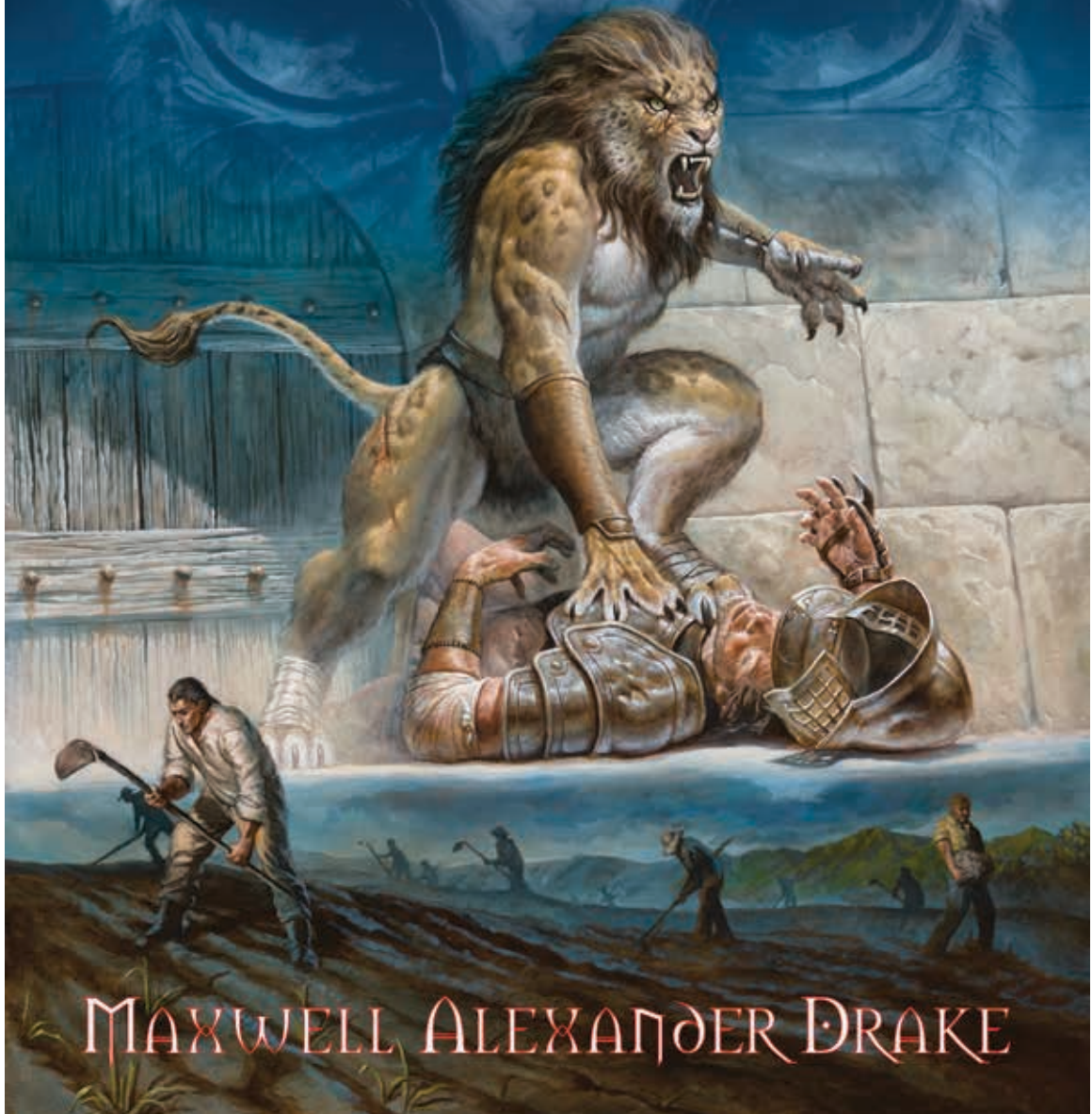


THE AWARD-WINNING, CRITICALLY-ACCLAIMED  
SERIES RETURNS!

# GENESIS OF OBLIVION

ARCANUM  
ONE

DIRECTOR'S CUT



MAXWELL ALEXANDER DRAKE



GENESIS  
OF  
OBLIVION

ARCANUM ONE  
OF THE  
GENESIS OF OBLIVION SAGA

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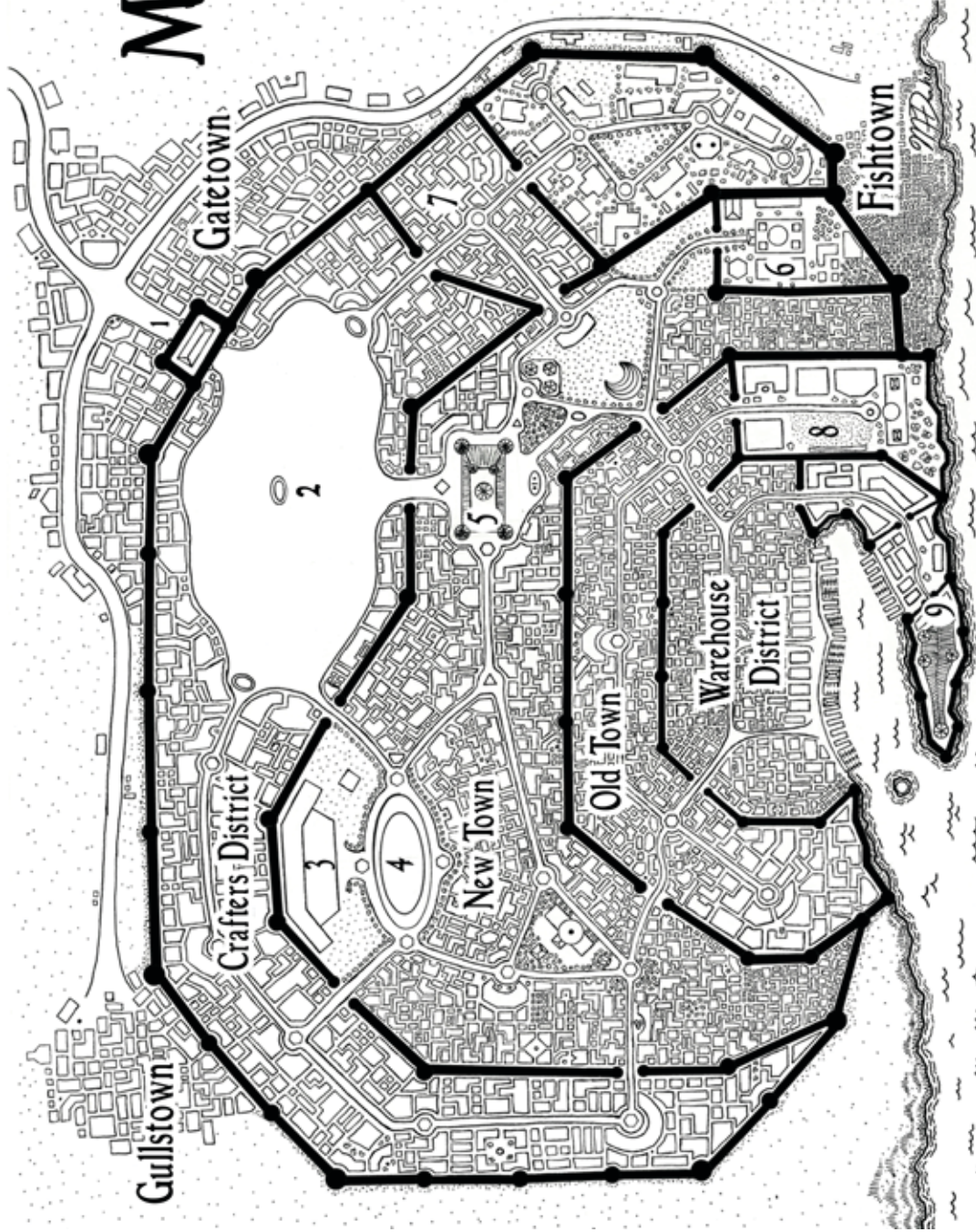
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# Mocley

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This one is dedicated to all the fans who have so patiently waited while I worked to overcome my health issues. Thank you!



# PART ONE

## A Day in the Life

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

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

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

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

-MAD





# Chapter 1

---

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

It did not.

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

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

Foreboding.

Oppressive.

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

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

*Why can I never find sleep before a fight?*

He glanced out the narrow window set in the back wall. All but the topmost part of his cell lay below ground, and beyond this portal lay the sands of the fighting arena.

*Sands that'll soon be blood-soaked.*

But *whose* blood that would be, well... only time and Alza'dysta's Luck would answer that.

On the opposite side from where his cell's window sat were rows of benches that would soon be filled with those who'd paid to watch him die. Above these, the newly risen sun spilt over the upper rim of the area's outer wall. Its infernal light charged down the sitting area, tore across the sandy floor, and breached the bars of his tiny window. It invaded his fortress of solitude with the mercilessness of a bloodthirsty conqueror. Dust motes churned and danced over the dingy floor in its wake, practicing their slow advances and feints.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Filthy Humans.*

He despised being caged so near the disgusting creatures.

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

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

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

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

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

*The dregs awaken.*

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

The one in the cell next to his had arrived yestermorrow, and judging by the old man's heavy wheezing, he'd be dead before overmorrow. Not that he'd live that long. Whatever the Games planned for him this day, the ailment filling his lungs would be irrelevant the moment he gave his life for the crowd's amusement.

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

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

*And I'll use them to—*

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



“BEAST!” The man’s bellow echoed in the subterranean corridors.

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

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

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

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

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

A mischievous glint danced in the fat man’s muddy-brown eyes before a chuckle overtook him. “Mayhap ya speak true, beastie.” The man frowned, his head dipping to the side. “‘Bout ya livin’ to see the morrow, that is.” A spiteful grin crept over his lips. “‘Though, I wouldn’t be so certain of that, was I you. The crowd, ya see? They’ve been whipped into a frenzy, they have. They ain’t gonna be cheerin’ for your survival *this* day. Nor shall they sing ya any praises.” Leaning his sweat-soaked forehead against the bars, his keeper scoffed. “For they care even less ‘bout you than I, for true.” The vile man’s dry, cracked lips parted, exposing a mouthful of rotted teeth. “Nix. They’ve paid to watch the savage Kith beast fight... *and die*.” He pulled back from the bars on the window, still grinning. “And I believe the Arbiters’ll try their *very* best to satisfy the crowd’s desires. I hear they’ve got quite the line up for you.”

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

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

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

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

With a sigh, the Beast leaned over and snatched one of the mutton shanks by its protruding bone. He shuffled away from the door, pressing his shoulder against

## GENESIS OF OBLIVION SAGA - ARCANUM ONE (OPENING FIVE CHAPTERS)

the back wall. Drawing the meat close to his muzzle drove the dungeon's stench from his nostrils, if only for a moment. His whiskers bristled.

*Fresh as the bastard claimed!*

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

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

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

The Beast grunted.

*As if any of the gods care about justice.*

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

*Now I know.*

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

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

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

*I'm nothing more than —*

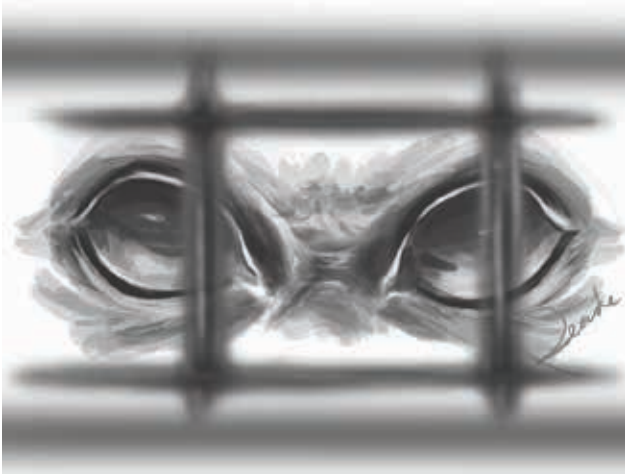
A hollow slam against the door snapped the Beast from his musings. He dropped into a half-crouch, his long tail lashing out.

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

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

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

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



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

His muscles tightened.

Having battled many exotic monsters over the past few seasons, the Beast didn't understand why this

*Honored One* should cause him such unease. But his hackles rose, and a primal growl rumbled deep in his chest. Attempting to shift his stance, shock sliced through him with the realization that his feet wouldn't move.

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

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

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

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

He found himself standing in a vast emptiness, darkness stretching out on every side. He had no recollection of the freedom his master's lies spoke of — he'd hunted nothing outside the fighting pits. Chains and bars filled even his earliest memories.

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

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

*The lies of a puny race.*

Pulled from the deepest wells of his memory, the Beast's history burst to life around him. From the fathomless darkness, images took shape. Though he didn't understand how, he knew what appeared before him were the apparitions of his parents, more vivid than any dream. His sire stood head and shoulders above even the tallest of Humans. A sprinkling of dark spots covered his golden-brown

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fur, with powerful muscles rippling underneath. A lush, dark-brown mane ended in a point well below his chin, resting against a bulging chest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*I've despised that Human ever since.*

The scene shifted once more.

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

*That's the day my life truly began.*

Another shift.

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

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

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

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



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

Shift.

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

Shift.

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

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

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

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

Shift.

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

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

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

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

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

Shift.

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

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

*A place I thought I'd never see.*

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

Shift.

The day they docked, Estular rode perched atop a befuddled Beast's cage. The

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Human paraded his pet with much fanfare through the streets of Mocley. With head held high and a perpetual glee in his voice, the man announced to all who would listen that a Kith beast would fight in the upcoming Games. “You be bearing witness to something never before seen throughout the Game’s long history!”

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

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

*Worthless.*

Worthless until Estular purchased him, anyway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What're ya saying, Honored One?"

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

"It's a vicious monster!"

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

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

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

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

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

"How did you be knowing about—"

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

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

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

The Beast sensed Estular relax. "I— I no be thinking I could put a price on

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it. I mean, for a hundred... hundred and fifty thousand tanarians who could be refusing. Yet... such a sum be ludicrous. Why would you be even—”

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

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

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

*Bent. Not broken.*

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

The weight of his past now poisoned his soul.

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

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

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

*‘Providing the Kithian survives this day’s event...’*







## Chapter

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

*And I'd failed.*

Sunlight poured through the glazed window beside his bed, washing over him. He blinked, shuddered, then attempted to push away the dread the dream left behind. The cool air of his bedroom tickled his bare chest. He wished for nothing more than to curl under his warm blankets and let sleep retake him. Judging by the sun, however, he'd be late if he did.

Lifting his arms high overhead, he stretched, then made a half-hearted attempt to wipe the crusties from his eyes. He scooted to the foot of his wool-stuffed mattress and peered out his window's wavy, semitransparent glass. The portal offered him a blurry view of what little he could see of the Hildalan stead from his bedroom.

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

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

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

The nightmare lingered on the edges of his mind, stoking his fears that he

would spend the rest of his days as a common fielder trapped inside these walls.

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

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

*Still, it's gotta be more than this!*

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

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

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

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

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

12

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

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

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

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

He frowned at his cousin rocking back and forth, falling asleep even while sitting.

*If it weren't for me, the lazy bastard would stay in bed all day, every day.*

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

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

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

*Wha'ever works.*

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

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

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

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

*Mayhap over a thousand!*

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

*Besides, it's an honest livin'.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*I just hope that anybody is anybody other than me.*

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

"Alright, you two." His mother carried over a pan of fried eggs, steam rising from its sizzling contents. "Stop all this nonsense. Layla, be a dear and take this out

for me?" Without waiting for an answer, she held the hot skillet for the girl to take.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

14

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*How many aurns of my life has that game consumed?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leaving Siln standing stunned, Arderi continued toward the tables. He held



his fingers pointing up while crossing the middle two, in honor of Rash'ayel.

*Justice for Tary.*

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

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

The group of older menfolk all mumbled their greetings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

16

*Sheep's dung! Is that for true?*

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

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

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

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

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

Siln laughed, trying not to choke on the food he'd stuffed into his mouth. "Looks like I might get my own room soon."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Why must it be so embarrassin'?*

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

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

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

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

It was also the night of his first nightmare about failing the Test.

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

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

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

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

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

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

With a roll of the eyes, Arderi drew near his kin. "Oh, ha ha."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fine, fine." Tanin gave a shrug, then glanced off toward the lead wagon. The cold he'd been fighting for the past few days seemed gone, though Arderi doubted the man would ever admit to any discomfort.

*Even if his arm was severed from his body.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"On my Namin' Day?"*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*And what if I fail?*

An image of him wed to Layla with a half-dozen redheaded kids clawing at



his dirt-covered trousers welled up in his mind. Looking into his father's eyes, the realization fell upon him that this was the *exact* life Tanin lived. Shame filled him thinking of his father this way and he broke eye contact.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Besides, I've enough troubles to worry over.*

Flopping back, Arderi wanted nothing more than for all his problems to melt away. *The Test. Marriage. Namin' Day celebrations... Damnation!*

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

*I'm a cloud floatin' on the wind and I ain't got no worries at all.*





# Chapter

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

*Or I do.*

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

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

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

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

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

*If I were but a simple-minded beast.*

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

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

As if vexed by this game, the Beast squared his shoulders on one twin, giving the other his back. The young man didn't hesitate, launching an attack as soon as the opening was offered.

## GENESIS OF OBLIVION SAGA - ARCANUM ONE (OPENING FIVE CHAPTERS)

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

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

*Well... not all their arms.*

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

Boos and jeers greeted his offering.

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

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

"Niixx!!!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Raylac would be so disappointed.*

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

Howling, the Beast pivoted to dig claws into the annoying Human only to

find himself dodging a second, then third swipe from the surviving twin's sword. Without pause, the boy kept up the torrent of attacks, and the Beast gained several knicks and cuts under the relentless barrage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*How are these pathetic things the masters of this Plane?*

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

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

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

*Apparently not.*

The Beast ignored them as he stalked toward the center of the arena. He swept his gaze over the scene as he went. What did he care of their love for their

champions? The twins were but two more to join the half-score of other corpses baking under the scorching sun.

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

*Humans taste worse than they smell.*

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

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

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

*I'll not die for want of a weapon.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A murmured laughter rippled over the crowd.

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

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

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

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

*Or mayhap awe.*

As one, they began a low chant.

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

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

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

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

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

The throng exploded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seasons of training had taught him that those who couldn't be fluid with their plans didn't live long enough to regret their shortcomings. Linking his paws



around the Human's midsection, he dug his hindclaws into the packed sand and lunged forward with the little strength remaining to him.

*I can finish you on your—*

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

*Essence enhanced!*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When he'd put enough space between them, he stopped. Although his sight

was still tunneled and the world around him blurry, the pads on his paws informed him that Salmik was some sixty paces away and had slowed from a run to a jog, and finally to a walk.

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

*Sorry to disappoint.*

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

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

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

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

He found none.

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

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

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

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

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

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

With every ounce of energy remaining, the Beast fought to stay calm. Breathing in through his nose, he exhaled through his mouth. Clearing his mind. Beneath the exhaustion and pain, he found that which he sought — the ever-present flicker of rage at the core of his soul. He took hold of it. Fanned it. Spurred it to burn through

his muscles in a torrent of hate and fury. Loathing for those who owned him as nothing more than an object. Vengeance for the pain he was forced to endure day after day. Revenge for having the sanctuary of his mind invaded, his memories stolen from him. His life wasn't his own. Had never *been* his own. He was property. A fool with no more value than the wheezing old man who'd occupied the cell next to his.

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

The vibrations increased as the Human charged.

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

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

*Thrum, thrum, thrum.* Death came calling.

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

*Fifteen paces.*

*Ten.*

*Five.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

What he saw drained away all his animalistic fury.

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

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

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

*Silence!*

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

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

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

"The crowd!"

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

*And with defeat comes death.*

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

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

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

*This day shall be my last.*

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

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

As swiftly as they'd fallen silent, the crowd exploded. Waves of sound struck the Beast from every side. The mass of noise reverberated off the Coliseum walls like a mountain collapsing into the sea. A jumble of jeers, shouts, and indistinct cries tumbling one over another until a single word emerged from the madness.

## GENESIS OF OBLIVION SAGA - ARCANUM ONE (OPENING FIVE CHAPTERS)

Starting from his left, in a small group at first, it caught like wildfire until the entire crowd chanted as one.

"Kith! Kith! Kith!"

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

"Kith! Kith! Kith!"

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

*They chant for my VICTORY!*

"Kith! Kith! Kith!"

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

The crowd went berserk.

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

"KITH! KITH! KITH!"

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

"KITH! KITH! KITH!"

The Beast felt pride.





# Chapter

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**R**eality roiled into a kaleidoscope of colored lights swimming across Malant Cor's field of vision.

*It's like openin' my eyes under water, but everythin' looks crisp and clear. I just can't tell what anythin' is...*

Irritation mixed with worry churned inside him. After two seasons working with the Essance, he should be better at this. And he couldn't make any mistakes if he wished to earn the last endorsement he needed.

*I must be allowed to go train in Hathoolan. I simply must!*

"Now, Malant. Focus. Bend your mind to see the room around you." Sier Sarlimac, Malant's primary instructor, stood in front of him — an ethereal version of him, anyhow.

*I ain't never gonna get used to that.*

A dizzying array of colors formed everything else Malant saw through the Sight of Sukai.

The soft whisper of his Sier's robes tickled his ears in the otherwise silent room. "Tell me what I'm holdin'."

Strain as he might, Malant couldn't separate the multitude of swirling colors that represented the room from anything his teacher might or might not be holding.

Irritation morphed into frustration.

Clenching his jaws, he drew a deep breath in through his nose and held it. Too much rode on his performance this day.

He conjured up images of home. His ma and papa laughing and singing in the communal dining hall. Playing Barca with his younger brother, Arderi or cousin, Siln. Teasing his little sister, Tary. As they always did, the memories grounded him, reminding him that this Plane was more than what could be seen through the Sight of Sukai.

A calmness washed his mind free of the emotions threatening to overwhelm

him, and he regained some of his composure. Letting the breath out through his mouth, he fixed his gaze upon the outstretched hands of his ghostly teacher.

He stopped trying to force things, instead allowing the floating dots — Spectals, he reminded himself — to differentiate one from another on their own. Within a few heartbeats, a square object emerged, becoming distinct from the background. The item didn't take on any actual shape. Rather, to his mind, connections formed between the Spectals inside whatever Sarlimac held, interacting in a way Malant still failed to understand. Soon, other patterns emerged, and the room's contents took shape in the bright, multi-colored Sight of Sukai.

Once Malant was certain of his surroundings, he found the confidence to answer. "Ya hold a book, Sier."

"Impressive." His instructor's voice held a tinge of something more.

Malant sat up straighter, a smile curling the corners of his lips. It disappeared as his eyebrows knitted together. "Then why's it still so hard to control?"

"Patience, boy. It normally takes ten seasons or more to fully control Sukai. The Essence doesn't give up its secrets easy." Sier Sarlimac stepped away, the Spectals creating the book he held dissolving into the background as he moved.

Once the man stopped, it took mere moments for the book to discern itself once more. "Do ya still see the book's pattern?"

Nodding, Malant licked his lips. His imagination raced trying to guess what his next task could be. It wouldn't be something as straightforward as picking out the pattern of a book. Sarlimac was too wily for such mundane tactics.

32 *And I'm certain he'd rather me fail. But I can't for the life of me figure out why.*

Even though the Sier was one of Malant's favorites here at the Acadèmia, the man seemed to be doing everything he could to discourage Malant from accepting the invitation that would open up a whole new way of learning the Essence. Methods most Human Shapers could only imagine.

"See if ya can walk to me without losin' the Sight."

And there it was. Malant clamped his mouth shut to cut off an angry protest. No second-season student was required to move while holding the Sight. It was impossible! If this was what the old man required of him, there was no way he was passing this test.

*Why is he tryin' so hard to prevent me from leavin' Mocley?*

His heart sank. All his other Siers had given him their endorsement. Sier Sarlimac was the lone holdout. Over the past tenday, when Malant had approached him to plead his case, the older man had avoided the topic. Or brushed him off saying he had other, *more pressing* duties. The ship sailing for the island home of the Elmoriens left in just a few days. What could be more pressing than that?

Malant stood as slowly as he could. He'd be damned if he'd give up without at least trying. Still, the simple movement sent the Spectals whirling into a tempest. The area around him once again became a maddened mingling of indistinguishable points of color, and he couldn't separate them into the patterns that made up the room. Out of reflex, he grabbed the stool he'd been sitting on.

*This is crazy!*

"Hold the Sight, Malant. Here, let me help."

A wispy hand, one that appeared to be made from thick smoke, grasped Malant's elbow, and the unmistakable hint of mint from his teacher's breath invaded his nostrils. Thankful for the aid, but still weary of what awaited him, Malant allowed his instructor to guide him the few steps to the large lab table that dominated the center of the small study. As they walked, the Spectals spun out of focus, making his stomach queasy. If Sier Sarlimac hadn't been holding his arm, he would've either lost the Sight... or fallen.

"Easy. Easy now. There ya are." His teacher grunted a laugh. "Don't be too hard on yourself. No Shaper can move and still see things clearly. It's simply a limitation of the Sight. But in time, you should master the vertigo, at least."

"Then why make me do it?" Malant spoke before he could stop himself, regretting the bitterness in his tone.

"'Cause I needed ya standin' here for this next part, and I didn't wanna wait while you regained the Sight." The mater-of-fact way Sarlimac said the statement made Malant feel the fool.

Tension that had built inside him drained away, and he let out a heavy sigh. "Of course, Sier. My apologies."

Once they stopped moving, the Spectals snapped back into sharp focus. One moment they were a swarm of buzzing bees whizzing around in an angry mass, the next, frozen in midair as if time itself had frozen.

"Now. The marble table is in front of you." His Sier let go of his elbow and shuffled away. "I want ya to focus on it. You know what it looks like with your normal sight. Now see it as it looks through Sukai."

Malant relaxed while his mind fought to make sense of the chaotic image. "Aye, Sier, large and flat." He studied the table's pattern for a moment longer. "Nothin's on it, though."

A rustling echoed through the small room. "I'm adding somethin'. Can ya tell me what?"

The answer came quick. "Another book."

"Look closer."

Malant chastised himself for his haste. If he continued to muddle things this badly, he could kiss his endorsement goodbye. And he'd already sent a Crystal to his family telling them he was going. How would he explain himself if that failed to happen?

*Damn fool, is what I am!*

Pausing, he focused on the new object's pattern. A tangled web of Spectals rested on the table's pattern. Mixing and mingling. It seemed similar to the book's pattern Sier Sarlimac held a moment earlier, but also different. Less. "Aye, Sier. Ain't enough there to be a book. A piece of paper, then?"

"Well done." The approval in Sarlimac's voice made Malant's chest swell. It was the same feeling he got when his papa complimented him. More rustling filled the room. "I'm adding a second piece. Do ya see it?"

"Aye, Sier. At first, it also looks like a book. Then I can tell there ain't enough interaction. It's like seein' what at first appears to be a large, deep puddle, only to discover it's shallow."

## GENESIS OF OBLIVION SAGA - ARCANUM ONE (OPENING FIVE CHAPTERS)

"A perfect analogy." Sarlimac chuckled. "Now, I'll light one piece on fire. Tell me what ya see happenin'."

Relief washed through Malant. Jintra had walked him through this very exercise last eve. He could kiss her.

*Well... if she wasn't so damn annoyin'.*

Still, she knew what she was about, and he'd have to give her his thanks later.

A lantern shutter squeaked. The faint aroma of a freshly lit hearth tickled Malant's nose as the sounds of paper crackling and popping echoed in his ears. Inside one of the pieces, the green colored Spectals shifted, their hues morphing into blue. "The paper on the right is the one on fire, Sier. I can tell 'cause its Spectals is changin'." He took another moment to ensure the process unfolded as he expected. "Though I can smell it burnin', I can't see any flames. This is 'cause fire's energy, and therefore cannot be seen through the Sight of Sukai. It ain't no brighter either, 'cause the Essence shows everything at the same luminosity."

"Go on."

"Aye, Sier. The Spectals are vibratin' slower, and many of the green ones have gone blue."

The Sier's shadowy form glided past Malant and one of the plush leather chairs behind him groaned under his instructor's weight. "What's the difference between them now?"

Malant studied the collective piles of colored Spectals which formed the papers' patterns. "They both still have the look of paper, Sier. The one ya burned seems smaller, however. Somewhat constricted. The Spectals inside have fallen motionless, and there ain't no green no more."

"You may release the Sight."

The Sight of Sukai slipped from Malant's vision like water flowing over a pane of glass. A gloomy chamber materialized around him. Not that there wasn't plenty of sunlight filling the space, but the contrast between Sukai and the natural world was stark. The strain of switching forced him to rub his eyes, but the room soon became clear.

He stood a few paces from the large, black and gray marble table that dominated the small room. The piece of paper Sier Sarlimac burnt lay upon it, crumpled and black, smoke still rising from its charred remains.

A light breeze wafted in from open windows behind where his instructor sat, mussing the man's thinning gray hair. The warm spring air the wind brought with it was fresh and clean. The late morn sun leaked through the swaying tree branches outside, its light dancing across the room's hardwood floor at Malant's feet. Through the portal, the sounds of what must've been tens of thousands of people shouting and cheering exploded in the far distance.

The commotion even captured the attention of his instructor, who rotated in his seat to peer out the window. "Is that comin' from the Coliseum? What a ruckus." The aging Sier shook his head.

*The event everybody's been talkin' 'bout!*

Malant had heard of the Games, of course. Though, since initiates weren't allowed outside school grounds, he'd never been. "Do ya think the rumors are for true? 'Bout the lionman, I mean."

Sier Sarlimac turned back with a frown. "I doubt very much the beast is five paces tall with claws like swords and can devour a man's soul simply by lookin' at him." He scoffed. "Besides, everythin' about the Games is *barbaric*! Men fightin' to the death for the amusement of others... It should be outlawed."

"Most are criminals, right?"

"Does a man lose value as a human being just 'cause he's stolen a crust of bread?" Sarlimac's scowl deepened, and he let out a long sigh. "Never mind all that. You still haven't earned my endorsement, and our time this morn ain't without limits." He motioned for Malant to join him. "Come. Sit."

Malant forcibly swallowed past the lump in his throat as he crossed the room. Bookshelves crowded with all manner of curiosities lined every wall. Bound tomes, rolled scrolls, and a collection of far more exotic sundries — dried and bleached skulls, as varied in size as style; pieces of colored glass or crystal; small carved figurines; and more that he'd never been able to identify, even when he scrutinized them up close. A set of four leather chairs, a half-dozen stools, and the large marble table completed the room's other furnishings.

He'd spent more time in this study over the past two seasons than he cared to admit.

His instructor, Sier Sarlimac, was a plump old man with a shaggy white-gray beard that failed to conceal his multitude of chins. He lounged in a leather chair, his dark blue robes stretched tight over his ample belly. Two golden stripes, a row of red sunbursts separating them, lined the cuffs and hem of his garment, marking the man an Arch Shaper of Sukai.

*One day I'll wear robes like that.*

As Malant approached, an easy expression fell over his teacher. Malant wasn't sure if it was a good sign or bad.

"What are the two aspects of the Essence?"

"Sukai and Sulok."

"And the difference between them?" His Sier gestured at the chair opposite where he sat.

Malant took the seat. "Sukai is the ability to meld Spectals inside objects, as you and I can. Sulok is the ability to meld Spectals inside livin' things."

With a nod, the aging Sier's countenance took on a serious air. "And why does that distinction matter?"

Sitting straighter, Malant maintained eye contact. "The Essence permeates this Plane, infusin' itself as Spectals inside... well, inside everythin'. Shapers, be them attuned to Sukai or Sulok, meld these Spectals and change their states of being. Shapers attuned to Sukai can change the state of objects." Looking over his shoulder, he pointed at the lab table. "Like bein' able to meld the state of that paper to what it was before ya burnt it." He shifted back. "While Shapers attuned to Sulok can change the state of livin' things, like mendin' a broken arm or enhancin' a plant's growth."

His teacher motioned to the table. "Could I light the burnt paper a second time?"

"Nix, Sier." Malant pushed further back into the plush chair. "It wouldn't catch."



Sarlimac grinned. "Could I write a quick note on the burnt paper?"

"Nix, Sier. It'd crumble."

"Why?"

"'Cause it's ash."

"Is that so?" As he often did when lecturing, Sarlimac formed his hands into a steeple and placed the point under his chin on a spot that had no hair, causing several coarse bristles to splay out at odd angles. "Did the paper change to a different pattern while ya viewed it using the Sight?"

"Nix, Sier. Its pattern is still that of paper. The Spectals simply changed color and slowed their vibrations."

Sarlimac gave a nod. "And what would it look like now if you viewed it using the Sight?"

Malant tugged at his plain gray robe that had bunched at the small of his back. "By now, all the green Spectals would be blue and no longer vibratin'. This is 'cause there ain't nothin' left in it that'll burn. It ain't got no stored energy — *potential* — left in it. The color of the Spectals indicates their potential state. Blue shows that in one of the item's states it can catch fire, but is lackin' that in the state it's currently in."

"An astute answer. You're adept at memorizing your textbooks and recitin' 'em." With a wave of his age-spotted hand, Sarlimac motioned toward the table. "But, what of the lab table? What do the blue Spectals residin' in it represent?"

36 With effort, Malant kept a grin from spreading across his face. "There ain't no blue Spectals inside marble, Sier. Stone ain't got no potential to catch fire."

Having never contemplated this fact from this angle, Malant's mind struck on an idea. "Sier, if I could manipulate the Spectals fast enough, instantly changin' 'em blue and freezin' 'em in place, shouldn't I be able to cause the paper to burst into flames?"

"This ain't *magic*, boy!" This Sarlimac laughed aloud, his bellow reverberating in the tiny space. "A trained Shaper could meld it into ash, or rather paper that no longer has the ability to catch fire. But the act of using the Essence to *create* flames... that's impossible. As skilled as I am, it would take me several aurns to meld that ash back into a clean piece of paper. Or vice versa. Much easier to simply go to market and purchase a new sheet." He scoffed and shook his head in bemusement. "Even the Elmorians aren't gifted enough to make somethin' burst into flames. Strong as they are, melding the Essence is a tedious and time-consumin' process for one and all."

The mention of the strange, exotic race sent Malant's mind running down a new path. "How *are* they so much stronger in the Essence than us, Sier?" Malant yearned to learn more about the Elmorien people. He couldn't wait to start training under them.

If, that was, he earned Sarlimac's endorsement. And by the Sier's scowl that had suddenly appeared over the question, Malant was less certain of that now than ever.

His teacher started at him for long uncomfortable moments that stretched out longer than they should. Finally, the man shrugged. "The reason for the Elmorians'

skill is unknown, although there are two principal schools of thought.” Sarlimac shifted in his chair, the leather creaking as only old leather could. “Some speculate the Essence itself created their race. Or they possess a unique physiology which allows them to interact with the Essence in a more natural way than the other races. This would make them superior to us, whether by creation or by chance of nature. Many Siers reject this hypothesis. They can’t accept being born inferior.” He sneered. “*They* assume the Elmoriens are privy to some powerful secret. Somethin’ they hide from the rest of the Shapers of this Plane and thereby keep themselves superior.”

Malant’s mind drifted back to something Jintra mentioned last eve. She’d made the claim about there being a third aspect of the Essence, and now he wondered if *those others* who believed the Elmoriens were hiding something weren’t as farfetched as his teacher appeared to believe. He didn’t voice his musings, of course. Topics like that were things initiates learned quickly to avoid. Instead, he nodded thoughtfully. “Which do you believe, Sier?”

“It doesn’t matter which I believe, although...” The Sier cocked his head. With a sigh, he seemed to come to a decision. “What about you?”

“Me, Sier?”

“Aye. Do you have any theories as to why the Elmoriens are more powerful at meldin’ than we Humans? You are, after all, intent on studyin’ under ‘em.”

Malant hesitated. Without realizing it, he’d walked onto thin ice. Certainly, him and the other initiates spent many an aurn discussing topics considered taboo by his instructors, but never had a Sier initiated the conversation. If he answered, it might give the Sier what he needed to withhold his endorsement. Still, if he didn’t...

Butterflies danced in his stomach. “I— Um...” Rubbing palms gone suddenly clammy onto his robe, he could see no solution that didn’t lead to his dreams being crushed. With nothing else for it, he decided honesty was best.

“Last eve at study group, senior initiate Jintra Deln mentioned somethin’ that got me thinkin’.”

“Jintra Deln.” The derogatory manner in which the Sier spoke the island girl’s name left little doubt over the older man’s opinion of the senior initiate. He pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment. “Has that girl not graduated yet?” Exasperation laced his words.

“Nix, Sier.” Malant wasn’t certain if he should’ve answered and flinched inwardly.

His instructor grunted, shaking his head with a frown. “Make your point, then.”

Malant rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, Sier... Senior initiate Deln mentioned there used to be a *third* aspect. Somethin’ she called *Sujen*? And that makes sense.” He pointed to Sarlimac’s robe where a three-sunned emblem was embroidered over his right breast — one red, one silver, and *one blue*. “The emblem for



the Order of Shapers has *three* suns on it. The red is for Sukai and the silver for Sulok, but... is the *blue* sun meant to represent this *Sujen*?"

Taking on a more serious air, the older man leaned forward. "As ya say, our Order's emblem does indeed bear *three* suns. And by all logic, the blue sun might, at one time in the past, have represented a third aspect of the Essence. As to what that aspect was, or even if it ever existed at all... well... who knows? Outside of our Order's emblem and being mentioned in a few ancient texts that survived the Great Darkness, there ain't many references to it. Are ya implyin' this *third aspect* has somethin' to do with the Elmorians?"

Shock over his teacher's continued inquiry, as if they were equals discussing the weather, held Malant's tongue for a moment. Although, since this was the first time any Sier had done more than snap at him over this line of discussion, he couldn't help but test Alza'dysta's Luck. "Well... Jintra speculated that it must be somethin' quite different from Sukai or Sulok. Claimed it might reside between objects? Or mayhap even inside energy like fire or lightnin', which may be why we can't see it."

The Sier squinted. "And *you* believe this?"

Malant licked lips gone dry. "I ain't sayin' I believe anythin', Sier. I'm just sayin' that mayhap she might be on to somethin'. When she brought it up, it got me thinkin' that a third aspect of the Essence could be the Elmorians' advantage over us."

Sarlimac leaned back, lacing his finger together. "You aren't the first to consider this as a possibility, ya know. However, if there were a third aspect, why are there only two moons?"

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Malant had heard this nonsense before, of course, but not from a Shaper. The idea was preposterous to anyone who had studied the Essence for more than a tenday. This was a superstition some fielder or herder from his home might think.

When he didn't answer, Sarlimac continued. "I mean, Silvery Sainor must represent Sulok and red Traynor, Sukai, right? So, where is the blue moon for this so called *Sujen*? What says ya to that?"

Malant couldn't accept an Arch Shaper would believe such fanciful tales. His mouth worked, no sound escaping. When he noticed a mischievous glint in the older man's eyes, he gave a sheepish grin. "You know as well as I, Sier, those are just will-the-wisp tales. The moons ain't got nothin' to do with meldin' the Essence."

His teacher chortled, his belly jiggling. "For true." The aging Sier pushed deeper into his seat. "And I'm happy to hear silly country superstitions like that haven't clung to you. But there is a flaw to your line of thinkin'."

"Flaw, Sier?"

"Aye. Many a Shaper has been present when an Elmorien melded, both with Sulok and Sukai. If they were usin' some forgotten third aspect, I should think somebody would've noticed by now. Even if a Shaper couldn't see them usin' this *Sujen*, surely they could deduce something was happenin' that was invisible to them."

The Sier's explanation was logical. Malant thought about it for a moment before nodding. "Then I guess I ain't got no opinion as to why they are stronger than us, Sier. At least, not 'til I learn more of it."

A smile split the old man's face. "Now *that* is an astute answer. And one I wish more Shapers followed."

When it seemed the Sier was about to move on to another topic, Malant couldn't help himself but attempt to continue this line of conversation. "Although... if I may, Sier?"

Sarlimac inclined his head, and Malant continued. "That doesn't explain the blue sun in our emblem."

His teacher paused, his smile dipping into a frown and a seriousness gripping his features. He blinked a few times, his mind at war with something he wasn't voicing. Taking a deep breath, he ran his fingers through his thinning hair. "Much was lost during the Great Darkness that wracked this Plane after the War of Power. And while the *name* Sujen has survived in the odd ancient text, and as ya pointed out—" He tapped a finger on his right breast. "Its symbol remains a part of our emblem. As to what it did or how it was used, no one alive knows. At least, I know of no books describin' its use." Sarlimac gave a sagely shrug. "If it ever existed at all. We're simply left with boogeyman stories of secret orders of menfolk ya shouldn't bump into at night." He huffed and rolled his eyes. "Wha'ever it was, that knowledge is lost to us."

"How can knowledge of the Essence become lost?"

A puzzled countenance fell over his instructor. "Mayhap it didn't." He rubbed his chin causing his whiskers to bristle. Nostrils flaring, his somber expression returned. "You and I have the ability to meld Sukai, though not Sulok. People like Jintra can meld Sulok, but not Sukai. We were born with our gifts, and it manifested after we passed through puberty. As far as we've been able to determine, the gift and which aspect can be manipulated by whom, is completely random. It doesn't run in families, and only about one in every few hundred thousand may possess it. It's the reason so many ruling bodies have mandatory Testing, as we do here in Mocley."

Sarlimac sat back, resting an arm across the leather-cushioned chair. "As for Sujen, I personally believe it did, at one time, exist. It's mentioned in enough texts that survived the Great Darkness to support that belief." He brushed a hand across the emblem on his robe. "As well as other proof." He harrumphed. "I also believe people in the past could meld it. Wha'ever... *it* was. As to why it was lost? One theory, one I agree with, is that people aren't *born* with the ability to meld it anymore."

It was Malant's turn to see a flaw in his Sier's reasoning. "Wait. If, as ya say, it's random, how would birth fit into it?"

With a shrug, Sarlimac peered out the window once more. "Mayhap it ain't as random as we presume. I 'spect most people, if not all, have the trait to use either Sukai or Sulok inside them. It's simply dormant for the vast majority of the population." He returned his attention to Malant. "They pass this trait on to their children, most of whom can't use it either. Then, for a lucky few like you and I, and for reasons we still fail to understand, the gift becomes... *active*."

He paused, as if collecting his thoughts. "Think of it this way. Most children born to parents with brown hair shall also have brown hair. However, occasionally,



brown-haired parents produce a blond-haired child. Or even a red-headed one. Meanin', that inside one or the other parent was the trait for that hair color. We know this 'cause we can trace it back through their lineage." A glint lit his eyes. "Provided, of course, no *infidelity* occurred." He gave Malant a conspiratorial wink.

"Uhh..."

Malant's unease pulled a chortle from Sarlimac. "Two seasons removed from farm life and still shy as a rabbit." His grin slipped as he tilted his head to the side. "To answer your question, if this fact holds true for the ability to meld the Essence, it could mean the trait that enabled Sujen died out before it was passed on to future generations. That it's simply... *extinct*."

Malant could follow that line of thinking. Still, there was something off about it. He shifted to ask another question that popped into his mind, but the old Sier frowned and waved a hand. "Or mayhap the moon theory is true and the blue one was destroyed in some heavenly catastrophe eons ago."

Mouth agape, Malant sat stunned by his Sier's words.

The twinkle returned, and the aging Sier giggled. The man fell silent, regarding his pupil for a time before relenting. "Our time is up, and you've more than demonstrated you'll give the Acadèmia a fine representation while ya study in Hathoolan. I formally give ya my blessin' to accept the Elmorians' invitation."

Relief washed over Malant like a fresh spring downpour.

"As to the nature of your new instructors' strength, I have no knowledge to prove any of these theories correct. I know only what I can do, and that's all that concerns me. Now, come." Standing, he made his way to one of the bookshelves. "I have an errand for ya before your midday lessons."

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Malant's heart soared as he followed his teacher to one of the bookshelves.

*I'm goin' to Hathoolan! The birthplace of the Essence!*

Stopping in front of a collection of strange metallic devices, the Sier picked up something Malant had long been curious about. It resembled a brass funnel, though no funnel he'd ever seen looked so bizarre. What appeared to be an empty waterskin covered the large conical end, and a thick needle protruded from where the narrow stem should be. Even in the warm room, ice clung to the device's outside. With a careful hand, Sier Sarlimac plucked it from the shelf by one of its two wooden handles. "I promised the Grand Oversier I'd have this delivered to the council chamber after halfmeal." He motioned toward a small box on the shelf next to where the unusual device had lain. "If ya would, pull that out and open it."

Malant did as instructed. Cloth lined the box's interior, matching the shape of the funneled contraption. The Sier eased the device inside the box and shut it, drumming the top with his fingers. "A stranger device I've never beheld."

"What is it?"

Shaking his head, his teacher harrumphed. "Just an old Sulok surgical instrument. Nothin' ya need to concern yourself with, young initiate." His smile took away any sting from his words. "Once you've taken halfmeal, I need ya to deliver this to the council chamber. They'll be expectin' it. I'd do it myself if I had the time, but I have other commitments I must attend to."

"Aye, Sier." Malant tucked the box under the crook of his arm, though he had



to fight the urge to continue questioning his teacher about it. He followed Sarlimac to the door.

Before they reached the exit, his instructor came to an abrupt halt and turned. "Malant?"

"Aye, Sier?"

"I want ya to know that... much to the chagrin of many Siers here, you're the most gifted student we've had at the Acadèmia in livin' memory. None have ever gained the ability to hold the Sight and discern items one from another in only two seasons. Even talented initiates take four or five to advance so far."

Malant's chest swelled. "My thanks, Sier, I—"

His instructor interrupted him with a raised finger. "You have a long career as a Shaper ahead of ya, young man. It would pain me to see that taken from ya." The plump old man bit his lower lip, as if unsure whether to continue. "I won't deny it's a wonderful honor to be invited to train in Hathoolan, and even in the short time you've been with us, you've more than proved ya have the natural ability worthy of being chosen. But... I must warn caution."

"Caution, Sier?"

"Aye. There's a reason I withheld my endorsement till last. And I'm still not certain I'm doin' right by you lettin' ya go."

Malant had only thought he was shocked before. His instructor's words hit him like a ballista bolt.

Sarlimac continued to chew on his lip. "It's a recent thing for the Elmoiriens to allow Humans to study with them on their island home — just the past two decades or so. Many, me included, were suspicious when their ambassador first approached the Order with this offer. While I'll be the first to admit that most who've gone have returned better for the experience, there have been several... accidents."

Malant's throat went dry.

Sarlimac's frown deepened. "The Elmoiriens' trainin' methods differ from ours. They're more taxing. A few who've gone to study with them have had their ability burned out. Worse, the last two we sent came back in funeral boxes."

Malant's eyes grew large.

*They... died!*

It seemed that the Sier wanted to say more, but the old man closed his mouth with a click. A forced smile stole over his features. "Forgive me. Mayhap I'm becomin' paranoid in my old age. I simply want you to be careful, is all. And always keep in mind — the Elmoiriens have their own agenda for invitin' us Humans into their sanctuary. One we have yet to discover. But if you keep your wits about ya, do as you're told, you should be fine."

"Aye—" Malant was forced to swallow before he could speak. "Aye, Sier."

After an awkward pat on Malant's shoulder, the aging Sier hurried from the room.

Malant stood holding the small box, too stunned to follow.

*As if I ain't gotta enough to worry with, I now need to be concerned that my trainin' may kill me?*

## GENESIS OF OBLIVION SAGA - ARCANUM ONE (OPENING FIVE CHAPTERS)

Though his appetite had abandoned him, his feet began taking him toward the initiate dining hall as his mind churned. After all, now that he'd gotten his final instructor to agree he could go, the ultimate decision rested with him. No one was forcing him, and he doubted anyone would blame him if he refused the invitation.

*Nix!*

He shoved his apprehensions away. What was he thinking? The Essence of everything! He'd walk through the burning halls of Rash'ayel's fortress itself, if it meant he could enhance his abilities to meld the Essence.

Standing a bit taller, he strode forward with the confidence of Maja'kasta himself.

*I'm goin' to Hathoolan!*



## Chapter

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“KITH! KITH! KITH!”

Clytus Rillion stood on his seat. His voice strained as he added his elation to the throng of one-hundred-thousand spectators packed inside the Grand Coliseum. He had become just another sheep in a sea of madness. The stupidity of his actions did nothing to taint his excitement, however. In all his seasons attending the Games, never had he witnessed such a spectacle.

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*What a wonderful story I will have for Cyril!*

When his son had brandished a flyer and spoke of how much he would enjoy seeing a real live lionman, Clytus' heart broke. He would give anything to see his son running and playing with the other children his age. He had shed more tears in worry and frustration over the boy's ailment than he cared to admit. If he could force himself to believe in the Twelve, he would attend prayers every day with his wife just for the chance of earning his son even one painless day. Yet even if the Gods were real, they cared nothing for mortal men.

*Nor dying children.*

Still, it was the look of longing on Cyril's face that had compelled Clytus to witness this day's spectacle for himself. Recounting these events to his bedridden child would be a memory they would share for the remainder of their days.

*Days I am determined to extend as long as possible.*

Thoughts of his ailing son threatened to overwhelm his excitement. He pushed them aside. All that could be done for his boy was being done. Besides, though his son could not be here himself, it would not tarnish the joy the boy would experience as Clytus regaled him with tales of the Beastman's fights.

“KITH! KITH! KITH!”

When the Kith beast first emerged from the undertunnels, it let out a roar so loud it quelled the crowd. Of course, Clytus had heard the farcical tales of how big the creature was, yet the one stalking the arena floor stood well over two paces.

## GENESIS OF OBLIVION SAGA - ARCANUM ONE (OPENING FIVE CHAPTERS)

*Towering over even the tallest of men in this country of giants.*

He had never met a blacksmith with shoulders so wide nor a chest so deep.

Clytus sat too far away to see the details of the creature's face, yet he made out the chocolate-colored mane surrounding its head well enough. Honeymilk fur, peppered with darker spots, glistened over its muscular lion-esque frame.

Most who competed in the Games did so under compulsory circumstances. Criminals whose crimes made them unfit to serve as slaves of the city-state. Murderers, rapists, repeat offenders who have earned the ire of the various watches that kept peace within the Grand City of Mocley.

Yet not this day.

The honor of dispatching the famed Kithian from the north fell upon the shoulders of the pugiants — men, and the occasional woman, who found a career competing in the Games. Though, most found it a brief career, indeed.

For the past few tendays, criers had been shouting of this day's event from every intersection in the city.

He did not believe the stories of the Kith's crimes, of course. No news of any massacres anywhere in the city-state's territory had found its way his ears. And news of that import would have reached him before most.

*Hype to sell more tickets, no doubt.*

The ploy worked. The Coliseum could not hold even one more drooling idiot.

*And I have become one of them.*

"KITH! KITH! KITH!"

He did not envy the first pugiant to face the creature.

*Glory be damned, that thing is a monster!*

As he feared, the first fight was short-lived. The beast charged the poor man, lifted him from the ground as if he weighed little more than straw, and tore both his arms from his body. The crowd sat stunned as Aldarek 'Axeman' Drellwer, champion of at least a dozen Games, lay screaming on the arena floor. Even before Aldarek's last breath left his body, the creature let out a roar louder and more bestial than the first. The Axeman's lifeblood spurted from his shoulders like a fountain, with all his triumphs ending as a crimson stain upon the sands he had ruled this past season.

*A stain the crowd will not remember a tenday from now.*

The poor man's wounds were so grievous, even a gifted Sulok could not have saved his life.

*Not that any Healer rushed to the fallen man's aid with that demon of death stalking about.*

The fights that followed took much the same course. Whether alone or in pairs, man after man died at the claws and fangs of the ferocious Kith beast.

Joining the crowd, Clytus cheered when each new pugiant took the field, and groaned when each were shown the gateway to the Aftermore. He kept one eye on the sun, of course. He could ill afford to miss his midday meeting with the Council of Elders, and he had errands to run even before then. Yet he so wanted to be the one to tell Cyril who felled the beast, and how it was achieved.

"KITH! KITH! KITH!"

Which is why, when the twin brothers Baylain and Gaylain emerged from the undertunnels, Clytus leapt to his feet. In his excitement, he dropped half the meat pie he had been eating. As young as they were, the brothers' mastery of combat had become legendary — each having been raised from birth as pugiants to compete in the Games.

He remembered well the Games of last spring when the brothers defeated a horde of O'arkin, outnumbered five to one. A pang of guilt struck Clytus.

*That was the last time Cyril had been well enough to attend the Games.*

Clytus wanted nothing more than to see the twins put an end to the beast. Not only because the brothers were Cyril's favorite pugiants, yet also because his time for leisure was running thin.

They started out well, each twin protecting the other or pressing the attack. However, as the fight progressed, their youthful impatience betrayed them.

*Separation was their downfall.*

Though Gaylain's severed arm promised swift entry to the Aftermore, it was Baylain's death that had been the hardest to witness. It shocked Clytus that the monster had not finish the helpless twin after slaying his brother, instead giving the boy a moment to mourn.

*Perhaps the creature is not as much of a 'beast' as the tales attest.*

When the Kithian bit into Baylain's throat, however, the crowd gasped in unison, as if rehearsed. The twins' deaths would not please Cyril. Clytus would need to figure out how to deliver that bad news before returning home.

Yet for now, he stood on his feet, ensnared in the crowd's jubilation, his voice melding with theirs.

"KITH! KITH! KITH!"

The Beastman stood over the corpse of poor old Salmik. A legend in his own lifetime, the aging warrior had seen more Games than any in living memory. He had been much loved by the crowd.

*Live in the Games, die in the Games, as the saying goes. The crowd will not mourn his passing long, for they have a new champion to adore.*

When the big warrior gained the upper hand via a brutal blow to the creature's head, Clytus marked the beast dead. The Kith's tenacity impressed him, although he groaned inwardly over the fight's extension.

"KITH! KITH! KITH!" His throat ached, on the verge of becoming hoarse.

*Yet, by the Twelve, what a sight!*

Clytus then noticed the Beastman was staring death at someone in the stands.

The crowd pressed in on all sides. This, combined with the annoying height of even the women of this country, served to block his view. To discover what held the Kithian's attention, Clytus was forced to lean out over the rail. His eyes came to rest on the Chancellor's booth, which dominated the western side of the Coliseum.

Bedecked in silk curtains of yellow and blue, the canvas-roofed area stood in stark contrast to the plain wooden benches the common folk sat upon. Seldom was he concerned with who occupied the booth. Clytus discovered a long time gone that his life was healthier the further he separated himself from politicians and diplomats. However, what he saw sitting amongst those who ruled Mocley gave him pause.



## GENESIS OF OBLIVION SAGA - ARCANUM ONE (OPENING FIVE CHAPTERS)

*An... Elmorien?*

Clytus could count on one hand the number of times he had seen the eerie, white-haired race. Secretive as they were powerful, they almost never ventured from the safety of their island home. He glanced back to the victorious Kith who stood glaring at the blue-gray skinned visitor from across the sea.

Finally, the Beastman broke eye contact, lowered its arm, and dropped the helm containing the remains of Salmik's face. It fell to the ground like so much trash. The Kith headed for the portcullis leading to the undertunnels, yet the Elmorien's large black eyes never left the beast as it stalked from the arena.

*There is definitely something between those two. Yet what? And... how?*

Clytus' mind raced over the implications. He had no idea how long he stood pondering what any of it could mean before he noticed the sun. "Bathane's ass!" The curse earned him a dirty glare from an old woman standing beside him. He gave her an apologetic smile. If he did not hurry, though, he would have to skip his meeting with the merchant, Grilmire, and head straight to the Acadèmia.

*The Grand Oversier does not tolerate tardiness.*

That would not do. He needed to procure the last of the supplies for his journey and this day was his final opportunity. He glanced at the sun once more. If he hurried, there was still time to make both.

The crowd stayed on their feet, screaming and wailing like fools even though the Kith had long since returned to the undertunnels. Clytus frowned at the undulating bodies separating him from the aisle. He tugged his fingerless leather gloves tighter over his hands and sighed. Even after two decades living on this continent, being surrounded by so many *round-eyes* gave him pause. In addition to despising the fact that most loomed over him by at least a hand, none kept to a level of hygiene he preferred. He loathed fighting through, yet what could be done about it?

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Pressing his sword against his thigh, he murmured apologies as he jostled his way past his fellow spectators.

As he stepped into the main aisle, the Arbiter's voice echoed from the center box, Essence enhanced to a thunderous level. "Now *that* folks was somethin' you'll tell your grandbabies of! Alas, WAIT! This day ain't but half-done! If you'll fix your eyes upon the southern tunnel, you'll see one of the O'arkin beasts from the Noctera Mountains emergin'."

Clytus did not pause. Instead, he joined the throng who, like him, had come only to witness the Kithian's fight.

"You've the honor of being in the presence of Orm, king of the O'arkin Pigmen! Followed by his elite guards. This day, they have challenged our very own Tomathya, Captain of the Mocley Royal Patrol, and her *Black Outriders!*"

Clytus let the flow of people exiting the stands carry him toward the spiral stairway that led to his freedom from this mass of ill-washed bodies.

The crowd's roar faded behind him once he entered the wide, slopping corridor leading to the Coliseum's main gallery. The booming drums heralding the Black Outrider troop rumbled in his ears as he descended.

Clytus chuckled, half annoyed that he would miss the spectacle. Tomathya and

her men always put on a good show. And O'arkin were as ferocious as they come. Though he doubted the creatures were from the Noctera, much less that their leader was a *king*. Northern O'arkin were reclusive and tolerated no one. As far as he knew, they had no dealings with anyone outside of their mountainous domain.

*No doubt these Pigmen are from the more civilized southern tribes.*

Once he reached the lower level, the crowd thickened into a dense wall of flesh. Clenching his jaw and breathing through his mouth, Clytus began pushing through the throng of bodies.

About halfway to the main exit, the slightest of tugs on the coin purse hidden under his vest came to his attention. More from surprise than need, he opened himself to the ever-present onslaught that was Sujen.

Power flooded through the Bonding Stone embedded in the palm of his right hand and would have infused every fiber of his body had he not halted its incursion by sheer force of will.

With the speed only the Essence could fuel, his hand whipped to his side and snagged the intruding arm. Sujen-enhanced strength, several times greater than the strongest of men, allowed him to hold the invading arm as if it were embedded in stone.

Shifting his position so he could look his would-be cutpurse in the eye, Clytus suppressed a laugh. The thief gaped in horror; his mind unable to comprehend how such a small man could hold him in an unyielding grip with just one hand.

Of course, the thief towered over him. The cutpurse was not tall by Roarthian standards, yet that still put the man a good half-head taller than Clytus himself. Close-set round eyes, short-cropped dirty-blond hair, and a stubbled chin ensured his face would slip from anyone's memory who happened to notice him.

Clytus pulled the rogue closer so he could keep his voice low. "I think you can find a far easier mark than I, friend."

Round eyes wide, the thief nodded. After a moment's pause to allow the man's fingers to release his purse, Clytus let go. Like a rabbit being chased by a pack of hounds, the cutpurse dashed away through the crowd.

Letting out an exasperated breath, Clytus stared after the man. While a substantial sum filled his purse, it held little value to him. He had accumulated plenty of wealth in his life. It was the time he would waste returning home to replace the money he could ill afford. He could not help glancing at the sun once more.

Still, he wished the incident had given him more opportunity to think. Using his powers for such trifling matters was a mistake. Drawing upon Sujen was dangerous and reckless, and left him vulnerable to discovery, even with the small amount he had allowed into himself.

He looked around. The crowd was a motley sort, and he doubted anyone near him would have the ability to mark his transgression.

Though, to his surprise, one man *was* looking directly at him.

A Silawayian, his olive skin glistening with a sheen of perspiration, stood on a raised platform overlooking the crowd. He smiled at Clytus. It was more of a conspiratorial grin than one of contempt. One that implied, *'I see you, and know what you have done. What you are...'*

Clytus' eyes shot to the man's hands and found them hidden within a pair of red leather gloves. His own gloved hands began to itch.

The man did not hold Sujen — Clytus would see the glow of the Essence if he did. Still, that fact did not mean the man was *not* Tat'Sujen. Unfortunately, too much ground separated them to sense if the red-gloved man had the gift. It was the gloves, however, that stoked Clytus' concern more than anything else. The gnashing teeth of terror bit into his throat as surely as the Beastman's fangs had done to Baylain's.

Sure, gloves were in fashion here in Mocley. So that, in and of itself, was no proof of a hidden Bonding Stone in the man's right palm. Yet the stakes were too high to let this be. Especially now. He needed to get close enough to make sure one way or the other.

Shoving through the crowd with renewed intent, Clytus forced his way toward where the man stood. As he went, his fingers wrapped around the hilt of his belt knife. The thought of murdering a man just for looking his way appalled him. More so considering it would be a direct result of his own folly having used his powers when he should not have.

*What needs be done, needs be done.*

Once he worked his way to the platform, however, the man had vanished. Clytus' head whipped around, scanning the crowd. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and his anxiety rose to a palpable level. He weaved through the throng, relying more heavily on Sujen to press through. The enhanced strength and speed Sujen offered meant Clytus slammed into people harder than socially acceptable, earning him more than one dirty look. Yet he no longer cared. Could not care. Desperation clawed at his mind, spurring him on.

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When he found his target, what he saw stayed his hand. The red-gloved Silawayian stood near where Clytus had his run-in with the would-be thief. He greeted a tall Roarthian woman with long, blonde hair. They embraced, then began chatting with each other as they headed deeper into the Coliseum. Never once did they glance his way.

*That man is not hunting me.*

The Silawayian must have been looking over Clytus' head at the blonde woman who must have been standing behind Clytus. Sometimes the simplest answer was the correct one.

*Damn the height of these round-eyes!*

Even with this realization, Clytus watched the couple until they disappeared from view. Both continued to have eyes only for the other, which was a relief. With a nervous laugh, he shook his head, then peeled his fingers from the hilt of his knife. Tension washed away with the last of his fear.

*I am getting paranoid in my old age.*

No. Paranoia had kept him alive long enough to call himself old. He could ill afford to let his guard down now. Still, it had been stupid to use his powers in public.

*Ragnor will give me an earful if he hears of this.*

With a start, he realized he still held Sujen. Reluctantly, he severed his connection

to the Essence. Its abatement left behind a longing nothing except Sujen could fill. It remained on the edge of his senses, a constant reminder of its desire to fill him to the brim.

He let his gaze pass over the crowd one last time. If anyone was paying him any mind, they escaped his notice — not an easy task.

His eyes found the sun again.

*I still have time.*

With an unamused grunt, he took one more deep calming breath before turning and exiting the Coliseum by way of a small side archway. Once outside, he stepped onto Pugian Way and joined the tide of people walking by, allowing the crowd to sweep him toward the Bazaar.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**M**axwell Alexander Drake — or Drake as he is known to friends and fans alike — has been writing professionally since 2007. He is invited to teach creative writing at colleges, writers conferences, and fan events across the country as well as holding monthly classes at the Clark County Library District. He holds the distinction of being the only author ever invited to teach his creative writing classes at the San Diego Comic Con for Seventeen years in a row now.

He was the Lead Fiction Writer for Sony's Massive Online RPG EverQuest Next, has written for other game properties, such as Shadowrun, and is currently the official storyteller for Harnworld, the oldest fantasy RPG setting ever created.

In addition to being an award-winning novelist, he has also won awards for screenplays, and currently has a children's movie in option.

He lives in Las Vegas with his wife and two sons.

Find out more about him and see a schedule of his appearances on his official website, [www.StarvingWriterStudio.com](http://www.StarvingWriterStudio.com).

Arcanum One of the Genesis of Oblivion Saga will be released in late 2024. For more information about it, please visit: [www.StarvingWriterStudio.com](http://www.StarvingWriterStudio.com)