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BRANDON
SANDERSON

INFINITY BLADE

AWAKENING

CHAIR

Salt Lake City, Utah

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

INFINITY BLADE: AWAKENING

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Prologue

GOD'S DEATH didn't do much to change the lives of the people of Drem's Maw. In fact, most of them didn't even know their deity had been slain.

Those who did, however, took advantage.

"There is nothing at all to worry about," Weallix said, raising his hands as he stood upon an improvised stage made from two carts. He was flanked on one side by a daeril, a hulking creature that only shallowly resembled a man. Daerils came in many types, but this one had deep violet skin and arms as thick as tree trunks.

"You've always paid your taxes to me, and I've passed them along," Weallix continued, speaking to the gathered crowd. "Now I'll keep them myself, and I'll be your lord. It will be good for you to have a leader who is more local."

"What of the God King?" someone called from the nervous crowd. Things had been the same in Drem's Maw for centuries. They worked themselves ragged to meet quota, and were bullied into giving up almost everything they had for the tax collectors.

"The God King has no complaint regarding this arrangement," Weallix said.

Members of the crowd grumbled, but what could they say? Weallix had daerils and soldiers—and, supposedly, the God King's blessing.

A stranger stepped up to the edge of the crowd. The air tasted wet and smelled of minerals; Drem's Maw had been built inside a massive cavern. It had a large grinlike opening a hundred yards across at the front, and thousands of stalactites hung from the ceiling; many were so thick that three men holding hands wouldn't be able to reach around them.

Only stumps remained of many of the gargantuan rock formations, however. A hundred enormous chains hung down from the cavern roof, their tops bolted to the stone. The town's men climbed those chains each day and strapped themselves to the ceiling, where they mined for the precious minerals the God King demanded.

The location of buildings in the town shifted month by month, moving out from beneath where the miners worked. Even still, most people—men, women, and children—wore a helm to protect them from falling bits of rock.

“Why now?” one of the braver men called. “Why make us have a local lord, when we’ve always been able to pick our own leaders before?”

“The God King needs not explain his ways to you!” Weallix yelled. Instead of a helm, he wore his publican’s cap and a rich velvet costume of violet and green.

The townspeople stilled. To disobey the God King was death. Most didn’t even dare question.

The stranger rounded the crowd’s people, passing between dangling chains with thick black iron links. Some people gave him looks, trying to peer at his face, which was lost in the cowl of his deep hood. Most dismissed him, assuming he was one of those who had come with Weallix. They got out of his way as he walked toward the center of the crowd, where the publican continued explaining his new rules for the town.

The stranger didn’t shove or push; the crowd wasn’t pressed together so tightly that he needed to. He passed one of the thick chains and hesitated, reaching out and resting his fingers on it.

Woven into that chain were ribbons of blue, remnants from the festival that had occurred here a week before. Fallen flower petals—now wilted—still lurked in some cracks and corners. Some of the buildings had even been repainted. All for the Feast of the Sacrifice, a day that came only once every two decades.

“. . . So, of course, there can be no questioning my authority,” Weallix said. He pointed toward the front of the crowd, to the man who had asked the question earlier. “Wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes . . . yes, my lord,” the man said, shrinking down.

“Excellent,” Weallix said. “Let’s see you beaten and be on with our day, then.”

“But, my lord!” the man said. “I—”

“Questioning again, I see,” Weallix said. He waved curtly. “A price must be paid. You will remember to whom you belong.”

Daerils began to descend upon the townspeople. There was variety to the inhuman monsters in skin, shape, and color, some with claws, others with

eyes that burned. They shoved among the people, grabbing young women from their families—including the daughter of the outspoken man.

“No!” the man said, trying to push the daerils away. “Please, no!” One daeril—lean like a wolf, with bony knobs on its skin and a face that appeared burned—hissed, then raised its sword and swung down at the man.

A *clang* rang through the cavern.

The stranger stood there, arm extended, sword blocking the daeril’s attack.

The townspeople, the daerils, and Weallix all seemed to notice the stranger for the first time. People pulled back from him in a ring.

Then they saw the sword.

That *sword*. Long and smooth at the sides, with a distinctive set of three holes in its center . . . it was a symbol every child in the land was taught to recognize. A symbol of power, of authority, and of rulership.

It was the God King’s own weapon.

The daeril was so surprised that it could do nothing but gape as the stranger spun the weapon and impaled the creature through the throat. The stranger moved in an eyeblink, ripping the sword free and dashing forward, cloak trailing behind him. He grabbed one of the chains, moving with practiced familiarity, and swung on it. He swept to a pair of daerils who were towing a young woman toward the stage.

The two fell easily. These were not the champions of the God King’s palace; they were simple brutes. The stranger left them gurgling in their own blood.

Weallix started yelling, calling for his soldiers. He raved and ranted, pointing. Then he cut off, stumbling back as the stranger grabbed a chain and pushed forward, swinging up and landing with a thump on the wagons. The purple-skinned daeril struck with a thick-headed mace, but the God King’s weapon—the Infinity Blade itself—flashed in the air.

The daeril looked with befuddlement at the stump of his mace. The head thumped to the floor of the cart. The daeril’s corpse followed a moment later.

Weallix tried to leap from the cart, but fell to his knees as the vehicle shook. As he rose, he found the blade at his neck.

“Call them off,” the stranger said in a soft voice.

“Daerils!” Weallix cried. “Release the people and stand back! Stand back!”

The stranger’s hood had fallen behind, revealing a silvery helm that covered his entire face. He waited as the monsters retreated to the edge of the clustered townsfolk. Then he raised his blade—dripping with blood from the monsters he’d slain—and pointed toward the mouthlike opening into the town. “Out. Never return.”

Weallix obeyed in a scramble, falling to the ground as he climbed from the cart, then dashed at a full run out of the cavern, his daerils falling in around him.

The cavern fell silent. The stranger finally reached up and peeled his helm from his head, exposing sweaty, brown-blond hair and a youthful face.

Siris. The Sacrifice. The man who had been sent to die.

“I have returned,” he told the townspeople.

Chapter One

“HE WASN’T supposed to *win*,” Master Renn hissed.

Siris could hear them talking in the other room of Renn’s hut. Siris sat quietly, holding a small bowl of soup in one hand. Fenweed, a very healthy soup. A warrior’s soup.

It tasted like dishwater.

“Well,” Master Shanna said, “we can’t exactly blame him, can we? For living, I mean?”

“He went to fight the God King,” Master Hobb said. “*We sent* him to fight the God King.”

And Siris had gone, just as his father and his grandfather had gone. Dozens had been sent over the centuries, always from the same family. A family sheltered, protected, and hidden by the people of the land.

The Sacrifice, it was called. It was how they fought back. The only way. They’d live beneath the oppressive thumb of the God King. They’d pay nearly all they had in tribute, would suffer the brutality of men like Weallix—who, up until his power grab, had been only a simple tax collector.

But they would make this one act of rebellion. One family, hidden. One warrior each generation, sent to show that the people of this land were not completely dominated.

The Sacrifice didn’t need to win. He wasn’t expected to win. He wasn’t supposed to be *able* to win.

Hell take me, Siris thought, looking down at his bowl. *Even I didn’t expect to defeat him*. Siris had gone in with the dream that maybe—if he were incredibly lucky—he’d get a single cut on the God King, make the tyrant bleed.

Instead, he’d slain one of the *Deathless*.

The other room fell silent, then the whispers continued, softly enough that he couldn’t hear.

I really did it, Siris thought. *I’m alive*. It was only now beginning to sink in. He looked down, then pointedly set the bowl aside. *And that means I never have to drink this dreck again!*

He stood up, smiling. He had dreamed of what might happen if he actually killed the God King. He hadn't dared hope, but he had allowed himself those dreams. He'd imagined triumph, celebrations. He'd imagined exulting in his victory. Oddly, he didn't feel exultant. Instead, he just felt *free*.

Being the Sacrifice had dominated everything he'd ever done. But that was done with. *Finally*. Finally he could figure out who he was—the person he could be when he didn't have this terrible duty weighing him down. He hesitated, then fished a small woodbound book out of his pocket. His mother had given it to him and told him to record his thoughts each night as he traveled to the God King's castle.

His mother and he were among the few in the town who could read. The Sacrifice had to be literate. Siris wasn't certain why—it was merely tradition. He hadn't considered it an arduous requirement; reading and writing had come easily to him.

The logbook was empty. Siris had never written in it, and felt foolish for ignoring his mother's suggestion. He hadn't been able to force himself to do it. He'd been marching to his death, determined to avenge his fathers who had fallen to the God King's blade. Not by killing the creature, but by fighting him, by proving that—despite what he may think—the world was not completely his.

Siris's mother had included a charcoal pencil with the book. Siris raised it and turned to the first page. There, in bold letters, he wrote one sentence.

I hate fenweed soup.

The door opened, and Siris turned to face the town's elders. Master Renn stood at their forefront, a short, bald man with a round face and red ceremonial robes now faded with age. "Siris," Master Renn said. "We were wondering . . . what it is you intend to do next."

Siris thought for a moment. "I intend to visit my mother," he said. "I'd assumed she'd be in the town, as it's midday. I should have gone to her hut first." She lived outside of the main cavern, in the open air.

"Yes, yes," Master Renn said. "But after that . . . ?"

"I've given that a lot of thought, master," Siris said, tucking away the book. "And . . . well, I've come to a decision."

"Yes?"

"I'm going swimming."

Master Renn blinked in surprise, then turned to the other elders.

“After that,” Siris continued, “I’m going to eat an everberry pie. Do you realize I’ve never tasted everberry pie? I was always on too strict a diet to eat the pies during feasts. A warrior cannot afford such frivolity.” He rubbed his chin. “Everyone says everberry is the best type of pie.”

I hope I like it, he thought. I’d hate to have spent all of these years envying everyone else for nothing.

“Siris,” Master Renn said, stepping closer. His eyes flickered toward the corner of the small room, where Siris’s armor lay piled, bundled inside his cloak—which doubled as a pack. The Infinity Blade rested against the pile. “Did you *really* do it? You didn’t . . . just sneak in and steal his sword, did you?”

“What?” Siris said. “Of course not!”

The fight flashed in his mind. Sword against sword. The God King’s voice, commanding, dismissive—yet surprisingly honest. It had been an unexpectedly honorable dual, after the ancient ideal.

“And the others?” Master Renn asked. “The other six members of the Pantheon? You killed their king. Did you face the others?”

“I duelled some captives in the dungeon,” Siris said. “I think they might have been important, but they didn’t look like members of the Pantheon. I didn’t recognize them, at least.”

Master Renn glanced at the other elders. They began shuffling, uncomfortable.

“What?” Siris demanded.

“Siris,” Master Renn said, “you can’t stay here.”

“What? Why not!”

“They’ll come hunting you, son,” Master Renn said. “They’ll come hunting for *that*.” He looked toward the sword again.

“All Deathless covet the Infinity Blade,” Master Hanna said from behind Renn. “Everyone knows that.”

“They’ll be angry,” Master Hord said. “Angry at you, for what you’ve done.”

“We *can’t* let you remain in the town,” Master Renn said. “For the good of us all, you have to go, Siris.”

“You’re exiling me?” Siris said. “Hell take me . . . I *saved* you. I saved all of you!”

“We appreciate that,” Master Renn said.

Several of the others didn't look like they agreed. Just a week before, these people had toasted his bravery. They'd sent him off with a feast and fanfare. They'd praised him and lauded him. *They didn't want me to win*, he thought, looking into those hostile eyes. *They're afraid. They spoke of freedom, but they don't know what to do with it.*

"You should go quickly," Renn said. "We've sent word to Lord Weallix, inviting him back."

"Him?" Siris demanded. "You'd serve that *rat*?"

"Our best hope now," Master Hord said, "is to look cowed, placated. Dominated. When the other gods come searching, they must not find a town in rebellion."

"It is the best way, Siris," Master Renn said.

"You've been slaves so long," Siris spat, "you don't know how to be anything else. You are fools! Children." He was shouting, he realized. "After all of these centuries, time after time feasting and dreaming, now you throw it away! Now you throw *me* away!"

The elders shied back before his rage. They seemed frightened of him. Terrified.

Siris formed fists, but then found his rage evaporating. He couldn't be angry at them. He could only pity them.

"Fine," he snapped, moving to pick up his gear. "Fine, I'll go."

AN HOUR LATER, Siris lifted up an old, worn axe. Its blade was chipped, the haft grayed and weathered with time. He hefted it, judging its weight, and tried to ignore the tempest of emotions inside of him. Betrayal. Frustration. Anger.

His training let him banish all of that for a moment, as he stared at the axe. In his mind, he saw the ways he could use it to win a fight.

Smash his foe at the knees, then bury the axe into his chest as he fell . . .

Hack at the neck, coming in furiously, using the long haft for additional reach . . .

Bash the axe against an opponent's shield time and time again to throw him off balance, then step back and strike unexpectedly from the right . . .

He raised the axe . . .

. . . then swung it down at a log resting on the stump before him. He hit the log off-center, and the axe *bounced* away, as if the wood were stone.

Siris growled and swung again, but this time only managed to hack a chip off the side.

“Damn,” he said, resting the axe on his shoulder. “Chopping wood is a *lot* harder than it looks.”

“Siris?” a shocked voice asked.

He looked up. A middle-aged woman stood on the pathway up to the forested hut, clutching a bucket of water. Her hair was starting to silver, and her clothing was of the simplest wool. His mother, Myan.

His mother would know what to do. Myan was *solid*, in the same way that an ancient tree stump was solid, or the balanced boulder outside of town was solid. He’d tried to push that over as a child. Though it seemed delicate, he hadn’t been able to shove it an inch.

“Mother,” he said, lowering the axe. She hadn’t been in the hut when he’d arrived a half hour ago. Fetching water. He should have known. That task he’d always done for her, as the jog to the river and back fit well with his training.

“Siris!” she said, putting down the bucket. She hurried to him, stepping with a limp from her fall ten years back. She took his arm tenderly. “You saw reason, then? You actually refused to go to the God King’s castle? Oh, lights in the heavens, boy! I never thought you’d come to your senses. Now we . . .”

She trailed off as she saw the object that Siris had set down beside the woodpile. The Infinity Blade. It almost seemed to glow in the sunlight.

“Hell take me,” Myan whispered, raising her hand to her mouth. “By the seven lords who rule in terror. You actually did it? You *killed* him?”

Siris swung the axe down again on the log. He hit it off-center again. *It’s the grain*, he thought. *I’m trying to hit it across the grain, instead of with the grain.*

Strange. He could kill a man seventeen ways with this axe. He could imagine each one in perfect order, could feel his body moving through those motions. Yet he couldn’t chop wood. He’d never had a chance to try.

“So you didn’t see reason,” Myan said.

“No,” Siris replied.

His mother had never wanted him to go. Oh, she hadn’t been overt about her displeasure. She hadn’t wanted to undermine what the rest of the town—the rest of the land itself—saw as his destiny and her privilege. Perhaps she’d sensed, in some way, that it *had been* his destiny. He’d never given

serious thought to fleeing. That would have been like . . . like climbing the tallest mountain in the world, then turning back ten steps from the summit.

No, she hadn't tried to undermine his training. But what mother would *want* her son to go off to certain death? She'd tried to talk him out of it the night before the Feast of the Sacrifice, the most forward of her attempts. By then, it had been too late. For both of them.

"We have to take you to town," she exclaimed. "Talk to the elders. There will be celebrations! Parties! Dancing and . . . and . . . And what is that look on your face, my son?"

"I've been to town," he said, pulling his arm from her grip. "There will be no celebrations, Mother. They sent me away."

"Sent you away . . . Why would they . . ." She paused, studying him. "Those small-minded fools. They're afraid, aren't they?"

"I guess they have reason to be," Siris said, putting the axe aside and sitting down on the stump. "They're right. People will come looking for me."

"That's nonsense," she said, crouching down beside him. "Son, I'm not sending you away again. I'm not going through *that* again."

He looked up, but said nothing. Perhaps with the support of the town, he'd have stayed. But with just his mother . . . No. He wouldn't endanger her.

Why had he even come to her, then? *Because I wanted her to know*, he thought. *Because I needed to show her that I'm alive*. Perhaps a greater kindness would have been to stay away.

"You're not going to let me choose, are you?" she said.

He hesitated, then shook his head.

Her hand tightened on his arm. "Ever the warrior," she whispered. "Well, at least let me feed you a good meal. Then perhaps we can talk further."

HE FELT immeasurably better with a good meal in his stomach. His mother hadn't had any everberries for a pie, unfortunately, but she'd fixed him some peach cobbler. He carefully noted in his logbook:

I Like peach cobbler. Definitely Like peach cobbler.

"How many times did I try to feed you that when you were growing up?" she asked him, sitting across the table and watching him as he spooned up the last bite.

"Dozens," he said.

“And you refused every time.”

“I . . .” It was hard to explain. He’d *known* his duty, somehow. Even from childhood, he’d known. The town’s expectations had held him to high standards, but the truth was that he’d held himself to them as well.

“You always were an odd child,” she said. “So solemn. So dutiful. So focused. Sometimes I felt less like a mother to you, and more like a . . . an innkeeper. Even when you were young.”

It made him uncomfortable when she talked like that. “You never speak of Father. Was he the same?”

“I didn’t know him long,” she said, looking wistful. “Isn’t that odd to say? We met like it was a dream, married in under a month. Then he was gone, off to be the Sacrifice. He left me with you.”

She’d come here to Drem’s Maw in order to get away from her old life. She had cousins here, though she’d never really fit in. Neither had he, even though the townspeople had claimed to be proud of being the ones to raise the Sacrifice.

“He did have a sense of purpose,” she said, nodding. “The same as you.”

“I wish I had that still,” Siris replied. He looked down at his empty plate, then sighed and stood. “I had hoped that now . . . finally . . . I could go about being myself. Whoever that is.”

“Must you go, Siris?” she asked. “You could stay, hide here. We could make it work.”

“No,” he said. *I won’t bring this down upon you.*

“I can’t make you stay, I suppose.” She didn’t seem pleased about that. “But where will you go?”

“I don’t know,” he said, gathering the cloak, wrapped like a pack with his armor inside of it.

“Are you at least willing to listen to a little advice?”

“From you?” he said. “Always.”

“I wished to the lights of heaven that you hadn’t set your feet on this path. But you did, son.”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“That’s foolishness,” she said. “You always have a choice.”

Foolishness or not, it was still how he felt.

“You set your feet on this path,” she continued. “So now you need to finish what you began.”

“I *did* finish it,” he complained. “I killed the God King! What more could they ask of me?”

“It’s no longer about what people are asking of you, son,” she said. She reached over, taking his hand. “I’m sorry,” she said more softly. “You don’t deserve this. It is true.”

He looked down.

“Don’t despair.” She rose, taking him by the arms. “You’ve done something *wonderful*, Siris. Something everyone thought impossible. You have fulfilled the dreams of your fathers, and avenged their deaths.” She pulled away and looked up at him. “Do you remember what we spoke of, on that night before you left?”

“Honor.”

“I told you that if you are going to do something, son,” she said, “you need to do it with all of your heart. You have something you didn’t have before. Hope. You’ve defeated one of them. They *can* be beaten.”

She held his eyes, and he nodded slowly.

“Good,” she said, squeezing his arms. “I’ll pack you food for your trip.”

He watched her limp away. *She’s right*, he thought. *I’ve done the impossible once. I’ll do it again.*

This time, however, he wouldn’t be hunting someone to kill. This time his quest would be more personal. Somehow, he would find the one thing he’d always wanted without realizing it.

He’d find freedom.

Chapter Two

THE GOD KING came awake with a deep gasp. It was the uncontrolled gasp of one who had been without breath for too long. The gasp of the dead returning to life, his heart pounding, his eyes opening wide. It was a terrifying, yet exhilarating feeling.

It was a feeling he had *never* wanted to feel again.

Around him floated the serene sounds of his Seventh Temple of Reincarnation. Soft rain outside, hitting leaves and the quiet rooftop, leaving the air cool and damp. A few muted beeps from the deadminds that monitored his vital signs. The swishing of robes in the hallway outside; his Devoted, hurrying to obey the call of reincarnation.

Yes, outside was serenity. Inside was chaos. That would not do. Thousands of years of life had taught Raidriar many things, but the most important was to be in control. He sat up, reaching out to pick up the helm that lay on the nearby table. The faces of the Deathless were not to be seen by common mortals.

He rose, bare feet upon the smooth bamboo floor, and crossed the room to where a suit of armor stood waiting. One of the newer sets, the height of current design and technology. He'd been meaning to begin using it—this offered a good chance.

His old set had probably been taken by thieves by now, robbed from his corpse.

He checked the wall-mounted deadmind mirror—that mirror would have been called a ‘monitor’ in earlier eras, but it had been so long that he'd stopped using such terms. They could be confusing to people in this era. The mirror's information indicated that his new body was functioning normally, that reincarnation had been a success, and that all was well in this particular quarter of his kingdom.

He stepped into the armor, which lay open and splayed like a corpse on a dissection table. It began to fold around him, locking into place.

The fight replayed in his mind. Another in a long line of “heroes” come to kill him, responding to the seeded legends. An offer to join him refused. A

duel, one on one, after the classical ideal. Did these mortals understand the honor he did them in granting them such a privilege? Probably not—after all, this mortal had ended that duel by ramming the God King’s own blade into his chest.

For just a moment, lying stunned at the foot of his throne, the God King had known true fear. He could not suppress a shiver. That . . . that *boy* had used the Infinity Blade, killer of gods.

I could have died, he thought. *Died the final death, real death*. The concept was unfamiliar. He turned it over in his head, like a man tasting a new vintage of wine.

He found that wine bitter. It reminded him of something he had been long, long ago. He had no more in common with that person of old than an acorn had with a mighty oak. No—no more in common than an acorn had with a *temple* constructed from that oak.

The comfortable familiarity of his armor enveloped him, locking onto his arms, hands, neck, torso. Cool air immediately circulated over his skin, and the armor took account of his vitals, delivering strength, bursts of healing, and other aid through careful injections. He slipped on the helm.

The armor itself had no life, of course—not even a deadmind—and the boosts it gave were minimal. In clashes between the Deathless, one’s own body was the true test. Armor that worked like a machine had been abandoned millennia ago. When you could not be killed permanently, you found other ways to prove yourself superior. Duels were about finesse, skill, and class, not who could construct the most powerful device to aid them.

His Devoted entered in a cluster, then fell to their knees. The God King passed them, his footsteps crunching on the bamboo rug. “Activate the deadminds in the temple of Lantimor,” he said, waving a gauntleted hand.

“Great master?” asked one of the Devoted, looking up. “Has something gone wrong?”

“Of course not,” the God King said.

The Devoted said nothing; they knew the God King was not supposed to have been reincarnated here for some time yet. They also knew not to demand answers of him.

Some Deathless would execute their servants for even this small amount of questioning, but the God King was no fool. Mortals were a resource, one he had used to great advantage when many of his peers dismissed them out

of hand. In fact, he was fond of many of them, including Eves, High Devoted of this particular temple.

Surround yourself with people too afraid to speak, and you left yourself to only your own ideas. That could be disastrous. It was important to have men who would question you and see flaws in your plans, so long as you could control them. It was all about control.

The rain continued outside; the God King wished he could control that. He was trying to find ways, for it galled him that he could not do something so seemingly simple.

The eye of the room's primary deadmind displayed a window into his palace on Lantimor, the place where that . . . *child* had defeated him. It displayed an empty throne room, and information came up in lists beside it.

A week had passed since his death. A tiny smidgen of time, barely worth noticing—except it meant that the child had had time to escape with the Godkiller. No matter. Raidriar had good ways to keep track of him.

A particular bit of information scrolled past, and it gave the God King pause. *Dead*, he read. *All three of my captives. But those were soul cells. They couldn't be completely gone unless . . .*

The sword *was* working. That should have been impossible, in the hands of one such as he'd faced. The proof was before him, however, and he felt a thrill at it. How, then, had Raidriar himself survived? He confronted this question, the one most worrisome to him, as it displayed a profound lack of control. That fight had not gone the way it should have.

Of course. It was strong enough to kill lesser Deathless, but not yet at full power. He should have realized this. Perhaps only one more death of the right bloodline, and . . .

Ah, he thought, seeing another bit of information. *That could be an issue.*

"Find me a recording of the moment where I let him defeat me," he said out loud. The servants worked, and the deadmind mirror displayed an image of him fighting the child in the throne room.

Too many questions. He *hated* questions. They would surrender their secrets to him; he had come too far to let this plan spiral away from him now. In a way, all that had happened was good, as he now had the proof he needed.

And so, he decided he had *not* been defeated. This was what the plan had required, even if he hadn't known it at the time.

Those moves . . . he thought idly, pondering the recording. So familiar. Who trained him . . . ?

And then it all locked into place.

He'd been played. Masterfully. *Worker of Secrets*, he thought. *My, but you are a subtle one.*

"Gather the Seringal," he said, sending his Devoted to fetch the most skilled of his knights. "And set up surveillance on that child."

The Devoted burst into motion. The God King sat back, contemplating. He waited for six hours, practically motionless, a few thoughts playing across his mind. He could faintly recall when six hours would have felt like a great deal of time to sit and think, but now it passed as quickly to him as a single breath.

His servants located the child, crossing the rocky expanses of his homeland. The God King laced his fingers, inspecting the child's path.

So. This 'Siris' was returning to the palace, was he? Why? The God King leaned forward and watched with interest.

SIRIS STEPPED UP onto the edge of a rocky precipice overlooking the God King's castle. It squatted in the cliffs, like a nugget of dark iron trapped in the surrounding rocks.

He'd decided that he needed to start here, primarily because he wanted to lay down a new trail for anyone looking for him. He didn't want them tracking him to Drem's Maw; he needed, instead, to lead them another direction.

He started the hike down to the castle. *The other Deathless*, he thought. *Maybe I could . . . buy them off.*

He looked down at the sword he wore in an improvised sheath at his side. They wanted the God King's weapon; perhaps he should just give it to them.

No, he thought. *They'll still execute me for killing their king.* A mortal did not slay a god.

He continued down the pathway toward the God King's palace. It stood to reason that they'd begin looking for him here; if there were daerils still in this place, he could make a big show for them of going somewhere other than Drem's Maw. That might work, might give his mother some protection.

The rocky path was slippery with pebbles and shale. He remembered walking this long route just over a week before, each footstep electric. He'd been marching to his death. That doom was one he'd come to grips with, however, and he had even been excited by the challenge ahead of him.

This time, he walked with a slower step. He felt . . . older now. Ancient.

At the base of the cliff, he put on his armor. He continued forward, reaching a tree hung with ropes just outside the palace walls.

He stopped and inspected the tree. A rope could be a weapon, if you really needed one. Tie a heavy bit of metal to one end, then swing it about and attack. He'd practiced that.

The children of Drem's Maw had done something different with ropes. They'd created swings on the trees outside of the maw. Siris had once stood on one of those, then had several boys push, so he could practice keeping his balance on unsteady footing.

He'd never just sat down and swung. *What is wrong with me*, he thought, continuing forward with clanking steps. *Why didn't I ever try it, even once?*

He reached the side gate to the castle, and a daeril stepped out. Long of limb, with red-orange skin and a skeletal cast to the arms and legs, the daeril had a horrifically twisted face.

Siris raised his sword with a sigh. He'd have to fight his way in again, it appeared.

"Great master!" the daeril exclaimed. It jumped forward, and Siris stumbled back, wary. The creature didn't attack, but threw itself at Siris's feet. "Great master, you have returned!"

"I . . . State your purpose, daeril!"

"We live to serve you, master. I am Strix, and I obey. The castle is yours, now! The *kingdom* as well."

The kingdom . . . mine? He almost laughed. He'd never be able to stand against the forces of the other gods, even *if* this creature were telling the truth. Which he found suspect.

"What am *I* supposed to do with a kingdom?" Siris said, walking around the daeril—keeping an eye on it—and crossing the bridge to enter the palace's outer court. The court seemed strikingly familiar to him, though he'd only passed this way that one time.

"Great master—" Strix began.

"Don't call me that," Siris said.

"Greatest lord of all that is powerful and—"

“That’s really not any better.”

The daeril fell silent. “My lord . . .” the daeril began again, stepping up to him. “Please. Let us serve you. Remain here and rule us. Do not leave us again.”

Siris hesitated. “How many of you are there in this place, still?”

“Perhaps two dozen, master.”

“And you will all serve me?”

“Yes, great master. Yes indeed! You have slain our ruler, and in so doing have become our leader.”

“Who led you before I returned?”

“Kuuth, master,” Strix said. “He is ancient and wise, a troll nearly *forty years* old.”

“Send for him,” Siris said. “And gather the other daerils. Every one of them in the castle. Bring them to the throne room.”

He didn’t trust these creatures, not for a moment. But perhaps he could use them.

FINISH WHAT YOU BEGAN.

Siris sat on the God King’s throne. What had his mother meant by that? Surely she hadn’t meant to imply that he should take the God King’s place. That would be suicide.

The God King’s throne wasn’t very comfortable—though Siris was wearing armor, which never made sitting particularly comfortable. He’d removed his helm and set his shield to the side, though he kept the Infinity Blade close.

Seeing his face unnerved the daerils. That seemed a good enough reason to him to keep the helmet off, for now. He inspected the Infinity Blade as he waited. The blade had some kind of magic that had let the God King summon it, making it appear as if out of nothing in a flash of light. So far, despite a week of tinkering, Siris hadn’t been able to figure out how that magic worked.

Something chirped beside him.

Siris jumped, glancing down. Only then did he remember the little mirror built into the armrest of the throne. He poked at it. The thing had done . . . *something* following the God King’s death. It was magical.

Poking at the thing made it speak, which chilled him. “What is your command?” it asked.

“I . . .” Siris looked up at the shuffling host of daerils—in a variety of shapes and colors—gathering at the back of the room. “I’d like to know how the God King’s sword works.”

“Answer pending. Please enter the pass phrase.”

“Pass phrase?” Siris said. “I don’t know it.”

“Would you like to retrieve it?”

“Um . . . yes?”

“Very well. Please answer this security question: In what kingdom did you first meet the Worker?”

So it was a riddle. His mother had told him stories of magic mirrors that asked riddles. “In the kingdom of night and dawn, at the break of the day,” he said. It was the answer to one of the riddles from the stories.

“Answer incorrect,” the mirror said politely. “Security question two: What was the name of your first and most trusted Aegis?”

Aegis. It was a word for a master duelist, after the classical ideal. The daerils that guarded the castle had all followed the old precepts. Horrific and terrible though they had been, they had each shown that much honor.

“Old Jake Mardin,” Siris said, saying the name of the first man who had trained him in the sword, a retired soldier.

“Answer incorrect,” the mirror said.

“Your riddles make no sense, mirror,” Siris said. “Am I supposed to answer as myself, or as the God King?”

“I’m sorry,” the mirror said. “I don’t understand that query. Security question three: How many days passed before your first reincarnation?”

“Uh . . . five?”

“Answer incorrect.”

“Damn it, mirror!” he said. “Please, just tell me how I make the sword come at my will.” He was silent for a moment. “Even better,” he whispered, “how can I find freedom? Can you answer that for me, mirror? Can you tell me how I can be free of all this and live my life?”

A rope swing from a tree, he thought. He’d write that in his book tonight, beginning a list of things he *would* try, once he didn’t have to worry about being hunted.

“I’m sorry,” the mirror said. “I am not authorized to speak further. The waiting period is one day before the next access attempt.”

The mirror grew black.

“Hell *take* me,” Siris said, leaning back in the horrid throne. Honestly, couldn’t someone who called himself the *God King* get a decent cushion?

“The deadminds will not speak to you, slayer of gods,” said a deep, tired-sounding voice.

Siris sat up, turning toward the back of the room. Something moved in the shadows, where a doorway led to the servants’ quarters. The shadow lumbered forward, entering the light and revealing itself as a massive troll. It leaned on a staff as thick as Siris’s leg, and wore bandages covering its eyes. White hair fell around the thing’s animal face, a face furrowed with wrinkles that were sharp and distinct—like the scars left by an axe chopping at a tree.

“Kuuth, I assume?” Siris said, standing up.

“Yes, great master,” the beast said, lumbering forward. The other daerils parted for him, and a younger troll helped the elder, looking concerned. This younger beast moved like an animal, with quick steps, testing the air with its snout, walking in a crouch. The aged one, however, had an unexpectedly civilized air.

“What’s a deadmind?” Siris asked Kuuth. Even stooped with age, the beast towered a good ten feet tall. Kuuth wore a strange robe that had the right shoulder cut out, exposing a wicked scar on his shoulder and neck.

“It is a soul without life, great master,” the troll said. “The God King instilled these souls into objects. They are knowledgeable about some things, but cannot make choices for themselves. They are like children, and must be instructed.”

“Brilliant children,” Siris said. He shivered. Had the God King used the souls of children themselves to create these things? The legends said that he feasted upon the souls of those who fell to him. Siris scooted a little farther away from the mirror. “Well, perhaps I won’t need its help. I summoned you because I hoped you’d be able to answer questions for me.”

“Unlikely, great master,” the ancient troll said, then coughed into his hand. “I know more than most here, but a cup with two drops instead of one still will not quench a thirst.”

“I’ll start easy then,” Siris said, walking down the steps to the throne. “The God King spoke of greater evils. And then, after that, I met a man in the dungeon who claimed to be my ancestor. He said that someone—or

something—would come hunting me. Am I to assume that they referred to other members of the Pantheon?”

“Perhaps,” Kuuth said. “Ashimar, the Sorrowmaker. Lilendre, Mistress of the End. Terrovax, Blight’s Son. Others whose names I do not know. Each will be angered by what you have done.”

“As I feared,” Siris said, speaking loudly, so the other daerils could hear. “I will need allies, troll. Do you know where I should search for them?”

“Master,” Kuuth said, sounding confused. “These are not questions I can answer for you.”

“Surely the Deathless have enemies,” Siris said.

“Well . . . I suppose . . . there is the Worker of Secrets.”

That was a myth even Siris had heard of. He doubted the Worker was real, but hunting him was a perfect way to start laying down a false trail. “Where can I find this Worker?”

“He is imprisoned,” Kuuth said. “But, master, I do not know where. It is said that nobody knows.”

“Surely there are rumors.”

“I’m sorry, master,” Kuuth said. “I know of none.”

“Fine, then. I wish to attack one of the other Deathless. One who is very powerful, and also very cruel. Whom would you suggest?”

“Master? This is an odd request.”

“It is the one I make nonetheless.”

Kuuth frowned. “A Deathless who is close but powerful . . . Perhaps the Killer of Dreams? You travel to the north, across the ocean, to find him. He is not part of the Pantheon, and has of late been very antagonistic to our former master.”

Siris frowned, sitting down. There were Deathless who *weren’t* in the Pantheon?

Well, perhaps that’s what I killed, in the dungeon, he thought. But then, there had also been Siris’s ancestor. He wasn’t certain what he believed of what that man had said. When Siris had taken off the man’s helm, he had found a youthful face beneath it. Perhaps serving the Deathless granted men immortality? Was that why one who had come to kill the God King would instead choose to serve him?

Siris knew so little. “Do you know how the God King made the magic of his sword and shield work, Kuuth?” He asked it in a softer voice, no longer for the show of the watching daerils.

“I may be able to guess, great master,” Kuuth said. “I believe it had something to do with his ring.”

Siris fished in his pocket, taking out a silvery ring. He’d pried it from the finger of the God King. “This? It’s a healing ring. I have others, taken from the bodies of Aegis I slew.” He slipped it on; he could feel its healing magic tingling on his finger.

“That one is more useful than the others you found,” Kuuth said. “It somehow let him summon his sword to him.”

“How?” Siris asked.

“I do not know. Before I lost my eyes, I saw the God King use it to sling fire as well.”

Siris frowned, then extended his hand to the side and attempted to summon fire. It didn’t work. Once he’d defeated the God King, all of his rings save the healing rings had stopped functioning. “It can’t do that anymore. Why?”

“I do not know.”

“All right, then. What were those creatures in the dungeon? They seemed . . . different from other Aegis I fought.”

“I never saw them, master.”

“Why did the sword flash when I slew them, and why did the God King have them imprisoned?” He still worried that he’d killed what could have become his allies. Yet, each one had fallen into the Aegis stance and then attacked him.

“I do not know that either,” Kuuth said.

A sudden flare of annoyance rose in Siris. “Bah. Do you know *anything*, fool creature?”

Siris froze. Where had that outburst come from? It had been many years since he’d lost his temper; his mother had trained him to deal with that as a child. He immediately took a grip on his frustration and shoved it down.

The ancient troll stood quietly, then sniffed the air a few times. *He’s blind*, Siris reminded himself, looking at the bandaged eyes.

“Do you mind if I sit, great master?” Kuuth asked.

“I don’t.”

The great beast tested with his large staff until reaching the steps to the throne, then settled down quietly. “Thank you, great master. It is growing difficult to stand in my age.”

“What happened to your eyes, Kuuth?” Siris asked, sitting on the lip of the throne dais, hands clasped before him.

“I put them out.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“Among the kavre—that is what we call ourselves, great master, though many just call us ‘trolls.’ Among the kavre, the most powerful lead. I was wounded many years ago, when . . . well, it would have been when your father entered the palace. I fought him, and I lost.

“My wound was great, and I should have been slain by my kin in mercy. That would stop a younger troll from killing me and taking my honor, you see. However, the blind and the mute are not to be killed—they are left alone in the wilderness to die, as they are marked by the gods.”

“So you . . .”

“Blinded myself,” Kuuth said. “So that my kin would exile me rather than killing me. It also made the younger trolls see me as lame and blemished, to be left to rot, rather than to be slain as a rival.”

“That’s horrible,” Siris said.

Kuuth chuckled. “Yes. Horrible. And our way. At times, I wonder at what I did. A troll is not meant to reach ages such as I have. Still, now that I am of this great age, the others have begun to respect me.”

“The other daeril . . . he said you were forty years old?”

“In another two years,” the troll said, shaking a long-snouted head.

“Ancient. But, great master, my concerns are not yours. I wished to speak more softly with you. Most of the denizens of this castle do not think about the future, and I do not wish to make them question.”

“Very well.”

“Over the years,” Kuuth said, his voice quiet, “I have seen many things. I have thought many things. Perhaps these thoughts will be of use to you. You see, this castle has no servants. No maids, no groundskeepers, none of the things that are kept by the lesser lords beneath the God King.”

“I’ve noticed that,” Siris said. “I would have assumed that the God King would want comforts for the place where he lived.”

“You see,” Kuuth said, “he did *not* live here. He only came to the castle on occasion, usually when there was news of a warrior of note fighting his way through the wilds.”

Siris fell silent. “So this place was a trap.”

“Trap? I do not know that I’d say that, great master. But a destination . . . yes, that is what it was. Like a metal pole set up high to draw the lightning when it comes, this castle was placed here to draw the warriors who sought to kill the God King.”

“He dueled them,” Siris said. “He could have just used his magic to kill them, or overwhelmed them with his forces. Instead, he faced them in person. Why?”

“What do you know of the Deathless?”

“Not much,” Siris said. “Seven lords, ruling together, with the God King above them all.”

“Yes, though that is mostly just the illusion they give to others in the land nearby. The God King was but one of *many* who name themselves Deathless. They are immortal—truly immortal. They need neither food nor water to live. They do not age, and their bodies heal if wounded. Chop them to pieces, and their soul will seek out a new receptacle to be reborn. Often they are reborn into what the God King called a ‘bud,’ a replica of themselves, prepared ahead of time.”

“I saw some of those,” Siris said. “Below.”

“Yes,” Kuuth said. “But even without a bud, the soul of a true Deathless will find a new home. Unless . . .”

“Unless.”

“The God King’s sword. You mentioned its magic before. You have the weapon?”

Siris reached to the side, fingers resting on the blade.

“The Infinity Blade,” Kuuth whispered. “Crafted by the Worker of Secrets himself.”

“But he’s just a myth, isn’t he?”

“What better creator of a sword that should not be, a sword to kill the unkillable? Great master, that weapon *is* designed to slay the Deathless. Permanently. It is a terrible and wondrous thing. The Deathless have lived for thousands of years, and have come to see themselves as eternal. But if one of them were to gain access to a weapon which could finally threaten them . . .”

“He’d be a God,” Siris whispered.

“God among gods,” Kuuth said. “King among kings. First of immortals.”

Siris ran his fingers along the blade. “They *will* chase me. They’ll hunt me, for this.” He gripped the sword by the hilt. “I should throw it away.”

“And they would still hunt you,” Kuuth said. “Because you know the secret. Because you’ve done the unthinkable.”

“You’re dead too,” Siris whispered, realizing the truth. “Everyone in this castle. Each Aegis or daeril who knows that a mortal slew one of the Deathless.”

“You see why I needed to whisper this to you,” Kuuth said. “No need to inspire a panic. Many of the Aegis in this castle are golems with deadminds controlling them, but many are not. All will likely be destroyed. Just in case.”

“You don’t seem afraid.”

“I’ve lived many years beyond my lifespan,” Kuuth said. “I believe my death will be a nice rest. The others . . . well, they’ll probably be allowed to fight one another until one champion remains to fall upon his sword. It is the method commonly granted to skilled Aegis who have acquitted themselves well. They will consider it an honor.”

“Hell take me,” Siris said, looking at the creature’s bandaged eyes, then at the gathered daerils at the back of the room. “You’re all insane.”

“We are what we were created to be, great master,” Kuuth said. “Though, the rebel inside of me tells you all of this to perhaps . . . repay the God King and his ilk. My kind were created to die and to kill.” He raised his head, blind eyes looking toward the ceiling. “But *they* are the ones who created us this way.”

Siris nodded, though the beast couldn’t see him.

“Great master,” Kuuth said hesitantly. “If I may ask a question. Why do you say that phrase that you did?”

“Hell take me?”

“Yes,” Kuuth said.

“It is a saying from my village and the region about,” Siris said, standing up, taking the Infinity Blade. “These Deathless are the gods; they claim to rule the earth and the heavens. And so, when we die, we wish for a place where they are not. Better the pains of hell than living in heaven beneath the Deathless.”

Kuuth smiled. “And so, we are not so different, are we?”

“No,” Siris said, surprised at the answer. “No, I suppose we are not.”

“Then I must ask you,” Kuuth said, “as one warrior to another. Will you stay? Rule here, make your stand here. Together, the two of us may be able

to decipher the secrets of the God King's deadminds. We might be able to face the others."

That . . . that *was* tempting, when put that way. Siris considered it for a long moment, but eventually discarded it. Making a stand here, even with daerils, was suicide.

As frustrated as he was with the townsfolk of Drem's Maw, he *was* coming to understand why he'd been required to leave. He couldn't remain long in any location where the Deathless knew to find him. They'd kill him and take the sword. If he was going to survive, he needed to escape them.

Freedom . . .

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "But it is not to be."

Kuuth lowered his aged head.

"Your words are wise, Kuuth," Siris proclaimed loudly, standing. "I will seek out this Killer of Dreams, starting immediately. If he was an enemy of the God King, then he may be an ally to me. If not, I will slay him, then hunt out the true location of the Worker of Secrets. You and the other daerils are to remain here and guard my castle."

That should do it—his home was to the south, and so if he traveled north, he would leave a trail that would not endanger his mother. Speaking these words, however, gave Siris an immediate sense of regret. He was leaving these creatures to die. They were daerils, true, but it didn't seem fair.

"Very well, great master," Kuuth said. "That should—" He cut off, cocking his head, as if hearing something.

Siris threw himself to the side.

As a child, Siris hadn't swung on swings. He hadn't played marbles, or eaten everberry pies.

Instead, he'd trained. He may not have had a childhood, or a youth, to speak of. But he did have something to show in exchange for that loss: *reflexes*.

Siris dodged before he even understood why, hitting the ground and ducking into a ball, making himself as small a target as possible. He did this even before his mind registered what he'd heard. A click from behind.

Something sliced his cheek. *Idiot*, he thought. He'd let himself be caught without his helm. He came up from the roll with his back to the God King's throne, putting it between himself and the windows behind it. Those would probably be the source of the attack. He pressed one hand to his cheek, stopping the flow of blood.

The pain was nothing. He'd trained himself to ignore pain with a specific group of exercises that had earned him quite a bit of notoriety in the village. They had not been pleasant, but they *had* been effective.

He remained still, pressing up against the stone of the dais. How many assassins were there? He needed his weapon. Making a quick decision, he let go of his bleeding cheek and scrambled up the steps to the throne, then grabbed the hilt of the Infinity Blade in his unbloodied hand and spun around the side of the throne to assess his enemies.

A single figure in dark clothing had dropped on a rope from one of the upper windows of the vaulted chamber. Sleek and dangerous, the creature wore a long black coat that came down to its ankles, with dark brown leathers underneath. It had the characteristic mask on its face, one that he had come to see as a mark of being in the service of the God King—or, perhaps, another of the Deathless.

The creature pulled a long, thin sword from the sheath at its side. Siris sighed, flexing his hands and gripping the Infinity Blade. His shield was on the table a short distance away, where he'd set his helm and gauntlets. He doubted he had time to grab them. Instead, he climbed down from the throne dais and fell into the stance of the Aegis, inviting the enemy into a duel of honor. In case of an emergency, the healing ring glinted on his finger.

He didn't use it on his wounded cheek. That was a simple cut, and healing had a terrible cost. Before, he hadn't cared. He had expected the God King to kill him. Now, the potential cost weighed upon him.

His foe studied him for a moment, then raised its blade.

Here we go, Siris thought.

The creature promptly lowered its sword and raised something from within its coat—a slender, dangerous-looking crossbow.

“Oh, *hell,*” Siris said, flinging himself to the side. The creature fired, and had expert aim. The bolt drilled into Siris's thigh, where the metal armor plates parted. He grunted. This was *not* how a proper duel was supposed to go.

Siris came up, stumbling, and winced. He yanked the small bolt from his thigh, awkwardly holding his blade and trying to watch for the creature's next attack. As he did so, he felt a deadening of his leg. *Poison.*

Hell take me! He had no choice now; he took cover beside the throne dais, then engaged the ring.

The healing effect was immediate. He felt a burning on his finger as the magic was expended, and a shock ran through his body. His skin grew clammy, as if he'd dunked himself into an icy pond in the winter.

It lasted only an eyeblink, and when he came out of it, his pains were gone. However, in that eyeblink, his hair had grown all the way down to his shoulders, and he now had a beard where previously he'd had none. His fingernails had grown long.

The healing rings sped up his body in a twisted way. Though they made him heal quickly—wounds scabbing over, then becoming scarred—they *also* made him age as long as it would have taken to heal wounds naturally. As near as he could figure, each use of the ring took about a half of a year off his life.

He raised a hand to his newly grown beard as he glanced at himself in the polished marble of the throne's dais. He hated healing. The more he did it, the more . . . alien his own features seemed.

He peeked around the side of the large throne. The assassin was slinking along the side of the dais toward him, obviously expecting him to be succumbing to the poison. The creature yelped in a quite undaerilic way as Siris dashed out from behind the dais, running toward the side of the room.

The assassin raised its crossbow again, but Siris was ready. He ducked low and jumped in a roll. He came up beside the table and grabbed his shield, turning and raising it.

The enemy scuttled away, taking cover. Siris gritted his teeth. Every beast he had faced in the God King's palace—even the most foul of daerils and most primitive of trolls—had followed the ancient dueling ideals. Obviously, he was facing a different kind of evil now.

"So . . ." a feminine voice called from beside the pillar where the assassin had fled. "You're not dead then, I see." Her voice had a faint accent that Siris couldn't place. She said her "eh" sound too long, like it was an "ee" instead, and she punctuated her syllables too much.

Siris blinked in surprise, but didn't reply. He moved across the room back toward the throne dais. It made for good cover.

"This is very awkward," the hidden assassin said, voice echoing in the room. "I'm going to flay that vendor alive; he promised the poison was a three-breather. You've taken considerably more than three breaths since I shot you."

Siris reached the base of the dais.

“I don’t suppose you’re starting to feel tired?” the voice asked.

“Afraid not,” Siris called back.

“Weak? Dizzy? A little peckish?”

Siris hesitated. “Peckish?”

“Sure. You know, like something has pecked you? Isn’t that what the word means?”

“It means hungry,” he said flatly.

“Damn.” There was a sound coming from one of the back pillars, like the assassin was *writing*. Taking notes? “Your language is stupid, immortal.”

“Wait,” Siris said. “Immortal?”

“And might I add,” the voice continued, “that when people speak of awe-inspiring divine powers, spontaneously growing a beard doesn’t really come up. I expected lightning, thunder, earthquakes. Instead I got facial hair. I’m less than impressed.”

Thunder . . . earthquakes . . . immortal?

Siris almost laughed. She thought he was the God King!

What else would she think, finding someone sitting in the throne, with the God King’s sword beside him, speaking with a troll?

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding—” Siris began.

At that moment, she leaped out from behind her pillar and leveled her crossbow at him again. She’d removed her mask, and he was surprised to see that she was completely human.

And she was not unattractive, with long black hair that she kept in a simple ponytail. But her eyes spoiled it. Those were grim and hard. Dangerous.

Siris’s hard-won reflexes meant he got the shield up in time to deflect a crossbow bolt; the woman ducked back behind the pillar, her black coat swishing. She’d been trying to lull him with the conversation.

“Look,” Siris said. “You’re making a mistake. I—”

The door to the room exploded. A massive, hulking *thing* of sparks and darkness broke its way through the far wall, tossing down chunks of rock. It held a blade as wide as a man’s stride, and its head was capped by a helm that trailed black mist through the eyeslit.

“What’s *that*?” Siris demanded.

“You didn’t think I came alone, did you?” the woman called.

Great, Siris thought, turning toward this new foe—though he had to be careful not to put his back to the woman. That would likely earn him a

crossbow bolt between the shoulder blades. His armor was good, but she obviously had an enhanced crossbow built to punch through the best steel.

The newcomer stepped into the room, the beautiful marble tiles crunching and cracking beneath its feet. Siris was half-afraid the tower floor would fall out from under them. They were at the highest point in the castle, and the drop would be deadly.

Most of the daerils fled, though Kuuth retreated to the side of the room. The ancient troll rested on his staff, head cocked to listen.

None of the daerils offered to help Siris, despite their willingness to call him “great master.” Siris put himself into an Aegis fighting stance—well, as best he could, while watching two places at once. The machinelike monster took a pair of crunching steps forward, and then another one just like it followed through the hole the first had made, knocking pieces of rock to the ground.

Great, Siris thought. He made a snap decision, then attacked forward, intending to try to defeat one of the monsters before he could be overwhelmed.

The assassin had been waiting for that move, however, and took a shot at him as he charged. Siris had to lurch to a stop, letting the bolt shoot in front of him, then awkwardly raised his shield to block a blow from the first golem.

The monster’s gigantic sword crashed down, hitting hard and sending a shower of sparks from his shield. The shield’s magic held, but just barely. *Terrors*, he thought, *I’d never be able to parry a blow from something like this unaided.*

He breathed out, bringing his sword around to strike, but caught another motion from the corner of his eye. He leaped to the side in time to dodge yet another crossbow bolt. She was *fast* with those reloads.

“Did that one kill you?” a feminine voice called.

Siris grunted as he blocked another blow from the golem. The second golem was rounding to his right, each footstep shaking the room.

“You’re downright unaccommodating, Deathless,” the girl called at him.

“I’m *not* the God King!” Siris yelled desperately.

“I’ll be satisfied with one of his minions.”

“I’m not one of his minions. I . . .”

Something about this situation seemed suddenly familiar. One foe in front, one to the side, one to the back. Siris felt as if he knew how he should

stand, how he should fight. As if he'd done it before.

But he'd never been in a situation like this. He'd trained in the Aegis Forms. One on one.

Except . . .

The golem attacked again with a crash. At the same time, the second one charged in from the right.

Siris cursed, jumping into a roll. The first golem's sword smashed into the ground, spraying chips of stone, and Siris rolled up just inside the reach of the other. He met its blow with his shield.

Terrors, but these monsters were *strong*. The shield's magic gave out, and he heard a distinct *crack*. His arm felt numb, and the force of the blow hurled him backward.

Siris hit the marble floor with a grunt, his vision going black for a moment. He could feel the ground shaking, could smell the too-clean, too-sterile air of the God King's throne room. He groaned, rolling over.

No. Don't stop. It's coming.

Siris growled and his vision returned. He was lying on the floor before the God King's throne. His hip ached where he'd hit the ground. His head rang with pain.

Without his armor, he'd have been dead. He could barely feel his shield arm.

The golems were coming at him slowly, cautiously, stone tiles crunching under their feet. Siris climbed to his feet, then stumbled backward, moving up the steps toward the throne, flexing his fingers. That was when he realized both hands were empty.

The sword. He'd lost the sword.

He cursed, glancing to the sides. The Infinity Blade rested on the marble floor a short distance away from the throne. Too far for him to reach without exposing himself to the now-close golems, particularly with the pain in his hip making it harder for him to walk.

Dared he heal again? He glanced at his ring; its runes weren't glowing. It hadn't recharged yet. His hand brushed the throne as he moved, and there was a beep from the magical mirror on the armrest.

"Ring of Transportation," the helpful voice said, "fifteenth generation, running service pack six. Please enter the password for activation."

"Damn you!" Siris sputtered.

"Incorrect password."

“It can heal too, right?” Siris asked, desperate as the golems closed.

“Rejuvenation sub-specialization,” the mirror chimed. “Seventh generation. Currently rebuilding injection from ambient compounds. New injection available in seven minutes.”

Terrors! Siris thought, leaping over the side of the throne’s armrest as one of the golems swung for him.

The room shook, and the throne exploded into rubble, the golem’s sword spraying chunks of metal and rock. Siris hit hard on the other side of the dais, and his hip screamed in pain. Where was the other golem? Why wasn’t it attacking?

He found it by following the sound of its footsteps. Incredibly, it had turned *away* from him and was lumbering toward . . . toward the Infinity Blade.

The beast’s emotionless helm—trailing a blackish smoke from the visor—was fixed on the fallen sword.

And on the slender figure crouching beside it.

“This should sell for a bit of gold,” the assassin said. She looked up at Siris and smiled a toothy grin, snatching the Infinity Blade and turning to dash away.

Siris cursed, running after her. Fortunately, both golems stopped paying any attention to him, and instead began charging after the girl. Were they leaving with her?

No. They were *chasing* her.

“You’re *not* with them!” Siris yelled.

“Enemy of my enemy and all that,” she called back, reaching a rope dangling from the window she’d come in through.

“Routines . . . damaged . . .” a voice came from behind. “Restarting system . . .”

“You don’t know what you’re doing!” Siris yelled. “I’m not the God King. I killed him!”

“He’s immortal,” the girl said, scrambling up the rope. She reached the window, then pulled her rope up behind her. “You couldn’t have killed him.” Siris stopped his pained running as the two golems lumbered up to the wall, glaring toward the assassin with smoking visors.

“If you think that,” Siris yelled, “then why in the *hell* were you trying to attack me?”

She couched on the window ledge and looked down at him. She'd stopped grinning, but now just shrugged, almost in a consoling way. Then she leaped out of the window.

I've been played, Siris realized. She was never trying to kill me. She didn't ever think I was the God King.

She just wanted the sword.

As did the golems, apparently. One began beating the wall down with its fist, breaking open a hole, causing the ceiling to rain dust. If they kept bashing holes in the walls, this place was going to come tumbling down on their heads. The other golem glanced back at Siris, as if considering finishing him off.

They probably had the place under surveillance, he thought. In case I returned. Well, at least he'd done what he'd wanted. He'd drawn their attention, and could now lead it away from Drem's Maw.

And . . . maybe letting the woman run off with the blade was a good thing. If she took it to one of the other Deathless, they might fight over it. Leave him alone.

But it is the only weapon that can kill them, he thought. The only weapon we could ever use to fight back. Am I really just going to let it go?

He froze in place. Suddenly, he felt like a horrible coward. He would seek freedom, but what cost would he pay for it?

Finish what you began. . . .

"Please . . . reset . . . security protocols . . ." the throne warbled.

Siris glanced at it. Then started running. He scrambled up the rubble-strewn steps to the throne. It had been mostly destroyed, and sparks buzzed at the back, where some long, thin bits of metal were hanging free like thick strands of hair. The golem's strike had cracked the mirror, but words still glowed on its surface.

Siris touched his palm to it.

"Security protocols reset," the voice said. "What would you like to do?"

"Activate Transportation Ring."

"Ring activated and attuned to your Q.I.P., master."

"How do I use it?"

"You must choose a gesture. The default is to spread your three middle fingers apart, then snap them together twice."

Siris raised his hand and took a deep breath, then snapped his fingers together. His hands flashed, and weights dropped into them. The God

King's shield fell into one hand, the Infinity Blade into the other.

From outside he heard a distinct—and very aggravated—yell of annoyance.

Both golems spun on him.

“I'm an idiot, aren't I?”

“I'm not equipped to answer that question,” the mirror said happily.

“You don't need to,” he said, hefting the blade and shield. “How does the transportation thing work?”

“A linked ring and disc can summon inorganic material.”

“Inorganic?”

“Nonliving matter. Metal, stone, or wood that has been dead long enough. You must keep the transportation ring on your finger, then attach the anchor disc to something inorganic. Performing the summoning will bring one to the other.”

He glanced at the sword's hilt. There was a small metal disc there, stuck as if magnetically to the base of the pommel. He tried to pry it loose.

“Touch it and will it free, master,” the throne's deadmind said in its helpful voice.

“Right,” Siris said, the room shaking as two golems charged him. Sweating in anxiety, he rubbed his thumb across the “anchor disc,” and it fell loose. He transferred it to his shield hand, holding it in his palm.

All right, he thought. I can work with this.

He hurled himself off the dais. His wounded hip still ached, but it was starting to recover from its numbness. He focused only on the fight, clearing his mind.

The first golem swung a sword the size of one of the palace doors. Siris skidded on the marble, going down on his knees and sliding underneath the blade. Its passing stirred his hair. He came up on his feet, tossing the ring's metal disc toward the monstrous weapon.

The disc hit and stuck. Siris jumped to the side, narrowly avoiding a blade that crushed into the ground beside him. He rounded on the two golems, who turned and swung in a tandem attack.

Siris tapped his fingers together twice. One of the golems' swords vanished in a flash of light, then appeared before Siris. He didn't try to grab it—the thing was obviously too heavy for him—but he'd positioned himself so that it fell into the air just in front of him.

That blocked the second golem's swing. The blades crashed against one another. Siris ducked forward, ears ringing from the crash, and rammed the Infinity Blade into the knee of the still-armed golem. The God King's sword was made of strong material; it cut through the steel.

Sparks erupted around the blade as Siris—still in motion—moved past the golem and struck from behind at its other leg.

The golem teetered and dropped with a crash. The first golem—the one that had lost its weapon—was staring in stupefaction at its empty hands. It looked up at Siris, then swung a fist.

Siris dodged backward, his foot hitting the fallen sword. With a quick duck, he recovered the transportation disc and attached it to the Infinity Blade.

Then he tossed the blade between the golem's legs.

The monster spun, watching the blade skid away. Obviously, its primary orders were to recover the weapon. The golem turned to go after the blade, and Siris attacked forward, summoning the blade back even as he did.

The weapon appeared with a flash in his hands as he rammed it into the golem's thigh. Siris ripped the blade out, severing the thigh and dropping the beast. It smashed to the floor.

Grinding sounds from behind gave him warning that the other monster was—incredibly—climbing to its feet. Siris spun, pulling the disc free. The gigantic monster loomed above him, sparks spraying from its legs. It walked in a crouch now, trying to keep its balance.

Siris tossed the disc up toward the thing's face; the disc stuck to the golem's helm. Siris dodged a fist, then activated the ring. The flash of light from the disappearing helm blinded the creature, which stumbled.

Siris jumped, slashing his blade through the thing's mechanical, clockwork neck.

It lurched, then dropped forward.

Siris took a deep breath, then walked up to the other golem. It was trying to move. Siris slammed his blade down through its back.

Both golems fell still.

“You know,” a feminine voice said, “you're actually quite good at not dying.”

Siris spun toward the window. By reflex, he gripped the Infinity Blade tighter.

The window was empty.

“Over here,” she said.

He followed the voice, finding her standing in the shadows beside the doorway. Kuuth and a few daerils were waiting there, including Strix—the daeril who had first met Siris at the door to the castle. Strix yelped, moving out of the way as the assassin stepped into the light. He hadn’t seen her standing there either.

“How did you get there?” Siris demanded.

“I’m a good runner,” she said, folding her arms and looking at him appraisingly, one finger tapping her upper forearm.

“I’m not giving you this sword, woman.”

“I don’t want the sword,” she said. “Not anymore.” She smiled. “I’ve decided I want you instead.”

Chapter Three

THE GOD KING lounged on his throne in the upper room of his Seventh Temple of Reincarnation. He played with a knife in one gauntleted hand, watching the massive screen that dominated his far wall. In it, the boy stood in the rubble of the Lantimor throne room, speaking with that girl.

Who is she? he thought idly. *Which one does she serve?* His query to his deadmind ledgers had returned no results. She wasn't Deathless—or if she was, the ledgers had no record of her face.

The God King moved his other hand across the input pad on his armrest. He'd scanned the boy's Q.I.P. while his old throne had attuned the ring. You couldn't get much from a surface scan; you needed bloodlines. Still, there was some information there.

Curious. He needed some of the boy's blood to be certain. Or, at least, that of a true relative. *If I'm right about him, so much will suddenly make sense . . .*

"Great master?" Eves asked from beside the throne. "Great master, I don't understand. Why . . ." The Devoted fell to his knees, bowing his head. "Your ways are mysterious and wonderful, great master. Too grand for my mind to comprehend."

"I didn't want her running off with the blade, Eves," the God King said, still playing idly with his knife.

The boy was quick-minded. When the God King had remotely disabled security on his throne—covering what he'd done by implying damage to the throne had caused the lapsed security—the boy had immediately seen what to do. Good thing, too. She had to be a minion of one of the other Deathless. The Killer of Dreams, perhaps? Or Vist? Both coveted the Infinity Blade. They weren't the only ones.

Well, the boy had recovered the blade. That was just as well; better the foe he knew than the foe he did not.

The God King's hand hovered above his input panel. The boy and the girl were no longer trying to kill one another. Pity. The God King could make out no sound; those systems actually had been damaged in the fighting.

He needed more redundancy there. He *hated* discovering where he'd been insufficiently prepared.

He pushed the button on his input pad. In doing so, he shut down and destroyed the entire deadmind system in his old palace. That one button-push remotely wiped all the memories, then set the fail-safes to destroy the deadminds' mechanical housings. In moments, the palace systems were completely unrecoverable.

The cameras had to be turned off too. Unfortunate, but he had his other means of keeping watch on the boy.

The God King stood up. "Come." Twelve knights in black armor fell in behind him as he strode from the room. "It's time to pay a visit to the Worker."

"THE DEATHLESS won't leave you alone," Isa said. "Not as long as you have that sword."

"What do you know about the sword?" Siris replied, tapping his razor on the washbasin.

He'd stripped to the waist, and was standing in a bafflingly luxurious bathroom. It appeared that the God King, despite being immortal, had still needed to use the privy. There was a silver one in the corner. The mirror was almost as long as the wall, the washbasin was gold, and the polished razors were incredibly sharp. Isaline sat beside an enormous tub turning the water on and off. His mother would have loved a tub that large, though she'd have used it for washing clothing. The water came out *warm*.

"Well, I know that someone seems to want that sword badly," Isa replied. "They sent those golems to get it. It must be important."

He raised the razor to his skin. "Nice lie. You came here for the sword specifically, didn't you?"

Isa sat primly, giving no reply.

"Well?" he asked.

"Give it to me," she said, "and I'll spread a rumor that I killed you and took it. They'll believe me. You'll be free to go back to your simple life."

"What makes you think I want a simple life?"

"You're the son of a farmer or something, whiskers. It comes with the package."

Siris washed off the razor, keeping a close eye on her in the mirror's reflection. Would she take the crossbow to him again? So far she hadn't, though he did catch her slipping a fine hand mirror into her pouch.

"You have your vengeance," she continued. "The God King is dead by your hands."

"So you believe me on that now?" he said dryly.

"Sure. Why not? You have a bit of a godslayer look to you." She was eyeing his chest in the mirror, smiling appraisingly to herself. He resisted the urge to grab his shirt and throw it on. Being leered at was an . . . unfamiliar experience.

Nobody should look at me like that, he thought. I should teach her, show her, make her bow. I—

He cut off that line of thought, razor frozen at his cheek. Where had *those* impulses come from?

"Look," Isa said, rising, strolling toward him. "So you've done it. You killed the God King. Congratulations. You *do* realize that now every Deathless in the world is going to come hunting you for that blade, don't you?"

He said nothing.

"Don't you want to be done with this?" she asked. "Go back to your family and friends, Siris. Go be their hero. I'll take the sword and lay down a false trail. Nobody will think to connect you—and the ones you love back home—to the man who slew the God King and stole his riches."

"I already tried going back," he said softly.

She frowned at him.

Still, her offer was tempting. At the very least, he could go make a new life somewhere. Perhaps visit his mother occasionally, once he was certain that he wasn't being hunted. Of course, to do so he would have to trust this woman—a woman who had tried to kill him.

It would also mean giving away this weapon, the only weapon that could fight the Deathless. That made him hesitate, which made him feel like a fool. He'd come to this castle seeking freedom, hadn't he? This was a great chance for that.

I do want freedom, he told himself. But I'm not going to take it until I'm certain I'm not damning humankind by giving away our one path to salvation.

In the end, he needed to be able to face his mother with a clean conscience. So, as he shaved, he quietly revised his goals. He *would* find freedom, *would* find someplace anonymous to hide, but only *after* he had properly disposed of this weapon. Perhaps delivered it into the hands of someone he trusted to use it to fight.

Isa took a step toward the sword. Siris snatched it by reflex, dropping the razor to the basin with a clatter.

“Touchy,” she noted, then reached past him—and the sword—to pick up what appeared to be a soap dish made entirely of silver. The motion put her close to him. Close enough that he readied himself to slap her hand if she tried to knife him in the gut.

She stepped back and held the soap dish up to the light. Her scent lingered close to him. No perfume. She smelled of leather and of wax. Good smells.

She dropped the dish into her pouch.

“Looting?” he said. “You’re nothing but a common thief.”

Isa slung her crossbow over her shoulder—she wore it on a strap, like an over-arm pack. “Hardly.”

“Then what are you?” Siris asked, genuinely curious.

“A person who gets things done,” she replied, turning and walking toward the exit.

“For a price, I assume.”

“There’s always a price,” she said. “Thing is, if you’re lucky, someone else ends up paying it for you. I’m going to go wait down below until you decide to hire me.”

She turned to leave.

“Wait. What did you just say?”

She looked back at him. “Well, it doesn’t look like you’re going to let me take the blade—”

“I’ll die before you lay hands on it.”

“I don’t doubt that’s true,” she said, a twinkle to her eye. “Answer something for me. How did you find your way to this castle?”

“Everyone knows where it is. You just keep following the river until you reach the cliffs.”

“And I assume that before coming here, you hadn’t ever left your little town?”

“Why would I have needed to?”

She just smiled. “I know where everything is—*everything*—and I can get you wherever you want to go. Keep that in mind as you contemplate sitting here, in a castle *everyone* knows how to find, holding a weapon that everyone wants.”

She strode out the door.

What a strange woman, Siris thought, holding the Infinity Blade close. Her last words lingered with him. *In a castle everyone knows how to find . . . a weapon everyone wants . . .*

After a moment of consideration, he went looking for Strix.

“GREAT MASTER,” Strix said from beside the broken throne. “It is so wonderful to see you well. The golems’ attack did not harm you greatly, did it?”

Siris didn’t reply at first. He walked around the throne, feet crunching on bits of broken marble. He’d found the yellow-faced daeril poking and prodding at the God King’s broken seat, ostensibly trying to fix it.

Siris rounded the throne and stepped up to the daeril. Siris regarded Strix for a moment, then grabbed the gaunt daeril by the throat, hauling him up and slamming him back against the remnants of the side of the throne. He held the Infinity Blade in his other hand.

The daeril’s black eyes bugged out, and he tried to gasp for breath.

“Great . . . master . . . Why . . . ?”

“Who is it you serve?”

The daeril’s eyes grew more panicked. “Master . . . I . . . of course I serve you . . .”

“You are a smart one, Strix,” Siris said. “You know that it’s dangerous to be found here. The other Deathless will slaughter you for what you know of the God King’s death. I can understand why Kuuth stayed; he doesn’t care about life. But you? You stayed for a reason.”

The daeril struggled, eyes widening.

Siris tightened his grip.

“Who do you serve?” Siris demanded.

Something crunched behind him.

Siris spun without thinking, the Infinity Blade lashing out. He’d intended to behead the person sneaking up on him. Instead, he sliced through his 15-foot-tall opponent’s stomach.

Kuuth, the blind troll, stumbled back, blood dribbling down his waist. His large, treelike staff clattered to the floor. He'd been about to smash Siris across the head.

"Hell take me!" Siris yelled. ***Traitors! Kill them both! Bring them pain. Make them fear.***

He spun on Strix and drove the Infinity Blade into the stone of the throne, just beside the creature's head. "What," Siris bellowed, "is going on?"

"Do not blame Strix, warrior," Kuuth said in his rumbling voice. The aged troll gasped in pain, then went down on his knees. "He did as I instructed him."

"Kuuth," Siris said, turning. The dying troll toppled onto his side. "Why . . ."

"We serve our master, warrior," Kuuth said, voice growing softer. "It is . . . what we were created . . . to do . . ."

"Your master is dead!"

Kuuth fell still.

Siris spun on the quivering daeril beside the throne. Strix shrank down farther.

Kuuth had tried to get him to stay in the palace. That must have been what the entire conversation had been intended to do. Make him trust the troll, make him agree to remain behind. Where he could be found.

Siris leaned in. "*What. Did. He. Mean?*"

"The Infinity Blade doesn't work yet," Strix said, cowering. "The God King was preparing it with the souls of your bloodline! He thought killing you would be the last step. But he didn't kill you. He—"

He fell to me, Siris thought.

Which meant . . . if the sword didn't work yet . . .

The God King is still alive. He knows where I am.

Oh, hell.

Siris stumbled back, pulling the Infinity Blade from the stone and clutching it. Strix rubbed his neck, standing up and coughing. "He'll come for you soon," Strix said, hatred in his eyes. "I don't know why he let you defeat him, or why he ordered Kuuth to answer your questions. But this is all part of his plan. Everything is *always* part of his plan."

Siris longed to strike the daeril down, but he stopped himself. There had been a time he'd fought only when someone challenged him. Where had this bloodthirst come from?

The sword, he thought. It's corrupting me. I can't even use it, and it's corrupting me.

He stumbled back farther, and Strix laughed. “Flee. He will find you, human. He will reclaim what is his, and you will come to learn—as your ancestors learned—the price of defiance!”

Clutching the Infinity Blade, Siris fled.

Chapter Four

TRUE TO HER WORD, Isa was lounging outside when Siris burst from the castle's outer court gate. She tucked a book into the pocket of her long coat and slung her crossbow over her shoulder. "So, where are we going?"

"The God King is alive," Siris said, panting. He'd gathered his armor and regrown his shield, though he hadn't taken the time to don the armor. He had it tied in his cloak, slung over his shoulder, and wore the Infinity Blade at his side in the improvised sheath that didn't fit it very well.

"Well, he *is* immortal," Isa said. "People like that have a tendency toward, you know, not dying."

This upended everything. He hadn't won. He'd *failed*.

"I need to find a way to make the Infinity Blade function," Siris explained. "It . . ." He stopped. Telling her that the God King had planned to make it work by killing Siris didn't seem particularly wise. In fact, telling her anything didn't seem particularly wise.

But he was alone, ignorant, and running low on options. Isa seemed to know it, for she was watching him with a sly smile.

Siris took a deep breath. "You said you know how to get everywhere. So . . ."

"Making the Infinity Blade work isn't a place, whiskers."

"I need to find someone to help me. Maybe someone to take the sword off my hands. Can you find the Worker of Secrets?"

Isa froze, and he felt a sliver of satisfaction—through the anxiety—at having finally said something that surprised her. "The Worker of Secrets is a myth," she said. "Pure fabrication. Nobody fights back against the Deathless. Nobody."

"I did. You seem to have been intending to, in some way."

Isa didn't respond.

"The Worker made the Infinity Blade," Siris said, though he had gotten that information from Kuuth. Could he trust anything that troll had told him?

The God King told him to answer my questions. Why?

“Yes, it’s said the blade is the Worker’s creation,” Isa replied, which shocked him. She *did* know about it. Or was she playing along?

Terrors, he thought. *What am I doing? I can’t handle this. All I know how to do is kill people.* It appeared he couldn’t even do that properly.

“The Worker of Secrets,” Isa said thoughtfully. “Ancient enemy of the Deathless, trapped in a prison where time does not pass—his punishment for making a forbidden weapon.”

“What do you know, Isa?” he said, pointing at her. “What do you *really* know about all of this?”

“Not as much as it seems,” she said lightly. “And certainly not where the Worker is imprisoned, if he even exists.”

“You said you can take me anywhere.”

“Anyplace not mythical, whiskers,” she said skeptically, folding her arms. “I think the Worker is probably a rumor spread among the Deathless to cover up the true origins of the Infinity Blade.”

“Well, we have to go somewhere,” Siris said, looking back at the castle. It seemed hollow and empty. A throne without a king. “Let’s get moving, for now. I’ll . . . I’ll think about what to do.”

Isa shrugged, then started down the path. He followed, hoping he didn’t look as uncertain as he felt.

I’M A CHILD, Siris thought. *A child playing at games only the adults understand.*

He trudged along the road, his armor heavy in his pack. Isa, it turned out, had a horse—a luxury that nobody in Drem’s Maw had been able to afford. She clomped along the road behind him, humming a tune softly to herself, wearing a narrow hat with a wide brim to keep off the sun.

He’d always wanted to ride a horse. What would it be like? He shook his head, trying to force his thoughts away from that path. The world was crumbling. What did horses matter?

And yet, a piece of him still struggled to discover itself. He wanted to live, to *thrive*. He wanted to know things, be things, experience things. He’d always denied himself the slightest bit of pleasure, worried that if he tasted the life of a real person, he’d develop a hunger for it.

He’d been right. He’d tasted it now. He was ruined.

And he was happy for it.

Perhaps Isa would help him achieve that; perhaps not. It seemed terribly convenient that she would arrive, decide not to kill him, and now offer to take him wherever he wanted to go. There had been no discussion of price. Probably because they both knew her leading him was merely an excuse for her to stay near the Infinity Blade, and perhaps get a chance to snatch it.

I should ditch her, he thought. Go on alone.

Go where?

Into hiding? He could make his way into the mountains, alone, live off the land . . . only, he had never learned how to do something like that. Beyond that, what good would it do to hide with the Infinity Blade? Potentially the only weapon humankind had for fighting back against the Deathless?

I need to find people who are fighting back. Give the sword to them.

The Worker of Secrets, if he existed, would be a place to start. If not him, then some other rebellious group. Surely something like that existed.

“You realize that this looks odd,” Isa noted.

He looked up at her, frowning.

“Me riding,” she explained, “and you walking like that. It looks unusual. I assume you want to be . . . what is the word in your language? Inconspicuous?”

Was she going to invite him to ride with her? The prospect of being that close to her made him wary, and he glanced at the knives on her belt. He also found himself intrigued by the prospect of being that close to her, however, and he tried to quash the emotion.

She tried to kill you, he reminded himself. And will probably try again.

Still, it would be nice to try riding a horse.

“Yes, this is not very inconspicuous,” she said, looking at him appraisingly, “not with a weapon like that. You *could* be my guard, but anyone we pass is going to wonder why a woman in simple leathers can afford a guard. I don’t look like a merchant—and there are no wares besides—but I’m certainly not going to pass as one of the Devoted or the Favored.”

“I don’t suppose you have a fancy dress tucked away in your saddlebags?” Siris asked.

She raised an eyebrow at him, looking highly amused.

“I guess not,” he said.

“Assuming you want to travel incognizant,” she said, “we need to do something about the sword.”

“Wait, incognizant?”

“Wrong word? In . . . I swear there was one.”

“Incognito?”

“Yes, that’s it. What a stupid language. Anyway, if you want to travel *incognito*, we need to do something about that sword.” She made a great show of thinking it over, then sighed loudly. “Guess you’ll just have to let me tie the sword to the saddle up here, where I can cover it with a blanket.”

“You really think I’m that stupid?”

She just chuckled, reaching into her saddlebags. “Merely trying to measure your stupidity, whiskers. You soldier types get knocked upside the head frequently. Who knows how forgetful you might become?” She pulled something out and tossed it to him. A cloak, nicer than the one he’d used to pack up his armor. “Tie that on, let it drape over your left side. Maybe it will hide the weapon well enough to turn aside questioning eyes.”

He lifted up the cloak, looking at it carefully, wary of some kind of trap.

“I sewed deathfang spiders into the collar,” she said dryly.

“Just being cautious,” Siris said, throwing on the cloak, letting it fall as she’d described. It did an acceptable job of hiding the sword. “Thanks.”

They walked a little farther along the dusty trail. It wasn’t really a road. In another part of the countryside, it would have become overgrown long ago. Here, where the weather was hot and the terrain was stony, there wasn’t enough life to overgrow anything.

Siris trudged along beside the horse, his armor feeling like bricks on his back, trails of sweat making their way leisurely down the sides of his cheeks.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Isa asked.

“Beautiful?”

“The rock formations,” she said, nodding to the side. The ground there fell away into a series of gullies, then rose sharply in a ripple that exposed lines of strata shaded red, yellow, brown, orange. “I’ve always loved this part of the island.”

“Island?” Siris said. “We live on an island?”

“A big one,” Isa said, sounding amused. “But yes, Lantimor certainly isn’t a continent. You could ride from one end to another in about a month.”

“Lantimor,” he said, working the word over in his mouth. Someone else’s name for where he lived. Names like that belonged to the Deathless. Everyone he knew just called it the land or the area.

“So naive,” Isa said, mostly under her breath. She probably didn’t realize he’d heard.

He kept his eyes forward, trying not to let her words dig at him. He didn’t care if he was naive. He didn’t. Really.

I’ll show her naive. I’ll show her what it’s like to know truths. Pain like the world crumbling, shame like it might consume you, guilt like a sky of lead . . .

He stilled himself, hand shaking on the hilt of the Infinity Blade. The sweat beads on the sides of his face grew larger.

“Did you really best him?” Isa asked. “In a duel?”

“The God King? Yes. For all the good it did. He isn’t dead.”

Isa pursed her lips.

“What?” Siris asked.

“Raidriar—you call him the God King—is said to be among the greatest duelists of the Deathless.”

“It was part luck,” Siris said. “Any duel is. A dodge at the last moment, an attack in the right opening. He was good; better than any I’d faced.”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand. Raidriar is thousands of years old, whiskers. Thousands upon *thousands*. You think he hasn’t faced skilled opponents before? He has. Hundreds of them—many of them Deathless who have lived, and trained, as long as he has. And you say that you beat him.”

“What? You think I found this sword sitting in the midden heap or something?”

“No. But a shot with the crossbow to the back could work. It wouldn’t kill him, but it might knock him out for a little while, let you steal the blade. Hell, hit a Deathless with enough destruction, and they’ll need to grow a new body. Cut off his head while he sleeps, then take his sword, get out before he comes back . . .”

“I fight with the Aegis Forms,” Siris snapped, hand growing tight on the sword hilt. “I follow the ancient ideal. If a man faces me with honor, I will return it.”

“Might as well have thrown *that* in the midden heap,” Isa muttered. “That’s where it belongs.”

Siris said nothing. You couldn’t explain the Aegis Forms to someone who didn’t understand, who didn’t *want* to understand. When he and the God King had fought, they’d shared something. They’d set out to kill one

another, and on one level, they had hated one another. But there had been respect too. As warriors who followed the ancient ideal.

Of course . . . as he considered it, the God King *had* known that he wasn't fighting for his life. Immortality would make it a whole lot easier to follow the Aegis Forms.

Before talking to the minions in the castle, he hadn't even known that Deathless could restore themselves to life. He'd known the God King had lived a long time, but had figured a sword in the gut would end any man, no matter how old he was.

Naive. Yes, she was probably right.

"You didn't seem surprised to find that he wasn't truly dead," Siris said. "You seem to know a lot about them."

"I stumbled upon one of their rebirthing chambers once," she said absently. "It was an . . . educational experience. So, where'd you get that healing ring?"

Siris snorted. "You acted so surprised at my beard. You knew all along, didn't you?"

"I'm good at connecting facts," she said. Which wasn't really an answer to his question. "Where did you find it?"

"It belonged to the God King," Siris said. "I found others, though. On the bodies of the guards I fought. I've got a few of them in my pouch."

"Huh," she said, thoughtful.

"What?"

"Did the guards ever use the rings against you?" she asked. "To heal themselves?"

"No," he said. "Actually, they didn't." He considered for a moment. "Usually when I found one, it was hung by a strap around their neck, or kept in their pouch. That makes sense for the trolls, who couldn't fit them on their fingers. But a few of the guards I fought were ordinary men, knights or Devoted who served the God King."

"Maybe they didn't know how to work them."

"It wasn't hard to figure out," Siris said, holding up a hand, looking at the ring. "I just kind of . . . did it, naturally. Most of the rings stopped working after I killed the God King, though."

Isa frowned.

"You know something, don't you?" Siris said.

"No."

He eyed her.

“I know *many* things,” she said, haughtily sitting atop her saddle. “I know how to get anywhere. I know that you walk like a soldier—with a gait I’ve seen from men who have trained in the military for decades—yet you can’t possibly have that kind of experience yet. I know a really *incredible* recipe for cinnamon-baked sweetbread. But I don’t know anything more about those rings. Honestly.”

He said nothing.

“What?” she demanded.

“I don’t believe that for a moment,” he said, looking ahead.

“I’m telling you,” she said, “it’s *really* good cinnamon bread.”

He found himself smiling. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Well, people do usually assume I’m lying when I speak of baking. I’ve been told I don’t look like the baking type.”

“You *did* glare at me when I suggested you might have a frilly dress in those packs.”

“That was not a glare. That was a dignified look of measured contempt.”

“I’m sure,” Siris said. “So, you can really bake?” Cinnamon sweetbread. That sounded delicious. Exactly the sort of thing he’d never have let himself taste during his years training.

“I like to be able to do things for myself,” she said. “Unfortunately, I *also* like to eat meals that don’t taste of moldy rat leather. This sort of conundrum necessitates a woman taking a few liberties with her chosen persona. And if this entire line of reasoning is intended to get me to *prove* myself with an outpouring of cinnamon sweetbread, then I’ll relent.”

“You . . . will? So you’ll fix me the bread?”

“As much as you can eat, whiskers. Price is one sword. Oh, look. You happen to have one. What a fortunate turn of events!”

“Well, you certainly are determined.”

She smiled. “Actually, I’m *persistent*. You are so fond of using the wrong words. Are you not the one who speaks this language natively?”

“Natively,” he said. “But apparently not that fluently.”

“I’ll trade you my very nice dictionary—”

“—for this sword, I assume?” he asked, taking a drink from his canteen.

“Nonsense. The sword is worth far more than that. I’ll throw in a pair of penis.”

Siris nearly choked, sputtering through the water.

Isa looked at him, frowning.

“A pair of them, eh?” Siris asked, wiping his chin. “Wow. Must have cost you a lot.”

Isa, looking confused, pulled two pens out of her saddlebags. “They were quite pricey, but are very nice. You are still laughing. I see. One pen, two penis? No?”

“I think you, uh, may want to work on your pronunciation there, Isa. You say pen in a way that does not sound at all like—”

Isa suddenly froze, turning forward, coming alert.

Siris cut himself off, loosening the Infinity Blade in its sheath. What was that? *Voices*, he thought.

Isa pointed. “Ahead, I think.”

“I agree.”

“Hide the sword! Remember what I said!”

“I’m not a fool,” Siris said, moving the cloak to cover his arm. Isa checked her crossbow, making certain it was covered. It wouldn’t be much good if there were a tussle, at least not immediately—he doubted she could get the leverage to cock it from horseback. It was of the ‘step and pull’ variety.

A small group of people appeared atop a hill on the road ahead of them. Isa slowed her horse and inspected the ragged group. They didn’t *seem* dangerous. There were three of them, men in caps and workers’ smocks. No trousers, just knee-length tunics and sandals.

They’d be from one of the farming regions to the near west. It had been a shock for Siris to discover that people even in nearby areas dressed quite differently from those he’d known in Drem’s Maw. The newcomers stopped on the road after seeing Isa and Siris. Their chatter quieted.

They’re trying to decide what to make of us, Siris thought. Isa had a horse—a mark of someone rich, lucky, or favored. But, true to her suggestion, the lack of arms seemed to convince the three that Isa and Siris were not a threat. The peasants continued their trek, carrying sticks with bundles and walking cautiously.

“Ho, travelers,” one called when the two groups grew near. “You come from the east! What word?” The man’s voice sounded nervous.

“It’s hot,” Siris called back. “And dusty. What word from the west?”

“Much of the same,” the man called, voice growing more calm. “With a little bit of wind.”

“That will be nice.”

“Well, it *is* a hot, dusty wind, mind you.”

Siris laughed, walking up to them. The three men had relaxed, and one pulled out a canteen, offering him a drink. All looked to be of their middle years, but hard work in the sun could age men quickly.

“Thank you,” Siris said, taking the canteen. It likely held only water, but sharing anything with a stranger was unusual.

“It’s a fine day, young traveler,” one of the men said. “Tell me . . . have you come from paying homage?”

“Homage?”

“To the Sacrifice,” the man said.

“Has that come, then?” Siris asked, taking a sniff of the canteen, then lifting it to his lips. He made as if he were drinking, but barely let the water touch his lips. Best to be careful.

“It has,” one of the other men said, whispering in a solemn tone. “A mortal has been sent to face the God King.”

The third man gestured to his bundle. “Three villages’ worth of spices. An offering for the Sacrifice’s grave. We were chosen. If he has not yet been buried, we will see the job done.”

Everyone knew the story, the legend. By tradition, the God King would dump the Sacrifice’s body outside of his castle, and would not interfere with those who came to remove it. One or two from each village or town would be sent. The God King would not molest them as they stripped off the armor and shield, then buried the fallen hero. The armor would be returned to the Sacrifice’s home city, where it would be passed on to the next chosen sacrifice. Usually his son. Siris had broken that tradition by not marrying or siring a child before he left.

It had always bothered Siris that the God King allowed the harvesting of the armor, but it now made sense. The God King had *wanted* these Sacrifices to continue. Somehow, they had been what he needed to make the Infinity Blade work.

All this time, the people had thought they were showing defiance. A hint of resistance against the beast that oppressed them, worked them, taxed them nearly to starvation. Turned out that all this time, even this one little act of rebellion had been controlled by the creature they hated.

What would these men do when they found no body to bury, no corpse to revere?

“You did not know it was the time?” one of the men said.

“I . . . heard a rumor,” Siris said. “But people are always speaking of the Sacrifice; I didn’t believe the time had really come.”

“It has,” the man said. “Our elders counted the days with extreme care. All three villages agreed.”

“Come with us,” one of the men offered. “You can tell your grandchildren that you saw him. Only one Sacrifice comes each generation.”

Siris handed back the canteen, and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I have other tasks. But I wish you luck.”

They parted ways, the men continuing toward the God King’s castle. Siris watched them go, solemn, until Isa rode up beside him.

“I worry for them,” he said. “What will the God King do to them?”

“Probably nothing,” she said. “He’ll need them, and the others that come, to spread whatever propaganda he decides fits his return. He might even toss out a corpse and pretend you never defeated him, that he killed the Sacrifice.”

And the tradition will continue, Siris thought, disturbed. *Only I will know the truth.*

Another reason for the God King to hunt him. “You didn’t join the conversation.”

“My accent may have been memorable,” she said. “Besides, I have a way of being off-putting to those I just meet.”

“It might be the crossbow bolts you shoot at people before introducing yourself,” Siris said. “You might want to, you know, look into *not* doing that.”

“An astounding revelation.”

“Well, I’ve been told that my people skills are admirable.”

“Actually,” she said, “they seem to be.”

He glanced at her. She sounded sincere.

“They trusted you right off,” she mused. “People don’t do that to me. They assume I’m lying to them, cheating them, or smuggling something.”

“And are you?”

“Always,” she said absently. “Hell, I’ve got six pieces of contraband farshot magics in my saddlebags right now.”

“Wait, really?”

“Can’t make the *toorim* things work,” she said. He didn’t know that word she used. Was it some kind of curse? “You need a magic tube to activate

them. Anyway, that's beside the point. People don't trust me."

"You could try being honest."

"It doesn't work," she said. "The more honest I am, the less they believe me. Like our discussion about those rings. I *really* don't know anything about them, by the way."

Siris hesitated.

"You're skeptical," she said.

"I . . ."

"It's all right. I'm more than used to it. But you . . . you're genuine." That, oddly, seemed to trouble her. "What is this Sacrifice thing they spoke of?"

"You don't know?" he asked, shocked as he turned to her.

"No."

"Everyone knows."

"Humor me."

"One man each generation is chosen to fight the God King," he said, starting to trek down the road again.

"Chosen? How?"

"It's the nearest relative of my family line," Siris replied. "Usually, the Sacrifice marries and has a child before he leaves."

"You're married then?"

"No," he said.

"But—"

"Things were different for me."

He hadn't been able to bring himself to do it. The girl the town elders had chosen for him had been nice enough, but Siris hadn't been able to force himself to marry her, only to leave her a widow one year later, so he'd backed out of the marriage. His mother had instead sent word to her husband's family, so the new Sacrifice could be chosen from the children there. Poor kid.

They continued on their way. About a half hour later, Isa suddenly started laughing—a quick, exuberant bark. He glanced at her, and found her reading in her dictionary.

"Ah yes," she said to herself, still chuckling, "I see. Peens. No. Pens. Yes, I must learn to pronounce that one right." She wiped a tear from her eye.

"Damn, I wish I'd done that one on purpose . . ."

SIRIS LET ISA pick the camping spot for the evening. He wanted to be off the roadway, but otherwise didn't know much about picking a campsite. Isa seemed to find that amusing—she had an expectation that people from 'rural villages' should be capable trackers and wilderness experts.

Siris shook his head. He'd never even worked the stalactites, let alone left the village to wander the wilderness. His every moment had been needed to train. Leaving Isa for a moment, he went off to test the transportation ring with the sword. It still worked, even though they were away from the castle. He was relieved to find that; since the elemental rings had stopped working, he'd worried that eventually this one would as well.

That confirmed, he went and helped unload the horse, passing Isa with the saddlebags. He began to undo the saddle, and then noticed the crossbow sitting in its strap. A deadly weapon; he'd heard of its type, but hadn't ever seen one. It was easy enough to figure it out from a short inspection.

Isa walked back a short time later. Their camp was at the base of a small hill. Not on top of it, as Siris would have probably chosen. That might have to do with the small spring Isa had found at the bottom, or with not making them visible from a distance.

"We haven't talked about price yet," Siris said, pulling off the last saddlebag.

Isa eyed it, though obviously tried to remain nonchalant. As if he would make off with her goods. *That woman is about as trusting as . . . well, as I am, lately.*

"Price?" she asked.

"You're not going to guide me for free."

"So far, there hasn't been much guiding. You don't know where you want to go."

"Regardless. You don't seem the type to provide a service—even a meaningless one—for free."

She looked at him solemnly, and there were no signs of mirth in her voice.

"You die. I get the sword."

"That—"

"Not if I kill you," she said. "I mean, my price is this: I'll be your guide. If you die along the way, the sword is mine. I think you'll find it a fair price. It doesn't actually cost you anything."

“Except my life.”

“I only take the sword if you die because of some something outside our control,” she said, shrugging. “Losing your life is not a cost.”

He rubbed his chin as she went to the horse, slinging her crossbow over her shoulder, then pulling off the saddle. She began scraping at the horse’s coat with a small, handheld tool, which Siris found baffling.

He rounded the hill and settled down in the hollow to care for his armor—the leather needed oiling—and later Isa joined him. The two worked in silence, and eventually Siris moved to take up his logbook and begin writing items down. He’d spent a large part of the walk deciding on things he wanted to try.

See the ocean. Play an instrument. Learn to make my way in the woods. Eat cinnamon bread. Play cards.

She’d probably have laughed at him if he’d mentioned he didn’t know how to play cards. Everyone—even the simplest of men in the town—had played. Not Siris.

Isa started a small fire and boiled some water.

“Any chance of some of that bread you talked about?” Siris asked.

“Do you have sugar, butter, and cinnamon handy?”

“I have some jerky and some oatmeal.” He held up a small jar. “And some armor polish.”

“I suppose I could *try* to make something out of those three ingredients . . .”

“Uh, no. Thanks.”

Isa smiled, and they dined on travel rations. The things tasted like sawdust. Before long, Siris was pulling his blanket over himself—head resting on his armor pack—and closing his eyes.

He was exhausted. After fighting those golems, making the discovery that the God King lived, then walking for hours . . . he was worn out, wrung dry.

Yet sleep was elusive. The three peasants weren’t the only ones they’d met on the roadway—they’d passed two other groups, and both had spoken of the Sacrifice. Siris had felt . . . dishonest speaking to them. How would they react if they knew that he’d lived, yet had also failed to kill the God King?

I could find a way to make the sword work, a piece of his mind whispered. Then go back. Face him in truth. End him.

The next thought was immediate. Why? Why Siris? He'd done his part, hadn't he? Didn't he deserve freedom? Didn't he deserve, for once, to play cards? To go swimming? To see the ocean?

Finish what you began. . . .

Time passed as he lay in thought. He didn't toss or turn; that wasn't his way. He lay, eyes closed, breathing regularly. As if to coax himself to sleep. Also, there was another reason to be still. One he dearly hoped was unjustified.

After about an hour, he heard a soft boot scrape rock.

He snapped his eyes open. Isa crouched beside him, crossbow pointed at his neck. Bathed in moonlight, her expression was grim, her eyes hard.

He exhaled slowly, regretfully.

They exchanged no words; both knew what this was. She reached down for the sword at his side.

He tapped his fingers together, then sat up, grabbing his sword in one hand. She pulled the trigger on her crossbow.

At least, she tried to. Nothing happened. She moved her finger frantically and backed up, eyes going wide. Siris held something up in the moonlight: the trigger mechanism. He pried the transportation disc off it—he'd attached the disc earlier, when inspecting the crossbow—and tossed the trigger into the night. He'd been expecting it to bring the whole crossbow, but this would work as well.

Siris stood in a fluid motion, whipping the Infinity Blade free and leveling it at Isa's throat.

"In my defense," she said, "I didn't try to murder you in your sleep. I waited for you to open your eyes first."

"You were planning to take the sword and run," Siris said coldly. "And if I woke and tried to stop you, you'd have killed me."

"I—"

"You don't point a crossbow at someone's throat by accident, Isa," he whispered. *Hell take me!* "And you damn well don't pull the trigger by accident." He found himself furious. He'd been growing to like her!

"Fine," Isa said, sounding exhausted. She sat down, tossing aside the crossbow. "But don't feign the high ground here. Don't pretend you weren't planning to do something similar to me one of these nights. I just acted first."

"Do something similar . . . Isa, what reason would I have to do that!"

She regarded him flatly, but said nothing more.

Frustrating, intolerable woman! He thought. *What in the name of the ancient prayers am I going to do with you?*

He struggled to hold himself from ramming the blade into her chest and being done with it. She'd betrayed him! ***How dare she!*** He stepped forward and she backed up, tripping on a rock and falling so that he loomed over her.

She looked up, eyes wide in the moonlight. Well, she would know the price of treason. He would—

No! he thought to himself with some effort.

It was the blasted sword. It was doing things to him. Siris forced himself to slam the Infinity Blade back into its sheath. He was going to have to find one that fit it better, eventually.

Isa let out a long breath. She hid her fear well, but her hands were shaking. Couldn't she have simply been content with her "price"?

She knew things. Much more than she was sharing. He could make her speak of them. He could *force* her to—

No! Heaven take this cursed blade!

"Go," he said to her, surprised at how ragged his voice was. "Take your horse and your things. Leave."

"You're . . . you're letting me go? *And* I can take the horse?"

Siris said nothing.

"You're going to stab me as I turn away," she said. "Run me down. I . . . You . . ." She was rambling, shaken, as she sat where she had tripped. Her hair was loose, having fallen from its ponytail. She seemed baffled.

"You can take the horse," Siris said, "because I am no thief. You can leave, because I don't seek death without reason."

It wasn't supposed to be like this. It was supposed to be faceless enemies, fought in honorable duels. Not crossbow bolts in the night from people he was starting to trust.

"Let me stay," she said.

"Are you *mad*? You think—"

"Tie me up at nights," she said. "I'll give you all of my weapons. You ride the horse; I'll walk in front. No chance for betrayal. No need for trust. But let me stay."

"What reason could I *possibly* have to want you around?"

"Saydhi."

“Excuse me?”

“She’s one of the Deathless,” Isa said. “She has lands that border those of the God King. She’s less powerful than him, but has managed to remain autonomous. She’s an information dealer. If anyone knows where the Worker of Secrets is, it will be her.”

Siris rubbed the hilt of the Infinity Blade. The Worker of Secrets. Did he really want to find the man?

If he created this weapon, Siris thought, he’ll know how to use it. It would be right to give it up to him. He’d fight the Deathless better than I ever could.

Siris could find the freedom he craved *and* do something good in the name of his people. It was a tempting, tantalizing prospect.

Isa was still watching him.

“I don’t have anything to offer this Saydhi,” he said. “If she deals in information, I’ll have to pay her something dear to get her to give up the location of the Worker. The only thing of value I have is this blade, and I’m *not* going to deliver it back into the hands of one of the Deathless.”

“You won’t need to,” Isa said. “Saydhi has a standing invitation. She loves duels. Any man who can best her champions wins a boon. Fight your way to her, and she’ll answer a question for you.”

Siris gripped the blade’s hilt. It could be a lie. Isa could be leading him into a trap. She probably was.

But, hell take him, there was something in her eyes. A frankness, a sincerity, that he hadn’t seen before. This night had shaken her. He couldn’t fathom why she wouldn’t just run, perhaps take the chance to gather reinforcements and hunt him down. Wouldn’t that make more sense than a convoluted trap?

He still wanted to trust her. What was wrong with him? Maybe he should pay more attention to the hateful thoughts the sword seemed to be trying to force on him.

“Fetch your rope,” he said, blinking. Ancient Prayers, but he was tired! “I’ll sleep on it.”

Chapter Five

SIRIS AWOKE, feeling stiff. He groaned, rolling over, looking at the sun, which was just cresting the horizon. That hadn't been nearly enough sleep.

He was accustomed to resting on hard stone of course, and to going without sleep. Both had been part of his training. He'd needed to be tough, as tough as a man could be. But even with that training, he was tired. He'd forced himself to remain awake much of the night, waiting to see if Isa had some hidden method of escaping the ropes.

Isa. He turned with a start, half expecting to find the woman gone. She still lay on the ground where he'd put her.

Siris sat up, rubbing his chin. Her blanket had pulled free in the night, but with her hands bound behind her back and tied to her ankles, she obviously hadn't been able to get it back on. He felt a stab of guilt, but remembering the crossbow aimed at his throat banished the emotion. She had decided to stay; she had suggested the bindings. He wouldn't feel bad for doing the job well.

He walked over and untied her. She started awake, then watched him silently with reddened eyes. She'd slept as poorly as he had.

He wound the rope, then did his morning sword practices, going through the Aegis Forms one at a time in slow motion, breathing in and out. He kept an eye on Isa, who watched him with a curious expression. For some reason, he found her observation unnerving, and he made more mistakes in the forms than he had in a long while.

Finished, he wiped his brow and stowed the Infinity Blade, and then—to be doing something—he started packing the horse. The surly brute gave him a glare that seemed to indicate it knew what Siris had done. The thing even tried to bite him a few times.

Cross 'riding a horse' off my list of things to do, he told himself. These beasts are horrid.

"You're packing him too heavily," Isa said, walking up behind. "He can't carry all of that and you too."

“He won’t be carrying me,” Siris said, finishing tying on his bundle of armor. Oddly, the saddle suddenly seemed loose.

Isa snorted and walked over, gently pushing him aside and redoing the saddle. “So we’re both walking?”

“I sure as heaven am not getting up on that beast,” Siris said, shaking his hand where the horse had nicked him. Weren’t horses supposed to be placid grass-eaters? He’d met cave bears with better temperaments.

Packing done, Isa walked back to the camp and spared a glance for the discarded crossbow.

“How easy would that be to fix?” Siris asked.

“Tough,” she said. “We’d need a specialist.”

It seemed a waste to leave the weapon. Siris picked it up and managed to discharge the bolt—it had sat in place all night—by pressing his knife against the catch. Then he fetched the trigger mechanism and stowed both on the horse.

As he was working, he heard thunder. He frowned up at the clear sky.

“Back!” Isa hissed, grabbing his arm. He barely kept from drawing the sword on her, and instead allowed her to tow him and the horse to the side of the hill. She crouched down, watching the road.

A group of mounted knights in black stormed down the roadway, coming as if from the God King’s palace. Siris’s breath caught in his throat. He had little doubt they were hunting him.

He and Isa crouched beside the hill for a long time, the thunder of the horses’ hooves growing softer in the distance. Siris swallowed.

“They’re heading north,” Isa said.

In the direction I told the daerils I’d be going, he thought. Well, his false trail was working. That was something. Hopefully, they would have asked the peasants about him, and found that he was indeed traveling this way. Drawing them away from his home was vital.

He should have been watching for pursuit; he hadn’t realized they’d come after him so quickly. He’d intended to travel on the road for a while, to give confirmation to those pursuing him that this was the way he’d gone. Then he’d planned to cut out a different direction. He’d probably stayed on the road too long; he hadn’t ever done anything like this before.

“Is there a way to get to this other Deathless by going cross-country?” he asked.

“Saydhi? Yes, there is. In fact, that’s probably a *very* good idea.”

“Let’s move, then,” he said, cautiously rising.

“I assume you want me walking in front?”

Siris nodded. “And you lead the monster.”

She obeyed, striking out, horse in tow. Leaving the roadway made the path more difficult. However, the opportunity to put most of the gear on her animal meant that—rougher though the terrain was—he had a much easier time of it. He actually found himself enjoying the walk, particularly as the weather took a pleasantly cool turn.

Over the next few days, they slowly climbed in elevation, and the furrowed landscape of rocks and cliffs gave way to more greenery. Isa knew a little-used pass through the heights, and they began passing thickets of thin, reedlike growths that climbed high into the air.

It was bamboo, Siris realized. He’d seen wares crafted from it come through Drem’s Maw, but had never seen the plants alive. It seemed incredible to him that a week or two of walking could change the vegetation so soundly—Isa tried to explain something about a “rain shadow” with the mountains, whatever that meant.

He kept close watch on her, binding her tightly every night. She submitted wordlessly, though her wrists got rubbed raw, and each morning when she rose her steps were stiff with soreness and cramps caused by the awkward sleeping. When he could, he tied her to a tree instead. That seemed to be slightly more comfortable.

They didn’t speak much. Not nearly as much as they had on that first day, when he’d still nurtured a glimmer of trust. Siris tried to spend the time thinking about what to do. Unfortunately, he kept thinking of things he wanted to add to his list. That distracted him.

And so, he decided to try some of them. Isa watched him, baffled one night, as he constructed a rope swing and hung it from a branch, then swung on it.

“That’s a children’s activity,” she said.

“Oh?” he said. “Are they the only ones allowed to have fun?”

His reply seemed to disturb her greatly. That evening, he took down the swing and used the ropes to bind her. Then, in his book, he wrote down rope swings as one of the things he *definitely* enjoyed.

They continued their hike. During the traveling, Isa proved her competence on more than one occasion. She always found fresh water for the camp, even when he would have thought it impossible. He tried to learn

how she did it, and found himself very satisfied as he learned to spot good campsites.

A few times, she ranged on ahead, then returned to lead them a different direction. Apparently, these highland hills and valleys were populated with a large number of free daerils that roved in bands. He never caught sight of them, though he and Isa did cross a few old camps and the remnants of the occasional caravan, skeletons peeking through the charred, burned-out remains.

As they left one such location, he found himself wondering about her motives. Was all of this—the care she took with the camps, the show of protecting him from roving daerils—just an act? Like her laughter had been on that first day, her wry friendliness? Could guiding him be a long-term attempt to get him to let his guard down?

Would he go to sleep one night, then never awake, killed by a hidden dagger?

Each night, he tied the bonds tightly, hating himself as he did so. Better to hate himself than to die because of another betrayal.

SIRIS FOLLOWED ISA and the horse up the forested hillside. He was surprised the horse could make it up the steep incline; the beast seemed to have less trouble with it than he did. He had to be wary not to get too close, lest the animal drop a gift down at him. He was increasingly certain that it waited until Siris was close to do its business.

The air was hot and muggy, and the sun was veiled in a sheath of gray clouds. They were coming down out of the hills, leaving the pass behind them. If anything, the land here was even more lush than before. Enormous forests of bamboo spread like green blankets over the rolling hills. The tall, slender plants were almost like the lawn of some gigantic creature—which made Siris and Isa the insects that prowled among the blades of grass.

The Infinity Blade hung in its sheath on his back, where he'd moved it after getting it caught repeatedly in the underbrush. He no longer wore the cloak; they hadn't passed a living soul in days.

He practically crawled the last steep distance up to the hilltop, pulling on grass slick with dew. The ground here smelled alive. If the people of Drem's Maw knew that just across those mountains, they'd find this paradise of growth and life . . .

They wouldn't know. They would live their lives at work, slaving as they hung from the roof of their cavern and cut the fast-growing stalactites, delivering the minerals to the God King as tribute. Siris reached the top of the hill and stood up tall, taking a deep breath of the misty air. If he could get the weapon to the Worker of Secrets, would that start something that *truly* brought freedom to his people?

It was an oddly daunting thought. Though the God King still lived, Siris *had* defeated him in a fair duel. He didn't believe that he'd won by accident, or that the God King had allowed it. He had enough dueling experience to know when someone gave their all.

That victory, however small, left him wondering. Could they *all* be defeated? Could his people actually be *freed*? He reached over his shoulder, touching the hilt of the Infinity Blade.

Isa stood atop the hill, looking up to the right, toward one of the lower peaks in the mountain range. She seemed thoughtful.

"What?" he asked.

"The rebirthing chamber I told you about," she said, sounding distracted. "It's up there. On the slopes of that peak. I stumbled upon it by accident. I was lost . . ."

"I thought you couldn't get lost," he said, smiling.

She didn't hear the humor in his voice. "I can't now. But I still could, back then." She shook her head, then continued on her way down the slope.

Siris joined her, walking beside her, rather than in his customary place behind. She eyed him at the irregularity, but he was tired of watching that animal's backend. The thing was demonspawn for certain.

"How much farther?" he asked.

"A little over a day," she said. "Then we'll have to decide if you try to sneak in or challenge the guardians."

"Sneak?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "Have you heard me in my armor?"

She nodded. "I just . . ."

"What?"

"It's so odd, the way you people do things. Stepping right up, announcing you want to fight, going into it."

"It's the path of honor and civilization."

"I wonder if that's one of the ways the Deathless keep you in line," Isa said. She was so subdued. Professional, quiet—not cold, but giving up no

more than she had to. He missed the way she'd been on that first day.

"Keep us in line?"

"Sure. They convince everyone that it's 'honorable' to fight one on one, formally. That way, when we rise up, we do it with loud declarations and challenges. It gives them more time to prepare."

Siris pushed a bamboo branch out of the way, frowning. He didn't like the idea that honor, like everything else, might have become just another tool for the Deathless. There had to be some things that were beyond their touch, didn't there?

"Watch your step," Isa said.

He paused, then looked to the side. The ground here had grown rocky, and was broken by cracks, each about as long as his leg. There was a pungent scent to the air and, Siris realized with surprise, heat was rising from the cracks.

"They're all over the place out here," Isa said. "You have to watch yourself around pools of water; some of them grow so hot, they can boil you faster than you can scream for help."

Siris shivered, stepping away from the cracks. They continued on their way in silence for a few minutes, before Siris finally found himself asking something he'd been wondering for a while. "Isa, why *do* you want the Infinity Blade? Really?"

She kept walking.

"You talk about humankind fighting back," he said. "A moment ago, you used the word 'we.' Half the time, you act like a freedom fighter. The other half, you act like an opportunist trying to make off with whatever wealth you can get. Which is the truth and which the mask?"

"You, with good reason, don't trust me not to kill you in your sleep."

"What kind of answer is that?"

"The preemptive kind. If you don't trust me not to kill you, why would you trust any answer I give about my true motivations?"

She has a point, he thought. "Well, maybe I'm just tired of walking in silence."

"Please tell me that doesn't mean you're going to start singing."

"I happen to have a very good voice," he said with a huff.

She cracked just a hint of a smile. After a few moments of walking through the bamboo—they were following some kind of game trail—she spoke. "Maybe I don't know which one I am. Maybe part of me thinks we

should fight back, but the rest of me thinks there's no point. There's no real way to stop them, so why try? Why not just take care of myself, you know?"

"Yeah," he said. "I do know." He stopped himself from asking the next question. *And that's why you betrayed me?*

Isa started to slow.

"What?"

"This path," she said, kneeling down and inspecting the ground. "It's getting too wide, too regular."

"Someone else uses it?"

"Maybe," she said. "We've come to the area where villages are more common, and we just intersected with the outflow from one of the more well-traveled passes." She stood up, then handed him the reins of the horse.

He took them, and she pushed away through the bamboo. He hesitated, then tied the horse off and followed. She raised an eyebrow at him, but didn't send him back. They made their way toward a higher elevation, where the bamboo was thinner.

He joined her atop the rise, scanning the valley before them. It didn't look like anything special. A wide, but shallow stream ran through the middle of it, and there were some hills along one side.

"Well?" he asked.

"If I were going to ambush travelers coming this way," she said, pointing, "I'd do it there, where the pathway turns along with the stream toward those two lower ridges. I'd also make sure the 'game trail' through this area was kept well-cleared and made obvious, so that people drifted my way."

Siris rubbed his chin.

"It's not likely," she said. "But I think we should go around."

"All right," Siris said. "Sounds good to me."

She led the way back to the horse, then backed them up a ways before cutting around. Was *this* a trap? But . . . if it was, she wouldn't have said anything. He'd made it abundantly clear he didn't know much about being a woodsman.

He shook his head, joining her in front again. "Isa," he asked, "what *are* the Deathless?"

"I don't think anyone can answer that for you except the Deathless themselves. Not that people haven't tried. In some of the world's larger

cities, I could throw a stone in any direction and have a good chance of hitting some theologian or scholar who thinks he knows the answer.”

“What do *you* think?”

She didn’t answer at first. “They’re gods,” she finally said. “What else would they be?”

“A god wouldn’t have fallen to my blade,” Siris said. “Even if the death wasn’t permanent. If they were really gods, no mortal could have fought one of them and won.”

She didn’t reply, though he caught her giving him a measuring glance.

“Maybe,” he said, “there’s nothing special to them other than knowledge. They *know* things, like how to make the rings work, like how to manipulate others.”

“And how to stop aging?” she said skeptically. “And come back to life when killed?”

“In the next town over from ours,” Siris said, “there was a very learned doctor. He was trained by a doctor before him, and that doctor by another doctor. This man could bring a mother giving birth—and the child—back from what other healers thought was fatal. Maybe it’s like that. If you have the right information, you can do what everyone else thinks is a miracle.”

“No,” Isa said softly. “There’s more to it than that. Being Deathless is about more than knowledge. I—”

She was cut off by a scream. Both of them spun toward the sound. The shouting continued, and Siris caught what might have been a call for help.

“Is that—” Siris began.

“—The place where I said there might be an ambush?” Isa said. “Yeah. Looks like someone wasn’t smart enough to go around. I advise hanging back to watch, but I suppose you’re going to want to go rush and help the fool who . . .”

Siris didn’t hear the rest of what she said, as he was already charging toward the sound.

Chapter Six

SIRIS BURST OUT onto the stony bank of the stream. He could hear splashing downriver.

There! he thought, running toward a group of daerils with pale yellow skin and bony ridges. They hooted, surrounding a solitary figure who had fallen into the shallow water while trying to cross the stream. The traveler wore a brown robe; Siris couldn't see much of him beyond that.

Four daerils. Could he handle four at once? There was no reason to think that feral daerils would obey the Aegis code of honor. *Not much choice now*, he thought.

Siris spun, sweeping outward with the Infinity Blade. Bamboo rattled against itself, clattering to the ground as he cut two dozen stalks free. The clamor brought the daerils up short, and they turned on him, one sniffing the air. The poor wayfarer crawled toward shelter beside some rocks.

The four daerils prowled toward Siris. One at the front grunted something, and the others split up, moving to surround Siris. Gripping his blade, he stepped into the shallow river, the water coming up only to his calves. If he got surrounded, the splashing of those trying to come at him from behind would give vital warning.

The daerils were all of the same species. These grunted and hooted rather than speaking, though they wore crude armor and carried swords. They had hollow-looking, almost skeletal faces. He couldn't distinguish them by their features, though the leader wore armor stained the color of blood. This one stepped into the river directly in front of Siris, and for a moment, it looked as if he might follow the ancient ideal after all.

Then the leader waved, and the other three moved into the river to attack. Rustling and hooting came through the bamboo in the distance. More were coming. *Great.*

Siris positioned himself, trying to watch—or at least listen for—all four. The cold mountain water was icy on his feet as it seeped through his boots. Something about his circumstances suddenly struck him as familiar.

I've never been in this situation before, he thought, spinning on one of the daerils that tried to come at him. The beast moved back in the water, growling.

All of Siris's training had been focused on single duels. And yet, there was a sense of familiarity to this larger fight . . . as there had been in the castle, when he'd faced the two golems. There was something there, something inside of him. If he could just reach it . . .

The daerils attacked, and he shook out of the reverie. Siris jumped forward and engaged the first one to gain a second or two breather from those coming up behind.

He slammed the daeril's sword out of the way, then rammed his weapon into its chest. Splashes behind. Siris ripped the sword free and yelled, spinning, coming down on the arm of a daeril swinging for him. The daeril's blood was red, just like that of a person.

Keep moving, keep moving. Splashes and hoots, cries of rage and pain. A third daeril was coming at his side, where Siris had intentionally left himself open. The creature struck as Siris snapped his fingers together, summoning the God King's shield in a flash of blue. The daeril's eyes opened wide as its sword was blocked by the steel.

Siris shoved the beast's weapon aside, then struck, sword through the neck.

That left Siris completely exposed from the back. There was no way to stop the fourth daeril in time. Siris spun, expecting to feel the blow at any moment.

Instead, he found the daeril splashing and flailing, a figure in a long black coat hanging onto its back, her arms around its neck in a choke hold. The daeril tried to stand, and Isa cursed, kicking at its leg and bringing them both down in a splash of water. The creature was wheezing.

"Wow," Siris said.

"If . . . you're done . . . admiring," Isa said, straining, "could you *please stab this thing?*"

Siris leaped forward and rammed the blade down into the creature's chest. Isa rolled free, water pouring over her as she puffed in and out. "Damn," she said. "Those things are *strong.*"

Siris helped her to her feet, and she pulled off her coat—it was so wet that it flopped when she moved. She dropped it and let it float away, fishing out

one of the daerils' fallen swords. The hooting of other daerils was growing closer. A second later, eight of them broke out into the small clearing.

"Hell take us," Siris whispered.

"I believe I *warned* you that this was a perfect place for an ambush," Isa said, her teeth chattering as she raised her sword.

"You did."

"And I believe I suggested restraint as you charged off like a fool."

"You did."

"Well, so long as I'm proven right, I guess I can die happy. And cursing your name, of course."

Siris smiled wanly as the newcomers fanned out, looking at the corpses of the fallen, the blood coloring the river. One of the daerils—the one whose arm he'd cut off—had crawled to the bank. One of the newcomers killed him with a strike to the head, a sneer on his lips.

"If it turns out that guy yelling for help was just a means of drawing us in here," Isa said, "I'm going to be *really* annoyed at you."

"You aren't now?"

"Too cold to be annoyed yet. Did we have to fight *in* the river?"

"Felt right at the time," Siris said as the daerils closed in. Their hooting had grown agitated. They obviously didn't like having lost so many members during a simple ambush. "I don't think the guy we saved is with them. He seems terrified." Siris couldn't make out much of him, only a robed figure cowering behind the rocks.

"That's something, at least. So . . . I'm not that handy with a sword. I can deal with one of these guys. Maybe. You can handle the other seven?"

"Yeah, sure," he said. "No problem."

"Good. For a moment, I thought we were in trouble. Maybe if someone hadn't broken my crossbow . . ."

"Maybe if someone hadn't tried to murder me in my sleep . . ."

"You keep coming back to that one little slip of mine," she said. "You really need to stop holding grudges, whiskers. They aren't healthy."

He found himself smiling as the daerils came for them. That smile vanished quickly. The splashing of clawed feet, the hoots, the swinging of swords.

They bunch up when they attack with so many together, Siris thought. *There's something to that. . . . I can see it, in my head. Forms with the sword . . .*

He threw himself into the fray, Isa guarding his back. He slammed swords aside, used his shield like a bludgeon, roared in rage to try to intimidate the daerils. But they were careful. They forced him back, and he could barely defend himself. He did get one lucky jab in, sending a single monster to his knees, holding his stomach and coughing blood. The others closed in.

Yes . . . I can see it . . . like a fragment of a memory . . .

Siris fell still. That seemed to make some of the daerils wary, for they drew back. Others still rampaged toward him, fighting.

Isa fell. He could hear her grunt, could see new blood in the stream, could feel the splash of water against his legs as she collapsed.

The daerils closed on him.

He shut his eyes.

There.

His arms moved, raising the sword as if by their own volition. In his youth, he'd trained his body to follow the instincts of a soldier, performing practice attacks, jabs, and stances until they were second nature. He was familiar with fighting by instinct.

He just had no idea where *these* particular instincts came from.

He snapped his eyes open and spun in a complex sword kata, feet moving quietly in the water. He seemed to dance with the river itself. His blade struck seven times in rapid succession, each blow precise, each move exact. When he stopped, he held the Infinity Blade before him in a calm, two-handed grip. The river flowed at his feet.

Seven daerilic corpses floated away.

He took a deep breath, as if coming awake after a long sleep, then turned—absently noting his shield, which he'd dropped sometime during the process.

What had *that* been? The rhythm of the attacks seemed so familiar. The seven strikes had come as if this particular fight—with each daeril in its place—was something he'd practiced time and time again.

The Infinity Blade? he wondered. *Did those reflexes come from the sword?*

Isa.

He cursed, dropping the weapon, grabbing her from the nearby water. She had a gut wound, a bad one, and the chill water washed the blood from it. Her eyes were still open, still moving, but her skin was pale, her lips trembling.

“I didn’t . . .” she said, “. . . when I said you had to fight seven, I didn’t actually expect you to *do* it. . . .”

“Here,” Siris said, pulling the ring off his finger and shoving it onto hers. “Use the ring. Heal yourself.”

“I can’t . . .”

“You *can*. It’s easy. You can sense it. See? Use it. You don’t even have to worry about growing a beard.”

“How can you not know?” she whispered.

“Know what?”

“I can’t use this, Siris. It doesn’t work that way. It—”

“Oh my, oh my, oh *my*,” a voice said.

Siris looked up. The robed figure who had been cowering behind the rocks had un-covered his way up the bank to inspect his saviors. His hood had fallen back, and there wasn’t a face in there.

Or . . . well, not a human face. Not even a *living* face. Two eyes like blue gemstones regarded him from their place set in a head carved from wood. There was no mouth, though the spindly thing spoke. “That is not good, not good, not good.”

“Can you help?” Siris asked desperately.

“Must I?”

“Yes!”

“Bring her over then, out of the water, out of the water. Yes, yes. Something metal, let us see, and thread I should imagine . . .”

Siris lifted Isa and splashed through the water to the bank, watered-down blood seeping out of the wound. He set her on the rocky bank as the creature—a golem of some sort—shucked its robe, revealing a puppetlike body of thin wood.

Bamboo, Siris thought. *It’s made of bamboo.*

“Yes, yes,” the golem said, inspecting the wound with thin fingers. “Your shield. I need your shield.”

Siris fetched it. What else could he do? It didn’t seem the time to ask questions. When he returned with the wet shield, the creature was absently reaching out to touch its fallen robe. Its hand, then arm, unraveled.

Siris froze. The creature’s body was turning to thread, the transformation running up its arm.

“Excellent, excellent,” the creature said, waving with the hand that was still wooden. “Bring it, please. Please, yes.”

Siris knelt, setting the shield beside Isa. She was still breathing, but had her eyes closed. She looked so pale.

The creature touched the shield with its wooden hand, and that hand fused to the steel, transforming and becoming metal. This transformation ran up its other arm, turning half of its body to metal.

Then the creature *broke* its arm free, splintering its entire body. The fracture was precise, and from the heap of metal emerged a smaller version of the creature, perhaps one foot tall, with one half of its body made of bunched up thread and the other half made of slender, silvery steel.

It walked up and prodded Isa's wound with fingers that were now very fine, like needles. It cut away the clothing near the gash—its fingers were sharp on one side.

“Clean wound,” it said, the voice now much softer. “Cut very sharply. Good, but yes, much work to do. Must be quick! Lots of blood. Not good, not good.”

The creature pushed its way into the wound, burying its arms—one of silvery metal, the other a pile of thread that moved like muscles—into her abdomen. The creature began to hum, using one spindly finger like a needle, threading part of its own body through and beginning to sew on the wound.

“It's going to be all right,” Siris said to Isa. *I think. I hope.*

“Too much of a coincidence,” she whispered.

“Hush,” he said. “Don't—”

She opened her eyes. “It was following us. That thing, whatever it . . .” She grimaced in pain and took a few panting breaths. “It must have been followed us, Siris. That's why it fell into the ambush. It didn't catch that we'd split off to go the long way around.”

Siris looked at the creature, which was working quickly, humming to itself. In just a few minutes, it finished with its work on Isa's innards and moved to sewing up her outer gash. Its fingers were a blur, and the stitches it made incredibly tight and small. It pulled the final stitch tight, then tied it off and snipped.

Isa was unconscious by then, but still breathing. Siris felt helpless. Why had she refused to use the healing ring? He slipped it from her finger. Perhaps she'd just been addled by the wound, the fight. If she came to . . . *when* she came to . . . then she could use it.

“Thank you, creature,” he said.

“Hmmm. I obey, as instructed.” The creature inspected its handiwork, then fell backward.

Siris started as the creature melded into the rock behind it, its body transforming to match the stone. A second later, a larger version of it—five feet tall now—ripped free of the ground, now made of river rocks and mud. He could still see its former body where it had melded into the large stone at the thing’s chest.

It opened gemstone eyes in a vaguely head-shaped stone on its shoulders, and when it stepped, rocks ground against one another. It picked up the robe.

“What *are* you?” Siris asked.

“TEL,” the creature said. “Transubstantive Entity, Lower-class.”

“And were you following me?”

“... Yes.”

“You serve one of the Deathless, don’t you?”

Another pause. “I do.”

“Which one?”

“I have been commanded not to respond to that question,” TEL said happily. “Oh my. This is probably not a good place to be having a dialogue. I do believe that other bands of Q.I.P.-mutants may inhabit the area.”

Siris looked down at the unconscious Isa. Moving her didn’t seem to be a good idea, but remaining in this place—where the sounds of battle might have drawn attention—was a worse one. Siris moved to pick her up.

“If I may suggest,” TEL said, “with a substance of stone, I am quite well equipped to carry large burdens without growing fatigued. If you would command me . . . ?”

“Uh, pick her up.”

“Excellent,” TEL said, kneeling down and easily lifting Isa. “I might suggest that you fetch the sword, as I have been commanded not to touch that particular item.” He walked off, humming to himself.

Siris shook his head, walking out into the river and retrieving the Infinity Blade. He summoned his shield to him, then—after a moment of hesitation—ran off to get the horse and their supplies.

“I CAN’T ANSWER that question,” TEL said happily. “I have been instructed not to speak on the immortality of the Deathless or how they obtained their

status.”

“Well what *can* you tell me?” Siris asked with exasperation.

“Many things!” TEL said. He walked beside Siris, still carrying Isa. She was unconscious, but TEL seemed to be capable of carrying her with a much smoother gait than Siris could manage, so he tried not to worry too much.

The foothills of the mountains still rose on either side of them, the sky blurry with a haze that occasionally dropped a fine misting rain. The stream at the center of the valley had grown in size until it was now truly a river, though they didn’t travel directly along it. He hoped that following a harder trail might divert them from trouble.

“Indeed,” TEL continued. “My knowledge is wide and varied. I can explain why the sky is blue, for example. Or I can list the ingredients in lentil soup. I can tell you what time it is in Loher’s Depths right at this moment. I can explain why—”

“What’s a ‘Cue Eye Pee’?” Siris cut in. “The deadmind at the God King’s palace spoke of something like that when it attuned me to one of these rings. You mentioned it again, when talking about those daerils.”

“Q.I.P.,” TEL said. “Quantum Identity Pattern. The individual quantum signature inherent in every sentient being, as related to his or her ancestors. It is similar to, but completely separate from, a person’s physical DNA.”

“Their what?”

“I believe,” TEL said, “that you lack the proper scientific understanding for this conversation to proceed with specific details. A simpler explanation is in order. Your Q.I.P. is what you might call your soul. Yours is individual to you, but is separate from your physical form.”

“And it’s related to my ancestors?”

“Indeed,” TEL said. “A person’s descendants will have a Q.I.P.—a soul—that manifests their parentage.”

“So this sword drains souls,” Siris said. “And it needs to drain enough of them from my . . . my bloodline, is it? From my bloodline before its powers manifest.”

“That is an extremely simplified way of explaining it,” TEL said, sounding displeased. “It speaks nothing of Q.I.P. alignment—indeed, it speaks nothing of science at all! But for an ignorant peasant, it will do.”

“The God King was hunting my family,” Siris said, mostly to himself. “He wanted my bloodline specifically. He baited us, created the idea of

Sacrifices so that we'd come to him and die by his sword. But what is it about my family that is special?"

"I'm afraid I cannot answer that question, as it would conflict with my orders."

"I didn't mean it for you," Siris said, though he was interested to hear that TEL had been ordered not to speak of Siris's family specifically. It confirmed a growing suspicion he had that TEL had been sent by the God King to spy on Siris.

Every step I go, I'm surrounded by people who would betray me if given half a chance. That made him worry again about Isa. He checked the horizon; the sun was nearly down. Time to set up camp.

He chose the location as best he could. He found a place where some fallen leaves made the ground soft. He spread out Isa's coat—which he'd fetched from the river—to catch a few last rays of sunlight and hopefully dry off.

TEL set her down in a nook beside some rocks. Siris dealt with the horse—the thing only managed to get one good bite in—and brought back the saddle blanket for Isa. He knelt beside her, touching her hand. It was clammy and frigid. "She's so cold."

"Indeed," TEL said, settling down his rock body. He leaned back against some of the bamboo, and the grain of the wood spread across the stones of his shoulders. His body collapsed, the stones becoming chunks of wood, and the puppetlike wooden version of TEL broke from the center of one, cracking out of it like a chicken from an egg.

"Flesh bodies are notoriously poor at dealing with extremes in temperature," TEL said, shaking his head as if at the shame of it. "She will need warmth for the night, or she will likely not survive."

Siris looked at the unconscious Isa. Maybe if he held her . . .

"A fire would be preferable," TEL added, "particularly with this dampness." The golem sounded amused.

"Right. Of course." Siris could make a fire, couldn't he? He gathered some wood, but everything was sodden to its innards. He dug in the saddlebags—they were crafted in a way to keep the water out—and came up with some tinder and straw.

An hour of frustration later, he still didn't have any fire. He could get something started, but the wood around him was just too wet, and the

occasional drizzle didn't help either, though he'd created shelter as best he could by draping a blanket on some bamboo stalks over the fire.

He knelt in frustration over the makeshift firepit, feeling completely useless. TEL sat to the side, silent and motionless, like a wooden statue. TEL didn't seem to mind the rain—and had explained, regretfully, that he had no skill in fire building. It wasn't "part of his designated parameters," whatever that meant. Neither was fighting, which explained why a creature that could craft a body for itself out of stone had cowered before those daerils.

"I've been a fool," Siris said.

"For what purpose?"

"It wasn't intentional," Siris said. "I thought, all those years practicing, that only one thing would matter in my life. Fighting the God King. That was *everything*. Now, here I am, as helpless as a three-year-old when practically anyone else from Drem's Maw would have been able to start this fire."

"That may be true," TEL said. "However, I doubt seriously that anyone else from your town would have been able to perform the Patterns of True Swordsmanship."

So he knows what it was I did, Siris thought. He kept that in the back of his mind—along with a healthy distrust of this creature—but didn't have time to focus on either right now. Was Isa's breathing more shallow?

He would find a way out of this. There *had* to be a way. He fished in his pocket, pulling out a handful of rings. He held one of them up, one of the very first he had found. It generated blasts of fire. Like most of the others, it had stopped working soon after he killed the God King.

"TEL, can you tell me why this ring stopped functioning?"

"I would guess," TEL said, "that it was set for local power, and something disrupted the source of energy."

"Can I set it to work out here?"

"It depends on the ring," TEL said. "If you wanted to make it function, you would probably need a similar source of energy to what it creates. Then it could draw on that and transport it to you."

Siris turned the ring over in his fingers, and—for the first time—noticed something on the inside. A piece was designed to come off, a tiny shard. About half the size of his smallest fingernail, it reminded him of the disc that was paired with the ring that summoned the sword.

Draw on a similar type of energy, he thought, and transport it to you. They were actually very similar, this ring and the transportation one.

“I need something hot,” Siris said.

“Might I note,” TEL said, “if we had something hot, would that not solve our problem in and of itself?”

Siris looked down at the metal disc, then grasped it in his hand. He took a deep breath, putting the ring on his other hand.

TEL stood up. “Oh, oh *dear*. No, no, no. That is a bad idea, *BAD*. You don’t have enough heat inside of you to start a fire. I’m sorry. Ninety-eight-point-six, across a hundred and eighty pounds of flesh. Oh, you’ll get a burst of flame, but you’ll be dead at the end of it. Please, do not, do not, do not—”

“Fine,” Siris said, holding up a hand to TEL. “I won’t. But I’ve got to find something warm to use.”

He looked right at the horse.

“Still not hot enough,” TEL noted.

That was almost a pity. But what . . . *The steam vents*, Siris thought. Isa said they were all around out here. Had he smelled some on the march here from the river?

Dared he leave Isa with this thing? “I command you not to harm her,” he said to TEL.

“I wouldn’t have anyway.”

“Stay here. Watch over her.”

“As you command.”

He almost ordered the thing away. But what good would that do? If it went to report, Siris would be discovered. If it remained here, he might find a way to control it.

Siris turned back the way they’d gone, and started jogging. It was a difficult run. They’d walked some four hours since the river. He’d noticed the scent somewhere about halfway through that time.

It grew dark. He ran on, pushing through patches of bamboo and across open meadows. Was he going the right way? What if . . .

There!

He found the vents tucked up against the side of a rockfall beside a hill. These ones were slim, and didn’t give off much heat—certainly less than he’d hoped. Still, the cracks seemed deep, and the scent of sulfur was strong.

He dropped the metal disc down the one that seemed the deepest, then turned and ran back the way he'd come. A half hour later, puffing—wheezing—he reached the camp, though he'd had to call out to TEL to find it. The sky was nearly pitch black.

Siris ducked under the damp blanket stretched between stands of bamboo. He knelt beside the firepit, pushing the ring farther onto his finger. He held out his hand, palm forward, trying to summon the heat.

He felt nothing at first. Then, with relief, he felt a faint warmth around his finger. The ring made a clicking sound, then buzzed.

A blast of flame erupted from his palm. Its coming was so sudden, he almost jerked back. The fire blazed forward and covered the entire firepit. Steam hissed, wood popped. Siris had to turn his face away.

With focus, he took the heat down from an inferno to a careful bake; better to dry the wood than turn everything in the camp to ash. The heat continued for a good count of a hundred before the ring buzzed, its energy expended.

Siris lowered his hand and looked at what he'd done. The wood was singed, and some of it smoldered, flames growing. He nurtured these, and in minutes he had a satisfying fire. He positioned Isa beside it with the blanket over her back, her head resting on some wadded-up clothing.

Finally, Siris sat back against the rocks, rain falling lightly on his head. There wasn't room under the blanket for him, with the fire and Isa. He exhaled softly.

"Where did you find a source of such heat?" TEL asked. The golem sat in the rain as well.

"Some cracks in the ground," Siris said. "Isa said they were common in this area."

"Ah . . ." TEL said. "Yes, yes. Very clever. Hopefully you didn't melt the transmittance disc by tossing it into lava! But I suppose those can be replaced."

Siris wrapped his cloak around himself, the one Isa had given him on that first day. "You'll now tell me everything you know about . . . what was it you said? The Patterns of True Swordsmanship?"

"They are of ancient date," TEL said. "The most accomplished art of a warrior, a unity between sword and body. Some Deathless claim it took them centuries of practice to master them. Mortals aren't supposed to be able to grasp them in their short lifetimes."

For some reason, Siris felt colder.

“They are intended,” TEL continued, “to be used in fighting multiple opponents of inferior skill. The Deathless developed them so that one of them could stand against many; indeed, they are next to useless in a formal two-combatant duel. One could argue that the formal duel rose out of so many Deathless being accomplished at the True Patterns.”

“So how do I know them?” Siris asked.

“I cannot answer that.”

Siris was quiet for a time, listening the rain beat softly against the leaves. “I’m a descendant of one of the Deathless, aren’t I?”

TEL gave no reply.

“I can use their machinery. That’s what Isa meant—she can’t use the rings because her soul, her Q.I.P., doesn’t connect her to the Deathless. Mine does. I can do things I shouldn’t be able to because of my lineage. That’s why the God King was hunting us, because of our heritage.”

Again, TEL gave no reply.

“Can you answer any questions on this topic?” Siris asked.

“No,” TEL said. “I am forbidden.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. I won’t hold myself accountable, just because one of my ancestors might have been a monster. I’m probably part of some illegitimate line.”

Maybe the God King’s own line, he thought with a shiver. Wouldn’t that be appropriate? Him killing his own children to make his blasted sword work?

The rain eventually let up. Siris checked on Isa, then on her coat, which he’d hung on the other side of the fire to dry, and to keep the rain from blowing in on her. The rain had soaked one side, so he switched it around.

When he turned back, she was looking at him. He started, nearly dropping the coat. She blinked, then grimaced, glancing down at her side. TEL had tied a bandage there, which she prodded at.

“You should be resting,” Siris said.

“I am resting,” she said. “This is hardly bleeding at all. That shouldn’t be possible.”

“TEL does fine work,” he said, nodding toward the golem, who sat in the rain, looking up at the stars. He hadn’t changed positions in two hours.

“I guess he does.” She sounded skeptical.

“You thirsty?”

“Yes,” she said. “Horribly so. But first, I . . .”

“Yes?”

There was something to her voice. Something soft, something intimate. “First, I’ve *really* got to pee.”

He blushed. “Oh, right.”

He fetched a pot for her, then went off into the bamboo to give her privacy. When he came back, she was dressed and sitting up by the fire, warming her hands.

He sat down across from her.

“I’m hoping I don’t need the rope treatment tonight,” she said.

“No,” he said. “You came to help when I was fighting in the river, even though you were unarmed. You could have let those creatures kill me, then stolen the blade from them.”

“Steal from a pack of wild slaughter daerils?” she said. “Easier to get it from you.”

He snorted. “I doubt they knew what it was worth, and you’re sly enough. When they went to sleep, you’d have had that sword and been on your way in under a span.”

“You have quite the opinion of my skills.”

“It’s out of regard for my own,” he said. “You almost killed me twice. I’d hate to assume someone incompetent could manage that.”

She smiled.

“The fact remains,” he said, “that you didn’t have to rush in to help me. You did. Saving my life negates an attempt on it, so you’re forgiven. That is, assuming I can get a promise from you. No more trying to kill me, all right?”

“All right.”

“And you won’t try to steal the blade while I’m sleeping?”

“I won’t,” she said. “Or even while you’re awake.” She paused. “But if you die and I can’t do anything to prevent that, I’m still taking the sword.”

“Fair enough. Better you than one of the Deathless.” He held out his hand beside the fire, toward her.

She paused, then shook it.

“Get some sleep,” he said, rising to go fetch some more wood.

“You too, whiskers,” she said with a yawn. “We’re less than a day’s hike from Saydhi’s estate. You’ll need your strength tomorrow. Be sure to get some sleep.”

“I will,” he said.

He proceeded to stay up the entire night making sure the fire kept going and she remained warm.

Chapter Seven

“THE REAL SECRET to good cooking . . .” Isa said, lifting the spoon to her lips.

“Is . . . ?” Siris asked, sitting across the fire from her.

She took a sip.

“Well?” he said.

She licked her lips, held up a finger, then tossed in another pinch of spices.

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?” he said.

“Don’t be an idiot,” she said. “The secret is patience.”

“Huh. I just failed that one, didn’t I?”

“As soundly as if you’d brought a salad fork to a jousting match.” She smiled.

“Pshaw,” he said. “Jousting would require riding one of those *things*.” He eyed her horse, munching on some foliage on the other side of their camp. A few days back, they’d carefully moved to a location that was more secure. They hadn’t spoken of the fact that Siris continued to stay in camp with Isa, as opposed to going to fight Saydhi’s champions.

He would go eventually. He hadn’t lost his resolve. However, if he failed, it would mean his life—and he wanted to make sure Isa was well enough to reclaim the Infinity Blade if things went poorly. Besides, he wanted to attempt a few things on his list, like cooking. So far, he was confident that one was going to move to the list of things he did *not* enjoy.

“They’re not so bad,” she said. “Horses, I mean. You just have to know how to treat them.”

“The same could be said of a persistent rash,” he said, “You know, I considered—for just a moment—using the disc on him.”

“Nams?” she said with a start. “You were going to draw the heat from my *horse* to start a fire?”

“Yeah.”

“I’d have killed you.” She said it frankly, though she blushed. “We’ve been through a lot together, Nams and I. More than you and I have,

whiskers.”

“Well, TEL indicated he didn’t have enough heat in him for it to work. Makes sense to me. I’m pretty sure he has a heart made of iron, blood as cold as a mountain snow.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“I saw him eat a baby once,” Siris added. “And not even one of the loud, crying types. A sweet giggling one. Pure evil, I tell you.”

She shook her head, sipping the soup. “You’re insulated.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“No?” she said. “Not a word in your silly language?”

“It’s a word,” he said. “But it doesn’t mean what you think it does.”

“In . . . insatiated? Insociated? A word that means you say stupid things and are never likely to change.”

“I don’t think we have word for that.”

“I’m sure I knew one,” she said. “Stupid language. It doesn’t have enough words.”

“How many words does your language have?”

“Many. Many, many, many. We have seventeen different ways of saying a person is no longer hungry.”

“Sounds complicated.”

“Nonsense. You just have to be patient.”

“I’m beginning to wish you hadn’t learned *that* particular word.”

She grinned, getting out bowls and dishing out the soup. “You *are* a patient man, Siris of the Lost Whiskers. Did you not spend twenty years practicing with the sword? All to achieve a single important goal? That is patience.”

“I’m not sure it was,” he said, taking the bowl. “I only did all of that because it was expected of me. Once I started, it built upon itself. Nobody would let me do common things, like wash clothing. They’d insist on doing it. I needed to train. Keep training. Always. At a feast, I couldn’t eat the good foods, because everyone was watching.”

“I watch you every morning, with that sword, working until you sweat. That is not the mark of an impatient man.”

“I train because it . . . it’s what I am. I can’t explain it. It’s as natural to me as breathing. You wouldn’t call a man patient for reaching the ‘milestone’ of continuing to breathe for twenty years straight.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Sometimes, continuing to breathe is a tough enough prospect.” She grimaced at her bandage. The wound was healing, but slowly. Getting a sword through the stomach wasn’t the sort of thing you just shrugged off.

Unless you were Siris. He looked down at the God King’s ring on his finger.

Isa followed his glance. “We haven’t discussed,” she said, “what I said. About the ring . . .”

“It’s all right,” he said, stirring his soup. He took a sip. It was fantastic. How did she do that? It was just boiled leaves and chopped-up bamboo shoots. “I figured it out.”

“You did?”

“I must be of the lineage of one of the Deathless. That’s why I can use the rings. It’s why the God King was interested in my bloodline.”

“Wait. He was interested in your bloodline? Why?”

“I haven’t mentioned it,” he said. “But I’m pretty certain he set up the system of Sacrifices. It might . . . it might be that my family is the reason for his entire dominance of this area. It’s why he treated people with such tyranny—to encourage my bloodline to come fight him.”

“This changes everything,” she whispered.

He frowned at her.

“Deathless rarely have children,” she explained. “Some say that the children of a particular Deathless can challenge them, steal their immortality. Whatever the reason, there’s an unspoken rule among them. No children. They . . .”

“What?”

“It’s said that long ago, when they first seized power, the Deathless slaughtered everyone who was related to them.”

He fingered the Infinity Blade, buckled at his side. *Well, that means I’m probably not related to the God King, he thought. He tried to get me to join him. He succeeded in getting one of my ancestors to join him. He’d not have kept us around if we could threaten him.*

That relieved him. Though, one of the Dark Thoughts—as he’d started to think of them—crept into the back of his mind. A panicked sense that felt Isa knew too much, that she needed to be taught to hold her tongue, to fear him.

These things weren't really thoughts. They were more basic than that. Instincts. Impulses. He fought this one down. They came to him frequently these days. Too frequently.

The conversation hit a lull. As he was finishing his last bites of soup, the nearby bamboo stalks rustled. He immediately stood, hand on sword, until a small form slipped out of the forest.

TEL had turned himself into dark cloth using Isa's coat, and in doing so, had shrunk down to about three feet tall. He still had gemstone eyes.

The golem entered the clearing of their camp, then bowed. It took orders from Siris—so long as those orders didn't violate previous commands. Siris didn't trust the thing, particularly after Isa had warned him that the Deathless had ways of communicating over great distances.

But if TEL was a spy, he already knew the most important fact about Siris—namely where he was. Siris faced the option of either destroying the little golem or putting him to use. TEL had ignored orders to “go away” and “stop following me.”

He didn't feel like destroying the thing. He just . . . well, he couldn't. It hadn't done anything against him, not overtly.

“Well?” Siris asked.

“The pathway is easy,” TEL said in a voice that was faintly reminiscent of rustling cloth. “I watched the sentries for three hours and seventeen minutes, and it is as the Lady Isa says. Four champions. I saw one of them slay a petitioner. Even the first champion is quite skilled.”

Siris rubbed the pommel of the Infinity Blade.

“You need to go eventually,” Isa said, looking up at the sky, which still held to its overcast gloom. “We can't forage out here forever, and eventually those knights hunting you will realize they've lost our trail. They'll spread out, and this direction—through the passes—is a natural place to search.”

“Can you make it?” Siris asked.

“Riding? Shouldn't be a problem.”

“Is that a brave front, or is it the truth?”

“Both?”

He took a deep breath. In her condition, she probably wouldn't be able to recover the Infinity Blade if he fell. Still, it made him feel better to have her there to try. At least someone other than TEL would have a shot at the blade.

“Let’s go then.”

They didn’t break down camp; they’d probably make their way back here for the night before striking out for the Worker’s prison. Assuming he won. Assuming this Saydhi even knew the information he wanted. Assuming she kept her word and told him.

Those were a lot of assumptions, but this was the best option they had. Siris helped Isa onto the horse, smacking the thing in the face when it tried to bite him.

TEL walked over, then dropped. The black cloth unraveled, turning green, and plants sprouted. A few moments later, TEL crawled free, now the size and shape of a small cat made entirely of leaves. He leaped up onto the horse’s rump, then settled back.

They set out, a solemn group passing through dew-wetted stalks of bamboo. Siris wore the God King’s ring, with its healing and teleportation powers. His fire ring had stopped working; the disc he’d dropped into the vent must have melted. Siris would rather have the healing anyway, and wearing more than one of the rings caused them to interfere with one another. You risked triggering the wrong ability, and Siris would prefer not to start himself on fire when trying to heal.

“So the God King was hunting your family,” Isa said speculatively as she rode. “Whiskers . . . it might have to do with that sword.”

He walked around a moss-covered stump. “Yeah. It does.”

She raised an eyebrow at him from horseback.

“I . . . uh . . . learned something from the minions in the castle, and TEL mostly confirmed. The blade needed to drink the souls of people related to my bloodline in order to activate. That’s why the God King lived, even though I stabbed him with it.”

Instead of looking betrayed that he’d withheld the information from her, she just grinned in a self-satisfied way, as if proud of having pulled the secret from him. “Now *that* is interesting. You don’t have any estranged brothers that just happen to be evil, do you? It would be terribly convenient.”

He laughed. “No, my only relative is my mother.” *Well, her and—*

He froze in place.

Isa pulled up, and TEL poked a green, catlike head out from behind her, leaf-ears perking up.

“Hell take me,” he whispered, pulling free the Infinity Blade. “The sword might be active after all, Isa.”

“Then the God King—”

“No. After beating him, I went into the palace dungeons. I met a man who served the God King, a man who claimed to be one of my ancestors.” Siris turned, looking toward her. “The daerils in the place, they said the God King felt only one more soul was needed. I slew my ancestor; that might have been enough.” He turned the silvery blade; it glistened in a beam of filtered sunlight.

“Great,” she said. “So all we need to do is hunt the God King down and kill him again. How hard can it be to locate, fight your way to, and slay a god?”

“I did it once.”

Her smile faded. “I meant that jokingly, whiskers.”

“I know.”

“So . . .”

“So I don’t know,” he said, slamming the sword back into its makeshift sheath and continuing on. “I feel like my entire life has been controlled. I was the Sacrifice, and that was it. I trained, I focused everything I had on facing the God King. And you know what? Part of the reason I could do that was because I saw an end.”

She moved the horse up beside him, listening.

“An end,” he continued, fingering the pommel of the Infinity Blade. “It was death, yes, but at least I knew exactly what I had to do. It’s like . . . like I knew there was an enormous race in front of me, but there was also a finish line, after which I could rest.

“These last few weeks, they’ve taken that finish line from me. Fight the God King. Oh, you won. Well, now you’ve got to fight him again. And if you manage that, you’ve got an entire Pantheon to worry about. And maybe hundreds of other Deathless nobody has told you about. Want to bring freedom to your people? Well, you’re going to be fighting every moment of your life, like a drowning man struggling to hold his head above water.

“So I don’t know, Isa. This sword is a lead weight at my side. I should use it, but I’m exhausted, and someone has stolen my prize away. I lost my entire childhood. I’d like to live a little, just for myself. Does that make sense?”

“More than you could possibly imagine,” she whispered.

He glanced at her. He still didn't know what to make of her. She seemed to like it that way.

"I think," she said, "that what you are doing is more than noble enough. You shall find this Worker, and give him back his sword. Nobody could ask more of you." She grinned. "And if you die instead, I shall then take the sword and sell it for a mountain of gold."

He eyed her.

"I'll use it to throw you one *hell* of funeral party," she promised solemnly. "I'll make sure the Dark Barrower himself comes to take your soul, and that no Deathless claims it."

"Thanks. I'll just try to live, though."

"Sure. Make things boring."

Siris got a good look at Saydhi's estates as they wound their way down around the side of a ridge. Instead of a castle, it appeared that this Deathless preferred sprawling estates with ornamental gardens. There were practically no walls, just streams, stands of bamboo, and the occasional peaked building.

One building stood out: an open-sided structure in the center of the gardens. "I fight my way there, I assume?" he said, pointing.

"If she keeps her word, yes," Isa said. "You challenge the guard at the pathway in. If he falls, it will draw her attention and alert the other champions. Saydhi will probably watch from a distance to see if you're entertaining enough. If you are, she'll summon her current high champion. Defeat him, and you get your answer."

"Supposedly."

"Supposedly," Isa admitted.

He took a deep breath. He'd feel less nervous if he could remember how he'd performed that True Pattern sword dance. His instincts—ones he hadn't realized he had—whispered that the True Patterns were extraordinarily varied, and the one to use depended specifically on the number of attackers, their skill, and how they were surrounding you. Using the right form could end them all in a series of perfected strikes. Using the wrong one meant leaving yourself wide open to multiple attackers.

He shouldn't need that today. These *should* be duels after the ancient ideal. As they rode, he found himself increasingly nervous, more so than when facing the God King. Then, at least, he'd assumed he knew the fight's result. "All right," he eventually said, stopping. "You wait here."

Isa raised an eyebrow at him as he unloaded his armor. "I don't recall," she said, "being turned into a golem, instructed to obey your every command."

"Hey," TEL said. "That's what I am. Did you realize that you were saying ___"

"Shut up," Isa said.

"Oh."

"I'm aware that you don't need to do as I ask," Siris said, strapping on his left forearm guard. "But you're in no condition to fight."

"I thought I was here to help."

"But not to interfere," Siris said. "These battles are one on one. I won't have you joining. My honor won't allow it." He met her eyes to let her know he was serious.

He didn't get an eye roll, as he'd been expecting. She did lean down from horseback and rest her hand on his shoulder. "If you do fall, I might be able to get you out before they finish you."

"You wouldn't be fast enough," he said. "The Aegis Forms all include finishing strikes. These are duels to the death. It's not about mercy or ruthlessness; it's just how things are done. If I fall, I die."

"And the blade . . ."

"Fighting won't get it for you," Siris said. "If they recognize it for what it is, you'd just get yourself killed trying to grab it. If they don't, it will be much easier for you to take by slipping in quietly."

"All right," she said, though she didn't seem pleased about it.

"TEL," Siris said. "I need to rest for a bit before attempting this. I need my cloak, also."

"Your . . . cloak?"

"I left it at the camp, I'm afraid."

The golem fidgeted. He probably realized that Siris had left the cloak intentionally. It was time to see how far he could push the creature's subservience.

"You'll wait until I return?" TEL asked.

"Of course."

Two conflicting commands, Siris thought, but an implication that he can follow both. What will he do?

The golem left, muttering to himself. "Oh, not good. This is not good. Not good at all . . ."

Isa watched him go, then turned back and raised an eyebrow at Siris as he finished putting on his armor. “You think that will work?”

“If it doesn’t, I haven’t really lost anything. But I don’t trust that thing, and I’d rather it be gone while I do this.”

He unsheathed the Infinity Blade, then tossed the sheath aside before attaching the transportation disc to the hilt of the blade. This time, if he dropped it, he’d be able to get it back with speed.

He pulled on his helm. He breathed the stuffy air inside the metal shell.

“Siris?” Isa said.

“Yeah?”

“I’ll try to sneak in after you. I’ll be watching. Maybe if something goes wrong, I can . . .”

“Don’t get yourself killed, Isa.”

She smiled wanly. “I’ll promise that if you’ll do the same.”

“It’s a deal, then,” he said. He did up the final straps at the side of his breastplate, then pulled on his gauntlets and nodded toward her. “Wish me luck?”

She shook her head. “The Deathless have all the luck, whiskers. They always have. You don’t need luck. You need obstinance, belligerence, and a bit of selective stupidity.”

“Selective stupidity. Yes . . . that sounds like me.” He marched out of the woods, armor clanking, toward a serene pathway of moss and overgrown stones. A daeril guard stood there, slender and lithe.

Siris held his blade up in the posture of one requesting a formal duel. The monster fell into a familiar stance, causing Siris to release a breath of relief. This was familiar. This was where he excelled. He stepped up.

The duel began.

SIRIS YANKED HIS SWORD free of the chest of the last of the guards, dropping the beast like the others before him.

Siris breathed in and out inside his helm for a moment, then stepped from the pathway out into the open gardens. The sky was dark with gloom and melancholy. It had begun to drizzle again.

For a time, he’d managed to forget all else—all but the duels. He cherished that focus. During such moments, he didn’t worry or wonder. He

could fight and seek the solace of a spinning blade, a shield turning aside attacks.

The open-sided building was just ahead. It was a thing of beauty, with ornate carvings and subtle colors, set in a garden with bridges spanning ponds and slow streams. He'd never before realized that a building could be a work of art.

"I seek the champion of Saydhi," Siris called. "I have come for my boon."

"A little early to be making demands, warrior," a feminine voice said from the building. He could see someone sitting in the shadows there, in a cushioned chair. A larger figure stood beside the chair. It began moving, stepping out into the dampened sunlight.

The champion was a hulking brute who was almost big enough to be a troll. He might have been human beneath that evil silver mask, or he might have been a daeril. Either way, he wore little armor, leaving his thick chest—bulging with both fat and muscle—bare.

Siris raised his blade. The champion raised a huge machete-like sword and leaped down the steps, shaking the building as he landed.

Time for the real challenge, Siris thought.

The champion started immediately. Three quick blows, forcing Siris back.

Insolent grub, Siris thought. ***They use our fighting forms, but they are not worthy.***

Siris attacked into the creature, moving by instinct, with a barrage of blows.

We shouldn't give them privileged positions. Raidriar was a fool. Saydhi is a fool. Choosing "champions" like this encourages these grubs to think themselves special.

Siris battered aside the champion's weapon, then slid the Infinity Blade forward. The skin split like water parting before a slimfish. Siris pushed the blade in up almost to its hilt, then whipped it out, spinning it around back to the ready position.

Pathetic.

The champion collapsed without a grunt, bleeding out on the pathway. Siris brushed past the dying creature.

"Impressive," said the woman under the pavilion, her voice curious.

"Who taught you the Aegis Forms, warrior?"

He could see her better now, a slim woman with a golden mask, hiding her face after the way of the Deathless and their servants. Her armor

gleamed with gold and straps of black leather.

“I have come for my boon,” Siris said harshly, trying to control the tempest within him. His calmness was gone. Those Dark Thoughts—they seemed like they’d consume him. “I wish a question answered.”

“Something so . . . pedestrian?” she said, rising and walking around him in a circle. Inspecting him. “You could be my new champion. You could duel my challengers, slay them, find glory in battle. And, of course, there would be other rewards. Riches, women, power. I treat my champions well.”

“A question.”

“Very well,” she said with a sigh. “What great mystery does your small mind ponder?”

“Where can I find the prison that holds the Worker of Secrets?”

The woman froze, her armor clinking faintly. She looked toward him, eyes narrowing. “Whose child are you? Which immortal’s blood do you have in your veins?”

“Answer my question.”

“The Vault of Tears,” she said. “The place once known as Saranthia. Take a ship due west until you strike land, then climb the mountains to the north. You could find him there.” Her eyes flickered toward Siris’s hand.

The sword. She recognizes it.

“But you won’t,” she added, raising an arm.

Siris raised his shield to parry the knife he assumed would be thrown. Saydhi’s hand instead let loose a jet of fire.

Even behind the shield, the heat was nearly overwhelming. Siris felt as if he was going to suffocate within his armor, and his shield didn’t completely block the flames. The metal on his side grew so hot it scorched his skin. He stumbled backward, turning his head and gasping for fresh air.

The flames stopped and he turned back toward her, his shield steaming. He forced himself to raise his sword and made the sign of one offering a challenge, after the ancient ideal.

She lowered her hand, and he thought he caught a sign of guilt in her posture. She removed a tall, slender pole from its place beside her throne. The weapon had a long, golden blade affixed to one end.

The Deathless held it for a moment, then attacked, giving no other warning.

Siris was ready. He threw himself into the duel, trying to focus despite the Dark Thoughts within, despite the burning at his side.

She was good. Not as good as the God King had been—but Siris was wounded this time. And there were those thoughts, insidious. Driving him to kill, driving him to dominate, to take this woman's domain as his own.

He rounded her as she swung the polearm out, forcing him to keep his distance. He tried to come in from the side. The thoughts made him miscalculate, and his slice took only a small cut—a spray of blood—from the weak point at her side, where her armor joined.

The sword in his hand began to glow softly. He could almost hear it humming.

Saydhi backed away. She stared at that sword; he could see her eyes behind the mask. “Is it true?” she whispered. There was a tremor to her voice.

Siris attacked, driven by the Dark Thoughts. She raised her polearm in one hand and—ring recharged—turned her other palm at him, letting out a burst of fire.

He should have prepared for it. He *knew* she had a ring, like the ones he'd used. He had simply grown accustomed to his foes not having that advantage, and his mind was not clear.

The fire took him in the chest. His armor instantly became an oven, his skin searing, then charring. It crusted against the metal intended to protect him. Siris screamed, dropping to his knees, smelling the acrid smell of his own burning flesh.

She chuckled, lowering her hand. “I wonder whom to test the sword on. Raidriar himself, perhaps? He thinks he can saunter in here whenever—”

Siris stopped listening. He activated his ring.

The healing came in a rush of energy and new skin, in the sensation of sudden *motion*. His heartbeat, like a thundering river. His breathing, in and out, fast as a drumbeat. His hair grew, his fingernails curled in his gauntlets, and the pain vanished. As she stepped to him, he stood—

—and in a fluid motion, he rammed the Infinity Blade up into her chest, right under the breastplate.

She gasped. “No . . . but you can't . . .”

He ripped the blade free and stepped back, the sword glowing with a pulsing flash that matched the one coming from Saydhi's own body. It built, like a concentrated bonfire, then burst out of her in an explosion of light.

She collapsed.

Siris fell to his knees, gasping for breath in the quiet, open-walled building. A few leaves blew past, carrying a chill wind that blew through his faceplate. His armor still felt hot enough to burn him, though not as badly as it had before.

I've killed another, he thought. Had her answer about the Worker been truth, or was that a lie?

He stumbled to his feet, then checked on the fallen Deathless, just to be certain. That strike hadn't been part of the forms; it had been brutal, guttural, and desperate. It had also been effective. No signs of life. Underneath her mask, she was quite pretty. He shook his head, then rose.

He didn't want to remain too long, in case other Deathless—or guards—came. For now he seemed alone, so he checked her throne, hoping for another mirror that could answer his questions.

He didn't find one. Behind the throne, however, he did see something that he hadn't noticed before. A small stone obelisk, with a familiar shape carved into its front.

He froze. There had been one similar to this in the dungeon of the God King's castle. Placing the Infinity Blade into it, like a key, had opened a pathway to the dungeons. That had made sense—the God King possessed the only Infinity Blade, so using it as a key had been rational, to an extent.

But this obelisk *also* had the imprint of the Infinity Blade on it, and it was in Saydhi's gardens.

Suddenly, nothing made sense. What was it really? Did all of the Deathless have these obelisks—and if so, could they open them? He raised a gauntleted hand to his helm.

What is happening? he thought. *I've been lied to at some point along the way.* But when?

He hesitated, then stepped forward, slipping the Infinity Blade into the 'keyhole' of the obelisk. It fit perfectly. What would it open? What secrets would he—

The obelisk dropped sharply into the ground.

Reacting quickly, Siris snapped his three fingers together to summon the blade back. Nothing happened.

"Yes," a voice said speculatively, "I thought you might fall for that."

Siris spun. The God King stood behind him. The creature wore new armor, shaped somewhat like he'd worn before, almost organic in feel. Siris

recognized him, even with the change. The voice . . . he *knew* that voice.
Oh, hell.

“You opened the pathway to my dungeons,” the God King said. “I know you killed the prisoners there. Not to mention Archarin, which is a pity. He *was* a useful servant.” The God King strolled past—Siris could see where he’d come from, a doorway that had risen up from the grass beside the building.

Desperate, Siris snapped his fingers together again.

“That will not work,” the God King noted. “You don’t think we’d create a means of teleportation without creating a means of blocking it as well? The transportation ring will not work as long as the sword is properly shielded.”

The God King prodded at Saydhi’s body with his foot, shaking his head. “I do believe she was planning on taking the sword and betraying me. I suppose you did me a favor by killing her. Pity.”

“I . . .” Siris struggled to make sense of what was happening. The God King was here. “So you *do* live. TEL. You were using him as a spy?”

“The transgolem?” the God King asked, amused. “No, I’ve been using my ring to listen in. Quite useful, these are. Why do you think I gave them to my minions?”

Siris felt cold.

“Excellent listening devices,” the God King continued. “I’d hand them out to those who pleased me, and so they fought for my favor, never knowing that their prizes were the means by which I took care they wouldn’t betray me.” He looked at Siris. “I never thought one of my foes would actually be able to use them.”

“Of course you did,” Siris said. “No lies. You know what I am. You sought out my lineage.”

“Oh, I know what you are,” the God King said, a smile to his voice. “Though I’m more and more certain that you do not. I *do* wish I knew who sent that transgolem to spy on you.”

A large portion of the ground cracked near the building, and a rectangular chamber rose from beneath. A group of knights in black strode out, surrounding the building. One carried a cloth-wrapped bundle over to the God King, who reached into it and took out the Infinity Blade.

“Thank you for returning this to me,” he said to Siris. “I’ve been worried about its safety.”

“Give me a sword,” Siris said. “Duel me!”

“I think not. You . . . surprised me, last time. I don’t think I’ll put myself into that position again.” The God King stepped down from the building, walking up to Siris, who couldn’t back up any farther without hitting the knights.

“What of honor?” Siris demanded.

“There are some I give honor,” the God King said, voice growing cold. “But not you, Ausar. Never you.”

“What? I fought you with honor. I *killed* you with honor.”

“And I do believe that was the only time in your awful life you ever showed honor to another.” The God King spoke softly, raising the blade so that the tip touched Siris’s neck.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The God King chuckled. “You really don’t, do you? Ironic. What did you do to yourself, Ausar?” He pulled the blade back to strike.

Siris spotted something moving on the other side of the court. Behind the knights, a dark figure crawled along the top of a low landscaping wall. None of the guards saw her; they were focused on him. She shouldn’t have been there.

Isa. She carried her crossbow.

She lied! Siris thought. *It wasn’t that hard to fix after all!* He laughed, both in horror and incredulity.

The God King hesitated, sword raised.

Isa lowered her crossbow at the God King’s back.

It won’t work, Siris thought. *It won’t kill him. It probably won’t even stop him. It—*

She turned the bow fractionally, so it pointed past the God King, and pulled the trigger. The bolt flew, streaking across the garden between the knights.

It hit Siris directly in the forehead.

Chapter Eight

AUSAR'S BODY JERKED with a sudden *snap*, then toppled back to the ground.

The God King froze. That had *not* been part of his plan. "What is this!" he roared, turning and pointing. A dark figure was already dashing down the pathway out of the gardens. An assassin? Had that bolt been meant for him?

He gestured, and three of his knights charged after the assassin. The God King growled. Saydhi had left her estates far too open by living in gardens like this. It was nearly impossible to create a good, defensible border.

"We leave," he said, suddenly feeling exposed. Too much had gone wrong lately. He strode toward the lift that would take him down into the undercomplex of Saydhi's estates.

"What of this, great master?" one of his knights said, kicking at Ausar's fallen body.

"It is just a husk, now," the God King said. "You may take the armor as a prize—and recover my ring for me. Burn the body."

He walked into the lift as his knights obeyed his orders and secured the area. In the near distance, he heard hoofbeats. The assassin had a horse.

The God King was disquieted. An assassination attempt on him was meaningless, though people still tried. He'd deliberately kept the people of this island from knowing the true nature of the Deathless. So long as they thought they could kill him, they'd focus their rebellion on assassins and warriors sent to challenge him.

No, an assassination attempt wasn't what disquieted him. What worried him, as the lift began to lower, was the chance that the bolt *hadn't* been meant for him. That it had been meant for the target it had struck.

If that were the case, someone had known to kill Ausar before the God King could strike with the Infinity Blade. And that meant someone understood far more than they should.

SIRIS AWOKE with a deep gasp. It was the uncontrolled gasp of one who had been without breath for too long. The gasp of the dead returning to life.

He sat up with a jerk, something liquid and gel-like sliding from his naked torso. He was sitting a metal tub in a dark room, which was lit only by a few flickering red lights.

He breathed in and out, viscous goo dripping from his chin. He raised a trembling hand to feel his cheek. "Damnation," he whispered. "I'm one of them."

"I sat there for hours, that first night," a voice whispered.

He turned to the side. Isa sat in the corner, on the floor, her knees up and her dark coat spread on the metallic floor around her.

"I watched you," she said, staring straight ahead. Not at him. Not at anything, really. "I watched your chest go up and down. I sat there, counting to myself. Terrified. You were one of them. I *knew* it. I'd seen you use one of their rings. I'd heard you claim to have killed the God King with his own sword. You fought like one of them, like a . . . a *creature* from another time. Too perfect to be completely human. A warrior cannot learn such skill in one lifetime. You fought like a god."

He blinked, then wiped goo from his face. *Hell take me . . . it can't be true . . .*

"And yet," Isa whispered, "you'd been kind to me. I knew I should strike you down, take the sword. You were lying to me, I thought. Pretending honesty, pretending kindness, spouting all of that nonsense about a Sacrifice. You were making sport of me. Why else would one of the Deathless act as if he were a mortal?"

"I didn't know," Siris whispered. "I . . ."

"I was frozen," she said, growing quieter. "Watching you lie there. What was I to do? Should I act upon the lies I knew you held close, or on the honesty I saw in your eyes? It was not an easy choice. In the depth of the night, my fears won." She looked up and met his eyes across the small chamber. "I didn't think it a betrayal, since you had obviously lied to me. Obviously . . ."

Siris coughed, trying to get some of the gunk out of his mouth. "I've lied to myself too, apparently." He closed his eyes, raising his hands to his head, groaning.

This can not be possible.

"Do you really not remember anything?" she asked. "You've probably lived thousands of years."

“All I know is my own life,” he said. “Growing up in Drem’s Maw, being told I was the Sacrifice. Seeking the God King.” He took a deep breath, in and out. “I’m just a person. Hell take me, a regular *person*.”

“You don’t fight like one.”

He tried to banish the thoughts that came next. Memories from his childhood. Veterans who had left the God King’s service and come to train the Sacrifice. They had whispered that Siris was too good. That he learned too quickly. By childhood, he’d been able to fight as well as any of them. By his teenage years, he’d have been named a duelist in any major city.

By his twentieth year, he had been good enough to defeat the God King.
. . . *too perfect to be completely human anymore . . . you fought like a god . . .*

“I’ve seen something in your eyes, occasionally,” she said. “A depth to them, a . . . change to you. Sudden flashes of arrogance.”

“The Infinity Blade,” he protested, opening his eyes. “It was corrupting me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Why would a weapon built to free mankind, to defeat the Deathless, corrupt the one using it?”

“I . . .”

She mocks me. Kill her.

An awareness blossomed in him. Those thoughts weren’t external. They were a part of him. A *real* part of him.

“That’s who I was . . .” he whispered. “That’s what I used to be. One of them. Oh . . . Verity . . .” He could almost remember it. He banished those memories by reflex. No. He didn’t want them. He hated them.

He hated who he had been. *Hated him.*

“Who *are* you?” Isa asked.

“I wish I knew.” It was a lie. He didn’t want to know anything of that man, the one who thought the Dark Thoughts. The man who hated all things, who kept himself isolated, who acted like he ruled everyone.

The God King had named him Ausar.

Siris shook his head and started to climb out of the tank, then realized he was completely naked. “My clothing?”

She nodded toward a pedestal beside the tank, and didn’t even have the decency to blush. Damn Avrians. “That’s all I could find. Your own clothing was burned; I had to haul what was left of you here. You were badly

burned. I peeled off what clothing was left; I didn't know if the rebirth would work with the clothing on."

Siris wished he had a towel. The chamber was all metal, with a few of these tubs full of goo in them. "It would have. I saw the God King's rebirthing chamber. He had . . . copies of himself, fully armored, waiting for him."

"I don't know if you saw what you think you did."

"It looked a lot like this," he said. He hesitated, then climbed out on the side opposite her, keeping the large, waist-high tub between the two of them for some modesty's sake. He began pushing the goo from his body as best he could.

"I think there's a hose beside the tub," she said.

She was right. The water was cold.

"I assume we're in the chamber you visited that once?" he asked. "On the mountainside?"

"Yes."

"You broke your promise, you know. You killed me."

"You'd have preferred the alternative?" she snapped. "He was going to kill you. Kill you *with* the blade."

Siris froze, water gushing out over his arm. She'd killed him to save him. He should have realized it before, but all of this was coming at him so quickly.

"I knew I couldn't fight through to you," she said. "And I didn't know if a crossbow bolt would stop him. I didn't know if you were . . . what I thought . . . Well, I didn't know what to think any longer. I gambled. I do that. Father always said it was a bad habit."

He continued washing, disturbed.

"You should be grateful," she said. "I won't even *mention* the chase I had to go through to get away from his minions. When I finally got back, they'd burned your corpse. Gathering you was *not* a pleasant experience—for me, or for Nams, who carried you here.

"This place seemed the best choice. I knew . . . well, I *assumed* that some of the facts I'd heard were true. If you'd been left alone, your soul would have sought out a new body. However, if your corpse is placed in one of these things, the soul will seek it instead. The tub repaired your corpse and started it breathing again, and your soul returned. It took a couple of weeks."

“Weeks?” he said. “You’ve been waiting here with me for *weeks*?”

She said nothing, so he finished washing and started dressing. Isa sat in silence, staring forward again. This entire experience seemed to have disturbed her greatly. She wasn’t the only one.

As he was stomping on the boots, Isa slid something across the floor toward him. A sword. “I took it from one of the champions you killed,” she said.

Siris affixed the sword’s sheath to his belt.

“You said your ancestors fought the God King,” Isa said. “That your father, your grandfather, went to fight and died. Have you considered that you didn’t *have* a father or a grandfather? At least, if you did, they’ve been dead for thousands upon thousands of years?”

“But . . . the Sacrifice . . .”

She shrugged. “Something in there is a lie. Something big. You weren’t born, Siris.”

“I grew up as a child. I *remember* it.”

“I . . . I don’t know how to explain that.”

Questions for another time. “I need armor.”

“You might be able to take some off one of the fallen daerils,” Isa said.

“Saydhi’s guards. I think the God King’s minions left them behind.”

He nodded, then looked to her. He was stunned by the coldness he saw in her eyes.

“Isa . . .” he said.

“You’re one of them, Siris,” she said softly. “I just . . . I’m having trouble with this. One of *them*, Siris. *Shemsta macorabi natornith na . . .*” She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered visibly. She looked sick.

Kill her, the Dark Thoughts said. ***She knows too much about you.***

He found himself gripping the side of the reincarnation tub, knuckles white. She was right. He *was* a monster.

“What will you do?” she asked.

“Before she died, Saydhi answered my question. I know where to find the Worker of Secrets.”

“But he’s your enemy,” she said. “He created a weapon to kill the Deathless. He wanted to overthrow you.”

“I’m *not* one of them,” Siris said firmly. “I won’t let myself be.”

“And what would you give the Worker?” she asked. “You can’t deliver him the Infinity Blade, now. So why go?”

“You wanted freedom, Siris. Well, the God King has his weapon back, and he doesn’t know where to find you—if he even cared to. I think he won’t bother, focusing on Deathless with armies, lands, and influence. *You* can disappear. You’re free.”

The realization hit him like a clap of thunder.

No expectations. No responsibilities. He could escape, live his life. “Will you come with me?” he found himself asking. He held out his hand.

Isa regarded that hand, then looked up at his eyes. Finally, she turned away.

“Isa . . .” he began again.

“I don’t know what I think, Siris,” she said. “You’re *one of them*. I know that’s not fair, but . . . it’s complicated.”

“I’m still me, Isa.”

“Are you?” she asked. “Are you completely?”

Not completely, he admitted. The Dark Thoughts prowled inside of him, stronger than ever. He tried to say otherwise to Isa, but the words wouldn’t come out.

“I came for the Infinity Blade,” she said. “I’m going to follow after it. That’s . . . that’s where I need to be, right now. I’m sorry.”

She walked toward the exit.

“Isa,” he said.

She paused.

“I release you from your oath.”

“My oath?”

“Not to kill me,” he said. “If when we meet next, I’m not myself . . . if I’ve become one of them, truly . . . I want you to do what you need to.”

She stood in the doorway, and he hoped for a wisecrack. Something like, “I’ve killed you once already. Don’t you think I have better things to do?” He smiled.

No jokes came.

“All right,” she said. “It’s a promise.”

He felt cold, and she left him, walking down the hallway. He heard a door open, and faint sunlight shone into the metallic tunnel.

Siris sat down on the steel floor, then lay back.

Everything I’ve been, he thought. *Everything that I am . . . is a lie*. If this was true, then he was ancient, a thing no longer truly human.

His mother wasn’t really his mother.

His home wasn't his real home.

He could remember some things, fragments. Those hadn't been there before he'd died, but he could see them now. Shadows within his memory.

They showed fragments of a life—a very, very long life—that he'd led.

Sounds came at the doorway. He stood up, hopeful. Isa, returning? He heard a voice, getting closer. Soon he recognized it.

“. . . bad, bad, bad! Oh dear. Oh dear!” TEL scrambled into the small cavelike room. He wore his stick body and robe, blue gemstone eyes searching about nervously. He froze as he saw Siris, then he looked at the tub and screeched in what sounded like horror.

The little golem fell to his knees. “Bad, so bad! Oh, this is bad. I'm supposed to destroy the body! Orders! My commands! You must be reborn as a child! Oh, terrible day!”

“TEL,” Siris said in a commanding voice. “Stop!”

The golem fell silent.

“I am your master, aren't I,” Siris said. “The Deathless you spy for. It's me. Before my memories went away, I ordered you to watch over me, didn't I?”

“Oh, *very* bad,” the golem said, quivering. “Master, I tried! I tried. I followed her here, but she locked the door! I hid outside for weeks. I could not get small enough to slip in. She locked the door each time she went out. She watched for me. I *tried*. I promise, I tried.”

“Tell me about my births as a child,” Siris said, feeling numb. Detached from himself.

“I did as commanded, master! Each rebirth, I brought you as a baby to young women, finding you a home so you could grow up from childhood! I altered the woman's memory to think you her son, and to think herself married to the former Sacrifice—just as you ordered! I made her move to a new town where she would not be known. But this is wrong, so wrong! You . . . will have memories . . .” The golem hushed. “Terrible memories, master. Terrible, *terrible*.”

“I know,” Siris said softly. He looked over the sword Isa had found him. It was of good make. He'd need armor; perhaps, as Isa suggested, he could recover some from the fallen Aegis he had killed in the gardens below. If the God King had left the bodies, the armor would be gruesome to recover, but not as gruesome as going into combat without it. If he did that, he'd likely end up . . .

Dead. *Hell take me*, he thought. *That doesn't really matter anymore, does it?* The realization was surreal. Was this how the Deathless felt? If he couldn't die . . . so many things no longer had a cost.

The Dark Thoughts within seemed pleased.

"TEL," he said.

The golem whimpered.

"You will speak to me," Siris said. "Who was I, before?"

"I am commanded not to speak of that," TEL said. "*Commanded.*"

"But I am the one who commanded you. I now rescind that command."

"Not possible, not possible," TEL said. "You said I cannot. I *will* not."

Siris sighed. *Fine. I can work on that one later.* "Who was the one who claimed to be my ancestor, the one I killed in the chamber beneath the God King's palace? Did slaying him truly awaken the Infinity Blade?"

"It did, master."

"But he wasn't really my ancestor," Siris said, frowning. "He couldn't have been. If this is all true . . . I have no ancestors. At least, not any that would still be alive."

"I . . ."

"Speak," Siris commanded, finding that a voice of authority came to him easily, but unexpectedly.

"He was your son, master," TEL said, cringing. "Sometimes, you did not fight the God King. Sometimes, some generations, I could not change enough memories to make you the Sacrifice. Other times, you refused to come. That man . . . he was a child of yours, during a generation when you married, grew old, and had children. That one was chosen as the Sacrifice in your stead. He joined the God King instead of fighting him."

Siris blinked in surprise. *Hell take me . . . I was married? Had children? How many times?* He didn't remember any of it, not specifics, but he suddenly felt empty.

"Dying and being reborn in one of these vats, rather than as a child," he said. "It returns my memories?"

"Brings the terrible memories!" TEL said. "Oh, it shouldn't have happened like this. They must be wiped away, master. If we wipe away your memories each time, have you born as a child, it will keep them away. But now . . ."

"It will grow worse?" he said grimly.

“Much worse,” TEL said softly. “Each rebirth will make it worse. You will become him again, master. *HIM.*”

So there was a cost. A terrible one. If the Dark Thoughts, the shadow upon his mind, were who he had been, and if dying would return him to that . . . Well, that seemed worse than dying and not reawakening.

“I’ll be certain not to die again, then,” he said. He hesitated. “But if I do, TEL, you are to bring me here. To be reborn, with my memories.”

“Master,” TEL whispered. “Better to become a child again. Much, *much* better.”

It was tempting. He could banish all of this. Would that not be freedom? But if that was the case . . .

“Why the Sacrifice, TEL?” he asked.

“There wasn’t one, at first, master,” TEL said. “You’ve always hated Raidriar, and I think you responded to his search for someone to use in activating the Infinity Blade. You went to fight him in one of your generations, and he took note of you, thought you were a child of one of the other Deathless.

“He created the Sacrifice, the entire tradition. And you . . . you often wanted to go fight him, and when I *didn’t* make you the Sacrifice, you’d declare yourself to be the one who had to fight him. It seemed best to just start making you, and others around you, think you were the son of the former Sacrifice. People had started to remark on the similarity in your features, you see . . .”

So most of those champions who had fought the God King, they had been Siris. Each time, him again, in a different life. He could just vaguely remember. Coming to the God King’s palace, falling while fighting him. Time and time again. He shivered at those fragments of memories.

The God King didn’t know, Siris thought. He had located what he thought was the bloodline of a Deathless. He must have discovered the truth only recently.

So many lives. So many failures.

But I could run, Siris thought, standing in that quiet steel cavern. His womb. I could be free. I have enough of my old memory to be aware, but not so much that I’m corrupted. It was perfect. A chance to live a life free from obligations.

And if he did that, he left the God King with incredible power. A weapon, finally active, that could kill other Deathless. Siris left his people, his

mother, in bondage.

He stood for a long time, eyes closed, breathing in and out. Hand on the hilt of his sword.

Finish what you began. . . .

He was in a perfect position to run, but he was also in a perfect position to fight. A man who had the powers of the Deathless, but the mind, passions, and honor of a common man. For the time being, at least.

Honor. Did he really have honor?

All through his childhood, his life had been set out for him. He now realized that these last few weeks had been the first chances he'd had to choose for himself. What would he do with that choice?

He opened his eyes.

"TEL," he said. "If I die, you *will* bring me back here to be reborn. With my memories." He shoved the Dark Thoughts away. "Will you do it, TEL?"

The golem whimpered.

"TEL, I command it of you."

"I will obey," the golem whispered. Apparently he would hold to some of his former commands, but there was leeway with others.

"We are going to locate the Worker of Secrets," Siris said, striding forward, TEL falling into place beside him. "I will free him. And then we will find a way to fight back."

Not because it was meant to be. But because he chose to. For now, the list he'd written in his logbook would wait. The truth was, he'd probably already done everything on the list a hundred times over, even if he didn't remember.

Saving the world, though . . . that was something he was certain he'd never done.

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As always, thanks for reading.

Brandon

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