinary arts. All the while, I was teaching them what herbs they could use in their cooking, what plants could be used to treat burns, what leaf to stay away from to avoid a rash and more. It was a much easier way to teach Nature Lore than walking around everywhere.

I remained in southern Europe for more than a millennium. I moved from small town to small town every thirty to forty years as not to arouse suspicion. You couldn't exactly live in the same place for a few hundred years without having to answer an uncomfortable question or two. I'd found most mortals had trouble associating with a known immortal so I tried to remain incognito as much as possible. With my size and build, not to mention feral fangs, I still stood out in a crowd. Hence the need to relocate now and again. When it was time for me to move on from a town, I would take the opportunity to check up on other villages I'd assisted along the way.

The world had taken a dark turn as of late. Wars between countries were constant. Wars between races and clans of the same country were even more prevalent. Blood soaked the earth of many lands I'd once helped grow. These places were now torn asunder, burned to the ground in one skirmish or another. Order was deteriorating rapidly but it didn't feel like chaos was making any ground. I couldn't explain it, but the only place I'd ever felt the presence of chaos reigning over the land was in Egypt. My sister's influence was wide in the area and spread out from Egypt to the surrounding region. Other than that, there were only trivial pockets of chaotic places around the world. This was different. This felt like two other forces pulling at each other. I wondered if this meant Love and Hate would soon be brought to bear. I had to assume Valencia and I would be informed if this were to happen. They would need our help and guidance.

I was returning to Europe from a recent trip to Persia and had noticed a plant I had never seen before. I pulled the Book of Nature Lore from my satchel and opened to a blank page. I examined it closely, making sure it was a new variety. Once convinced, I pulled a leaf off and

went to place it on my tongue. Before I could, I heard a voice.

"I wouldn't do that." The voice came from nowhere and surrounded me. It was soft, as if the breeze itself was talking to me. "It's poisonous."

"I don't think that really matters," I replied to no one and felt foolish the second I did it. I was responding to thin air.

"No, for you I guess it doesn't."

This time I was sure I wasn't hallucinating. As I went to reply, the light breeze I'd noticed grew into a gust of wind. The wind intensified and began to swirl around in front of me. A small twister formed before my eyes. To my wonderment, the miniature tornado transformed into the shape of a man. He was wearing a dark maroon robe that covered his entire body with the exception of his face. I couldn't see what his face looked like because he had his head lowered. When he did look up, I stumbled backwards in shock. He looked like me.

"Do not be alarmed, Aggression," the wind said to me. "I will not harm you."

"You look just like me," I said to the stranger. I watched his mouth move as I spoke, mimicking my words.

"Right now I do, yes," was the reply. This time, his mouth didn't move at all.

"What do you normally look like?" I asked and saw his mouth again move with mine.

"That is not important right now," the wind replied.

"Right. What is important is you telling me how you're doing that." Watching my face on another person, moving their mouth with mine, was very possibly the most annoying thing I'd ever experienced. It was too bizarre to comprehend.

"That is not important either."

"Then let's start at the beginning. Who are you?"

The stranger tilted his head back and I heard polite laughter swirl around me. My mouth on his body remained closed. "You have finally asked the proper question. I am the Ancient Each, Aggression, and it is my honor to meet you at last."

My bewilderment faded at the mention of his name. "Ancient one, the honor is all mine," I said with all due respect. Smiling, I added, "I was beginning to wonder if we'd ever cross paths."

"You are not that easy to keep up with, child." The voice lilted with laughter as the words floated past my ears.

"I assume, of course, that you are about to tell me what you think order is."

“Soon. There are other pressing matters to discuss first. I can sense that, though you are quite eager to receive my advice about order and how I perceive it to be, you have other questions clouding your mind.”

There were indeed several things I wished to know more about. I wanted to find out more about Genepool. Since his deception was revealed to me millennia ago, I’d wanted to get some sort of retribution. The means of accomplishing that goal eluded me however. Also, when Christi Lona and Lillith paid that unpleasant visit to The Beholder, they mentioned the Ancients. Not only that, they mentioned a way to kill an Ancient. He was right. I did have a lot more to discuss than I realized. Questions I hadn’t considered in ages leapt to the forefront of my mind. I felt as if my mind wasn’t my own.

“My apologies, Aggression. I simply noticed these things. You see, I’m not really here. I’m just a projection from your mind.”

My thoughts may not have been completely my own, but I definitely owned the headache. “Please, just tell me what’s going on,” I moaned.

“I will try. I do not reside on this plane in physical form. I watch from the air, for I am the air. My mind resides at the end of time yet I am in the mind of every individual, conscious mind on Earth. What you see, the reason you see your face on my body, is that I have no body as such. I choose to show the face of the person I’m speaking with only because it is normally less troubling for the individual. It is also the face most readily available to one’s own mind. As I said, that’s all I did. I merely created a projection from your mind. The door to your mind was much easier to open than I had expected.” The last words flittered by with a tone of pleasant surprise.

“Why do I suddenly want to ask you questions that I haven’t thought about in centuries?” I asked.

“Because I knew you wanted to ask them. I prodded them from you mind.”

“Don’t you think it’s rude to go around prying into people’s minds?” I asked, my anger growing. I was getting confused and wanted this cleared up.

“Again, my apologies, but I only looked for things I knew were there. No thoughts are private to me, child. Where Propheteus knows what will happen in the annals of time, I know why. I know a person’s motivations, their innermost rationale. I know why people make the choices they make.” The voice paused with the wind. The air around me was perfectly still. In my mind, I saw memories of my life cascading past

me. I saw Valencia and I sitting on a log by the riverside in Egypt. I saw The Beholder standing in a vast desert as I sped towards him. All of the Ancient's words came flooding back to me, visions of them enlightening me with their counsel as clear to me now as it was centuries, even millennia, ago. My time spent in Asia teaching construction methodology, centuries in Greece holding council with the local teachers and philosophers, even memories as banal as a beginner's cooking lesson in Italy, they all came rushing back to me. Minutes later, after I'd seen countless years run through my mind, the breeze and the voice resumed. "There are no secrets from me."

I hadn't moved in a while yet I was utterly exhausted. Reliving almost four thousand years of one's life took a lot out of you. I bent over and put my hands on my knees. I shook my head in an attempt to totally clear my head but a few stray thoughts remained. They were the questions I wanted to ask. First, I wanted to clarify something. "If you're in my mind, you can control it."

"I can, but I do not. I do not interfere in the everyday choices people make. I observe. I do not intrude."

"Fair enough," I mumbled. Regaining my composure, I straightened up and asked, "So what happened to The Beholder?"

To explain what I felt would be impossible. The only way to accurately describe it would be to say the wind smiled. The breeze kicked up some stray leaves. Soon, small whirlwinds formed and scooped up more and more leaves. The leaves bounced from one twister to another in a display of aerobatic brilliance. More and more leaves joined the dance until the small twisters merged into one. Hundreds of leaves floated higher and higher into the sky. When the breeze subsided, the leaves fell from the treetops. Before the first one landed, the voice of Each said, "A judgment was made and his sentence was carried out." I wouldn't say the voice sounded happy about The Beholder's demise, but he most assuredly wasn't upset about it.

"Judgment made by whom?" I asked.

"His fellow Ancients. There was a conference of sorts where Propheteus informed us of The Beholder's intentions. The Beholder was planning to take control of the portals on Earth. He would decide who could pass and who could not. If a being arrived from the portal that The Beholder did not want present, it would be slaughtered. Had he succeeded, he would've controlled what beings roamed the planet, thereby essentially holding Haven and Haedes hostage. It is why you were first brought to Egypt, for there is a portal not far from where you once called home. To achieve his objectives, he needed your leadership, your logical

mind to be able to overthrow leaders and races around the world. Your decision to reject his arguments about order ruined his plans. That was why he felt you had to be terminated. His actions that day, as well as many others spanning all the years since his return, has caused irreparable damage to future events.

"Christi Lona and Lillith were present at the meeting as well. They had been asked by Tag and Nacht to inform us of The Beholder's belligerence in regards to you and your sister. Tag and Nacht were privy to the prophecy that foretold of your death. Neither of them, however, knew which realm you would be called to upon death. There were many people who were very interested in that information."

"Why on earth would my death be so important?" I asked, appalled at such a macabre notion.

"Had you gone to Haedes upon your death, you may have been the one to fulfill a prophecy told only to Lillith. The same holds true with Christi Lona had you gone to Haven. Since you showed up in Limbo, they both knew you weren't the one they were waiting for.

"So they both wanted me to die?"

"Yes, but naturally. Prophecy cannot be forced. It must occur naturally, without undue pressure. Forcing the issue only causes problems in the future. Only Tag and Nacht knew of your pending death by The Beholder's hand. Propheteus doles out his writings to those he believes should have them. His choices do not always make sense at first. Personally, I stopped doubting his wisdom eons ago."

"Can we get back to the topic please?" I no longer wanted to talk about how everyone was waiting for me to die. It was morbid.

"Absolutely. Christi Lona, Lillith and the Ancients decided that drastic measures would have to be taken in regards to The Beholder. Christi Lona and Lillith were assigned to kill The Beholder, and before you ask, yes, you can indeed kill an Ancient. Only the most powerful beings in the universe, working in concert with one another, can even dream of attempting it. Christi Lona and Lillith are two of those people. The Will Cosmic gave them the ability to dispose of The Beholder permanently.

"Christi Lona refused to kill him. She believed it was not justified to destroy him. He should be punished, just not killed. Even though all others disagreed, a compromise was reached. The sisters were taken aside by one of the Ancients and told how to hurt him badly without killing him. Since it left him alive, which was important to Christi Lona, and caused immeasurable pain, which of course appealed to Lillith, it was a good compromise. They were given pass to Earth by Styx for the sole

purpose of dealing with The Beholder and were then called back to their realms.”

I stood there and let his words fade away. It was a lot to think about after all these years. The memory of The Beholder’s fall was never gone from my mind. After Each’s little show, I guess no memory ever faded completely. After I digested all the information, I said, “I guess I have two questions. First, where is the mask?”

“It is safe,” came the brisk answer. From the increase in the wind when the words passed by, I assumed nothing else need be said on the topic.

“Second, who told the sisters how to hurt him?”

The wind laughed and the leaves that had cascaded over us moments ago flew into the air again. “It was not me, I assure you.”

“I don’t care who it wasn’t. I asked who it was.” I decided it was time to take charge of this conversation.

“Very well. Who do you believe it was?”

“Can’t you read it in my mind?” I asked sarcastically.

“Actually, no. I see the different possibilities and theories but no one definite thought. I will say that it is not the person you most strongly believe to be the guilty party.”

“Genepool?”

“Correct. Though he did deceive you, The Beholder’s downfall was his own. Genepool played no part except to vote at the council.”

“Why is it that every answer from you gives me more questions?”

“The vote was unanimous,” he answered before I could ask. “But for your original question, it was in fact Styx that imparted her knowledge to the sisters. She gets along quite well with both Lillith and Christi Lona. That is information worth remembering by the way.”

“Styx didn’t seem too fond of him when I met her,” I commented.

“The Beholder is not very well liked, as the vote tally should imply. Had Zaron not been resting, I am sure she would’ve voted the same way. He has a certain attribute none of the other Ancients share, at least not at his level.”

“And what is that?” I prodded.

“Arrogance,” Each replied. The word blew by and pounded in my ears. Though the mouth on his body moved with mine, when he spoke or reacted to my words, the head would move normally. The expression I saw on that familiar face showed nothing but disgust and contempt.

“I noticed,” I replied, rubbing my chest where he had impaled me

millennia ago. My physical scars always faded rapidly, from that first attack by The Beholder and beyond. The memory and the mental scarring that went with it remained to this day.

"I do not feel much is lost by his absence myself. We have different philosophies."

"So I finally get to hear your take on order," I said. I was truly eager to hear his thoughts on the topic. Besides, this marked the end of an almost four thousand year task. I was to hear from all available Ancients and now it would finally come to pass.

"I have no definition of order for you, just advice. This is only the way I see things. Everyone is different."

"Believe me, I know," I replied with a laugh. I had seen so many varied races and peoples that I'd come to the conclusion order was not going to be an easy thing to establish worldwide.

"I'm sure you do," the wind laughed back. My mind had finally grasped the concept of Each's voice being separate from his body and had fallen into conversation with him easily. It was good to see he had a sense of humor too. "In every town you've come upon you've taken your time, talked to a few of the people, visited the local shops and gathered as many facts as possible. From there, you made a conclusion as to whether or not you could help and if you could, how. I've witnessed you lift a tiny village from abject ruin and make it a viable society again, and I've see you help topple great empires that stretched over many lands. I've seen you take matters into your own hands and slaughter entire towns as well. You have leaned away from violence yet not once have you hesitated to use your aggressive gifts when necessary. Your self-restraint and control have helped you in immeasurable ways. Along with your ability to assess all relevant facts and draw accurate conclusions, most of the time, they are your greatest assets. It is what has made you able to push the evolution of society forward. Now you must bring them together."

"Bring them together? How?" Each seemed to be proposing the exact opposite of what Gilmore and The Hunger had advised. I stood still, patiently waiting for the headache to start in earnest.

"When societies work together, they flourish. I've noticed you have put Gilmore's advice into practice on occasion. I do not believe isolation is good for the people of a village. They don't get to share in vast experiences. They don't get to see new things, visit new places or meet new people. Also, they don't get to share their knowledge with others. Everyone has something to offer a society. It was not the architects that built the castles of England or the pyramids in Egypt. It was people, toiling everyday, who built these things. Laborers, masons,

carpenters, these people all serve a purpose. The shopkeepers, the blacksmiths, the innkeepers, a town cannot survive without these people. In a village, if a man is a skilled carpenter and his neighbor is not and needs assistance, the man will most often gladly help. If this is true, why shouldn't a village that has several skilled carpenters help a village that does not? Maybe that village has more proficient blacksmiths. Could they not help each other in this instance? When every village can live in peace and harmony, becoming one with each other, order cannot only be established, it can be maintained with less and less influence from you as time goes on. If they are teaching each other, helping each other to grow and prosper, have you not accomplished your goals? Good and evil, living side-by-side and cooperating on a base level. Cast your nets wide, Aggression, and bring them all into one."

His words rang in my head. It made sense on the surface but omitted one vital piece of data. The nature of evil was to kill. There could never be peace this way. Each's advice was worth the wait however. I could picture a world where everyone lived together, working towards common goals. I wasn't sure if Each was putting that image there or if it was my own. He said he didn't interfere but I'd been lied to by an Ancient before. After careful consideration, I thanked him for taking the time to impart his wisdom to me and turned to leave. I took one step and got pushed back by a wall of solid air.

"Believe it or not, that is not the most vital information I must pass along," the voice spoke with clear reservation.

I turned back and looked at the image of Each. His head was bowed again and I assumed he was unenthusiastic about the next part of our conversation. "Then what is?" I asked.

"I must advise you to go to Egypt."

"Absolutely not," I replied emphatically and without hesitation.

"Aggression, it is essential that you leave here and go directly to Egypt."

I paused to let my temper subside before saying, "As long as I don't have to go near her, I'll go to Egypt."

"Aggression, why else would you need to go there?"

"Absolutely not!"

The wind never ceased but the words did. Once my anger had again abated, Each continued. His voice was as calm as when I'd first heard it. "There is a very good reason. Would you like to hear it?"

"I have a very good reason for not bothering my sister. Would you care to hear that?" I mockingly replied.

"I already know it."

“Of course you do.”

“Please do not be upset with me, Aggression. What I have to tell you is in fact good news, in a way. When you tell Valencia what I have said, she may not be as upset as you imagine. May I at least speak my piece? After that, I will let you make your own decision.”

“Fair enough,” I replied.

“Twelve years ago, two brothers were born onto the Earth. These brothers are unlike nearly every other being on the planet...”

“Stop right there!” I demanded. I was furious. He was talking about Love and Hate. I was sure of it. For twelve years, our brothers had been walking this realm and we weren’t told. “Why am I only hearing about this now?”

“Because your influence, and your sisters for that matter, would be too powerful for them at such a young age. They did not have the same benefits you enjoyed. They were born as mere babies and grew with only human influence for half their lives. The last six have been spent in slavery to a man named Nathaniel Graves. A human as well, Nathaniel Graves is no mere mortal. Graves is a powerful master of the majicks, both light and dark. He is a dark individual, cruel and unforgiving of the smallest transgression. Though human, his influence is not. This evening, Nathaniel Graves will kill one of them. Which one at this time is unknown, even this close to the actual event.

“They do not know who they are, Aggression. They do not understand why, at the tender age of twelve, they are as tall as many adults and many times stronger. They can hear each other’s thoughts but cannot comprehend why. All the knowledge you’ve revealed to the world over the millennia is unknown to them. The existence of the Ancients is but a story their adopted parents told them. The Aseraphim are but a fantasy. They do not know these things for they have been in the ethereal for eons. Their spirits, their auras, have not faded, but without Order and Chaos by their side they failed to retain their concept of self. That is why they had to be born as infants. They needed to be allowed to grow as naturally as possible. Now one of them will die and they will need to know. You need to go to Egypt, tell Valencia what I have told you, and wait.”

“Wait? Why can’t I stop it?”

“Because it has to happen,” the voice said sadly.

I was growing tired of that excuse. “Fine. Then why do I have to wait when I get to Egypt? Why can’t we just go to where they are?”

“Because you must wait for someone. An escort, if you will.”

“Who?”

"I do not know at this time. It depends on who dies and how. There will be another that will join you. Of that I am most sure."

"And after that?"

"I recommend you have your sister wait with the slain sibling. When he returns from whichever realm he was destined for, he will most likely be very disoriented."

"And she's supposed to help?" I asked sarcastically.

"When it comes to her family, Valencia can be trusted. She will comfort the slain until you complete your task."

"And that task is..."

"To judge and punish Nathaniel Graves as you see fit."

I nodded. It sounded simple enough. "I guess I'm off to Egypt then," I said unenthusiastically.

"I believe so. Be well, Aggression. Remember all that we've discussed and use it well."

"I will. It truly has been an honor," I said sincerely.

"For me as well." As his words faded with the wind, the figure of Each dissolved into a small whirlwind and dissipated into the remaining breeze.

Now I had to go break a promise. Well, not really a promise. It was more like a deal. Somehow, I knew the finer distinction would be lost on Valencia. Knowing I was in for a serious verbal bashing upon arrival, I sprinted off for the pyramids of Egypt.

Chapter 16

The sun was still high in the sky when I arrived at the pyramid, bringing with it unbearable heat. The great pyramid had weathered much in the centuries since I'd seen in last. I wanted to visit the village while I was here, just to see if it was still standing, but time was of the essence. I was about to go in when a young man approached. He eyed me up suspiciously and I had to admit, I looked very different from everyone else around.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is none of your concern," I replied as politely as possible.

"You aren't going in there, are you?" He was visibly shaken by the prospect.

"Yes, I am. Why?"

"Many men have ventured into the pyramid. Very few ever return. Those that do have been driven insane by what they've witnessed. They say the Labyrinth swallows them whole. I would not enter that cursed place for all the Pharaoh's gold."

I smiled warmly at the nervous gentleman and replied, "There's no need to worry about me, sir, but I appreciate your concern. I assure you, I'll be fine."

"Then you take a greater risk than I," he said and quickly ran off. I could only imagine what Valencia was doing to these poor people to make them react in such a way. If time permitted, I planned to talk to her about it.

The moment I entered the pyramid, the path to the Labyrinth came rushing back to me. My mind felt so open and free since my visit from Each. Every thought and memory I possessed was instantly available. That all changed the closer I got to the Labyrinth. My headache started out small until I got to the first intersection. By the time I reached the entrance to the Labyrinth of Chaos, it was as if someone was swinging a mallet inside my head and battering the inside of my skull.

I wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible so I sprinted into the maze. A few seconds and a few wrong turns later I saw the walls shift. The majicks Set placed in motion so long ago apparently still held their power. I continued running as the walls reset. I didn't mind the moving partitions as much as the corpses.

Down every corridor there was at least one dead body. I paused the first time I came across one and came to the conclusion the man had died of dehydration. His body was severely decayed and I could only

guess at how long it had been down here. Every corpse I encountered seemingly suffered the same fate. After getting lost in the Labyrinth they just sat down to die, exhausted and most probably insane.

I was moving faster and faster through the maze. Going so fast, I didn't see the man wandering aimlessly until I was almost on top of him. I slowed down as fast as I could but still bumped into him. He pitched forward but did not fall. Stranger still, he never turned around. He kept wandering along, oblivious to my presence. I stepped around and looked into his face. The moment I saw the look on his face I regretted it. This man was clearly insane. He was smiling but behind his eyes was abject madness. He glanced over at me and just kept walking. Since I was on a schedule and he didn't appear to be in any physical danger or hurt in any way, I continued past him in search of my sister.

The walls kept repositioning themselves constantly, making my mission more challenging than I cared for. After three hours of top speed running, I finally reached the center of the maze. All those years ago, upon arriving at this place, Valencia and I rescued Ihmo from Set's grasp in this very chamber. This time, it appeared empty.

"Val! Are you here?" I yelled.

She darted out from behind a curtain. To my amazement, she looked worried. Running over to me, she leapt up and hugged me. "Are you okay?" she asked excitedly. "You got killed, didn't you?"

"What?" I blurted out, thrown off by her question. This was not what I had expected.

"After you left here you died, didn't you? It was only a few weeks later." The concern on her face and in her voice left me dumbfounded. "It happened, didn't it? Was it The Beholder? I bet it was. I never did like him, and I tried to tell you..."

"How did you know? Did one of your teachers tell you?"

"No they didn't, Aggression," she said, humorously lilting her voice when mentioning my nom de plume. "I felt it."

"What? How?" The confusion never ended with her. I was with her less than a minute and just like that, I had no idea what was going on.

"It's like this," she replied and held her right hand out palm up. She closed her eyes for a moment and when she opened them I saw an image appear. It was a perfect, three-dimensional rendering of the planet. "Pretty cool, isn't it? It's only an illusion obviously. So far, it's the only spell I can do with any proficiency. Anyway, that's not what I wanted to show you."

"Would you get to the point? I have something I have to talk to you about."

"In a minute. Watch." As I gazed at the globe, a blanket of black and yellow began to cover the surface. "This is what the world looked like about four thousand years ago. You'll notice Atlantia is still on the surface."

"I see that," I said as I spotted it underneath the floating masses of yellow and black.

"What you see is the influence you and I had on the planet at the time. You're yellow, of course."

I looked at my outfit. I still dressed in yellow and red all the time. "Of course. But why are you represented by black?"

"Why do you think?"

I looked into her light green eyes hidden behind her bright blonde hair. Though she had spent several millennia in Egypt, one of the hottest locations on the planet, she'd been able to maintain her pale skin color. She dressed in white from head to toe and had from day one. "I have no idea. Personally, it doesn't make any sense at all."

"Exactly. Anyway, a few weeks after you left, something began to happen." A small section of a yellow mass began to quiver. It was located directly over Atlantia. I could make a good guess and say it was directly over the spot where The Beholder killed me. Valencia waved her left hand through the globe and continued, "I didn't actually see this happen. It's just a way for me to tell you what I felt."

"I get it, but can we finish this later."

"No," she offhandedly replied. "That feeling went on for about thirty seconds. The whole time it felt like someone was sticking daggers in my chest. Suddenly, the hole appeared." The place that had been quaking before now dropped, forming a cylinder that seemed bottomless. Tiny drops of yellow fell into the chasm and disappeared. "That's when you died. I know, because it felt like those daggers that had been driven into me were violently ripped out. Then there was nothing."

She paused and I saw a tear form in her eye. She looked up at me and saw the impatience in my gaze. "Keep going," I urged.

She wiped the tear away with her free hand and resumed. "After a minute or two, the hole patched itself up." The yellow funnel instantly filled back up and everything looked like it had when she started. "So, you did really die?"

"Yes, I did."

"And I sensed it."

"It would seem that way," I replied.

"Good." She let out a sigh of relief and relaxed. That lasted about three seconds. Gruffly, she asked, "So, why are you here? You're

breaking your promise."

"It wasn't a promise. We had a deal."

"Oh, so you're only going back on a deal, not breaking a promise. That doesn't sound much better, does it?" Her voice was getting louder the angrier she got. This was what I'd been waiting for.

"No, it doesn't. You know what else? I don't care. I was told to be here so I'm here. If you don't like it, take it up with him!" I shouted.

"So I see you're still taking orders from others. Some things never change," she said cynically.

"Val, when an Ancient tells me to do something..."

"Like The Beholder?"

"It was Each."

"And this makes a difference?" she sarcastically replied.

I took a deep breath, exhaled, and as calmly as I could muster said, "Valencia, sit down. Or stand, I don't care. But you are going to listen to what I have to say. It is very important."

"What could be so important that you would break your promise..."

"Our deal," I corrected.

"...and show up here? You leave me alone, I leave you alone. Remember?"

"Valencia, Love and Hate have been born."

That worked. Her mood swings, problematic as they may be sometimes, were a sight to behold. Her face went from contorted and angry to shocked and elated in a heartbeat. "Really? Where are they?"

"I don't know. There's more." Valencia sat down in a chair as I paced around the room. "They've been on this plane for the last twelve years."

"Impossible," she contested.

"It's true."

"Can't be. Someone would've told us." She was on the verge of tears again.

"They had their reasons and they're good ones."

"So they sent you to tell me about it? They don't even think I'm worth the time to do it themselves, is that it?" With that outburst, tears began to flow down her cheeks.

"Val, it's not that at all. In fact, I'm here because we're going to go see them. They wanted us together to make it easier."

"Really?" she asked, wiping away her tears. "You aren't just saying that to cheer me up, are you?"

"No, I'm completely serious. Trust me." I winked at her after

using her trademark reply.

I got the smile I was looking for. Instantly, she was happy again. "So when do we go?" she excitedly asked.

"I don't know. There is one more thing I have to tell you though."

And just like that, glee was replaced with exasperation. "What now?"

"There's a problem with one of them," I replied.

"A problem? What kind of problem?" she demanded.

As I opened my mouth to answer, the room was suddenly awash in a brilliant, white light. I saw Valencia squinting as I covered my own eyes. As the light diminished we saw before us Cherub, protectorate of Haven. His glorious wings were unfurled and he appeared on the verge of panic. He stepped towards us and placed a hand on each of our shoulders.

"We have to go," he curtly said.

Valencia quickly ducked away from him. "Excuse me?"

"Valencia, there is no time for this!" Cherub hollered at her.

"Cherub, my brother was in the middle of telling me something very important and you interrupted," she scolded.

Cherub went to reply and I held him back. "Valencia, I'm sure Cherub didn't mean to be rude by his intrusion. Now, we have to get going. Are you coming along or not?"

"We're going to see Love and Hate, right?" she asked.

"Yes!" Cherub and I both shouted at her.

As soon as she was close enough, Cherub placed his hand on her shoulder. A flash of light lit up everything around us and I was temporarily blinded by the intensity of it. The radiant glow faded quickly but the spots in front of my eyes didn't. Thankfully it didn't take too long to recover. When I could see clearly again, I couldn't believe my eyes.

The scene was sheer chaos. Now I knew why Each said Valencia would be helpful. We were in the foyer of a castle watchtower. The room was very dimly lit. Only two candles burned at opposite ends of the room, casting an ominous glow. We appeared directly beside one of these candles, furthest from the entrance. The only other faint light was from a burning hole in the wall near the entrance. In the center of the foyer was a man. At first glance, the unknowing would assume he was in his late teens. I knew better. This was one of my brothers. He was slightly shorter than me, with coal black hair and luminous blue eyes. Years of indentured servitude had toned his body into a lean, muscular specimen.

I glanced around and saw another person in the room. It was my other brother. He looked exactly like the first, except for the large wound winding from his hip to his temple. I still had no idea which one was Love and which was Hate. All I knew was he was running for the door and fast. I darted for the exit and stepped in front of my fleeing brother.

“He’s going to get away,” he cried.

“Relax, he can’t outrun us,” I assured him. I looked over at Cherub as he told Valencia to keep an eye on Patrick. I now knew his name on Earth, but I still didn’t know if he was Love or Hate. Unfortunately, now was not the time to try and sort it out.

I stepped back inside as Cherub went around me. Without warning, Cherub was violently thrown back through the door of the tower directly into me. Cherub was agile enough to stay upright but I fell into my brother and we collapsed into a heap.

“Do not try to stop me brother,” came a familiar voice from the darkness. It was the mistress of evil herself, Lady Lillith. “He will be a prize to offer my prodigal nephew for when he comes to my side.” She glanced at my brother, who was struggling to get up, and smiled fondly.

“He didn’t know, Lillith,” Cherub protested.

“I don’t care,” she replied. “And neither will his new lord and master.” With that, she stepped into a shadow and disappeared.

“I saw him running for the castle and disappear into the darkness before you got here,” the child said as we got to our feet.

“Teleportation. Damn it,” I cursed.

“Watch you language,” came a dull voice from the corner. Valencia was still standing next to the candle where we’d first appeared. She was staring blankly at our slain brother. I had to hope she would snap out of it when he regained consciousness. Right now, she wasn’t my primary concern.

“Sorry,” I mumbled back at her. Turning back to the Aseraphim, I asked, “Cherub, can you tell where he is?”

“He’s in the library,” my brother answered for him.

“How do you know?”

“It’s where his spellbooks are. It’s where I’d go if I were him.”

Without a word, Cherub vanished in a brilliant flash of light. I looked at my brother and asked, “How do we get to the library?” When he had given me the directions, I picked him up, told him to hold on, and took off.

I stopped just short of the library and put my passenger down. He didn’t hesitate one second and rushed in headlong. I followed him and knew right away we were too late.

Cherub was just inside the doorway staring at Lillith and her captive. "Lillith, do not kill him."

"Who do you think you are, telling me what to do?" she replied. She was caressing Graves's neck with her razor-sharp fingernails. Graves was petrified, shocked into silence at his current situation.

"There is no need to kill him. He has done good in the past."

"That is the past. He has enslaved our family for years and now he kills one of them, and you say he should live?" She took one of her talons and placed it on his neck, pressing ever so gently on his jugular vein. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just slice him open right now and let him slowly bleed out like the pig he is."

"The Beholder was allowed to live," I reminded her.

She glared at me with her hollow black eyes. "That he was, but not by my choosing. I'm surprised to hear you defend this filth, especially by invoking the name of your father."

"It's not your job to judge him."

"Oh, right," she laughed. "That's for you and Styx. In this case, I'm sure she won't mind." Her voice lowered to a seductive growl as she added, "Neither should you."

Cherub withdrew his sword and pointed it at Lillith, "Let him go," he warned.

"Never! Because of him, the prophecy of Light will transpire before the Dark. This cannot be allowed!" she roared.

Cherub smiled, feeding Lillith's anger. "You jump to conclusions too often, dear sister. The slain child is no longer in Haven nor has he returned to his physical self."

Lillith laughed. "Then I shall deliver him to his lord and master now." She looked at my brother and said with a laugh, "And here I was going to kill him for you." Grinning, she stopped caressing, and plunged her talons into her captive's neck. With one swift motion she tore out his throat. Blood spurted as his heart continued beating. Lillith bent down and commenced to drink his blood. Crimson droplets flew from her lips and his throat and sprayed onto various books and scrolls. Graves kicked a moment longer, and then went still. Lillith let his limp body fall to the floor. Flashing her darkly beautiful smile, she dropped into a shadow and was gone.

The three of us were alone in the library. The boy was crying, so I put my arm around him to comfort him. "Don't let what you saw disturb you. She won't harm you."

He brusquely shrugged my arm away. "Who are you?" he demanded. "What is going on? Graves killed my brother and all of a

sudden people keep appearing out of nowhere!”

I opened my mouth to answer but Cherub cut me off. “Can I talk to you privately for a moment?” he asked me. I nodded and asked my brother to stay put and I’d answer everything he wanted to know. What I didn’t tell him was I’d probably end up telling him many things he didn’t want to know too.

Cherub and I left the library, closing the door behind us. Alone in the hallway, I asked, “What is going on here?”

“I do not have much time, so I’m afraid I cannot go into great detail,” he responded. “Inside this library is your brother, Love. He is known as Maelduin. His brother is Patrick, whom you know as Hate. They do not remember who they truly are or their time in the ethereal. With Order and Chaos gone...”

“Yeah, I got all that from Each. Get to the point.”

“My apologies. This evening, Maelduin attempted to cast a binding spell on himself and his brother. Nathaniel Graves interrupted and tried to kill Maelduin for his impudence. Patrick jumped in the way and saved his brother’s life. For his selfless act, he was granted access to Haven. That is where the complications started.

“As far as life on Earth was concerned, Patrick was in Haven for less than a heartbeat in time. That was long enough for Lillith to assume that the prophecy of Light was going to come to pass. She passed to this realm to vent her anger at Nathaniel Graves. It also seems she was going to kill him as a prize to Maelduin under the misapprehension that he was the one the prophecy of Dark foretells of. While she was on Earth, Patrick’s essence arrived in Haedes. I knew this for I was by Christi Lona’s side as she passed judgment on poor Patrick.” A tear ran down the Aseraphim’s cheek and he casually wiped it away.

“Why did you care if Lillith killed him or not? Seems to me as if he got what was coming to him.”

“As I told Lillith, Graves did some good works in the past. Lately he has been nothing more than a cruel taskmaster to your siblings. Still, his actions should be judged by Styx in due time. He may have had a chance to redeem himself on Earth or he could’ve passed to Limbo for redemption. I’m not sure if Graves could have redeemed himself or not, but he should’ve had the choice.”

“So where do Valencia and I fit in?”

“All that was required of her was to stand watch over Patrick until his return. You have a much larger task.”

“I have to tell Maelduin and Patrick who they are,” I presumed.

“Actually, you only need to tell Maelduin. Christi Lona has

already told Patrick much about his family. With what you tell Maelduin, the pieces should come together quickly for them both. These two are very close, Aggression. One learns as the other learns. Their minds are linked not only telepathically but also on a much deeper level. Only the Will and Power Cosmic are more closely linked. The only time they cannot visit the other's thoughts is when one resides in another realm."

"Like now," I remarked.

"Exactly. Maelduin cannot understand why he still senses his brother's essence but not his thoughts. All Maelduin receives is a sense of fear, of violence and torment."

"I'm glad Valencia and I don't share that trait." I knew it was the wrong time for such comments. I just needed to release some of the stress from the day's events. When the sun rose this morning, I was walking alone in Persia about to document another species in the Book of Nature Lore. Then it was a rapid succession of maddening episodes. On top of it all, I still had to explain to Maelduin about his existence and the world around him. If I didn't let out at least a small joke, my head was going to explode.

Cherub reacted to my uneasy laughter with a smile. "Thank you for your help with her earlier."

"You just have to know how to talk to her," I said nonchalantly.

"I must go, Aggression. Be well, and tell him what he needs to know," Cherub said as a bright light engulfed him. The light faded and I was alone in the hallway.

I steel myself for the task ahead. I'd traveled the world for centuries, taught societies how to evolve and advance their cultures, taught the masses about the natural world and the many uses for various plant life. I'd even spread the story of Atlantia for ages. Now I had to tell my brother, who had no knowledge of his origins, everything I could about his existence and his family. This task was going to be no easier than the others.

I swung open the door to the library, ready to tell Maelduin what he needed to know about himself. I was startled to see he was ready for something else entirely. He had an open spellbook in one hand and his other hand was raised to the door. Before he could do anything disastrous, I zipped over and snatched the book from his grasp.

"There's no need for majicks, Maelduin. I'm not going to hurt you," I told him.

"Who are you?" he demanded to know once more. "And how did you move so fast?"

"My name is Vincent and explaining how I move like I do would take time that we do not have. There is much I need to tell you and I believe our time may be somewhat limited."

"I have all the time in the world. My brother is dead and my master has been murdered," he said sorrowfully.

"That is why time is so valuable right now. Our brother will be returning soon."

"Our brother?"

"Yes, Maelduin, our brother. You see, I am your brother and the woman accompanying me is your sister."

Maelduin dropped to the floor and sat, weeping quietly. "I'm so confused," he sobbed.

I knelt down and helped him up. "I will tell you all I can, Maelduin. You may not believe all I have to tell you but it will be the truth. Please, sit down and I'll do my best to ease your confusion."

Maelduin did as I asked and I proceeded to tell him of his origins. I explained the Ancients first, then the Aseraphim. His intelligence was evident as he asked very pointed questions as I was talking. He had surprisingly few questions and readily accepted the information I was passing along. When I told him of our creation in the ethereal, a warm smile formed on his face. I got a sense, somewhere deep in his mind, he could faintly remember his life before this one. After a while, he remarked how some of what I was telling him not only sounded true but also felt true. According to Maelduin, it was familiar in a way a book he'd read was familiar. I tried to pry more information from him about this book but he was done talking about it. Still, I had gained his trust. I suggested we depart from the library and return to the watchtower.

I finished up my lesson on his origins as we walked across the field from the castle to the watchtower. When we reached the tower, I told Maelduin to stay outside until I checked everything out. Since Cherub was able to stay on this realm for a while after Lillith left, I had to assume she did not leave right away. I wanted to make sure she didn't do anything to Patrick.

I peeked inside and saw Valencia still standing immobile in the corner. Her gaze never left the body on the floor. Without warning, Patrick began to stir. Valencia finally came out of the corner and walked over to Patrick's side. I went back to Maelduin and told him it was safe to enter. I also warned him of his brother's scarred appearance.

The four of us were together for the first time since my sister and I had been born to this realm. Our reunion wasn't the joyous occasion I had hoped it would be. Sadly there was nothing I could do to ease

Patrick's turmoil. Having accomplished my task of educating them about their true selves, I escorted Valencia outside and prepared to leave. If only life were that simple.

I looked up to the sky when we got outside. The night sky was overcast but some moonlight shone through. I wanted to get my bearings so I could get pointed in the right direction to take Valencia back to Egypt. She had other ideas. Once out of earshot of our younger siblings, she vented her frustrations.

"So this is what you call a problem?" she shouted. "Not only were our brothers brought to bear in this realm without our knowledge but when we first get to see them, one of them is dead? If that's a problem, what do you call a crisis?"

"Valencia, calm down," I steadily replied.

"Don't even start with that!" she retorted, wagging her finger as she yelled. "You broke your word to show me our dead brother. Calm isn't really something I'm capable of at the moment."

"I broke my word for a good reason."

"According to you. I had to stay there with his dead body. Yes, I knew he'd come back, but that doesn't change the fact that he was dead when I got here."

I heard a rumbling in the distance and looked up to the sky again. The few clouds I'd seen at first had multiplied and the sky turned darker with every word from my sister's mouth. "Someone needed to stay with him until he regained consciousness."

"And it had to be me?"

"Yes, it did. I had to go after his killer."

Valencia's eyes were glowing brightly as she floated up to eye level. "If you ever think about disturbing me again, don't. I don't want to see you. I don't want to hear from you. I don't want to acknowledge your existence. Do you understand?" A bolt of lightning cracked the sky as she shouted at me. The rumble of thunder was louder this time and echoes rolled down the valley.

"I understand."

"Do you promise?"

Hesitantly, I replied, "I can't promise anything. If it weren't for Each's direction, I wouldn't have come to you this time. Who knows what will happen in the future?"

"Make an effort." One more flash of lightning lit up the sky. This bolt struck the ground a few hundred yards from us and ignited a tree. The thunder was so loud I couldn't hear my own thoughts.

"That I will promise you."

She floated back down to the ground and glared up at me. “I guess we have a deal.” She turned her back to me and started to walk away.

“Do you want me to give you a ride back to Egypt?” I asked.

“Nope,” she replied cheerfully. “I’m going to walk back. And I’m going to take my time about it too.”

“What about staying in Egypt like you said?”

“What about you not bothering me, like you said? This is your punishment, brother. Besides, you’ve had millennia to get a foothold for order on Earth. I’d like to see firsthand how much progress you’ve made.”

“And change it where you can,” I surmised.

She smiled broadly and said, “Whenever possible.” She turned from me again and casually walked away.

I stood there momentarily to gather myself. It was not as if I expected her to be happy about all of this, but she didn’t have to take it so badly. The sky cleared up a tad as she left and I could clearly see Patrick and Maelduin standing in the archway of the watchtower. There was not much more I could do for the two of them. It was now in their hands to decide their futures. I could only hope they would make the correct choices as time moved on. I was hopeful as well that we’d meet up again. Next time, maybe it would be under more favorable circumstances.

With the thought of a future encounter with my brothers to comfort me, I decided to go back to Persia and pick up where I’d left off. After finishing up in Persia I would not be returning to my life in Europe. I needed to get back into the world. With Valencia roaming the land temporarily, I couldn’t afford to rest on my laurels. I glanced at my brothers one last time and sped off for Persia.

Epilogue

The old man careful closed his book and placed it in his satchel. Crickets chipped deep in the wood, and other than the occasional owl no other creature stirred in the forest. It was as if nature itself was eavesdropping on the story. The fire they'd set up had been stoked several times during the evening and was now burning out its last embers. He looked at his son and saw eagerness in his eyes. "That is all for this evening, my son."

"But what happened to Aggression?" he asked.

The father let out a pleasant laugh and replied, "He continued to do what he was charged to do. He traveled the world, spreading the lessons of Atlantia and nature everywhere he visited. Along the way, he learned a few things himself. However, those stories are for another day."

"Is he still alive?"

"Aggression? Very much so. We may even be granted the honor of his company eventually. One never knows where Lord Aggression will show up next."

"Does he get to see his brothers and sister again?" the child pressed.

"My son, there will be time enough for those stories later. You must first learn about the siblings themselves. Otherwise, tales told in the future will make very little sense at all."

The child contemplated these words for a bit before speaking again. "So are you going to tell me about Aggression's sister next?"

The old man frowned at this question. "No, child, I am not. Although she was the other one brought to this realm with Aggression, her story is for another day as well."

"Can you please tell me just one more, father?" the child pleaded. "I can stay awake. I promise."

The father smiled lovingly at his son and tousled his hair. "I have no doubt. However, just because you can doesn't mean you should. You need your rest."

"But I'm not tired," he protested.

"I'm not surprised. But I will not be telling anymore stories this evening, so you may as well attempt to get some sleep."

The child, ever obedient, did as he was told. He retrieved his bedroll and spread it out not far from the dying fire. "So which sibling will I learn about next?"

The boy crawled into his bedroll and squirmed around until he was comfortable. His father leaned down and kissed him on the

forehead. "That is for tomorrow, my son. The next story is best told in the light."