

Genesis of Oblivion: Arcanum One

by

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Part One

A Day in the Life

**Some say Destiny is set,
and Fate dictates the events of our lives.**

**Others claim Destiny is what we make of it,
and Fate is nothing more than a myth.**

**I say, Destiny is a word in a vast dictionary,
one with unlimited definitions.**

**All you must do is choose the one definition
that fits into the sentence that is your life.**

MAD

Chapter One

Property

The dull pain radiating through the Beast's neck and shoulders goaded him from his slumber. He lay with his eyes closed for several moments, hoping sleep would retake him.

It did not.

With a groan, he rolled onto his back and attempted to stretch in the cramped alcove. He'd awakened here for the past few tendays, upon a stone slab in a tiny cell tucked beneath the Grand Coliseum of Mocley.

Glaring at the ceiling, his gaze traced the wooden support beams that stretched out like the fingers of a giant hand. The rough-hewed timbers loomed in the deep shadows of predawn.

Foreboding.

Oppressive.

A constant reminder of his master's hold upon him—that his life was nothing more than someone else's property.

Forcing sore muscles to move, the Beast sat up, swinging his hindpaws to the straw-covered floor. Resting his elbows on his fur-covered thighs, he let his head sag. Sleep eluded him last eve, and weariness draped him like a death shroud.

I can never find sleep before a fight.

He glanced at the narrow window set high in the back wall. Beyond the portal lay the sands of the fighting arena.

Sands that'll soon be blood-soaked.

But *whose* blood that would be, was still to be determined. Only time and Alza'dysta's Luck would answer that.

The day's first rays of sunlight breached the upper level of the area's sitting area, invading his fortress of solitude. Dust motes churned and danced over the dingy floor, practicing their slow advances and feints.

At that moment, he hated little more than the rising sun.

Curse you, Gehanna. Why must you allow your Shroud of Shadows to be pierced each morn?

The Beast would have no complaints if the Goddess of Night reigned for all eternity. With the day's warmth came the cold reality of what awaited him.

I could bear an endless night if it meant avoiding the Games.

No. He wouldn't indulge such musings. His life may be forfeit, but he'd fight till the bitter end.

They may break my body. They shall never destroy my spirit.

A low growl rumbled deep in his chest as he pushed himself to his feet. Old wounds greeted him like festering evils. His right shoulder throbbed; the vexing injury a souvenir from a Human whose corpse now fed the worms. Other maladies tormented him—knotted muscles, a sprained digit on his left forepaw, parasites burrowing into his flesh in their unrelenting quest for food. Though none of it compared to the revolting stench of dank urine wafting through the dungeon.

Filthy Humans.

He despised being caged so near to the disgusting creatures.

Hunger gnawed at his insides. Nothing to be done about it. Food would be brought at his *keeper's* whim.

The Beast paced with purpose across the stone floor. Three strides to the far wall. Turn. Three strides to the stone bed. Turn. Three strides to the far wall. Turn. Three strides to the stone bed. Turn.

Even in these cramped confines, the drive to fight never left him. He refused to give an inch to a land that had reviled him since the day of his birth. Walking got the blood flowing, the stiffness of his limbs to abate. He twisted at the waist. Rotated his shoulders, neck, spine. Dragging sharp claws through the fur on his upper back, he combed out a few tangles that formed while he slept.

As he exercised, the Beast's padded hindpaws picked up vibrations through the stone floor.

Soon, the pitiful moans of his fellow prisoners echoed from the other cells. An incessant murmuring over their hopeless lives.

The dregs awaken.

The pads of his paws took in the information provided by the other's actions, forming a mental image which allowed the Beast to know the exact location of each nearby Human. Their precise distance from him. Their approximate weight.

The one in the cell next to his had arrived a day gone, and judging by the old man's heavy wheezing, he'd be dead before overmorrow. Not that he'd live that long.

Whatever the Games planned for him this day, the ailment filling his lungs would be irrelevant the moment he gave his life for the crowd's amusement.

At least I'll face my would-be executioner with strength.

He flexed his forepaws, his claws extending and retracting. He found solace in their sharpness. Their power. Their ability to rend flesh from bone. Life from the living.

And I'll use them to—

A metallic squeal ripped through the dungeon. The Beast froze mid-stride. Stronger vibrations reverberated from the hallway, announcing the pig's arrival who'd been his keeper for near two seasons.

"BEAST!" The man's bellow echoed in the subterranean corridors.

Scowling at the barred window set in his cell's iron-banded door, the Beast snarled at the bloated, pasty face that appeared. While he found all Humans fiendish, he loathed this white demon above most. With effort, he shoved away the desire to fling himself at the barrier separating them. It would accomplish nothing save earn him a beating.

"Feed me and begone, you whore's bastard!" Though he spoke no other tongue, the Human dialect came out more as a guttural growl than words.

The keeper snorted, then bent to open the small slot at the bottom of the door. A wooden platter slid into the Beast's cell; raw mutton shanks piled atop. Wide-eyed, he glanced at the keeper who once again peered through the window. The realization that his mouth hung open caused him to snap it shut with a snarl.

The rotund man chuckled, amused by the Beast's shame. "Aye, beastie, it's fresh. Slaughtered less than an aurn gone. The master bade me give his infamous Kith a good... *final meal*. I think this day ya be earnin' him back all the tanarians he done spent on ya these past few seasons."

The keeper's words stabbed at the Beast. "This shan't be my final meal, you hunk of pig's dung. I haven't killed *you* yet." His upper lip rose, exposing sharp fangs. "And I'll not go into the Aftermore until I get *that* satisfaction."

A mischievous glint danced in the fat man's muddy-brown eyes before a chuckle overtook him. "Mayhap ya speak true, beastie." The man frowned, his head dipping to the side. "'Bout ya livin' to see the morrow, that is." A spiteful grin crept over his lips. "'Though, I wouldn't be so certain of that, was I you. The crowd, ya see? They've been whipped into a frenzy, they have. They ain't gonna be cheerin' for your survival *this* day. Nor shall they sing ya any praises." Leaning his sweat-soaked forehead against the

bars, his keeper scoffed. "For they care even less about you than I, for true." The vile man's dry, cracked lips parted, exposing a mouthful of rotted teeth. "Nix. They've paid to watch the savage Kith beast fight... *and die.*" He pulled back from the barred window, still grinning. "And I believe the Arbiters'll try their *very* best to satisfy the crowd's desires."

The Human stepped away, half-turning to leave. "As to your chances of killin' me? I 'spect you'll have to do that in the Aftermore, many, *many* seasons from now. That is, if godless beasts like you even get to enter the Aftermore." He shrugged. "Either way, you'll be long dead before I." He left the dungeons, chortling the entire way out.

The cur's statements drove the hunger from the Beast's mind. Fury filled him and he wanted to refuse the fresh meat—to rage against any show of kindness. But the intoxicating odor permeated the cell, driving away even the reek of Human piss. The Beast had seldom savored such a delicacy.

In a heartbeat, hunger overrode anger. Besides, refusing the meat would be folly. For the tasks ahead, he'd need all the energy the meal would provide.

And the pock-faced pig could be correct. This very well may be my final meal.

With a sigh, the Beast leaned over and snatched one of the mutton shanks by its protruding bone. He shuffled away from the door, pressing his shoulder against the back wall. Drawing the meat close to his muzzle drove the dungeon's stench from his nostrils, if only for a moment. His whiskers bristled.

Fresh as the bastard claimed!

The raw flesh squelched under his fangs, juice dripping onto the thick fur of his chest. He cared not. Taking his time, he savored the flavor. He had no reason to rush; his days weren't his to plan. They'd never *been* his to plan. His master, Estular Jerts, had delivered him into the hands of the Games.

My life is forfeit, and this stinking abyss shall be my tomb.

The dark thought brought his mind to his current situation. His keeper had reveled in the wild stories Estular spread about the Beast's savage crimes. Tales of how he'd attacked a remote farming community. Hunted and slaughtered their women for sport. Feasted upon the corpses of their children. Of how many soldiers it took to bring the Beast's reign of terror to an end. Bind him and deliver him here to satisfy Rash'ayel's justice.

The Beast grunted.

As if any of the gods care about justice.

At first, he hadn't understood why his master told these lies—for that's what they were.

Now I know.

The fabricated crimes gave the people a monster to hate. And they'd pay well for the opportunity to bear witness to that monster's punishment.

Coins that'll no doubt find their way into my master's pocket.

All for the perceived vindication of his *nonexistent* victims.

I'm nothing more than—

A hollow slam against the door snapped the Beast from his musings. He dropped into a half-crouch, his long tail lashing out.

"Oh my! You do be in rare form this morn." Even through the small window's grimy bars, his master, Estular Jerts, exuded perfection—black hair combed flat; beard and mustache trimmed and waxed; his ebony skin shimmering in the torchlight.

The Beast gazed into the cold green eyes he'd grown to hate over the past two seasons. Once more, he suppressed the desire to fling himself against the ironbound door.

Rotating, Estular spoke to the hallway. "As I did be telling you, Honored One, a frightfully uncivilized beast, even at the best of times. Please... no be shocked by what you be seeing. You be safe here. Of that, you be having my honor." Estular's accent had the quick, clipped manner of a Silawayian, much different from the thick drawl of his Ro Arthian-born keeper.

The Beast made to return to his meal but hesitated when some... *thing* replaced Estular's face in the small window. On the other side of the portal stood a creature stranger than anything he'd ever beheld. The being's head had the shape of an inverted teardrop. Its smooth blue-gray skin, devoid of any facial hair, had a leathery appearance as opposed to the normal texture of flesh. Slim, dark-blue lips formed its mouth, and a tiny set of slits created a recessed nose. Silky-white hair flowed over the top of the being's domed head, accentuating rather than hiding the lack of any protruding ears. It gave the thing an eerie, disconcerting appearance.

The Beast's nostrils flared as he inhaled this so-called *Honored One's* scent—a dormant smoldering laced with a ferocity that matched his own. Though he'd never seen such a creature, locking eyes with it was like gazing into the soul of an ancient enemy his ancestors had fought since the dawn of creation.

His muscles tightened.

Having battled many exotic monsters over the past few seasons, the Beast didn't understand why this *Honored One* should cause him such unease. But his hackles rose, and a primal growl rumbled deep in his chest. Attempting to shift his stance, shock sliced through him with the realization that his feet wouldn't move.

The visitor's eyes, large and black, like pools of liquid infinity, enveloped the Beast. His head swam as those boundless onyx orbs grew until they filled his vision, choking out everything around him and sending him tumbling into a never-ending abyss. From this void, an unseen force assaulted his mind, paralyzing him further, until even his very thoughts slipped from his grasp.

Get... out... of my... mind!

It took all his strength to simple form those words inside his skull. Throughout his lifetime of suffering and abuse, the Beast had never been so vulnerable. It was as if his fur had been stripped away and he stood naked to his very core.

Within a heartbeat, he lost the fight against this mental onslaught. He loathed his weakness even as he yielded to this invader. Detested how fast the desire filled him to have those eyes embrace him, to hold him and let him weep, though he'd never wept before. He mounted no further defense to fend off the invasive force penetrating his mind, pillaging his most private thoughts. For reasons he couldn't explain, he surrendered everything.

Pulled from the deepest wells of his memory, the Beast's history burst to life around him. He found himself standing in a vast emptiness, darkness stretching out on every side. He had no recollection of the freedom his master's lies spoke of—he'd hunted nothing outside the fighting pits. Chains and bars filled even his earliest memories.

I was a mere cub when they stole me from my homeland.

Tales of his abduction still haunted his nightmares—stories of the Humans who slaughtered his family and sold him to his first owner. He prayed those were wild tales as well.

The lies of a puny race.

From the fathomless darkness, images took shape. Though he didn't understand how, he knew what appeared before him were the apparitions of his parents, more vivid than any dream. His sire stood head and shoulders above even the tallest of Humans. A sprinkling of dark spots covered his golden-brown fur, with powerful muscles rippling underneath. A lush, dark-brown mane ended in a point well below his chin, resting against a bulging chest.

The Beast had never seen a female of his race before, but the figure standing next to the older male appeared proper somehow. She didn't have the large mane he and his sire shared, though the same spotted, golden-brown fur covered her lean, muscular body. Shadows hid her face, however, and he yearned to claw that shroud away. To look upon the light in his mother's eyes. To touch the fine halo of fur edging her tufted ears.

The living images melted away before he could react, leaving the Beast filled with a cold emptiness. A longing for a mother's embrace he'd never known.

As the shadows of his parents faded, more recent memories were ripped out for examination.

Sitting in straw soaked in his own urine, a small cub that would one day become known as the Beast rocked from side to side as his cage on wheels rolled along a dirt road. One wagon in a long procession headed for the next town, all part of the ménagerie that had purchased the cub from his abductors. Seasons would pass, filled with the monotony of being an item to be gawked at. An inanimate *thing*.

The boredom alone should've been the death of me.

The scene shifted, images swirling away to be replaced by others.

A Beast on the cusp of maturity, seasons removed from the cub of the last memory, sat in the same dirty cage, feigning disinterest as the ménagerie owner haggled with a dark-skinned Human. "My price be more than fair!" It was the first time the Beast ever laid eyes upon Estular. The man waved his arm to punctuate his words. "Your need for coin be obvious. Why... you no can even be affording to feed your animals." He flicked his hand to indicate the younger Beast. "Look at that creature. Wretched. All skin and bones, it be. You should be grateful I be willing to take the beast off your hands at any price!"

I've despised that man ever since.

The scene shifted once more.

A cool breeze tussled an awed Beast's fur as a clean, salty scent filled his nostrils. While traveling with the ménagerie, he'd seen so much of this Plane. But nothing could've prepared him for the vast, empty ocean stretching off into forever.

That's the day my life truly began.

Another shift.

Searing pain ripped up an exhausted Beast's arm, drawing a yelp.

A small Human with halfmoon-shaped eyes danced away, blood staining the edge of his thin blade. "Come, cat! Use that amazing speed you possess. Thick as your hide is, it is no match for cold steel. If you learn nothing else from me, learn that!"

Learn I did, Raylac. You pushed me harder than most. I almost regret killing you, you slanted-eyed goat.

Raylac wouldn't be the Beast's last instructor, for there were many. Each taught him how to use weapons, fangs, and claws to their best advantage. Showed him that anything could become a tool for dealing out death. At the behest of his instructors, who believed knowledge was of equal import in combat as raw skill, Estular even employed teachers who taught the Beast how to read.

The books in Estular's library were my only true taste of freedom.

Shift.

"Train hard, my pet, yet be well, for you be making me rich one day." Estular stood in the shade of his balcony watching a sweat-drenched Beast spar a group of four men.

Shift.

"Into the wagon, beastie!" The rotund keeper prodded an angry Beast with a Painstick, sending a jolt of agony slicing through his body. Dawn had yet to break, and his younger self stood glaring at a cage with no desire to enter.

That was two seasons gone. I remember well the thoughts running through my mind as I stood there... that they were going to put me back on display. A freak for the crowds to gawk at. A fate more terrifying than I care to admit.

Even though the keeper beat him often, and the fighting instructors wore him down to the point of collapse, the Beast had grown to relish this new life of conflict. His lips curled over the idea of once again being relegated to a caged oddity.

Thank the Twelve that wasn't Estular's plan.

Shift.

A confused Beast dropped into a dirt pit surrounded by a throng of shrieking spectators. His understanding solidified when a large, hairy creature burst from a tunnel opposite where he stood—all teeth and claws and fury. The monster stank of something left to wallow in its own filth for moons, and the madness in its eyes sent a shiver of uncertainty streaking to the younger Beast's core.

It held no fear of me until the bitter end, when it knew me as predator, not prey. Kill, or have death wrap you in its icy embrace.

The Beast still savored the memory of that first real struggle for life. Reliving it now did nothing to tarnish its glory. As never before, he understood what it meant to be alive.

And that feeling had never diminished, not once over the multitudes of fights that followed that first. Each victim that fell to the Beast became another sacrifice to feed the lifeblood flowing through his veins.

Proving that I have purpose. That I deserve to live even as they die.

Shift.

The Aktita docks materialized from the darkness. Silawayians scurried between ships of all sizes, sweat glistening off the Human's black skin. The heavy aroma of brine and fish hung on the breeze that mussed a hopeful Beast's thickening mane.

"We be traveling to Ro Arith and the Free City of Mocley." Estular stood on the docks watching as sailors lowered his pet's cage into the dark hold of a massive sailing vessel. "The lands of your birth."

A place I thought I'd never see.

For five tendays, the Beast endured the rocking of the dank hold, locked away with the cargo. Other than his keeper who brought him food, the ship's rats were his sole companions.

Shift.

The day they docked, Estular rode perched atop a befuddled Beast's cage. He paraded his pet with much fanfare through the streets of Mocley. With head held high and a perpetual glee in his voice, the man announced to all who would listen that a Kith beast would fight in the upcoming Games. "You be bearing witness to something never before seen throughout the Game's long history!"

The throng of Humans, as varied in skin tones as dress, oohed and awed as the Beast's cage rolled by.

The images faded away to blackness, for the Beast's memories ended there. He'd spent the first part of his life as a caged monster—an exhibit—some inanimate *thing* living with no purpose.

Worthless.

Worthless until Estular purchased him, anyway.

Some say that with every ending comes a new beginning. I now find myself back in my homeland. All I must do is—

Remorse beset the Beast's mind—an emotion he knew instinctively hadn't come from him. He still stood in his tiny cell; his gaze locked onto the strange *Honored One's*.

Thin, semi-transparent sheets slid up from the bottom of the visitor's globe-like eyes.

Was that remorse I felt from you? Shame? Or is that pity I see in your fathomless gaze?

The Beast clenched his jaw as a smoldering hate bubbled up.

The being bowed its head before disappearing from the window. The sudden withdrawal shattered the hold it had on the Beast. He staggered from the abrupt release—his muscles drained, having been under constant tension throughout the ordeal.

Instead of the rage that was the Beast's constant companion, a dark, morose blanket pressed down upon him.

The sensation of being dropped back into the reality of his own miserable existence was like a splash of ice-cold water. He lost himself in the solitude of his own thoughts. So self-absorbed was he, he failed to notice his master and those with him departing until a scurry of footsteps receding down the hall filled the silence. Only then did he become aware that several others accompanied Estular and this mysterious Honored One.

The strength of his legs abandoned him, and with it, the desire to stand in front of that ever creature again. He slumped against the far wall, swallowing hard to clear the bile from his throat.

"I be guaranteeing you, Honored One." Estular's voice echoed through the dungeons, dripping with silky elegance. "This day's Games shall be the most exciting ever witnessed. Mayhap the most exciting event since the founding of this city. My Kith be the first of its kind to be competing. The Coliseum shall be filled to the breaking."

The small group come to an abrupt halt, causing the Beast's ears to swivel.

"The Arbiters of the Games have no doubt paid you well for your... *participation*, yes?" The voice sounded as airy and soft as a spring breeze, and yet so commanding it demanded attention. There was no doubt who the voice belonged to. "How much to purchase the Kithian, hmm?"

Icy fingers gripped the Beast's throat as a great cacophony arose in the hall, people speaking one over another.

"What're ya saying, Honored One?"

"Honored One, ya can't be serious!"

"It's a vicious monster!"

“Silence.” The order floated through the stone hallway, a faint whisper to the Beast’s ears. But the group of men, and even the slaves in the other cells, fell quiet. As the stillness stretched, the Beast imagined the Honored One glaring at Estular with those fathomless black eyes.

When his master next spoke, the Human’s voice quivered. “Wh—What would you be doing with it?” After a brief pause, Estular cleared his throat, regaining some of his bravado. “If—if I may be asking, Honored One.”

“My business is my own, yes? No doubt you shall make close to a thousand tanarians from this one day alone, hmm? I assume you expect the Kithian to survive the event, allowing you to enter him into future Games, yes? How many times shall he endure, hmm? Two? Three?”

The Beast flexed his paws, claws digging into his pads. His mind raced to understand the implications of the conversation unfolding just beyond his sight.

“If the Kithian survives, Estular Jerts, you stand to become a richer man than you already are, yes?” The Honored One’s voice took on a mocking tone. “I think there is a flaw in your investment strategy, for the Arbiters shall not allow this to last. Its novelty is its draw, yes? Besides, if the Kithian survives this day’s Games, who shall want to fight him on the morrow, hmm? Certainly, you may find contests in the smaller cities of Ro Arith. I hear the Games are becoming quite popular as far away as Orlis. Yet your winnings shall pale compared to what you could earn here in Mocley, yes? Unfortunately for you, these are not the unorganized, illegal fighting bouts you are familiar with back in Silaway.”

“How did you be knowing about—”

“I think you shall find the Arbiters here shall lose interest once they are forced to cover the Death Tax time and again, yes? No, I am afraid to inform you that this shall not be a long-term venture, Estular Jerts. Not here in Ro Arith, anyway. Now. I shall not repeat the question a third time. How much to purchase the Kithian, hmm?”

“Um, Honored One, certainly... although—when your aide did be approaching me, I... I did be thinking that you simply wished to see...” Feet shuffled as Estular coughed. “The original purchase price did be an enormous expense, no to mention the costs I did incur since.” Estular’s tone betrayed a man attempting to regain control of a lost situation. “Pulling the beast from the Games now would bring down the wrath of the Arbiters. It would be shattering my reputation, and—”

“Your reputation.” A tinkling sound, akin to a laugh, reverberated through the stone corridor. “Estular Jerts, I would never ask you to pull the Kithian from *this day’s* Games. Why, after all the hype the Arbiters have generated over the past few tendays, doing so might actually result in a city-wide riot, yes? No. I am asking what you want providing the Kithian survives this day’s event.”

The Beast sensed Estular relax. “I—I no be thinking I could put a price on it. I mean, for ten or eleven thousand tanarians who could be refusing. Yet... such a sum be ludicrous. Why would you be even—”

“I thank you for the information, Estular Jerts.” The dismissal in the Honored One’s tone was unmistakable.

The Beast’s hindpaws once again picked up vibrations as the footsteps resumed receding down the corridor. When the large door at the end of the hall banged shut, grumbles from the other prisoners mauled the silence left behind.

Most days, the Beast kept his dreams and memories locked deep inside, not daring to think on them until long after the goddess Gehanna’s blanket of darkness covered this Plane. He’d lived his entire life in the bonds of slavery and had long since bent to that reality.

Bent. Not broken.

But his mind had always been his. The one thing that belonged to him and to him alone. Having his memories yanked out, being forced to face them, to take stock of his own pathetic existence against his will...

The weight of his past now poisoned his soul.

Of its own volition, a feral growl spilt from him. Noticing he held a half-eaten leg bone in his paw, he flung it across the tiny cell. The shank ricocheted off the stone wall with a loud *clack* before skidding into a corner. Rage overwhelmed the Beast, and he dropped to his knees. Snarling like the savage monster his keeper claimed him to be, he pounded the floor with a clenched paw.

The anger slipped from him with the same alacrity as it had come. Staring at the tangles of dirty straw without seeing them, his head sagged and his eyelids drooped.

Time became meaningless as the Beast crouched motionless on all fours. His stomach grumbled, pulling his attention back to the tray of meat. Snatching another portion of sheep, he sat on the edge of his stone bed. Gnawing at the raw flesh without thought, he ate a meal he no longer tasted. The prison cell evaporated as the Honored One’s haunting voice echoed in his mind, repeating one line over and again.

'Provided the Kithian survives this day's event...'

Chapter Two

An Honest Living

Arderi Cor sat up in bed with a start. Breathing hard, he gazed wide-eyed around his tiny bedroom, focusing on nothing. The dream mirrored those he'd had for several moons, ever since the strange happenings at last harvest's Talintine festival. While the details differed from nightmare to nightmare, the terror did not. Nor did the outcome. In each, the Siers had Tested him...

And I'd failed.

Sunlight poured through the glazed window beside his bed, washing over him. He blinked, shuddered, then attempted to push away the dread that accompanied the dream. The cool air of his bedroom tickled his bare skin. He wished for nothing more than to curl under his warm blankets and let sleep retake him.

But judgin' by the sun, I'll be late if I do.

Lifting his arms high overhead, he stretched, then made a half-hearted attempt to wipe the crusties from his eyes. He rolled to the far side of his wool-stuffed mattress and peered out at the blurry view offered through his window's wavy, semitransparent glass.

Oblivious to his anguish, Ridhale stead was already awake and preparing for another day's work. Even this early, people milled about the cobbled streets, either running a quick errand or heading to their assigned work details.

His gaze wandered up the fortification protecting the farming community he called home. The walls towered over the three-story public houses by a half-score paces—an indistinct mass climbing into the sky.

Like his parents and theirs before them, Arderi had spent his entire life in one of the apartment buildings lined in neat rows against the massive exterior walls, their whitewashed plaster standing in sharp contrast to the gray-hued stones towering behind them. A lone guarder walked the battlements, a human-shaped shadow against the glare of dawn.

The nightmare lingered on the edges of his mind, stoking his fears that he would spend the rest of his days as a common fielder trapped inside these walls.

If I'm Tested and found lackin', a life tillin' dirt'll be my fate.

Arderi tried to be content with this revelation. Him being born to this station was through no fault of his own. But working a communal farm 'til he was a broken-backed old man wasn't his idea of a satisfying life. He had no clue what a *'satisfying life'* looked like.

Still, it's gotta be more than that!

Shifting to the other side of his bed, he kicked the wood-framed trundle resting beside his. "Rise 'n shine, cousin. The day's begun without us."

Siln Cor mumbled something incoherent before burying himself deeper into his covers.

Arderi stood and massaged his shoulders to loosen sore muscles. Nothing new. Springtime meant days spent bent over a hoe, and he'd worked hard since planting season began a few tendays gone. The soreness would pass, as it always did.

Crossing to the chest of drawers, he poured a little water from the pitcher into a ceramic basin. He made quick work of washing his face and running wet fingers through his curly brown hair. Digging out a clean shirt, he slid it over his head and laced it up. The brown trousers he wore the day prior lay over his footboard. A quick sniff told him they were clean enough, so he pulled them on and buckled the belt. Hand slipping into his small belt pouch, he withdrew a wooden carving of Alza'dysta the Hunter, white wings etched into the god's back. He pressed the talisman to his lips.

Watch over me this day, Alza'dysta, and lend me your Luck if I need it.

Of the Twelve Gods of Man, Arderi had always held the Hunter closest. He'd spent many an aurn daydreaming about flying alongside the winged deity. His cousin chastised him for being foolish, mocking Arderi for his fantasy. *'Your head's too thick to allow ya to fly!'*

Slipping the small charm back into his pouch, Arderi frowned at the mound of blankets covering his still sleeping cousin. "Come on, Siln. Get up!" He kicked the bed once more. "Papa'll break us if we miss the wagons. Ya ain't gonna make me walk all the way out to the fields... *again!*"

"Alright, alright." Eyes still closed, Siln sat up. "I'm awake!" The dense tangles of black hair upon his head gave him the appearance of a beast more than a man.

Though Siln was a few moons older, Arderi had been responsible for his cousin for as long as he could remember. They'd shared a room since they were toddlers, after Siln's parents died—both taken by a plague that swept through the stead over fifteen seasons gone.

He frowned at his cousin rocking back and forth, falling asleep even while sitting.
If it weren't for me, the lazy bastard would stay in bed all day, every day.

Arderi slapped the back of Siln's head hard before jumping away.

"Oiy!" His cousin's eyes shot open. "Why, you!" Attempting to scramble out of bed, Siln's blankets tangled around his legs and he half-fell, half-slid to the floor.

Dashing from their room, Arderi giggled at the sound of Siln's trundle groaning as his cousin fought for release. Arderi bound down the stairs, knowing the older boy would retaliate later. Still, the slap served its purpose and would force his cousin to rise and give chase.

Wha'ever works.

As with most morns, instead of entering the dining hall through the door sitting across from the foot of the stairs, Arderi took the long way around and through the kitchens. Wives, daughters, and grandmothers greeted him as he entered. They bustled to and fro, preparing firstmeal.

Still chuckling, Arderi marveled at the ordered chaos filling the room.

Ma says it's the womenfolk who're the first to rise and last to bed.

The eight extended branches of the Cor family shared his side of the public apartment—grandparents, aunts, uncles, and more cousins than he could count. The Toln family resided in the other half, though they weren't blood-relatives. This arrangement repeated itself throughout the score of buildings that formed the fielder's quarter of Ridhale. The herder's quarters were a mirror image echoed on the opposite side of the fortification. Generation upon generation spent their entire lives here—work and play, love and marriage. From birth to death. Arderi had no idea the stead's exact age—at least a few hundred seasons, if not more.

Mayhap over a thousand!

None living here were slaves, of course, as the rumors claimed. Those ruling over this region had abolished slavery of honest folk a few generations gone. I was simply that this was the life these people were born to, and they had nowhere else to go.

Besides, it's an honest livin'.

The sight of all the womenfolk as they prepared firstmeal was a marvel. Although, the smells of fresh-baked bread, frying meats, and boiling vegetables held a far greater attraction for Arderi and made his stomach rumble. Raising a hand, he greeted the womenfolk. "Well wishes, Ma, Mis'ams." Crossing to the center worktable, he reached for a slab of smoked pork resting on a clay tray. Before his fingers touched the

scrumptious meat, he snatched his arm back as a wooden spoon thwacked the countertop, missing his hand by a hair's width.

"Arderi Cor! You know better!" A tall, redheaded girl loomed in front of him, brandishing the long-handled spoon like a club.

"Layla-Dyis Toln!" Arderi rubbed the top of his hand as if the makeshift weapon had found flesh. "Lucky ya missed! I'd hate for all these womenfolk to see ya spanked so early in the morn!"

"Spanked! I'd like to see ya try!" The girl's feigned outrage no longer fazed Arderi after their many seasons of flirting. Thin for her height, but to his mind, she'd grown into one of the prettiest girls in the stead. Fiery red hair, a rarity in these parts, added to her allure. She'd stolen the hearts of most the boys in Ridhale—though he 'spected she favored him above most.

Worse, her family's smitten with me as well.

He shuddered at the thought. For true, Layla was beautiful and would make a wonderful wife for anybody.

I just hope that anybody is anybody other than me.

Marriage would be one more hook binding him to a life he longed to escape.

"Alright, you two." His mother carried over a pan of fried eggs, steam rising from its sizzling contents. "Stop all this nonsense. Layla, be a dear and take this out for me?" Without waiting for an answer, she held the hot skillet for the girl to take.

"Aye, Mis'am Cor." The young girl took the pan by its wooden handle, placed her other hand under the oven towel, then headed for the communal dining hall.

Arderi admired how her blue-frilled dress unfurled as she spun, exposing her ankles. Glancing over her shoulder, she noticed him watching and graced him with a coy smile before disappearing.

His face flushed when his mother cleared her throat and gave him a look. His gaze found the floor, but the twinge of guilt that struck Arderi for gawking had nothing to do with his mother catching his lecherous stare.

I shouldn't flirt with her so much considerin' my future plans.

"Arderi, where's Siln? Is he bein' a slugabed this morn?" His mother wiped her hands on her apron before squaring her broad shoulders on her son.

As if on cue, his cousin strolled into the kitchen. "Here I am, Auntie Cor. And hungry as a prairie worm."

Mel-Ona Cor accepted a kiss from her late sister's only child. "Well, off ya go then. Most the menfolk have finished firstmeal already. I wouldn't wanna be in your shoes if ya miss the wagons again. You'll be on the wrong side of Papa's wrath, for true." After raising an eyebrow to drive home her point, she returned to her work without a backward glance.

As soon as his mother's attention shifted, Siln punched Arderi in the arm. "Ow!" He rubbed the spot as he glared at his cousin.

His cousin kept his voice low so as not to be overheard. "And don't go thinkin' that makes us even, *pretty boy*."

Rolling his eyes, Arderi followed Siln to the same door Layla had disappeared through. "Stop bein' a prairie worm in both mind *and* stomach, Siln. I was only helpin'. If ya—"

Arderi crashed into Siln as the older boy came to an abrupt stop.

Whirling around, his cousin pushed Arderi back a step. "Helpin'? How helpful's the knot on the back of my head gonna be?"

"Better than what ya would've gotten from Papa had ya overslept."

"Well... there *is* that." Siln wore a puzzled expression. "Nix, I still owe ya one. And I *shall* have my revenge!" He finished in a big booming voice, raising his hands in the air for effect.

Arderi shoved him in the chest and both young men laughed as they stumbled through the door.

The communal dining hall was a large chamber used for all meals and gatherings. Its many rows of tables and benches offered enough room for the hundred and fifty or so people dwelling in the building. Despite its size, it had a homey, well-lived-in appeal. A large, unlit fireplace rested at either end, each with a small shrine dedicated to the Twelve Gods of Man resting upon their mantles, while sconces and painted hangings were scattered along the walls. An aged bookshelf sat in one corner, surrounded by a half-score of chairs. Well read books filled the shelves, their spines long since broken from the generations who'd read them. A few games mixed between them. Resting on a small table between two chairs, Barca waited, set up and ready to be played.

How many aurns of my life has that game consumed?

Most of the benches were empty, and a few girls, his younger sister included, scurried about cleaning away used dishes and wiping down tables. Tary-Ona Cor beamed at them as Arderi and Siln approached. "Well wishes, Tary."

The light-brown-headed girl waved back. "Well wishes, Arderi." She shot a frown at Siln. "*Cousin...*"

"*Tary.*" Siln's snide tone matched the young girl's.

Arderi sighed and shook his head. "You two've gotta get over this."

His sister's eyes flew open as if he'd slapped her. "Me?! There ain't no chance. Not unless that oaf apologizes." Her eyes narrowed. "For true, this time!"

Siln scoffed. "Oh, go stuff a mattress. It ain't *my* fault ya made a fool of yourself."

"*Ain't your fault?* I wouldn't've even *told* Barnat I liked him if you ain't said he was sweet on me!"

"Aye..." Giggles overtook Siln. "But I never thought you'd do it over lastmeal! In front of the entire apartment, no less!" His chortles morphed into outright laughter.

Tary snarled and lunged for him. She would've gotten her hands around his throat had Arderi not snatched her wrists before they found purchase. He glared over his shoulder at his cousin. "Bad sport to rub salt in it. Just apologize."

"*Fine...*" It was Siln's turn to sigh as he nodded to Tary. "I'm sorry."

Arderi kept none of his frustration from his voice. "For true!"

His cousin raised his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright." His features took on a more genuine expression of guilt. "I ain't mean for ya to make a foo—" Arderi's glare cut Siln off and he cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. My prank went a little bit too far."

Shifting his gaze back to his sister, Arderi's eyebrows rose in a silent question.

Tary stopped struggling against his grip and her features softened. "Apology accepted. Though, if you ever—"

"Apology's been accepted." Arderi let her wrists go. "What's done's, done."

Her look still held an angry edge, but she waved a dismissive hand. "Fine. I've got work to do anyhow." She graced Arderi with another smile. "Be safe in the fields." With that, she rejoined the other girls who were busy cleaning the dining hall.

Two tables still held food and a few clean place settings. Siln pointed to the one Layla bent over, placing the skillet she carried at its center. The young men headed for it.

Arderi waited 'til the pair was out of his sister's earshot before speaking. "You was a pig-headed herder for doin' that to her, ya know?"

"What? Why?" Siln sounded like somebody nursing an actual wound.

"You know as good as me! Girls her age have tender hearts."

Siln gave a sheepish nod. "Aye. I ain't never thought it would turn out like that."

"Ya never do." Arderi glared at him. "And thinkin's never been one of your strengths, so ya should avoid doin' it whenever possible."

It was his cousin's turn to look as if he'd just been slapped. "Oiy."

Leaving Siln standing stunned, Arderi continued toward the tables. He held his fingers pointing up while crossing the middle two, in honor of Rash'ayel.

Justice for Tary.

He loved his cousin with all his heart. Still, somebody needed to keep him in line, and Arderi felt no shame over his verbal attack.

Several elders sat their ease, chatting at the table as Arderi approached. A rotund man was taking the last few bites of his food when Arderi sat opposite him. "Well wishes, Mir'am Toln. Elders."

The group of older menfolk all mumbled their greetings.

Dorn Toln swallowed. "Well wishes, Arderi." He nodded at Siln sliding onto the bench next to Arderi. "Siln."

Layla gave Arderi another coy smile, sending his mind racing for something to say. "My thanks, Layla."

My thanks? You're s'pose to be flirtin' less, ya idiot!

"Aye, my thanks, sweetheart." Mir'am Toln patted his daughter's hand before giving Arderi an approving smile.

Cheeks burning, Arderi averted his gaze. This pulled a barked laugh from Siln, heightening Arderi's embarrassment. He grabbed the empty plate in front of him and became preoccupied with studying the food spread out on the table.

Mir'am Toln frowned, pointing his fork at Arderi. "Ya needn't be shy, my boy. I know your Namin' Day's near. When is it?"

"It's this day!" Siln's interjection sent a fresh wave of panic racing through Arderi.

Sheep's dung! Is that for true?

Turning to his cousin, his expression asked the unvoiced question. The older boy bobbed his head, grinning like a fool while stuffing a heaping scoop of hash into his mouth.

Doing a quick mental calculation, his heart sank. He couldn't believe he'd lost track of the days. Had he been asked a heartbeat sooner, he'd have sworn it was still a tenday off.

By the Twelve. I'm... I'm seventeen.

"Well, good on ya." The rotund man laughed. His face took on a more serious countenance as he cast a glance at his daughter nearing the kitchen door. "Remember, if ever ya need to bend my ear over... well, over what have ya. I always have time for you, my boy. You're like the son I never had, so..." He cleared his throat. "Well, feel free to bend my ear, is... is all I'm sayin'."

Stomach churning, a stammer was all Arderi could muster. As of this day, his papa and Mir'am Toln could make the courtship of Arderi and Layla official, and there wasn't anything he could do to stop it.

Siln laughed, trying not to choke on the food he'd stuffed into his mouth. Arderi's mind scrambled for a toehold that would save him from falling off the cliff this conversation had become. "Um, aye, Mir'am Toln. My thanks. But... but I..." His eyes lit up as he found a safe haven. "I ain't been *Tested!*" His pending Test gnawed at his insides as much as the idea of getting married. *Neither* were things he wished to dwell upon. Still, his comment served its purpose.

"Aye. There's that, I s'pose." A frown creased the rotund man's forehead. "I guess we wouldn't wanna rush into anythin' if you're simply gonna be whisked away to Mocley. Now, would we?"

While the Toln family made it no secret they'd love for Arderi and Layla to wed, no plans would be made 'til the Order had determined whether either of them had the potential to Meld the Essence. Girls were Tested after their fifteenth Naming Day, so it was already known that Layla didn't have the gift. Though, for reasons Arderi never understood, it wasn't 'til after their seventeenth Naming Day that boys were Tested.

The mention of Arderi's older brother, Malant, brought with it its own set of emotions—both pride and jealousy—over the fact that he'd escaped farm life and was away being schooled as a Shaper at the famed Mocley Acadèmia.

An easy smile returned to Mir'am Toln. "I hope I ain't ruined wha'ever surprise your ma has planned for ya this eve?"

Arderi didn't think his heart could sink any lower, but it did.

The larger man leaned in in a conspiratorial way. "Just act surprised when it happens. Your ma has quite the temper, and I don't fancy bein' on the wrong side of it, if ya take my meanin'."

Grimacing, Arderi gave a halfhearted nod and shrugged. "She ain't mention nothin' when I saw her this morn." He let out a long, hopeless breath. "But, you're prob'bly right. She must have somethin' planned." Arderi knew all too well his mother wouldn't let his *'special day'* pass without fanfare. He cringed remembering what Malant and Siln were both forced to endure on their seventeenth Naming Days, and he didn't relish what this eve might bring for him.

Why must it be so embarrassin'?

His gray-haired great uncle, Duff Cor, broke from his conversation and turned to the group. "Arderi. I was just tellin' ole Varm here about ya winnin' the biathlon last Talintine." The hairs at the nape of Arderi's neck stood on end and a lump formed in his throat. "I'm tellin' ya, Varm. My nephew was way behind on the final lap. Then, as if every beast from the Nether Planes 'a Hell was on his tail, he ran like the wind, he did. Never seen nothin' like it! The boy caught up, and without even takin' time to catch his breath, put an arrow dead center in the gold. For true, he did." A huge grin split his great uncle's wrinkled face as he passed his gaze between those sitting at the table.

Though the senile old man had told this story scores of times, Mir'am Toln laughed as if it were the first he'd heard it, his ample belly jiggling. "I seen it!" He reached out and gave Arderi a fatherly pat on the arm. "Alza'dysta's Luck was with ya that day!"

Joining in the laughter, Mir'am Varm shifted on the bench. "I hate that I missed it. How'd it feel to win?"

Arderi remembered well the feeling. That race was the moment all his mental woes began. He wished he could believe it'd been the favor of the gods, but the event left him so shaken, he was unsure. It was as if he'd found some secret fuel hidden deep within, and once ignited, it burned like the hottest of fires. Though he won, the effort left him weak and shaken.

That's the night the nightmares began.

Thinking of it even now sent an upsurge of nausea crashing upon him. "I... it was..." Arderi glanced around at all the expectant faces, terror building. "My apologies, elders, Mir'am Toln... I need to hurry and eat, or I'll miss the wagons."

Not waiting for a response, he moved his attention to filling his stomach in earnest. The older menfolk all glanced at one another before shrugging and returning to their individual conversations.

Besides the fresh pan of fried eggs Layla delivered, plates of smoked pork strips, turnip mash, rice pudding, and that wonderful smelling, fresh-baked bread lined the table. He loaded his plate with some of each, scooped out a glob of butter from the center dish, and did his best to ignore any further prodding from those sitting around him.

Before Arderi's appetite was sated, he found himself the last man at the table. Buttering one more piece of bread, he stuffed it in his mouth and made a mad dash from the room. Most of the bread stuck from between his lips as he raced through the front doors of the apartment building. He mumbled morn to the few elders sitting on the porch for their daily gathering, bolted down the steps, and then sprinted toward the fielder's gate.

It was promising to be a mild day, thank Yavotha. Spring drove the last of winter's chill away, and the next few moons promised to be pleasant. Rounding the middlemost building, relief washed over him when the wagons came into view, still waiting just outside the walls. He slowed to a jog. A light breeze fluttered through the open gate, tousling his curly hair. He drank in the cool air, letting it wash away the trepidation brought on by this morn's events. He loved the early spring in the Northern Plains, and it brought a smile to his lips.

"I see ya finally drug yourself down here, *pretty boy*." Siln sat on the last wagon's bench, a foolish smirk painting his face. He turned to Arderi's father who sat next to him. "I swear, Uncle Cor. If it weren't for me, he'd miss the wagon every morn."

With a roll of the eyes, Arderi closed on the wagon. "Oh, ha ha."

Arderi's father, Tanin Cor, leaned over and extended a hand. "Well wishes, Son."

"Well wishes, Papa." Arderi took his father's hand and hopped onto the wagon, plopping beside his cousin.

Not the tallest nor broadest man in the stead, Tanin stood a finger's width under two paces. Wide shoulders and strong arms gave him a stature many mistook for a guarder instead of a simple fielder. He didn't even have the gut most menfolk his age developed. He kept his face clean-shaven, and his sandy brown hair, now showing a sprinkling of gray, cut short. Most agreed that Arderi favored his father both in looks and build, though he was the tallest in their family by a few fingers.

Arderi winced as a sharp pinch bit into his upper thigh. He glared at Siln, who flashed him a sly grin that promised *I-ain't-even-started-to-get-my-payback*.

Arderi kept his voice low enough so nobody other than Siln could hear. "Next time I'll leave ya sleepin'! Papa can tear into your hide for all I care!"

Both knew it was a false threat. Arderi returned his attention to his father. "How fare ya this morn, Papa?"

"Fine, fine." Tanin gave a shrug, then glanced off toward the lead wagon. The cold he'd been fighting for the past few days seemed gone, though the man would never admit to a modicum of discomfort.

Even if his arm was severed from his body.

Arderi couldn't remember one single time his father had complained about anything. The man was the epitome of what Arderi considered *strong* should be.

"The Order delivered a Crystal from Malant this morn. He's leavin' Mocley and bein' schooled in Hathoolan." Mir'am Cor raised a hand to forestall the boys' interjections. "He ain't give no reason for the transfer, but says he's well and sends his love."

"Hathoolan!" Arderi blurted once his father finished speaking. He couldn't believe his ears. "The Elmoriens birth home!? They're the most powerful Shapers on the entire Plane!"

"Aye." Siln sat up straight. "Some say their island home's the birthplace of the Essence itself!"

Arderi's mind raced. "Malant must be more gifted than even the Arch Shaper 'spected. Do ya have the Crystal with ya, Papa?" He held out an expectant hand. "May I draw upon it? Please?"

Tanin's chuckles faded, though the smile remained above his strong chin. "Nix, Arderi. I wouldn't bring a Crystal to the fields. It's safe at home. If ya hadn't slept in so late, you'd've been at firstmeal when it arrived. You may both draw upon it this eve and hear for yourself what Malant has to say." He placed his hand on Arderi's shoulder and gave him a serious look. "When the Order's messenger arrived this morn, I half 'spected him to be there to collect you."

"On my *Namin' Day*?"

"Well... that would be *uncustomary*, for true. And best you act like ya forgot it was this day. Your ma's been looking forward to this eve, so don't you go disappointing her."

Arderi's heart fell, but he nodded. "Aye, sir."

His father ran callused fingers through his hair. "And I've known for a while how eager the Order is to Test ya, as well."

Siln let out a derisive sniff. "This numbskull'll never pass!"

Tanin's smile faded. "Now, now. There ain't no reason to speak ill of your cousin." He gave the older boy a stern glare before locking eyes with Arderi. "Still... Siln may be right. Ya shouldn't get your hopes up, son. It's ain't like the ability runs in families. As far as I know, Malant's the first Cor to have the gift. *Ever*. There's nothin' says you'll have it as well." Sitting back against the wagon's rail, his easy smile returned. "Besides, what fool in their right mind would wanna leave all this fresh air for the stink of a city?"

Guilt constricted Arderi's throat as he made a sound he hoped his father would take for agreement. All his dreams depended on him passing the Test. If they found the ability to Meld the Essence inside Arderi, it would mean an escape from the life he was born to.

And what if I fail?

An image of him wed to Layla with a half-dozen redheaded kids clawing at his dirt-covered trousers welled up in his mind. Looking into his father's eyes, the realization fell upon him that this was the *exact* life Tanin lived. Shame filled him thinking of his father this way and he broke eye contact.

Leaning forward, Tanin patted Arderi's knee. "Aye. I know you're scared, son." He glanced at Siln. "I remember well the tales the older kids tortured me with when I was your age. Just remember, everybody gets Tested. We all survived. Truth be told, ya ain't gonna feel nothin'."

Arderi was glad his father mistook his expression as anxiety over being Tested. Aye, a few of his friends had tried to scare him with wild tales, but for all Siln's faults, he had Arderi's back when it mattered. After Siln's Test, he'd explained every step, and other than the fear of failing, nothing about the Test worried Arderi.

"Move out!" The guarder captain, a grizzled man named Flinnok Nime, shouted the command from his horse at the caravan's front.

One by one, the string of wagons lurched as their drivers urged the horses forward. Arderi rocked back and forth with the motion of the wain as it rolled down the dirt road.

They didn't have far to travel. The field they'd been working of late sat close to the stead, only one section past the animal pastures which surrounded the outer walls.

Captain Nime trotted by on his large, brown destrier, and Arderi's father waved him over. Tanin rotated on the wagon's bench and indicated the dozen or so armed menfolk accompanying the work detail. "Why's there so many guarders? Did somethin' happen?"

The captain shrugged, then adjusted the hunting spear he held. "There've been reports of late. A few critters seen nearby. I wouldn't worry myself with it, Tanin. Just a precaution, I imagine. Ya know there's always more beasties down from the Noctera in early spring."

Tanin didn't seem satisfied, but waved his thanks to the man before turning back to the boys.

"What ya thinkin', Uncle Cor?" A wary glint sat in Siln's eye as he watched the guarder captain ride away.

Frowning, Tanin gave a dismissive wave. "Prob'bly nothin', as the man said. Still, make sure ya boys keep alert out there. More than one fielder's lost his life to some hungry creature, even on the closer fields."

Siln rubbed the small tuft of hair on his chin that he'd been trying to grow since a season gone. He scanned the surrounding area as if he expected to find a ferocious beast lurking behind every bush, though Arderi wasn't concerned. For true, he'd heard the stories. Although, in the five seasons he'd been working the fields, he'd never even caught a glimpse of anything dangerous.

Besides, I've enough troubles to worry over. It ain't like I need more.

Flopping back, Arderi wanted nothing more than for all his problems to melt away.

The Test. Marriage. Namin' Day celebrations... Damnation!

He pushed it all from his mind, pretending none of it existed. No, they wouldn't go away, but ignoring them did make him feel better. Basking in the warm spring sun, he let his gaze follow the one stray cloud drifting high in an otherwise clear blue sky. He focused on that cloud, allowing it to fill every corner of his mind.

I ain't got no worries at all.

Chapter Three

Death Comes for Us All

An unforgiving sun hung high in a cloudless sky, scorching the Grand Coliseum's sandy arena floor. The Beast panted hard, his skin burning as sweat ran in rivulets beneath his thick fur. While fatigued from the combat he'd survived thus far, he'd be given no reprieve until either all those slated to fight him this day lay dead...

Or I do.

The twins he faced infuriated him, and it took all his willpower to stop his rage from consuming him. *'Losing your temper during combat will kill you as quickly as your adversary will.'*

Even from the grave, Raylac, you still haunt me.

By far the youngest he'd faced this day, he guessed the twins had trained together since birth. They fought as a single entity, one protecting the other as they maneuvered to end the Beast's life.

The bout had taken longer than it should, and the Beast's primal strength seeped from his body with each passing moment. Despite Raylac's warnings, the urge to fling himself at the two boys threatened to overtake him. Before he was compelled to use the impulsive move, however, his adversaries' youth betrayed them.

A smile most Humans took for a snarl spread across his lips as the pair separated. One boy made half-hearted attacks to hold the Beast's attention while the other shifted behind. A cunning maneuver.

If I were but a simple-minded beast.

He feigned concern, trying to keep both brothers in sight. Not that it was much of a ruse on his part. The slightest misstep would end with his life bleeding out onto the sands.

He danced this way and that, but the twins adjusted and repositioned, doing their best to keep him between their razor-sharp blades. The vibrations the two made as they jostled for position fed the pads of his hindpaws the information he needed to track their locations and distance from him, regardless of their machinations.

As if vexed by this game, the Beast squared his shoulders on one twin, giving the other his back.

The young man didn't hesitate, launching an attack as soon as the opening was offered.

Tremors rippled through the ground behind the Beast, closing fast. He dropped low and lunged backward. The killing stroke meant to end this bout in the twin's favor sailed overhead. The boy's sword arm slammed into the Beast's shoulder, hyper-extending the young man's arm and sending his weapon flipping away.

While armor covered the boy's arm and shoulder, his pit lay exposed. The Beast's sharp claws dug into the spongy, unprotected flesh. The Human screamed in agony. Wrapping his other paw around the young man's wrist, the Beast pitched forward and flung the twin at his brother. The two Humans slammed together, flailing onto the sand in a tangle of arms and legs.

Well... not all their arms.

A mirthless grunt crawled over the Beast's lips as he glanced down at the bloody trophy he held. Shifting his gaze to the crowd, he held the remains of the boy's tattered arm high over his head.

Boos and jeers greeted his offering.

The Beast growled, flinging the severed arm into the stands. "Are you not entertained!?"

While he doubted the crowd could hear his words over the din they made, he was certain of their dismay. Almost as one, they shouted obscenities and threw trash onto the arena floor. He didn't blame them; he'd ferried another of their champions to the Aftermore.

"Niixx!!!"

The scream pulled the Beast back to his vocation. One twin hovered over the other, attempting to stem his brother's life from painting the ground crimson. Hatred burned in the boy's eyes when he glared at his brother's killer. The Beast welcomed the malice like an old lover.

The Human's attention fell back to his kin long enough to witness his twin fade into the Aftermore.

Nameless though he may be, the Beast was no villain. He held himself at bay, allowing the Human time to mourn his sibling.

It's the least I can do before I send him to join his brother.

After a few moments, the Human snatched up his weapon and lurched to his feet. He gulped in air, his face twisting in rage even as tears stained his cheeks. "You'll die for this, ya monster!"

The Beast's upper lip rose, exposing sharp fangs. With a flick of his wrist, he bade the boy to do just that. "Come then! Let us be done with it!"

The young man's eyes widened, as if he hadn't known the Beast could speak. The Human's shock evaporated with the same alacrity as it came. Letting out an animalistic shriek, the boy charged. He held his shield like a battering ram, his eyes burning murder over its rim. Wrath drove the young man now, not brains.

Raylac would be so disappointed.

At least four times heavier than the boy, the Beast almost pitied him. His hindclaws extended, digging into the packed sand as he leaned forward to take the impact head on. At the last moment, the young man spun. Pain lanced through the Beast's shoulder as the Human's blade found flesh.

Howling, the Beast pivoted to dig claws into the annoying Human only to find himself dodging a second, then third swipe from the surviving twin's sword. Without pause, the boy kept up the torrent of attacks, and the Beast gained several knicks and cuts under the relentless barrage.

But it takes more energy to attack than dodge. Soon the boy's swings came slower, his arms growing heavier. Before long, the young man ceased his attacks all together. He stood a few paces from the Beast, panting, his arms hanging by his sides.

"A slanted-eyed goat once told me anger was a warrior's worst enemy." The Beast placed a paw over the deep cut in his shoulder. "Though your feint was well timed."

"A hand higher and my blade would've found your throat." The boy continued to gulp in air as he spat the words out.

Moving his paw from his wound, the Beast lazily scratched his neck. "Mayhap. But I still have voice."

The two stared at each other for long moments, neither breaking eye contact. Even the crowd had fallen into an uncomfortable silence. The young Human's resolve faltered. Swallowing hard, he shifted his gaze to his dead brother. Grief washed over his features and tears sprang anew. "He was—"

The Beast shot forward in a blur of violence, his fangs sinking into the Human's throat. Powerful jaws clamped. The boy's windpipe ripped away as the Beast yanked his head back.

Rising to his full height, blood dripping off his chin, the Beast glared down at the twin who was only now realizing that his life had come to an end. For the second time this day, the boy's hands failed to stem blood from pouring onto the arena's sands. His eyes pleaded and mouth worked, as if begging for mercy.

The Beast spit the disgusting flesh from his maw. "Ask the Twelve for mercy. You'd have given me none, and you'll get none *from* me."

It took mere moments before the boy's last breath escaped his lungs.

If the Beast hadn't been holding him, the young man would've long since fallen. He took a moment to admire his handiwork. Once the boy's heart ceased pumping, the blood stopped pouring from his neck. Though he'd killed his fair share, it always marveled him how fragile Humans were.

How are these pathetic things the masters of this Plane?

Still... the Beast was no monster and wished the boy no ill will. "May you find your brother in the Aftermore and the peace of eternal sleep." Retracting his claws, he let the fair-haired corpse dropped in a heap. Another prize for the Coliseum to claim as its own. He hoped the twins would be the last he'd sacrifice to its sands this day.

Have I not spilt enough blood to satisfy Rash'ayel's justice?

The crowd, which remained silent even as the second twin died, began their shouting once more.

Apparently not.

The Beast ignored them as he stalked toward the center of the arena. He swept his gaze over the scene as he went. What did he care of their love for their champions? The twins were but two more to join the half-score of other corpses baking under the scorching sun.

The fetid tang of Human blood sat heavy on his tongue, so he raked a furry arm across his lips in a bid to wipe some of it away.

Humans taste worse than they smell.

Weariness gripped his legs, and his shoulders drooped. He panted, his chest rising and falling in a quick rhythm. He'd been fighting non-stop for near an aurn, and his primal rage waned. The battles thus far had been single foes or pairs of opponents, with a pause in between for slaves to rush onto the field and collect the weapons of the fallen.

Two of these pitiful creatures hovered over the twins now, collecting their pretty swords and matching shields. The Beast cared not. If he attempted to pick up a weapon, it would mean his death.

His attention shifted to the arena's far wall where his keeper stood holding his damnable Painstick. The two archers flanking the fat pig, however, were the real deterrent.

I'll not die for want of a weapon.

His mind drifted back to when he'd first entered the arena. The noise of the crowd had been deafening. He'd never have believed so many Humans existed, let alone could be crammed into one building, had he not seen it with his own eyes.

The Beast had snarled once at the mass of undulating bodies when he emerged from the undertunnels, then did his best to ignore them. They were nothing more than a distraction.

The arena's floor spanned a hundred paces across and half that wide, covered with hard-packed sand from the multitudes who'd fought and died here over the ages. The wall separating the crowd from the fighting area loomed high, well over six paces. A larger-than-life fresco adorned the barrier's upper half. Giant pristine figures depicted combat of every conceivable type—Human against Human or beast or thing—frozen in a timeless struggle, indifferent to the carnage strewn below their stone feet.

The throng packing the rows of benches varied from one another as much as the stone carvings. Humans ranging from this land's blanched tones to his master's black-skinned Silawayian kin to the brown hues of the Komarian people—a multi-colored sea of Humans, wailing and screaming. A clash of shapes and movements, threatening to spill over like a tidal wave of flesh upon the blood-stained sands the Beast hunted.

"Well, Mir'ams and Mis'ams!" A voice boomed over the din, louder than any being could produce naturally. "Thus ends the brief reign of Gaylain and Baylain!" The comment earned more boos and jeers from those in attendance. "But the Beast still draws breathe, and it ain't finished its penance to Rash'ayel for its *HEINOUS CRIMES!*" The reminder of the Beast's farcical rampage earned more cries of hate.

"To *earn* its freedom and appease the War God, the god of Justice, the Beast must face one final, ultimate challenge!"

More lies... Only death shall earn my freedom.

"And as you all well know, that challenge is no small one!"

A murmured laughter rippled over the crowd.

"I give you... *SALMIK THE VINDICATOR!!!*"

The ruckus rose to new heights as every Human leapt to their feet. Shrieking and howling, they clapped or waved colorful pennants.

The squeals of a gate rising pulled the Beast's attention to the arena's far side. A mountain of a man strode from the undertunnels, ducking to clear the portcullis' lower bar before it finished its ascent. Even at this distance, the packed dry sand carried the vibrations from this massive Human's footfalls.

The crowd's mood changed. Their murmurs and outcries still wove together into a blanket of dissonance, but they were no longer as agitated. They were more reserved. Sheltered. As if the throng had become a single mindless blob, holding its breath in anticipation.

Or mayhap awe.

As one, they began a low chant.

"Sal-mik. Sal-mik. Sal-mik."

Soon, every voice in the arena picked up the call, and their volume increased by magnitudes.

"Sal-mik! Sal-mik! Sal-mik!"

The large warrior paid them no mind, his gaze locked onto the Beast's. He came to a stop some ten paces away. A wide-bladed sword extended from his right hand, a medium-sized burnished shield covered the forearm of his other, and a full-faced helm hid everything except his eyes. While enormous for a Human, the top of his steel helmet stopped short of the Beast's forehead.

The man hoisted his muscular sword arm into the air and acknowledged the crowd for the first time.

The throng exploded.

"SAL-MIK! SAL-MIK! SAL-MIK!"

They see this Human as the grand finish. The man meant to end the life of the... murdering monster.

Dropping his arm, Salmik took up a defensive posture. With no other ceremony than that, the big warrior advanced.

Good! It'll make the crowd's heartbreak all the more satisfying when I end this quickly.

Once the Human was just out of sword's reach, the Beast let out a vicious roar to unsettle this new opponent. Instead of being unnerved, Salmik attacked, swinging his sword in a high diagonal arc aimed for the Beast's collarbone.

Crouching low, the Beast sprang for the man's throat, his long tail lashing out to provide extra balance and accuracy. He slipped under the man's descending blade, but the Human was quicker than his size suggested. The warrior's elbow slammed into the Beast's upper back like a mallet, driving him down. Never had he been struck so hard, and a jolt of pain rippled through his spine.

While he still managed to wrap his arms around the giant man, the Beast found himself much lower than he'd aimed, his muzzle smushed against the thick leather armor covering the Human's stomach.

Seasons of training had taught him that those who couldn't be fluid with their plans didn't live long enough to regret their shortcomings. Linking his paws around the Human's midsection, he dug his hindclaws into the packed sand and lunged forward with the little strength remaining to him.

I can finish you on your —

As the Beast launched forward, Salmik grabbed him, took a step back, and spun. Using size and momentum against him, the big warrior yanked the Beast off his hindpaws like a sack of grain. In desperation, he made to sink his claws into the man's leather jerkin, but the thick hide allowed them no purchase.

Essence enhanced!

At the spin's apex, the warrior flung the Beast. He sailed through the air a good two paces before crashing to the ground.

Like the feline he was, the Beast rolled, finishing the tumble crouched on all fours. He glared at the mountainous man with new respect.

Salmik squatted and retrieved his dropped sword, and the Beast envisioned a grin hidden behind the man's steel visor.

He'll not pass into the Aftermore as easily as the others. Good... Perhaps I'll earn my freedom after all.

The Beast rose with deliberate slowness and each combatant took in the other — weighing... measuring...

Flexing his shoulders, the Beast brushed sand out of his fur as they circled. Unlike those whose corpses littered the arena, no stench of fear clung to this man. The Human's armor bore none of the fine decorations most of his earlier adversaries had fancied. Plain it may be, knowing it was Essence enhanced changed everything. His claws could gouge through steel easier than the leather covering this gigantic warrior.

For the first time that day, a speck of doubt wormed its way into the Beast's heart.

And even as it did, a spark of hope emerged.

Salmik sucked air in with large gulps after tossing him just once. He'd always had difficulties judging a Human's age, though the spots adorning the hand gripping the sword confirmed that this was no young man.

Mature and experienced, of that there's no doubt. But has age dulled your edge?

When the pair circled to where the sun rested over the Beast's shoulder, the warrior tilted his shield. Light glared off the polished metal, striking the Beast's eyes and sending a blazing streak of agony ripping through his skull.

Blind, the Beast leaped to the side. The sound of a sword slicing through air proved he'd moved none too slow.

His sight cleared in time to see Salmik's second attack a moment too late.

The warrior spun, his burnished shield parallel to the arena floor. The edge of the defensive armor struck the Beast's temple like a hammer.

Blackness consumed him, lit only by the stars filling his vision. The ground rushed up to pummel his face. With terror-fueled panic, he rolled away. Steel bit into the sand he'd vacated. Scrambling to fore- and hindpaws, he tore across the arena with the speed reserved to animals who run on all fours. He spat out sand and blood as he distanced himself from the blade seeking a taste of his hide.

When he'd put enough space between them, he stopped. Although his sight was still tunneled and the world around him blurry, the pads on his paws informed him that Salmik was some sixty paces away and had slowed from a run to a jog, and finally to a walk.

The crowd's shouts and screams, which rose in anticipation of the Beast's defeat, degenerated into chaos once more.

Sorry to disappoint.

Rising, the Beast stumbled as the Plane spun. He panted hard, trusting that his sight would clear before Salmik closed the distance between them. He shook his head and regretted the motion. His temples throbbed and a sharp pain pulsed behind his eyes. Blood trickled from his scalp, carving a crimson track through his honey-gold fur.

He shifted to face Salmik. The brute of a man was still some distance away. With a slow, deliberate movement, he let his paw probe the fresh wound on his head, and again considered the blurry form striding his way.

Is it truly this Human who'll prove my better? And why should I not welcome death? What has life ever given me?

Exhaustion tore at him as the sun continued its assault on the remainder of his strength. The arena tilted, and he found himself on the ground once more. Flopping into a sitting position, he glared at the warrior who quickened his pace. The Beast scrambled back a few more paces, though there was no escape. His fatigued arms gave out as he reached the second twin's body. That fight seemed as if it had happened a lifetime gone. No longer caring if his keeper punished him or if arrows riddled his body, the Beast searched the corpse for a weapon—a dagger or small knife overlooked. Anything he could use to penetrate the warrior's enhanced armor.

He found none.

Leaning upon the dead boy for support, the irony of looking to the twin's body for assistance didn't elude him.

The Beast kept his back to Salmik as he fought to rise. Before he could stand, his hindlegs gave way, dropping him to one knee. Grabbing the wound on his head sent another wave of misery coursing through him.

He forced himself to peer over his shoulder and saw what his paws had already told him—the old warrior, no more than thirty paces away and moving fast, wanting to close the distance between them as quick as possible.

Only now, Salmik's sword and shield hung low, exhaustion gnawing at him as much as the Beast. If he'd had the strength, he would've smiled.

Turning from the approaching warrior and laying his paws on the dead boy's chest, the Beast struggled to rise once more. He failed, his knee sinking into the sticky crimson sand. Staring into the twin's lifeless eyes, it was as if the boy mocked him.

I shan't beg for mercy. Death comes for us all.

With every ounce of energy remaining, the Beast fought to stay calm. Breathing in through his nose, he exhaled through his mouth. Clearing his mind. Beneath the exhaustion and pain, he found that which he sought—the ever-present flicker of rage at the core of his soul. He took hold of it. Fanned it. Spurred it to burn through his muscles in a torrent of hate and fury. Loathing for those who owned him as nothing more than an object. Vengeance for the pain he was forced to endure day after day. Revenge for having the sanctuary of his mind invaded, his memories stolen from him. His life wasn't his own. Had never *been* his own. He was property. A fool with no more value than the wheezing old man who'd occupied the cell next to his.

And just as he did, I'll bleed and die for the pleasure of others.

The vibrations increased as the Human charged.

Fuming, the Beast ignored his ears—the crowd’s rising fervor overpowered all sound anyway. His pads were all he needed to judge the space between them.

Thrum, thrum, thrum. The massive warrior’s feet struck the ground.

Thrum, thrum, thrum. Death came calling.

The Beast continued to feed on the flood of ferocity swelling inside him. His claws extended, slicing deep into the lifeless flesh he leaned upon.

Fifteen paces.

Ten.

Five.

With a roar, the Beast rose, spun, and launched the dead twin in one fluid motion.

Salmik thrust his shield forward to fend off the unconventional attack.

Propelled by the last of the Beast’s strength, the boy’s body struck the warrior’s defense like a ballista bolt. The joyous sound of the man’s arm snapping reverberated through the air. Corpse and shield slammed into the man’s chest, throwing him off his feet and sending him flopping to the ground. Salmik’s head smashed into the hard-packed sand first as the two bodies crumpled to the arena floor.

Sprinting forward even before the pair came to a rest, the Beast pounced. He crashed onto the carnage, swiping the twin’s body away as he landed. Grabbing the warrior’s helm by its face guard, he plunged his claws through the open eye slit.

Salmik’s screams assaulted the Beast’s ears as he pushed his fingers down, claws biting into the unseen flesh below. Hooking his thumb under the chinstrap, it became wrapped in a warm, spongy embrace as it sliced into the soft underside of the Human’s jaw. The Beast’s muscles bulged under the strain of closing his fist around both the piece of armor and Salmik’s face it was meant to protect. A cracking of bones rang out from the helmet as the warrior’s shrieks morphed into a strangled gurgle.

Yanking the helm off, the Beast lifted it high into the air, intent on using the piece of armor to bash in the Human’s skull.

What he saw drained away all his animalistic fury.

Although the Human still drew breath, his face was a horror to behold. Everything between his eyes and chin—nose, mouth, cheeks, and jaw—had ripped away with the helm, leaving a gory, gaping hole where the old warrior’s face should’ve been. Tattered skin and juts of broken bone formed a bowl-like crevice, blood spilling into the gruesome orifice. The shredded remains of a windpipe twitched, spraying out a fine red mist as the man gasped his last few breaths of life.

It impressed the Beast that even as the man died, his fingers groped in vain for the hilt of his sword. The shattered remnants of the Human's left eye slipped from its crushed socket to tumble into the destroyed fissure of his face. The empty socket that had been his right orbital cavity stared up at the sky as if longing to see its blueness one last time.

Standing, the Beast dropped his arm to his side and took in the destruction he'd wrought. Though he should've reveled in this victory, his hackles rose as an icy terror gripped his core. His tufted ears swiveled, searching for the source of his unease. Then it struck.

Silence!

Whipping his attention to the stands, the Beast tensed his exhausted muscles in anticipation of some unseen killing blow to take him. He didn't know how much more he could endure, but he wouldn't die like some helpless rat in a ship's hold.

The entire crowd stood on their feet, leaning over the rails, all sound fled from them. The sight sent dread slicing through the Beast's heart. For the first time, he stared into the face of the one thing he realized he could never defeat.

How can I survive a horde that'll not rest until I bleed my life out for them? It's not me against those sent to kill me. It's me against...

"The crowd!"

The arena's full weight pressed down as never before, forcing his shoulders to slump with dejection. The victorious elations of this day fled his mind. Never had the Beast tasted defeat.

And with defeat comes death.

As he stared out over the silent mob, his eyes lighted upon the strange blue-skinned being who'd visited him earlier that morn. The one who'd stolen even the privacy of his own mind from him. The creature sat under a colorful cloth canopy inside a walled area separated from the common seats. Estular Jerts and gaggle of Humans hovered nearby, each garbed in wealth. But unlike the others who gazed at the Beast with loathing, this *Honored One* sat looking at him with a cold impassiveness, as if there was nothing he could do to win its approval. The strange, ancient hatred that bubbled up inside him during their first meeting was still there, but the numbness of despair that washed over him overshadowed all else.

That creature shan't be sated until it sees me perish.

For the first time, the will to live fled the Beast.

This day shall be my last.

Despite this realization, he wouldn't give them the satisfaction of witnessing his shame. With a defiant glare at those who wished to own his very soul, he stood tall and silent. While he knew he could endure no more, he used his last flicker of rage to cloak himself with the guise of strength.

I'll fight, though death be my only reward.

As swiftly as they'd fallen silent, the crowd exploded. Waves of sound struck the Beast from every side. The mass of noise reverberated off the Coliseum walls like a mountain collapsing into the sea. A jumble of jeers, shouts, and indistinct cries tumbling one over another until a single word emerged from the madness. Starting from his left, in a small group at first, it caught like wildfire until the entire crowd chanted as one.

"Kith! Kith! Kith!"

It rumbled on and on until every voice in the arena took up the call. They chanted so loud the Beast reeled toward unconsciousness.

"Kith! Kith! Kith!"

He spun in a slow circle, seeing the crowd as if for the first time. They chanted not for this nameless Beast's failure. Not for his destruction. Not for his death.

They chant for my VICTORY!

"Kith! Kith! Kith!"

He glanced at the gore-filled helm still clutched in his paw. Bits of flesh and bone dangled from the neck hole. In open defiance to his blue-skinned tormentor, the Beast glared at the creature who'd invaded the one lone place that had ever been his. He thrust the piece of armor high over his head, the blood of his vanquished foe oozing down his arm.

The crowd went berserk.

He wouldn't have believed the noise could increase, but it did. The air screamed with bloodlust. Clamor fell from the stands like a torrential rain, washing over him, invigorating his spirit.

"KITH! KITH! KITH!"

The nameless Beast who'd never tasted a moment's freedom experienced something new as he took in the acclaim of those who now revered him.

"KITH! KITH! KITH!"

He felt pride.