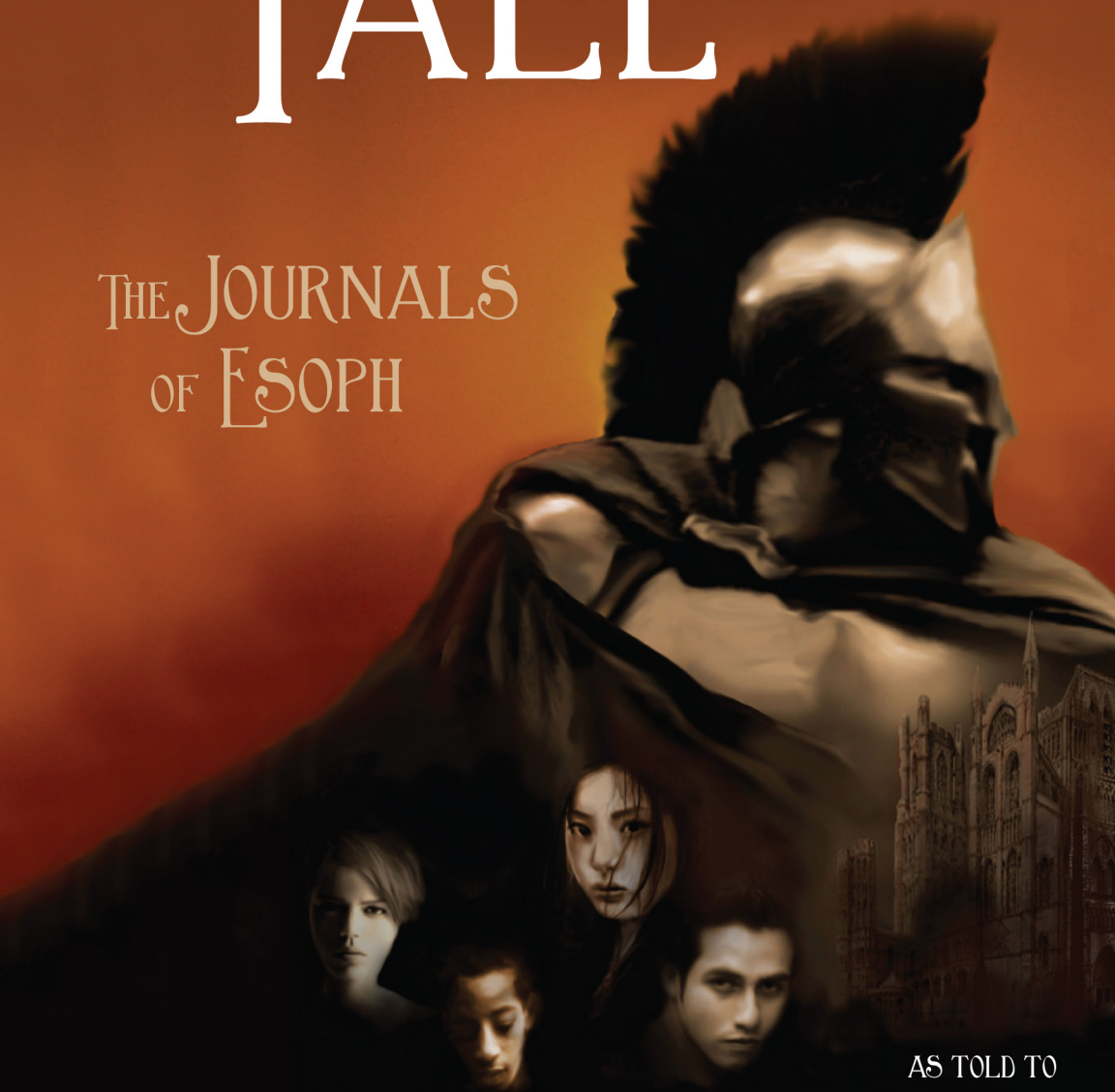


# TELLER'S TALE

THE JOURNALS  
OF ESOPH



AS TOLD TO  
ANGELO VERDELLI

# TELLER'S TALE

FROM THE JOURNALS OF ESOPH

As told to Angelo Paul Verdelli

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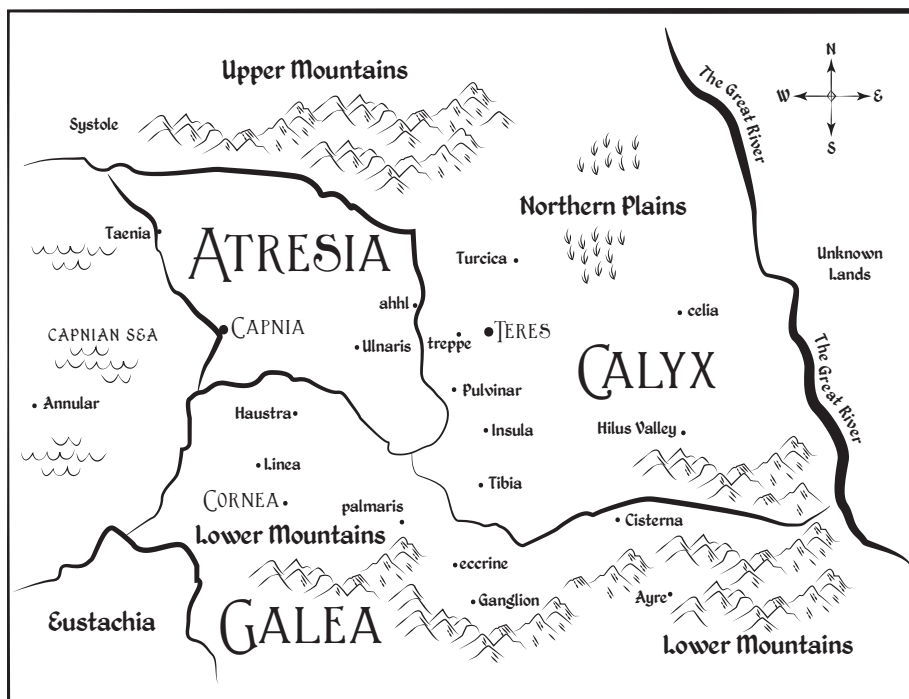
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To Pam, Cindy, Nicole, Armit, David King, and to Mary my mom: Life changing endeavors cannot be accomplished without the help of others. To those who helped me through the process, I am grateful.

—Angelo Verdelli





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# BOOK 1

## THE RISE OF TALUS





# PRODIGAL SON

A lone man saddled his horse behind the castle stables. The air was brisk causing his breath to show in the dawn mist. Grabbing the bridle, he lifted his leg up into the stirrup. For a moment Talus hesitated before attempting his mount. Earlier that night, before going to bed, he had felt confident of the plan he was about to put into action, but now he wasn't sure. Was he doing the right thing? The anger that consumed him took over and with one swift motion he was upon his horse. The hour was at hand.

Few opportunities were given to a prince to leave the castle unnoticed. The country was at peace. The drawbridge had just been lowered for the baker's morning delivery. As their custom, the sentries rotated at dawn. Most of the soldiers began to gather their belongings, anticipating their discharge. The watchmen that stayed behind were either too sleepy to move or too involved with their talks of women and gambling to notice the quiet rider. He passed over the drawbridge without protest. The months of planning were now a reality. He had passed his first test. The simple disguise of darkness and shadows had worked.

Once free from view, Talus kicked his horse into a gallop and raced toward the eastern border. Wearing a dark cloak to cover his royal robes, he looked like the rest of the travelers who journeyed along the road to Teres. Who would think a prince would ride unaccompanied on this particular trail known for its beggars and thieves?

Hours away from the border, he now had time to think. Pacing his horse for the long journey, Talus began to reflect upon his life. Three minutes he thought to himself; three minutes—the difference between being king or a traitor. His hands clenched the reins tightly as the anger once more surged through his body. The recent discovery about his birth haunted him. Talus had changed. No longer was he a prince willing to live his life known as the future king's brother. His lineage had been stolen from him by a witch, a hag, who was not even worthy to wipe his boots. Again the wrath that

motioned him toward Teres pulsed through his veins as he thought of the event that had altered his life forever.

The road offered little for scenery; the terrain consisted mostly of fields and swamps. Clusters of trees, some resembling small forests, broke the monotony of trampled grass and mud. Unexpectedly the landscape changed as he plodded through a wooded area. The trail had led the prince to a small gorge. Being familiar with the road, and its inhabitants, he tried to create an alternate route only to be thwarted by the cultivated thicket and thorns. Whoever arranged this passage made it self-evident; turn around or enter at your own risk. The gorge was six-feet deep and about twelve-feet wide. It was designed to barely allow a wagon to pass and just deep enough to prevent a horse from jumping out to the ledge above. Talus entered cautiously steadying his horse as it sensed danger.

As he reached the midway point, a voice cried out. "Hallo and who might you be?" A rotund man, short in stature, stepped out on the ledge above with a cross bow aimed at the prince's heart. Normally Talus would have been an imposing figure at well over six feet tall, but being trapped in a hollow made the prince look less than commanding.

"I am a traveler from Capnia who begs mercy to allow me passage through this gorge," said Talus in a hesitant voice, trying to mimic the others who had fallen prey to the robber.

"I would grant it dear sire, but it would be remiss of my sort to not ask from you a token for that mercy," said the highwayman with a sly smile.

Talus slowly reached down toward his saddlebag. Releasing the strap, he grabbed a small bag of coins. "How much would such mercy cost?" The prince spoke never taking his eyes off the cross bow or the stranger.

The robber forced a laughed with his reply. "All that there is in that bag, I suppose."

Talus grimaced at the thought. "Sir, if I may call you that, this would be all the money I have to my name. Teres is so far away. Would it please you only to take half so that I may have enough for my food and lodging?"

The request angered the highwayman who raised his bow toward Talus' head. "T'would better to be cold and hungry for a night than to be dead, would it not?"

Reluctantly, Talus threw the bag of coins just to the right of the man, landing a few feet away from his boot. As the thief turned in a downward motion to pick up the coins, Talus kicked his horse and sprinted to safety beyond the wood he had entered. The prince patted the other small bags of coins in the satchel as he fastened the buckle. "All part of the plan."

The plan; how did he get here? His mind wandered again as he slogged through more mud and trampled grass. Since his birth, he knew his brother Ramus, as by law, would be king. The boys' sibling rivalry began as soon as they could walk. Who among them would be the faster, the stronger, and the smarter. Talus, the quick and the sturdier of the two, won most of the challenges. He was the best hunter and the best swordsman. Talus remembered how he would ask his father, Clavius, to change the law and let him be king, but Clavius always replied, "It would be better for the kingdom that you look after Ramus and be his most trusted guardian." Talus did not agree but accepted his fate because, despite their rivalry, they were above all brothers.

As time went on their positions in life dictated their behavior. Ramus focused on his studies becoming more serious, while Talus lived life with reckless abandon. Ramus socialized among the nobility knowing his standing required a reputation above reproach. Talus' reputation, on the other hand, became more sullied with each pleasure-seeking excursion to the capital city with the head stableman's son, Fossa. Talus always gravitated toward the more physical pursuits of life and Fossa was a natural cohort. Together they were an imposing pair. In a tavern you could easily spot them for they were heads above most in any crowd. The only difference was their appearance: Talus had straight black hair with chiseled facial features while Fossa had reddish curly hair with no distinct facial features at all. Their positions in life also dictated their friendship. Talus was the leader while Fossa followed.

As he rode, Talus' mind wandered to that fateful night and to the moment that changed his life. The place, a pub he and Fossa liked to frequent regularly called the Apple Blossom. The women were particularly friendly for most were hoping to win the affection of the prince on a nightly basis. Fossa enjoyed the attention he received as well for some of the girls would snuggle up to him in hopes of getting closer to their prize, the prince. The

night offered no insight as to what was about to happen. The women, the wine, and the occasional Totchpak match made the night ordinary.

Totchpak, a game invented by the Plainsmen, was played out in a pit four-feet deep and sixteen-feet wide. This was the arena in which the contestants battled. The object of the game was to get out of the pit first while being tied around the waist to each other by a twenty-foot length of rope. Fossa and Talus rarely challenged each other so the match that took place that fateful night was considered an event. The combatants, having had a little too much wine that evening, started the contest looking more like two drunks stumbling home than those trying to wrestle. They playfully slapped at each other occasionally falling down, the one standing offering a hand to his adversary on the ground.

Everyone knew that the prince and stableman's son were fierce competitors and soon the real match would begin. It started with Talus picking Fossa up, which was no small feat for someone sober. The stableman's son was six foot six and weighed over 300 pounds. Hoisting Fossa above his head, Talus threw him to the ground. The impact shook the dirt off the walls of the pit creating a cloud of dust. The match was on. The pain in Fossa's ribs, from a stone he had landed on, cleared Fossa's head from his drunken stupor. He was now sober enough to fight and was very angry. Talus, still feeling the euphoria of the wine, began laughing at his friend. The stableman's son retaliated by sweeping his leg through the prince's feet. Talus fell backwards and within a second Fossa was up and ready to pounce on his opponent. Talus, no longer seeing humor in his friend's eyes, realized his folly. The prince propelled himself forward by lifting his legs and then landing on them, thwarting Fossa from taking advantage of his vulnerable position.

They began to circle each other. While in motion, each reached out toward their opponent to begin their next move. With each attempt to grab hold, the other countered. For several minutes this dance of flailing arms and legs continued, and then Talus stumbled giving Fossa an opening. The stableman's son grabbed the rope and wrapped it around Talus' neck. Positioning himself behind the prince, Fossa pulled the rope tightly, cutting off any air to his adversary's lungs. Talus, now red faced, summoned all of his strength and flipped Fossa to the ground in front of him. The prince stood over his victim as he unwrapped the rope from his neck.

As Talus tried to catch his breath, Fossa kicked the prince in the outer thigh. Talus collapsed to one knee allowing the stableman's son to stand up. Fossa then locked his hands together and crashed his forearms into the back of Talus' neck. The battle looked to be ending, with Fossa winning once more, but the prince had other thoughts. As Fossa reached for his wounded opponent, Talus grabbed the rope. Twisting the line around Fossa's legs, the prince pulled the rope in hopes of taking the stableman's son down. Fossa landed on his back, his head hitting the rim at the edge of the pit. Now stunned, the stableman's son tried to shake it off only to find he was being dragged by his feet to the other side of the pit. Desperately he attempted to untangle the rope while pulling at the line to halt Talus' march towards his exit and triumph. Just as he managed to free his legs, a loud cheer erupted from the crowd as Talus raised his arms up in victory. The match was over.

An old man approached the prince as he was sitting back down. Talus had seen the man at the Apple Blossom before. He was unusually old for the typical crowd found there. Most of the older men hung out at the Sea Urchin with the crusty old sailors and told stories of their glory days. On this night he approached Talus after that particular Totchpak match. The prince was pouring Fossa some wine to ease the pain of losing when the old man approached. Talus looked at the elderly gentleman with curiosity.

"What's your business here old man? Do you want to challenge me to Totchpak?" Talus looked at the girls who had gathered around him and joined in their laughter.

The white haired man replied. "No. Oh Nooo!" The old man turned pale at the thought. Looking at the prince, he continued. "I have been sent to tell you of a great wrong that took place at the time of your birth."

Talus looked puzzled as he turned to Fossa, and then the prince smiled. "Was I supposed to be a girl?"

Everyone laughed, including the old man. "Heavens no," corrected the stranger, "but you should be the next king!"

At this Talus stood up. At six foot four, he towered over the elderly gentleman. Raising his voice in a commanding tone he asked, "Who are you?"

"As I told you my prince, I was sent by my master to correct a great wrong."

Talus pushed the stranger aside and said, "Foss, let's go." The stableman's son immediately got up and fell in behind.

"Wait," the old man called out. "I have proof."

Talus turned around as if he had been stabbed. Looking down at the stranger, Talus conveyed his anger with each word he uttered. "Where is it old man?"

"Not here," said the elderly gentleman. "Let's go somewhere..." as he motioned with his head at all the people strolling, "less crowded."

Talus took the old man by the arm as the three men entered the street. The night was clear and unusually warm for spring. They stepped out onto the cobblestone avoiding the gutters that ran to the sea. Oil lamps dimly lit the road and establishments while candles lit the doorways of the houses along the way. No one said a word until they turned the corner. Abruptly, the prince turned toward the old man. Fossa strategically stood behind the stranger preventing any escape. The prince put his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Talus looked down and whispered, "I should kill you now for suggesting this treason against my father, but I want to know the name of your master so that I may have the pleasure of killing him, too."

"Let it be so, Your Highness," said the old man, "but if I speak the truth, will you spare my life and that of my master's as well?"

Talus complied in silence, his hand no longer on the weapon.

Fossa followed the stranger as Talus led the trio to a table and chairs across the street. The restaurant was closed providing them a place to talk.

"My name is Manus," the old man said. "I am Galian by birth but Atrisian by heart. I worked in the castle at the time of your birth. Rumor had it that something went terribly wrong. Only now can I tell you the truth." Manus removed a cloth parchment from his pocket.

The old man continued, "A woman named Gyri helped deliver you and your brother. She confessed to me, after much persuasion, the truth of that fateful night. Written here, on this parchment, is where she lives." He handed the cloth to Talus, who dropped it on the table as if it were scalding.

"On the night your mother died, she gave birth to you and Ramus. You, my dear Talus, should have been the firstborn, but you were a breach. Your mother was growing weaker with each contraction. Gyri pushed you out of the way to deliver Ramus, expecting you to die within the womb. Your mother's last words were to deliver you and with that the surgeon

cut her open and removed you from her dying body. Instead of being the younger, you should have been the elder of the two sons by three minutes.”

The revelation hit Talus like a stone in the Totchpak pit. He was stunned beyond words staring at the paper he'd dropped on the table just a moment earlier.

Fossa spoke up. “The King, Clavius, does he know?”

Manus looked at Talus as he replied. “Yes, Clavius knows. He was there at your birthing. He has blamed you for the queen's death and so he punished you by taking away your birthright.”

Talus put the parchment in his pocket, turned to old man and said, “Go in peace.”

Manus thanked Talus for listening to him and headed across the street back toward the place of his lodging.

“Tal, you're going to talk to this Gyri, aren't you?” Fossa, still not comprehending the total impact this had on Talus, called out again,

“Tal, Tal.”

Fossa was unaware that he was now shouting at his friend.

“TAL!”

Talus looked up at the only person he could trust, tears running down his face.

“Yeah, Foss, we'll see her.”

As he reached into his pocket, his hand clenched the parchment. The prince spoke the words again. “We'll see her.”

They rode back to the castle together, neither saying a word as they parted ways at the stable. Fossa headed toward the servant quarters where he lived with his father.

Talus headed to the castle where, for the first time in his life, he felt like an outsider. The young prince walked through the kitchen remembering life as he once knew it. A vision of himself chasing Ramus around the table, pie in hand, to avenge the egg his brother had thrown at him. The yolk still dripping from the back of Talus' head as they tumbled chairs to slow the other down while the servants stood back screaming at them both to stop. Laughing to himself, Talus continued through the castle. The prince then entered the grand hall where he was reminded of the banquet in his honor for winning the Golden Arrow, an archery challenge, beating



men twice his age. Finally passing the throne room, Talus saw the chair where the king sat looking as empty as his heart.

He was thankful that his brother and father were now sleeping. His servant attended to him: fresh nightclothes, warm water for washing, and a goblet of wine. Talus said nothing as the servant excused himself for the night. After cleaning up, he finished the wine and proceeded to lie down. His head swam with the various thoughts that invaded his mind: his mother's death, the king's hatred toward him, and his brother's desire to become king. The more he thought, the angrier he became. It took another goblet of wine before Talus slowly succumbed to exhaustion. He fell asleep not knowing who he was anymore.

Manus arrived at the boarding house. He felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his old frame. He entered his room, fell to his knees, and addressed his master. "It has been done, master." Manus paused waiting for a reply. The old man continued. "The vessel is nearly full with only one spoon of poison left to take." Manus waited for approval. None came. "It will soon be time for you to present yourself to him so he can be used as you desire." Again he waited for approval and again none came. "May I leave now?"

A dark translucent form appeared in front of the aged kneeling man, "I free you from this physical world."

Manus got up and walked toward his duffle bag. He removed a small sword from the bag. He unsheathed the blade and raised it toward his chest. With the care of a surgeon, he placed the sword in such a position as to pierce both lungs while driving the blade through his heart. He took a deep breath, mustered all of his strength, and completed the task. He was now free.

# DESTINY REVEALED

The next morning, several hours after everyone else began his or her day, Talus awoke. No one took notice because this was commonplace for the “younger” son of the king. After getting dressed, he wandered to the kitchen for something to eat.

“Any new conquests?” The fireman asked as he emptied his arms of the load of wood he had just split and carried in.

“No,” Talus said softly. He remembered how the fireman lived vicariously through him, being one who was neither rich by birth or in looks.

Talus grabbed some flour cakes and a pitcher of milk that he had spied on the counter.

“Hey you! Get a vessel!” Zona had been the matron of the kitchen since before the prince was born and treated him more like a son than her superior. Zona stopped what she was doing and looked at the young man who appeared disheveled. “Another long night for you, eh?”

“Yeah, Zo.” Talus continued to drink from the pitcher ignoring her request.

“Ramus has been looking for you. Classes have been cancelled and he wants to go hunting. Are you up to it?”

“Yeah, sure.” Talus continued eating as he spoke.

Giggles could be heard from across the room as two maidens walked in to deliver eggs giving the prince more than an inviting smile.

Talus returned the look giving them both reason to chirp in delight. The prince then finished the last flour cake he’d stolen from the tray. “Hey Zona, they were a little dry this time.”

“Oh, buck off!” Zona knew he was trying to get under her skin. She loved Talus. She felt ever since the prince was born that he wasn’t given a fair shake.

“He is what Clavius made him to be,” she’d say to anyone who would listen. “He ain’t bad, just misguided that’s all. The king has his favorite and Tal ain’t it.”

Ramus entered the kitchen knowing Talus would be there, "Hey, Tal, how about a hunt?"

"Sure, let me down the last of this milk so Zo has to squeeze another cow before lunch." With that, milk dripped down from both sides of the pitcher as Talus gulped what was left. Wiping his chin and then wiping his hands down the front of his shirt, he announced that he was ready.

Ramus and his brother proceeded toward the stable where Fossa was grooming the horses used from the night before.

"Hey, Fossa."

"Hey, Foss."

Both brothers addressed him as if he were family and not one of servitude. Fossa just nodded as he continued his work. Each gathered a horse from the stable and then walked to the hunting station where they armed themselves with bows, arrows, and spears.

Ramus and Talus were identical twins. Ramus was as tall but lankier than Talus. He, unlike Talus, did not fill out his frame partly due to his station in life, requiring him to be more studious and less physical. Talus, on the other hand, learned the value of lifting heavy objects on a regular basis, which showed in his arms and chest. They rode off together with Talus leading the way. As they came to the royal hunting grounds Talus slowed his horse to a trot and turned to face Ramus who had slowed in kind.

"Hey, Ramus, I've got a question for you."

"Yeah, Tal?" Ramus looked to be enjoying his escape from the learners who hounded him daily.

Talus continued, "If I wanted to be king, would you let me?"

Ramus replied, "I would but father wouldn't allow it."

"What if Dad was dead?" queried Talus.

Ramus looked insincere as he answered. "He would haunt me. Besides, why do you want to be king?"

Talus hung his head while keeping his horse at a steady trot. "I was just curious."

The hunt went well even though Talus' heart was not in it. They came back with a deer and a boar. Talus, as on most hunting excursions, had killed them both. The sun was setting when they entered the stable. Fossa had just finished his day when he caught up with Talus.

Witnessing the two brothers parting in opposite directions, Fossa asked, "Hey, Tal, are you okay?"

Talus looked at his friend and said, "Yeah, we'll talk." They walked off together toward the castle to grab supper and plan their nightly excursion into the city.

In the castle there were two rooms where one could eat, the Grand Hall and the nook. The Grand Hall was just that, a ballroom with a large table placed in the middle of it. The room was used mostly for parties and important guests. It made a statement of prestige and power, if needed, with armor ornamentation along the walls to remind those of Atresia's military might. The nook was a cozier eating space with a table about the size found in most family dining rooms. It was just beyond the kitchen, which made it easier on everyone.

As Talus and Fossa entered the nook, Ramus was all ready eating the roast that was prepared by Zona. She entered as soon as the boys sat down.

"I'd offer you some flour cakes to sop the gravy but somebody ate them all this morning," she looked at Talus as she spoke.

"It's okay ma'am," Fossa replied. "Those potatoes will do just fine." He grabbed the bowl and emptied half of it onto his plate. Zona had been feeding the three boys for years and made sure there was enough food for ten.

Fossa, attempting to strike up conversation, turned to Ramus and said, "Tal told me the hunt went well."

"So I heard," said the king as he entered the room; nobody stood or bowed. The king sat down. As Zona served him she made sure Talus could see that the king got flour cakes for his gravy. "I am glad Ramus asked you to go on a hunt," said Clavius.

Talus would not have thought anything different about that remark if it wasn't for the revelation last night, but Talus then realized the king might have been arranging things for a while. Did Ramus even like hunting? Talus sat wondering how deep the deception went.

The small talk ensued. The subject quickly turned toward Ramus who was being pursued by the Lady Sura, the Lord of Taenia's daughter. Of course Talus offered his advice, being more tongue in cheek than anything serious. They all laughed but behind the laughter Fossa could see a sadness enveloping his friend. By dessert, Talus excused himself from the

table. Fossa, not to miss an opportunity for a little more of Zona's pie, cut himself a large piece of the pastry. The stableman's son then proceeded to dump it on his dish. At that, he excused himself from the table and followed Talus to the stables.

Talus had the parchment in his hand when Fossa caught up to him. "We're seeing her, aren't we?" asked Fossa.

Talus nodded as they gathered up their horses and rode into Capnia. The ride to Atresia's capital was longer that evening, or so it seemed. Talus wished he had never talked to the old man. He wished he could forget but as hard as he tried, the truth was revealed. His father hated him so much that he denied Talus his birthright, while Ramus made sure his chief rival was kept close to his side.

Down toward the wharfs, taverns and whorehouses lined the streets. The laughter, shouting matches, and brawls created a deafening din. Fossa and Talus walk down the alley to a flight of stairs indicated on the parchment. The stairs led to a door above the tavern below. Talus looked at the parchment once more to make sure the address was right.

The prince turned to Fossa and said, "I need to go alone."

"Sure, Tal," said Fossa who had started up the stairs behind the prince and then slowly descended back down them.

Talus knocked on the rotten wood, which made a poor excuse for a door.

"What you want?" screeched an old woman from behind the wooden frame.

"I want to talk to you." Talus replied as he leaned into the door, which started to give way from his weight bearing on it.

"Talk's cheap, go away," sneered the old woman.

"I've got gold," implored Talus.

"That's what the last one said, he did, and what did I get? He hurt me bad," screeched the old woman.

Talus now knew what kind of persuasion Manus had used. Talus was running out of ideas. At last he shouted, "Clavius sent me."

There was silence. A minute passed and a voice much softer rang out from behind door, "Ramus, is that you?"

The prince realized that she must have been part of the conspiracy. "Yes, it's me, Ramus." Fossa looked up at Talus with confusion but the prince extended his hand toward his friend signaling him to remain silent.

The latch slowly opened. The room, dark and musty, looked worse than the door. The old woman, bent over with age, looked up at Talus stretching her neck as far as she could to see his face. "Oh, I was afraid you'd be the other one." She shuffled to one of the only two chairs in the room and sat down. Talus grabbed the other chair and placed it in front of the woman. He braced himself as he sat hoping it would not break from his weight. The only light came from an oil lamp on the table making it difficult to see her face clearly.

"I want to know what happened the night of my birth," asked Talus.

The woman shook her head as she leaned on her cane in front of her. "Sad thing that was, a sad thing. He should have died for being a breech. It's a bad omen that is, being a breech. I would have let him die, but the surgeon saved him against my wishes." The woman pointed her shaking finger at the prince. "You are the true king my dear Ramus, not Talus." She nodded as if giving credence to her statement. "Clavius said so after the surgeon spared him. Everyone knew Talus killed his mother. He should never have been born," clucking her tongue as she relived the event.

Talus clenched his fists trying to remain calm as the woman rambled on.

"He killed your mother. I could have saved her but I was pulled away. I told the king, I did." The woman looked up once more at the prince. "It wasn't right, he being cut from your mother to be born and your mum dying."

Talus could not control his emotions any longer as he grabbed the woman by the neck and suspended her in the air. "You hag! You don't deserve to live!"

The woman's eyes widened being unable to speak.

Fossa, hearing the commotion, ran into the room. There he saw Talus' hand on the old lady's throat. Her feet were lifted off the ground as he pressed her against the wall. Her face was gray, her lips slowly turning blue. Fossa could not allow his friend to take her life. Summoning all his strength, the stableman's son pulled at Talus' arm trying to free the old woman. Fossa could see the rage on the prince's face, the fury making Talus more determined to end Gyri's existence.

"She's not worth it, Tal! She's not worth it!" yelled Fossa.

Fossa was the only one in the entire kingdom who had the strength to drag Talus away from her. Four of the best soldiers working together would

have failed. While Talus was working in anger, Fossa worked out of fear. The adrenaline was so intense they strained muscles trying to complete their objectives. Finally, Talus gave up and submitted to his friend. The woman fell back slumping into the chair sideways. As Fossa hustled Talus out of the room the old woman barely whispered, "You'd been dead if I had my way!"

Fossa dragged Talus through the streets of Capnia preventing him from going back to complete his mission. After several attempts on the prince's part to free himself from the stableman's son, he finally relented as they approached a more familiar part of the city. At the Apple Blossom, Fossa shooed the girls away making up a new excuse with every encounter. He then went to the barkeep where he asked for a flask of wine, two goblets, and not to be bothered.

Talus threw back the last of the wine in his cup. Looking at his friend, he spoke for the first time since the incident with the old woman. "I can't stay here. It's all a lie; I have no family, no place to call home."

Fossa poured more wine into Talus' goblet and said, "I'm beside you, no matter what. I'll go where you go."

"Thanks, Foss." Talus smiled just enough for the stableman's son to know the message of his loyalty was received

He won't let me leave you know," said Talus.

Fossa looked like a dog that had heard an unfamiliar noise. "Huh? You mean Ramus?"

"No," said Talus. "He's just trying to be a good son and besides, he knows he will be king."

"Then who?" asked Fossa.

Talus looked at his friend, trying not to let the words hit him as hard as the thought of it, "My father." Talus looked so serious, it took Fossa by surprise. Talus continued, "I need to come up with a plan to escape, and I may need your help."

More than the usual Totchpak games broke out as Talus and Fossa engaged in conversation. The boys of the city, seeing Talus and Fossa alone, realized it was their chance to woo the women. This offered a nice diversion and a chance to forget what happened earlier in the night.

The next morning Talus woke up to the rain beating against his window. Today was the first day of his deception. He acted as he always

had, never letting on the truth within him. All day long he thought of his escape but nothing came to mind. He needed money, lots of it. A country of safe harbor and to let his brother know his position to the throne was safe. Talus knew Ramus would not pursue him to the ends of the earth if his brother understood that he was not a threat, but Clavius would. Talus thought of the countries of trade: Systloe, Eustacha, and Annular. He thought of Galea or Calyx, but felt they were too close. He thought of going beyond the Lower Mountains or traveling past the Great River to unknown lands. The logistics became maddening and by the end of the day, he was exhausted.

Talus knew he had a wealth of resources at his disposal because Atresia was the country of commerce. The country offered any traveler a wealth of experiences and opportunities. Because of its position along the sea, it was a great bastion for innovation, philosophy, and religion. Thinkers, mystics, and conjurers gathered in hopes of exporting their ideas. Atresia had the best of what their world had to offer.

Though Talus was a prince, the monarchy was not the sole authority of his land. It allowed its people some influence within the power structure by having "Sessions". A Session allowed a group of people from a city or town to have an audience with the king and his advisors. Similar to a trial, the king would sit as judge as each argued their point: The needs of the region versus the needs of the kingdom. The king would remain impartial as he heard the debate. A good king would find a way to compromise both; Clavius was one of the best. Talus knew that controversy, especially involving the future monarch, was bad for business, and the people were all about making a profit. His father had to remove the risk that would weaken the throne. Talus now knew he was the risk that Clavius feared could change the fabric of power in Atresia.

Fossa had dropped by the nook in the castle after completing his duties at the stable. For Talus, dinner was uneventful. The king and Ramus were both in particularly good moods. News of a newly discovered land was brought to Atresia. Ramus and the king were eagerly discussing what new treasures would be seen with the next ship from Annular. Talus excused himself and caught up with Fossa who was having leftover pie in the kitchen.

The prince stated the obvious. "Don't you ever stop eating?"



The stableman's son shoveled the last piece of pie in his mouth, handed the plate to Zona with a muffled "Phank you," and headed toward the stable with Talus.

As Fossa picked the crumbs off his shirt to eat he turned to Talus and said, "Any ideas?"

"None." Talus sounded discouraged.

"Hey, my uncle had a problem once and he went to one of those mystics. Maybe we should see one of them." Fossa was hoping the idea had merit, but Talus didn't seem to give it much value.

"Thanks, Foss, but I am not sure if someone rattling bones and burning incense is right for me." Talus chuckled as he spoke mocking the proposal that his friend had offered.

"Yeah, you're right, Tal, forget about it. What about a thinker? They're smart, or at least they say they are," continued Fossa.

"I don't know Foss, let's just go to The Blossom." This seemed to be a recurrent theme for Talus. The more he thought of a plan, the more it eluded him. Day turned to night and each night ended drunk. He became so despondent that he considered Fossa's idea. On one evening, when the stableman's son had finally accepted that Talus was going to drink himself to oblivion, the prince suddenly changed their itinerary.

"Let's go," urged Talus.

"Fossa announced their agenda. "To The Blossom!"

"No. To rattle some bones and burn incense." The prince then turned his horse in the direction of Capnia.

It was a foggy night and given the task at hand, a perfect backdrop to be looking for gravediggers as Talus would call them. Each part of the capital had a particular flavor to it. The mystics gravitated toward the eastern edge of the city, stating it was the most spiritually open area in the region. As he walked down the street, hawkers called out to the passersby.

Talus began to feel foolish and thought about turning around when she approached him. "My name is Lacunae. My master sent me to find you."

She was beautiful and unlike the charlatans who beckoned their victims off the streets, she had an aura about her. Her hair was flaming red. She was wearing a low-cut dress drawing your eyes to her chest, while her hips

demanding as much attention with her short hem exposing her legs to the misty air. If she were at The Blossom, he would have spent the night with her alone but here she offered more. Was this the same master who sent Manus? Talus had to know.

She led them down several streets only to turn left onto an alley away from the hawkers. "They give us a bad name." She paused just momentarily to catch the eye of the young prince.

"Here, through this door," she said as she entered a room where a small crowd had gathered.

"They are the gatekeepers," she said. "They will prevent the unwanted spirits from intruding upon our sitting."

She led them to another room where two men stood guard. "You," she said as she looked at Fossa, "will stay here."

The stableman's son looked at Talus for confirmation.

Talus shrugged his shoulders and said. "It's okay, Foss."

Lacunae then led Talus to yet another room where she lit a lamp. In the room was a small table just large enough for two people to sit with walls covered with symbols, none of which Talus understood.

Lacunae asked Talus to sit down as she brought the lamp over and placed it between them. The mystic then sat at the opposite end to face the prince. She placed her fingers over his and began to enter a trance. She let go of his hands as she opened her eyes and placed hers, palm first, on the edge of the table in front of her.

"The gift has now been bestowed upon me. My master will now help you." Lacunae spoke softly, as one would talk in their sleep. Talus looked across the table; Lacunae no longer looked beautiful, the mystic now looked possessed.

"The king has set forth a terrible fate for you, Talus," she said as her eyes burned his with her stare.

The prince lost his composure for only a second when she said his name but then regained it as he realized that everyone knew who he was. He tried to remain skeptical.

"Clavius will soon become ill," she continued. "He will ask Ramus to be king but with one condition. He must help kill you." Lacunae continued to stare at the prince as she spoke.

Talus was shocked with disbelief. Ramus would never hurt him. He wanted to be king but not at the price of killing his own brother.

She added, "Ramus will at first refuse, but the lure of being king will be too strong. Clavius will reveal the truth, forcing Ramus to choose between the crown and you."

"Even if you tell him that his position is safe, Ramus will not be able to rest until the throne is secure. His new love, and soon to be queen, Sura, will insist on it. Is your life and loyalty worth more than the crown and his love?" Lacunae queried, her tone lacking emotion.

Talus looked down at the table. It all made sense. He realized that making his plan for escape was naïve. "What will become of me?" he said as he felt his time in the world ending.

Lacunae's beauty returned along with the lilt in her voice as she said, "I am here to help."

Lacunae stood up. The trance now lifted. She started to walk around the room. "You are more powerful than you can possibly imagine, she said as her eyes caught his once more. "My master has a great interest in your well-being and will send guides to help you."

Talus, at this point, realized he was trapped between two powerful forces: Clavius, the king, versus this master whom these people serve. So far, this master desired to see Talus alive while the king desired to see him dead. "What do I have to do?" Talus spoke as if he were bargaining for his life.

Lacunae leaned over Talus who was still sitting in the chair, her arms reaching down toward his chest. "You must trust me." Her breath caressed his ear.

Talus began to collect himself, the allure of the moment had passed. "This master of yours has taken quite an interest in me, why?"

Lacunae continued circling the table slowly, allowing Talus' eyes to follow her. "Let's say we have a mutual interest."

Talus kept staring at her as she walked around him, "What would that be?"

Lacunae stopped, looked directly at Talus and said, "Power."

Lacunae could see that Talus didn't quite understand so she continued, "You need power to survive and my master needs power to defeat his enemy."

Talus felt unsure. He tried to comprehend everything that was being said. "How does my survival help him defeat his enemy?"

Lacunae sensed she had the prince's interest. "He has a plan that involves you playing a small, but important role in 'The Great Battle'. Another could easily fill this role, but my master has taken a liking to you."

Talus decided to gamble. The prince summoned all of his composure. Standing, Talus used his height as he had before to intimidate. The prince raised his voice for added effect, "I want to meet this master of yours."

Lacunae laughed. "You have no idea who you are dealing with, do you?"

Talus sat down, seeing his bluff had failed.

"There are forces out there that dwarf the most powerful armies. My master doesn't rule a mere kingdom like Atresia," Lacunae said looking at Talus as one would a child they were scolding. "He rules the world!"

Talus, feeling chastised, looked up at Lacunae. "Tell me more about this master of yours and how my life may be spared?"

Lacunae looked at him and said, "Enough has been said tonight. Now that you are receptive, my master will inform you of his plan when the time is right. For now, leave and return when the moon is nigh."

Talus left the room looking less confident than when he first entered. Fossa got up from the bench that was barely holding the three enormous gentlemen. "Hey, Tal, are you okay?"

Talus looked at his friend as if to say 'Not here'. Moments after Lacunae departed, the two guards escorted them through the other room.

Once they got out of the house Talus turned to Fossa and said, "I need a drink."

The Apple Blossom was quite lively. A stranger was taking on all challengers in Totchpak. "I am Vasa, warrior from the Northern Plains. Is there anyone among you worthy of my challenge?"

Talus and Fossa ignored the stranger, having more important things to discuss.

"So Tal, what happened?" asked Fossa impatiently.

"I don't know for sure, but according to Lacunae there is a force greater than us at work trying to help me I guess." Talus was still trying to shake off the aura surrounding his experience.

"Force?" asked Fossa.

"Yeah, it's the same being that sent Manus," said Talus.

"Okay, I'm lost. Being? Force?" Fossa grabbed Talus by the shoulders. "What are you talking about?"

In the pit another Atresian fell to the hands of the stranger who called out again, "Is this the best you have to offer? Children?" Vasa taunted the crowd once more.

"Foss, it's bizarre but the bottom line is I now know more about my destiny than I did yesterday," Talus said trying to reassure his friend that he was not crazy.

"So Tal, what is your destiny?" Fossa sounded dubious.

"To become king, I guess; I don't know ... Lacunae said she'd tell me more later this week."

"How are you going to do that, Tal ... Clavius will kill you." Fossa now felt compelled to question everything that this Lacunae had told his friend.

"There must be a way to prevent my death and usurp the throne." Talus spoke as if confident of the mystic's plan.

"Yeah, are you willing to kill your father?"

"Only if I have to, I mean if my life is in danger. I am not a murderer." Talus knew Fossa was not as persuaded as he was by the woman they had just met.

"And what about Ramus? How is he going to take not being king after studying for it his whole life?" Fossa now seemed to be challenging the whole line of thought that Lacunae had presented to Talus alone in the room just an hour earlier.

Vasa strutted around victorious once more as yet another Atresian fell victim in Totchpak. "Are Atresians mere women compared to the Plainsmen? I'll challenge two at once!" He mocked all in hearing distance.

Ignoring Vasa, Fossa continued, "I don't like it, Tal; we can get away. We can go to the eastern border, enter the plains, and be gone.

Talus looked distant.

"Did you hear what I said? Tal, Tal ..."

Talus was looking at Vasa who had just defeated two men in the pit. The stranger who had just lifted himself to the rim, circled around, dropped his loincloth, and urinated on his opponents.

Fixed on the scene transpiring before him, Talus spoke aloud. "That's uncalled for."

Fossa stood up. "That's it! He's gone too far." Yelling across the room, the stableman's son pointed at Vasa. "Hey dung heap, now it's time to feel the wrath of the Atresians!"

The crowd cheered as Fossa hopped into the pit to help out his two countrymen. Vasa jumped down to meet his new challenge only to be met by Fossa, who wiped his wet hands on the hide that covered Vasa's chest. The Plainsman smiled knowing he had a challenger worthy to fight. Each man stared at the other as they tied the rope around their waists. Fossa was taller, but the Plainsman was stout. They seemed evenly matched.

The crowd chanted Fossa's name, but he was oblivious to it all. He was a master of Totchpak. He knew any distraction could mean the difference between winning and losing. He also knew that his opponent was as skilled as he, for only the best could beat two combatants at the same time. Something he had done himself on occasion for a wager or to impress a maiden.

The two men sized each other up, offering each other their hands to grasp. Having height, it seemed Fossa had the advantage, but the Plainsman turned it around quickly by flipping the Atresian over his back. Fossa's legs crashed into the wall of the pit causing him to land awkwardly. To keep Vasa off him, Fossa pulled the rope. The Plainsman slammed into the wall and landed on top of him. The stableman's son then picked up Vasa and threw him to the other side of the pit. This gave Fossa a chance to get up. The crowd cheered.

The stableman's son didn't fall for the same trick twice. He didn't take the offer when Vasa raised his hands to grasp. Instead, the Atresian slapped his opponent's hands away and then scooped up the hunter, slamming him to the dirt. The Plainsman swung his legs through Fossa's causing him to drop to the floor of the pit. Vasa pounced on his fallen opponent. The Plainsman then used a move the Atresian had never seen before; Vasa had Fossa's right arm pinned while squeezing his neck with his legs. Losing his breath and only having use of his left arm, Fossa pushed the Plainsman's head away from his body. The force broke his opponent's hold.

Remembering Talus' trick from the previous match, he began to wrap Vasa's legs with the rope. As the Plainsman kicked to avoid being tangled by the line, Fossa lost his balance just for moment and landed on his opponent. It was then that Vasa jabbed his thumb into Fossa's throat, breaking

his windpipe. The competitor in the stableman's son took over as he stood up. Dragging the Plainsman to the edge of the pit, the Atresian began to climb out. The crowd was ecstatic only to be silenced as Fossa fell back lifeless. Vasa howled as he untangled himself from the rope and jumped out of the pit. Talus ran to his fallen friend, but it was too late. Fossa was dead. The Plainsman escaped using the confusion unfolding around him; his mission was now complete.

Talus quickly searched the crowd for the stranger. Not seeing him, Talus ran out to the street in hopes of gaining revenge, but it was too late. Fossa's murderer had vanished.

# THE LONG NIGHT

Vellus overlooked the capital from his palace. It was sundown; the horns were calling the hunters home. Soon the gates of the city would be closed for the night. Tomorrow would change Teres for the better, he hoped. An opportunity presented itself to the country of Calyx in the form of a spoiled prince. The prospect had made the last council meeting contentious at best. Vellus, the ruler of Calyx, kissed his several children goodnight as they paraded by him to their rooms. His wives adjourned to their quarters following their children. Alone, he was left to overlook the city through his window as darkness invaded the horizon.

Needing to feel that his father loved him, Talus had begun correspondence with Vellus two months earlier. The prince's plan was to be kidnapped and then ransomed to his father Clavius, the king of Atresia. Calyx would receive all the gold and Talus would return home, having proof that Clavius sincerely cared for the younger prince after all. Calyx was a poor nation, and the gold could be used to help its people. On the surface it had no risk but when it involved a nation like Atresia, there was always the potential for ruin.

At the time Calyx became a nation, a council was formed to unite the Plainsmen. Every chief had a voice; every voice was heard. A high chief was chosen by the council to rule the people. It was a position of honor and for life. The majority ruled within the council, having fourty of the fifty chiefs being the majority. The high chief would dictate all of the other proposals brought to the meeting, making the position one of influence.

By the time the council had gathered, the rumor of this prince had been swirling for days among the attending chiefs. Some saw it as easy money while others saw it as a political entanglement. The Chief of Elad was the first to speak, being concerned about the matter.

"My brothers some of us here are older and remember the great wars our nation has endured. Atresia and Galea have both invaded our lands many times in the past and will do so again in the future. Don't be fooled by the



peace that has given us this prosperity we've enjoyed over the last twelve years. The city that we gather in was not a design of peace but a design of war. Many times during the day our neighbors would overrun our borders. Many times we as a people fell back into the plains, only to fight at night for what was ours. We grew tired of this fighting, so we united as chiefs and created barriers to prevent this from happening again. This city is one of those barriers. The high chief rests his head here to insure the safety of us all. I tell you this not to instruct you, but to remind you that peace is not permanent as long as one man desires a thing another man has.

"We have now been offered a choice for our nation. Do we risk the peace for much needed gold, or do we savor the peace that we have before it is lost once more? I tell you gold, like peace, is fleeting. The needs of our people will remain after the gold, you have acquired is gone. Our children will continue to be poor. Our lives will remain unchanged. We are hunters who rely upon our animal brethren for food and shelter, not merchants who parlay one treasure into another. The gamble is too great in angering a nation more powerful than our own. The son of a king is the king's concern and not this council's. We cannot get involved without its wrath being brought upon us, either by the king or by the 'would be king'. My voice had been heard; my peace remains with this council." Chief of Elad then bowed slightly in respect to Vellus and proceeded to sit down.

The council mulled over the chief's words until Sem, the Chief of the Hilus Valley, addressed the members. "We need to look at whom we are speaking. What is gold to Atresia? A spoiled child wants to know what he is worth to his father. Isn't our responsibility to keep our neighbor's son safe? If we deny this boy refuge, will he not go to the thieves who could do him harm within our borders? Then what do we say to the king whose son and gold are lost forever? This opportunity is not of our making, but we are involved no matter what the council chooses. Clavius could simply refuse to pay the ransom, in which we return the boy unharmed. We will not go to war, nor risk the fury of our neighbor, if we choose to remain at peace.

"My brother Elad had said that the gold would not make a difference in our lives. I say that it will. Are we destined to remain hunters as our neighbors create new opportunities and grow? Once our ability to trade is lost with Atresia and Galea, to whom do we go in order to obtain those things

we cannot make ourselves? The gold can be invested in our cities to foster trade. We can invest in artisans and skilled men to teach our children alchemy, the fashioning of tools, and craftsmanship needed to build a future. If our high chief were one of greed I would agree with my brother, but he sees the value in my words and the value of investing in our future. My voice has been heard; my peace remains with the council.” Sem looked at Vellus; smiling slightly at his friend as he returned to his seat.

Various members of the council echoed the chief’s views. Sometimes the words became more heated, but the sentiments remained the same. Rhodo, the Chief of Celia, brought forth a proposal of sending all the correspondence to Clavius and letting him deal with his son. The idea had merit. It would free Calyx from the responsibility of the boy’s well-being and maybe Clavius would reward them for being so forthright. The high chief pondered it all. At first he was confident in being a willing accomplice of the prince but as the night went on, he became uncertain.

Vellus was a relatively young for a high chief. He was chosen for two reasons. He was the most educated of the Plainsmen, having gone to Atresia for his schooling, and he was the great-grandson of Mesa, the 13th born of his family. Mesa was the first of the high chiefs over eighty frosts ago. Vellus, being high chief for the past eighteen frosts, had proved himself worthy on many occasions. He negotiated the last peace treaty between Galea and the Lower Plainsmen, allowing them to receive the needed medicine and physics to tend to their children. He also prevented an uprising between the families of the Northern Plains when hunting rights were violated. His greatest achievement was the re-opening of the border between Atresia and Calyx. Though he never met Clavius, he was the one who counseled the Atresians who debated on his behalf. It was his arguments that convinced the king to continue trade after the road to Teres, the capital city of Calyx, became too dangerous. The night lingered into the early morning without a consensus being reached among the chiefs. It ultimately became Vellus’ decision. He adjourned the council with a promise that his answer would come the next day before the council members left for their homes. The high chief, in solitude, returned to his palace. The palace resembled a large house more than a place of prominence and was centered in the middle of the walled city. This gave the high chief a fundamental location

and an invading army a place to focus its attack. Vellus, being the leader, was expected to die, if needed, in defense of Teres. The fact that the palace was in the inner most area of the city was no accident. It prevented any means of escape for the ruler of Calyx.

Vellus read the correspondence over and over again hoping to glean something from this prince who felt unloved. The letters all sounded the same, but the one that struck him the most was the first.

My lord and High Chief Vellus:

I beseech you to hear my voice. I am the youngest son of Clavius. Though I will never be king, my desire is to find out my worth to my father. I want to know if I have meaning as a son, or if by birth I am a mere afterthought born from my mother's womb.

Soon I will be of an age when I will leave Atresia and seek my own way. Since there is no future for me here in my own country, I have only one question left to answer. Have I earned my father's love? I propose a simple transaction between Calyx and Atresia. A modest sum will be asked for my return. It is not the money I seek or to foster any animosity among your people and mine. All I need is a means to answer the question that cannot be answered by words. It is the act of sacrifice that will prove to me where my place is in the king's heart. If he chooses not to pay for my honor, I will leave your nation and travel to lands unknown for I will have no home.

I am most obliged to you and your people,

Talus, the youngest Prince of Atresia

Vellus looked at this letter over and over trying to find something that wasn't there. He had sent out his messengers to find out more about this Talus. Known as a drunk and a womanizer, it was after his friend died in a Totchpak match that he had changed. He could be genuine. He lost his best friend. He had no hope of being king, and his reputation was lost within Atresia, making his desire to leave credible.

But what if he was wrong? What if this boy who wanted to be ransomed had an ulterior motive? Clavius had nothing to conceal. What would the king gain by trapping Calyx? But what if this Talus had a plan to usurp his father's throne? How could this work to that end? Vellus was in his forties and had trouble capturing the emotional level he had when he was twenty. The decision was his and in the morning, he would make it. He went to bed alone praying to his God for wisdom.

The next morning the chiefs gathered once more. There was nothing left for the assembled to say, only the high chief's voice was to be heard. Vellus stood before the council; each word he spoke was carefully crafted the night before.

"I was convinced before entering the council meeting of my decision but after hearing all of your voices, I went to bed deep in thought. My decision is based on my faith in our god and in the goodness of our people. We will offer this boy safe harbor. We will demand ransom, as is our right. 'If any son of nobility is to be found within another's border uninvited, it is within the right of that country to receive payment for his well-being.' If Atresia refuses to make payment, we will release him at the border and we will no longer be responsible for his safety. We will notify Clavius of this action. If at that time the prince decides to return to Calyx, he does so at his own peril." The chiefs accepted the decision and dispersed. Vellus returned to his house feeling drained and exhausted.

The horns sounded one last time to signal the closing of the gates, returning the high chief to the moment. Vellus turned away from the window. The die had been cast. Tomorrow the prince would arrive and with him the future of Calyx. He walked through the living room where reminders of his heritage were displayed. He was Mesa's great-grandchild. Walking passed the tokens of his lineage, he wondered to himself what his grandfather's father would have done. Entering his chambers, his third wife lay in waiting. She brought him comfort, but he found no peace in his sleep.

# THE GATHERING

Teller felt the imbalance. He had known of the evil that planned to invade his home but The One was with him. He opened *The Book of Esoph*. As he read, he looked not for guidance but for hope.

“We believe we are all one: with the earth, the air, and the sea. By being joined to all that live in the physical world, our actions affect one another. But what joins us? What if this connection was not just a spiritual sinew, like an ore pulling one stone toward another, but a bond that connected us to another living being? Not blindly affecting each of us in the world but one with purpose and thought. If we were connected, would not this being know us as intimately as we know our own hand? Would it not be in this being’s best interest to care for or bring to health everything within itself? Would it not love each spirit as you love yourself?”

Teller felt a change in the world. The leader of Galea knew that his life, along with his people, was about to be altered. The Darkness would soon be arriving. He put down the book and began to pray. Using meditation, he placed himself in the moment, for The One was timeless. He felt at peace within his breath. He allowed the moment to take over as he communed with God. He listened to his heart, the connection all around him. His pulse, the pulse of his people, and the pulse of the earth all joined as one within him. Without words, he knew the will and the hope of The One. Teller opened his eyes, having no concept of the time that had passed. Having regained the peace, which The One offered, he closed his eyes once more and fell asleep.

The Temple of Molaris is where the leaders of Galea assembled. For a fortnight the See’ers concluded something ominous in the stars. At the same time, the Sayers had begun to have visions of malevolence. Teller, the leader of Galea, had called for a Nissl or a gathering. He had been warned of impending doom in his dreams. Being the eldest of the Galeans, Teller slowly rose from his seat and addressed those who had gathered.

“My friends and my family in The One, we must prepare for the evil that will scourge our land. The Darkness has disturbed the balance in his world and ours as well. The peace we have will soon be lost. We will again be at war with our neighbors.”

A member of the Nissl questioned Teller, the leader of Galea. “Neighbors? Do you mean Atresia and Calyx will ally against us?”

Teller responded, “The Darkness will use all of their resources to defeat The One by way of Galea.”

Lauric, a See’er who studied the stars intensely, joined the discussion. Compared to Teller, Lauric looked like a child. The See’er had barely turned twenty. Teller was in his eighties and had been the head of Galea through the last war and through the latest peace.

“Teller, the stars have foretold of a great battle where spirit and man are cojoined. This battle will challenge The One’s supremacy. Before this occurs, an emperor will rise from Atresia and his war will be upon us. Darkness surrounds him and he will do its bidding. This emperor will be the one who will disturb the fabric between the realms causing ‘The Great Battle’. He will make this temple his domain and the place of the battle foretold.”

The people attending the Nissl pondered what the See’er had said. Some nodded in agreement having seen the constellations. Others showed concern, for the temple was the heart of Galea and it would be lost. Those who were cynical of the stargazers spoke up; saying the See’ers had been wrong before, and that the stars were not always revealing.

It was then the Sayer named Psoas added his thoughts. Psoas was the leader of those who could see visions of the future, so his words held weight among the Nissl. Being a Sayer, he was the first to predict the peace when the Mountain War seemed to have no end.

“The stars are correct I am afraid to say. ‘The Great Battle’ will result in the loss of Glean blood and our temple will be in peril.” He continued, “The emperor will wage war with all: Atresia, Calyx, and ourselves. The Darkness will make this emperor a vessel of destruction and a tool in opening a passage to Celestia. It will be then that the spirits and man will join in combat.”

Psoas nodded to Lauric to acknowledge that the See’er was correct in his analysis and then added to the prophecy. “The One has presented to

me a reflection of hope. Four will arrive from lands beyond our own to challenge the emperor. They will be lost within our world. Because the emperor will see them as a threat, we will need to keep them safe until they become part of us and of The One”.

“I too have had the visions,” Falx added, “and concur with my brother Psoas. The disturbance in the fabric must be brought to order before both of our realms are destroyed. The future not only of our world but also of others depends on it. If we fail, the emperor will not only rule over us but many like us throughout worlds known and unknown. He will be able to travel realm to realm, realizing more power than we could imagine. He will amass a great army to challenge The One. I, too, have seen the four but in the hands of the emperor. My question to you, Teller, is this: how do we keep them safe if they are in the hands of our enemy?”

As the Nissl continued, concerns for Galea and fears of the emperor arose. Who was he and how would he be able to usurp the throne of Clavius? Atresia loved their king. They would never allow someone to harm him. But the four strangers commanded most of the discussion among the gathering. If they were to have the ability to challenge the emperor, why did the Galeans have to keep them safe? And how were the strangers to be handed over to the emperor?

Teller concluded the Nissl by easing the fears of those who attended.

“My children, it is not our destiny to choose the path we would favor; however, it is the path we must endure. The One will guide us, for without The One what hope would there be among ourselves? Life would end; memories of even the greatest would fade in time for who born is eternal? Whatever happens will be the desire of a being greater than us. Tomorrow we will prepare for the days ahead. Rest easy knowing that all is the will of The One that created us.” Teller then stood up, acknowledged his brethren, and left the room.

In the past Galea was no stranger to war. History proved that they were the most feared of all the countries, but now it had become deeply spiritual. It only desired peace within itself and the world around it. The country changed with a man called Esoph. A philosopher, Esoph sought to make sense of his place in the world and in doing so altered Galea in the process.

After the revelation of Esoph, the country began to live by his Books of Law: *The Law of God* and *The Law of Man*. *The Law of God* rested within the temple walls presiding over all concerning The One. *The Law of Man* governed all that was secular under the authority of the Assembly who gathered in the Great Hall of Cornea, the emperor's palace long ago.

Galea evolved to become a nation of farmers and herders. The farmers populated the lowlands and valleys while the herders inhabited the mountains and highlands to the south. In the past, warlords ruled each region with an emperor exuding control over all. Their way of life was that of conquest. Since Esoph, Cornia became a center of trade. If war were to come, the capital city of Cornea would be threatened and so would its people. Teller called the Nissl not only to discuss the impending doom but also to develop a plan to present to the Assembly the following morning.

As the sun rose, Teller joined the Assembly in the Great Hall. The Assembly consisted of men and women who were chosen not by their peers but by a calling. Each felt the need to serve Galea and their god. The Assembly's roster fluctuated from less than a hundred to over a thousand. The elders within the Assembly sat in judgment over secular matters while the apprentices studied the The Books of Law and assisted in the community.

The Assembly was more of an extension of the Temple, providing Teller with a way to focus solely on spiritual matters. Those who had a higher calling could leave the Assembly and become one of Teller's disciples known as Sharers of The One. They would live among those in Galea and the world to promote a deeper spiritual life by teaching others the way of Esoph. When a Teller passed, it would be the Sharers who would gather in Cornea and through the Levitum, choose the next person to assume the name and lead Galea. A Levitum was a procession where each Sharer would traverse the sacred passage deep within the temple, a narrow hallway fifty yards long with no light or doors. As they came out they would know whether they were the Sharer chosen by The One. The last Levitum occurred over fifty years ago.

Teller addressed his followers.



“There have been signs and visions telling of an evil that will invade our land. The One has given me hope of survival in this time of danger. Those who are not of the Temple or of the Assembly will be given a choice to leave or stay Cornea. We, who are devoted to The One, must remain. Our desire will be to discover and then repair the disturbance that our enemy creates within the temple walls. We will not fight this darkness but co-exist until the time is right. Then, with The One’s help, we will overcome this evil presence within our borders.

“Time is short. Preparations must be made for those who will leave Cornea to seek refuge in the valleys and mountains. The invaders must not know we plan to fight. We must safeguard our weapons so we can use them at the appropriate time. Strangers will dwell in our homes and our streets will not be safe. Those who stay must not trust anyone who doesn’t profess The One. We, in this Assembly, will be the connection for all who remain in our city.

“As members of the Assembly, you will need to find a way to communicate outside the normal ways of life so the evil will not know of our plan. When The Darkness is upon us, we will need to seek the four strangers who have been foretold. It was seen that they will be handed over to the emperor, and it is imperative that we save them from the gallows. Once they are safe, we will need to teach them our ways and the way of The One. These strangers will hold the key for victory over our enemy. I must caution you, if the evil among us thrives, every living being in our world, and those not known to us will suffer at the hands of this emperor. The One’s very existence in our world may be threatened if we do not succeed. Go now and tell the people of Galea what you have heard and help them prepare for the days to come.”

After addressing the Assembly, Teller’s chief disciple, Alba, approached him. “Teller, if you stay won’t you be this emperor’s first target?”

Teller turned to his young apprentice. “Yes, my child, I will, but I must stay. It was foretold to me in a dream that to defeat the evil I must be handed over to the emperor. It is through this act that I will meet the four strangers and guide them until ‘The Great Battle.’ Alba, you will need to lead our people at that moment until I return. If The One chooses to take me from this world, you must help the strangers and look for the signs that will defeat The Darkness.”

“How will I know what to look for?” Alba sounded concerned, not only for Teller but for the world which would then be depending on him.

“Lauric and Psoas will be with you,” Teller answered. “They will offer you The One’s wisdom. They will show you the signs as they come to pass.”

Alba remained uncertain, but Teller’s confidence in him and in The One assured him that everything was going to be all right. All they could do now was wait.

# IN THE TOWN OF AHHL

Talus finally arrived in the border town of Ahhl. Three additional bags of coins were spent with five remaining. He was tired—of the ride, of the thoughts that penetrated his head, and of remaining an outcast. All of this would change soon as the plan unfolded. He thought of what he had to do and the reason why. He couldn't escape his father's hatred and that he, Talus, Clavius' own son, was in the way of his father's grand design of insuring his successor. Also, the fact that those who were loyal to the crown supported Ramus convinced Talus that he had no choice. It was either follow through with this master's plan or die by the hand that gave him life.

Ahhl was a typical border town. The dirt roads were a mixture of manure and mud, making every step treacherous. Torches were used to light the streets. Lanterns lit the various establishments along the road. Everyone looked dirty, muddy from their travels, and no one smiled. The town offered little but a place to sleep or drink before moving on the next day. He entered The Nomad, one of the two taverns in town. After getting a goblet of wine, which had bits of cork floating in it, he asked the barkeep about a room. The barkeep looked at Talus, sizing up the stranger and his ability to pay. After passing his inspection, the barkeep told him a room was available for a condyle. Talus gave him a gold piece for the wine and the room. The man looked at the coin and then up at Talus to re-evaluate his original assessment.

The barkeep was in his fifties, balding, and overweight. He looked like he had been doing this his whole life, which he had. He had never been wrong until now. There was something more to this stranger than met the eye, but he couldn't figure it out. Talus asked him to have a pitcher of water waiting in the room.

The proprietor, now seeing this man had money, added, "Would ya like a little company fir your stay?"

Talus thought of what that company might look like and shuttered at the thought. "Just the water and to not be disturbed."

The barkeep motioned to his wife who looked like his perfect match. She waddled up the staircase to ready a room.

"Where ya going?" asked the barkeep while quickly filling Talus' half empty goblet and picking the cork from the vessel.

Talus brushed the barkeep's hand away from his cup saying, "That won't be necessary," while refusing to acknowledge the barkeep's question.

After finishing the wine, he was led upstairs by the portly woman. The barkeep's daughters were standing by a doorway in the corridor. The two rotund girls giggled as he passed by. Talus ignored their presence as he pushed by them to get down the hall. As he entered the room, all he wanted to do was sleep. He washed his face with the water left in a basin, took off his outer clothes, and laid on the bed. After a minute, he got up to arrange the room. He placed a chair under the bolt to jam the door. He then took his sword and leaned it against the bed rail and hid a knife under the pillow. He trusted no one; he had no friends. As he drifted off to sleep, he kept thinking of Fossa. What would have happened if he were alive? Would they have just ridden off finding new lands and places? Would he have joined him in this conspiracy? The answer never came, only thoughts of sadness at the loss of his friend.

After Fossa died on that fateful night, the days began to blur. He hunted for the Plainsman throughout Capnia. Then the day arrived when the moon was nigh. If nothing else, he thought, Lacunae might be able to help him find the plainsman called Vasa. That night he walked by the hawkers once more. Taking a left down an abandoned street, he met one of the two guards who had stood watch over his lost friend. The man looked Talus in the eye. "My mistress told me to find you."

He led Talus through the doorway where they met the small crowd that was there before. Entering the inner room, the guard stopped before entering Lacunae's chamber. "Wait here." The large man then knocked softly upon the chamber's entrance.

Lacunae opened the door; she was ravishing. Talus' eyes widened to capture the woman before him: her red hair flowed down her back; her dress silhouetted her form, while her deep blue eyes pierced his soul. The prince had missed her, having not realized it until that moment.

Lacunae grasped his hands and said, "I'm sorry about Fossa." Then she led him to the table and had him sit down; the lamp was already in place.

Talus looked around trying to figure out the symbols. None of them made sense. His eyes wandered around the room until he saw some letters that he could make out. "Solus."

Lacunae took his hands and began entering a trance. Very quickly, she was again transformed. After opening her eyes, she started to speak. "Talus, your time has come. My master needs to know whether you are ready or not to take the next step?"

Talus looked at Lacunae; he had nothing left to lose. "I am ready."

Lacunae rose from her chair and began to circle the room. "If you fail, it will be your life, but if you succeed, you will have your revenge."

Talus knew exactly what she meant; her master would deliver Vasa to him. Nodding, he said, "What do I have to do?"

Without hesitation she spoke without emotion, "Kill Ramus."

Talus jumped up. Stepping back he knocked the chair to the floor. "No! I won't."

Lacunae walked over to Talus and placed her hands on his chest. Then softly she whispered in his ear, "It will be you or him who will die by frosts end. If you die, my master cannot help you; you will not avenge Fossa's death, and..." as she leaned closer towards him, "you will not have me."

Lacunae recoiled and proceeded to walk around the table once more, circling Talus as he tried to calculate the cost. He thought of Fossa and how Fossa might have counseled him at this moment. Then for the first time, he felt a surge of anger. Anger so intense it swallowed him whole. He thought of his father's hatred, his culpable lying brother, and the friend who remained lifeless in the pit. The anger reassured his answer, "I'll do it."

The Nomad's owner held the coin in his hand. Strangers never use gold to pay for anything, a fatal mistake on Talus' part. The fact that he requested not to be disturbed meant he traveled alone—mistake number two. The barkeep sent for his friend to arrange a deal. Crus was as old as the barkeep but in much better shape. He was the leader of a band of marauders who took advantage of lonely travelers such as the one sleeping upstairs.

The barkeep looked at Crus and whispered, "He's got gold! No one ever pays with gold in Ahhl. Not if they've got any sense, they wouldn't." The portly man continued. Balancing the coin on end, he tipped it so it fell flat.

“And I suppose that we should help him take leave of what sense and gold he has, don’t you my friend?”

Crus nodded. Then in a gravelly voice the marauder replied, “How much is in it for you?”

The barkeep tallied the bill in his head. “Let’s see ... damage to the room ... loss of a good customer ... a nick in the tavern’s reputation ... I’d say a 50/50 split should cover it.”

Crus looked down at the barkeep shaking his head. “If it were going to be easy, you wouldn’t have called me. No, there’s something you’re not telling me. What is it?”

The barkeep looked back at Crus and whispered even more softly, “He’s a noble.”

Crus yelled back. “What? Here?”

The barkeep shushed his friend and began to explain, “My dearest saw ‘e was wearing noble clothes.”

Crus scratched his head. “I don’t know. It might be sticky business being friends of the crown, you know.”

“Okay, how ‘bout 40/60 and I’ll take care of the body?” Handing Crus the gold coin on the table to sweeten the deal.

Crus looked at the barkeep and said, “All right, but if there be any questions, I got nothing to do with it, right?”

“Right,” said the barkeep as he stretched his hand to shake Crus’.

Crus leaned over pushing the barkeep’s hand away. Then taking out a knife he pointed it towards the barkeep’s face as he softly asked, “Where’s he staying?”

Talus had been asleep for hours when the four men readied themselves to invade the room. One crawled up to the window; another positioned himself in the adjacent room while Crus and his brother Tru waited in the hallway. The interloper unlocked the door with the barkeep’s key. As the marauder pushed slowly to gain entry, he felt resistance.

Tru whispered to his brother, “There’s something in the way.”

Crus became annoyed with Tru’s ineptness. “Push through it.”

The marauder did as his brother ordered. The chair landed on the floor waking Talus. The four men charged into the room. The prince grabbed his knife stabbing Tru, the first to get to him. He then threw the wounded

thief toward the man entering from the room next door. Knife in hand, Talus threw it at the man entering by the window. The intruder screamed in pain as the blade hit its target. This bought Talus time to get his other weapon, kicking Crus out of the way. Talus grabbed his sword. The prince unsheathed the blade and, with one fluid motion, cut down the man who had freed himself from the wounded Tru.

The only one left was Crus who was pointing a cross bow at Talus' heart. "My brother had better live." He took aim and shot. Talus used that split second to position himself for the oncoming arrow. Deflecting it with his blade, he plunged the sword into Crus' chest. The battle was over. Talus cleaned the blade of his weapon before returning it to its sheath. Then he proceeded to retrieve his knife from the man lying across the windowsill, causing him to scream once more. The prince then calmly gathered his belongings and headed down the stairs. Banging on the barkeep's door, he yelled to wake the owner up. The portly gentleman feigned being awakened by the noise, but the shock on his face gave him away. Talus looked down at the barkeep; the portly gentleman stammered as he answered the door. The prince put his hand on the barkeep's mouth to stop him. Looking at the portly man in a worn nightshirt, he spoke slowly to insure the barkeep's absolute comprehension of the request. "I need another room."

The time for concealment was over. The next morning he strode down the stairs wearing his royal robes. He looked at the barkeep who had been up all night cleaning the room. Talus asked one of the portly daughters for something to eat. She quickly ran into the kitchen. Giggles were heard as the two daughters discussed who the nobleman might possibly be. Minutes later, pastries were handed to him folded in a fine napkin. He thanked the maiden who swooned at his feet and then asked for his horse. The barkeep brought the stallion to the front of the tavern. The maidens hurried to meet the nobleman outside to capture a final glimpse of the stranger. Talus looked at the barkeep with disgust as he mounted the stead. The maidens handed the young nobleman flasks of water and sweet rolls for his journey. Leaning down, he kissed the hands of each of the girls and smiled. Talus mouthed the words, "Thank You." Then pulling on the reins, he spurred his horse toward Calyx.

# THE RANSOM

The countryside changed as he headed toward Teres. The road slowly turned from the grass and mud while in Atresia to rock and sand the further he traveled into Calyx. No one approached him as he traveled. Talus did not anticipate an attitude of indifference. The prince thought by being dressed in a royal manner while riding unaccompanied that somebody would stop him. After hours of journeying, Talus entered a town called Treppe. The air in the town was dry and hot. Water seemed scarce, even the horse's trough was empty. He tied his horse to a post and entered what looked like a tavern.

The few patrons, who happened to be sitting at separate tables, stopped to stare at the young prince. He walked self-consciously to the bar. "I need water for myself and for my horse."

The waiter laughed. "Your honor, there is no water."

"What do you have to quench my thirst?" ask Talus.

"Wine or rum," offered the waiter

"What about my horse?" inquired Talus.

"The stable can offer your horse some water, but it's not fit for humans to drink," said the waiter.

"Will it make my horse sick?" Talus looked out the dingy window at the stallion; its head was buried in the empty trough.

The bartender laughed. "The water is mixed with malt; he may not get sick, but he could get drunk."

Talus fumbled through his pocket for a pent or two. He was not going to flash gold again in a strange town. I'll have a cup of wine. He looked down at the goblet; at least there wasn't any cork in it this time. Talus found that the wine tasted better than he thought being in such a dry town. Downing the last of his drink, the prince got up, retrieved his horse, and walked his stead to the stable.

A burly man met him at the barn door. "Your Honor, what can I do for you?"



"I would like to water my horse. Handing the reins to the burly man Talus continued. "Whatever you have to freshen his journey will do."

Right away, chief."

"Chief?" Talus said to himself. Then the prince knew why he wasn't being stopped. The townspeople thought he was one of their tribal leaders passing through. There were so many of those damn things running around, no one wanted to insult one by guessing wrong. To Talus' amazement his horse was given a bucket of fresh water, which he appreciated. If something were to go wrong, he didn't need a wobbly horse. "How far is Teres?" he queried.

The burly man looked up strangely at Talus. "How can you not know how far Teres is?"

The prince thought quickly and replied, "I traveled south around Teres to see an old friend, and I must have lost my sense of direction."

This satisfied the burly man who answered respectfully. "Teres is five leagues from here. That is why we are so surprised to see you. By horse, you're less than an hour away."

Talus was an hour away from his destiny. An hour away from starting the plan that would result in his brother's death, Fossa's revenge, and to have his birthright restored.

The horns announced the arrival of the prince. The high chief prepared himself for the visit from the young prince. Before he would send a ransom request to Clavius, he would meet this spoiled child and determine if he was genuine. If he was not, he would follow Rhodo's suggestion by delivering him to Clavius with the correspondence he had received.

The gates were already open. The guards looked at the prince suspiciously but let him pass unimpeded. All was at a stand still as Talus rode through the city while the throng that gathered on the sides of the road stared at him. He tried not to let the feeling of so many eyes affect his confidence but if one was to look closely, you could have seen that he was shaking in his boots. Luckily, the prince was on horseback, which concealed this from the curious crowd.

As the prince approached the palace, he could see the high chief waiting at the top of a large stairway. This gave him a sense of relief. Talus stopped his horse at the foot of the stairs. A young man attended to the animal as soon as he dismounted. A guard stopped him before he started his ascent.

After being disarmed, he proceeded to climb the steps. When the prince reached the high chief, he knelt on one knee and bowed his head. Vellus acknowledged Talus' show of respect with the wave of his hand.

The leader of the Plainsmen spoke softly. "Welcome to Teres, the capital of Calyx. I am Vellus, the high chief. You and I need to discuss certain matters about your visit. Please rise and follow me."

Vellus turned around and entered the doors of the palace. The high chief led Talus through the main room and headed toward what we'd call a study. Following his host, the prince looked around and saw the history of the Plainsmen displayed on the walls. The high chief motioned to the prince to sit down on a sofa, while Vellus sat in a wooden chair that had been moved from across the room.

The two men began to assess the other. The high chief was taken back by Talus' figure. He did not look like the man-child he had pictured in the letters. The prince was more than capable of taking care of himself. With or without Clavius, he could easily rally the support needed to make a good life for himself wherever he decided to make his home. Vellus thought the prince's scheme, involving two nations, was the folly of selfish immaturity.

The couch, being soft by design, now seized Talus, making it impossible for the prince to assert himself. The high chief moved in, pulling his chair closer. Having trapped the prince, Vellus took a moment to assert his position over him. Talus looked at his captor trying to glean from his appearance the man who controlled his destiny. Vellus was almost bald. What hair he had left was so short, it looked shaved. He was a muscular man; the position he was given did not soften his stature. Compared to the prince, he was at least four inches shorter; still Talus would think twice about entering a Totchpak match with him.

Vellus leaned over the sunken prince, just a foot from Talus' face. "You are a foolish boy who has endangered my people. I invited you here to keep you safe while we decide what to do with you. You have no idea what would happen if harm were to fall upon you while in Calyx, do you? You are too young to know of war. Do you think your father would let us remain at peace if you were found dead?"

Talus looked straight into the eyes of his elder and said, "Yes, he would be relieved to have me gone from his presence." Talus spoke with sincerity.

Vellus leaned back. The prince in the letters came into view. The vulnerability displayed by Talus convinced the high chief that the prince was not lying. "Why do you say that?"

Talus allowed the sofa to pull him in as he created his deception. "I am the youngest of twins. Ramus, my brother, has spent his whole life preparing to become king while I humiliated my family. As time passed I saw in my father a loss of affection and a deepening concern. If I were to remain in my kingdom, could my brother handle having me embarrassing him? He would be a new king dealing with the commerce of various nations. How difficult would that be having a brother who was a drunkard?" explained Talus.

Vellus seized the moment. "But haven't you stopped drinking since the death of your friend? People change; why do you feel that you can't?"

Talus should have realized that Vellus would have known his recent past. "I simply stopped going into the city. In the castle, I was free to drown my loss in the court wine. I needed to move on to either live in peace or die in misery. For me to take the next step, one question needed to be answered. If I were to return after making something of my life, would I be welcomed? That is why I wrote my request to you."

This convinced Vellus that from Talus' point of view, he was genuine. Talus simply wanted to run away and in doing so, be assured that he could come back if things didn't work out. Typical reasoning, Vellus thought, for a spoiled brat. The high chief did not want to make it easy on the prince. He did not want this to be a common occurrence every time the prince felt unloved. There was still the matter of dealing with Clavius. It was all in his hands. The weight of the world, or at least his people, fell on Vellus' shoulders.

The high chief called in the guards from the other room. "Put our guest in the prison. Let no one harm him and give him what he needs: food, water, and a blanket. He will remain there until I call for him."

Vellus then dismissed the prince from the room under guard. The next matter at hand was the ransom request. Vellus would ponder over the exact wording for hours. The high chief sat down at the table on the other side of the study, putting ink to paper; he began to write his request for ransom.

Your Honor and Most High Clavius, King of Atresia,

Your son, Talus has submitted himself to me, Vellus, High Chief of Calyx in the city of Teres. I have imprisoned him for his own well-being and to discourage any further reckless behavior on his part. He is safe and being well cared for by my order. I write to you as a matter of law among our nations.

A ransom is to be paid for the safe keeping of any noblemen captured in another's territory without consent. Talus entered Calyx without my authority and in doing so, endangered himself and the peace between us. To keep our peace, I request payment for his safe return. I will not demand a specific amount, for I do not want to insult you by placing a monetary worth on your son. My people will appreciate whatever amount you decide.

Signed,

Vellus, High Chief of Calyx

Vellus called forth a messenger to deliver the note to Clavius. The note gave the king a choice of paying the ransom, or not. He could decide his son was worth nothing and the matter would be settled. Vellus would release the prince and wash his hands of the affair. On a positive note, Calyx could receive a substantial payment, and its future would be secure. Either way, Calyx would be free of this Prince Talus.

The messenger rode through the brush filled plains hoping to meet his Aresian counterpart in Ahhl. From there, the note would be presented to Clavius by morning. According to Vellus, the situation would be over by the end of the week. As the messenger passed Treppe, the one who had murdered Fossa closed in. The messenger drove his horse harder, but Vasa's horse was faster. Once in range, the assailant raised his bow, shooting a single arrow and hitting its mark. The rider fell. Vasa grabbed the messenger's horse releasing him in the process, knowing it would find its way home. Digging a shallow grave, Vasa buried the messenger. Now wearing his clothes and riding his horse, Vasa sped on to Ahhl to deliver a different message; one his master had told him to send.

# ONE MUST DIE

“Three thousand five hundred gold coins of the King’s Realm?” Clavius was shocked not only by the fact that Talus was in prison but that Calyx wanted his weight in gold. The King of Atresia slumped in his throne, shaking his head. Age was catching up to him. Over the last month he’d felt all of his sixty years. He had grown weaker blaming the stress of the crown and Talus, who weighed constantly on his mind. The king took a deep breath knowing he needed to focus on the task at hand. Clavius then sent the messenger away thanking him for his courage in traversing such a dangerous trail.

Ramus entered the throne room just as the messenger left. “Father, what was that all about? You look awful.”

“Your stupid, irresponsible brother!” Clavius threw the parchment on the floor in front of Ramus.

Ramus picked up the note, more out of curiosity than concern. “You’ve got to be kidding!” Ramus roared in disbelief as he read the message.

The message, which Vasa had exchanged for the original one, said the following:

To whom it may be a concern:

It is our displeasure to have become acquainted with young Prince Talus. During a drunken tirade, he insulted one of our chiefs in a way that only his death will satisfy his highness. I will not go into detail. To spare the prince, I have evoked the ancient law of ransom. The amount was set by an agreement between the chief in question and me. It was the only way I could save your son’s life. If the ransom is not paid, I will hand your son over to the dishonored chief who is requesting his head.

Signed Vellus, High Chief of Calyx

“What are we going to do?” Ramus queried his father; the moment of truth was at hand.

Clavius looked at his heir apparent. Speaking calmly, the coolness spoke volumes regarding his feelings toward Talus. "Nothing."

"Father, we need to do something. He is your son ... and my brother." Ramus was astounded by his father's response.

Clavius stood up. His anger now in full view and staring at Ramus he responded. "He's an embarrassment to our name!"

"For that he should die?" Ramus tried to comprehend the depths of disdain Clavius had for his son Talus.

The king stopped short of telling Ramus the truth. With Talus' life in the balance, Ramus could abdicate the throne to force his father into paying the ransom. Clavius took a moment in order to think of a solution to this predicament. He looked at his son and said, "Would you not agree that this is more than a family concern but an issue that could affect our nation?"

Ramus agreed but did not understand his father's line of thought.

Clavius called in his scribe. "Upon this time tomorrow, there will be a Session concerning Talus, Prince of Atresia. There, his fate will be determined. Since Talus has created a concern for both his family and for Atresia, representatives will argue both before me. If it is proven that the nation's needs outweigh that of our family, I will not act as a father but as a king obligated to his people. The Lord of Taenia will represent Talus while Flavin will speak upon Atresia's behalf."

Ramus knew that Flavin was the best solicitor in the kingdom, while the Lord of Taenia was an imbecile given the fortune of birth and not one of brains. The acts of Talus would be proven reckless, causing most of the affluent Atresians to side with his demise. A war with Calyx would not be profitable since there would be nothing to gain from an impoverished nation.

Ramus had to think quickly to insure some equity in the debate. "Father, may I add to your proclamation?"

The king looked at the scribe, nodding as to gesture his approval.

Ramus cleared his throat and then proceeded, "As Prince and heir apparent of Atresia, I agree that a Session is needed to determine the fate of Talus. But since it is a family matter, I believe one related to Talus should represent him. Since Clavius is unable to do so being the judicator, I offer myself to either represent the family or adjudicate the proceeding so my father may be free to defend Talus."

Clavius was furious and astonished by Ramus' loyalty toward his brother. The king knew he had to keep his anger under control. Clavius, by Ramus' decree, was trapped. If he were to strike the record, he would then have to reveal to Ramus the truth. Seeing that Ramus maneuvered himself in position to help Talus, the king chose the position of advantage.

"I will honor my son's request and allow him to represent Prince Talus. Therefore, Atresia will benefit from both my wisdom as judge and Ramus' passion for justice."

Ramus retired to his room trying to gather his thoughts. He couldn't understand why his father did not want to pay the ransom. There had to be something between Talus and his father, something beyond his behavior. Ramus had been present for many sessions in the past, but this would be the first where he was directly involved. He knew the Session was a ploy. Being judge, the king could side with the kingdom and not be directly responsible for his son's death. This put Ramus in a precarious situation. He would be the only one in the room fighting for Talus' life. To make matters worse, he would now have to convince Clavius as the king and not as his father.

Flavin began the Session. This allowed him to make his point unopposed.

"Your Highness, it is regrettable that we are placed in this unfortunate situation. I am here not to argue for Talus' death but to represent the interest of our kingdom. How I feel about our prince will not dissuade me from doing my duty. Talus entered Calyx without our knowledge. He acted as an individual and not as a representative of our country. With that said, being a prince, what is our obligation? Has he not committed a crime worthy of beheading? If we pay this ransom, will we not be allowing a criminal into our mist? Would he not have his position of nobility to allow him to commit more heinous crimes within our borders? Would we not as well be sending a message to our people that he is above the law? What if he commits another crime; what would our lordship do? Talus has put us in a difficult position. For the best interest of our kingdom, we need to let Talus' fate be determined by Calyx and not by us."

As Flavin ended his argument, he turned to Ramus who saw that the solicitor took no pleasure in his words. Ramus stood up as Flavin sat down. Ramus would not have the ability to discuss his point unimpeded.

Flavin could counter any statement the young prince made. He needed to hold his own until the closing argument where he could make his speech to save Talus.

Ramus started with a hesitance knowing he alone was his brother's only hope.

"Do we know what Talus has done? In a strange land where our customs could conflict with theirs? Talus may have done nothing more than vomit on his shoes. Is that worth losing your head?"

Flavin stood up to counter. "Your Highness, if the insult is not repented, are we not risking a future conflict with Calyx?"

The prince quickly retorted. "Would not the ransom be repentance enough?"

Flavin, still standing, spoke, "We can not make light of the severity of this crime. Money is not the salve to heal all injuries. Talus must pay for his transgression. If mercy is to be brought, it must be done by the High Chief of Calyx."

Ramus continued his defense. "Are we not sending another message as well? That the worth of our nobility is based on convenience and not by the right of his birth? If Talus were the heir apparent, would we be having this discussion?"

The king bristled at the thought. He hoped that his son's ending argument would not include that threat.

Flavin again rose to address the king. "Even if this were so, would our subjects stand for Talus being king without the risk of revolt?"

Clavius relaxed; Flavin made his mark. Ramus' posture slumped ever so slightly, but it was enough for the king to notice.

Ramus faced Flavin as he changed the debate's direction. "Without argument Talus is the best of our warriors, correct?"

Flavin nodded in agreement.

Ramus persisted. "Would his skill not have value in war as the noble leader of our army?"

Flavin remained silent waiting for Ramus to finish his point.

"Let's not argue his status as a prince but his ability as general. Would our kingdom be better served having me in that position?" Ramus felt as if the momentum was turning.



Flavin rebutted. "Do we keep Talus locked away like a beast to be unleashed in the time of conflict?"

Ramus made his last point before his ending statement. "If we as King and as Prince of Atresia can not keep order in our own house, do we deserve to keep order for the kingdom?"

A slight smile came over Flavin's face as he stood for the last time. Ramus proved to be a worthy adversary. He looked forward to debating before him one day. "Anyone or anything that weakens the crown's ability to rule would weaken our kingdom as a whole."

Ramus' last chance to save Talus was upon him. He would have to create an irrefutable argument. In his room when he was deep in thought, he had done just that.

"I am having trouble understanding the position of the kingdom. Is it the crime? Is it the money? We were given a single piece of parchment. Is this enough information to decide the fate of any of our citizens, let alone one of noble blood? If it is the money, an offer has been made; can we not make a counter offer? If it is the crime that troubles my lord, is it not our duty to find out the severity of this crime to determine if ransom is even warranted? I propose that we send a representative to determine our next course of action. Let the king determine the amount of ransom the crown is willing to pay and the severity of crime we as a nation are willing to accept. If Talus can be bought and the crime is more cultural than one of violence, then let us act on his behalf. If he acted in violence, then I will join with my father in his condemnation."

As Ramus sat down, he looked at the king not as a member of the court but as a son appealing to the man who gave him life.

Clavius looked perplexed. Ramus had made his point beyond the king's ability to deny his request. The problem for Clavius was to secure the demise of Talus without disenfranchising his beloved heir apparent, Ramus. The king stood up from his throne to make his proclamation.

"As ruler of this arbitration, I have decided the following. A representative of Atresia will determine the severity of offense committed by Talus. The ransom payment will then be discussed; if the crime was nonviolent and if an agreement can be made where both parties are satisfied, Atresia will welcome Talus home."

Clavius, being an expert mediator, provided himself a way to seal Talus' fate.

Ramus rose as the king reclined on his throne. "Let me be the one to represent Atresia."

The king looked at his son and said, "I am sorry but it would be foolish of this kingdom to lose its crown while trying to save its court's jester."

Ramus had lost. The king would opt for a subordinate who shared his view. In doing so, Clavius would be assured of Talus' demise. Ramus needed to choose between his father and Talus. His decision would determine the fate of a kingdom. The prince knew there would be a time when he would have to make a stand. All good leaders do. Though he loved his father, he loved his brother as well. The thought that Clavius was condemning Talus to death evoked the courage Ramus needed to challenge the king. He would set out the next morning in defiance of his father's bias against Talus in hopes of proving his brother's innocence.

The night was cool; frost had begun to form on the windows, making his escape easier. A band of four riders strolled over the drawbridge just as the baker's wagon was approaching the castle. Ramus had hand picked three of his most loyal friends to carry out his mission. Dartos, Oris, and Jute were not only similar in education but were as fierce as Talus. Ramus only had to say that he needed their help, and they were ready by morning's light.

The plan was simple: find a guide in Ahhl, rescue Talus, and stop Chordae, Atresia's emissary, from entering Teres. The plan got sketchier upon returning to Capnia and facing the king. The ride on the road to Teres was uneventful; no one approached the four armed men. Upon arriving in Ahhl, Ramus chose to enter a tavern named The Drifter's Oasis. After looking at the Nomad, he thought The Drifter would at least have better wine.

The crowd paused as the men dressed for battle entered through the heavy wooden door. Ramus didn't need to capture the mob's attention. It was all ready his the moment the door closed behind him. The prince looked at the rabble, most drunk, sweaty, and smelling of the road. Ramus walked toward the bar, with each step the clanging of metal was heard. Facing the men who were now fixated on the prince, Ramus held a gold coin in the air. Everyone knew it was a King's Realm. Taking his sword from its sheath, Ramus then

used both hands to slam the blade into the floor by his feet. Nobody moved. The effect was exactly what Ramus wanted.

"I need a guide; a man who is familiar with Teres. I will pay you well if you serve me, but you will die by my sword if you don't." challenged Ramus.

The silence remained as Ramus scanned the crowd, hoping to have weeded out the true mercenaries from the imposters.

A man named Rete rose. "For a King's Realm, I will not kill but for two, I would."

Ramus sized him up. He was over six feet tall and muscular. The warrior stared at the prince like one would an opponent in Totchpak. The gaze did not intimidate the prince but rather confirmed his belief that this was the man he needed. The leather vest and blood stained pants authenticated one who hunted. He looked like a Plainsman in his demeanor and in his dress.

Ramus threw a coin over to the lone man who rose from his chair. "Here's a King's Realm for having the courage to stand before me." The prince then threw another coin. "Here's another for your loyalty."

The three from Capnia joined the prince at the Plainsmen's table to discuss the next day's events. As the five talked, they felt confident in their new guide. Rete had provided the prince with the information he needed to reaffirm his initial decision. The Plainsman knew Teres. He knew the customs and the attitude of the locals toward strangers. Rete continued by saying that he was familiar with the layout of the jail. The Plainsman had an uncle who worked there and a cousin who spent more than a night as a guest. The men at the table talked further until a plan was conceived. Hours of talking and drinking left none desiring more of either as they adjourned.

Ramus retired to his bed having drunk more wine than he normally allowed himself to have. He thought about why he was there and what he hoped to achieve. All his life he was the dutiful son, the one who was destined to be king. Up until this moment, he had no reason to cross his father, but he could not stand back and let his brother die. Within his mind he had created a Session of his own, the good of the future king versus the good of the young prince.

If the young prince allowed Talus to meet his fate, he would be guaranteed kingship. He would no longer be compared to his brother and as time

passed, the people would accept him as their own. Though he thought he loved Sura, he could remain open to other possibilities. Propriety would no longer be needed, an asset of being the single heir. This sounded good to Ramus. Without consequence, he could have the freedom he always desired without endangering his position. Then the prince began to think of the repercussions that Talus' death would have upon his throne. The people would consider Ramus weak after allowing his twin brother to be executed. How could he establish a rapport with people who despised him? More evident would be the fact that his crown would always be under the shadow of Clavius.

A future king would take advantage of this opportunity. Saving Talus would make him a hero among his people. His throne would be established by action and not by perceived ineptness. Talus would owe him his very life, a benefit worth more than a mere ransom. The sons would be united against their father, tipping the balance of power from king to king to be. With one moment, Ramus would carve out a reputation that he could use for life. Every time Talus entered Capnia, the people would be reminded of Ramus' day. Ramus was pleased with the prospects, but the risks were much higher. He could be captured himself. But would not Clavius have to spare both sons? How could he ransom Ramus and allow Talus to die in the same prison? The thought had merit. Ramus concluded that there was even a higher risk to this newfound fame he wanted to create, death. The question posed in his imaginary Session was simply this. Was being your own man worth dying for? For Ramus, the answer came back yes. He then turned to his side, trying to find a soft spot in the hay filled mattress, and went to sleep.

# RAMUS' DAY

The next morning, the five men dressed as Plainsmen rode off toward Teres. As they rode, the discussion about the plan from the night before continued.

Dartos turned to Ramus saying, "Okay, let me get this right. We attempt a jail break. If we fail, we see the high chief as emissaries of Atresia."

"Yeah, that's about it. We'll give it one attempt. If we can't get him without starting our own personal war, then we'll try diplomacy." Ramus patted the King's Realm in his saddlebag.

Oris chimed in. "Okay, why not diplomacy first?"

Jute replied to spare Ramus the annoyance. "Because we only have 689 of the King's Realm, remember? You could only get eighty six pieces."

"Besides," Ramus added, "we have the value of surprise."

Jute then continued the thought. "If we can't afford the ransom, don't you think they'd know that we'd try to help him escape?"

Rete interrupted. "We need to hurry; The Horns of Teres will blow soon, and we just passed Treppe." With that, the men stopped talking and urged their horses to a full gallop.

Everyone's effort would be needed if they were to arrive at Teres by nightfall. If the gates closed, a day would be lost and their arrival would be too late. The horns were sounding as the men arrived. They dismounted and joined the assembly of hunters returning home. Rete looked at his employers and whispered, "When we get inside, turn left down the street to our first right. From there it will be safe to talk, until then, silence." He put his extended index finger to his mouth to emphasize the point.

They entered the Gate of Mesa and quickly turned left. Driving their horses through the masses of people, they managed to turn right. Rete stopped the quartet.

"Now what?" Oris complained.

Rete, ignoring Oris, looked at Ramus and stated, "We need to go two streets down and turn left. From there we can see the prison."

“Can you get in and find out where Talus is?” asked Ramus.

“I will try, but I may need a realm or two,” said Rete.

Oris spoke up. “Ramus you’re not going to give him the money are you?”

Jute and Dartos looked angrily at Oris. Ramus looked at the Plainsman like a poker player about to throw all in. “Here, take four. We need to know.”

Rete, appreciating Ramus’ confidence in him, took the coins and replied, “Yes, Your Highness.”

The Plainsman walked up to the gate. Two guards stood protecting the main door. One of the guards spoke as Rete approached. “What do you want?”

Rete shook his head while acting embarrassed at having to do another’s bidding. “There was a rumor that the King of Atresia’s child was upset. Vellus sent me to see if I could rock him to sleep.”

The guards laughed. Seeing that Rete was unarmed, they allowed him entry. Rete turned toward the guards as he passed by. “Where are they keeping the brat, anyway?”

“To the left, you’ll see,” grinned one of the guards.

The other sentry continued, “It’s as if he were the only one in the prison. Vellus kept him away from the likes of us. He didn’t want his precious prince to get hurt.”

Rete replied as he started to head down the hallway, “You know Atresians, they like to talk, but they’re all just full of words.”

The Plainsman walked by empty cells noticing that there were no guards between him and the main entrance. As Rete continued, he saw a door that looked like it led to the outside. As he peered out, he could see a street. The Plainsman jammed the bolt to prevent it from being locked. There, he thought, would be the way in. Then Rete continued to see where Talus was being held and who they had posted to guard him. Walking further down the hall, he spied a man in a chair.

Rete hollered out to the lone guard. “Is Talus all right?”

The man in the chair turned his head in the direction of the voice. “See for yourself.”

“Talus?” Rete called.

The prince was not sure how to respond. “Yeah, who’s asking?”

"Vellus wants to know if you're okay," yelled Rete as he continued to walk towards the prince's cell. Soon they were face to face. The Plainsman gave him a look of contempt. "Atresian."

Talus responded in kind, "Vermin."

Rete looked at the guard who was ignoring the exchange. "I've seen enough." The Plainsman walked away. On the way out he stopped at the main gate.

One of the guards stopped him as he passed by. "How's the child of Atresia?"

Rete responded, "Whimpering like a baby needing milk."

The guards laughed having their belief of Atresians justified.

Rete reached into his pocket, pulled out a King's Realm, and threw it in the direction of the guards. "Oh yeah, he gave me this because I cared."

The guards nodded in appreciation of Rete's disregard for Talus and his willingness to forgo a month's worth of game and fur in the form of a coin.

It was getting dark as the men from Atresia waited for Rete. Oris began to fear the worst. "What if someone approaches us? What if Rete doesn't return?" Oris handed his horse's reins to Jute and started to pace. "I don't like it, Ramus; he sold us out."

Just then a figure appeared from the darkness; Rete had completed his mission. "He was placed in the western cells with no one around him. The prince is guarded by a single warrior." He looked at Oris as he handed Ramus not two but three coins.

"Can we pay off the sentry?" asked Ramus.

"I don't think so; he's not one I know," said Rete.

The prince thought. Then spoke once more, "Then we'll do it by force. Can we avoid the other cells?"

The Plainsman replied, "Yes, there is an entrance to the western cells three streets down and to the right."

Ramus looked at Oris. "You stay here and look after the horses."

The prince looked at his guide. "My brother will need a horse."

Without hesitation Rete replied, "He may have mine."

Ramus handed him the three coins that Rete had given back to him. "No matter what happens, you have earned these."

The four men walked toward the door leading to the western cells.

As they entered through the wooden door, Ramus saw a stone hallway.

Rete's voice could be heard from behind the others. "To the left, that is where they are holding Talus."

The Prince and the others stopped to allow the Plainsman to lead. Ramus could feel his heart race, not knowing what to expect, as he got closer to his goal of freeing Talus. As they moved along the corridor, the prince could see a lone guard fighting sleep while sitting in a chair.

"This should be easy," whispered Jute.

Rete turned and said, "Let me take care of him."

Ramus looked at Rete and said, "Can we spare his life?"

"I will, Your Highness." Rete bowed before the prince.

Ramus didn't need to explain the death of a guard if they were to get caught. Rete walked up to the man leaning back in the chair. "Back again? Does Vellus want a report on him every minute?"

"Nah, he's asleep. I've been given new orders," said Rete.

The guard looked at Rete. "Are you the palace dog? Fetching every bone they throw your way?"

The Plainsman kicked the chair causing the man to lose his balance. "It's time for a break; Solus has sent me to relieve you."

The guard looked at Rete as recognition between the two was made. The guard started to walk off in the opposite direction. Ramus knew his time had arrived. He drew his sword just in case the guard returned. The prince led the way as Jute and Dartos followed.

Whispering to the prisoner, Ramus hoped to hear his brother's voice. "Talus, are you there? Talus?"

Upon arriving at the cell door, Ramus whispered, "Hey, Tal, it's me." Rete opened the door with the key left by the guard. The cell was dark. Ramus could barely make out a cot against the far wall and a form lying on it.

"Tal, it's me, Ramus. We're here to get you out! Tal, wake up." Approaching the bed, all he could see was a bundle of blankets. Ramus became unsure of his surroundings not knowing who resided within them. He lifted his sword in preparation for an attack. The prince then turned as he heard Jute yell in pain. Dartos stumbled by the door with a knife stuck in his back. "Ramus, it's a trap."

As he rushed to cross back over the threshold, Ramus saw his brother with a sword in his hand. Ramus was confused. Why was Talus armed?



Talus looked at his surprised brother and said, "I'm sorry," as he plunged the blade into his chest.

Ramus was wrong: about Rete, about his plan, and about Talus. A profound sadness overcame the prince as he grew weaker. He looked at his brother who now stood over him. Talus witnessed Ramus' final word in life as the prince mouthed, "Why?"

The two friends of Ramus reacted quickly to the guard returning, but it was too late. Jute was the first to be struck down by an arrow. Dartos avoided a fatal blow by stepping back only to be stabbed by Rete. Dartos stumbled down the hall and out the door. Mustering all of his strength, Dartos ran back to Oris. "Rete!" was all he could say before the arrow finished the job. The Plainsman lowered his bow and smiled at Oris. Then Rete walked away.

Oris released all the horses but two. Ramus' for it held the saddlebag filled with gold, and the horse that would carry his friend, Dartos. When Oris saw the Plainsman, he wanted to run after him but his head took over. What chance did he have in a strange city in the dark? Oris shivered in the cold as he slowly drove the horses through the streets. He managed to prop Dartos up, so it appeared two were on horseback and not a single rider. His plan was to wander the night, get out in the morning, and return to Calyx. As the hours passed, Oris thought of what had gone wrong. He knew Rete had betrayed them, but who else? As the lone survivor, he was given the task of telling the king about his son's demise. Could it be possible that both princes were dead? He would not find out; he only hoped it wasn't so.

Riding back to Capnia, Oris regretted not being slain in the prison. His hands shook as he pulled Dartos from his horse and handed him to his family. Oris now had to tell the king the news. Ramus' friend entered the castle through the kitchen. There he saw Zona, along with the others, preparing the evening meal.

"Hey, Oris, have you seen Ramus?" Zona spoke like a mother trying to find the whereabouts of her missing child.

Oris spoke quietly, as to not alarm the others. "I'll tell you later, but first I need to speak to Clavius."

“Something happened, didn’t it?” Zona was not one you could easily lie to. Even though he tried to hide his emotions, Oris could not prevent the tears from running down his face.

“Oh my God, no!” wailed Zona.

Oris took Zona into his arms pulling her close to him. “He’s gone Zona. Ramus is gone.”

Zona pulled herself together in an attempt to control the others in the room. “All right then. You need to see Clavius right away.” The others wept with Zona as Oris left the room.

As he entered the throne room, Oris could see the king was presiding over a Session. He waited until the arbitrators concluded. This bought him time to summon the courage to confront the king. Oris saw that the king knew he was in the room. Clavius’ face wore a look of concern as he motioned for Oris to appear before him. Oris knelt before the king, keeping his head down to avoid eye contact. “Your Highness, I bring you news about your son, Ramus.” Oris hesitated just enough to make Clavius aware it was not good. The king stood up and approached Oris who was still kneeling. Oris felt the king’s hands on his shoulders.

Clavius guided the young man to a standing position so that their eyes would meet. “Oris, tell me about my son.”

Oris didn’t know whether to start at the beginning or cut to the chase. “Ramus died trying to save Talus,” blurted out Oris.

“What?” Clavius, already having his hands on Oris’ shoulders, squeezed them tightly.

Oris winced, trying to ignore the pain as he continued. “Ramus died in his attempt to free his brother. It was a trap. Everyone died.”

The king’s hands shook causing them to fall from Oris’ body, and his arms became limp as they returned to his side. In complete despair Clavius asked, “Who died?”

“Dartos, Jute, and Ramus,” Oris stated, his head bowed once more to avoid eye contact.

“How did you come to know this?” asked Clavius.

“I was there. We had hired a guide to help us, and he betrayed your son.”

“And what is this betrayer’s name?” demanded Clavius

Oris looked up momentarily. Seeing the pain on the king's face as he asked for the details, he bowed his head again. "He called himself Rete. We met him in Ahhl."

The voice of Clavius began to tremble as he continued. "And how is it that you survived?"

Oris detailed, "I remained behind to tend to the horses. Dartos stumbled out of the prison calling out to me that it was a trap. He yelled Rete's name just before the Plainsman struck him down in the street."

The king sat back on the throne shaking his head that was being supported by both of his hands. Oris left; there was nothing more to say. As Oris opened the door to the outer hall he heard the king say, "I need Chordae."

# THE MEETING OF KINGS

Vellus turned pale as Chordae told him about the death of Ramus. "I don't understand. Talus has one guard who is ordered to attend to his needs and he's not even armed." Vellus was desperately trying to process everything he had just heard. Then he spoke once more to the ambassador from Atresia. "No one informed me of such an event."

Chordae, understanding the high chief's position, acted like a true diplomat. "It was unfortunate that someone has undermined your authority and created this crisis. Your Honor, how can you help me explain this to Clavius who needs to understand why this happened?"

"All I can do is meet with Clavius and offer my life in exchange for his son's, if it would prevent anymore bloodshed." Vellus, being a father himself, sounded contrite.

"The offer is appreciated and I will convey your sentiments to my king, but we are now faced with a present problem as well, Talus," posed Chordae.

"Shall I release him to you?" asked Vellus.

"No, that would not be wise. There is some ..." Chordae tried to find the right words, "ah, friction between the king and his son."

"What shall I do? Vellus was anxious to resolve the situation.

"Keep him safe for now and let me return to Calyx with your desire to meet with his majesty," suggested Chordae.

Vellus awoke to an overcast morning, an ominous sign for the high chief. The High Chief of Calyx would bring his great-grandfather's sword in order to kill himself if Clavius so desired. After saying good-bye for the last time to his family, he headed out while his attendant faithfully followed behind. Vellus felt guilty convincing his people to go along with Talus' charade. The high chief had miscalculated the repercussions in teaching the prince a lesson. Vellus remained convinced it was his fault. Someone had manipulated the situation allowing Ramus to be murdered. He should have been wiser. If only he had kept Talus closer to his side, maybe if he had been more involved, he would have known who betrayed him by murdering Clavius' son.

The high chief led the procession from the east. A band of ten compared to hundreds that most high chiefs would command. Along with Vellus was his first attendant, who would assist in his suicide, and enough staff to attend to his daily necessities. Vellus excluded any warriors in his troop. He wanted to show complete submission to the army of Atresia. Everyone from Teres arrived to Ahhl either by carriage or wagon.

Clavius had arrived hours earlier after the initial group from Atresia had created a meeting place. The fires for cooking were set along with the tents. Soldiers from the royal guard fanned out to protect the perimeter. It was a show of force to insure his safety.

Vellus walked with his attendant past the rows of soldiers to Clavius' tent. There the king awaited him. The high chief pulled the flap open to see a table, chairs, and scribes. No one was armed. The high chief saw Clavius stand up while extending his hand as a gesture to sit down across the table that was brought from Capnia. Vellus bowed before taking his seat.

Clavius leaned in toward Vellus and said, "A guilty man does not offer his life to prevent a war. I appreciate all of your efforts in bringing my son home."

Vellus couldn't help but feel relief. "Your Majesty ..."

The king raised his hand to stop the high chief in mid sentence. "My name is Clavius and I prefer that we call each other by our names since we are united on this issue."

Vellus looked at the King of Atresia eye to eye and said, "Thank you."

"We have a lot to discuss ... can he be trusted?" Clavius pointed to the high chief's attendant.

"I trust him with my life, which he was to help me take if you so desired." Vellus looked at his servant who immediately avoided eye contact knowing the reason behind his presence in the room.

Clavius nodded, knowing the offer was genuine.

"We have a common enemy. One who switched messages, killed my son, and framed you in the process. I had you meet me here to discuss who this enemy might be. There must be a common thread between us that can point toward this individual. It is just a matter of revealing all the facts in front of us to see what the common thread is."

“Clavius,” Vellus felt uneasy saying it after having his life spared. “I believe Talus is the key. Whether he is an accomplice or being used, I am not sure.”

Vellus then opened his hand to his attendant who gave him a pile of papers. “Here, these are the correspondences to me from Talus. Maybe you can find something that I was not able to detect.”

Clavius took a few minutes to read the letters; sadness began to show on his face as the words passed by his eyes. He put down the parchments and looked at Vellus. “I am afraid he is telling the truth.”

Vellus countered, “Or he’s a damn good liar.”

Clavius looked down out of guilt. “We were not close.”

The high chief tried to spare the king any more pain by speaking up. “All right, if Talus was being used, someone close to you had to have known he was writing to me.”

The ploy didn’t work. Clavius began to weep. “It’s my fault, all of it. I’m the one whose hatred for Talus caused the death of my Ramus. I should have told them the truth years ago and allowed them to decide Atresia’s future. I’m an old fool who was tricked into believing I wasn’t. Now, my son is dead, the other one hates me, and Atresia is worse off because of it.”

Vellus didn’t know what to say. He didn’t dare ask for more details because it wasn’t his place. “Can any of this be the thread that binds us together?”

Clavius composed himself knowing that it was not the time or place for a king to wallow in self pity. Looking at Vellus he said, “If Talus knew he was the oldest, yes, but he never suspected.”

Vellus continued to be skeptical of Talus’ innocence. “Nothing changed over the last few months?”

“Nothing. I can question the staff but in my own house I am sure I could detect treachery,” said Clavius

“Then as allies, what will be our next step?” asked Vellus.

The king’s face revealed a royal countenance once more as he looked at Vellus. “A trap!”

Talus feigned shock at the news of his brother’s death. He remained poised knowing the high chief was monitoring his reaction. The young prince did not give himself away. He sat back in the sofa and gave himself

a moment. It appeared that he was trying to process everything he had heard, but in reality he was buying time to think.

Talus leaned toward the high chief and said, "How did this happen?"

Vellus looked at Talus. "Somewhere between your cell and the streets nearby. Ramus was found in an alley, along with Jute, on the other side of the city. Did you see or hear anything that night?"

Talus remembered the events that occurred. He had killed his brother. Rete had stabbed Dartos as the guard struck down Jute. In the commotion, Dartos managed to get away with Rete in hot pursuit. The guard cleaned the cell along with removing the bodies and weapons from the prison before daybreak.

Talus looked at Vellus appearing deep in thought. Shaking his head, the prince replied, "No, nothing I can remember."

Vellus knew it was a long shot but he needed to at least ask.

Talus looked up at the high chief and asked, "What happens now?"

Vellus sat back in his chair; The Horns of Teres began to blow. "Your father will be here tomorrow. Both of you will be my guests until you return to Capnia."

There was nothing more to say. Vellus kissed his children good-night in view of the young prince; his wives followed close behind. Talus stood up after the processional and excused himself, retiring to his room. Vellus, now alone, went into his study to pray.

In midmorning, The Horns of Teres sounded to welcome the King of Atresia. A large contingent of soldiers and aides followed behind. The house of Vellus looked even smaller as the mass of people stopped at the staircase leading to the front door. As the king started to walk up the steps, Vellus proceeded down to meet him. They shook hands as they met in the middle of the stairway.

Walking together, Clavius turned to Vellus. "Have you told Talus?"

"Yes," said Vellus. "Talus was shocked but he could not assist us in finding out more about our enemy."

The king nodded. "May I see my son?"

"Yes, he's inside waiting in my study; take your time." Vellus led the dignitary through the house. Children ran up to the king, awed by his presence. Their mothers pulled them away.

When they entered the study, Talus was looking out the window. Although the prince turned when the door opened, he showed no signs of emotion. Vellus excused himself, closing the door behind him, leaving Clavius and Talus alone.

Clavius broke the awkward silence. "Before we leave this room, I need to tell you the truth." The king asked Talus to sit down. The prince took Vellus' chair, leaving the sofa for his father. Clavius ineptly tried to position himself on the couch to establish his presence, but by design it was impossible. Sinking back into the sofa, Clavius began to speak. "I am an old man, too old to allow my foolishness to prolong your suffering. When I read your letters to Vellus, I could see how you felt unworthy of my affection."

Clavius saw that Talus was taken aback by the king's candor.

"For your whole life I have blamed you for your mother's death. When I saw you, I felt the loss of the only woman I loved. The pain I experienced prevented me from accepting you as my son. I should have afforded you the same opportunities Ramus had, but I allowed you to go your own way. Without my guidance, you became lost."

The king made one last attempt to position himself on the couch.

"So here we are in a strange city, mourning the death of the only one who loved us both. Through his death, I now come to you to say I am truly sorry. I can't make up for the past but if you are willing, I will start being your father and your friend." Clavius slumped; giving into the sofa he had fought hard against while talking to his son. Talus leaned back into the chair. He was speechless.

All his life he knew just what Clavius had admitted. He now felt ashamed, guilty, and overjoyed all at the same time.

Talus thought to himself, what could he say? "Father, your hatred drove me to plot against you and to murder my brother?" Talus thought the better of it.

Remaining silent, he acknowledged what his father said by nodding. Clavius pulled himself out of the clutches of the couch and extended his hand toward his son as a gesture of peace between them. Talus stood up and engulfed his father with his arms, hugging him for the first time since receiving a horse for his birthday fifteen years ago. Tears came from both.



Sadness and joy were together expressed in the moment. As they released each other, they composed themselves.

Clavius exhaled to release the last of his emotions prior to speaking. "We have a lot to discuss with Vellus before we leave in the morning. There is an enemy among us who has tried to manipulate us into warfare. We need to find out who and why. To do so, we need your help."

Talus, now more poised, agreed. The young prince knew who the enemy was but was not ready to confess his part in the scheme.

The following day was brighter than he had ever remembered. Awakened by the horns, Talus gathered himself and headed downstairs. Vellus was already there, meeting with the warriors who would assist in their plan. The high chief stopped his discussion to welcome the prince into their circle.

"Let me introduce you to my best and most loyal warriors." Vellus pointed to the four men gathered at the table: Myx is my brother's 14th son. He is the best archer in all of Calyx. Keto is the master of the sword. He trains the elite who guard this palace. Pons is known for his tracking, even those days old, and Trochanter is our greatest Totchpak champion, who took on three combatants at the same time and emerged victorious. The four men acknowledge the prince's presence. They will follow your caravan to Ahhl." Talus thanked the high chief and the men for their commitment to his father.

Just then Clavius walked down the stairs. A little disheveled, his attendant being ill had not readied him for the day. "Good morning, are we ready to discuss the plan?"

Vellus looked at the king as he replied, "Yes, these are the men who I told you about earlier."

There was no need for introductions; the king was confident that they were the best Vellus had to offer. "I will be the bait if someone were to attack." The king then pointed to the gentlemen at the table, "then they will overtake the attacker."

The high chief nodded.

Talus looked at the two leaders. "That's not a plan, that's suicide! He couldn't fight off a rogue goat, never mind a warrior bent on killing him.

How long will it take before you show up,” looking at the warriors, “five, ten minutes at best? Do you think my father would survive that long? There has to be a better way. Maybe I could trade places with him; I could at least survive until help arrived.”

The men all looked at each other and seemed to agree, but Clavius wasn't so sure. “Why should you risk your life for me?”

Talus looked at his father. “Because you're the king.”

“But you'd be king upon my death.” noted Clavius

“That would be something I'd like to avoid. To put your mind at ease, Oris is as motivated as I am. He'll stay with me.”

The king complied.

The plan was simple. The king would venture out toward Capnia with his guards in place, but a flaw in his defense would be detected. The opening would be at nightfall. The king's tent would be susceptible. The warriors of Vellus would then capture the assailant in the midst of an attack. The twist from the original plan was that Talus would be dressed as Clavius.

The caravan headed out of Teres, the horns sounded their departure as planned. Talus, wearing his father's robes, kept to the carriage with Oris by his side.

“Ramus loved you.” Oris said, keeping his head down.

Talus kept looking out the veiled window. “I know.”

They passed Treppe; Talus laughed to himself thinking about the town being besieged with drunk horses. By sunset the procession stopped a morning's ride from Ahhl. The bait was set. Attendants delivered food to the acting king. Talus shared his meal with Oris, who for nothing better to do kept sharpening his blade. Talus, witnessing Ramus' friend, offered him a leg of mutton. “You'll wear that thing out before night fall.” Oris put the knife back only to pull it out again to sharpen it some more.

The night passed quietly, even the wolves that howled at night retired early. Talus couldn't sleep so he slipped out for a stroll. As he walked by the servant's tents, something caught his eye. A flash? He wasn't sure, but it was to his right. He turned and walked in the general direction of the disturbance. Another flash. This time Talus was sure what caused it, a buckle?

Then he saw a rider upon his horse beginning to make stride. "Vasa!" Talus ran after his foe but with each step the horse put more distance between them. Four riders followed in hot pursuit, all vanished quickly into the darkness. It was then Talus realized he had passed the tent where his father was resting. "Father!" Talus threw open the tent. The king was dead. The young prince held the king's lifeless body sobbing, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

# CASTLE OF DARKNESS

Celestia is the place where spirits dwell. It is the connection between our reality and the unknown. Time and space cannot order its existence ... it simply is. A spectrum of light defines its boundaries. The purest white is where The One resides, while all that is not dwells under the influence of The Darkness.

Within this blackness lies a castle, a structure consisting of spires and turrets. In our world, it would look like a fortified Notre Dame. The shadows conceal its true structure except for the outline defined by an invading light, which is reflected by The One. Upon its throne stands Solus, the Keeper of Darkness. Solus in form is like no other, beautifully serpentine. He is able to mesmerize anyone under his slightest persuasion. Ethereal in nature, he is able to take on an appearance that produces the reaction he most desires.

The castle walls are cast from the pain and suffering caused by human desire under the master's influence. Screams and cries can be heard throughout the hallways entering the main chamber. From upon his throne, Solus can scan the world below, which is seen on the floor of the massive room where he resides. The Darkness can see as far as Eustachia, beyond the seas to Annular. If needed, the Master of Darkness can pull the world in to gaze upon one's face.

Celestia, having two divergent entities, is in continual conflict. Despising the light, The Darkness longs to destroy The One who illuminates his world. But how do you kill God? Throughout the ages, The Darkness has attempted to annihilate his enemy only to be reminded by its glow that he has failed.

The confrontation began with Solus' self-awareness. That he, a being of shadows, craved darkness, but there was none to be found. His desire soon turned to a ravenous hunger. Solus devoured the weak in his world. Darkness evolved and soon Solus gained a following of those who saw his power and were attracted to it. Solus created an army that dwelled within the blackness. Feeling superior to all in Celestia, he conspired to destroy

the light known as The One. It was at that time a battle ensued and Celestia, as we understand it, was born. Solus, along with his army, was thrown to the far end of space. A spectrum of light was created across the expanse and the Plains of Celestia were forged.

Solus saw another world beneath the plains where physical beings dwelled. The Lord of Darkness preyed on the humans who were unaware of his influence. The One countered by making itself known through the Guardians of Light. The war was now being fought among those who were oblivious of their role in it. As time passed, discerning men and women realized the battle raging around them and chose sides while most remained unaware of the conflict. The war rages within each person's heart. Those who long for self-gain will be empowered by The Darkness for it encourages gratification at the expense of others. As The Darkness overwhelms the heart, those under his subjection become the spoils of Solus. The Darkness sees The Followers of Light as weak in sacrificing their selfish desires for acts of love. For those who seek The Light, the thought is contrary. Each selfless act makes them stronger, freeing themselves from the influence of darkness around them. The conflict occurs daily within those who dwell in the physical world. Those unaware of this conflict remain in constant flux between meeting the needs of self versus the needs of others. Soon the balance of power is lost and those who have been naïve are no longer for all eventually choose between The Light and The Darkness.

Necrosis approached his lord and master. "Most High Solus, I bring you Manus." Manus no longer looked frail but took on his true form, which he created in his heart. He was half human and half beast, a perfect blend of predator and prey.

Solus looked at the form before him. "You have done my bidding and now I will reward you." The Lord of Darkness extended his hand to reveal a door behind his throne. "Enter, beyond my castle, the consuming darkness." Manus snarled, being unable to smile, and thanked his master. A door opened just beyond Solus' throne where Manus was to enter. Upon entering the door, a scream like no other was heard. Solus, being true to his word, witnessed the consumption of Manus into darkened oblivion.

Necrosis looked up at his master and smiled. "How much longer, My Lord?"

“Be patient, my dear Necrosis, time has no meaning for us.” Solus looked down upon the human world sprawled before him. Necrosis disappeared leaving Solus alone to gaze upon the world below.

Since time had been known, Solus had fought The Light. Every attempt drew the same conclusion; The One remained hovering on the horizon while Solus remained in darkness. Solus felt confident in this, his continued survival. Since The One had not destroyed him, he felt invincible. Solus was convinced that with every defeat lay the groundwork for the eventual destruction of The Light in Celestia.

Until this moment the pawns were not ready to be used, but now the time had arrived. Talus was the being he would manipulate to his own end. Humans, in their frailty, would be the key to the destruction of The Light. The One had taken great care to provide them with the freedom to choose their own path. Solus believed that free will was the flaw that would end the power of The Light over Celestia and allow him to rule all within his realm. Solus would craft a war between The One and those he had created in the world below. In the mist of this battle, Solus would join the fight producing in The One a conflict of choice. Destroy the human race or be destroyed. Solus particularly enjoyed that aspect of the plan. He turned back to view the physical world. Though time was nonexistent in Celestia, Solus was content to wait for the new king to accept his fate. A fate that was predetermined for Talus.

# THE NEW KING'S ARRIVAL

Traveling back to Capnia, Talus had time to think. Allowing the prince to process all that had taken place and, more importantly, formalize his next move. Lacunae's master was no longer an asset; Clavius and his heir apparent were dead. Talus would be king by default. The prince realized in order to rule Atresia that he had to think of his people instead of himself.

Did Vasa's plan go terribly wrong, or had it? Was he trying to kill Talus? Why? With more questions than answers, all the prince could do now was hope that the four horsemen would find the man who killed his friend Fossa and now his father Clavius.

For Talus, the feelings of sadness were overshadowed by his feelings of guilt for causing the death of his brother and his father. Would he have been better off telling Clavius the truth? Talus would have allowed Ramus to be king if Clavius had acknowledged his misdirected anger towards him. All that the prince wanted was to be the king's son. This one thing had eluded Talus until that last night in Teres.

Everything changed in that one moment. The hate was gone, the jealousy that he had for Ramus vanished. Lacunae's master became irrelevant. Would death by his father's hand compare to what he was feeling now? Even if he had died, his conscience would have been spared the anguish bearing on his mind. Talus was tired. The emotional waves in the stormy sea of guilt seemed to exhaust him. Talus just wanted to get back to Capnia, bury his father, and try to be a good king. Maybe in that, he could redeem himself and by the end of his life be at peace in Celestia.

The mood in the city of Capnia was solemn. Clavius had brought prosperity and peace to their nation. They admired and loved the king who had now passed. Talus knew he would have to address the people; they were uneasy having lost the man who had brought Capnia years of affluence. The young prince had changed with the weight of the crown upon his head. No longer was he the drunk who loved Totchpak, but a serious, sober man who had to live up to his father's stature.

Talus remained silent. Clavius' funeral overshadowed everything. The king was laid to rest in the Grand Hall, allowing all to pay their last respects prior to his burial. The young prince remained at the side of Clavius for the entire viewing. Talus felt it was a sign of respect for his father. The burial itself was an event. A hundred thousand people were present for the king's final farewell. High priests, mystics, and sharers all paid homage to the king. Talus felt it was inappropriate to deliver a eulogy. Their grief spoke volumes. The people had made a statement about their beloved king over the last three days. There was nothing more to say.

The news of Clavius' death brought shock and apprehension to the people of Calyx. Vellus was stunned. After meeting Talus, he was unsure of what kind of relationship there would be between the two nations. To further complicate matters, Vasa had escaped. The king would not be avenged. The high chief planned another council to be held. When all the chiefs arrived, no one knew what to expect, but all feared war with Atresia. Vellus had offered his life to Clavius. Vellus was sure that Talus would not be as understanding. The Horns of Teres blew once more. The gates were closing as night fell upon the city. Tomorrow another meeting would occur. No longer would there be discussion about the future of Calyx but only to determine its survival.

Vellus spoke to open the council. The chiefs were no longer talking about the possibilities of what might happen but simply when.

"My brothers, I am ashamed to say that the decision I made failed us all. Talus is young and can easily be prejudiced. The death of Clavius will be used against us. Since my life is forfeit, I will offer whatever I have to prevent the bloodshed of my people, but I am afraid this will not satisfy those who will blame us. I am here only in name and ask that a new high chief be appointed when Teres falls. The plan for the defense of Calyx must be made before Atresia crosses our borders. I am grateful for the years I have been with you and pray that my service has been honorable. My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council."

Rani, Chieftess of the Northern Plains, spoke as the wise woman she was. "Teres will fall whether a thousand of our best warriors defend her or not. We cannot withstand the onslaught of chariots against our people



or the rammers against these walls. Vellus will die here for it is his chosen place, but our strong must retreat and our children must be protected.

"I have fought against the Atresians and the Galeans in the past. We must appear to be strong when they conquer this city. It would not be beneath us to have our women fight in order to create this deception. Then we will attack the Atresians when they have become soft and their bellies full. It has been our way since the beginning, and it will be our way again. Teres can be rebuilt, but our blood cannot be reclaimed once it is lost. My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council."

Rhodo offered his thoughts. "My people of Calyx, we can not act out of desperation. It is wise to prepare for the worst but let's discuss all of our options and not just the dire ones. Talus is now king, which means he has as much responsibility to his people as we have to ours. Emissaries must be sent in hopes of avoiding bloodshed. At least, if they fail, we will have gained two important things: It would provide us needed time and give the appearance that we have not readied ourselves for war. Then if Teres falls easily to the Atresians, it would seem to be a true victory and not a hollow one. We also have Galea. Could we not request Teller to assist us? Would Atresia chance a confrontation involving two borders? My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council."

The Chief of Elad rose. "I had been opposed to the plan brought to us in our last council. It is not my place to accuse Vellus or anyone here of failure. We as a nation chose this path and we, as a nation, must endure this trial. War comes too easily for those who need to demonstrate their superiority over another. If it were not so, kings, chiefs, and conquerors would not so readily take up arms against their own kind. The lion does not attack the strongest of the herd but the old and weak."

The elderly man walked over to the high chief's chair and stood next to Vellus.

"Our enemy perceives us as fair game. War, like the hunt, ceases when the prey is killed or successfully discourages further pursuit. We will be unable to discourage Atresia from destroying our cities and murdering our people. Talus will use his father's death as an excuse to unite his people under his reign. Even if Galea were to oppose them, what fear do they pose to Atresia's army? I agree with Rani, let us seek our revenge when their drums of victory

cease. Then our warriors can pursue the fattened calves that graze upon our land. My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council.”

Vellus looked at the chiefs in the room. He no longer heard what they were saying, only muffled sounds entered his mind. His people were in jeopardy because of him. He thought of Mesa and how difficult it was for his great-grandfather. He was the first to offer his life for a united Calyx. eighty frosts had past since the last high chief sacrificed himself for his people. Was he going to be the second? Vellus did not take pride in this for he was the cause of his own suffering. He sat there numbed by his own miscalculation. Vellus had given a spoiled prince a way to prove his manhood by destroying Teres. Clavius was a good man. He understood the ways of diplomacy, but he was gone.

When the funeral was over, Talus returned to the palace feeling saddened by the loss of a father he never had. Talus knew before he could become king he needed to talk to Lacunae. Tomorrow would be his coronation. In a speech to the nation, he would have to rally the people around him. Talus could not let an unknown master and the worshipers of spirits become a distraction. The newest King of Atresia thought of using his new found power as leverage against Lacunae’s master to ensure the truth was never revealed. How could a nation follow a man who killed his own brother? Talus was never educated in the finer art of politics but in a few short days, he had developed a flare for it.

When Lacunae entered the throne room, she looked stunning. A pale silk dress conformed to her body. Her hair flowed behind, framing her face. She did not smile, nor did she look upset. She revealed nothing to betray what she was thinking.

Lacunae stopped before Talus, bowed her head, and spoke while still on bended knee. “My Lord, it is good you survived the attack upon you.” Lacunae looked up at Talus. “My master sends his regrets about your father.”

Talus took Lacunae’s hand and guided her to her feet. The future king then dismissed the staff attending him. Being unable to talk freely, Talus took Lacunae to the balcony, which overlooked Atresia. The young king leaned over the railing to make sure there was no one in hearing distance.

“So much has happened in this last week.” Talus continued, “I never expected things to get so ...” The king turned back to Lacunae, “complicated.”

Lacunae remained unfazed by Talus' insecurity in Solus or the plan Solus had laid before him. "My master has been troubled also. All he has wanted to do is look out for your best interest. When Clavius realized he failed you as a father, my master was pleased. Time has no place where Solus is concerned. My master knew Clavius was ill. Your father's death would have delayed his plans by a year, but it would have provided you a lifetime of memories." Having once again gained the upper hand, Lacunae continued her persuasions. "Solus has a greater concern now that you are king. The Light is plotting against you. It was The One who guided Vasa to your tent. The Light intended on killing you, not your father."

Talus looked at Lacunae in disbelief.

The master's mistress, now having control over Talus, began to circle her prey as she explained the realities of unknown world. "There is a place beyond what we see that affects every thought and action around us. This place is called Celestia."

Talus interjected, "That is where my father sleeps in peace."

Lacunae continued to circle Talus, touching his shoulder for effect. "I am afraid that is not true. Celestia has been at war since my master's existence. He has tried to bring peace to Celestia, but The One blinds those who follow its brilliance. Like a moth to a flame, The One destroys those who are attracted to it. The deception runs deep among our people. Humans naturally fear the dark because The One has instilled this fear upon us. Through darkness one can see The One for what it is: a creature that devours souls. Once they enter The One's luminosity, a person becomes trapped within it. It is Solus, my master, who has tried to reveal the truth and in doing so has endured the onslaught of The One's wrath. Your father will not be at peace until the war ends in Celestia. For that conflict to cease, you'll need to follow your heart." Lacunae reached out to Talus once more, this time touching his chest.

The future king pulled her to him engulfing her with his body. "What does this master of yours need me to do?"

Talus' coronation day was brilliant. The air was crisp, but the sun warmed those in attendance. After the coronation ceremony, Talus walked out to the balcony to address his people. Wearing the crown, Talus scanned the mass of people who came to see the new monarch. His moment had

arrived. Talus wanted to be more than their king. He now, because of Lacunae, wanted to be their savior.

"My people of Atresia, I appear before you as your king. This was neither my destiny nor my desire. Your true king was murdered in an alley in Teres trying to save me. Our king, my father, was murdered on the sands of Calyx trying to discover our enemy. I know who the enemy is. The enemy is Vellus, the High Chief of Calyx," said Talus in a raised voice, his hand pounding the balcony before him.

The commoners in the courtyard became captivated by the king's excitement.

"Has anyone been brought to justice in either crime?" queried Talus.

The crowd clamored at the question.

Talus had them and started to rally the people into frenzy. "I witnessed Vasa ride off after killing my father, yet he continues to be free. Is it so difficult to find a man who lives in your own backyard?" asked Talus. "Four of their best warriors tracked him, but he has yet to be found. Does Vellus fear Vasa more than Atresia?" Talus continued his argument with more intensity.

"Ramus was slain within earshot of the high chief's dwelling, yet the crime remains unavenged. Vellus is a pawn of our enemy, an enemy who seeks our destruction. Can we sit back and wait for the wolf to come to our door?"

The throng became more responsive.

"We need to behead the beast before its fangs bury themselves in our necks. Are we not Atresians? Are we not the nation that others follow? Then why should we grant Calyx mercy after murdering my brother and causing the death of my father? We must have justice. We must conquer Calyx and kill the beast. We must destroy our enemies!" The crowd cheered. Talus had succeeded.

Sem looked perplexed having traveled hundreds of miles to Cornea to hear Teller speak in gibberish about The Light and The Darkness in some great battle. "So let me get by this straight, you won't help us now, but you will be seeking our help later?"

Teller remained his stoic self. "This war Talus is creating will overwhelm both our borders. As long as the peoples' anger remains strong, we cannot defeat them. The Darkness is manipulating the Atresians and will ultimately use this conflict in an attempt to destroy The One. Once Calyx

falls, Talus will invade Galea. The king has no reason to attack our country. But after attacking Teres, his people, having tasted blood and victory, will easily follow Talus anywhere."

Sem remained standing while Teller sat. "Why us? We have done nothing to Atresia to warrant the death of our women and children," said Sem.

"Talus will use the murders of Ramus and Clavius to infuriate his people."

Sem remained angry with the old man before him. Knowing his own country would soon be attacked by Atresia, why did Teller decide to wait when the opportunity to stop Talus was now?

Teller stood to show solidarity with Sem. "I am sorry that you have traveled so far to hear these words but they are the truth. We will meet on the Northern Plains of Calyx soon to avenge our loss, but we must remain in the moment until the time is right."

The chief was unable to comprehend all of Teller's words. He stood back from Teller to reveal his disbelief.

"So you want me to believe a god, or gods, is controlling our destiny. That my children must die to fulfill this prophecy that you accept as true. I have no god ruling over me, but you want me to accept this massacre while you wait for a sign?"

Sem continued while pointing his finger into the face of the old man before him.

"Talus will fill his cup with our blood and drink from the life of our people, but your god has no place in our lives or in our hearts. We as Plainsmen will remember this day as we will remember the days that will follow."

Sem was then pulled away from Teller. The fellow members of the Plainsmen council feared that Sem would escalate into violence if they didn't act. The chief shook the arms off his body as he angrily walked away.

Sem's hope was to avoid bloodshed only to have Teller openly accept it. He had failed. Calyx would soon be at war and his closest friend would die in the heart of Teres. Vellus didn't deserve this fate. The midnight hour was here and for the high chief, there would be no reprieve.

Alba followed Teller as he left the Assembly room and walked back toward the temple. "Teller, how will we ask the Plainsmen for help later when we denied help to them now?"

Teller turned to his disciple and smiled. "My child, it is not I who will convince the Plainsmen to help us but The One. Faith does not always make sense at the moment but when all the events unfold, you will see the greatness that is God."

Alba was not as confident. He was worried that they would not be able to convince the Plainsmen to join the fight after being slaughtered.

Teller noticed Alba was still concerned. "Esoph was a man just like you. He wanted more from life and to pass it on to others. He sought truth and in seeking it discovered The One. He had no more faith than you or anyone else that lived in his age. Yet, through time his devotion grew and with it, his confidence in God. By the end of his life he was performing wonders simply by faith. I am old and having lived way beyond your years, I can assure you The One cares not only for us but for the Plainsmen and the Atresians." As Teller entered the sanctuary, it was time once more for prayers.

# THE DAWN OF WAR

The emissaries from Calyx arrived in Capnia. Rhodo led the delegation. The Plainsmen felt uneasy. The people on the streets looked with suspicion as they rode by. Rhodo knew it was too late to avoid war. The citizens of Atresia had been convinced. His role now was to simply act as if Calyx was unaware of Atresia's future aggression. As Rhodo arrived at the palace, the servants did their duty without pleasure.

The four Plainsmen entered the throne room where Talus held court. "My Lord," said Rhodo addressing Talus. "Vellus sends his condolences. We are here to discuss future plans to defeat the enemy that plagues our nations."

Talus laughed. It was the first time his face contorted to the point of appearing evil. "Doesn't the high chief know who our enemy is?" The King of Atresia then stood to look down upon the Plainsmen. "Does Vellus honestly think we are fooled by his, so called, sincerity? He is an idiot if he thinks we have no reason to doubt his true motives."

Talus revealed his sword. Pointing the blade at Rhodo, Talus' voice echoed throughout the chamber. "Go! Now! Before I decide to display your heads on spikes."

Rhodo didn't know what to say. He bowed to the king as the others among the delegation turned quickly toward the door. Once the emissaries left the castle, the archers readied their bows. Rhodo was the first to fall; the Plainsmen met their death no more than 100 yards away from the drawbridge. The war had begun.

Sem returned to Teres feeling defeated. He entered the palace as the high chief was preparing for attack. Vellus was addressing the defenders of Teres, the Plainsmen who had volunteered to stay with their high chief.

"If we can withstand the assault of the Atresians for two days, help will arrive on the third morning. By then a weakened Atresian army will be forced to retreat. My brothers and sisters of the council will have their warriors waiting to attack after the horns blow a fifth time during our siege."

Sem waited until the plans for their defense were completed. Vellus was a gifted leader and a credit to his great-grandfather who, like Vellus, was noted for his ingenuity. Vellus was brilliant; he had received his schooling in Capnia where he surpassed the most gifted Atresians.

Sem stepped forward as the people of Teres left to carry out the plan. The chief, having been sent away by Galea's Leader, delivered the bad news to Vellus. "Teller will not help us. He says it is not time, but that wasn't that all ..." Sem looked at Vellus in a way to show his disbelief. "He is expecting us to join him later to fight Talus when his god gives him a sign."

Vellus looked at Sem shaking his head. The high chief pointed toward two of the several chairs in the room. "Come, sit down."

Sem did as he was requested, sitting one chair away from where Vellus reclined.

"You have not experienced Teller's uncanny ability to do the right thing at the right moment but I have." Vellus spoke as if he were speaking to his oldest son, Thalamus. Turning his chair to face Sem, Vellus continued.

"During the Mountain Wars, Teller told me it was The Darkness who drove the Galeans to conflict. They had been fooled into believing that the Plainsmen were cheating them. Teller waited until the mountaineers had gained a significant victory before addressing his people. It was then that Teller stepped out of the shadows to question his children as they basked in their glory."

Vellus paused to see if Sem had any objections, but his friend remained silent. The high chief, satisfied that he had Sem's interest, carried on. "Teller stood by the fire. Having gained the attention of the revelers, the leader of Galea began his inquiry. 'What have you gained with this bloodshed? How will I convince my friend Vellus, the high chief, not to bring down his wrath upon us? Have they not paid enough for their transgression or will there be a higher debt to pay with the loss of more of your brothers? Do you think their anger is not justified after your recent victory? As you dance, they are forced to bury their loved ones as you have done too many times during this war. The time is now for this to end!'" Teller slammed his staff into the ground using both his arms to do so. "The celebration stopped. The people no longer saw joy in their victory."



Vellus pressed on knowing Sem had never heard the story before. "Teller then announced his plan of action. 'I am now going to meet with the Plainsmen with their leader by my side to end this argument. In the morning he said to the mountaineers, 'you will send three men to represent your interests to the field of battle. There the High Chief of the Calyx, I, and the three men of the Southern Plains will bring an end to this fighting.'

"It was on that field of battle that I saw Teller at his best," concluded Vellus. "Teller listened to both sides, turned to me and said, 'Forgiveness is the key to inner peace.'"

Vellus explained, "Teller allowed them to grieve and to express their pain to each other. The Galian leader brought understanding and gave them hope beyond the words spoken that morning. He then had me negotiate the terms that both sides could accept."

Vellus looked at Sem. "My point is simply this, Teller is as wise as his vast years. Though his ways are strange to us, I believe his god and ours are the same."

Sem was not sure how to respond because he wasn't convinced. He felt betrayed by Teller, yet Vellus understood completely. There was more to this than Sem could comprehend. The telling of the story was not as effective as being present in the moment.

Sem got up from his chair. "I must say good-bye to my family."

Vellus, still sitting, looked up. Vellus' eyebrows scrunched while his head cocked slightly at the same time.

Sem, seeing Vellus' strange look, felt a need to explain. "I will remain by your side until the Horns of Teres triumphantly sound or till my death by your side."

Vellus was moved by his friend's devotion. The high chief stood up, grabbed the Plainsman's shoulders, and looked him straight in the eye. "Sem, you and I are like-minded. Without you to guide the council, chiefs like Elad will make our people cling to the old ways. You are needed beyond these walls. Go and join our brothers. When the horns sound for the fifth time, be the first to lead our people to victory."

Sem nodded; it was not the time to argue. Vellus needed to concentrate on surviving, not on convincing his friend to leave. "Is there anything I can do before I go?"

Vellus looked at Sem and drew a deep breath before he spoke. "If I die within these walls, take care of my family."

Sem embraced his friend; time was too short for long good-byes. Talus assembled his army: Chariots to the front, archers to the rear and of course the fodder. Talus made sure the barkeep from The Nomad, led the way. The mass of warriors marched toward Calyx. Talus believed Teres would fall within three days and that included the two days of marching. During his travels, all the king could think of was Vasa who murdered his friend and his father all in the name of The One.

As the king rode toward Teres, he began to ponder in his mind what Lacunae said. "There is Light and Dark in another world that we cannot see which manipulates people in our world. The Darkness is the truth. We cannot see reality for what it is because The Light has created a culture of fear surrounding what we call darkness. In doing so, all who follow The Light in death are enveloped by it."

Talus continued to think because the march went slowly. "Solus wants to free all who are trapped by The Light. To do so, The Darkness has to destroy The One. He would then free the spirits, which include my father, so they can find peace. In defense, The Light is influencing those here to prevent anyone from helping Solus. Doesn't this prove The One was afraid of The Darkness and of The Light's possible destruction? Was the barkeep a vessel of The One? Did The Light know of Solus' plan prior to it evolving? Why did The One want Fossa dead? Was Fossa's murder an attempt to prevent me from carrying out the plan to destroy The Light?"

Talus tried but could not figure out what Lacunae had said; without context, his imagination could not fill in the blanks. The king was unaware of the next step for it had not been revealed to him. All he knew was that Teres had to fall to save himself and to seek revenge on Vasa. Talus was confident that his army would be victorious, and then he would transform Calyx into his own design.

Vellus heard about Rhodo's death along with the rest of the emissaries in Capnia, but the high chief already knew diplomacy had failed. Rhodo was due days ago and since he had not returned, Vellus assumed his demise. Rhodo, like Vellus, put his people first. He had bought Calyx time and allowed the warriors to escape. The Plainsmen who stayed in Teres

remained out of duty. Women and children also remained behind to create authenticity, doing so of their own free will. The plan was to take the children to a shelter where, once discovered, they would be freed if Teres fell. Even in war, children were considered sacred. The rest would fight until the third day or die.

The Horns of Teres blew on that fateful morning only to welcome a sea of Atresians across its horizon. Talus readied his troops with one last rallying cry, "For Ramus, For Clavius, For Atresia!"

A roar could be heard throughout Teres from the army that would soon attack. Vellus readied his defenders setting into motion a series of traps awaiting the oncoming soldiers. The chariots swirled around the city probing its defenses. Vellus ordered the archers to hold their fire to save arrows.

The general reported back to Talus that the weakest wall faced east. It would be there that they should concentrate their attack. The sea of warriors shifted in one giant column in that direction.

Vellus smiled realizing they had taken the bait.

Soon the fodder along with the rammers moved forward. The rammers had a giant shield covering themselves and a wooden pole on wheels. The fodder had what they could afford; some had shields of iron while others had shields of wood. The fodder's role was to scale the wall so every tenth man carried a ladder. The archers stayed back as they were able to penetrate Teres' defenses by hailing arrows toward their victims into the city itself.

Vellus yelled to the archers to fire. The first wave of fodder fell. The rammers reached the east wall but were soon impeded from completing their task. Vellus had time to create and assemble a pulley system that would carry boulders to the top of the wall. Arrows had no effect on the metal shields, but the shear weight of the giant rock did, crushing the rammers beneath while fortifying the weakened area. Cheers erupted as the first boulder fell. Soon boulders were falling like rain as the machine, being on wheels, was moved from one rammer to the next.

In the meantime, the fodder started to climb their ladders only to be greeted by a similar misfortune. Flaming oil spewed from the ramparts producing chaos and a fiery death. Out numbered and unable to call

upon his brethren for assistance, Vellus was ruling the day. Talus looked out at the battle before him bewildered by the results. This was not what he expected or what Lacunae's master had predicted. The army fell back to regroup.

Dead bodies were strewn across the plains; victory was as far away as Capnia. Talus' crown rested upon the fall of Teres. He could not go back defeated. The Horns of Teres sounded reminding the king of the tenacity of the people behind the city walls. Talus hoped that tomorrow would bring the victory he needed. If not, his army's confidence would soon be lost.

Sem along with the others heard the horns. Vellus had survived the first day. Hope embraced the Plainsmen. On the dawn of the third day, the warriors would ride with the sun on their backs. Talus and the unsuspecting army would be out flanked and unprepared for the assault. If only Vellus could hang on for another day. Sem was not a religious man but that night he prayed to the god he had been told of as a child. Sem regretted not being in Teres but understood the high chief's longing to ensure the future of his people. The opposing camps became restless anticipating what the next day would bring. The night brought sleeplessness to everyone involved in the conflict.

As the campfires glowed, Talus sulked in his tent. He was not a strategist. He could not create a battle plan to defeat his enemy. He had to rely on the professionals around him. The king viewed the generals at the table, feeling he was surrounded by incompetence. The only satisfaction he got that day was hearing how the barkeep met his fate from a falling boulder. Revenge was sweet. The king was concerned not only at the cost of life in taking Teres but of the possibility of reinforcements rallying to the aid of those within the city. Teres had to fall and fall soon. He had assembled the officers in his tent to discuss the plan for the next day. The consensus was to create a siege around the city, a process that would take months to achieve victory. Without food and water, the city would fall from within.

Talus rejected the idea. He did not have the time or the patience for a long siege. The king dismissed the council of war demanding a better idea in the morning prior to the attack. The king hoped that somehow he could

figure out a way to bring Teres down, having lost faith in his soldiers and in Lacunae's master.

Just as the campfires died down and sleep swept the camp, Lacunae's bodyguard entered Talus' tent. The king was startled at first and then angry at how easily the intruder had invaded his rest. The bodyguard knelt before Talus. "I was sent here by Lacunae. Our master has seen the events unfold this day and has graciously decided to offer his assistance. Do as commanded and Teres will fall by sunset tomorrow."

Talus smiled. His hope was renewed. The master was in control and he would have his victory. Talus stood over the messenger as Lacunae's bodyguard informed the king of the plan. In the silence of the night, three spirits named Colostrum, Mortus, and Demise set out to complete their mission. A dark cloud blackened the base of the western wall, turning rock into clay. Unaware of the events created by The Darkness around them, the guards of Teres stood upon the ramparts above the site. At dawn, hordes of Atresians would enter the city through the wall that was no longer stone.

The Horns of Teres blew once again. The city had endured the night. Vellus overlooked the eastern wall seeing the remains of weapons left on the ground. Today the Atresians would not be so easily fooled. Having only one machine, he maneuvered it to the northern wall. Horses pulled the machine and boulders into place, taking most of the night to do so. The high chief then positioned his warriors along the western and southern face of the city. When Atresia attacked, he would then reinforce the areas as needed. This was the moment when all of Vellus' skills would be tested.

Talus met with the generals once more. They, being of a unified mind, tried to convince the king to create a siege. Talus stood up and made his announcement, "The western wall will fall before you. We will attack from the north until our chariots lead the charge westward into the city, causing panic and chaos for those inside. When the wall is broken, it will be there that we will focus our attack. By the end of this day, Teres will be ours."

The generals remained unconvinced, but Talus had ordered them to follow his directions. His crown depended on this victory. If he failed, Talus would relinquish his position as King of Atresia.

The morning was clear; the sun had burned the light frost off the brush. Trumpets blew rallying the troops once more. As the Atresian army marched toward the northern wall, Vellus praised God for his fortune. The high chief guessed right. The archers defending Teres readied their bows as the fodder carried their ladders toward them. Arrows descended upon the unlucky Atresians as they desperately threw their rungs of wood against the stone. Fiery oil spewed down burning the first trying to ascend the wall. Boulders began to drop once more on the rammers creating even more obstacles for the Atresians to overcome.

The strategists of war looked at Talus who remained calm. Incus, the most confident of the generals yelled, "Your majesty, we need to pull back."

Talus extended his hand to Incus to wait as he motioned with his other hand for the chariots to race toward the western wall. The Darkness was with them. The horses, being possessed, were given a mind of their own. The riders held on as the steeds raced across the plains. The horsemen pulled back on the reins in hopes of preventing the inevitable collision between themselves and the stone wall. Some of the riders jumped, breaking bones or worse, as they were trampled to death by other horses' hooves. The others, frozen by fear, braced themselves for the pain of crushing into solid rock. The wall gave way as the chariots disintegrated the clay causing gapping holes for the fodder to pass through.

Loud cheers came from the Atresians as they ran into the city. Chariots crushed the defenders who were running through the streets. Vellus, who was upon the northern wall, looked in horror as the Atresians overwhelmed those on the ground below him. Rallying his troops, the high chief gathered two hundred men and women to counter attack. As the mass of soldiers ran towards them, Vellus led his warriors to stem the tide. Seen by the few still on the wall, Vellus ran a hundred yards into the swarm killing fifty Atresians in his charge. Slowly, his force dwindled behind him until he stood alone. Flailing his sword in all directions, he continued to fight until at last a spear ended his assault. Teres had fallen. The high chief was dead.

The Horns of Teres blew once more to sound the victory. Being near sunset, it was heard as a signal of hope to others who were unaware of the recent events. Sem heard the horns sound. He, along with others, rejoiced, convinced that Vellus had carried on for another day.

Sem stood upon a rock to address the warriors readying for battle the next morning.

"My brothers, the Atresians have failed to take our city! Upon sunrise, the horns will blast and we will ride into battle. We will destroy the aggressor and drive them back to Capnia. Vellus has made it known to all how great a warrior he is. After our victory, we shall honor him as we have honored Mesa. All shall speak of this to our children and our children's children. As we join the battle, we will become part of his greatness."

"To Vellus! To Vellus! To Vellus!" the warriors echoed Sem's cry.

If the Atresians had not been celebrating themselves, they too would have heard the warrior's howling. As night fell, Sem desired to see his friend. He wondered how Vellus managed to defeat a force ten times his own. Sem anticipated the stories he would hear as the high chief relived his greatest hour. Sharpening his arrows and placing them back in his quiver, he held up the last to the sky and said, "This one is for Talus!"

As night fell on Teres, the king set his sights on conquering the various towns and cities that defined Calyx proper. Talus knew it was unwise, even with help of Lacunae's master, to pursue the Plainsmen into the wilderness. His plan was simple: control the west, maintain the center, and pin the warriors to the east. The king planned to create fortified encampments just beyond Teres, so the Plainsmen could not counter attack as they had in years past. The warriors would be unable to infiltrate Atreisa's defense without a column of soldiers in pursuit. In effect, the nation of Calyx had died with Vellus.

Without the resources needed to continue the war, the people of the plains would revert to their nomadic ways, pushing further into unknown lands. Those who remained would become citizens of Lateralis, a new remote province of Atresia. Calyx would be lost to the wilderness beyond the civilized world.

Talus had not forgotten the most important event that occurred that day. The Master of Darkness became real to the king. He was no longer an expression of Lacunae's passion but an entity of its own. Talus had a powerful ally, one that could destroy his enemies. The king felt confident that this master would help him gain revenge on Vasa and free his father from the emptiness of The Light.

Leaving enough of a force to control Teres, the king planned to march to the south toward Pulvinar, Insula, and Tibia, as a smaller force would be sent to conquer Turcica to the north.

The Horns of Teres were silenced. The warriors of Calyx, who were ready to race across the sands at daylight, remained motionless. Slowly, the reality that Teres had fallen sunk in; the Plainsmen turned away from the west and headed east. Sem was the last to accept defeat. Pulling on the reins, he brought up the rear of what was now a column of refugees carrying what belongings they had on horseback. Sem, mourning the loss of his good friend, allowed his stead to walk slowly towards the rising sun.



# TALUS RETURNS HOME

Having defeated Calyx, King Talus returned to Capnia a champion. The king walked with the confidence of a nobleman. He was no longer the drunkard whose only ambition was to seduce the local gentry. Talus called for Lacunae. He wanted to share what he had learned from the battle. While he waited, he called in his chief advisors: Flavin became the chancellor, Chordae remained the ambassador, and Osseous, commander of the military. The general had gained a newfound respect for his king after the battle of Teres. He would not question the king's judgment again.

Talus didn't like the throne room; there was too much pomp and circumstance for his liking. The king preferred a room just off the main chamber. He set up a table with chairs. Even then, while the others sat, he preferred to stand. Not knowing what the next step in the master's plan would be, Talus wanted to consolidate his power.

He called for Oris, who would be in charge of Lateralis (formerly Calyx). Oris wanted the same thing that Talus desired—revenge. He had no use for the Plainsmen after the death of his friends. He considered them all untrustworthy. Punishment would be swift and harsh to all who challenged Atresia's authority. This hatred harbored within Ramus' friend guaranteed that Lateralis would not revert back to its native land. For Oris, this provided him with the opportunity to find Rete and to take his anger out on those who reminded him of the traitor who killed the prince. Oris was pleased with his new position. The king asked only one thing beyond his loyalty, find Vasa and bring his head to Talus. Oris understood and was more than willing to comply with the king's request.

For Flavin, Talus wanted to free himself of the routine Clavius had set. The chancellor would be the judicator over all the Sessions brought before the court. Chordae would manage the interactions between the new province of Lateralis and Artresia and begin the task of indoctrinating the new inhabitants. Talus was pleased with having delegated control of the mundane and freeing himself for the adventures that this master had waiting

for him. After dismissing the assembled, Talus found himself alone in the room. The King of Atresia gave himself a moment to think about all that had recently transpired. He had justified his murdering Ramus as a necessary occurrence for the future of the world. His brother would not have been as bold to transform the destiny of mankind.

A page broke Talus' solitude and announced the arrival of Lacunae. The king entered the throne room. The beautiful mystic bowed before him. He motioned with his hand for her to rise. Talus led Lacunae out of the palace to the stables where two stallions waited to be mounted. Riding to the royal hunting grounds, Talus slowed his steed and dismounted. Following his lead, the young maiden did the same. They started walking their horses down a path leading to the river.

Talus turned to Lacunae, now feeling safe to talk. "He's real. I didn't believe it but The Darkness was the one who brought victory to Atresia."

Lacunae smiled. She no longer had to convince the king to follow her master's plan.

"Now that I discovered Solus is real that must mean The One is real as well. How am I to achieve victory?" Talus continued, "The Light wants me dead. Before this moment I was just dealing with men, but now I am warring with demons."

Lacunae turned to Talus and said, "That is why my master sent me. I am to protect and to guide you to further victories." Lacunae saw an opportunity to continue her instruction of Talus. "Do you remember the room of people before you entered my chamber?"

Talus nodded.

"They are your guards against spiritual forces of The One. As long as they gather, The Light's demons cannot hurt you."

The king looked puzzled. "What about Vasa? He is part of The Light."

"Yes, Your Highness, but Vasa is a man. The demons have influence over mortals but you cannot be touched. Your father was made to believe you were responsible for your mother's death. As his hatred grew, so did The Light's influence over him. Vasa is subject to the same spirit. He will not rest until you or he is dead."

Talus listened intently before changing the subject. "So, how did you become a slave to this master?"

Lacunae smiled. "I am not a slave nor am I controlled by a force other than my own. My master saved me from a horrible fate when I was a child." The mystic paused before continuing the narrative; her story had never been shared until now.

"My father was more gifted than I or anyone known before him. He loved The Light but the people who worshiped and followed the thing did not understand his powers so they shunned him. With every act of kindness, he was accused of witchcraft. Soon he was healing people in secret, asking for nothing but praise for The One, who allowed his people to scorn him." Lacunae paused, as she was about to relive her nightmare. "One night a crowd gathered outside our house demanding my father. My mother hid me from the mob. My father was at first beaten and then stoned on the street for heresy."

Lacunae continued walking, her hands twisting the reins as she became caught in the emotions while she spoke.

"Then, they entered my house dragging my mother out to face the people who murdered my father. She was unwilling to confess her allegiance to The Darkness, so she was tortured until she begged for mercy. But for her it was too late; the injuries were too severe. She died after crawling back inside the house. A gentleman named Manus took care of me and guided me in the fine art of spirits. He told me of The Light and The Dark. My father was a victim of his desire to seek The Light. I desired The Darkness for I had seen The Light and wanted no part of it. When I was old enough, I was presented to The Darkness. I learned from him the truth and became devoted to his passion of saving us all."

Talus no longer saw a beautiful woman but a child inside her shell. He too had known what it was like to be an outsider. They reached the river, which deafened any further attempt at conversation. The horses waded into the water drinking freely. Talus reached out his hand to Lacunae. From holding hands to embracing, it was only a moment before they kissed. Time passed without notice until they rose from the grass as the sun began to set.

Soon they were riding back to the castle; Talus wanted her to stay but she knew the time was not right. Her master had plans for the king that superseded her own.

As they rode, she turned to Talus. "My master has been pleased with your effort. He wants to address with you the next step of his plan."

"When does he want to meet?" Talus was eager for adventure.

Lacunae replied, "At his appointed time; when you are alone and free of distractions."

Talus laughed. "So you won't be there, will you?"

"No", said Lacunae. "Each person who has the honor to meet him does so individually. Then each person is given his or her own path to take."

Lacunae sped her horse ahead of the king's. Talus kicked his steed into a gallop to give chase. The race was on. Talus overtook the maiden but had to slow down. Positioning herself to the inside, Lacunae had pushed Talus toward a group of trees as they came to a turn. The king had to almost stop to avoid a collision. He caught up again only to be thwarted by the mistress grabbing his horse's reins and pulling hard to the right, causing them both to almost tumble. Talus, being left far enough behind for Lacunae not to notice, took a short cut to the stables.

As she approached the barn, the king stood waiting. "You're not the only one full of surprises." They laughed as he helped her off of her saddle. It was dark. Talus received one last stolen kiss before Lacunae departed with her bodyguard who was waiting just beyond the drawbridge. Everything was right in his world. He was a conqueror of all that stood in the way of his happiness. Not even a god could stop what he was about to accomplish.

In Cornea the news of Teres confirmed what they already feared, the fall of Galea was near. Talus was a means to an end, the destruction of The One. Teller called upon his spiritual children to aid the Plainsmen, knowing the frost would soon be here. Though meat would be plentiful, the land would offer nothing. The grain stores were opened to assist the refugees.

Alba would lead the caravan north. The young disciple approached his teacher. "Teller, I am troubled by your request. We are about to be overtaken by our enemy, our temple desecrated, and you want to send me away?"

Teller smiled, as he was about to reveal the wisdom of his thoughts. "Alba, if you were here and I was to be taken, could you stand by and watch me be humiliated before you?"

Alba lowered his head and answered quietly, "I would give my life for you."

Teller looked at the young Sharer of The One. "Exactly. The will of The One must be followed. Your desire to spare me contradicts what has been foretold. You must follow your own destiny. You have great promise, my son. Each of us must pursue what God has laid before us."

Alba looked up resigned to his duty. "Teacher, what can I do to help you in a strange land?"

Teller started to walk toward the old emperor's palace to address the Assembly. "We need to make the Plainsmen aware of The One's intentions and their role in 'The Great Battle'. The grain will only keep their bodies fed, but their spirits are broken. They cannot reclaim what was rightfully theirs. Talus has assured it. Having their identity stolen from them, the tribes will begin to fight among themselves for what they have left. The others will be forced to enter the unknown lands. The Plainsmen need hope. You will need to provide it with your words and your actions. Knowing what lies before us, it is you who will make our neighbors understand the evil that has taken over Atresia. If we fail in our quest to free ourselves from The Darkness, the world will never be the same."

Teller stopped. Putting his hand on Alba's shoulder, he looked at his disciple. "You, my dearest Alba, are the key to it all."

The Assembly was a third of its size from a few weeks ago. Some went back to their towns and villages to avoid the occupation. Others felt the call to rally the Plainsmen who would engage the enemy at the appointed time. The few who stayed behind had already worked out the codes and meeting places needed to keep the resistance viable. Teller stood before them and began to speak.

"My children and followers of The One, I am so proud of you all for working so hard in this great time of need. Alba will lead a procession to the north to provide aid to those who have fallen to the Atresians. We need to keep his mission in our thoughts and prayers. The success of his work will determine the balance of power in the battle before us. As for me, I have been given the task to seek the strangers and to do so, I will surrender myself into Talus' hands."

All in the Assembly cried, "No, no, nooooo!"

Teller silenced them by raising his hands. "This is all within The One's will that had been laid before me. We need to believe that The One we follow is

truly supreme and by being so, allows things to occur for the greater good. We are all called to be servants; even I am not above this charge.”

The crowd muttered mostly sounds of concern.

Teller continued, “If for some reason The One takes me from this post as leader and teacher, Alba will take my place until the temple is restored and another Teller is chosen.”

The crowd murmured to one another while most nodded in compliance.

Teller raised his hands once more to gain the Assembly’s attention. “The time is here; Talus will soon arrive. Let us move toward the battle that will free us all from The Darkness that permeates our world.”

The Assembly rose cheering. Teller simply did as he always had without acknowledgement; the leader of Galea turned from the applause and stepped down from the podium. The die was cast. The plan set in motion. All hope rested with Alba’s ability to convince the unbelievers.

The herds began to dwindle. The lands could not support the mass of people. Tension rose as the tribes who were evicted from their homes began to squabble. Shouting matches escalated into skirmishes and slowly the death toll mounted as warriors fought not only for space but also for food. The chiefs, who followed the refugees east, knew a council was needed if Calyx was to survive. Vellus was gone and without a leader, soon anarchy would rule the land.

The frost made it impossible to gather nourishment from the soil. The further east, the more uninhabitable the earth became. The unknown lands were the worst being mostly free of beasts or edible vegetation. Sem looked out to the west. Talus had created an ingenious barrier to keep the Plainsmen pinned in their present location. Encampments of four Atresians were placed within an arrow’s distance. If one were to be assaulted, a flare would be sent by flaming arrow to warn the others. A battalion would be dispatched to repel the invasion. Even if the warriors succeeded, the element of surprise would be lost with more soldiers waiting to engage the enemy.

Under the current conditions, the chiefs knew their people could not survive. Soon the food would run out and starvation would eliminate any hope of cooperation between tribes. Action was needed, but even a council could not fix this problem. Words would not be enough; sustenance was the only thing that could save Calyx from self-destruction.

# SOLUS

Talus anticipated meeting Lacunae's master. He envisioned leading his army into battle against The Light and then in victory, freeing his father and those who were trapped like him. Talus heard his name being praised as the souls found rest in The Darkness. No longer would The Light mislead his people into believing in its righteousness. The king also looked forward to being with Lacunae after destroying The One. He and his lover would live forever as rulers of the world. He retired to his bedroom remembering the events that had occurred earlier that day. Lacunae had captured his heart.

He had just finished the last of his wine when an ethereal presence, black in form, appeared before him. Talus backed away not knowing what the presence was. The king reached for his sword but then realized it would have been completely useless.

"Who are you? How dare you enter my chamber unannounced," demanded Talus

The smoke took on more of a human look. Talus thought he could make out a face. Hoping to see his father, he didn't recognize the being before him, but the presence looked magnificently old.

Resting in the middle of the room, the aberration began to speak. "My child, it is I, the master of all there is and all that will be."

The king lowered the sword, leaned toward the spirit and asked, "Are you Lacunae's master?"

The Darkness responded, "Yes, I am, and yours as you shall soon see."

Talus began to question his own reality; the king looked around to ground himself. As he reached out to touch the being before him, the presence became more solid and walked away from Talus' reach. The king followed the being with his eyes as the form walked around the room.

"I am Solus, the creator of the darkness and the proprietor of the truth. I have fought the deception since the beginning of time. I have seen many taken in only be lost to The Light." The presence took Talus' sword from

his hand, inspected it, and then handed it back. "I have waited for this moment in time to rescue all that have become victims of the beast. Since your birth, I have cared for you and kept you safe from my enemy. I am here now to determine if you are worthy of the task that will finally bring upon The One's demise."

Talus responded, "And if I am not?"

Solus turned toward the king. "Then you will die."

This, to Talus, did not sound like the benevolent being he had imagined. The king had pictured a far different conversation than the one he was having.

"My child," Solus continued, "you must understand there are only two choices given to each person. You are either for or against. If you are for, then you will be under my care. But if you are against, then you are my enemy."

The king relaxed feeling a little better about the presence before him. "I want to free my father from The Light."

The Darkness began to circle Talus as Lacunae had. "So you shall my child, so you shall."

The monarch followed the presence with his eyes. "What do you want from me?"

Solus stopped and looked into Talus' eyes. Even in his darkened state, the look was penetrating. "You must enter the Temple of Moralis and create a door to Celestia."

The king looked at the Master of Darkness. "What will happen if I do?"

The dark figure became less solid and more translucent. "Then you will have your opportunity to destroy The One who has trapped your father."

"Will you free Lacunae?" requested Talus.

"Free?" The smoky presence wisped around the arrogant king. "Free? Was I the being who allowed her father to die? Was I the one in The Light's name to stone him?"

Talus, realizing he had gone too far, retreated. "What will become of us if we succeed?"

Solus became solid once more. Standing two feet in front of the king he spoke again, "Life!" Then The Darkness standing before Talus vanished.

The king was more confused than reassured having now met the being that protected him. Talus wanted to please this being but to do so would



mean starting a war with a peaceful nation. How would he convince his people to do such a thing? He walked around his room half the night trying to process the visitation but the more he thought, the less confident he was of carrying out Solus' request. The king finally accepted the fact that he needed Lacunae's help to manage this situation presented by her master.

The following day, Talus called on Lacunae to discuss the night's event. They rode off to find privacy within the royal hunting grounds to talk and embrace. Walking their horses down a beaten path, Talus turned to his lover and said, "He came in the night, Solus, and he talked to me."

Lacunae turned to her king and replied, "I know; I was there."

Talus looked stunned. "You were?"

Lacunae smiled, seeing he was still very naïve of spiritual matters. "Solus allowed me to be present with him so that I may assist with your quest."

The king continued feeling relieved that he didn't have to waste time explaining the ghost like presence that appeared to him. "I have to invade Galea. To do so, I need to convince my people to go to war with a nation with which we have no quarrel."

Lacunae stopped. Talus had to turn completely around to face her. She then looked up. "Why?"

Talus looked perplexed. "Why what?"

"Why do you feel the need to fight the Galeans?" asked Lacunae.

The king felt frustrated. For all Lacunae knew about the spirit world, she knew nothing of the real one. "Do you honestly think we can walk in and take their temple without an arrow shot?" Talus laughed.

Lacunae was insulted and showed it in her tone as she tried to explain that he was the one who lacked vision. "Battles are not always won by the strongest but by the smartest. Lunge at me."

Talus reached out to grab her but as he did, she pulled back, wrapped her leg around his, and with her arm pushed him to the ground.

"Are you not stronger than me?" she teased.

Talus felt the need to demonstrate to his point of view. Lifting himself up from the ground, he lunged again. This time he had the element of surprise. Lacunae grabbed his arm, twisted her body, and slung him over her back, causing the king once more to topple on to the dirt road. "Victory

does not always go to the strongest, but the one who is the most clever," instructed Lacunae.

Talus rose again submitting to her argument. "Okay, how does one invade a nation without warring against its people?"

Lacunae embraced her lover pulling him down to the ground. As they kissed she whispered, "Later."

The council met within Rani's tribal village. The quarters were cramped and ill fitted for Calyx's leaders to assemble. Still, necessity outweighed the inconvenience. The refugee issue needed to be resolved before the people starved during the upcoming frost. A new leader had to be chosen, and a new battle plan had to be devised to recapture their land.

The Chief of Elad, being the eldest, spoke first. "My children we are here under great duress. Our children will now judge us by our actions today. We cannot wilt under the pressure of the Atresians for if we do, we will have nothing to offer those who will follow our path. Our next high chief will bear the responsibility of this, and so we must be wise in our choice. We must not be persuaded by provincial attitudes, but look beyond them to see who is best for Calyx. I have seen many of you come of age here at this council. I know all of you like a father knows his children. Though Rhodo would have been my choice, I now seek Sem to guide us as high chief. My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council."

Sem looked up at the older chief. They never agreed on anything, much less spoke more than a few words to each other. Vellus' friend wanted to ask the old man why he should lead the Plainsmen, but he thought better of it.

Rani spoke next offering more testimony on the elder's choice. "Men and women of fire are rare among us. Whether they look to the ways of old or a future strange to us, leadership is a gift few of us have. Sem has that gift. We must join around him and follow his desire for our people. The wisdom of this council will guide him in choosing the right path. I now bow to Sem, whom I honor as my high chief."

Rani bowed toward Sem. The Chief of Hilus Valley stood and returned her gesture. She then spoke once more, "My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council."

Sem sat back down but as he did, he noticed more eyes upon him. More chiefs spoke, each giving their reasons for enlisting the Chief of Hilus Valley.

Most had testified about Sem's ability to rally those to a cause. What greater cause could there be than the salvation of Calyx? As the council continued, it became evident that Sem was their indisputable choice. It was almost unanimous but for Sem, who declined to speak. The chiefs were satisfied with their first order of business, but the next would be far more difficult. The council adjourned for the day allowing the new high chief to prepare for tomorrow. Sem felt overwhelmed. He was now appreciating the pressure Vellus had endured over the last eighteen frosts. He missed his friend even more with the future of Calyx weighing in the balance of his next decision.

# FOR OR AGAINST

Solus gazed at the floor of his throne room. He particularly enjoyed the encounter between the King of Atresia and his mistress. His plan was unfolding just as he imagined it would. As Solus looked upon the world below, he felt the light penetrating his domain and hated The One for it. Soon Celestia would be dark, and he would rule it all without mercy.

The Darkness summoned one of his servants. Sepsis answered his master's call. Looking at the demon, Solus instructed his minion. "I must add one last ingredient to make Talus' transformation complete. I need Vasa to murder Lacunae. Can you arrange that for me?"

Sepsis was not as imposing as Necrosis or even Colostrum, but he had abilities that served his master well in the physical realm. "I will set his mind upon the woman. I will convince him that Lacunae, the mistress of Talus, is a traitor to his cause."

"Very good," said Solus who remained sitting on his throne. The Lord of Darkness continued, "The lovers like to play in the royal hunting grounds. There, Vasa should have ample opportunity to dispose of her."

The creature looked up and nodded in agreement.

Solus raised his finger in the air to prevent Sepsis from leaving. "Oh, by the way, Vasa must not harm the king; Talus has worked so hard, and it would be a shame to have him die before his time." A wry smile came upon Solus' face. The Darkness then dismissed the demon before him. Necrosis entered the room just as Sepsis turned to leave.

"Things are going well, I see."

Solus looked at Necrosis as he sat back in his chair. "Better than one could hope for."

Time escaped once more for the lovers who rode by sunset toward the castle. Talus would now have to wait for the answer that Lacunae posed earlier. He was happy. For the first time since Manus invaded his life, he felt at peace. He was a king who had a mission to save mankind from destruction, and he was in love. Talus looked at his mistress who never

looked less than attractive. She was racing back to the stables; the loser had to kiss the other's feet. The king could care less. The humiliation would do him good. The important questions had to wait until tomorrow. He wanted to know more about Solus. What did Solus say to her when she met him? And why has this battle endured so long between The Light and the Master of Darkness? The most pressing question being on Talus' mind was what prompted Solus to choose him? They pulled into the stable yard. Lacunae had won; she kicked off her shoes while remaining on her mount and laughed as the king kissed each toe.

Sem awoke feeling as if the weight of the entire world was placed on his shoulders. Thousands of people huddled around him, all displaced with no hope of returning home. It was his responsibility to find the answer that would save his people from certain death. Another council meeting would start after lunch, only this time he alone would have to decide the fate of a nation. He washed his face with the cold water left in a basin and then flicked both hands away to dry them. He was not the strategist Vellus had been nor had he been trained with the elite of Atresia. With that said, he was resourceful while making the most of what he had.

Three possibilities came to mind: attack, retreat, or conform. Looking west, he thought of ways to foil the trap set by Talus. Two or three war parties could allow some to infiltrate and disturb the peace in what Atresia called Lateralis. Would that be enough to warrant the withdrawal of Atresia's army? Probably not.

Sem looked to the east. Beyond the unknown lands, were there lands that would provide sustenance? How many scouts would he send to find out, and how long before he knew? The last possibility was the least favorable but the most plausible. Maintain our new border, relocate as many as the land could hold, and then have others move east to serve the Atresians. At least most would survive the winter with the hope that someday the Plainsmen would regain their land. None of the options he came up with provided the solution to keep Calyx intact. All he could do was pray for an answer from an unknown god that Vellus had talked about.

As Sem thought of regaining Teres, Ramus' friend had other ideas. Oris looked out over the old capital of Calyx. Slowly, the city started to show,

signs of life once more. The occupying force remained entrenched. No one dared oppose them. Retaliation under the new governor was quick and excessive by anyone's standards. Oris hated the Plainsmen. He thought they were nothing but ignorant people, bordering on subhuman. The horns were destroyed along with any other reminder of the recent past. The night fell in silence; the curfew ensured it.

The governor had two missions he wanted to complete before returning to Atresia: break the back of the enemy and find the man who called himself Rete.

A messenger entered the study as Oris was finishing the last of his wine. "Sire, we have a man here who may be the one you were looking for.

Oris bolted up. "Where?"

The soldier, trying to catch his breath from the run, pointed to the west. "The reformatory."

The governor had made it a habit to arrest anyone for even looking suspicious. After an interrogation using a small whip, or in the case of a woman or child a long flexible rod, they would be released the next day. It was upon one of those roundups that a beggar informed the guard of Rete, who was now sporting a beard. The man was escorted to a holding cell where he waited for the governor to appear. Oris heard the screams as he passed through the halls, ignoring the women who cried out for mercy.

He wanted one thing: revenge. Turning the corner, the recognition was immediate. Oris saw Rete who stood holding the bars as if he could bend the iron he was grasping. Oris smiled at the Plainsman in the same way Rete had looked at him on the night he murdered Ramus. "Well, trapped in your own cage I see."

Rete just stared at Oris, angry that the bars would not give.

"Bring him to the courtyard," shouted Oris. The guards did as the governor had ordered. Oris walked back to his quarters where he grabbed his sword and shield. He knew it was reckless for the Governor of Lateralis to engage in a duel, but he didn't care.

Oris saw Rete in the field surrounded by guards. He felt his heart pounding as he gave the command, "Let him go."

The guards did as the governor had instructed. Oris' sword felt light as he pressed the handle into his hand. The shield shimmered as it

reflected the torchlight that illuminated the field. Rete was still bound by leather straps.

"Release him," said Oris.

Rete looked around but it was too dark to see anything beyond the torchlight.

Looking at Rete, the governor remembered how the Plainsman laughed as he walked away after killing his friend Jute. Oris spoke coldly. "Give him a sword but no shield. He doesn't deserve one."

A guard threw Rete a sword keeping far enough back to ensure his safety.

"Rete," Oris yelled as he held his sword and shield high in the air. "I have a proposal for you. Kill me and you may go free. That's a much better offer than you gave my friends, don't you think?"

Rete continued to look around trying to see if anyone would sneak up on him, but no one moved.

The tone in Oris' voice changed as he taunted Rete once more. "What do you say, just me and you?"

Rete began to maneuver toward the Atresian. Holding his shield up while waving his sword in the air, Oris readied himself for battle. Rete grasped his sword with both hands, hoping that using his whole body would disarm the nobleman. The combatants clashed; a clear ring of metal broke the silence. Another ring was heard as Rete rushed toward Oris, slamming his sword into the governor's shield. Oris kept moving backwards until at last Rete began to tire. "This is for Dartos!" Oris swung his blade catching Rete in the thigh. Limping badly, the Plainsman backed up to position himself for another blow. "This one is for Jute!" The governor twirled around Rete as he swung again hitting the other leg, causing the traitor to fall to his knees. Rete knew he had lost. As he attempted to kill himself, Oris kicked the sword from his hands.

"No! You will not deprive me of this moment!" The governor dropped his shield and with both hands swung the blade toward his opponent. "This is for RAMUS!" Rete lay lifeless on the ground. Oris had finally gained his revenge.

Unknown to Talus, the seeds were planted long ago for the plan Lacunae had told him. Clavius had made it a culture trying to respect all people by preventing offense. The mystics approached Clavius with a concern they

had about the reference to God being The One. Though most believed in this being, it was not fair of the sharers to make the assumption that their God was the only true being. Saying The One was offensive to all who did not believe in this god. Clavius agreed, which forced the Sharer's from Galea to use other terms like The Light or simply Our God to convey their message. It wasn't the words that made this a useful tool for Solus but the inability of those less discerning to know who God really was. To most, God became an entity beyond the physical world and not a presence in one's life. Being disconnected from the spiritual world meant the deception could be easily managed. For Solus, all Talus had to do was guide the citizens toward his god and create a new enemy of the state. The king already had reason to accept this from his own experience. The Light was the one who put hate in Clavius' heart. It was the being that controlled Vasa who killed not only his best friend but also his father. And it was the thing that had held man captive, devouring all who entered its presence. The final step was for Talus to convince his people of Solus' truth.

The day was bright and unusually warm, considering the lateness of the season. For two weeks Talus had prepared his people for this day. Rumors of miracles were circulated. The king invited all who were spiritual in the kingdom to discuss the recent events. Finally, after much fanfare, the king was ready to announce what the strange occurrences meant for the Atresians.

Talus addressed his people.

"My fellow Atresians, only now after much discussion can I present to you the enlightenment I've been given. God made himself known to me, and his name is Solus. He has chosen us, the people of Atresia, to carry out his greatest quest. We must eliminate the enemy first within our borders and beyond so all may be free of the beast. The question is simple for every man, woman, and child to answer. Are you for or against God?

"For those who are against Solus will be considered the enemy, and they will know the contempt of our nation. We must unite under his cause to free man from the evil that burdens us. I stand here before you not as your king but as a prophet of God. This is why I consulted with all the spiritual minds of our kingdom. I needed to determine the validity of my experience before presenting it to you, the people of Atresia.



“The truth is now before us and I ask all in the name of Solus to rid ourselves of the being whose followers worship as The One. The Sharers told us not to regret, for regrets prevent us from being with The One. Why do they ask us to seek The One’s forgiveness? To control us! If we grovel at the monster’s feet, we cannot free ourselves from The One’s influence. We need to rid The One from our lives. Only then can we see the truth. Since the beginning of time, we have been manipulated. We need to destroy this thing that has taken over our lives to create a new life for us all. We must swear an oath to Solus to rid the enemy that steals our hope.”

The crowd cheered, chanting “Talus! Talus! Talus!” For Solus, the deception was complete.

In Atresia, the mystics and competing spiritualists seized upon the opportunity Talus had given them. Flavin was inundated with various requests for sanctions or ordinances against Churches of The Light. There were no Sessions to be called. To do so would be an act of treason against the state. People were discriminated against for their faith. Those known to be of The One lost their jobs. Others were occasionally beaten. Most either hid away or moved to other towns. Some ventured south to Galea to worship as they desired. All of the citizens were forced to sign a pact honoring Solus. Since most were pragmatists, they went along to be left in peace. Those who protested against the ordinances were imprisoned. Some were even tortured solely for the entertainment of the guards. The Atresians had an enemy beyond their borders to rally behind; the enemy was God.

# UPON THE NORTHERN PLAINS

Sem entered the council meeting with little more than the options he had already created. He was hoping for an answer in the faces he scanned in the crowd before him. All the while he thought to himself, how did Vellus manage this so well?

Que, a chief from the lost city of Turcica spoke first, “My people are growing restless, the frost is upon us, and we have no home. Our warriors gave their lives so that we could someday return to our lands. What do I say to my people who grow cold and hungry?” The chief stood waiting for a reply before sitting once more in silence.

Rani rose to face the chief since it was her land they inhabited. “I understand your people’s anger, but we suffer as one. My people are going without to make sure yours are fed. Soon even this sacrifice will not be enough. I ask my brothers and sisters to hear our plea. Take home those you can care for and spare us the agony of deciding who will live or die. My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council.”

Zeis, a chief along the Galean border, stood and looked at Sem. “Look around you. We are a defeated nation left with so little for so many. Did Vellus want us to die a slow death? Yet there was no plan, no place for all these people who populate these plains. We could care for half of these people with what we have left of Calyx. Who will decide about the rest and their fate? After the Mountain Wars, we have become close to our neighbors to the west. We need to ask the Galeans for help. The march would be long but with preparation, all would survive. My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council.”

Sem cringed; the thought of dealing with Teller again made his head hurt. Maybe he could delegate the task to someone more understanding to Teller’s ways.

The Chief of Elad stood looking at his brother from Turcica, who remained standing. "My son this is not the first time we have faced adversity nor will it be the last. We as a nation must deal with the ebbs and flows of life. All have their triumphs and all will taste the bitterness of defeat. It is how we accept these moments in our lives that reveal who we truly are. Are we a nation or individuals under a common name? As a nation, we must suffer together just as we will triumph together. If we are individuals, then we are only as strong as our weakest link. Soon the bond that holds us will break as we fight for ourselves and not for our brothers. Please sit down my friend; whatever is decided here will be the choice of a nation. My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council."

The chief of Turcica turned to the council as he said, "My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council."

Tensor was the newest chief to the council. He became the leader of the Celia after Rhodo passed. "What if the Galeans can't help us? What do we do then? I know we are all concerned, but when do we think about our own tribes? Do they deserve the same fate as those lost in battle?" Like the other council member who waited earlier for a response, the chief remained standing.

Sem got up and stood before the council. He had heard enough and thought it was time that he became the high chief. Looking out, he responded to all who were listening. "Until this moment, I had nothing of value to say but after hearing our newest council member, I will now speak."

"Have we already lost who we are? We are beginning to sound like the chiefs of old, concerned only with their own affairs and fighting for causes that promoted their interests. Time and time again as one tribe fell to an invading army, the other tribes fortified their own defenses. Only when pushed back to the Unknown Lands did they unite to repel the invaders from their homes. Mesa changed all of that by bringing the Plainsmen together. We built cities and created a way of life beyond the bow and spear. Now we are faced with a choice between our nation and ourselves. As High Chief of Calyx, I speak for our people, all of our people. Zeis is right; the time is now to care for our brothers and sisters by any means possible. If the Galeans do not help us, then let us band together and fight

as one force against the enemy occupying our lands. Then if we fail, we will die proud in our effort and our children will live.”

The Chief of Celia howled in response to Sem’s message. As the screams and chants subsided, Tensor spoke once more as he looked at Sem before sitting down. “My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council.”

Sem looked out at the passion displayed by his brethren. In the moment of silence after all the yelling had subsided, it was the high chief who spoke softly. “My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council.”

Sem awoke feeling no better than he did the night before. He knew if it came to a war with Atresia, many of his warriors would die with no guarantee of success. Along with planning a strategy to recapture Teres, the high chief needed to send an emissary to Galea. None of the chiefs immediately came to mind.

The disturbance started from a distance but soon it grew as the caravan came closer. Cheers erupted from the refugees as Alba led a procession of wagons full of food and clothing. Teller’s timing was impeccable. Most of the chiefs had planned to return to their homes while waiting for the next council.

Teller’s disciple marched toward the high chief, embracing him as they met.

“My name is Alba, Sharer of The One; I am here representing Galea. We brought all we have to assist your people through this trial. The time is near when our nation, too, will fall to Talus and to The Darkness that leads him.”

Sem looked at the young Galean bewildered by what had just happened. Screams of joy made it difficult to talk, even though the leaders were right next to each other. The high chief had to yell into Alba’s ear. “Thank you, we will convene a council to discuss your concerns tomorrow. Until then, we will enjoy the moment.”

The members of the Assembly distributed the supplies as directed by the chiefs, taking till nightfall to empty the wagons. Sem had called for a council the next day. The immediate crisis was over, but Alba presented the high chief with a new problem during the celebration. If Galea were to be defeated by Atresia, how would this effect Calyx and their hope of regaining Teres? The council was eager to talk to Alba, especially

after such a presentation. Sem was skeptical of Teller's show of affection. Experience dictated that expectations always follow a gift. Galea would be no different.

The high chief wanted to show his people the disingenuousness of the Galean leader. It was Teller who refused to help when Teres was in peril. Now in their darkest hour, the Galeans appeared to be the saviors of those seeking refuge in the Northern Plains. Sem was not convinced and waited patiently for the council. It would be there that Teller's disciple would be tested.

The next day the rumor about the Galean swirled among the council members. A sense of curiosity mixed with concern permeated most of the conversations. The hour had arrived. Alba's moment was here. The meeting place seemed to be more crowded than before. People unable to find a seat gathered just outside the tent to listen. The ambassador from Galea stood in front of the chiefs who assembled to see him. Sem sat to Alba's right being the position of honor as high chief. The young man's voice shook as he started to speak.

"My name is Alba of Palmaris," he started, "and I am known as a Sharer of The One. Time is short and soon no one will be safe from The Darkness. Talus is being led by Solus who desires to destroy not only our world but also Celestia." The chiefs looked perplexed, not expecting the young Galean to speak in such terms.

While the Plainsmen began talking among themselves, the Chief of Elad rose to address the Sharer from Palmaris. "Your language is strange to us. Let us talk in a way that we can all understand."

Alba appreciated the chief's desire to identify with his concept of the world. "I will try".

The older chief continued, "Please explain to us this darkness of which you speak."

Alba spoke with the passion of his faith, "To understand The Darkness you need to know about Celestia. It is a spiritual world where all will go when we die. There you will find The Light and The Darkness."

The chief walked closer to the disciple from Palmaris. "If I were to die, which way would I go?"

Alba replied, "To enter The Light you need faith and valor. Your faith is based on your heart's desire. If you think of others more than yourself,

you would naturally seek those who are like-minded and go towards The Light. But desire is not enough; it also takes courage for The Light reveals all: Who you are and what you have done is shown. The One exposes us to free our spirits from our physical form. Those who fear being known gravitate toward The Darkness. They hide themselves from the truth. There they become snared by Solus who devours all within his realm.”

The Chief of Elad stood next to Alba and looked at the other members in the room. “Why has this darkness taken an interest in us?”

The disciple of Galea addressed those seated. “Solus is using the king to conquer Celestia. Talus has succumbed to his influence and is following the desires of The Darkness. The Darkness gains its power by seeking those weaker than him. We are the perfect quarry being unaware of his presence in our world. People, along with the spirits, follow Solus for they crave his power. They see humans as having two choices: join the predator or be the prey.”

The elder council member started to pace in front of their guest. “So, let me understand this: Solus is like a wolf attacking those who stray or are left unprotected. His pack consists of beings of both worlds. Seeking those not of this darkness you speak of. So we are just victims of Solus’ desire to eliminate The One?”

Alba smiled feeling that the chief had recognized what his world consisted of. “Yes, in order to fight The Darkness, we need to recognize The One.”

The Chief of Elad looked directly at the disciple and said, “Why does this god of yours allow this darkness to exist? Why are we the ones suffering because of it? The last thing I will ask you is this ... why does your god need us to stop Talus when this being you speak of was the one who allowed him to become king?” As the chief turned toward his seat he looked at Sem. “My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council.”

Alba, no longer smiling, looked out at the crowd. “We enabled Talus to become a vessel of Solus and allowed The Darkness into our world. We would not have free will if there were not consequences to our actions.”

Que, the Chief of Turcica, rose as Elad sat down. “Alba of Palmaris, we appreciate the gifts you brought from Galea, but we have no use for your god. We as Plainsmen believe that our spirits belong to the earth and the sky. We become part of the world from where we are born. It is there that

we unite with our brothers and sisters of living things. To believe we are the subjects of another god would be denying our faith in the land that gives us life and in the herds that give us shelter. What I want to know is how are you going to help us regain Teres when you are under the foot of the same tyrant?"

The disciple looked at the Turcican Chief as he replied, "My father in The One said that we should not attempt to convince you but simply explain what is. Please understand that we of Galea expect nothing for our gift but a dialog between our nations. Our concerns do affect your desire to regain Calyx. If we fail, Talus will crush all who will oppose him, including lands that are yet not known to us."

Que appreciated the words of the Galean but remained skeptical, believing Talus, like those before him, would go too far and eventually collapse under his own weight. "My friend from Galea. We of Calyx will keep your words in mind as we focus on our war. If it benefits our people, we will consider them, but if Talus becomes weak by taking Galea, we will use it to our advantage. My voice has been heard; my peace remains with this council."

Though Alba could not alleviate their fears, they did begin to understand the Galeans hope and desire to destroy the thing that threatened their world.

Sem then stood up and ended the council. "My brothers and sisters, we have spoken enough today. Since there is nothing we can resolve at this moment, we will continue this later when the time is right. This council will decide whether we join Galea in their quest to eliminate this darkness or choose to reclaim Teres on our own. Until then, go in peace and may the spirit of our world be with you. My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council."

Sem then guided Alba to the exit thanking him for his time and for the generosity of Galea. After retiring to his tent, Sem smiled knowing that his people understood that Galea wanted more than Plainsman blood; they wanted their souls.

# AT WAR WITH THE ONE

Talus called for Lacunae. The king wanted to share his success with the one he loved. The people of the light were now in hiding. Atresia was safe from their influence and from the deception they preached. As they rode to find solitude, Talus wanted to discuss the next step in Lacunae's plan. The lovers stopped by the path that led to the river.

Lacunae looked at Talus. "The people of Atresia will soon see the greatness within you. Your father would have been proud of you."

The king looked down feeling the sadness of his grief. "I just want to free him from despair."

Lacunae reached for his hand. "And you will, my dear king, and you will."

Talus smiled at the mystic knowing she had changed his life.

Walking their horses along the trail, the sound of galloping grew louder. Since no one was allowed within these grounds, the noise was unexpected. Talus helped Lacunae mount her horse, and then reaching for his sword, the king jumped upon his own saddle, waiting for the rider to approach. Hoping it was only a messenger, Vasa came into view, his bow ready. Talus knew that he was defenseless against an arrow. The king braced himself for the shot while shielding Lacunae from their attacker. The Plainsman's first arrow grazed Talus' arm, causing him to turn away from his enemy. The second shot missed the king's head by an inch. Having another chance at life, Talus pursued his enemy on horseback.

The king soon realized he was unable to catch the Plainsman having a slower animal. As he chased Vasa, Talus saw that his enemy kept to the main path. Knowing its destination, Talus turned his horse down a lesser-used trail to intercept his assailant. Talus dismounted. Ready-ing his sword, the king anticipated Vasa's arrival. The sound of hooves approached as Talus hid himself from the Plainsman's view. As Vasa rounded the corner, Talus jumped out of the bushes. Striking the Plainsman with his blade, the king's blow caused the warrior to fall from his horse. Vasa reacted quickly to Talus' attack. The Plainsman rolled into



the grass grabbing his knife while in motion. Talus raised his sword as he raced to where Vasa fell.

"Vasa, you coward, come out and face me!" Talus screamed. His voice reflected the hate he had for the man hiding in the weeds.

The Plainsman was wounded. The sword had penetrated his lower leg. Vasa was unable to bear weight on his limb without agony. The Plainsman was now faced with a dilemma. He could kill the man his master wanted spared or be killed trying to escape. Talus looked desperately for his enemy as he approached the place where the Plainsman was hiding. The king stumbled back as Vasa jumped out of the high grass. The Plainsman managed to slice Talus' leg as he leapt. The King of Atresia felt the burning in his thigh where the knife penetrated his skin. The pain made it difficult to stand, much less fight. Turning, Talus saw that Vasa was limping badly himself, making it impossible for either to escape. Both were now favoring their wounded legs as they faced off. Vasa, having only a knife, hopped while the king still having a sword used it more as crutch than as a weapon. Circling each other, Talus swung his sword in Vasa's direction, hoping it would connect but failed to do so with each attempt. The Plainsman finally made his move, lunging at the king. Talus felt the blade enter his body just below his stomach. Talus screamed as he fought off the pain. The king saw he had one chance as Vasa struggled to free himself and the knife from his body. Talus summoned all of his strength and then drove his sword through the back of the Plainsman. The king pushed the corpse away and began to limp back to his horse. Soon, he would tell Lacunae that Vasa was dead, and they would celebrate his victory.

As the king approached Lacunae, he knew something was wrong. She was lying face down on the ground, motionless. The pain he felt while riding went away as the adrenaline of the moment took over. Vasa had gained his ultimate revenge by taking the last person in the king's life whom he loved. Talus jumped off his horse, but his leg gave under the strain. He crawled over to Lacunae. Turning his lover on to her back, he saw the arrow had pierced her heart. The king lifted his lover to his chest when he noticed she was breathing. Breaking the shaft of the arrow, he then lifted her off the ground. His leg was still weak, but she was light. Stumbling to his horse and fighting his own pain, the king managed to get her and himself on his stead.

He rode in full gallop to the castle praying to Solus to spare her life. Calling out the guards, he demanded that they get the surgeon. There was no time to lose. The court attendants assisted the king and Lacunae to his chamber where the doctor, along with the nurses, had readied themselves. Talus directed his staff to lay Lacunae on his bed as he sat on the chair beside her. The physician went to work immediately on the mystic's injury while a nurse cleaned and bandaged Talus' wounds. After Lacunae's operation, the only thing the king could do was wait.

Talus watched over Lacunae who remained unresponsive. All the king could do was cling to each breath that his lover made.

Flavin entered the King's chamber. "You called for me, Your Highness?"

Talus turned briefly to acknowledge his assistant. "Yes, I need you to send a proclamation and enforce the edict throughout Atresia."

Flavin reached for some parchment and a stylus. "What would you like me to write?"

Talus stood feeling the soreness of being bent over Lacunae for hours. The king stretched in hopes of relieving the pain but found himself limping as he walked from the wound inflicted by Vasa.

Talus had defeated his arch rival but now found a greater enemy wanting to destroy him. "Anyone who does not renounce The One shall be executed by order of Talus, King of Atresia. Those aiding anyone known as an enemy of the state shall die."

Flavin paused after writing what Talus dictated. Being a man of words, he wanted to respond appropriately. "Your Highness, we have always been a nation of tolerance; how will our people respond to your decree?"

Talus tried to restrain himself from screaming at his servant. The king began to sit down, winching in pain as he lowered himself into the chair. Turning to Flavin, he replied, "There was a time when we could afford that luxury, but now it is clear to all who follow Solus that to defeat this enemy action is needed."

The head of state nodded knowing not to question the king further. Flavin approached Chordae prior to initiating the king's request. The head of state was troubled by Talus' order. They entered a room adjacent to the throne to talk.

"Chordae, I have never known anyone to order the death of his own people." Flavin looked out the window to view the landscape. "What should I do? If I go along with Talus, I will have a hand in the murdering of Atresians. If I refuse, then I will be killed. This Solus business doesn't make sense to me. Why should we believe in a god that talks only to Talus, of all people? If this god were the 'Supreme Being,' why would he choose a naïve drunkard to be his spokesperson? Ramus would have been better suited or even a another prophet."

Chordae shook his head. "I don't know, Flavin."

The head of state looked at his follow minister. "Fear will grip our people. Accusations will come from family members, rivals in business, and jilted lovers. We have always prided ourselves on being a responsible nation. Sessions were created to promote fairness, and it was a way to moderate the extremes. I see nothing fair or moderate in the actions of Talus."

"What can you do? It would be suicide to challenge the king." Flavin looked beyond the courtyard toward the city. "Do you know who will have to preside over these poor souls and condemn them?"

Chordae smiled. "I'll be in Lateralis on business."

Flavin did not accept the humor. "It was bad enough seeing Atresians imprisoned but instead of being satisfied in taking their homes, now Talus wants their blood."

Chordae sobered. "I, too, was hoping that this would pass as the king gained prominence, but this is no longer about prestige. It's about revenge."

Flavin turned again to his friend. "So, how long do we allow this to continue?"

Chordae knew exactly what he meant. He paused to weigh the cost in his mind. "I will talk to Incus."

Days went by as Talus continued his vigil. The physician who worked on Lacunae offered little hope but still she remained alive. At the moment when the king prayed once more for Solus to save her, Talus' appeal was granted.

She opened her eyes and softly called to her lover. Talus held her in his arms as he called for her caretaker. "Get the physician."

Lacunae looked up at the man embracing her. "Water."

Talus put the cup to her lips while he held her up with his other arm. She smiled as she sipped. It was hard for Lacunae to swallow, but she managed to drink enough to quench her thirst.

Talus looked down at the mystic. "I love you."

She smiled.

"Our enemy will pay for its arrogance. I have ordered the death of all who follow The One."

Lacunae nodded approvingly.

"I am waiting for Solus to tell me what I am to do next. I want to kill this thing that almost took you away from me." Talus stroked her hair.

Lacunae drifted back to sleep.

Talus, his lover's life no longer hanging in the balance, decided it was time again to focus on his enemy.

Vasa failed, which ended his life in the flesh and became spirit. While being lifted to Celestia, he imagined what was in store for him. He was a hero. All his life he was told to hate his enemy, and he dedicated himself to its destruction. He was faithful to the cause and was willing to do anything his master requested of him. No matter what was asked, Vasa never questioned the intent or its validity for who questions God? Most would not have gone as far to serve his faith, but he was not like most people. The Plainsman perceived himself superior to those who were like-minded. Having the courage of his conviction allowed him to do the unthinkable. Now his time had arrived as he anticipated the glory that awaited him.

The Plainsman looked around the throne room. It was not what he had expected. There was no fanfare. No one greeted him to honor his sacrifice in the name of faith. There was only a dark presence sitting before him, laughing. Vasa looked bewildered at the being and asked, "Is this Celestia?"

Solus stood towering over his latest victim. The Lord of Darkness stretched out his hands. "Yes, this is where your desire has led you."

Vasa, now beginning to realize where he was, spoke in anger, "I serve The One not you; you have no authority over me!"

Solus smiled. "But I do, my dear zealot. A man of passion, if sensitive to The One, is dangerous, but your desire was one of self-importance. In

order to fulfill your desire, you did my bidding not The Light's, as you proudly claim. Tell me, does your precious god desire innocent blood?"

Vasa, now flustered by the recent disclosures, shouted at the being before him, "They were my enemies. I was told to kill them to protect my lord and master!"

The Lord of Darkness wisped around his latest victim. "No, actually you did it all for me. Fossa was the one person who could have led Talus away from being my vessel. The messenger was nothing more than a father of five whose children are now starving in the Northern Plains with thousands of others. And then there was Clavius. He would have bonded with his son, influencing him from following me. You were my greatest asset all in the name of The One."

Vasa was completely stunned. "No, you are a liar! You are the liar of liars! God! Save me from this beast!"

Necrosis entered the throne room. The Plainsman screamed as the demon's claws penetrated his soul. The door behind Solus' throne opened releasing the sounds of remorse from every soul trapped within the darkness. Necrosis heaved Vasa towards the door into the abyss. There, Vasa, along with all of Solus' other victims, would remain till time itself ended. The door closed creating an eerie silence after hearing such a haunting disturbance.

Talus called a meeting of his staff to evaluate the effectiveness of his new edict. Flavin, Chordae, and Osseous were in attendance.

Talus stood over those in attendance as he questioned his staff. "What do you mean you haven't enacted my proclamation!"

Flavin, being familiar with being interrogated, calmly responded. "Your Highness, my desire was to ensure that the law be applied appropriately. We needed to have people in place to discern the truth from those hoping to gain an advantage from false accusations. If we had abruptly applied your edict, we would have had chaos among our people, which would have allowed those you want punished to escape."

Talus smiled. The head of state had made a logical argument, but the king wanted retribution. "So my dear Flavin, when do you expect the edict will be initiated?"

Flavin, who already started to put his people in judiciary roles, replied, "By the end of the week."

The king looked at his servant. "Very well."

The head of state had won the first battle. He already sent rumors of the edict to those who would be affected, allowing them to escape. The prisoners were at the mercy of the court, but Flavin arranged with Incus the means to spare as many as possible.

Chordae, being the Ambassador to Lateralis, spoke next. "What should I instruct Oris to do?"

The king laughed. "It is meaningless to look for our enemy among those who worship the grass and the beasts they eat."

Chordae smiled, for he now had a haven for the Atresians who were being accused.

Talus looked at his ministers with purpose. "We need to eliminate the threat in our realm and then attack the source itself."

"The source?" Osseous replied.

"Yes," said Talus. "The Temple of Moralis has been revealed to me as the epicenter of The One's presence. We need to destroy this thing where it exists."

Talus did not want to divulge his desire to enter Celestia and risk losing the confidence of his staff. "I will give Flavin this week and then I want to see Atresia free of this menace." The meeting ended with the king reiterating his desire to invade Galea. The ministers looked at each other, questioning Talus' motivation, but no one dared to speak.

The die was cast. The king's proclamation would be enacted, and the people who served The Light would die.

Flavin's worst fears were realized with the new law. Hoards of Atresians, hoping to obtain revenge or a competitive advantage, clogged the judicial system. Vigilantes, inspired by Solus' servants, hunted down those suspected of following or of being with The One. Atresia was in chaos. Even with Flavin's preparations, judges spoke of stories with appalling conclusions. Like the child who accused his mother of believing after being sent to bed without supper or the Leatherman who accused his partner of being a traitor to gain sole propriety. The worst story Flavin heard was about the old woman who renounced her faith to

care for her grandchild but was found guilty because her husband was a believer. The stories varied but all of the horror led the head of state to the same conclusion. How long could Atresia survive the reign of this tyrant known as Talus?

The king awoke to the disturbance in his room; being familiar with the spiritual presence, he bowed in reverence as he stepped from his bed.

Solus responded by becoming solid before the king. "You have done well, my child. You will be rewarded for your faith."

"Master, thank you for allowing me to have Lacunae remain in my life."

The Darkness enlarged itself to encompass the king. "Galea is ripe for the taking, but you need to wait until your people desire the blood of their enemy. After feeding off those in Atresia, they will not be satisfied until they can spill the blood of their neighbors as well. Then, you will be able to lead Atresia south and take the Temple of Molaris. Be patient, my child, and all will be yours."

Solus became ethereal again as he swirled around the room prior to disappearing. Talus lay down next to the sleeping Lacunae and smiled.

Solus, returning to his castle, found Necrosis waiting. "There are traitors among those serving your vessel."

Solus sat down on his throne before responding, "I know but they are no threat to our plan. They think they are doing something noble, so let them be. Besides, by the time they conclude that Talus needs to die, it will be too late. He will have already served my purpose."

Necrosis grunted, "Can't we discourage their noble deeds?"

The Lord of Darkness looked at his most faithful servant. "We do not want to complicate our vessel's world by revealing the truth about his advisors. The king is depending on them to carry out our plan. I will allow you to discourage Flavin in due time, but for now he is achieving nothing."

# QUEEN LACUNAE

Lacunae, recovering from her near fatal wound, walked with her king in the courtyard. The air was crisp. The frost that covered the ground disappeared with the sun. All was right in the realm. The thing that ruined her world would soon be vanquished. All of the worshipers that reminded her of her past were now dead or in hiding. Her master would soon be the sole proprietor of Celestia, and life would be right for all who knew her truth.

Talus appreciated every step she made knowing that just two weeks earlier she was at death's door. "Lacunae I can not express with words what you have meant to me. All I can do is give you all that has been bestowed upon me. Please become my wife and witness the glory that Atresia will achieve for humanity."

Talus reached down and placed on her finger his mother's ring, which was fitted to her hand in the hope of her recovery. Lacunae accepted the gift with a smile and then kissed the hand that held hers. Holding each other, they walked back to his bedroom where she would rest.

Talus made no immediate plans for a wedding but hoped that the day would come soon. He never wanted her to leave him again. The king had almost lost her, and for Talus that would have been too much to bear. All would have been lost if he couldn't have shared his victory with her. Now, given a second chance, the king was revived. He didn't want to settle for having a lifetime with his love when forever was possible. Solus would create that world, and all Talus had to do was follow his guidance.

The Atresians, now weeks into the purge, created a tolerable state of normalcy. Business could not function in chaos, and Atresians were all about business. Though there were intermittent uprisings, Capnia rose once again to be a place of trade. The majority of Atresians, having been freed from the religious tyranny, could not have cared less. Only the fervent were left to create the occasional disruption.



Most toiled to create the profit needed to enjoy what Capnia had to offer. The mystics continued to hunt the followers, interrogating anyone who looked suspicious. Flavin had succeeded in sparing thousands of lives by creating an underground system with the help of Chordae. Those hunted resettled in Lateralis or Galea. Though it would have meant his death, the head of state believed more in the people of Atresia than in Talus. The judges were able to dissuade most of the accusers by having them prove their loyalty to Solus prior to indicting another Atresian. This left only the most ardent believers to appear before the court.

Talus was pleased with Flavin's handling of his proclamation. The king told his head of state that he would become Chancellor of Galea when Atresia defeated the enemy within their borders. Osseous entered the room adjacent to the throne room. Talus was there with Incus, who was sitting at the table.

Osseous, the general, bowed as he addressed the king before sitting down. "Your Highness."

Talus remained standing as he questioned his soldiers. "I want to know when it would be possible to invade Galea?"

Incus, who was in command of the force in Lateralis, spoke first. "The Plainsmen are trapped within the Northern Plains. They have yet to penetrate our defense, though there have been several reports of failed attempts. Ice has now covered the plains making it difficult for Calyx to launch any major assault. Our spies have informed me of Galean involvement. Supplies were sent from Cornea providing enough sustenance for the refugees to survive until the end of the frost."

Talus looked displeased as he realized that in warmer weather Calyx could decide to reclaim Teres knowing the Atresian army would be at war with Galea. Talus paused before speaking. The objective for the king was to eliminate The One. The Plainsmen were no longer a threat. In a game that the Atresian's played, similar to chess, it was common to sacrifice a piece to win the match. If Teres were to fall and The Light destroyed, then Talus will have won the war.

"We will need to invade Galea during the frost to buy us time. If needed, we will withdraw from Lateralis to secure the temple. We must make sure that Calyx doesn't interfere with our ultimate goal," the king strategized.

Incus nodded, not in agreement but out of duty.

The generals didn't understand the logic of their king but after the fall of Teres, they learned not to question him. Osseous, who had control over the main army stationed in Atresia, spoke. "Your majesty, how long will I have to prepare for such an invasion?"

Talus turned away from his staff and looked out the window trying to keep his cool. "When I say it is time, you will need to be ready. Until then, be aware of this..." The king turned to look at his generals. "I will not tolerate any dissention in my court. If you or any one under your command has a concern, do not let me hear about it."

The generals agreed knowing the king had become ruthless since assuming power.

The meeting ended with all in compliance.

When Talus stepped out of the briefing, Lacunae was sitting on the throne. "So, where are you going to sit?"

Talus smiled. The king could see she was feeling better. "I will just have to build another palace somewhere in Galea."

Lacunae, looking at her ring, replied. "All the way over there? Do you think I will travel that far to see you?"

Talus, knowing the game was on, retorted. "Oh, there will have to be something I can do to lure you south, like ... ?" The king waited for his future bride to fill in the blank.

"The head of the beast who tried to kill me?"

Talus looked down as if he was deep in thought. "I don't know. It might not have a head. But if it does, I will surely keep it on display for your pleasure."

Lacunae stepped down from the throne and wrapped her arms around Talus. Leaning up, she whispered softly in his ear. "For that I will do anything." The morning of the wedding was glorious. It was cool, being that time of year, but the sun offered hope of warmth. Talus announced a national holiday for the event. The king planned to rally his people to war against Galea, his wedding gift to Lacunae.

Everyone who was important to Talus was present that day in the briefing room: Oris, Chordae, Flavin, Osseous, Incus, and Zona.

"Tal, Clavius would have been so proud," said Zona beaming as she looked at the child who had grown to be king.

Talus looked at his surrogate mother. "Just make sure the cake comes out all right. We don't need Lacunae complaining about your cooking on our first day, do we?"

Zona laughed. "Oh, you!"

The king became serious when he looked at Osseous. "Are we prepared for the announcement?"

Osseous bowed. "Yes, Your Highness, we are ready."

Oris chimed in, "Lateralis is secure with no threat of a disruption during your next campaign."

"Thank you, Oris. I knew you were the right person to control the heathens."

Incus spoke next. "There has been no activity along the border for the last few weeks."

"Good, good," said Talus approvingly.

Flavin interjected, "Sire, you need to get ready for the ceremony. We don't need you being late for your own wedding."

"You're right; it's time. I will see you all later after the rally." With that, the king dismissed his staff and followed Flavin out the door.

Just outside the room were the king's attendants, ready to prepare him for his day. The throne room was decorated lavishly. The king readied himself in a guest chamber allowing his bride to use his room. Her bodyguard would give her away. This was symbolic since he would relinquish his duty to the king. Zona would represent the groom's family since no one cared more for Talus than she. Hallicus would perform the ceremony himself, being the most powerful mystic and truest believer of Solus.

The wedding would be small considering the people involved. Delegates from Systole, Eustacha, and Annular were present. The Lord and Lady of Taenia made their appearance along with their daughter Sura, Ramus' fiancée, while Lord Medius represented the city of Ulnaris. The other nobility of lesser birth, along with those mentioned before, were there out of obligation since most despised Talus as a result of the new ordinance.

Apgar entered the chamber where the king was dressing. "I know Fossa would have been proud to be your best man."

Talus tried not to well up, feeling the loss of his best friend. "I know. That is why I asked you to take his place."

The head stableman, already dressed, walked to the window. "You couldn't have picked a better day."

Talus tried to inject some humor into a solemn moment. "Well, this beats having to ready the horses for me and Lacunae, doesn't it?"

Fossa's father turned back and smiled. "Your mother loved horses, you know. Clavius and she rode daily. I hope you find the same happiness in your life as they did in theirs." The father of Fossa turned back to the window lost in a memory of the past.

Talus let him be knowing that all he had left were his thoughts.

The quartette played as Lacunae entered the room with her bodyguard. She looked even smaller compared to her massive companion. Dressed in white, a veil covering her face, she walked toward Talus and Hallicus. The music stopped when she approached the king. Her bodyguard lifted her veil and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Sagittus gave Lacunae's hand to Talus. Lacunae, along with Talus, turned to Hallicus who bowed to the two of them prior to speaking.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the court, it is with great pleasure that I unite this man and this woman in matrimony. May Solus guide them in their life and in their quest for happiness."

The couple looked like most you would see on their wedding day, full of hope and deeply in love. Talus placed a ring on Lacunae's finger followed with Hallicus placing a crown upon her head. Hallicus had the honor to bow first before her. The newlyweds walked by the mystic to the throne where they turned around to face the audience.

All bowed before them; Talus then made an announcement.

"My friends and fellow Atresians, please join us in the Grand Hall for a reception after we address our people."

The queen followed the king to the balcony where the mass of people waited to see the royal couple.

The trumpets sounded announcing the presentation of the king and queen. The crowd below cheered as they came into view. Unlike the aristocracy inside, the commoners believed in Talus. They relished being the chosen people who would usher in a new era under Solus. The crowd

welcomed the ordinance. The believers of The One were an annoyance reminding most of their shortcomings. Talus raised his hands to quiet the masses. Once silenced, the king began his speech.

“My dearest people of Atresia. We have worked hard to achieve our goals, and in doing so we have pleased Solus. Lateralis is proof of that effort and of the power of our god.”

The assembled roared with excitement.

“We have driven the enemy from Atresia, but the threat still exists. The beast rests in the Temple of Moralis, and it is there we must go to destroy it.”

The enthralled crowd, unaware that he was talking about God, thought he was talking about Teller.

“We will march into Galea under the hand of Solus and restore his supremacy. The One has attacked all whom I love to stop me from accomplishing my mission. The One has waged war against me, but I will not back down. I know once the beast is defeated, we will all prosper under the hand of Solus. What shall I say to our god? Do I say we will fight and free ourselves from this tyranny?”

His countrymen responded by screaming in agreement.

Again Talus asked while raising his voice, “Are we the chosen people of Solus?”

The crowd roared louder.

“Then let us rise to the challenge and destroy our enemy!”

Talus and Lacunae turned from the chaos he had created. The queen smiled knowing her king had done what he planned to do weeks ago: rally his people to war.

Talus and Lacunae returned to the Grand Hall. The mood of the reception was subdued. The guests in attendance politely congratulated the newlyweds but to the nobility, they were not of their stature. To them, especially Sura, the crown had been stolen by Talus, a drunkard. And as for Lacunae, to the wellborn she was nothing but a commoner. The couple was oblivious being focused on the moment. Soon, after much wine, all were resigned to making the most of the event. Later that night, Talus and Lacunae retired to their chamber as the party dissipated. The day for the newlyweds had been a success in many ways.

# THE INVASION

The drums sounded as Talus inspected the troops. The army looked impressive. Osseous made sure of it. They would begin their march in the morning. This gave Talus a day to finalize his plans. The king wanted to make sure the court knew that Lacunae would hold his position until his return. Talus held a meeting of his advisors to ensure her power.

While Osseous led the army into Galea, Incus would remain in Capnia. His duty was to lead the royal guard and protect the queen. The court ministers sat around the table while Talus stood over them with Lacunae watching.

“Gentlemen,” said Talus, “it is time to move forward. Galea will be ours. Like Calyx, it will be at the mercy of Solus. While I am away, your queen will assume my role.” Talus looked at each and every member of his court. “Obey her as you do me.”

The staff nodded knowing it would have been fatal to disagree.

Talus continued, “The Plainsmen have huddled in for the frost. The followers of The One no longer hold our people captive, and Teller has told his people to leave Cornea. This has left the capital weak, ready for the taking.”

“Your majesty, if for some reason you are not able to return, to whom shall the crown be given?” Flavin portrayed a look of innocence, even though he had an ulterior motive.

Talus was not amused with the question. Trying to remain confident, he replied, “Lacunae will remain the head of Atresia.”

Chordae decided to follow Flavin’s lead. “Until your return, but sire since you have no heir to whom shall the throne be bequeathed?”

The king was now losing his patience. “Solus will decide upon my death who shall lead his people.” The question ended with no hint of a successor.

To usurp the throne and to have a legitimate threat to the commoner queen, one of noble blood would have to be chosen. It would have been the only way to gain the support of the aristocracy. But three or four people could claim the lineage for Talus’ throne. This would not have appealed

to the nobility or the capitalists, the other faction needed to overthrow Lacunae. For them, having no definitive successor would create more problems than remaining loyal to the current queen. Flavin looked at Chordae shaking his head slightly.

The conversation turned to more mundane tasks of the court. Finally, Lacunae stood up when she was introduced by Talus to his staff. The beauty that dominated her presence changed. She looked fierce assuming her rightful position as queen of the court. "Are there any questions for me?"

Flavin decided to evaluate her ability to lead. "Your Highness, in the event Calyx did decide to take advantage of this situation, how would you proceed?"

Lacunae looked at Flavin with a wry smile as if she knew what he was trying to do. "My dear servant of the court, it would be my decision, would it not, if that were to occur?"

Flavin nodded.

"But, I will entertain your hypothetical question. The Plainsmen would have to penetrate the already existing defenses, correct?"

Flavin, along with Incus, agreed.

"So would we not know where they were going?" Lacunae paused.

"Wouldn't this allow us time to coordinate a point of attack, making our ability to defend Lateralis easier?"

Chordae interjected, "Wouldn't it make sense to just reinforce Teres?"

The queen looked at the ambassador with a glare of intensity. "All that keeps Calyx from being whole is Teres. It would be a rallying cry to those who call themselves Plainsmen. Not only would we be fighting those from the east but those from inside the walls as well. I am not a general, but I understand the human spirit. People, even the Plainsmen, give meaning to objects or ideas to unite their nation. Teres is their hope. Take away their hope and you take away their reason to fight. If the generals cannot defeat the Plainsmen without Teres to give them strength, then why have generals?"

Her logic was irrefutable. Flavin had been given a glimpse of the queen's intellectual prowess. He would not challenge her again. Talus smiled knowing Lacunae had done the same to him.

The next morning Talus kissed Lacunae good-bye. Marching toward Galea, his only thoughts were on his last meeting with Solus. He was troubled by his latest request. Even with Lacunae's help, he was unable to comprehend how to create a doorway into Celestia. Talus hoped by taking the temple it would prevent The One from entering his world, but the king was wrong. The temple was not the goal but just a part of some cascade of events to cross the threshold between the spiritual and physical worlds. Not only did the king have to cross into The One's realm, but he would need to lead his army there as well. He couldn't imagine Osseous agreeing to such a plan even after witnessing the fall of Teres.

The more Talus thought of the situation, the more troubled he became. Finally, he decided to concentrate on the task ahead of him and rely on Solus to help him later. The border was in sight. Haustra could be seen on the horizon. The king decided to wait until morning for the invasion to begin. Talus anticipated heavy resistance, knowing what was at stake. This would buy him time to send scouts and prepare for the first of many battles.

The morning was unusually cold. Even being dressed like a king did not spare Talus from shivering. The only warmth was the fire that all huddled near until ordered to march.

The scouts reported to Osseous, who then approached the king. "Your Highness, I have news from the scouts."

Talus shook off the cold to ready himself for the report.

"They went as far as Haustra, scoured the places of possible ambushes, and found nothing."

Talus jerked back in disbelief. "Nothing?"

Osseous continued, "All the people were sleeping and by morning they were going about their normal activities. No one carried a bow or a spear. It seems as if they knew nothing of the danger that would soon be upon them."

Talus went back to the fire; even the brief moment away from the warmth was too much to bear. The king tried to understand Teller's motive, but leaving his people defenseless was beyond his scope of reason. Lacunae may have been able to understand it, but Talus could not. "We march to Haustra. The chariots will flank the army just in case," ordered Talus.



The king knew that Galea was a peaceful nation but on the brink of its destruction, even the most docile creature would fight to survive. Talus cautioned, "We must be careful to make sure we are not trapped from behind."

Osseous saluted the king by raising an arm up and extending his hand. The trumpets sounded. A rustle of metal and men began to assemble in columns. Horses and chariots lined up on either side. Talus rode slowly past the columns, repeating the same thing every hundred yards so all could hear. "Atresia's destiny is now!" The king sped to the front of the column where he met Osseous. The march into Galea was on.

Keeping to the road, the army of thousands proceeded. Talus was amazed by what he saw: men and women milking cows, tending the fields, and keeping the livestock out of harms way. More than once, by the sheer mass of men, a farmer's field was trampled. On those occasions, the farmer simply looked away and waited for the army to pass. No one provoked the Atresians who continued on to Haustra.

Upon reaching the city, the Atresian army was restless. After being hyped about going to war, none was found. Soon soldiers were stepping out of line to hit or taunt the local gentry. Again no one resisted. Talus began to question the people's action of nonviolence. The king decided to make camp just outside the city, allowing raids into Haustra during the night. Talus was hoping to agitate the Galeans into tipping their hand, but again no one opposed the invaders. Even as the livestock were killed, the wine from stores taken, and the women stalked, the people of Haustra allowed the mayhem to go unimpeded.

Talus didn't know what to make of it. The next city before Cornea was Linea. There, the king would test the people even further. Talus prayed to Solus for guidance during the night but none came. He was alone in a country far from the reality he knew. Osseous sent scouts out during this time of unrest hoping to obtain some military advantage, but even his most trusted spies had nothing to offer.

The Atresian army moved toward Linea. Though the people changed, the attitude didn't. Talus rode unchallenged into the city. The king demanded to see the governor. Rennin approached the king. Talus called to all in hearing distance. "To all Galeans, we of Atresia are here to destroy your god. Though you have chosen not to fight us, we have chosen to kill you."

With that Talus dismounted his horse, removed his sword, and proceeded to impale the governor before him.

The king then announced to his soldiers to take whatever they wanted. The city was in complete anarchy. Screams of Galeans were heard as the army took what they could find, killing at will. Talus waited for a reprisal but again none came. The king was perplexed. He couldn't understand Teller for allowing Atresia to march freely toward Cornea. Talus refused to allow the Galeans to lull him into complacency. The goal was clear ... take the Temple of Moralis. The king would move on but for the night his troops would remain in the city.

The morning revealed the savagery of the Atresian forces. Corpses lay on the streets, broken windows and doors were a torn from of every shop and home in Linea. Fires that burned during the night now blackened piles of ashes, smoking reminders of the man made hell of the night before. Talus looked around surprised by the devastation that his own people created. The king gathered the soldiers together with the help of the officers. The chariots were already outside the city since the night before waiting for Teller's counter attack, which never came. Slowly the columns of men marched out of the city. An eerie silence was left. No one yelled out or screamed at the invaders as they left. Quietly, the survivors gathered their dead to bury.

Cornea was a day's march away. If there was going to be an assault, it would come prior to entering the capital. The king knew the news of Linea would soon reach Teller's ears, forcing him to attack. Talus wanted to fight the Galeans in the open and not in the streets of the capital. The thoughts of Solus' final instructions returned as the king marched from the view of Linea. Tomorrow, Talus would be in Cornea where he would face his greatest test of faith.

# THE TEMPLE OF MOLARIS

Talus could see the temple from his tent; something the king could not do the night before. The temple itself was unimposing, a large walled structure with little ornamentation at all. From Talus' viewpoint, he could see a small columned building that he imagined was on top of another building hidden from view. The king thought to himself, "There is where Teller will meet his fate."

Just beyond the temple was a magnificent palace. This structure had all the trappings of power. It was a display of craftsmanship that rivaled the best of Atresia. It was there Talus thought he would hang the head of the beast for all to see. Osseous approached the king. "The troops are ready sire. Would you like to address them before going to battle?"

Talus mounted his horse and went to rally his men. "We are now going to meet our destiny. The One's strength lies within the walls of the temple. We will take hold of it and remove its curse on our people. The people of Galea have been lulled to sleep by Teller but if they awaken, be ready to fight. We must be victorious. In the name Solus, I commend you!"

The army cheered. The sound echoed through out Cornea. The Galeans within the city prayed for strength once more before meeting the enemy. Teller looked out to see the mass of men marching toward Cornea. Looking up to Celestia, he offered himself to The One's will.

The gates remained open. The parapets unmanned. No arrows rained down on the Atresian fodder. There was no opposition to the chariots entering the city itself. The people were in hiding.

After Linea, no one dared expose themselves to the ruthlessness of the Atresians. Talus rode in on his steed with Osseous by his side. If there was a time to kill the king, it was then. An assassin had an easy target, but no attempt was made. The troops fanned out within the city. Unlike Linea, the Atresian army remained disciplined.

Soldiers, in single file, were seen on every street all at attention. It was a coordinated display only seen on a parade ground. The precision of the

Atresians would have been award winning. Talus stopped in front of the Temple. He dismounted and began to walk up the stairs. Osseous was beside him. He could see no one, only the two closed doors at the head of the stairs. Pushing through them Talus saw images of a god who cared for his people: a sculpture of a giant hand cradling humanity, another of winged creatures ascending to Celestia with a man between them as others looked up from below. At the end of the hall was a stone carving of a man, whom they called Esoph, writing in a book while looking up towards God.

The stone fire pits had all been stoked recently providing added light for their uninvited guests. The king walked through the hall passing display after display of a loving being that they called The One. Reaching the end of the hallway he started up a staircase, which led to the building he saw from his tent earlier that day.

Sitting on a chair placed purposely in the middle of the room was Teller. The old man looked peaceful. His hands were clasped while they rested on his lap. He said nothing to the intruders as he remained still. Talus raised his sword to kill him, but a small voice told him to stop. Thinking it was Lacunae, the king lowered the sword and thought for a moment. "Osseous, take him away; put him somewhere safe until I decide what to do with him."

Osseous did as Talus commanded, lifting the old man from the chair and leading him down the stairs. The king was left alone in the temple. Looking out he could see all of Cornea; each street lined with Atresians. "Now what?"

Talus had to at least create an occupation until Solus guided him through the next process. Each officer was given the task to control a region of the city. A communication system was set up between each officer so retaliation from the Galeans would be dealt with quickly. Each home boarded two soldiers. One remained on guard while the other slept. The officers themselves would take turns patrolling the city. The chariots remained outside the city limits where they were most effective.

Osseous and Talus slept with bodyguards in the old emperor's palace, a place fit for a king. They created sleeping chambers since there were none. Talus climbed to the tower of the palace and looked out. The vantage point was remarkable. Not only could you see all of Cornea

but also the mountains to the south and the Sea of Atresia. The king wondered why Teller chose to live in a temple over this place created for greatness.

The messenger from Talus entered the castle where the queen awaited his arrival. Sitting on her throne, she called forth her subject. The traveler bowed. Remaining on one knee, he held up the parchment for Lacunae to take from his hand. Reaching out for the note, the queen thanked the Atresian. After he was dismissed, she opened the letter. If one were there, they would have seen a curious look on her face. The look became more pronounced as she read.

Dearest Love,

I have arrived in Cornea without a single victory to my name. It seems that Teller bewitched the people of Galea. No one raised a hand against us, not even when justly provoked. The army now occupies the city, and I have a palace to call home. It was the emperor's before The One made Galea soft. I am troubled and now ask for your guidance. Solus has remained silent after his last request, but I fear I cannot honor it. I am not a sorcerer. Teller is now imprisoned. After having almost killed him upon my first meeting, I stopped after hearing your voice prior to making the fatal blow. Now that the temple is ours, how do I enter Celestia? And if a gateway does become possible, how do I convince my army to follow me through it? I miss you, my love, and hope to display the beast's head upon a wall of this palace for you to enjoy.

Love, Talus

The queen called upon Hallicus for assistance. She wanted to gain his insight before replying to her king. The Mystic of Solus approached the throne. "How can I be of service, Your Highness?"

Lacunae pointed toward the other room.

Hallicus nodded.

The queen continued, "I had a dream that has troubled me. Would it be possible for you to interpret it for me?"

The mystic rose from his kneeling position. "I have been able to assist many with their dreams, Your Majesty. Tell me more about this one that has you so troubled?"

Lacunae rose from her chair and started to walk toward her friend in Solus.

"There was a man who was sent on an errand. When he found the house, he couldn't find the door. He knocked on the walls hoping to gain the attention of the man inside but to no avail. He yelled the man's name but still there was no reply. Now this messenger is distressed. He's afraid of returning to his master in failure, but he knows he cannot stay without finding a way into the house. I find this man disturbs me. He wants to complete his errand, but he keeps searching for a door he can not find."

Hallicus smiled at Lacunae as he walked around the room. "I see; it is vexing to have such a dream. I can only tell you that this dream will end well. Tonight in your dreams, you will need to send an emissary to guide him to the door and complete the errand of his master. That way you will see this conflict resolved, and you will be able to rest easily."

The queen returned the smile. "I will rest easier knowing that in my dream this man will no longer be lost. Thank you."

Hallicus left the room as Lacunae returned to her seat on the dais.

Chordae, who had entered the briefing room using a secret passage, heard the conversation. The ambassador was frustrated by the lack of context. He knew it related to Talus but wasn't quite sure how. What did the house without a door mean? Who was Talus doing the errand for? Perhaps Solus? He needed to include Flavin to help him decipher the nonsense. Chordae knew in between the rhetoric was a message of great significance. So important, in fact, that it required the assistance of Hallicus. The ambassador knew that an emissary was going to Cornea, and it would be good for Atresia to find out why.

Lacunae sent a reply to Talus using the story she had told Hallicus. The queen knew, even with a royal seal, that the letter was not secure. Talus had powerful enemies who desired information for their own

gain. Lacunae continued her reply after providing Talus with the context needed to decipher it.

My Dearest Talus,

Rest well, for I had a dream that help would come. Soon the servant looking for an open door will find one. It is good that Teller rests comfortably for he may hold the key. To martyr him would have only angered the people made docile by his own hand. Sleep well for soon you will awake with the answer before you. Use what you have learned and accept the possibilities offered to you. I will see your trophy in its entire splendor. Though it will be great, it will pale in comparison to yours in Solus.

Soon, My Love,

Lacunae

Her fears were soon realized as Flavin resealed the letter, having the identical stamp of the queen's. Chordae looked on as the head of state handed the parchment to the messenger.

"So what did she say? Chordae prodded his friend.

Flavin looked up. "Nothing but affirmation that Talus needs the help of a spiritual guide."

The ambassador became restless. "Is there anything we can use to remove Talus from the throne?"

Flavin shook his head. "I'm afraid not. To whom of the nobility can we confide in about a dream and a house with no door?"

Chordae remained undaunted. "We are going to follow this guide to Galea to get the evidence needed to prove the king is unstable, right?"

Flavin agreed having an idea on just the person to send.

The emperor's palace started to take on its original form. After just a few short days Talus had furnished most of the rooms. The king needed to keep himself occupied while waiting for guidance from either Lacunae or Solus. Hallicus arrived with a group of conjurers, mystics, and sayers. Talus welcomed the guides into the main hall.

Hallicus spoke after bowing to the king. "Lacunae has told me of your concern, and we have come to assist you. There are many secrets within the Temple of Moralis. May I ask what you have done with Teller, its keeper?"

The king motioned with his hand in the general direction of the prison. "Teller is under guard. I was hoping that he would have some use in gaining access to Celestia."

Hallicus smiled. "Very Good. He will have much to offer in our quest. We will discuss more tomorrow after I become more familiar with the temple. For now, may I suggest that you continue making this palace your home. It becomes you; for you are no longer a king but an emperor. I believe Solus would approve of all addressing you as such. With that said, I shall leave you, Emperor Talus."

Hallicus bowed as he left being followed by the many who traveled with him.

The King of Atresia thought about what the mystic said and smiled. "Emperor Talus, Ruler of Man."

That night filled Talus' mind with a plethora of thoughts. The emperor thought of Lacunae and what her reaction would be to his new title. He thought of his invasion of Celestia and striking down the beast that held his father. As the King of Atresia started to drift off to sleep, he heard the cheers of the spirits he had freed. "Talus! Talus! Talus!"

"Talus," the sound in his mind changed to a single tone coming from the room.

The king awoke to Solus standing over him. He jumped out of bed, being startled by his master's presence. "Master," he stammered. "I need your help to complete the task you have set before me."

Solus became ethereal as he swirled around the room. "You are doing well, my child. Hallicus will discover the portal soon enough." Talus reached out his hands as he talked to the ghostly figure. "I have grown impatient. Please open the door so I may slay the beast that troubles us."

Solus became more solid as he motioned to Talus to sit on the bed. The Darkness then sat on a nonexistent chair in front of the king.

"My child, I can only open a door for those who no longer live in this world. It is the fact that you are alive that would make you unique in Celestia. By entering Celestia as a living being, you will be able to defeat



the beast you seek. Then, you can return to your own world to rule over it for eternity.”

Talus smiled at the thought of it. “What should I do with the creature I’ve imprisoned?”

Solus stood up. “After Hallicus has extracted the information he needs from him, do whatever you please.” The Darkness disappeared leaving Talus alone once more with his thoughts.

# THE PORTAL

Hallicus returned the next day leaving the rest of the guides in the temple. He approached Talus who now called himself emperor. “Teller was not forthcoming with the information that I desired. Nonetheless, we found what we were looking for. There is a tunnel that appears to be the source of power for The One’s followers. We are already making preparations to create a portal. Once we have succeeded, we will ensure its stability prior to calling for you.”

Talus nodded. “Very good. Is there any more that Teller can do for you?”

Hallicus shook his head. “No, he is useless to us.”

Emperor Talus started to walk with the mystic out of the palace. “I will deal with the old man. I pray that Solus guides you in your quest.”

Hallicus thanked the emperor as he walked back to the temple. Talus decided to talk to Teller himself prior to condemning him to death. As Talus entered the prison, he noticed the stillness among the prisoners. There were no cries of innocence, no insults thrown at the guards, only a sense of dignity among those behind the bars.

Talus couldn’t help but ask, “What’s going on here?”

The warden bowed as he answered the emperor, “They wanted to be close to their leader. At first we sent the Galeans away but then there were so many, we had to open the cells to hold them. If not, it would have been impossible to run the prison.”

Talus frowned knowing there could be a problem once Teller was executed. He thought of them as lost children longing for guidance, and it would be his duty to help them see the truth after Teller was gone. Talus arrived at the cell where Teller was being held. It was away from the misled souls he had seen earlier.

The leader of Galea looked older than when he last saw him. Maybe it was the lack of food or sleep, though he still had a look of defiance about him.

“I am not your enemy.” Teller looked at Talus as if he was addressing one of his own.

"What?" The emperor couldn't believe what the old man had said.

Teller elaborated, "You will meet the same fate as I when the portal is opened. Once you are no longer useful to Solus, you will see his true nature."

Talus demanded that the door be opened so he could get closer to the so-called leader of The One. "Liar," the emperor almost spit in Teller's face as he spoke the words.

Teller looked up at the taller Talus. "What do you hope to gain from destroying your creator?"

"My Creator," Talus laughed. "You're a fool, old man. It has been your god that has taken all that I love from me, and it has been your god that has brought misery to those you love."

Teller looked unfazed by Talus' fierce response. "Are you so sure you have chosen correctly? Before you send me to my death, wouldn't you like to be secure in the path you are taking?"

The emperor wanted to end Teller's life with his bare hands, but his desire to have Lacunae witness his elimination stopped him. "Enough of your nonsense. You have already led your people to their destruction, what more could you possibly hope for?"

Teller sat down. "I desire what is best for all that touch my life. The person before me now is whom I desire to help."

Talus wanted to walk out but something kept him in the cell. Magnetism only matched by the ethereal creature that led him to Galea. "Go on, have your say; let this be your last testament."

Teller stood once again. He looked up toward Celestia and began to speak, "My child, who created whom, Solus or The One?"

The emperor remained silent.

"If Solus created the world and all in it, why is he so bent on destroying it? If he created The One, why hasn't he eliminated it from his existence? Teller paused for a moment. "Doesn't it make more sense that The One created all that you see around you?"

"Now ask yourself why would such a being hate you, the very thing it created? Solus chose you because he saw an opportunity. Since he cannot create, he must destroy. Every being meets the same fate in Solus once their use is gone. The Darkness consumes them. You have acted out of jealousy and hatred. Solus did not create those feelings within

you, but he did cultivate them just as he cultivated the fear and anger around you.”

“If Solus were able to destroy The One, what would this world look like? Would not Darkness permeate everything in existence? Since all needs light to survive, would not all die? Solus has told you that you will rule this world, but all you will rule is death.”

Talus looked at the old man with hatred. The emperor hated what he represented: Teller’s desire to save him and the words that would now haunt him for the rest of his life. “Are you through?”

Talus walked toward the cell door. The emperor turned back toward the old man just as he was about to cross the threshold. “You have convinced me of one thing, Teller. You’re an arrogant old man who has allowed his people to suffer because of it.” With that Talus turned back around and disappeared from Teller’s view. Talus reminded himself that Teller would soon be dead. The emperor took pleasure in that thought as he returned to his palace.

Alba wandered out into the plains. He couldn’t sleep after hearing the news from Galea. Cornea was under occupation and Teller was condemned to death. To Alba, there was no sign of hope. Alone he shivered, looking at the stars, hoping to see a sign. Could the Nissl have been so wrong? A man sat down next to him. The man remained silent as Alba looked up at the constellations. Alba, feeling uncertain about the situation, started to get up.

“The stars are amazing, aren’t they?” said the man.

Alba relaxed allowing his weight to settle back on the boulder. “Yeah, I just wish I could discern their meaning and to tell me the future.”

The man smiled. “I know what you mean. I was sent to bring encouragement, yet I have nothing to offer those that need it the most.”

Alba turned to the stranger. “Teller will be dead soon. Without him, Galea will be lost.”

The man looked at Alba. “Really? Is there no one who could lead Galea and prevent Talus from entering Celestia?”

Alba slumped. “Teller asked me to lead Galea if he were to die.”

The stranger nodded. “Oh, I see.”

Alba looked at the stranger sitting next to him. “Who am I? What can I do against the might of Atresia and The Darkness combined? Here I am

in a foreign land hoping to convince Calyx to fight with us and after one council, I have failed."

The man got up. "If there is nothing I can say to convince you that there is hope, then I have failed as well."

Alba looked up. "What?"

The man looked down at Teller's disciple. "I was sent to inspire hope. If I cannot raise your spirit, being a follower of The One, what hope do I have?"

Alba thought for a moment. "How can I convince others when I can't convince myself?"

The stranger smiled.

An epiphany occurred to the Galean sitting on the rock. Alba stopped feeling sorry for himself and started to focus on those around him. "Thank..." The Galean looked around only to find he was alone. "You?" His voice trailed off. As Alba walked back to his tent, he wondered if the stranger had been there at all.

The Temple of Molaris was under heavy guard. Fearing The One would find a way to sabotage Hallicus' entry into Celestia, Talus gave the order to kill anyone found in the temple that was not Atresian. All was dependent upon the success of the mystics creating the portal.

Hallicus observed the work of the various mystics and conjurors. Various colors of light glowed with each incantation to create a doorway into Celestia. Meanwhile, their leader poured through the writings of Esoph hoping to glean an answer to their problem. All he found was inane writing that offered nothing.

Intermittently, some success would be seen. Holes were created in the fabric of the physical realm, but no one dared test their stability or knew to what world the doorways actually opened. With each opening, the mystics became more encouraged that Celestia would be revealed. Talus would stop by to inquire about Hallicus' progress but never interfered. The emperor knew when the door was found, he would be the first to know. For now all he could do was wait for Lacunae who would be there the day after tomorrow.

# BOOK 2

## THE FOUR STRANGERS



# THE POLAR CAVES

Just as the prophecy foretold, they appeared in the tunnel witnessing the conjurors at work. Each mystic projecting an incantation toward the wall they faced. The tunnel was illuminated by their work. Yellow, green, and red flashes of light were created, providing the four with enough radiance to see the activity before them. Tony covered Mike's mouth just as she was about to shout something towards them. Deavon, seeing the end of the tunnel, grabbed Erin's hand. The rest followed as they rounded the corner. Now covered in darkness, their silence was broken.

"I don't think they saw us," Tony whispered to the rest. Tony was the oldest of the four and became the self assumed leader.

"Duh, they were too busy yelling at a stupid wall," Mike, being just a year younger than Tony, interjected just to have something to say. Disgusted by her new surroundings, Mike wiped the dirt from her hand after touching the wall. She spoke once more to anyone who would listen. "Where are we, and how did we get here?"

Tony peeked around the corner to see if any of the mystics were coming towards them. "I don't know Mike; all I know is that we had better be careful until we know who these people are and why they are in the Polar Caves."

Deavon, barely a teenager and the younger male, looked at Tony. "I don't think we're in the Polar Caves."

Erin, the child of the group, pulled at Deavon's arm. "Then where are we?"

Deavon leaned down. "I don't know."

Mike remained annoyed. "It's all your fault, Deavon. 'There's a red light coming from that cavern; let's find out what's causing it?'"

"It's Deevon." Deavon looked incredulous. Then he pointed his finger at his accuser. "You didn't have to follow me, did you?"

"Shhhh, we can argue this later. Right now we need to find a way back to where we came from without getting caught." They all looked at Tony, acknowledging the goal at hand.



"Deavon, go up toward that light and see where it leads. I'll go this way. Mike, stay here with Erin and watch them. If they start moving your way, go toward Deavon. I'll catch up with you later." Tony knew it wouldn't happen but if one were to be separated from the rest, he had the best chance to survive.

Deavon walked toward the torch. As he got closer he hugged the wall trying to peer beyond the corner without being noticed. He saw a set of stairs going up. He stopped for a moment trying to build up his courage before venturing further. Slowly climbing the steps, he strained to hear if anyone was approaching. Once reaching the top, he realized he was no longer home; a great hall opened before him. Soldiers walked through the large chamber heading to their various destinations. All were dressed like gladiators from an old movie. He backed down the staircase knowing he had seen enough.

Tony fumbled through the darkness trying to find another hallway or a light. The blackness surrounded him. Feeling the walls, he tripped up the stairs before him. The pain from hitting his head on the stone dissipated as he patted his skull with his hand and found he wasn't bleeding. Tony crawled up what appeared to be a spiral staircase where he discovered a trap door. He pushed on the wooden frame, which seemed to open without resistance. Peeking through the crack of the trap door, Tony saw an empty room. It was then he decided to go back and discuss with the others what he had found. While feeling his way through the tunnel, he sensed something rub against the top of his foot. Tony quickened his pace hoping to avoid the experience again.

Deavon returned first. There he saw the girls fixated with the activity occurring around the corner. He was tempted to touch Mike on the shoulder, but her scream would not be funny if they were discovered. "Mike, Mike," Deavon's voice got louder as he repeated her name. The girls remained oblivious as Mike and Erin seemed hypnotized by the mystics further down in the tunnel. Deavon made one last attempt to get her attention by snapping out her name, "Mike!"

She jumped but suppressed her impulse to shriek. Looking at Deavon as if he had done it on purpose, she scowled. "Jerk! Why didn't you just tap me on the shoulder?" Shaking off the annoyance like one covered with sand, Mike continued. "So where are we?"

Deavon winced at Mike's attitude toward him. "Well we're not in New Hampshire, that's for sure. I don't even think we are on the surface of the planet?"

"What?" Mike gave a look that chided Deavon.

Deavon continued, "We're in another world. Somewhere with soldiers carrying swords, and shields, and wearing armor."

Mike tried to comprehend what Deavon said but the more she thought about it, the more she was convinced Deavon was delusional.

Erin looked up at Mike and Deavon. "How do we get home?"

Deavon, being the more sensitive of the two, replied, "I don't know, maybe Tony found something. We'll wait here until he returns." Deavon knew the only way to go was toward Tony. Confronting an army of Roman want-to-be's was the last thing he wanted to do.

Soon their fears of being discovered were realized. As the torchlight became brighter, they saw someone walking down the hall. They all shrunk into the darkness as Hallicus came into view. The appearance of Hallicus, The High Priest of Atresia, proved to Mike the reality of the moment. Deavon was right. The high priest wore a golden robe and carried a staff. He was standing where the girls had just been minutes earlier. Hallicus watched the mystics at work before gaining their attention.

"Fellow workers in Solus, listen to me!" The activity stopped causing the various colors glowing on the walls to dim. "Be aware of any strange occurrences while at your work. As we attempt to gain entry into Celestia, others may try to enter our world in order to harm us. Look for such actions perpetrated by those who follow The One. We must not fail. To conquer Celestia, we must create a path for our emperor to lead his army into the spiritual world. I see that you are all working as individuals. It would serve the effort better if you work in groups. The path to Celestia will bring glory to all and not just the one who creates it. I will be back later to monitor your progress. The queen will be here tomorrow morning. Nothing would be better than to present her news of our success."

As Hallicus started to walk down the hall, he heard a gasp. Peering into the darkness, the priest tried to see where the sound originated. Then

looking down he saw the snake that Mike had seen just moments ago. Raising his staff, he crushed its head. "Damn things, as if we didn't have enough to deal with." Hallicus then walked out of view, his light growing fainter as he departed.

There was a lot of discussion among the conjurers in the tunnel. The threat of an attack by The One dominated most of the talk. Then Meridian, the most gifted of the group, spoke to quell the fears of the others. "My friends in Solus, are we not warriors of the unknown? If Talus could enter Celestia without us, would he not have done so already? If this were easy would Hallicus have called upon us, the best Capnia has to offer? We knew being an enemy of The One there would be risks, yet all of us agreed to make this journey. Now that the threat has become real, does it make our task less important? No, it makes what we are doing a greater challenge. So let's stop talking about what could be and focus on the matter at hand. Let us join together to bridge the worlds of the physical and spirit so we can eliminate The One from our midst."

The group of mystics rallied. Soon brisk discussions started as each asked what the other had accomplished. Pairing off, each began another round of incantations with a positive effect. Brighter reds, greens, and yellows glowed along the wall. The light revealed the faces of the sorcerers. Each mystic's face seemed to contort as they spewed incantations while throwing dust that glittered just before reaching the stone before them. Soon a deep blue glow emanated from a pair of conjurers. One of the women reached out toward the glow. Her hand disappeared into what had been a solid surface moments before. Another wizard came over and decided to venture further, stepping into the wall itself. "This is it! I see ..." the glow vanished. The man was now incased in stone. His imprint remained before them, confirming his fate. Silence ensued and the work stopped as they looked upon the spot where Celestia had been briefly revealed. Meridian rallied his cohorts once more, and soon the conjurers became more determined in their work.

Feeling his way back, Tony finally returned to where the others stood. As he got closer, he was able to make out their images from the shadows that surrounded them. "So what happened? What did you find around the corner?"

Mike spoke up, as she was the one known for her conciseness. "Deavon saw sword carrying soldiers, we saw a guy turn to stone, and oh by the way, we're not in New Hampshire any more."

Tony looked concerned as the realization that they had traveled someplace beyond their own world became undeniable. There were two choices, either look for a way out or rely on the mercy of the people before him. They all agreed to move on, having seen what had happened earlier.

Fumbling through the darkness, Mike spoke up. "I hope there aren't any more snakes."

Deavon added to her thought, "If there are, I hope they're not poisonous."

Tony grabbed Erin's hand more firmly knowing that she would become frightened at the prospect of slithering creatures crawling along in the dark. They reached the steps. This time Tony was ready for them and kept his balance. Climbing up the stairs, he pushed on the trap door with his hand. After seeing that the room remained empty, they climbed out into the light. The sun was low giving the appearance of it either being morning or late afternoon. Tony suspected that it was just after sunrise because of the activity Deavon saw earlier. A change of shift would occur early in the morning or after dark. A single chair was in the middle of this empty room. There was no place to hide if someone were to enter. Tony checked the doors quickly and found they were locked.

The four cautiously looked out through the arches at the world beyond the room. Their view revealed an ancient city. The buildings were made of mud and or stone having aged with the years. Adjacent to the building they found themselves in was a palace, rivaling those they had seen in the storybooks Erin had in her room. It stood in its entire splendor as a stone monument to prestige and power. It was the highest and most predominant building in the city.

The strangers from the Polar Caves were faced with many problems: how to get home, whom to trust, discovering where they were, and more importantly, food.

Erin suggested going to see the ruler of this new world. "Maybe he's a good king?"

The three older children scoffed at the idea. Tony looked at Erin. "If he were a good king, he wouldn't have so many soldiers running around his own city."

Tony spoke to the rest. "Okay guys, what's next?"

Mike said, "Anywhere is better than here." The thought of mystics and snakes, along with the soldiers, made her nauseous.

Deavon sided with Mike not because she was right, but because he was getting hungry.

Then Erin asked the question that no one wanted to speak, "Are we stuck here?"

A moment of silence followed and then Deavon thought of a good lie. "No. This is like a video game. We're on level one and we have to get to level ten. When we reach level ten, the game is over and we go home."

Erin accepted his answer. The others smiled knowing it was a brilliant deception.

"So," Tony piped up. "Where's level two?"

They all looked out toward the city, which looked ominous.

"We can't go out there dressed like this!" said Mike looking at her T-shirt and shorts. "I am freezing!"

"Me, too," said Erin beginning to shiver. Until that moment the adrenalin had kept them warm, but that had passed.

Tony, trying to reach a consensus, created a plan. He didn't want to wander into a strange city when their best chance to return home was from where they entered. "Okay, how about going out to find what we need and then returning here?"

Since there was no dissent, the idea was accepted.

Tony led them toward a door in the back of the room. Prying it open, he managed to release the latch that bolted it.

"Oh great, another staircase," blurted Mike who earned a look from Tony as if to say, "Enough."

Tony, the practical one, said, "All we have to do is find some clothes and get something to eat."

At the end of the staircase was another door. Tony began to open the door slowly when the handle was pulled from his hand. A soldier who was about to ascend the stairs confronted the children before him, "Stop!"

The four immediately reversed their steps trying to get away. Mike managed to pass Deavon and Erin on the way up. Reaching the top, she ran toward the trap door only to be thwarted by a sword pointing at

her head. The rest now entering the room stopped, seeing their cohort in peril.

The guards wore looks of confusion as they apprehended the strangers. One of the soldiers looked at his commanding officer. "What should we do with them?"

Another spoke, "Kill them. They have entered the temple. Make them an example for others who disobey Talus."

"No." The group quickly became silent recognizing the voice behind them. The man in the golden robe entered the fray. Looking at the strangers, he smiled. Hallicus lifted Mike's chin to get a better look at her face. "So The One has sent children to defeat us. Take them to the palace and present them to the emperor." The high priest walked away laughing to himself.

Talus was sitting on his newly created throne when the four were ushered into the room. The emperor was surprised to see children having just been told that The One had sent strangers to invade the temple. Talus looked closely at each child standing before him. The tallest was a male, maybe old enough to hunt. He was tan in complexion similar to himself during the hotter days. He was the one who seemed to have taken in the full breadth of the unfolding event. The boy kept looking at the others as if he were the one responsible for the rest who were held captive. Talus kept that in mind in case his questions were not being answered to his liking.

Then there was a girl not quite like any other. Her hair was straight black, but the most striking feature was her eyes. They were different than any he had seen. She seemed to be the most disinterested of the group. She almost looked bored. Strange considering what was at stake. Did she know that being presented to the emperor under guard meant certain death? All the while she seemed to remain oblivious.

To her left was an Atresian or maybe a child from Annular. He was almost the same size as the girl but definitely younger. He had a look of defiance; something that would have served him well as a warrior if he were not being condemned. He seemed to lean over the youngest of the four as if to shield her from attack. The youngest child, that the boy seemed to be protecting, was fair in skin with blonde hair. She looked up at Talus as if to ask for mercy. The strangers were by appearance odd in dress and noticeably cold.

"Get them some coats. Enemy or not, there was no reason for these children to freeze to death." Talus wanted to appear humane to the strangers. "You have been brought here because you have committed a great crime against me. What do you have to say?"

All four began to speak at once.

Talus raised his hand to silence the din created before him. Pointing at Tony, he motioned for him to speak first.

Tony bowed before the emperor. The attempt was poor but the effort was appreciated. "My name is Antonio Luis Alicia. I am from Argentina. I am a foster child of Thomas and Joan O'Reilly." Tony then pointed to Mike. "This is Mei Ling; she likes to be called Mike. She was born in China, but was adopted by the same family." Tony then extended his hand to Deavon. "This is Deavon. He is another foster child who just arrived a few weeks ago and next to him is Erin. She is the only natural born child to Thomas and Joan."

Mike sneered at Tony. Deavon's look of defiance remained unchanged, and Erin simply smiled.

"We have no idea how we got here or who you are, but all we want is to find a way home. I think our being here is a result of whatever those people are doing down in that tunnel. We were all in the Polar Caves in New Hampshire when Deavon saw a red glow. The four of us ended up here, wherever here is, and that is how we came before you." Tony tried to be brief in hopes of gaining favor with Talus.

The emperor paused as the coats were given to the children. All seemed to feel the effect of the warmth they provided. Most said something of appreciation, but the girl with the black hair said nothing.

"If I were to accept your story Antonio of Argentina, then I would have to accept that you have no idea who I am or why you are before me, is that correct?"

The four nodded.

"Then let me explain your dire circumstances." Talus stood up for effect. "I hold your lives in my hand. At this moment you are destined for execution unless I say otherwise. You were captured within the temple, which as you now know is heavily guarded. No one but an Atresian is allowed in there, the penalty being death. Since none of you are Atresian, I have no

other recourse than to follow the law.” The emperor paused. “Unless you can convince me to spare your lives.”

Talus sat back down allowing some time for what he said to sink in. “You, they call Deee-von, it seems you were the one who led the others. By whose orders were you following?”

Deavon looked at the man before him. Talus reminded him of all the others who ruled his life, pompous and full of self-importance. He did not bow nor recognize in any way the emperor’s superiority. “I was curious, that’s all. No one told me to do anything. I saw this light and wanted to see where it was coming from.”

“And where is the land of your birth?” Talus appeared unfazed by the lack of respect shown by the youth before him.

Deavon smirked. “Not here, that’s for sure.” A guard standing behind him slapped him on the head. Not hard enough to hurt but to gain his attention. “Okay,” turning around to acknowledge the guard’s presence, “We are from South Portland, Maine.”

The emperor, having not recognized the name, asked his prisoner to explain further. Deavon felt like he was talking to a caveman who believed the world was flat and that the moon was made of cheese. “It’s in another place and time. When we entered the cavern with the red glow, it must have transported us here. I can’t explain it. All we want to do is get back home.”

“Tell me, Deavon of South Portland, Maine, do you know of The One?”

The young man in question looked confused. “The what?”

Talus simplified the question. “What is the name of your god?”

Deavon thought about his mom, the countless prayers to a faceless God who did nothing to stop her drinking. Looking up at the emperor with sincerity he had not shown before, Deavon answered the question. “There is no God.” The boy seemed saddened by his conclusion.

“I see. Then was there something inside you or a voice that prompted you to enter this red light? Certainly no one walks through stone simply because they are curious?”

Deavon’s look of defiance returned. “I told you. There was no voice. I just wanted to know what it was, that’s all.”

Talus leaned down toward the young man. “If someone were to be punished for this crime, who should it be?”



Deavon looked up at his inquisitor. Tony was older but he had less to lose. Deavon had no family, no hope of reuniting with his mother, and a strong desire to tell this Talus where he could go. "If you need to kill someone to make you happy, then kill me. Let the others go. As far as I care you can kiss my ...."

"Deavon!" Tony shouted out his name not to silence him but to blur the word he was about to say.

Deavon saw the emperor smile as he rose from the throne. Removing the knife from its sheath, he walked towards him. Deavon braced himself for the blade that Talus would plunge into his heart. He stood erect not giving into his fear. Deavon didn't want to provide the emperor any pleasure in the act. Talus took the young man's wrist, twisted his hand palm up, and slapped the flat side of the blade into Deavon's palm. The others looked on horrified as Deavon writhed in pain. His whole body began convulsing except for his arm, which was still held by the emperor's hand. Letting go, Talus wiped the blade with a towel an attendant had handed to him before returning it to its sheath. After sitting back down, he spoke once more.

"There are many ways to die. Most of the ways can be extremely painful." The point had been made to all before him.

The emperor looked at the girl with black hair. She seemed to be the one most affected by the demonstration. "You, the one they call Mike whose name is Mei Ling. Why did you follow Deavon into the red glow that brought you here?"

Mike looked scared as she replied. "I don't know. I didn't want to be left behind. They were all going into the cavern, so I decided to go with them."

The emperor nodded. "I see, so no one encouraged you to follow along?"

Mike tried to explain their actions. "You don't understand, we're kids. We weren't thinking. Come on." Mike looked at Talus like she would her father while trying to get a ride to the mall. "Just let us go. We'll walk across the street, go down into the basement where the weirdoes are talking to themselves, and let ourselves out, okay?"

Talus continued, "So if one were to be punished for the crime you all committed, who should it be?"

Mike answered immediately, "Deavon, he already said he was willing to die."

Talus, wanting to know her heart, questioned her further. If two needed to be punished, who would be the other?"

Looking at Erin, Mike made her decision. "Tony, he talked us into it."

"Mei Ling who they call Mike, if I could send one person home, who would I choose among you?"

Mike looked around at the other three. She knew Erin would be the best choice, but she could not bear to remain in Talus' world. Tony and Deavon could adapt if spared, but what would become of her? "Would the others die?"

Talus looked annoyed by her attitude. "Does it matter?"

Her silence spoke volumes to all in the room. Mike could not imagine speaking the words, but they were uttered for all to hear, "I don't know. Me, I guess. I should be the one to return home."

The emperor looked down as he asked his last question of her, "What is the name of your god?"

Mike replied, "Which one? God the Father, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit?"

Talus shook his head. "Since you would be of no use to any of them, it does not matter." Mike knew she had been insulted but didn't quite understand the context.

The emperor looked at the youngest of the four. She looked as if she could see the goodness in him. Something few people recognized. "Erin, how old are you?"

The girl bowed following Tony's lead. "I am nine, well ... I'll be ten in September."

"Who is the leader among you?" demanded Talus.

Erin replied, "Mom."

All in the room laughed. Even Deavon smiled, still shaking his hand to relieve the burning.

"Who among you, here in the room?" clarified Talus.

The fair child looked at the other three. "Mike likes to boss me around."

Talus continued, "Who is the most powerful person you know?"

Erin thought for a moment, and then looked up. "The President of the United States."

The emperor perked up. "And what is the name of his god?"

"In our world, God and government are separated." Erin spoke as if in class.

"Then how did this president become so powerful?" said Talus being curious about these strange children and their world.

"I don't know. I don't vote." Erin understood the election process but could not explain it.

"Vote?" Talus had never heard the word before.

"Yeah, when everyone picks who will run the country."

"People choose?" Talus could not imagine an advanced culture would adopt ways similar to those of the Plainsmen.

"Yeah, but our dad isn't too happy this time," offered Erin.

"Here people obey me." Talus ended the exchange by stating his prominence in the world.

"Erin of South Portland, Maine, who is your god?"

The youngest child proudly answered as if in Sunday school, "Jesus of Nazareth."

"Who?" Talus tried to comprehend their religion but was unable to do so. "Is Nazareth part of your South Portland, Maine?"

Erin corrected Talus. "No, it's in Israel."

"Erin of the O'Reilly's has anyone ever mentioned The One?" Talus continued to focus on their connection to the enemy and their threat to Atresia.

Erin thought hard and then answered, "No." The youngest child then pressed on. "Please, we just want to go home."

Talus nodded to the child as he sat in silence. The emperor wanted to interrogate Tony last. To Talus, he seemed to be the most valuable and the one who could provide the best answers.

"Antonio from Argentina, explain to me why you are innocent?" demanded Talus.

Tony took a moment before speaking. Then he extended his hands as a plea for mercy.

"Your most honorable Lord of the Atresians. You have asked about The One and have found no association between us. We are weak and unarmed. Had we entered your world to do you harm, would we not have been more prepared? We weren't even dressed for the elements. All we desire is to find our way home. If you were to be so generous as to help us, we would speak highly of you to all in our world."

Talus smiled seeing a lot of Flavin in this young man before him. "How can I be assured that others will not follow your path and challenge me?"

Tony spoke as if his life depended on it, "We came here by accident. We do not want to be in your world. If it were by design, wouldn't we have already told you? Since our lives rest in your hands, wouldn't we have bargained that knowledge for our freedom?"

The emperor felt saddened. It would be a shame to lose someone as gifted as the young man before him, but still he was given little choice. "I will ask you as the last of those before me, how can I know you are not of The One?"

Tony slumped: how could he prove a negative? "Your Highness, look at us. Are we a threat? A boy who speaks before he thinks? A girl who is only interested in saving herself? Then there's a child and me who plead for your mercy. If The One were to challenge your throne, wouldn't he find people more suited for the task than us?"

Before Talus could answer, Hallicus entered the room. Tony knew all hope was lost. Even if he had convinced the emperor, he was not going to win his argument with the high priest. "Your Highness, may I have a word with you?"

Talus walked over to the high priest. The emperor spoke first as if to bring Hallicus up to speed on his findings. "I don't know Hallicus. It seems as if they entered our world by mistake." Talus was convinced that the children posed no danger toward the task at hand.

The mystic replied, "Mistake or not, they are a threat simply by their existence."

"I can not condemn innocent children to death," said Talus adamantly.

The high priest responded, "You, of all people, should know the art of deception."

Talus nodded thinking back to his conversation with Vellus. He too had been convincing when he portrayed himself as a child who was unloved and lost.

Hallicus continued, "If it pleases you, allow the matter to be resolved by Solus. He will guide you on the path to take. Until then, let them share the cell with Teller. If they are of The One, let the leader of Galea see the help that has been offered by his god." The high priest laughed at the prospect.

The four, hearing the laughter, knew it was not a good sign and prepared for the worst. Talus returned to the throne. "I have discussed this situation with our spiritual leader and have come to a conclusion. Since I am unable to discern your intentions, I will keep you under guard."

The guards stepped forward to assert themselves.

"Until such time that Solus guides me to the truth, I will then act on his behalf. If you are to be spared, you will be given an opportunity to find your way back to your world. Talus concluded. "If you are of The One, even unwittingly as you so claim, you will be executed."

The guards led them away. Talus followed the children with his eyes as they were escorted from his presence hoping that Lacunae could help him with this newest dilemma.

# MY NAME IS TELLER

The four were ushered into the jail. The prisoners enclosed in the various cells stared in silence as they walked past. Some looked up to the ceiling whispering praises. The guards, in contrast, seemed to be disinterested. The effect of entering the prison brought a chill down each child's spine. Even Mike felt the reality of the moment; that maybe home was beyond their hope. After passing the cells full of Galeans, they entered a different part of prison.

Here the guards were on heightened alert. The four were escorted down a long corridor toward a single occupied cell. They were stopped prior to the last chamber. Within the confines of the bars, an elderly man sat on the floor. He seemed to be deep in thought as they were pushed into the confines of the room.

Once the door was closed and locked, the argument between Mike, Tony, and Deavon began.

"I can't believe it! I knew you were selfish but only you could think of leaving us here in order to save yourself." Deavon felt betrayed by the girl for whom he was willing to offer his life.

"You're the one who dared Talus to kill you!" Mike, trying her best to impersonate Talus, continued. "Dee-von."

"All right both of you! Neither one of you were helpful," interjected Tony. Mike responded first. "Oh, like kissing his butt was helpful, huh?"

Deavon sang sarcastically, "We're just poor little lambs who have lost our way, bah, bah, bah."

Erin had become oblivious to the quarreling as she slowly drifted toward the old man. Something about him caught her attention. As the others screamed at one another, the old man remained serene. She felt a pull as if he was calling her towards him. As she drifted, her sense of fear was replaced with curiosity. He reminded her of her grandfather who would always find a quarter behind her ear or manage to produce her favorite candy from an empty coat pocket.

"Well, at least I didn't get my hand slapped or told I was useless," continued Tony.

Mike walked over to Tony. "Who died and made you king?"

As the argument continued, Erin sat in front of Teller. The leader of Galea smiled slightly as if to acknowledge her presence.

"I'm Erin."

"Hello, Erin, I am Teller."

The young child pointed as she told the old man the names of the other children; "That's Tony, Mike, and Deavon."

Teller nodded.

Mike continued her rant, "So Your Highness, now what?"

Tony lifted his arms in the air out of frustration.

Mike then turned on Deavon. "You know we were quite happy before you showed up."

"Teller, why are you here?" inquired Erin.

The Galean leaned in toward the young girl. "To find you."

Erin cocked her head. "Can you help us get home?"

Teller looked at the child. "No, but I do know someone who can."

The girl jumped up and ran into the bedlam, which had continued between the others. Pointing toward the old man, Erin looked up at her adopted siblings. "Teller knows someone who can get us home!"

The guards chuckled thinking Teller was trying to convert them.

The children stopped arguing as they tried, each in their own way, to assess the old man who remained seated.

Teller looked up at the four strangers while gesturing with his hand for all in the room to sit down.

The four complied. Mike tried crossing her legs to mimic Teller while the boys just knelt. The old man immediately captured their attention with a look.

"My name is Teller. I am the leader of Galea, the country you are now in but more importantly, I am the spiritual guide for all who follow The One."

Tony, Deavon, and Mike all bristled at the name knowing it was the cause of their imprisonment.

"Great! Thanks Erin for introducing us all to a nutcase," said Mike sarcastically.

"Mike, that's enough." Tony spoke up to prevent the old man's feelings from being hurt.

Deavon spoke in defense of Mei Ling. "You're not her father, Tony."

Teller held up his hands to silence the children. "You all have a lot to learn, but our time is short. Talus, the King of Atresia, now fancies himself as the Emperor of Man. Under the influence of The Darkness, the emperor desires to destroy The One. This is why he has so many people in the temple. This Darkness seeks to rule Celestia and is using Talus to obtain his goal. You will need to make a decision tonight because the emperor's wife, Lacunae, arrives tomorrow. She, under the direction of Solus, will demand your execution. For you, it may seem you are victims of circumstance, but your presence was foretold."

Teller began to rise. "So the choice is yours. Do you remain here and hope that I am wrong, or do you escape in the hope that I am right?"

Erin smiled as she looked up at Deavon. "Level Two?"

The children looked at each other in silence. Stunned by the information they had just heard and of their potential demise, Tony looked at Mike and Deavon. "What do you think?"

"Oh my God, you're not thinking of following this lunatic, are you?" Mike spoke in disbelief.

Deavon ignored Mike's comments and looked at the old man. "Teller, why should we believe you?"

The old man smiled. "I am not asking that you believe me but to believe The One. If Talus wanted you to find your way home, would you be here with me?"

All but Erin replied, "No." The child simply reached out her hand for Teller to take.

"Then what hope do you have in being freed by the one who imprisoned you?"

Just as they were about to agree to join the old man, a noise from outside the cell captured their attention. "It is time." Teller slipped past the children and headed toward bars holding them. The guards were soon overwhelmed by the sheer mass of people entering the hallway. All the people seen by the children earlier were now free. Singing and praising The One, they pushed their way through the soldiers to reach Teller. The



old man grabbed the bars and proceeded to pull them towards his body. The snapping of the bamboo was concealed by the noise outside the cell. Using his hand, he motioned the children to leave through the hole he had just created.

The Assembly continued their diversion as the four being led by Teller walked down the hall toward a doorway. Just as they were passing through the threshold, they heard an Atresian yell to his cohorts, "They've escaped!"

Running down the stairs, they came to another hallway. "Turn right," Teller instructed the others as he took Erin's hand to make sure she didn't get lost. The plan was going perfectly until they saw a soldier closing from behind. Tony stopped allowing the others to pass him. "Keep going; I'll hold him off." Tony stood unarmed as the Atresian raised his sword to cut him down.

Looking for something to defend himself, he quickly grabbed two stones the size of small bricks. His first instinct was to throw them, but something stopped him from doing so. Holding a stone in each hand, he positioned himself for the Atresian's attack. As the sword came swinging down, Tony deflected it using one of the rocks he was holding. The guard swung again. Using the stone in other hand, Tony thwarted the guard's effort once more. The four watched as Tony looked like a black belt in martial arts. Mike was the most amazed knowing that her foster brother had never learned Karate. The soldier began to tire with each attempt. Tony then threw one of the stones into the Atresian's stomach, causing the soldier to keel over with pain. The Argentinean then used the other to knock him over the head. The guard slumped to the ground, allowing Tony to grab his weapon.

Teller pulled on Erin's hand as he instructed the others. "Let's go."

The four continued hoping to escape as they followed Teller.

"Go left at the end of this hallway."

Deavon did as Teller commanded and reached the door to the outside. They entered the shadows of the street and waited for Teller to lead them away. Rounding the corner, the four strangers were met by one of Teller's disciples waiting with horses. The Galean helped the children as they mounted. Teller then instructed his disciple to inform the others that they were safe.

Now on horseback, they followed Teller through the streets of Cornea under the cover of night. They stopped at a house where a man waited at the door.

“Salpingo needs you to hurry; sentries are due back shortly.”

He helped the children to the ground and then slapped the horses to prod them to gallop away. As they entered the house, they heard soldiers yelling as they chased the riderless horses down another street. The man lit a lamp where a table was set with food and drink for the new arrivals. The children quickly sat down and began to devour the meat filled biscuits.

The host continued to peer out the window looking anxiously for Atreians. “Once the emperor learns you have escaped there will be a house to house search.”

Teller reassured the nervous man. “My friend, we have time. Any search will take place long after we are settled. Until then, let them eat and catch their breath. As soon as they are finished, we will all hide in the tunnel until the sun sets once more.”

The man nodded but continued to peer out the window.

Teller turned to the children who were still gorging themselves. “There is much we need to talk about, but there will be time for that later. After you eat we will rest until night, then we will leave Cornea.”

The four muffled sounds of agreement while they continued stuffing their faces with food. Teller sat down once more on the floor and began to pray.

Talus was wakened by Osseous. “Your Highness, Teller has escaped.”

The emperor jumped out of bed. “What, how?”

Osseous looked sheepish as he explained, “It seems the iron bars were replaced by bamboo. They were painted to look genuine. The mass of followers created a diversion allowing their leader to make a break from his cell, then having received word that Teller had succeeded, all the prisoners ran free.”

Talus turned to his general as he began to dress. “Begin a search throughout the city. Let no one rest until he is found.”

“The search has already begun, Your Majesty,” stated Osseous.

“Does Hallicus know?” asked Talus.

At that moment, as if on cue, the spiritual leader entered the room. “My Lord, the general has not been completely forthcoming.”

Talus looked at Osseous. “What?”

Hallicus continued, “The children went with him. It seems as if our docile leader of Galea anticipated our every move. He must have known of

their arrival and planned to use them against you. I have instructed our scribes to delve into all the prophecies surrounding these events. We must not fail Solus.”

Talus agreed. The emperor now desired Lacunae's arrival more than ever.

At that moment a messenger arrived from Capnia. “Emperor Talus, I have an urgent message from the queen.”

The emperor took the parchment and opened it before Hallicus. “Damn it!”

Hallicus ask if he could read the note. Talus handed it to his advisor.

Dearest Tal,

I cannot risk being cryptic for this matter is of utmost urgency. I had a dream that may affect the outcome of our mission. Four strangers will arrive. It has been told to me by Solus to instruct you to kill them before they discover their true powers. Do not be deceived by The One. I will be there by tomorrow afternoon to further guide you in this matter.

Love, Lacunae

Hallicus looked as concerned as Talus. The old man had fooled them, and now he had these four strangers to help him. The emperor could not comprehend how these children could undermine the efforts of Atresia and Solus combined. Still, he knew that the city was secure. They would not be able to leave without being apprehended. For now, all Talus could do was wait.

# THE REASON WHY

The tunnel underneath the house was elaborate. A large room had been carved out. Along the wall were six beds already prepared for their guests. There was enough lighting so even Erin felt secure underneath the earth. Salpingo moved what little furniture remained in the room upstairs into the kitchen. The Galean then climbed down the ladder into the man-made cavern. Pulling on two ropes, a large crash was heard by all who were below it.

“What the hell was that?” shouted Tony

Salpingo turned to Tony with a smile to explain, “A trap door would be easy to spot, even for an Atresian, so Salpingo make a false floor.” The ropes that the Galean pulled on created a space full of furniture that was attached to a wooden base. As it landed into position, it removed all traces of Teller or the children being there. “Soldiers may look for hiding places, but who would think to look under an entire room?” Shaking his head, Salpingo laughed at the thought.

Teller looked at the exhausted children. “Please, go and get some sleep. When you wake up, I will answer all your questions.” The children found the beds to be comfortable, which surprised them. It was only a matter of minutes before the four were asleep. Teller looked at Salpingo. “It will be up to you, my friend, to guide us from here.” The host smiled, a sign that he was up to the task.

The Atresians searched everywhere. Anyone who was even thought to have been part of Teller’s escape was killed on sight. Talus went to the scene of the crime. The sun was now high enough to reveal the true brilliance of the Galeans’ plan. The warden showed the emperor by pulling on the bars that remained. “Only three or four had been replaced by the painted shoots. Unless you were looking for it, not even a mystic would have known.” Talus frowned, not at the failure of the guards but at Teller’s ability to see this event coming and prepare for it.

"We checked and all the cells were prepared the same way," continued the warden. "No matter where we put Teller, he would have been able to escape." The emperor should have known better. Once again, he had underestimated his opponent, first with Vellus and now with the enemy of The Darkness. All he could do was hope that Solus would help him as he did at Teres.

As the emperor walked back outside, the chaos ensued; the frantic search for the prisoners continued. Soldiers, along with the citizens of Cornea, took to the streets. All were running frantically in every direction. Those who got in the Atresian's way were killed, making the scene horrific. Talus was unfazed being more concerned about letting Lacunae down. By mid-morning the slaughter of innocents had slowed. Only those who appeared to resist met an untimely fate. The others had begun carrying off the dead so by the time the queen had arrived, it was orderly at best.

Lacunae quickly ran up to her king and embraced him. "I missed you so much."

Talus held her tightly. He hoped that the feeling of defeat would melt away. It did not. "Lacunae, I have terrible news."

The mystic looked up.

Looking into her eyes, Talus continued. "Teller had arranged to escape with the four strangers. It was as if he had planned the escape for weeks."

"In the name of Solus, this Galian is the devil, isn't he," stated Lacunae.

The emperor continued, "We have a house to house search going on, but so far nothing has come of it. The gates are secure, but there's been no report of Teller or the children."

Lacunae smiled, "It will be okay, my dearest Tal. Solus will guide us. Until then, tell me as much as you know about these strangers."

Talus explained that they were merely children, as confused as he was about their arrival, and how none of them knew or heard of The One. He further explained that one child in particular had no honor within her. That even The One would have been hard pressed to use her.

Lacunae thought a moment. "We will gather the mystics and call upon Solus. He will tell us how to deal with this threat. I will need a room and a place where the others can ward off The One's influence from disturbing us."

The emperor called for Hallicus to arrange the event.

Throughout the ordeal above them, the children slept soundly. They hadn't slept since the day before yesterday. As time passed, slowly each child awoke. Deavon was the first. He grabbed some water and asked Teller for something more to eat. Then Mike rose out bed. The girl from China looked at Salpingo strangely, having not noticed his appearance earlier. Tony awoke next. Taking the water, he splashed his face while Mike pointed toward their guide to make sure Tony saw his true form. Erin was the last to rise and seemed to be the most upset. Having realized how much time had passed, she began to cry.

Looking at Tony she stammered, "What are we going to do? Mom must be sick by now. I want to go home. I don't want to play anymore."

Tony went over and hugged his littlest sister. It was time for Deavon to get creative again and so he did. "Erin, your mom doesn't know we are gone. It may seem like hours, here but it's only been minutes. Once we entered the light, we became part of the game. And when we get to level ten, we go home and forget all this ever happened." The newest foster child smiled to reassure Erin.

She slowly composed herself by drinking some water and eating buttered biscuits.

The four were now ready to discuss the details of "The Game" with Teller. Knowing nothing about video, the Glean did manage to understand the context he needed to keep.

"There are two forces at work: The Light and The Dark. The Darkness has a plan to defeat The Light by using Talus. The man you met earlier. He is supposed to enter Celestia, the place where The Light is, and conquer it. By being human, The Darkness hopes that The Light will surrender rather than destroy its own creation."

Erin looked up at Tony for an explanation. "It's like Mom giving in to you after you've had a meltdown.

"Oh," said Erin.

Teller continued, "Since The One has given us freewill, The Light cannot simply choose to take that freewill away when it is threatened. To do so would be against its nature. So The One sought help in this world from those who believe."

Mike replied, "But we don't believe. Why pick on us?"

"For some reason you all have strengths within you that are some part of The One," replied Teller.

"The Light cannot ask anything of anyone who is not like minded. To do so would disturb the fabric of the world created for us," continued Teller.

"I also want you to know that I did not choose you. I have no idea why you are here other than you were sent, and that I was told to await the arrival of four strangers," explained Teller.

Mike corrected Teller. "No, we weren't sent here; Deavon went through a red light that those mystics made up."

"If that were true, Mike, why were you not discovered?" asked Teller. "As time goes by, I will learn more about you, and you will learn more about yourselves. On the day 'The Great Battle' begins, you will be ready."

"Great Battle?" shouted Tony. "Wait a minute, we're not fighting for you. We're freaking kids! Go get an army or something."

Teller looked at Tony. "Again, I did not choose you. You chose yourselves to enter this world. Something inside all of you called you here. If not, you would not have been able to enter the red door."

"Okay, it's a door now. I didn't see a door." Deavon looked around to see if the others were in agreement with him. "Did you see a red door?"

Teller looked at the four surrounding him. "Metaphorically speaking, people don't usually enter a room unwillingly, do they? So the same applies here. No one grabbed you against your will and pulled you into this world, did they?"

The four replied, "No."

Teller gave the four a quick history of the world that they were now in; how Atresia, Galea, and Calyx lived in peace until the days of Talus. How the sayers foretold of their coming and their need to learn about this world. The Galean then turned to the boy from Argentina and asked, "So, Tony, why do you think The One wanted you to enter this world?"

The boy looking thoughtful replied, "I don't know, really. I have nothing that would help defeat an army, never mind this Solus you spoke of."

Teller continued, "You managed quite well against the guard while we were trying escape."

Mike interjected, "Yeah, when did you learn Kung Fu? You looked like Jackie Chan."

"I don't know what you saw, but I was scared to death. The only thing I remember was how I wanted to throw the rocks and being stopped from doing so. It was then I decided to use them to defend myself. Everything started to go in slow motion. After taking the sword, things sped up again," explained Tony.

The old man thought for a moment. "Does anything like that happen in your world?"

"Not really," Tony said, trying to recall the feeling again. "I've heard of athletes talking about things going in slow motion. Maybe that's what I experienced."

Teller continued, "Maybe so."

Tony looked at the leader of Galea. "I still don't understand why the four of us ended up here. I mean we don't even believe in this One you talk about."

The old man answered, "This is why we need to talk. Once we discover the reason why you were chosen, we will know the purpose of your arrival."

Teller turned to Mei Ling. "Mike, why do you think you were chosen?"

Deavon spoke up before she had a chance to reply, "She wasn't chosen. How could someone who thinks of herself be a help to others?"

Mike retorted, "Shut up, you jerk! Unlike you I don't make an ass of myself trying to prove how brave I am."

"At least I tried to help. You wanted to leave us here, remember?" Deavon raised his wounded hand to Mike as proof.

"What's wrong with you anyhow? Why do you always walk around with a chip on your shoulder?" Mike turned the subject back on Deavon, feeling ashamed for what she had done.

Teller silenced the two before it escalated beyond a shouting match. "We will get nothing accomplished if we continue to look in the past. Even the recent past has no use to us if it doesn't answer the question of your future. So once again, Mike, tell me your thoughts on the subject."

The girl from China took a minute to answer. "I don't know why I am here but maybe it has nothing to do with us individually but us as a group?"

Teller smiled. "Maybe you're right. It is a brilliant thought."

Mike smiled as if she had earned a gold star from a teacher.



"Deavon, do you have anything to add to that thought?" asked Teller

"Yeah, I do. Maybe we weren't chosen at all. Maybe it's been a horrible mistake. So far all I've gotten is a sore hand and an army looking for us. And where are we? We are buried in this hole. So what's next, chief? Is there a fire pit we must walk through barefoot? All I want to do is go home. I wish I'd never seen that cave. I just want to be left alone." Deavon walked away trying to find a place of solitude.

The Galean looked at Erin. "Child, what do you think?"

The youngest O'Reilly looked around. "I think we're all scared and don't want to be here. But since we are here, it seems we need to help you. Maybe then we can go home."

Teller nodded. "I think it's time for, what did Deavon call it, Level Three."

# THE RIGHT HAND OF SOLUS

Lacunae led Talus into her sanctuary. There she sat at the table after instructing the emperor to do the same. Within moments she entered a trance. The look on her face revealed her connection with The Darkness. Soon the moment passed as she returned from wherever she'd been.

"Solus will guide you as he has since the beginning of your quest. You will be sent an aide to hunt for Teller and the four strangers. It will be your mission to assign someone to kill them. As for you, there is trouble brewing in Capnia. Some are plotting against you. Solus did not reveal to me their names, but they are the ones you have trusted. The mission will not be in vain if we continue on the path set for us by our lord and master. The cavern is the key. Hallicus will find the door. Until then, be strong in your desire to destroy The Light. Your opportunity to free your father is coming soon."

Lacunae smiled at her husband, reassuring him that he had not failed. The escape had not changed the outcome of their quest. Talus knew exactly who to commission to hunt down the enemies of Solus—Lacunae's bodyguard. A message was sent to the man who once protected Lacunae from harm. Sagittus planned to assemble the crew he needed while in Capnia and then arrive in Cornea by the end of the week. In the meantime Talus would learn as much as he could about these strangers with the help of Hallicus' scribes. If there was a prophecy, it would lead the strangers to their death. Lacunae would learn more about the treachery at home. Since it involved people that Talus trusted, he needed someone who was not as attached to those serving his court. All went about their tasks as if choreographed by The Darkness himself. Soon Solus would reign over Celestia and Talus the world.

The Darkness looked upon the physical plain below him. All was in place, or so it seemed. "Necrosis, I need you to travel to the human world to do my bidding."

Necrosis snarled. He hated the humans and preferred being in the castle. "Yes, master."

"Find the four strangers, lead Sagittus to them and when they are dead, you may return," commanded Solus.

"May I have the honor of ripping out their hearts?" requested Necrosis.

"Of course," replied Solus.

"Thank you, master, I look forward to my returning to bask in your presence," rumbled Necrosis.

"You shall witness the full extent of my glory when at last The One is destroyed." Solus gazed down at the strangers seen on the castle's floor, his window to the human world.

"Teller is planning to leave Cornea under the cloak of darkness. At the moment, they are still under the protection of their Assembly. Let them venture out; then you can attack with the human assassins. Talus will think he has done me a great service, even though we will know better."

Necrosis laughed as he began his decent into the human world.

The time had arrived when the four would leave their sanctuary and enter the world. While the others rested, Salpingo spent his time scouting the terrain. It was when he returned that the others finally noticed his odd look. He had rust colored hair that was as scraggily as his dress. One would have broken a comb trying to groom it. His face was scarred and pocked, weathered by the environment. His eyes were bloodshot giving him a look of a goblin or a troll. Though he was just a little taller than Tony, he spent most of his time hunched over, not for lack height in the cavern but simply out of preference. He also had a peculiar desire to smell things.

They all wondered what Teller saw in him but Mike, unable to resist, spoke her mind. "Excuse me, why do you want us to follow this freak? How can we trust him not to go psycho on us or something?"

Teller laughed. "Not all is what it seems. Many may think of you as a self-centered brat who thinks only of her own needs, but I know differently."

Deavon smiled. Tony turned to avoid eye contact, and Erin just nodded. Mike just looked at the Galean, not sure if she had been insulted, complimented or both. The gathering of supplies broke the awkward silence as they prepared to leave.

Salpingo crawled out of the tunnel into the fresh air. He had collected brush earlier to hide the opening and the fugitives' exodus from the fortress.

The wall was just a few feet away. Guards stood on the rampart surveying the terrain. Salpingo slowly moved away from the group. With each move he would stop, look up, and call for one to follow in his tracks. The process repeated itself. Slowly they made their way further from the wall.

As Tony was running to the next station, they heard what they feared most. A guard sounded the alarm. "Someone is escaping! Quick, open the gates!" Tony continued to where Salpingo had stopped. The guide motioned with his hands to lie flat. Horses galloped out of the city, each rider bearing a torch. Just ahead of them was a man running into the night. The scene ended quickly as an arrow found its mark in his back. The man fell as the riders turned their horses back toward Cornea.

Salpingo waited until the soldiers were gone before continuing their exercise. Slowly, while the night progressed, they gained more distance from the city that once imprisoned them. Finally after hours of toil, Salpingo stood and motioned the others to do the same. He strolled effortlessly across the ground even though he was carrying the weight that all the others had packed combined. Keeping up to him was not a problem because he would stop and sniff the soil in front of him. Mike just shook her head, still convinced that he would soon be howling at the moon. The guide stopped once more; again he motioned for the others to stand still. Salpingo dropped his pack as he reached for his spear. Slowly he walked out of view, and then the four jumped as they heard yelping. Time passed without a sound.

"What should we do?" asked Mike.

Teller looked at Mike. "Be patient."

A figure rose from the bushes before them. Over his shoulder, Salpingo had the hindquarters of a butchered deer.

"Gross." Mike turned her head, revolted by the man and his kill.

Tony tapped Mike on the shoulder. "It won't be when it's breakfast in the morning." They continued on, hoping that their trek would soon stop but Salpingo pressed on.

Pharnyx, the spy who was sent to Cornea, entered the throne room where Chordae was waiting. The ambassador led the agent into the adjacent room. As they entered, they saw Flavin looking out the window. Pharnyx spoke as Flavin turned to face him, "I am here to report disturbing news."

Flavin motioned for them to sit down at the table. The agent began his report, "Talus now resides in the old palace and is calling himself 'The Emperor of Man'. He is dedicating his time to creating a portal among the caverns of the temple into what he calls 'Celestia'. In the name of Atresia, he has murdered innocent people throughout Galea. And last but not least, I discovered that he is hunting for four children who are strangers to our world. This is all under the instruction of Solus."

Flavin and Chordae looked at each other. "How can we use this to incite a rebellion?"

Flavin thought for a moment before a smile appeared across his face. "So you could say that the king is no longer putting the interest of Atresia first."

Chordae quickly understood the tact that Flavin was taking. "Yes, you could say that."

Flavin continued, "So, you could say that even if Talus were successful, Atresia would suffer under his rule. This may not be enough to persuade all the nobility, but a few may take on our concern."

Chordae filled in the blank. "To eliminate Talus for the good of Atresia?"

Flavin continued, "By sharing our apprehension about the king's mental stability, we may be able to garner the support to challenge his authority."

Chordae nodded as he thought of who he could rally to their cause.

"So our next step would be to devise a way to lure this emperor back here where his safety would be compromised," suggested Flavin.

"Yes," agreed Chordae. "Once Talus is removed by unfortunate circumstances, Atresia would come together behind one of its own rather than follow Lacunae."

Flavin thanked Pharnyx for his service and called for Incus. "We'll need the support of our general to pull this off."

When morning arrived, the children were walking in their sleep. It was cold. Even the clothes they'd been given were not enough to keep them from shivering. Salpingo erected a tent, large enough for the entire party, and then proceeded to start a fire. "Salpingo stops here. Salpingo watch as you rest." Laying out bedding, he created a nice space for all to sleep. Soon the warmth of the fire made the misery of last night disappear. The guide continued to toil around their camp as they slept. By late afternoon they awoke to cooked deer.

Teller was already awake when the others rose from their slumber. After gorging himself on the venison, Deavon asked, "Where are we going?"

Teller looked at Deavon. "South. There we will meet the mountain people."

"How long will that take?" Mike was not enthused by the thought of going somewhere colder.

"Salpingo says another two days of travel after walking tonight." The four groaned in unison. Another night of tramping in the cold was the last thing any of them wanted.

"Can't we just sleep and start in the morning?" Mike, having the fur from her bed around her, sunk to the ground.

The guide looked at Mike. "Salpingo says it's too dangerous, bad men, bad lands. When we safe, we rest. Now we walk."

Mike looked at Teller. "Is he going to keep talking that way?"

Teller answered the girl from China, "It's not what people say but what people do that reveals their true nature. All he has done was to keep you safe, feed you, and provide you warmth. Instead of being thankful, you complain about his native tongue?"

Mike was embarrassed knowing her actions had not been as honorable. Looking at Erin, she thought back to her desire to leave her behind in order to save herself. Shaking off the thought like the cold around her, she fell in line as they marched once more into the night.

Hallicus joined Talus and Lacunae in the palace of Cornea. "Your Majesties, I have come to discuss the prophecies surrounding the strangers. The stars tell of the coming of a great battle. Teller has concluded that these children will change the outcome in this upcoming conflict. Though no such prediction could be discerned from the writings or the stars, I believe Teller wants to use them to rally his people and any who will fight against Solus. If we were able to find and eliminate these strangers, then it would hurt the morale of our enemy."

Talus looked at his spiritual advisor. "So by themselves, these children are not a threat to our mission?"

The high priest answered, "No, I believe their presence is symbolic. The children are being used by our enemy as a last gasp prior to the destruction of The One."

Talus felt relieved knowing his actions did not hinder the ultimate goal of Solus.

Hallicus, is there anything more about this great battle?" inquired Lacunae.

"Yes, My Queen. It is written that a clash involving both the physical and spiritual worlds will determine the supremacy of Celestia," revealed Hallicus.

Lacunae turned to her husband. "Talus, do you understand what this means? You will enter Celestia and defeat The One. It is written. Talus, you'll be known as the slayer of the great lie."

"Hallicus, what progress has been made on creating the portal?" Talus hadn't visited the cavern since Lacunae's arrival to Cornea.

The mystic replied, "The progress is slow, but there is progress. We have discovered that the colors reflected on the walls represent different places in time and or space. None have dared enter for fear of a collapse of the portal created. Our conclusion is that a deep blue represents Celestia. By concentrating our efforts toward producing this particular doorway, we are no longer wasting time producing others."

Talus thanked his advisor and then smiled at Lacunae. "We're getting closer, and soon all will know the truth."

As the four strangers tried to keep pace with Salpingo, disturbing sounds arose from the night. Howling, cries, and sounds unrecognized by the travelers seemed to get closer as they tramped through the wet grass. Their guide stopped once again to sniff the air. Quickly, he motioned the rest to stop as he gathered sticks from around him. Starting a small fire, he then pulled out some cloth and soaked it in oil. Attaching a piece of prepared material to a branch, he created torches.

As he handed the torches to each of the travelers he said, "Salpingo smell wolves."

There was nothing more to say. Even though none of them had experienced a wolf in their world, the children knew enough about them to make their fear palpable. The fact they knew and feared most was that wolves hunted in packs, so each howl sent chills through them. Tony grabbed his sword. Even though he had never used one, he felt better having it in his hand. Salpingo kept his spear ready as he led the troop through the darkness.

The first wolf lunged at the smallest, Erin. Salpingo, having sniffed the grass moments earlier, seemed to be ready for it. As the beast was about to hit its target, Salpingo deflected the animal with his spear. The wolf yelped as it limped away in pain. Just beyond the torchlight shadows the others were seen. The pack had them surrounded. The wolves trotted back and forth along the perimeter. Teller now had Salpingo's spear while their guide held a knife. The wolves attacked again, only this time as a group. Salpingo was knocked off his feet but managed to kill his attacker. Teller used the spear to ward off two of the wolves. The first he stabbed and then struck another using the handle. Tony, it seemed, acquired the ability to see in the dark. He attacked the three wolves before him. Cries of pain were heard with each blow the boy made. Soon the shrieks of wounded wolves were heard as the pack retreated. Salpingo sniffed the air once more and proclaimed that the attack was over; the wolves had left.

Gathering up what had fallen to the ground in the chaos, they proceeded on. They all seemed to have more purpose in each step as they marched toward the daybreak waiting on the horizon.

"How did you do that?" Deavon still annoyed over the fact he was not given a weapon.

"I don't know. I just knew where they were so I swung into the darkness, and each blow hit its target." Tony was as amazed as Deavon by his newfound talent.

"Teller, why is Tony all of a sudden a Kung Fu master? I mean all he has ever been able to do is kick a ball around a field. Is he going to start talking like you?" Mike was concerned that her head would explode if Tony started using words like "Confucius."

"I don't know, my child. Maybe Tony has received the gift The One has determined for him."

"Gift?" queried Tony who was now interested in joining the conversation.

"Yes. Since none of you are part of our world, you may have abilities here beyond those you would have in your world." explained Teller.

"Like Superman or something? You know, being from another planet, he could fly, stop bullets, and all that other crap." Deavon was hopeful that he would be able to fly. To him, flying would have been an awesome power to have.



The children now looked at Teller like Santa Claus as they waited for their presents. "I have nothing to do with what you will experience or the gifts you receive. I can only offer my thoughts on the matter and since Tony has been given an ability not of his own making, I can only suggest that you may also have a similar fate."

The three who anticipated Christmas looked disappointed. It was similar to waking up too early to open their treasures and being told to go back to bed. Tony, on the other hand, looked pleased at being the only one who already had a gift given to him. As they continued walking, they welcomed the sunrise. Salpingo made camp and soon they were asleep once more.

# SAGITTUS

Lacunae's bodyguard entered the palace. The queen was pleased to see he had not changed since seeing him last at the wedding. He embodied the strength of Solus in human form. Bowing before the king and queen, he spoke out of reverence for them. "Your Highness, I heeded your call and gathered those of like mind and body to assist me. We are ready to hunt the enemies of Solus of which you have spoken."

Talus stood as he motioned to the bodyguard to rise. "Sagittus, I commend you. Take from me what ever you need to fulfill your quest. Bring glory to Solus by destroying the hope of The One. Then we will celebrate your victory upon your return."

Sagittus bowed as he turned to leave. He was eager to get started on his mission. He was grateful to have a purpose and wanted to prove himself worthy of the task he was given. Gathering horses and supplies, the riders rode off to the south. The bodyguard wanted to catch Teller before he reached the mountains where tracking them would be more difficult.

Lacunae smiled at Talus as she said, "He will bring us honor when he kills the strangers."

Talus, still not convinced that the children were a threat, nodded in agreement.

Necrosis flew among the warriors of Solus unbeknownst to them. The demon proceeded to guide the former bodyguard to the children. Each time Sagittus turned away from his chosen path, the horse would correct him. Finally after several corrections, the bodyguard knew a force beyond his world was leading him. Allowing the horse to lead, he hung on as the steed pounded the earth below him.

Surrounding Lacunae's bodyguard were four other riders. All were from Capnia. Cephalon knew Sagittus from his days with Lacunae. He was there when Talus first entered her world. Corpus was known as the enforcer among the mystics. He was the one who worked the streets, making sure the hawkers didn't venture into outright thievery or worse.

He protected the unsuspecting citizens of Capnia. Though the men and woman who claimed to read palms or gaze into crystal balls sullied Solus' reputation, the streets were known to be safe to all who visited them. Corpus insured it despite the hawkers and the gypsy's questionable motives. Aphasia was the heir apparent to Corpus, learning from his master the fine art of dissuading those who saw opportunity at the expense of others. Serosa, known for his adventurous spirit, came along for the quest. His craving for excitement outweighed his desire to serve Solus. Knowing that Talus himself requested Sagittus to come to Cornea was enough to spur his interest.

When they arrived in Cornea, they were tired having ridden most of the night. Still when Sagittus addressed his comrades after leaving the palace, all the weariness faded as they mounted fresh horses and headed south. The former bodyguard explained their mission and the need to fulfill their duty. No one wanted to kill children, but no one wanted to return without doing so. Sagittus was able to convince the Atresians that the strangers were aliens in the form of children and that Teller had them under his control. Talus had also expressed his concern about Teller's desire to destroy their way of life and would use these creatures from another world to accomplish it. This was enough to motivate them to press on toward the mountains. Once there, they would kill the enemy of Solus.

After riding through the night, Sagittus saw he was closing in on his prey. When they finally stopped, they had passed two camps, including the battle with the wolves. Serosa was impressed, having seen three wolf corpses left behind. The other fact worth noting was the lack of blood heading south, which meant that the human party departed unscathed.

Aphasia suspected, after looking at the remains, that the travelers were armed either with swords or spears, seeing no arrows in the beasts. This would give them an advantage upon their encounter. Shortly after passing the scene, they dismounted for the night. The tracks of the strangers were now fresher. They were within a day of sighting them. Sagittus knew his prey was in reach and that he would have his glory soon.

Salpingo had rewarded the four by setting up camp early. It would be safe to travel in the daylight, and so the children were allowed to sleep while it was still dark. The guide had made a concoction similar to hot

chocolate with mint. After the children emptied their mugs, they quickly fell asleep in the tent by the fire.

Teller looked upon his guide through the firelight. "My friend, I sense concern from you. What is wrong?"

The guide looked around to make sure no one was listening. "Salpingo know trouble is coming. How much and how many Salpingo does not know, but trouble will soon be here."

Teller nodded to acknowledge the guide's concerns.

"Salpingo say we will be safe once we get to Ganglion, but that is two days travel. Salpingo say we are not safe until then."

Teller asked his friend if there was something that could be done to protect them against an attack. "Salpingo like a fox; Salpingo know tricks. We travel by day to see trouble coming but also to hide our tracks from the dogs that chase us."

Teller went to get some rest. As Teller slept, Salpingo spent his time creating a trail that would divert the pursuers away.

The next morning Salpingo woke the four strangers. Each one fought his effort until finally submitting to his persistence. Upon waking, they were greeted with fried eggs and cheese. After thanking their guide, each gathered their packs and began their trek southward. Each knew that in two days this march would end. Mike wanted a warm bath. Deavon wanted a change of clothes. Erin wanted a real bed to sleep in, and Tony just wanted to walk without a pack.

Teller, sensing their frustration, decided to break the monotony by striking a conversation. "What do you desire from your life?"

Tony and Deavon looked at each other and then replied, "What?"

Teller restated his question, "What are your dreams? Your hopes?"

Tony decided to speak first. "Okay, if I were able to do whatever I wanted, I would play soccer."

Teller, not knowing what Tony meant, asked the child to explain.

Tony picked up his pace as he spoke. "It's the only game that is played around the world. Each country competes every four years to see who is the best. The skill is in your ability to control a ball without using your hands. No pads or helmet, just you and the ball. I want to play on the Argentinean National Team and beat Brazil for The World Cup."

Then I would come back to America and play professionally. I would be famous."

"Famous?" queried Teller

"Yeah, everyone would know me and want to be near me." Tony kicked the air as if he were shooting a penalty kick.

Teller stopped, forcing the rest of the group to stop as well. Turning back toward Tony he then asked, "Like Talus?"

Tony shook his head in protest. "No way! I would be admired for my skill in soccer, not for killing people."

The old man faced forward and started to walk again. "Oh."

"Hey, what about me?" yelled Mike

Teller hollered back, "Yes, Mike."

"I want to be an actress and live in Hollywood," smiled Mike.

The leader of Galea asked, "Hollywood?"

The girl from China then realized that Teller had no idea what motion pictures were or what Hollywood symbolized. "In my world," said Mike, "there are things called movies. That's where people pretend to be somebody else and live out part of their life like in a play. They can be exciting, emotional, or funny. Anyhow, Hollywood is where people called actors live when they are well-known."

Deavon interjected, "It's like watching a performance but instead of seeing the people live, a picture of them is projected on a wall."

"Oh, I understand," said Teller who elaborated, "So, you want to be admired for what you do, like Tony."

"Yeah, but I would be doing something more than kicking a stupid ball," added Mike.

"Deavon, what do you hope for?" asked Teller.

Deavon was more solemn. "I just want a home. I want my mom to stop drinking and not to be shuffled around like a pair old shoes."

The mood was changed by Deavon's comment. No one knew what to say except Teller, who turned again to face the foster child. Patting his chest with his hand, the old man spoke to Deavon. "Home is where someone lies in another's heart. You will always have a home here." Deavon gave a half smile feeling as if Teller actually cared, something that had been missing in his life for a while.

“Erin, what do you hope for in your life?” continued Teller.

Everyone was curious having no idea what she would say. “I want to meet God.”

Teller perked up. “Really, why is that?”

Erin continued, “It seems everyone talks about him, but no one has actually seen him. He’s like Santa Claus. No one sees Santa, but every year we find gifts under the tree; wouldn’t it be great just to talk to him?”

“What would you talk about?” asked Teller.

“I don’t know. I just want to know God is really there. I talk to him, but he never talks back,” said Erin.

The four stopped to rest. It was now midday and time to eat. Deavon looked at Erin. “I would like to talk to God, too.”

Erin, having her mouth full, motioned for Deavon to continue his thought.

“I just want to know why,” said Deavon.

Nothing more was said as they ate. Soon the break was over and the march south proceeded. As they plodded on, their thoughts of Ganglion grew with each step.

Sagittus led the posse toward their objective. His horse kept him on the right path. As they approached the stranger’s last campsite, it was Serosa who noticed the tracks. Pointing west, he yelled to the rest on horseback, “Hey, they went this way.”

Cephalon turned his horse to where Serosa was pointing. “Sagittus come over here.”

Corpus and Sagittus followed suit.

Cephalon followed the tracks with his eyes; as he looked, he spoke to his friend. “What’s that way?”

“Eccrine. It’s a village about ten leagues from here,” said Serosa.

“Do you think they went there?” asked Cephalon.

Sagittus felt his horse pull him in another direction. “No, it doesn’t feel right to me.”

“Sag, you’ve been hanging around Lacunae too long. When did you become a mystic?” To Cephalon, the truth was before him in the form of footprints in the sand.

“It’s not me; it’s the horse,” explained Sagittus.

Serosa laughed, "What?"

Aphasia paused to analyze the situation before commenting. "So far we had tracks to follow, horse or no horse. Now you want us to abandon the trail and go on a horse's feeling?"

"Yeah, something is controlling this animal, and it's heading this way." Sagittus pointed further south.

Corpus joined in. "So what's in that direction?"

Serosa informed the others. "Ganglion, it's about a days ride from here."

"So, we could follow the trail and still be able to double back before they reach Ganglion, right?" Cephalon provided an option where both objectives could be obtained.

Sagittus was not fond of the idea of going against the beast leading him. "Yeah, we could, but I think it's a trick. Somebody is leading us astray."

Cephalon looked at his friend. "Okay, if we're wrong, we will never doubt the horse again."

The others agreed and to his chagrin, Sagittus followed along. Even as he led his horse west, the animal fought him. Necrosis, annoyed by the human's stupidity, gave in to their stubbornness and let the horse go.

Knowing that they could be racing against time, Sagittus and the others quickened their pace to Eccrine. It was a small village consisting of huts and pens for the animals. As they rode into the village square, the villagers looked more surprised than afraid.

Sagittus looked down at a shepherd. "We're looking for children: strangers to this land. They are lost and need our help.

The shepherd thought for a minute, as if to recall if anyone had talked of such things before answering. "No, I can't remember anyone talking about children or the like around here."

Aphasia turned to Sagittus. "They may be in hiding."

Sagittus frowned; more time would be wasted in a search, "All right spread out and see if there is any evidence of their being here."

A search, even of a small village, would take hours. They were losing light, but they were also losing distance. The men concluded that the strangers were heading to Ganglion. They gathered just outside of the small village for the night knowing that the horses needed rest before racing southeast. Serosa said half smiling, "Next time we listen to the horse."

That night Salpingo was restless, even more so than usual. Teller noticed his uneasiness. "What's wrong, my friend?"

"Salpingo feels a battle will be coming soon. The sand has changed. The wind smells of danger."

Tony overheard Salpingo and began to feel nervous. Though he had the gift, he hated conflict. He also hated the fact that so many relied on him. Looking at Teller, Tony extended his sword as if passing a baton. "Can't I transfer my gift to Deavon?"

Teller looked at the foster child. "I am afraid The One has chosen you for a reason. If Deavon is to be given a gift, it will be The One who will bestow it, not us.

Tony looked at his sword, resenting its purpose. "Is there any way of not fighting? Can we hide or something?"

Salpingo looked at Tony. "Salpingo not want to fight either, but those who hunt us will not be stopped by words."

Deavon grabbed a stick. "Come on, Tony, teach me some of that Ninja crap." Tony picked up a similar branch and tried to explain each move as it happened. With each assault, the result was the same. Deavon quickly realized the only thing he was going to get was a beating.

Mike went up to Teller having thought over the events of the last few days. "So far, all we have done is listen to you and your so called friend. I am sick of it. We should never have left the palace. Ever since then, all they've wanted to do is kill us. Why? Because we listened to you!"

Tony walked over hearing enough to know what Mike was saying. "Stop it, Mike."

"No, I won't," said Mike angrily. "Who are you? You're not the boss here. We could have been home by now. Maybe this Solus could have helped us. No, instead we're in the middle of nowhere running for our lives. For what! Huh? "

Erin looked up at Teller. "I believe in you."

The old man smiled at the youngest child. "I believe in you too."

The conversation abruptly stopped with Mike walking away in a huff. Sleep was elusive for all of them. As Teller took his watch that night, he prayed.

The morning was no better. It was cold and wet from the melting frost. Mike felt particularly miserable as they headed out away from the fire, the



last bastion of warmth. Tony kept his sword within reach. Salpingo held onto his spear using it as a staff. Teller brought up the rear prodding Mike to keep up with the rest of them. Salpingo picked up the dirt while he walked, sniffing it for signs. By midday the tension was obvious. No one spoke while they trekked.

"Cursed!" Aphasia noticed a single track heading in the direction they were originally going. "It was a trick."

Sagittus waited to see if the horse would again lead them in the right direction. Every once in a while he would turn the horse in another way, but the horse just followed along.

"What, the horse isn't talking this morning?" Serosa ridiculed Sagittus' attempt to get the horse to lead them in a right direction.

Finally, the horse jerked the Atresian to the left. "Okay, let's go!" The posse raced toward their enemy trying to overtake them before dark. Salpingo, picking up the dirt, spoke to the rest in the party, "They're coming."

Tony yelled out, "How many?"

Salpingo looked at the boy curiously. "Salpingo smell; he not see."

Ganglion was too far to make a run for it. Seeing a cluster of rocks among some trees, Salpingo suggested they go there. As they ran toward their shelter, a cloud of dust rose on the horizon rapidly coming towards them. Necrosis could see his victims but needed to wait for the human posse to attack. Sagittus slowed seeing that they had already made it to the rocks. Keeping out of an arrow's range, the Atresians discussed their plan of attack. Spreading out with their bows ready, the five Atresians surrounded the strangers.

"Use your packs to defend yourself against the arrows." Salpingo showed the others by lifting his above his head. The pinging of arrows was heard around them. Erin huddled in between Deavon and Mike for protection. Tony looked out between the rocks. The assassins slowly advanced upon the children who were being shielded by the stones. With each step closer, another arrow was sent in the children's direction.

Necrosis couldn't wait any longer. The demon wanted to use the Atresians' weapons by simply taking their spent arrows and spearing his victims after he had taken their lives. In that way, Necrosis could end his exile from the Castle of Darkness and allow Talus to obtain the

glory. The demon spied three of the strangers huddled together. Necrosis then rose in the sky like a hawk planning to swoop down on his prey. Descending at a speed faster than the eye could see, he was met by a force with such impact that the earth shook around those below him. The phenomenon resulted in a flash of lightening followed by thunder to those shaken by the impact. Before Necrosis, sword raised, was Acromion, a Guardian of Light.

"How dare you interfere with Solus!" challenged Necrosis as he drew his sword to slay the interloper.

The Guardian of Light lifted his shield in defense. The sky darkened as more lightning appeared in the sky.

Those engaged in battle were too involved to take notice of the storm raging above them. The arrows had stopped. Salpingo instructed the others to be ready. A renewed attack was imminent. Tony readied himself. Corpus, seeing the boy from Argentina, drew his sword to slay him. Aphasia followed Corpus along the line of rocks ready to assist if needed. Salpingo had slipped around the other side of the rock formation; there he had Sagittus in view. The guide, deciding to jump Lacunae's bodyguard from above, climbed the boulder that separated him from his attacker. Teller saw Serosa as he approached the stone defense but Cephalon, who was following the same path, disappeared from view.

Tony jumped out of the way of the blade that swung toward him. Bouncing from rock to rock as he split his attackers. Corpus tried again to wound the boy but his sword was met by Tony's blade, which rode up to Corpus' hilt, eventually catching the Atresian in the neck. Aphasia, seeing Tony had turned his back to him, held his sword with both hands to cut the boy down. Tony whipped around knocking Aphasia off balance as the impact of their blades clashed. Corpus, more surprised than hurt, attacked again only to have Tony duck under his weapon while at the same time cutting him at the knee. Using his foot, Tony kicked the Atresian's wounded leg, forcing him to collapse. Aphasia, regaining his balance, tried again to injure the foster child. Tony circled his blade around Aphasia's sword until the Atresian lost the handle. Turning back toward Corpus, Tony put his blade to the Atresian's throat. Having Corpus at his mercy, he instructed Aphasia, "Leave your weapon and take him

away.” Aphasia looked at Corpus, who nodded his approval while letting go of his sword. Tony grabbed the steel and stepped back to allow Aphasia to help his friend. The wounded Atresian grabbed Aphasia’s arm while they stumbled in retreat.

Salpingo reached the top of the boulder only to lose his footing. Falling in front of Sagittus, the Atresian laughed as Salpingo grabbed his spear. Having a sword, the former bodyguard of Lacunae slowly led Salpingo into a trap. Now pinned between two rocks, Teller’s guide had nowhere to go. Salpingo kept the Atresian at bay using his weapon, but the moment quickly passed as Sagittus picked up an arrow from the ground. Reaching for his bow, Lacunae’s bodyguard smiled as he took aim. Salpingo threw his spear in the Atresian’s direction. Using his bow, Sagittus deflected the Glean’s weapon. Laughing once more, the bodyguard took aim once more as he pulled back the string on his bow. Just as he was about to release the arrow, Tony’s sword hit its mark. From behind, Tony pulled the blade from the back of Sagittus as the Atresian slumped to the ground. Salpingo nodded as he grabbed the spear once more and ran toward Teller. Tony rushed to help the others.

When Tony got there, his worst fear was realized. Cephalon was standing over the three. Deavon had two rocks in his hand trying his best to copy what Tony had done earlier at the prison. His efforts failed as Cephalon stabbed the boy in the chest. Quickly Deavon fell, leaving Mike and Erin to the mercy of their attacker.

Tony jumped over the rocks using extraordinary agility. Before Cephalon could wound another, Tony blocked his path. Their swords met. The sound echoed throughout the rocks. Mike and Erin huddled together and covered their ears in response to the piercing sound. Cephalon was stronger and a foot taller, but Tony used fluid movement to counteract his attacks. After many clashing blows, the Argentinean finally saw an opportunity. Twisting around Cephalon’s sword, he swung his blade above his attacker’s leg, catching him in the ribs. Cephalon clutched at his right side as he continued to battle. Tony switched hands, leading with his left, to keep the Atresian off balance. Cephalon lunged at the boy exposing himself to a fatal blow. Tony, using both hands, pushed his blade through the attacker’s body. The battle was over.

Mike ran over to Deavon. "You idiot, why did you do that!" She bent down to grab him hoping that he was not as hurt as he appeared to be. In that moment a wave of nausea pulsed through her body. She wanted to let go of Deavon but found she could not. As she wretched, moments passed. Slowly the wound vanished, allowing the child she was holding to breathe normally. The girl from China released herself from Deavon's body. To her relief, the nausea and ill feeling faded.

Erin touched Mike as she handed her a drink of water. "You saved his life."

"Wow, who'd have thought ..." Tony stood over her amazed at what he saw.

"Shut up jerk," Mike's tone returned. "He was faking that's all."

Deavon slowly sat up, supporting himself with his right arm. "What happened? All I remember was being stabbed, losing my breath, and then waking up."

"Do you want to know what happened?" Mike asked now annoyed, "Okay genius, you decided that you were another Kung Fu wha-cha-ma-call-it." Oh please ... You didn't even deflect the first blow."

Mike then pointed at Deavon's chest. "The sword went in here and out there." Just as the girl from China started to explain what happened, she then realized how hurt he really was. More softly and slowly she continued, "You were just gurgling, laying there on the ground."

"Teller," Tony interrupted that moment realizing the war had not been won.

"I am fine," Teller answered as he came into view with Salpingo tailing behind. "My attacker, being outnumbered, left with the others."

The moment had passed. There was no time for celebrating knowing they were not safe. While Teller and the children gathered their things, Salpingo collected the weapons left behind. Again the strangers, with their guide, set their sights on Ganglion. By nightfall they hoped their nightmare would be over.

# GANGLION

Serosa knew better than to return defeated. After talking to the surviving Atresians, he continued on to Ganglion. Aphasia would help Corpus return to Cornea. The news of the stranger's ability would not please the emperor. Serosa knew to defeat this enemy he would have to separate Tony from the others. He needed a plan and his horse offered no help. Being in a strange land presented Serosa with another problem; who could he find to support his cause? To succeed he would have to use deception. If Serosa could gain the children's trust, he could then use it against them. As Serosa traveled to the village, he had time to think of how to accomplish his task.

"Mike, you discovered your gift!" Tony seemed to be more excited than she was.

"Let it go," snapped Mike.

"Why," questioned Tony. "You saved Deavon's life."

"I didn't ask for this. I don't want it."

"Come on Mike, it's awesome," said an impressed Tony.

"Oh yeah, well if it's so awesome, why don't we trade?" exclaimed Mike.

"I am afraid that would be impossible." Teller joined the conversation. "The One has given you each a gift for a reason. When you discover the meaning behind your chosen ability, then your true gift will be known."

Deavon tapped Teller on the arm. "When do I get my gift?"

"When it's your time," said Teller. "That is between you and The One."

Deavon fell back having no desire to continue the discussion.

"Gift or no gift, I like you just as you are," said Erin.

Deavon looked down and smiled. "Thanks, Erin."

The sun was setting when they reached their destination. Ganglion was a large town with a common. The people had gathered there hearing that Teller was entering the village. Cheers erupted as the children with Teller approached the square.

Teller stood on a makeshift pedestal to address the crowd. "Brothers and sisters of Galea," Teller extended his hand toward the children who accompanied him. "Behold the four sent by God to help us in our need."

The Galeans shouted praises to Teller and to The One.

The four were surprised by the villager's response, even more by Teller's announcement. Reality was sinking in; the Galeans were at war, and they were in the middle of it. Their world was now farther away than they had imagined with little hope of returning. As the people rejoiced, the four felt the sadness within tempering their mood. They were not the heroes Teller proclaimed them to be, only kids wanting to go home.

After days of being cold and hungry, they finally had warm beds and the security of the town to protect them. Erin looked at Mike who was sleeping in the bed next to her. "Why don't you like your gift?"

Mike looked up at the ceiling. "I got sick. I felt as if my insides were coming out of me. It was awful. I never want to feel that way again."

"But you saved Deavon's life." Erin was still astonished by the result of Mike's action.

"I know, but that was before I knew what it would feel like. I don't think I could do it again." Mike hoped she would never be put in the position to decide between herself and another's life.

"Oh," said Erin feeling sadness for her sister being given a gift she hated.

Tony stayed with Deavon and Teller. Having time to pause, he wanted answers. "Teller, when do we get to go home? We are going home, right?"

The old man sat on the Tony's bed. "I cannot answer when or how. The only thing I do know is that The One is involved in your being here, so you will have your answer."

Tony was unconvinced. "Why can't we just go home?"

The leader of Galea looked at the young man. "Because you need to fulfill your destiny."

Tony got out of bed. "Destiny? I've killed two people, Deavon almost died, and we have an emperor that wants us dead? What kind of destiny do you think we have?"

Teller remained seated. "The Darkness seeks to destroy Celestia and The One. You are the only people capable of preventing this from happening."

Deavon sat up. "Why us?"

Teller responded, "I do not know but the gifts I have witnessed have proven that you are the chosen ones."

Tony got back in bed, surrendering to his fate for the moment. The old man patted him on the shoulder as he went into the other room to see Salpingo.

Deavon looked at Tony. "We are going to get home, aren't we?"

Tony didn't answer. There was nothing to say.

Acting like one of the crowd, Serosa cheered as Teller spoke. He looked around seeing nothing but faces filled with joy. This troubled the Atresian who hoped to find someone like-minded. As the rally ended, Serosa found an inn. Ganglion was not a likely destination for travelers. The establishment was the only place within the town where the Atresian could lodge. Asking for a meal and some wine, Serosa noticed the waitress hung around a moment longer than one normally would. She began wiping the table when he noticed a blackened nail on the ring finger. Serosa nodded as he displayed his onyx ring to her as he reached for his goblet. The recognition was immediate.

The maiden spoke as she served the Atresian, "Are you here to see the strangers?"

Serosa replied as he sipped his wine, "Yes, I have been following them from Cornea."

The waitress filled his glass again to buy time. "I see, and how can I assist our master?"

The conversation turned cryptic, but the message was clear. Serosa needed help, and she was able to provide it. Serosa was impressed that Solus had people everywhere, even in the mountains of Galea. It would take a couple of days, but Serosa would have the assistance he needed. His next goal would be to gain the trust of his enemy. How and whom to approach would occupy his time as he waited. As he lay in bed he thought of the boy who fought like Radius, a legendary warrior in Atresia's past. All night he kept wondering how one could defeat a legend thought to be a god.

Though Necrosis had been stopped, he remained undaunted. He had been taken by surprise. The next time Acromion would not be as lucky.

The right hand of Solus reflected on the moment cursing The Guardian of Light's intrusion. The four were defenseless; each one of the humans were easy prey along with Teller, the old man who led them. All Necrosis had to do was reach out with his hand and bury his claws into their hearts.

At that moment, he felt the impact. Spinning away from his target, Necrosis braced himself to attack the being that thwarted him. Raising his sword, he lashed out at Acromion who deflected the blow with his shield. Having propelled himself in a forward motion, Necrosis twisted quickly onto his back to block The Guardian of Light's counter attack. The two danced above the human conflict in a choreographed ballet of death. The defeated would meet a fate of nonexistence. Neither could gain the upper hand since they were equal in strength and stature. Necrosis relented after seeing his human combatants falter in the battle below. He turned away from his battle with Acromion and followed Serosa to Ganglion where he arranged the meeting with the maid at the inn.

Necrosis hated incompetence more than he hated humans. The only satisfaction he had was that Sagittus would pay for his failure when he met Solus. Now Necrosis was forced to stay in the world longer than he desired. At least in Serosa, Necrosis saw potential. The Atresian's guile earned him a second chance. As for Corpus and Aphasia who failed against a boy with a sword, their bodies were left for the crows where Necrosis had killed them.

The morning offered new hope to the four strangers allowing them to feel safe for the first time a week. Pollex, the leader of the town, escorted them around the village as they sampled the local wares. Tony was given a new sword and a shield, and Erin received a porcelain doll. Deavon, after seeing the hunters at work, was given a bow while Mike was given a necklace of colored stones resembling rubies. The cold seemed to fade away as they walked in the sunshine.

The scene changed quickly as a distraught mother approached Teller. She was holding a baby, limp and lifeless. "Please save my child. He's been ill for days and now I fear I have lost him."

The guards started to pull her away when Teller motioned to have her approach. "I have no say in the fate of your child. This is up to The One. I



will pray on your behalf and hope that an opportunity will open for your child to regain his health."

Teller looked at Mike but said nothing. The woman started to walk away, carrying the baby in her arms, when Mike told her to stop. As she took the child Mike looked at the distraught mother. "I will help you."

Once the baby was in her arms, the convulsions began. She fought to keep the child from falling as the waves of nausea coursed throughout her body. Finally, the moment passed. The child started to cry for his mother. The fever was gone. The baby's health returned. The townspeople who witnessed the event were stunned to silence. The mother thanked Mike for her gift as she began to walk away with her child. The strangers in turn proceeded to travel in the opposite direction back to Pollex's house.

As they walked, the clamor for Mike to heal others started. Soon the children's pace quickened as more people pushed toward the girl from China. Tony felt compelled to shelter her from the onslaught of requests. Each person became more desperate as the children got closer to the mayor's house. As the door shut behind them, the cries from those who followed could still be heard.

"Way to go, Mike! Oh, a baby! Let me save it!" Deavon berated the girl from China while Tony stood in silence.

Teller entered the room hearing the commotion. "That is enough!" The children looked in shock at the Leader of Galea, who never used that tone of voice before. Deavon cowered as he walked away from Mike.

Teller looked at the girl from China. "What you did was commendable, and no one should make you feel less for doing so."

The girls walked into the kitchen where lunch was being served. Teller continued, "She is your sister. You need to care for one another."

Deavon recoiled, "No, she's not. She never liked me from the first day I arrived at her house. I have no family, remember?"

Teller pulled up a chair and sat down and then encouraged the young man to sit beside him. "You're right, that was true, but all that changed when you entered this world. Here, all you have are each other. I have no idea what you have experienced in the past or the wonders of the world from which you come. No one here can share that with you. This experience bonds you

and if The One is gracious enough to have you return, with whom will you share this experience? Would it have been better if Mike allowed the child to die in her mother's arms?"

Deavon, now sitting in a chair in front of Teller, replied feeling chastised. "No."

"The people who follow us are desperate and need more than Mike can offer," continued Teller. He then turned toward Tony. "Why did you not step in and defend your sister?"

"I didn't want Deavon yelling at me," Tony said sheepishly.

The old man looked perplexed. "You didn't want Deavon to yell at you?"

"You handled it; why are you picking on me?" Tony answered defensively.

Teller got up. Putting his hands on Tony's shoulders, he looked the boy in the eyes. "The One has chosen you to protect this family. Even against each other, you cannot be afraid to offend if what you believe is right."

Tony joined Deavon in their walk to the kitchen. Teller continued to the door so he could confront the mob that was forming outside. Opening the door, The Leader of Galea stood alone to speak to those clamoring for the girl from China.

"My children, let us be thankful for the gift The One has given us. This girl has come not to save us from our miseries but from The Darkness that seeks to destroy us. If we keep her from her destiny, all will suffer because of it. I ask now for you to go home and let this child be at peace."

The crowd started to disperse though a few stayed behind. Teller then turned back into the house. "We will not be able to stay in Ganglion."

Their guide spoke, "Salpingo knows a place where we can go."

The Leader of Galea nodded. "Good, we will leave tomorrow."

Serosa heard about the miracle, which disturbed but also inspired him. The Atresian knew that these strangers were getting stronger and finding powers beyond that of this world. He would have to kill them soon. He went back to the inn where he found the maiden he met earlier. "I need help tonight. I have a plan but I must implement it quickly." The two discussed in detail the events that needed to unfold, including Serosa's need to change his appearance before the next day.

High above, Solus watched the events develop below him and knew what the Atresian had in mind; The Master of Darkness admired Serosa's resourcefulness and proceeded to send demons to influence the afflicted of Ganglion. Soon those who were sent away questioned why Teller excluded them. The crowd began to form again outside Pollex's home, angered by the perception that Solus had given them. Teller approached the people once more, but those wanting the girl from China would not be appeased.

There was a look of concern on Teller's face when he returned. "The Darkness has influenced their minds. I am afraid leaving will become more difficult. I do not want to harm these people who already know suffering. My dear Pollex, could you arrange safe passage from this place?"

The host replied, "It will take time, but I will try."

Teller spoke to the rest of those in the room, "For now we must remain patient. If we give into our fears and allow Solus to misguide us, we will fail."

Tony grabbed his sword and readied himself for battle.

"That will not be necessary," said Teller quietly placing a calming hand on Tony's arm.

Tony looked at the leader of Galea as he lowered his weapon. "Isn't this what I was chosen to do?"

Teller shook his head. "You were given the gift of protection, not violence. It is easier to kill those who disagree than to find understanding with them. The One chose you because you are a man of peace. Once you choose to kill, you will no longer be the same. Every choice we make changes who we are for the better or for worse, so we must think before acting on our choices."

"But what if they come charging in here?" queried Tony.

The old man patted Tony on the back. "Then we will have a decision to make."

Talus received the letter from Flavin regarding his concern in Capnia. The rumors of Talus abandoning Atresia to become an emperor did not sit well with the people of Atresia. His chancellor urgently wanted Talus to return to dissuade those who were thinking of opposing him. Flavin was a man of words and scripted each line to draw Talus in.

“Your Highness, even if it were for a few days to reassure those who defend you against the nonbelievers.”

Lacunae never liked him. She always felt that Flavin had another agenda beyond serving her king. Now this chancellor implored Talus to return to quell the fears of his people. This was nonsense. His duty to Solus was more important than answering to those who served him. Lacunae accused Flavin of incompetence and felt Talus needed to replace him with someone less tolerant of dissidents. The emperor, and still King of Atresia, felt obligated to his people. Talus reassured his wife that a return would be good for all concerned. He had been gone too long and needed to address his people on his success. The discussion ended with the servants packing for their departure the next day.

An armed detachment left with the emperor’s entourage. Talus only agreed to that because of Lacunae’s insistence. As the day of travel ended, the emperor felt his influence in Galea. The farmers and shepherds who saw him bowed in reverence. The queen was not as impressed knowing that these were the same people who freed the strangers now threatening Solus. By nightfall they were on the border of Atresia.

Talus snuggled with Lacunae by the fire. “See, there is nothing to worry about. Tomorrow we’ll be in Atresia and soon we will hear the cheers of our people.”

Lacunae pressed herself into her husband. “Have you forgotten what Solus said about those you trust plotting against you?”

Talus bristled at the thought. “No.” He couldn’t imagine anyone in his court betraying him.

The mystic stroked his hair as she whispered in his ear, “That is why you have me.”

Incus readied the Atresians who joined his cause to eliminate Talus. A hundred of the best soldiers were found but not without difficulty. Talus was still popular among the warriors who fought beside him at Teres. Each one had to be tested without revealing the true nature of their mission. Incus was hoping to attack the caravan heading to Capnia while the king remained deep in Galea, but finding those who would follow him took time. Now with the break of day, the moment had arrived. The general spoke solemnly.

"Many will think that we are committing treason, but I say that Talus has betrayed us. He no longer thinks of himself as an Atresian but as an emperor of all nations. Where is his loyalty? He seeks to kill children and he desires to lead us to our death by entering a world beyond our own. He has killed our own for believing in a god he despises. Does this sound like a son of Clavius or a mad man being led by ghosts? We may leave here and never return home, but someday the truth will see us for what we are: Atresians!"

The hundred responded by clapping their swords against their armor. The sun rose from the east as they mounted. By noon, Atresia would no longer have a king.

As Talus began to assemble the caravan he saw the billowing sand, kicked up by horses, coming toward them. The soldiers rallied preparing for the assault. Talus assigned guards to protect the queen while he headed to join his soldiers. The king knew that the situation was dire being outnumbered ten to one, and those attacking were on horseback. "Arrows ready!" Talus drew his bow. His only hope was to see the traitor leading the attack and strike him down before his own death. Behind him, and moving through the camp, was a cloud of black dust. Talus felt cold as the darkness passed by him. Soon the cloud grew in size as it engulfed the attackers. Moments passed as the dust covered all that was visible to Talus and the guards who stood by him. When the cloud dissipated, all that were charging toward Talus were dead. The soldiers, along with the horses, were half covered by dirt kicked up by the wind in the cloud. Talus lowered his bow in astonishment. Slowly, the Atresian guards fell in behind their king as they inspected the remains. There, among the corpses, was Incus, the leader of the attack. Talus yelled as he took his sword and drove it into the general's body. Turning around he looked at Lacunae; she was right again. He no longer felt he could trust himself or anyone else but her.

As the sun faded, the crowd grew angrier. One person even pounded on the door demanding the girl. Pollex had not yet returned, which meant he had not obtained the help needed to quell the mob. The occupants within the abode knew they were on their own. Tony kept his sword nearby. Salpingo did the same with his spear. Teller remained unfazed by the events unfolding outside. While others relied on their strength, he relied on his god.

Mike was torn between allowing this ordeal to continue or hide away with Erin in the other room. Finally having heard enough of the cries and demands, she approached Teller. "All right, I'll do it!"

The old man looked at the girl from China. "My child, this is not about you or what you did earlier today. This is about their inability to trust in The One. Whether their misery was born of innocence, like the child you spared, or brought by their own hand, all are under the care of God. Nothing in life is guaranteed or fair. Since we were given freewill all is possible, even the worst of possibilities. Only when we enter Celestia can The One resolve the wrong in our lives and grant us peace. Until then, those who are miserable long for something they cannot obtain.

"The emptiness they feel is not a result of their corrupted bodies but their lack of faith. If they knew that life was temporary, they would react differently. Instead, they cry for you to take away their afflictions. Even if you cured them, most would walk away as miserable as they were when they were sick. For their lives will not improve by a miracle but by their attitude," enlightened Teller.

The Leader of Galea continued to explain further by providing her with the truth of the moment. "Mike, if you choose to go outside to appease those calling for you, you will soon be overwhelmed. With each person healed, the greater the resentment of those you did not. Soon you would be torn apart by those wanting more than you could give."

She knew Teller was right as she returned to the room where Erin stayed. She felt sad, not only for herself but also for those who called her name.

# SEROSA

Neither expected a tap on the window. Erin gasped; Mike screamed. Deavon yelled “They’re coming!” as he fumbled for his weapon. Having a sword and a spear respectively, Tony and Salpingo led the way. Tony pushed the door open to find the girls alone. Lowering his sword, Tony noticed a man peering through the window. Serosa motioned for the foster child to open it. Teller nodded as Tony pushed the pane out toward the stranger.

The man leaned in so everyone could hear him above the pleas and cries from the mob.

“My name is Serosa. I am here to help, but time is short.”

The guide sniffed the air. “Salpingo smell an Atresian.”

“Yes, I am. After the persecution, I settled in these mountains. The people around here are planning to attack and soon. They are growing impatient by the hour.”

Teller looked at the man in the window. “How do I know you are of The One?”

Serosa thought quickly. “My brother gave his life to save mine when Talus ordered the execution of all who followed The One. My family and I settled in Eccrine, just north of here. When I heard you were here in Ganglion, I gathered my brethren from Atresia. We came here to offer protection to the strangers that Talus now hunts. Our hope was to assist you in defeating the man who calls himself my king. I never thought I would be helping you escape your own people.”

Teller ordered everyone to grab his or her belongings knowing that Serosa was correct about the impending attack. Tony exited first in case the others were spotted trying to escape. Salpingo, being the last to leave, threw Tony his pack. Just as the children were about to mount the horses, a member of the throng calling for Mike yelled to others who were afflicted, “She’s running away! Stop her!” The unexpected then occurred; twenty men came out of nowhere armed and ready for battle.

The crowd paused as the children pulled on their horse's reins and trotted into the night.

"Where did they come from?" Deavon looked at Serosa.

"They are fellow Atresians who seek to overthrow Talus. They will catch up with us later." The children slowly guided their horses through the night as they followed Serosa. Though the others began to feel at ease, Salpingo remained guarded.

"Thank you for sparing us from a horrible dilemma. To harm those already in pain would have been disturbing to those inflicting it." Teller looked at Tony as he spoke.

The Atresian replied. "Let's say we have a mutual interest in seeing Talus fail."

The camp was already set for them when Teller and the children arrived. A fire was blazing to provide warmth to the chilled on horseback. The strangers dismounted feeling exhausted from the stress that occurred earlier. After enjoying a hot meal, the children retired to sleep.

Teller approached Serosa. "Thank you again for your help, but in the morning we will need to go our separate ways."

The Atresian looked puzzled. "Why? We desire the same thing, which is the children's well-being. After seeing the girl's ability, how could I not join you in fulfilling their destiny?"

Teller knew it was not the time to continue this discourse. Teller and the children were under the care of the Atresian, which meant they were under the Serosa's control. The leader of Galea would allow them to follow until Arye. Once there, he could dissuade their benefactor to head home.

Salpingo remained seated as Teller returned. "They want to remain with us for the duration."

The guide shook his head. "Salpingo not happy. Salpingo not convinced they are of The One."

"I know, my friend, so let us remain cautious until Arye."

Salpingo smiled as he nodded with approval, "Arye."

Meanwhile, Serosa met with the others who followed the strangers out of town. Cleido spoke for the men who gathered. "Kill them. Why are you waiting?"



Serosa looked at the supposed leader of the gang. "Because you'd be dead in five minutes." Then looking at the others. "And you would be dead in ten."

Then Cleido smiled skeptically seeing the children.

Serosa explained, "The girl healed a baby before my eyes. Has anyone done that before?"

The men shook their heads.

"No? Well the one they call Tony fights with the same ability. In order to kill him we need to set a trap. If you don't believe me, then try to kill him now, but take fifty of your best men to do so."

Cleido laughed being convinced that Serosa was a coward. "We'll see how much truth there is in your words tomorrow."

Serosa did manage to convince them of one thing, to separate Tony from the rest before seeing to his demise.

The next morning the children began the routine they were hoping to forget. Once again they found themselves huddled near a fire before being forced to leave it.

Erin looked at Tony. "I want to go home."

Tony nodded in agreement, "Me too."

"Do you think Teller is being honest with us?" asked Mike.

Tony looked at the girl from China. "What do you mean?"

"Well, what if we could go home but he won't tell us until we stop this Solus?" asked Mike.

Deavon tapped Tony on the arm. "Okay, let's say that's true. Who do we trust, huh?"

Tony responded, "I don't know, maybe us."

Deavon replied, "Oh yeah, like I see us creating some wormhole in the fabric of time."

Mike turned toward her foster brother, ignoring the person she healed. "Tony what do you think?"

Tony thought for a minute before answering, "If we can find a way home without these people, I am all for it. Teller, Talus, Solus—what are they to us?"

Erin spoke last but captured the attention of them all, "What if we stop playing the game?"

“Boy! Come here!” yelled Cleido from across the camp looking in Tony’s direction.

Salpingo grabbed a knife he had hidden in anticipation of any trouble. Teller held him back seeing that the guide’s threat of violence would only get the children killed.

“Do you like horses, boy?” asked Cleido.

“No, not really,” replied Tony.

The leader of the Atresian camp laughed. “So, you’d rather walk?”

Tony shrugged his shoulders not knowing what to say.

Cleido continued, “Your horse took lame; we found another, but it may need a little persuasion.”

The men, who gathered around Tony, chuckled knowing that the stallion was wild and needed to be broken. The horse, being controlled by two men, still managed to buck and pull from them.

Salpingo looked at Teller for approval. The guide wanted to stop the farce before the child got hurt.

Teller paused, “He knows?”

“Salpingo prepared him,” he nodded.

“Then let him be,” cautioned Teller.

Tony carefully mounted the stead. Having a saddle made of hide and reins made of hemp, the boy was left to his own devices. The horse was freed by the men but not before the stallion got a good kick at one of the Atresian’s head.

Most would have been thrown. Even those with experience would have failed several times, but Tony exceeded all expectations. Not only did he manage to hang on, but skillfully started to guide the steed into submission. The horse then bolted leaving the men and the camp in its wake. Tony tried to slow the animal but nothing worked. The Atresians mounted their horses and gave chase to Tony who was now yelling for help as he sped away.

Teller looked at his guide. “Run.”

Salpingo sought cover in the nearby wood. In the commotion, no one but Teller saw him leave.

Serosa looked over to see the children and Teller standing trying to see Tony, but all they saw was a cloud of dust. Cleido began to gain on the

boy as the stallion Tony rode grew weary. He did not see the Atresian aim and fire. The arrow hit its mark as the Argentinean fell, blood pouring from his back where the arrow entered. The Atresian laughed at his fallen victim. "Some warrior you turned out to be." Pulling on the reins, Cleido headed back leaving the corpse for the dogs.

The crowd that had gathered cheered as Talus entered Capnia. He was home, feeling the love of his people. Flavin looked surprised as he saw the king riding toward the castle. Having no idea what had happened, he calmly prepared himself and met the royal couple as they entered.

"Flavin," Talus sounded joyful. "I received your message and here I am to put your mind at ease."

Lacunae looked at the chancellor with suspicion, knowing that Incus did not act alone. In addressing Flavin, her tone was darker, "There is a traitor among us. Do you know who would have wished to see the king dead?"

Flavin looked at the queen. "No, Your Highness. There have been rumors of dissent, but no one would dare raise a hand against our lord."

"Rumors? Surely you could name these gossips?" questioned the queen.

Talus looked at Lacunae but did not say a word.

"Your Highness, there are many with ears and even more with tongues. To gather them all would bring about another purge," refuted Flavin.

"Then gather a dozen or so of the more prominent ones so I may discuss their concerns," commanded the queen.

Flavin wanted to buy time to prepare and to choose the twelve or so for her interrogation, "I will do so as quickly as possible, possibly tomorrow."

The queen smiled and then replied, "I want them here tonight, and you'll be there too, won't you?"

Flavin felt the noose around his neck but gave no indication of it. "Yes, Your Highness. I think reassuring those who have questioned our king would be a good thing for Atresia."

Lacunae took the hand of Talus as she led him away. Before leaving the room, she made sure that the chancellor knew he was included in her inquisition. "Yes, that is true but I feel you need to be reassured as well."

Flavin saw them disappear with the servants to their chamber. His mouth was dry from suppressing his fear; the chancellor entered the room

adjacent to the throne. "Chordea?" There was no answer. Flavin spoke a little louder, "Chordea?"

After another pause, the ambassador answered, "Is it safe to talk?"

Flavin replied, "Yes, for only a minute or two."

"What happened?" questioned Chordea

Flavin, trying to moisten his mouth, grabbed a glass of water and sipped before speaking. "I don't know but Lacunae is on the hunt. She suspects someone but is keeping it to herself."

Chordea was still in shock over Talus' arrival. "What happened to Incus?"

Flavin looked out the window as he continued to drink the water. "I don't know but we need to find out before we meet with Lacunae."

Chordea sounded less than enthusiastic as he replied, "We?"

"Those involved must attend and show a united front so she'll suspect the others I bring to her," explained Flavin.

The Ambassador of Lateralis smiled seeing the brilliance in his plan. "So as the others who attend accuse each other, we will join in the attack while expounding each other's innocence."

"Flavin smiled. "Exactly."

The news of Incus' attack on Talus spread throughout Capnia. Outnumbered, Talus lost no one in battle, yet all the traitors who opposed him perished. The king's reputation grew, along with the story, as it was passed along. Flavin now knew the fate of Incus but was dubious of the talk about a black cloud. Still, Talus was alive. The assassination failed.

In the meantime, the chancellor had to find eight more people to meet with the queen. Time was short; Lacunae wanted to clear the air before Talus' celebration. Flavin had already prepared his coconspirators: Lord Medius, Chordea, and Soma, the leading shipping importer. The hope would be to create enough suspicion for the queen to act allowing them to escape and to see how far Lacunae would go to quell the dissent among those in attendance.

As the sun fell slowly from the sky, the twelve gathered to meet with the queen. It was a solemn moment since nothing good would result from it. All wondered who would pay the price for their transgression. The twelve remained silent as they were given seats in the room adjacent to the throne. Even Flavin was told to sit among the others in question.

In their chambers, Talus looked at Lacunae as she prepared to leave. "You don't think Flavin is guilty of treason do you?" asked Talus.

The queen looked at her king and smiled. "All I know is Solus saved you from a fate arranged by those in Capnia. Flavin is man of self-interest. Chordea is a follower of the wind, and the nobility desire the throne. I am going to use them to obtain the truth." Lacunae gave Talus a hug. "By tonight you will be safe."

The king nodded in acceptance. "I will ready myself to address the Atresians and the court. By tomorrow night, we will have established once more the strength of our crown."

The queen smiled at Talus as she left but when the door shut, her mood changed. Lacunae seethed with anger. Somewhere in that room adjacent from the throne sat a traitor who desired to see Talus dead, and she was about to prevent another attempt on her husband's life.

Lacunae opened the door to find all waiting anxiously for her. She took a quick inventory of the people sitting in front of her: Lord Medius, Chordea, Callus, Vomer, Qalus, Leio, Protease, Malleus, Soma, Cori, and the Lord and Lady of Taenia.

Flavin stood to address the queen, "Your Highness, as you requested, the Atresians you wanted to reassure."

The queen walked around the table assessing each one as she passed by them. She then stopped and looked at the chancellor. "Thank you."

Lacunae sat down at the head of the table and addressed them.

"Our king was attacked the other day by Incus, the general in charge of securing our capital from harm. He did not act individually but was part of a coordinated effort by people who seek the throne. You are here because of your lack of faith in Solus. Those who don't trust in Atresia's god are most likely to take matters in their own hands. This makes you all suspect in my eyes and a threat to Talus."

She then looked at Lord Medius. "Tell me what have you heard and what has concerned you about our king?"

The Governor of Ulnaris looked at the queen feeling confident in Flavin's plan. "Your Highness, what I have heard was disturbing, but I am confident that you will assure me that the rumors are exaggerated." The

noble paused as he waited for the queen to motion for him to continue. "What I have heard from many sources is that Talus now calls himself an emperor, forsaking Atresia and those loyal to his cause in Capnia. That he has pursued the folly of conquering a place called Celestia where he hopes to destroy the god of the people he purged."

Lacunae smiled at the Lord's succinctness. "Yes, Talus now calls himself an emperor to unite the world he has conquered. Since he is an Atresian by blood, he remains king and loyal to his country. As far as the folly that you speak of, it is the desire of Solus and a concern between the king and our god. If you feel a need to talk further, I would wonder whether any assurance would be enough for you."

The Lord of Ulnaris thanked the queen and promptly became silent.

Lacunae looked at the four gentlemen sitting together. "I see there that commerce is well represented. Does Medius speak for you, or do you have something to offer?"

Soma, Qalus, Vomer, and Callus all looked at each other. Finally, Soma spoke, "I was concerned about our king. If he were to abandon Atresia for the sake of ruling all, it would be bad for business. But if Talus were to die, it would be worse." The others agreed.

Lacunae looked at the merchants with disdain knowing that their loyalty was only as deep as their profits.

"I see that there are thinkers among us as well. Why would that be? Could you explain why Flavin invited you?" queried Lacunae.

Leio and Protease nervously shifted in their seats.

Then Cori, the captain of the guard, spoke to the relief of the others, "Our king has talked about things that are difficult to understand. This Solus, who Talus claims to be our god, is new to me. I was not raised to believe in him so I find it hard to worship someone I do not know. I have also found it hard to accept the war with Galea, and the one with Calyx, but still I am loyal to the throne. It is not my place to lead but to follow."

The queen smiled at the young man and dismissed him from the room. "Our king is not looking for you to blindly follow but to simply trust that he is doing the best for Atresia."

The captain thanked the queen and left.

Malleus, the treasurer and Atresia's tax collector, stood up. "Your Highness, I am innocent. I don't understand why I should be counted among those who are thought to have betrayed the king."

Lacunae leaned over the table. "Sit down before I send you away."

The court attendant sat but continued his defense, "I have heard and seen many things." Pointing toward Chordea he continued, "I know that Chordea and Incus talked on many occasions."

Lord Medius interjected, "So did I. Since he was the leader of the army, wouldn't it have made sense that anyone involved with the throne would have had contact with him?"

Malleus stammered, "Well yes, but I heard him talk of overthrowing the throne." His voice softened as he said it.

Lacunae's eyes widened. "Tell me more."

The tax collector spoke as if his life depended on it, "Well, I heard Talus' name mentioned several times and not in glowing terms."

"Is that true, Chordea?" asked the queen.

"Yes, but let me explain," Chordea looked over at Malleus who remained cowering.

The queen sat back in her chair.

"Incus wanted me to help him overthrow the crown. I played along while reporting to Flavin. Our king was sent a dispatch when Lord Medius discovered a deeper threat to the crown," continued Chordea.

Flavin looked at the queen. "Incus was not a threat in himself simply because he had no authority to take the crown. It was only when we discovered a true threat existed that our king needed to return to deal with it. Still there were no facts but only rumors."

Lord Medius chimed in as if on cue, "I discovered the connection after Flavin enlisted my help. Still having no proof, I did not want to act until Talus returned."

Lacunae was peaked with curiosity. "And of what did this rumor consist of?" The Governor of Ulnaris looked at the couple across the table. "That the nobility in Taenia were prepared to take the throne upon the death of Talus."

The lord and lady refuted Lord Medius' accusations, but soon others joined the attack in order to save themselves.

"I heard Sura mention on more than one occasion that Talus was not fit to rule," said Soma looking at Flavin after making the statement.

Qalus pointed toward the nobles in question. "The Lord of Taenia himself was opposed to the purge since the beginning, maybe because he truly believes in The One."

The Lord of Taenia stood up and stared across the table at the merchants. "That's a lie!"

The queen looked at the lord and lady. "And what can you say to prove your innocence?"

The middle-aged gentleman sat back down to compose himself. "My Queen, wasn't it our family that attended your wedding? If it were our desire to take the throne, would we have attended? Instead, we gave you our blessing and our loyalty."

Chordea then delivered the crushing blow. "Funny, many, including me, heard you ridicule the married couple at that very wedding."

The lord and lady protested, but the damage was done. Without Incus, there was no way of disproving that the nobles from Taenia were involved in the conspiracy. Lacunae called in the guards and had the couple escorted out of the room. As they were pulled away screaming their innocence, Lacunae addressed the rest who remained seated. "I am not convinced that all who are here are not in some way culpable, but I am pleased for now." Then the queen stood up. "The next time any of you enter this room you will meet the same fate."

The warning clearly was heeded by all, including Flavin who masterminded the event. There would be no more attempts on Talus' life, at least overtly. The others left feeling less secure about their dissent of the king and queen.

Lacunae returned to her chamber where Talus waited. "Did you find the conspirators?"

Lacunae laughed. "No, but I did manage to get my revenge on those who mocked us at our wedding."

"Then why did you go through with the charade?" questioned Talus.

"Because, dear king of mine, whoever attempted to take your life will now think twice before doing so again," explained the queen.



Talus smiled knowing Lacunae was a master of manipulation. "I see."

By the next morning, the news about the Lord and Lady of Taenia spread throughout Capnia. Their example served as a warning to everyone who thought of challenging the king. No one was above reproach. Talus walked out to the balcony where he was met by the cheering masses. The King of Atresia held up his hands to silence the crowd. Talus continued to have the people's support since his coronation. All waited for his presentation. They wanted to see and hear their king.

"My fellow Atresians, I bring great news to you all. Galea is ours! The palace that once held the emperors long ago now houses Cornea's victors. Many have said I have abandoned Atresia to become emperor of our world. Many have said that I no longer serve you as king. Was I not born in this very palace? Am I not Clavius' son? I will never put Atresia's interests behind another's. It was you who helped me create Lateralis. It was you who supported our victory over the people who serve The One."

Talus concluded, "Proclaiming myself as emperor only proves Atresia's supremacy. Everyone who enters my presence sees Atresia's place in the world. Solus has not forgotten your faith, and I will not forget your loyalty. Rejoice and know our destiny will soon be fulfilled!"

The people of Capnia cheered as Talus walked back into the palace. The banquet was next. There, the king would solidify his support. Lacunae embraced her lover. The day was beginning well. Soon they would be back in Cornea to complete the task Solus gave them. The grand hall was prepared with all the elegance and power of Atresia. Lacunae wanted to reinforce the message delivered to the nobility the night before by assigning guards to every door.

Talus welcomed each guest personally; everyone in the room felt the king's presence. The only person missing of significance was Sura, who was arranging her parent's burial. Being stripped of her title, her presence was not needed. The emperor worked the crowd like a politician running for office. Each concern was answered until there were no longer any questions about his devotion to Atresia. The affirmation was complete. All who attended left feeling better about their sovereign. Flavin, Chordea, and Lord Medius knew that the king had won the war of words. All they could do was wait for another opportunity to present itself.

# PEA AND POD

Cleido arrived after all the others had returned. Looking down at Serosa, he announced that the boy was dead.

Serosa looked up at the man who still had a bow in his hand. "Where's the proof?"

"What?" laughed the man being questioned. "My word is not good enough?"

Serosa did not back down. "If you knew who you were dealing with, you would have taken his head."

Cleido dismounted and landed in front of the Serosa. "If you knew who you were dealing with, you would not doubt me again."

Serosa relented. He, like the captives, relied on Cleido's hospitality.

"Now we must decide what to do with the rest." The leader of the gang looked over at the four huddled together. "So who else should we fear among those quaking in their boots?"

Serosa did not appreciate Cleido's remark but replied genuinely. "The guide they call Salpingo could cause us trouble, but the rest are harmless."

Cleido looked around and saw the guide was not among those in camp. "Where is he?"

Serosa looked as well. "He's gone?"

Those who followed Cleido searched the surrounding area.

Serosa walked over to Teller and raised his sword toward him. "Where is he old man?"

Teller did not flinch. "If you were about to be killed, where would you be?"

The Atresian pushed The Leader of Galea aside as he looked through their tents. Serosa yelled across the campsite, "He's not here."

The men who followed Solus continued to hunt for Salpingo with no avail. By midmorning they regrouped to decide their next move. Arye was a day's travel away, so even if Salpingo raced at full speed, the Galeans could not catch them if they traveled toward Cornea. Cleido led his men northwest away from villages leaving Salpingo and Tony behind.

"Is Tony dead?" cried Erin, visibly upset.

Teller looked down at the youngest child. "If he were dead our hope would be lost, and I remain hopeful."

The girl from China looked at Teller. "Where's Salpingo?"

The old man turned to Mike. "I do not know but I believe we will see both before we reach Cornea."

Deavon kept silent. He felt helpless having no gift or ability that could save them from certain death. As he rode, Deavon thought of making a run for it. Maybe if he could divert the warriors away from the girls, Teller could help them escape. The plan was poor but if Tony were dead, it would be up to him to save the rest.

Serosa intruded upon the prisoners. "So Teller, who's in charge now?"

The Leader of Galea did not respond.

"It's okay old man, Solus will deal with you when you die." The Atresian laughed as he rode off to join Cleido.

The stallion that Tony had broken stayed by the boy's side. Nudging Tony with its nose, the horse finally got a response. "Okay, okay. Stop it." Tony removed his jacket and looked at the backside of the coat. "Wow, what a mess. Tony then removed the stone that prevented the arrow from penetrating his body. The boy stretched having lain in the same position for hours. Looking at the horse he asked, "Now what?"

"We rescue our friends from the enemy."

Tony looked at the horse but quickly realized Salpingo was behind him. "Where did you come from?"

"Salpingo knew they would try to kill you and then kill me. I had one stone. I gave it to you. Salpingo had to run," explained the guide.

Tony handed the stone to his guide. "Thank you. What kind of stone is it anyway?"

"Very rare and very old, passed from Salpingo's father to son. Someday it will break. Lucky for me Atresians can't shoot," grinned the Galean. Then Salpingo sniffed the air while picking at the dirt. Pointing west, the guide mounted his horse and tied the other he had for Tony to his saddle. "Tony already have horse?"

The foster child mounted the steed. The horse did not buck. "I guess I have."

The two warriors rode off hoping to catch up to the others by morning.

The day ended with no sign of Tony. Erin sat by the fire feeling sad. Deavon's desired to do something so he fashioned some sticks into little rudimentary horses. The foster child handed the two figures to the youngest child. Erin looked at the sticks. "Doggies?"

Deavon shook his head. "I was hoping to make ponies."

Teller looked at the figurines. "Deavon, close your eyes and imagine what the ponies would look like."

The foster child held the sticks in his hands. Concentrating on the figures he imagined hooves, manes, and tails. He thought of how they would move, prancing around. It was in that moment the sticks came to life. Erin laughed as they jumped around. Deavon looked down at his artwork and smiled. "Erin, meet Pea and Pod."

Teller looked at the foster child. "So, your gift is creation."

Deavon turned toward The Leader of Galea. "Let me get this straight. Tony is a great warrior. Mike can heal anyone she chooses, and me? I'm a freaking Santa Claus." The foster child was not impressed with his ability.

Teller bent down as he watched Erin laugh at the sticks romping around. "Deavon, do not underestimate the power of life."

Mike pulled back as Pea and Pod approached her. "Get them away or I'll throw them in the fire."

Deavon called them. They responded immediately to their creator's voice, "Play with Erin." The sticks began to jump around to the youngest child's delight. Deavon could not help but think that The One thought less of him than the others. Why else would he be given such a lame gift?

The next day the caravan moved toward Cornea. Deavon kept Pea and Pod in his satchel for Erin to play with later. Mike slumped in her saddle thinking about how they were never going to get out of the cold. Serosa kept looking east feeling unsure of Cleido's assertion that he had killed the child warrior. The only thing the Atresian could focus on was delivering Teller to the emperor. Once the enemies of Solus were handed over, Serosa could return to Capnia wealthier than when he left. The men who followed The Darkness plodded along knowing that their captives were secure within their ranks.

Salpingo looked out over the lands and saw the troop moving westward. "Tonight we rescue our friends. Until then, we will stay behind and wait."

Tony was not as confident in his skills as Salpingo was. He had fought off four people but not all at once. There were at least twenty men he would have to contend with. He also knew there was the risk of the others getting hurt or killed. Still he had no choice. Tomorrow would be too late, and there was no time to get help from those loyal to Teller. Tony prayed to whoever would listen.

The night brought rain, which made the cold intolerable. The fires were warm but then you became wet. If you remained in a tent, you were dry but without warmth. Mike was at her worst not being able to have both at the same time. She wanted to start a little fire in the tent but was told by Teller and Serosa that it was not a good idea. Serosa was not as kind using the words like stupid and idiotic in the same sentence.

Salpingo scouted out the camp and then returned to Tony. Pointing to various areas, he provided Tony the intelligence he needed. "Friends here." The guide pointed to a darker area of the camp at the left. "Soldiers here," illustrated by the many campfires to the right. "Salpingo save family. You kill soldiers."

Tony looked at Salpingo. "That simple, huh?"

The guide nodded.

"Okay, let me get this right," reiterated Tony. "You're going to rescue Mike, Erin, Deavon, and Teller."

Salpingo smiled.

"While I walk into their camp and kill them all," said Tony incredulously.

The guide seemed almost ecstatic over Tony's comprehension of the plan.

Tony looked at the guide. In his mind he knew it was suicide, but what other options were there? If someone were to die, he'd be the logical choice. Maybe he could take out ten or so before that happened. That would at least give them a fighting chance. "Okay, let's go."

Tony reached the edge of the camp. He had his shield, sword, and crossbow. He took one deep breath thinking that it may be his last. As the sentry came closer, Tony took aim with the arrow, felling the soldier. Crawling toward the wounded man, he dragged the soldier back below the line of sight of the others. There, he removed the man's armor. Tony thought it would be harder for the Atresians if they were all wearing the same uniform. The clothes were a little big but he managed to tear them

to size. The armor hung loosely but Tony was able to strap it securely to his body. Standing there at the edge of camp, he now could see the task at hand. Most were huddled by fires covered with hides or coats. Three other sentries were on duty: one by the horses, another by the tents, and a third just beyond the man guarding Teller and the children. Summoning up all of his courage, he ran toward the fires.

Tony had speed on a soccer field but at that moment he ran faster than he imaged he could. He was on them before they could react. Tony swung his sword twice before any of them tried to stand. He managed to slay a third in passing. The battle had begun. Tony hoped that whatever gave him the ability to fight was with him. As he raced into action, the Argentinean started to see it all unfold as if in slow motion. A similar experience Tony had when he encountered the guard at the jail. The Atresians rose, yelling at each other, as they rallied to kill the intruder. Tony raised his shield and deflected an arrow shot from across the camp. Spinning, the foster child then cut another with his blade. By now he was in the middle of the camp. Serosa looked in horror to see three more men die at the boy's hand. Cleido grabbed his sword. "Damn him to The Light. I will send him back to the grave."

Two more met their death as Cleido spoke. Tony's only thought was to reach the horses. Once there, his chance to survive long enough for Salpingo to free the others would be at hand. Killing the sentry, Tony reached the makeshift corral as the survivors of the first assault pursued him. Tony released the horses, providing him with enough confusion to blend in.

Salpingo acted quickly to Tony's diversion. Using an arrow, he struck down the sentry closest to Teller. The guard, seeing all the events unfold, raised his sword to strike the prisoners down, but he was too late. Salpingo was able to draw another arrow and strike the man who was about to kill Teller. Teller pointed the children toward the guide as he followed behind. Once they were safely away from the camp, Salpingo ran toward the melee that Tony was creating.

This was not lost on the spirits who saw an opportunity to take the enemy from the world. Necrosis lunged once again at the children in the darkness, only this time he was prepared for Acromion. The Guardian of

Light did not fail in blocking Necrosis from his appointed target. Their swords clashed once more creating what appeared to be lighting. The demon kept the warrior occupied as lesser spirits continued the attack. It was then a ball of light encompassed the strangers, when touched by the Darkness, resulted in the demon's nonexistence. The lesser spirits, which had desired to destroy the children, backed away after seeing two of their kind meet an untimely end. "What kind of sorcery is this?" Necrosis snarled. He retreated once more after the lesser Spirits of Darkness had done the same.

Tony ran with the horses, stopping to strike now and then, continuing his deadly onslaught. He had lost count of the number of Atresians he had killed or wounded. His only hope was to buy time. When the horses cleared the field of battle, Tony saw three Atresians left standing: Serosa, Cleido, and Aqueous. The latter drew aim at the boy having a clear shot. It was then the spear connected impaling Aqueous with the arrow still in his hand. Seeing Salpingo, Tony knew he had won the war. Even if he were to fail, the odds now favored his family. Tony paused as he saw Cleido run toward him. Tony reacted quickly; their encounter was brief. Cleido lunged at Tony but the boy countered, which resulted in piercing the man's chest with his sword. The Atresian looked up surprised at Tony's agility and skill. "I killed you?" The warrior slumped to the ground wearing a face of astonishment.

Unlike Cleido, Serosa had a plan. He remained standing as he waited for Salpingo to attack. The Atresian threw a spear hitting the guide while in motion. The impact threw Salpingo backward where he remained frozen. Anger took over as Tony ran to Salpingo's aid, raising his sword to attack Serosa. The last of the Atresians lifted his shield just in time to deflect the blow. Tony rolled away but the distance between them gave Serosa a chance to grab his knife and throw it. Tony felt the blade penetrate his body. Losing his breath, he crumpled to the ground. Tony knew it was only a matter of time before Serosa delivered the fatal blow, if he hadn't already. Tony thought about his sisters. Who would look out for them, Deavon? His breathing became more difficult, and his eyes blurred. Serosa now stood over him; the shine from the Atresian's blade now above his head. Tony gathered all of his strength pulling at the knife. He freed it from

his body but was unable to use it. The weapon fell from his hand. Tony waited for the last sting of battle only to see Serosa's face land next to his own. The Atresian's eyes were vacant, an arrow protruding from his back. Deavon came into view. Taking Tony's sword, Deavon finished the task he had started. Tony smiled knowing his family was safe. Then all went dark.

"Mike, come here quickly!" yelled Deavon. Mike ran over to her brothers. Tony had managed to pull the knife out, but the wound was still bleeding. The girl from China leaned over and held the wounded boy. Convulsing, she committed herself until the feeling faded.

Tony awoke, no longer feeling the throbbing in his abdomen. The bleeding had stopped. The Argentinean looked at Mike. "Thank you." The moment was short lived as they saw Salpingo lying on the ground. The girl from China grabbed the guide. "Maybe it's not too late." No feeling of nausea came. There were no convulsions. "I'm sorry." Mike let go feeling defeated.

Everyone feared the worse for Salpingo. But then the corpse spoke, "He broke my stone."



# THE CAVE OF ISCHIUM

Teller looked at the children. "It's time."

Deavon responded, "Time? Time for what?"

The Leader of Galea looked at the child. "I can now reveal the secrets that you hold within you."

Salpingo was still mourning the loss of his prized possession when Teller interrupted his moment. "Salpingo, we need to get to the Cave of Ischium by tomorrow tonight."

The guide laid the broken stone on the ground having no further use for it.

Mike leaned toward Tony and whispered, "Cave of Ischium?"

Tony shook his head. "I don't know."

The strangers packed the horses with what they needed from the camp and headed east once more. The rain had stopped, but the wind remained relentless. By late afternoon they had arrived at the mountain pass Teller was seeking. The trail was narrow but passable for those on horseback. Turning off the beaten path, they were forced to dismount and travel by foot, leading the horses by hand. The cavern they entered was surrounded by rock. Salpingo, knowing the terrain, had chosen the only way into the cave.

The entrance was too small for the horses. They were left tied outside. The guide lit a couple of oil lamps obtained from the campsite. They provided enough light for the children to get acclimated while revealing a large opening. Water trickled down the side of a wall creating a stream leading further into the cave. Benches surrounded the fire pit constructed in the middle of the space. A bookshelf lined another wall while artwork decorated the empty spaces. Artifacts were left scattered in assorted locations around the cave completing the room. The children marveled at the paintings as Salpingo lit the lamps on the walls. Similar to the Temple, all were representing The One.

"This was the place of Esoph. This is where our faith was born and where your destiny in The One will be revealed. We will stay here until

all your questions are answered, even those you have not asked. We will remain here until your time,” explained Teller.

On hearing Teller’s explanation, Erin looked up at Deavon. “What level is this?”

Deavon shrugged his shoulders. If this were the video game he spoke of earlier, Deavon would have hit the escape key a long time ago.

The children were exhausted after traveling most of the night and through the day. After eating, they found places to sleep. The fire warmed the cave making the space comfortable. Teller tended the fire as Salpingo rested. A smile came to his face as he saw Pea and Pod scampering around Deavon before finally settling down. The leader of Galea prayed once more to his god, praising The One for the children’s safety and for the hope that they brought to Teller’s world. The Great Battle was coming, and it was up to him to prepare the children for it. As Teller looked around, he saw how one man changed a nation. He imagined Esoph by the fire teaching others about The One. The scene changed back to the moment where The Darkness threatened everything in Teller’s world. Tomorrow, each child’s lesson would begin. The time would come when the children would have to choose. Hopefully, if they understood what was at stake, they would join the battle.

As Solus looked out upon the world, his anger could no longer be contained. “Gial! Crypts! Present yourselves now!”

The Spirits of Darkness appeared before their master. “How can we honor you?”

“The children are getting stronger. We need to help the mystics in the Temple of Moralis enter Celestia.”

“Yes, My Lord.” The servants of Solus descended into the physical realm prepared to assist Halicus and the others.

Solus sat upon his throne thinking of how to eliminate the strangers. Necrosis had failed but Solus saw that his demon was committed to fulfill his mission. Solus called upon Lacunae. Through her he would lead Talus to his prey. Then Necrosis would have his kill, which would allow him to return to the Castle of Darkness. Lacunae awoke from her dream. She turned to her lover. “Talus, we need to leave for Galea.”

Flavin entered the throne room where Lacunae waited. "You called?" The chief of staff was surprised that the queen was the one who summoned him.

"Yes, we are leaving this morning, and I wanted to discuss your future in this court."

"Have I disappointed the king or you in any way?" asked Flavin.

The queen smiled but not in a reassuring way. "Let's just say that I don't want to hear or see any more dissent from those in Capnia. If I do, I will hold you personally responsible."

Flavin understood that his life depended on keeping Atresia loyal to the throne. "I will do my best, Your Highness."

Lacunae replied, "Interesting how this conspiracy conveniently ended with the deaths of the Lord and Lady of Taenia as if they were orchestrated in some way."

The chief of staff tried to look innocent. "Really? I thought it was a result of loyalty to you and Talus that fleshed out their betrayal."

The queen scoffed, "Oh please, the Lord of Taenia couldn't tie his own shoes without help. How could he have pulled off something as elaborate as an attack on the king?"

The chief of staff realized the game was on. "I will make sure that the loyalty of Atresia will not be questioned again."

Lacunae leaned into Flavin. "I am not concerned about Atresia; my only concern is with you."

The next morning Salpingo had breakfast prepared when the children awoke. As they sat at the benches to eat, Teller spoke.

"Long ago when Galea was under the rule of emperors, a man sought wisdom. In this cave he discovered the essential truths: The first truth was self-awareness, the second was the existence of God, and the third was self-determination. How they related to one another became the basis for our faith. These manuscripts along the far wall are of his own hand as he pondered the arguments against these truths.

As a result, the journals of Esoph were created. He knew there had to be a secular and a spiritual rule of law. This is why we live by *The Book of Man* and *The Book of God*. Initially his philosophy was not widely accepted,

but he continued to teach in this cave. Anconeus, the ruler at the time, became threatened by Esoph and arrested him. The ensuing trial changed our nation. Galea, known for its fierceness in battle, became a land of peace.

“Much was written about those days but most accounts were embellished for the sake of glorifying Esoph, but it was Anconeus who displayed the most courage. Every argument was made to refute Esoph’s essential truths. Esoph patiently answered each question, and with every explanation he would inquire of each inquisitor, ‘If this is not the truth, then tell me what is.’”

“As the trial closed, legend states that a spirit of The One visited Anconeus. Through The Guardian of Light, the emperor concluded that Esoph was a man of greatness. Having been convinced of a power greater than his own, Anconeus relinquished his throne. He headed the Assembly while Esoph became the first Teller of The One.

“After the Revelation, Esoph grew in stature among those in Galea while Anconeus lost prominence. The emperor was asked later if he regretted his decision. His reply was one that all men should follow.

‘People with selfish desires are afraid of the truth, because it reveals their true intentions. If we can be honest with ourselves and accept the truth, we can make life better for all through our humility.’”

Teller stood up and walked away to give them time to digest what had been said. Soon he would take each one aside and begin the process of realization. The first would be Tony later that morning.

The Leader of Galea brought Tony from the other room. There, the stream reflected the light off the walls, allowing one lamp to illuminate the space. The furniture in the room confirmed that this was Esoph’s sleeping chamber. A bed and a couple of chairs, along with a table, completed the ensemble.

Teller sat in one of the chairs while Tony, being curious, reclined on the bed. “This is softer than I thought.”

The old man smiled. “Just because Esoph devoted his life, spiritual matters did not make him free from desiring physical comfort.”

“So, what do you want to show me?” asked Tony.

Teller looked at the child who was lying on the bed before him. “It’s not what I will show you, but what you will discover in yourself.”

“Really, how are you going to do that?” Tony sat up.

The leader of Galea brought the chairs to the table and lit a candle. Pulling a chair out for the young man, he motioned for him to sit down. "Let's get started."

Tony got up from the bed and joined Teller. The Leader of Galea dimmed the lamp, leaving only the candle for light. Sitting across from Tony the old man began his inquiry. "Why do you think The One gave you the gift you have?"

Tony looked at the flame dancing on the wick. "I don't know. Maybe because I'm the biggest?"

The old man continued, "Why do you think Mike has the ability to heal?"

Tony laughed. "Beats me. She's not the most caring person I know."

The Leader of Galea smiled. "Exactly. So what do you think would be the purpose of her particular gift?"

The young man thought. "Maybe to help her become more sensitive toward others?"

Teller nodded with approval. "And why do you think it's not without difficulty for her to cure those she touches?"

Tony took even longer to respond, "Because if it were easy, she wouldn't have to give of herself to help someone else?"

The old man was impressed. "Very good. Now let's get back to you. What do you fear most that the gift you were given would force you to confront?"

The young man remained silent.

Teller sat back and waited.

"I don't know," stammered Tony.

The Leader of Galea leaned in once more toward the flame. "You say you want to be a soccer player. Why do you think that would be such a good thing?" Teller had no clue what soccer was but if Tony desired it, then there had to be an internal reason for doing so.

Tony smiled. "I would be liked. No, adored by millions of people. I would be part of a team. The other players would count on me to win."

"And what if you caused them to lose?" asked Teller.

Tony's smile disappeared. "Then I would be hated by those who were once my friends or fans."

The old man smiled having finally obtained the truth from him. "So if you could be a hero but in doing so chanced failing, would you?"

The child looked strangely at the man before him. "Like a penalty kick where if I scored, we would win the game but if I missed, then we would lose?"

Teller understood enough to agree with Tony's premise and nodded.

"Well, I don't know. I don't think I'd want my life to be based on one shot."

"Why not?" asked Teller.

"Because, it would be too hard," said Tony

"Too hard, why?" Teller questioned Tony further.

"Because, I wouldn't want to be known as a failure."

Teller slowed the pace giving Tony a chance to gather himself. "What would you fear most: letting the people down or not having them like you?"

The foster child paused, "I guess not being liked." Tony then stood up as his emotions took over. "You don't know what it's like being an outsider. I'm just trying to fit in, you know."

Teller never wavered. "I know. The truth separates us from those who despise it. I am a leader of a nation and yet I am an outsider in my own home. Why? Because I stand on truth."

Tony sat back down. "Why are you telling me this?"

The old man looked the child in the eye. "Because you will have to make a stand and in doing so, you will risk not being liked by those closest to you. Like this game you call soccer, all will depend on your ability to make the shot. You see, my dear Tony, it's not the kick that frightens you but the repercussions of your actions from those who care."

The boy sat there looking at the candle. "What if I'm not able to face this fear?"

Teller spoke solemnly, "Then those with you will die."

Tony walked from the room unsure of his future. The others looked at him as he returned to the fire.

"Are you all right?" asked Mike.

Tony looked at the girl from China. "I don't know."

Teller entered the room but after seeing Tony, the enthusiasm of the strangers to go with the old man waned. "Mike, please follow me." Her foster brother assured her that it was okay. She walked off looking back at the others. Soon she was sitting at the same table where Tony sat earlier.

"So what do you want from me?" asked Mike.

Teller dimmed the light once more leaving the candle to dance before her. "Have you given any thought to the gift you received?"

Mike looked at the candle. "No, not really. Well, yeah ... Why is it I get sick? It doesn't seem right, you know. Here I am trying to make someone better and I end up feeling awful."

The old man looked at the girl in front of him. "What if I told you that the feeling could go away?"

Mike perked up. "Really? How?"

"The convulsions you experience are simply your body resisting the act of healing," explained Teller.

The girl from China looked up from the candle. "Why's that?"

Teller leaned toward the young woman. "Because it requires the giving of yourself. Something you have seldom experienced and at the level healing requires, your body revolts."

Mike hardened not liking what the old man said. "So you're saying I'm selfish?"

Teller sensed her discomfort. "It is not me, but it is your body that speaks. You asked how to heal without distress. I am just explaining why the distress occurs."

Mike's tone softened. "So how do I stop this battle inside of me when I touch somebody?"

"By offering your true self to another," explained Teller. "When you are able to allow someone to accept you without pretense, the feeling of illness will subside."

Mike replied, "What if they don't accept me for who I am? Do you know what it's like to be rejected by your parents? I don't want to be rejected again."

The Galean looked through the flame and into the girl's eyes. "My child, those who love you already accept you for who you are. The protection you desire only prevents you from feeling that acceptance."

"You know I felt really good helping that mother and then Deavon attacked me." Mike felt Deavon had robbed her moment of compassion.

Teller rose from his chair. Turning toward the stream as he spoke, "He's scared and needed to lash out. He feels safe with you. Even though his words can be hurtful, he's secure in knowing that you will never abandon him."

“Why does it have to be me who has to change, I mean it’s not fair. Did you tell Tony he’s screwed up, too? Or is it just me you’re picking on?” pouted Mike.

Teller’s tone became somber with his response, “Mei Ling from China who dwells in self-pity. I have had enough of your complaining and your desire to think of yourself first. Yes, I did tell Tony the challenge that awaits him and if he fails, you and the others may die. If I were to say the same to you, it would not have the same effect having already offered your brothers and sister to the king for your own freedom.”

Mike recoiled; a small voice was heard from beyond the candlelight. “How did you know that?”

“Wasn’t that part of your argument in the cell? The One is God, my child, not some figure of fantasy that I conjured out my imagination. The being that created this world wants the best for us. In your case, The One has challenged you to think of others before yourself. If this were not possible, Deavon and Tony would both be dead,” explained Teller.

Mike thought for a moment. “I’m afraid.”

Teller returned to his chair; a smile could be seen through the flickering flame. “We are all afraid of change. That is why you received this particular gift. If The One didn’t care for you, then you would have no reason to be here.”

“I don’t know. I’ll try,” whispered Mike.

Teller looked at Mike. “The One doesn’t ask for perfection nor does the result reflect in God’s acceptance. Only a desire to follow your heart is all that is needed.”

Mike got up feeling differently about the world she experienced. Returning to the fire she looked at the others. “I’m sorry for being a brat.”

The children sitting by the fire could see the words were not easily forthcoming.

“Deavon, I do like you.” She paused again before she continued. “And Tony, thank you for saving our lives like three or four times.” Then she bent down toward the girl by the fire. “Erin, I am sorry I’ve been mean to you. I’ll be a better sister; I promise.”

The children looked at the girl from China in the same way Bob Cratchit looked at Scrooge on Christmas morning. Tony spoke for them all, “It’s okay.”



# CREATION

For Talus and Lacunae traveling back to Cornea was uneventful. The emperor immediately went to Hallicus in the cavern where the mystics were working. Surrounded by torchlight, and flashes of blue bursts, the high priest began to update Talus on their progress. "I am pleased to say we are having success. Phalanges along with Meridian have created a passage. The portal is not large enough to allow more than one to pass safely, but the door is open. I have personally witnessed Celestia."

Talus was impressed. "Solus must be pleased. When can I enter the portal?"

The high priest paused. Hallicus wanted to make sure the passage was free from the spirits defending The One before allowing the emperor to walk through it. "We can arrange your journey to Celestia by tomorrow."

"Very good," said Talus. "I'll await your word."

While Talus went to the Temple, Lacunae went to the palace to obtain information about the strangers. Fulcrum, the captain of the guards, stood waiting by her throne. "What do you have for me?"

The captain frowned knowing the news he was about to deliver was not good. "The children had been captured, but the one called Tony freed them all."

The queen cocked her head. "Freed?"

The soldier continued, "Under the protection of twenty-two Atresians the boy managed to kill eighteen while wounding four others. One managed to survive and return to Cornea. Another died trying."

Lacunae now sounded annoyed. "So where are they now?"

The captain cleared his throat before responding, knowing he was the messenger of bad news. "They were last seen heading toward the mountains."

The queen's annoyance turned to anger. "And do you have anyone searching for them?"

"Yes, Your Highness, but we have yet to discover their whereabouts."

The queen looked up in disgust. "Leave and do not return until you have found them."

She now knew why Solus called upon her. She knew her master had witnessed the incompetence of those calling themselves his followers.

When Talus arrived at the palace, he could see Lacunae was in a mood. "What's wrong?"

The queen smiled trying to hide her frustration. "I've been inquiring about the strangers. It seems they were captured only to have escaped again. The survivor claims that the boy named Tony killed twenty people while freeing his friends."

Talus remembered the boy cowering before him. "So what do you think happened?"

"They probably got drunk and started to fight over the reward money," suggested the queen.

"What would you like me to do?" asked Talus.

The mystic, now queen, thought for a moment and then she walked over to her lover. Leaning into his chest she said, "I would love to have you find them."

Talus almost gave in to Lacunae's request but Celestia could not wait. "To please you, my love, all you need is to ask and I will hunt down the strangers."

Lacunae, knowing Talus' response was sincere, smiled as she rested her head on Talus' body. "Solus needs you here, my beloved. Who else would be worthy of having a hand in The One's demise?"

The emperor thought for a moment and then responded, "Since I cannot pursue the strangers myself, maybe those who have been closest to Fossa and me could."

Deavon entered the room with apprehension. Tony had returned from the place wearing a look of concern, while Mike apologized for everything she had ever done. After leading the child away, Teller again darkened the space leaving just the candle for light.

"Have you ever pondered how the world was made?"

Teller's first question perplexed Deavon. "What?"

The old man rephrased the question. "Have you ever asked yourself how life began?"

Deavon tried to be scientific in his answer. "I guess one cell got together with another cell until multicell creatures developed." Pausing for a moment,

Deavon took himself back to Mr. Whitaker's biology class trying to recount the rest of the documentary on Darwin. "And then from there we evolved."

Teller probed the young man's logic. "Before substance like cells or minerals or air?"

The child thought. "Like nothing, there was nothing?"

Teller nodded having made his point. "Yes, I imagine you would call it nothing. Now from there, how do you believe life began?"

Deavon was stumped. "I don't know."

The old man changed tactics. "How did Pea and Pod come to life?"

The young man remained silent as he recalled the moment. "You told me to imagine them as real horses."

Teller looked through the flame. "So what brought them to life?"

Deavon again became silent and then after a moment answered, "My thought?"

Teller knew he was close to obtaining the truth within Deavon. "So what is creation?"

The young man looked at the flame. "I don't know."

Teller began again, "When you write something on paper are you not creating something from nothing?"

Deavon nodded.

"Are you not taking a thought and making it real?"

The foster child responded, "Well yeah, but everyone does that. How does that count as creation? They're only words?"

The old man leaned in once more toward the table. "Until the thought is translated into words, it remains nothing unable to be seen by others. Similar to a painting or a sculpture, only when the artist portrays it through a medium does it become real to others. Similar to an artist, that is what God did when the world was thought into existence."

"How is that the same?" Deavon remained confused.

Teller responded, "How is it not? The artist used canvass and paint, the writer paper and pen. God created the particles that bind the world together. Since we are a reflection of The One who created us, are we not able to do the same by bringing thought into our world?"

Deavon looked back at the man behind the candle. "I didn't make a freakin universe. I just imagined two stick figures dancing around Erin."

The Leader of Galea sat back in his chair. "How many people in either world have you known to make sticks dance?"

"None," said Deavon.

"So, my dear friend, you have the ability to make things real by thinking them. Where others can only express their thoughts with words or song, you can make life."

"I don't understand," said Deavon still not trusting what he was hearing.

Teller got out of his chair and walked over to the child who was sitting across from him. Pointing to stones piled across the room he said, "Take those rocks and make something."

Deavon resisted. "No, you'll laugh."

The old man was curious. "Why do you say that?"

"Because," Deavon now solemn said, "they all laugh."

Teller pondered Deavon's affliction. "Why do they laugh?"

The child put his head down toward his legs. "Whenever I say something or show somebody something, it's always the same. Look at what that fool did this time."

Teller put his hand on the child's shoulder. "Did Erin laugh?"

A muffled sound came from the head buried in hands, "No."

"Then why would I laugh having just encouraged you to use your mind and create?"

Deavon stood up. Taking some stones, he built a rectangular structure with a group of round stones on the top of one corner and a flat rock at its farthest end.

The old man asked, "What do you see?"

Deavon looked at the pile and stated, "I see a rhinoceros!"

Teller reached over and touched Deavon. "Then believe."

Just then as Deavon summoned his mind to defy reality, the beast came to life. Snorting and stomping around, the creator commanded the rhino to go outside. The commotion from the other room was unmistakable as Tony, the girls, and Salpingo struggled to get out of the way of the animal charging through the room. Deavon smiled as he looked at Teller. "This is cool!"

The old man stopped his celebration momentarily to instruct him. "If you lose your faith to express yourself to others, the gift will no longer bring life."

"Why is that?" asked Deavon.

Teller looked at the child before him. "Because where Mike fears rejection, you fear acceptance."

Deavon ran into the other room eager to share his excitement. "Did you see that?"

"You almost got us killed!" shouted Mike.

"Easy, Mike, remember?" Tony tried to calm his sister down before responding, "Yeah, Deavon, how could we miss it."

"Did you do that?" The beast Deavon sent through the room amazed Erin.

"Yeah, better than some little sticks, huh?"

Mike, now composed, commented on Deavon's achievement, "Next time could you give us a little warning?"

"Oh sure, sorry about that."

Her response reflected change. "It's okay."

The old man smiled seeing their growth and knowing they would soon be ready. There was one person left to reveal the truth to and she, according to Teller, had the greatest of the gifts.

Talus awoke anticipating the moment for which he had been waiting. Lacunae, delighted for the emperor, continued to worry about the strangers. "Talus, when will Kerato arrive?"

The emperor looked at his beloved. "Soon. I wanted him to assemble a crew to complete the task you have asked of me. Would you like to come to the temple?"

Lacunae declined. "When you experience victory, I will see Celestia in its glory under Solus. Until then, I do not want to detract you from the task at hand. Entering Celestia is only a small step toward defeating The One."

The emperor smiled knowing that Lacunae was right. Victory would only come with seeing his father free from the influence of the evil that had devoured him.

Hallicus arrived to guide Talus into the spiritual world. "Your Highness, we are ready for you."

Talus looked at Lacunae hoping she would change her mind, but she remained behind. The tunnel had changed since the last time he had

seen it. Deep blues illuminated the entire hallway. The mystics anxiously awaited the emperor. "Here is the doorway, Your Majesty."

Talus looked at the opening. He first reached out his hand seeing it pass through the wall that was once there. Gathering his courage, he stepped through. Hallicus awaited him on the other side. "This is Celestia!" The emperor looked across the vast expanse. The spectrum of light revealed the diametrically opposed forces at each end of the plain. Looking forward, he saw the enemy for the first time. The Light shined like the sun just beyond the horizon. There floating above the surface of Celestia were The Guardians of Light from which Lacunae had protected him. They seemed to resist venturing too far into the shadows. For that reason, Talus felt safe standing in the shade that separated the two forces before him. Hallicus then guided the emperor to look toward the darkness. There, barely visible, was the castle. "It's there in the fortress where our master dwells!" Talus looked at the stronghold. Hovering above Solus' refuge were the spirits who followed The Darkness. They seemed to be unimpressed by the visitors who had invaded their world.

"Once we create an opening large enough for our army, you will be able to invade this world and destroy the beast that defiles it," said Hallicus. "Then all will be possible in the name of Solus."

The emperor assessed the battleground. He wondered how the Guardians of Light would react to the Atresians but more importantly, how the Atresians would react to the Guardians of Light. Talus needed to test the spirits before risking his army in a war against them. He would return in hopes of learning how to destroy those protecting the creature holding his father. Then having success, the emperor could lead his people into the breach knowing all that remained would be The One. Talus returned through the portal having a better idea of how he could accomplish his mission. He needed Lacunae to guide him, but more importantly he needed Solus to ensure his victory. Talus returned to the palace eager to share all that he had experienced with his lover.

"Lacunae, you should have seen it!" exclaimed Talus.

The queen smiled feeling her husband's excitement.

Talus tried to explain Celestia along with his concern in fighting the spirits protecting The One. Lacunae listened intently remaining silent until the emperor was finished. "So what should I do?" asked Talus.

The queen thought for a moment. "First of all you will not be acting alone. Solus would not allow to you fail after coming so far. Second, having never fought within the spiritual world, you have no idea who is superior. I will take what you say and see if Solus has any guidance in this matter. In the meantime, Hallicus needs to expand the portal, and you need to find those who will follow you back into Celestia."

"I will prepare the soldiers who will join me in an attack against the spirits. Then we will discover who in battle will have the upper hand."

The queen embraced her king. "Your father would be so proud."

Talus' joy faded as he responded, "I hope so."

Teller took the youngest child into the room where the rhino came to life. "Erin, do you know why I brought you in here?"

The youngest O'Reilly looked at the old man. "No."

Teller had the girl sit down. "We are going to discover your gift and how you can help Tony, Mike, and Deavon."

The child looked up at The Leader of Galea. "Okay."

Teller dimmed the lamp for the last time and then sat at the table. "You have been given the gift of spirit."

The Leader of Galea reached over and held her hands. "Close your eyes." The girl did as she was told. "Think of your body as a jar that simply holds your essence within it."

Erin spoke through the flame, "Essence?"

Teller tried to explain, "Your body is just a physical place that holds your spirit. Without your body, you could not live in this world since you need to pick things up or walk from here to there. Since your body is living, it needs you to eat and sleep, but your body is not you. It is only a place where your spirit lives. Once your body stops living, you will move on from this world to one of spirit."

Erin tried hard to imagine life without a body. "Like a ghost?"

"If you mean a being without physical form, yes, but you are not limited to living in one world or the other. You, my child, can live in both."

“You mean I’m a ghost in a body?” asked Erin very confused.

“Yes,” agreed Teller. “Now free yourself from your body and lift yourself from the chair.” Erin imagined herself flying. In that moment she realized she was above herself, which scared her.

Teller rose from his chair. In spirit he joined Erin. “It’s all right, my child. You are experiencing what it is like to be in the other world. People are so focused on the physical that they forget the world they cannot see exists just the same. As you wished, you are now free to talk to God.”

Erin looked at the transparent Teller. “What?”

The old man grabbed her hand and looked up. “Let’s go.”

They propelled themselves into the world called Celestia. Upon their arrival in the heavens, the Guardian’s of the Light welcomed them. Erin was amazed by the nature of the beings she witnessed. They were the personification of tranquility. The child was led toward the horizon where she experienced The One. There, she felt absolute serenity. It was an experience only known to others in death. All her fear, all of her remorse, left her body. The memories remained but the feelings associated with those thoughts vanished. Even the longing for her mother and father waned with the enveloping peace. Those things that were once important no longer mattered in comparison. All she wanted to do was stay within The One’s presence.

“Erin, we must go. Erin. Erin!”

The girl turned to see Teller standing behind her.

Slowly she pulled herself away. As she left, she saw the darkness and the castle within it. “What’s that?”

The Leader of Galea leaned down toward the child. “That is where Solus dwells. Those who repel the light seek refuge there.”

The child looked at the beasts hovering around the castle. “It looks like an awful place.”

Teller responded, “It is the place where torment and despair remain for those who cannot find peace.

The moment passed. Erin and Teller returned to their world and their physical forms. The girl felt remorse having departed the presence of God. “Why do I feel sad?”

Teller responded, “Once we leave The One, the hope remains but the peace is gone. Having experienced God, we can only hope to return and



never leave God's presence. Until then, we are forced to experience the choices we make and those others make that affect us."

"Teller, how can my gift help the others?"

The old man smiled. "Because you have experienced God, you need to help those around you by guiding them toward The One."

Erin looked at the Galean. "Why would they listen to me?"

"Simple," said Teller, "because you know the truth."

# CARINA

Twelve men walked into the throne room. All were intimidating as individuals, but as a group they were an imposing force. Kerato smiled at Talus having known him since childhood.

“Tal! Sorry you can’t join the hunt.” They embraced as friends recapturing their past in the moment. “I brought a few of my comrades.” The Atresian extended his hand as he introduced the men who followed him into the room. “And this is Phago, the best tracker I know. We’ll be on them before they know it.”

Lacunae stood up. “I would like to add another to your group.”

Kerato looked at Talus for an explanation, but all the emperor could do was shrug his shoulders.

“Having dealt with the evil that The One can create, I would like a mystic to guide you,” explained Lacunae.

Kerato nodded accepting the queen’s request. Carina entered the room. She commanded the attention of all who were present. Turning to Lacunae she whispered, “These men are full of themselves having never faced anything more than a stupid beast or frightened men in battle.” Then she spoke to the men before her. “You think these strangers are easy prey, but those who have died by their hands know better.”

The queen then made her announcement. “This is Carina, Mystic and Guide of Solus. Listen to her as you would me for your lives will depend on her assistance. The men left with the woman having been given their task. Lacunae then looked at Talus with hope. “By the week’s end, we will have all we desire.”

The troop left Cornea in search of their quarry. “So mystic, where do we go?”

Carina looked at Kerato. “Where Solus leads us.”

Phago, not to be discounted, interjected, “Let’s head toward the mountains and then continue this discussion.”

Kerato agreed as they headed south.

"You don't like mystics, do you?" asked Carina.

Kerato looked at the Carina. "No, just women who get in the way of the hunt."

The group needed to make time leaving conversation to a minimum. As they closed in on the mountains, the mystic felt the presence of Necrosis. "He's here!"

Kerato yelled over to the woman, "Who?"

"A messenger of The Darkness." She turned right. "This way!"

Kerato needed to make a decision either to follow or to lead. He deferred to the woman as he led the others to trail behind her.

Reaching the base of the mountains, she slowed. "We need to take this path that leads to Cisterna."

"Cisterna?" That's two days away!" shouted Kerato.

He was about to revoke her authority when Phago chimed in, "Let her lead. Once there, I'll find the rodents easy enough."

Kerato followed the trail hoping the mystic was wrong, so he could lead the hunt and get rid of the woman he was forced to take along.

Erin entered the main room without fanfare.

"So what happened?" Deavon was eager to see if his gift, or at least in his mind, was better than the others.

"I saw God," said Erin simply.

Mike sounded dubious. "No really, what happened?"

"I went to Celestia where I met The One. Teller, who's that at the door?" asked Erin.

The others looked toward the door but saw nothing.

The old man replied, "What do you see, Erin?"

Erin looked again to describe the person to the others. "He's tall. He's kind of glowing—wearing white clothes and has a golden shield. On his belt is a sheath with a sword hanging down his leg."

Teller smiled. "That would be a Guardian of Light. He has been with us since we left Cornea."

The others looked stunned. They were not sure whether it was an elaborate joke or if Erin and Teller were serious.

"He's gone," said Erin sounding disappointed.

Teller encouraged Erin to look again. "Try freeing your spirit."

The girl remembered her body being like a jar. She then refocused and saw that the spirit had not moved. "How come I can see the man and then not see him?"

Teller explained, "Once you lose focus on the spiritual you lose sight of those who are not of this world. Since its only natural to see what is real, it's harder to get the mind to see what is not. All you have to do is refocus, and all will be seen once more."

"So we got a warrior protecting us?" Deavon was impressed.

"Yes, he protects us from those not seen," said Teller.

"So we got things hunting us we can't see?" Tony pointed toward the door. "And this Guardian of Light is protecting us?" The Argentinean sounded concerned having not only to battle real warriors but spiritual ones as well.

"Yes, and that is why he is present, but you have a greater force protecting you—A Child of God," said Teller.

"Really? Who?" Mike spoke as if she were waiting for a celebrity to be introduced.

Teller looked at Mike. "Erin. She has been gifted with the power of the spirit, and she has already defeated the enemy with her power."

"Oh," Mike sounded disappointed expecting someone to appear from the other room.

"When was that?" asked Tony.

Teller looked at Tony. "When you were fighting the physical enemy during our last encounter, she fought the spiritual ones."

Pointing across the room Mike inquired about the imaginary man only Teller and Erin could see. "So what's he here for?"

The Glean looked at the children. "The Guardian of Light is a guide connecting us to The One."

"So now what?" asked Tony. He wanted to know when they would be leaving the cave, which was now closing in on him.

"We will go to Cisterna and from there to the Northern Plains where you'll choose your destiny," continued Teller.

"Choose?" Mike perked up. "I thought we didn't have a choice?"

Teller replied, "You always have a choice. The problem is that others may choose another path for you without your consent."

"Huh," Tony spoke for the unanimously confused.

"Just because you want to be a soccer player or an actress doesn't mean you get to be one. Choices are subject to others' choices as well. Those who follow Solus desire your destruction. I choose not to follow that desire. Yet you are still captive to these choices, even though you are not involved directly in either one."

Salpingo shook his head as he picked up his pack. "Gifts, choices, Salpingo dizzy. Let's go."

As they packed, Teller gave Erin a book to put in her pack. "Take this; it will become useful someday when all of this is forgotten." They headed out into the cold once more. Collecting the horses, they plodded toward Cisterna better prepared for the future. Erin refocused once more as she rode to see if the spirit was still there. To her amazement various beings flew around her, both light and dark. The Guardians of Light circled in protection as The Followers of Darkness hovered, hoping for an opportunity to attack. The spirit that stood by the door smiled to reassure the child that she was safe. Soon the spirits disappeared from view once more as her focus changed and reality took over.

Necrosis led the mystic through the mountain passes. Looking at the woman who seemed entranced, Kerato knew by tomorrow night they would be rid of her.

Kerato turned to Phago. "Once we're in Cisterna, we'll double back."

Phago nodded feeling the same as his leader.

Without warning Carina stopped. The men struggled to avoid bumping each other on the narrow pass as they pulled back on their reins. "They're here!"

"Here? Where?" said Kerato still annoyed by the mystic's abruptness.

Phago began to search around the ground. "If she is right, four maybe five horses passed by here an hour ago."

She remained undaunted. "If? Do you doubt Solus?"

Kerato looked at the woman. "I would never doubt Solus. I only doubt you."

The mystic paused as she awaited guidance. Moments later she turned right at the next fork leading away from the town. The men followed expecting to get lost. Weaving through trails, brush, and rock, she stopped

once again as the sun began to set. Pointing ahead she stated to Kerato, "They are just over the horizon preparing to camp. Before you doubt me again, let me warn you about the evil you are about to face."

Phago dismounted and maneuvered toward where she pointed. The others readied the camp.

"What are you doing?" asked Carina.

The Atresian, striking a flint, looked at the woman in disbelief. "I'm going to start a fire."

Carina scolded the man at her feet, "Fool, don't you think we should wait until it's dark so the strangers don't see the smoke?"

Kerato stepped in as he told his fellow Atresian to wait. All the while the leader of the posse was half hoping that Phago would return empty handed so he could send Carina on her way.

The guide returned a couple of hours later. "She was right. Solus is with her, and we should heed her words. I saw the old man they call Teller, the four children, and a mountain guide. They have chosen a place that would be difficult to penetrate while it's dark. We will have to wait until morning to attack."

Carina smiled at Kerato. "While we remain here, I'll prepare you for the challenge that awaits you."

"Tomorrow we'll be in Cisterna." Teller announced the agenda to the children who again looked tired of traveling.

"Hey, Mike, when we get there can you keep your hands to yourself?" chided Deavon.

The girl from China looked at Deavon. "Ha, ha, don't you have a rhino to catch?"

The foster child looked at Teller. "Oh yeah, where is that thing anyhow?"

The leader of Galea looked at the young man. "Being its creator it's part of you. Close your eyes and look beyond this place. What do you see?"

Deavon's head swiveled as if he was searching for the animal in some far off place. "I see it! It's grazing on a field by some trees."

Teller instructed the young man to make it go away.

"Go away?"

The old man continued. "You gave it life; you can return it to its lifeless form."

Deavon felt a little sad but knew it was not natural for a stone rhinoceros to be wandering around. "Okay." The foster child brushed away the essence within the animal. Soon the image was gone from his mind. "What happened? I don't see it anymore."

Teller replied, "That is because you are no longer connected to the thing you gave life. It has returned to its original form."

"Hey, do that to those sticky things too while you're at it." Mike was still annoyed by Pea and Pod's presence.

Erin spoke up, "Don't. I think they're cute."

"Get some sleep everyone." The children complied with Teller's request.

Salpingo approached The Leader of Galea. "Salpingo smell danger. Not sure who and what, but danger just the same."

Teller put his hand on the shoulder of his guide. "Get some rest. I'll keep watch." The next morning as they were preparing to leave, Erin once again focused her mind on the spiritual. It was then she saw something disturbing.

"Teller, there's a ghost thing out there that's bigger and uglier than the others, and the man who stood by the door is at the edge of the rocks ready to confront the thing."

Salpingo looked at his leader. Teller now saw what Erin was describing. "Prepare for an attack!"

They took shelter among the boulders when the first arrows hailed from above.

"Okay, Tony, go get 'em." Mike sounded like a coach sending out her star quarterback to score the winning touchdown."

"What?" shouted Tony.

"Come on, you did it before," said Mike

Teller looked at Deavon. "It's time to use your gift's full potential.

Deavon looked at the old man. "How? I've got nothing to work with?"

"The models you made only assisted you in creating life. Like The One, you have the ability to make something from nothing," explained Teller.

The foster child thought about Teller's statement. "I'll try."

Meanwhile the arrows got closer to their targets. Tony yelled to the guide, "They're moving in on us. I'll try to drive them away."

Salpingo provided cover by shooting arrows in the general direction of the attack. Tony stepped out only to be met by two attackers. Blocking

the initial blow with his shield, he thwarted the other with his sword. Unlike the others he had faced earlier, these men were skilled and worked together. The best Tony could do was to defend himself being unable to counterattack. Salpingo took a chance and shot an arrow in their direction. Kicking one of the attackers away from him, Tony positioned the Atresian into the arrow's path as it hit its mark. Having only one warrior to contend with, Tony quickly dispatched him and found cover before another onslaught of arrows found their way toward him.

Deavon concentrated, having to fight his own insecurity as several animals flashed through his mind. Keeping his eyes closed and waving his hands, he imagined molding soft clay. When he finished, a cougar came to life.

"A mountain lion, is that the best you can do?" screamed Mike who was hoping for a *Tyrannosaurus Rex*.

The animal disappeared against Deavon's will. "What happened?"

Teller bent down toward Deavon. "You lost faith in yourself. Try again."

The foster child relived every moment of ridicule as he fought once more though his fears. After several attempts, he created another cougar without comment from Mike. Deavon had broken the doubt he had in himself as he sent the cougar off to attack. Immediately, he created three more.

Screams were heard echoing through the cavern as the beasts pounced on their prey. Tony managed to join the fight but was wary of the mountain lions, not knowing if they knew he was on their side. Erin, sensing the end of the battle, focused her mind to see how the Guardian of Light was faring. There she saw Necrosis in a full rage looking directly at her with The Guardian of Light between the two. The other demons made futile attempts to attack but retreated when faced with the glow that Erin produced, shielding those around her from harm. The battle was soon decided. Being defeated once more, fire seemed to come from the Necrosis' eyes as he rushed toward the girl. Erin stepped back holding her breath. The Guardian of Light tried to block the demon's path but was knocked aside. Erin was defenseless. Necrosis opened his mouth; the fangs readied themselves to devour the child. The light that surrounded Erin became brighter as the creature approached. Inches from her face, Necrosis dissolved into nothingness.



The cougars had wreaked their havoc. Kerato and Phago were the only survivors. "Save us!" they pleaded.

Deavon pulled the mountain lions back. "Drop your weapons and leave at once."

The men did as they were told. The cougars vanished. The battle ended. Erin remained silent trying to comprehend the event that just occurred.

As the children began to gather their belongings a voice was heard, "Die a vile death, Teller!"

The arrow struck the old man. Salpingo quickly caught the woman and ended her life to avenge the one she took. The old man lay on the ground as Mike ran over to Teller. Tears ran down her face as she pulled the arrow from his heart. Putting her hands on him, she waited for the sickness to consume her. There were no convulsions, no waves of nausea. She closed her eyes and concentrated harder knowing she was his only chance. Still nothing came. Mike slumped feeling as if she failed. The only hope of returning home lay beneath her motionless.

"Its okay, child, you have spared me from meeting The One," whispered Teller.

The girl from China looked at Teller who no longer looked gray.

"I told you the feelings of sickness would go once you were willing to give of yourself."

# CISTERNA

The children had enough bloodshed. They became more homesick with each league of ground they plodded. They only hoped that Cisterna would provide them with warmth and a soft bed.

Mike turned to Deavon. "I'm sorry; I shouldn't have yelled at you earlier."

The foster child looked at his sister. "It's okay, I'm used to it."

Mike picked up her horse's pace to get closer to Deavon. "What do you mean?"

Deavon answered as if it were common knowledge. "Have you ever had a new kid join your class in school and everyone looks at them funny?"

Mike replied, "Yeah."

"Well, I'm like that new kid only I never got to make friends, because I was constantly moving so all I've known is that funny look."

Mike felt sorry for him. She felt sadder knowing the way she had treated him.

Erin approached Teller. "During the battle, a big horrible creature attacked me."

The leader of Galea became curious. "Really? What happened?"

The girl provided Teller with the details of the event as it unfolded before her. "It really scared me. Do you think it will come back?"

The old man explained to the child as they rode, "No, you made it go away. It can never come back. Others may try to hurt you, but they will meet the same fate."

Erin looked at the old man. "Is that because of my gift?"

Teller smiled. "Yes, it is."

"Are the others safe too?" asked Erin.

The Galian responded, "In this world they are not but you can protect them with your spirit."

Erin thought for moment. "How can I do that?"

"When you see the demons, you have the ability to make your spirit bigger so it covers the others like a tent, protecting all inside."

"Will the guardian who watched the door help me?" asked Erin.

Teller leaned over as he responded, "I don't know; maybe you should ask him?"

Erin never thought of talking to The Guardian of Light but decided the next time she encountered him that she would.

Cisterna was a border town between Calyx (now Lateralis) and Galea. From there, the strangers would head to the Northern Plains to join those who would fight The Darkness.

A Plainsman named Dalton met them at the edge of town. "We can not go into the village. Talus has sent his troops everywhere looking for you."

The Plainsman guided them away from the soldiers to the dismay of the children who longed for a warm bed.

"Where are we going?" Deavon asked the question to anyone who would answer.

The Galean guide sniffed the air and then looked at Deavon. "Salpingo say we're heading into Calyx."

Mike asked tentatively, "Any hope of having a bed to sleep on?"

Salpingo laughed.

"I guess that means no." Mike looked at her newest foster brother. "Could you whip up a wooly mammoth?"

Deavon laughed. "I don't think so."

Teller turned to face the child. "Deavon, don't underestimate your gift. Creation has unlimited possibilities."

Dalton turned to the children. "Tonight, we will sleep outside, but tomorrow you will be safe and warm."

The shelter that the Plainsman made protected the children while allowing the warmth of the fire to cover them. Mike snuggled underneath the hides that Dalton had provided feeling almost as comfortable as she did in Ganglion.

Erin decided to look for the spirit that stayed with them. Closing her eyes, she again floated beyond her physical shell. There she saw Acromion floating above the camp.

"Hello?" said Erin.

The spirit flew over toward the child. "How can I help you, Your Highness?"

“Your Highness?” questioned Erin.

“Yes,” then the spirit waved his hand over the camp. “All of you are nobility being direct descendents of The One.”

Erin looked confused.

Acromion lowered himself to her eye level by kneeling in front of her. Pointing to himself he declared, “We are made by The One and so we can only be with The One.” Then pointing at Erin he continued, “You are part of The One and so you can join The One when you enter Celestia. You are of God where we are in spirit only.”

The child looked at the being in front of her. “Can you help us get home?”

The Guardian of Light replied solemnly, “No, but because you are a child of God, there is hope.”

The spirit comforted Erin as she fought the pangs of being homesick. “Why are we here?”

Acromion picked up the child and put her on his shoulder. “It would be better to show you.” They entered the Plains of Celestia. Spirits of Darkness flew around them but none approached.

“Once long ago Solus desired to destroy The One; the battle resulted in The Darkness being thrown across the heavens. If you look down, you can see the world below,” explained Acromion.

“There in the physical world the war continues. Solus seeks to use the human’s freedom of choice to aid in our creator’s destruction. With each person consumed by The Darkness, another is lost to us and to The One. Now Talus plans to enter Celestia and annihilate The Light from the world.”

Erin looked at the castle in the shadows. “What if Talus succeeds? What would Celestia look like?”

Acromion’s expression turned solemn. “Our worlds would be dark with no hope of life.”

“Why would Talus want to do that?” questioned Erin.

The Guardian of Light looked up at the girl on his shoulder. “When one is led by The Darkness, they become blind to the consequences of their actions. Talus is sincere in his belief, but his actions betray the goodness he seeks for his people.”

“What if I talked to him?” asked Erin.

The spirit smiled knowing her heart. "He would not listen because he refuses to see what is before him."

"Will God win?" asked Erin anxiously.

The spirit began his descent into her world as he spoke, "The One feels sorrow if any child, even Talus, is lost. So it's not a matter of winning or losing; for The One, it's about redemption."

Erin found herself among those covered in hides. The spiritual world had vanished.

The call was made to all who were with The One. Those throughout Galea, Lateralis, and Atresia began the trek toward the Northern Plains. The mass exodus was not lost upon those who followed Solus. Lacunae, along with Talus, became disturbed seeing Cornea only populated by Atresians, having no idea where the others went.

"What in the name of Solus is going on?" asked Lacunae of Fulcrum who had no answer as he found himself again being the bearer of bad news.

"There seems to be a movement of Galeans toward the east," said Fulcrum.

The queen snapped at the soldier before her. "And no one saw, let's see... THOUSANDS of people leave during the NIGHT!"

The Atresian swallowed before answering, "Most of our people were drugged."

"And how do you suppose that happened?" screamed Lacunae who now was annoyed with having to deal with the captain in charge of guarding the city.

The soldier had no plausible explanation.

"Since you are such a fountain of information, could you tell me why all the Galeans would leave the city?" baited the queen.

"Perhaps Teller has called his followers to him," guessed Fulcrum.

Lacunae paused and then the queen looked at her king.

Talus concluded the thought, "This could mean one of two things: he plans to finalize his retreat or he plans to attack."

Looking at Talus, Lacunae continued, "In any event where Teller is, so are the strangers." The queen then turned toward the captain. "Since you failed to find four children and an old man, do you think you could possibly find someone who could tell us where all the Galeans are going?"

The captain responded without emotion, "Yes, Your Highness."

"Very well, report to me when you have ascertained their destination." Fulcrum left hoping to return under better circumstances.

"Maybe Hallicus could help us discover the meaning behind this madness," suggested Talus.

Lacunae's eyes gleamed. "Maybe we should seek Solus to guide us in this matter." She was looking forward to encountering her master again.

Hallicus entered the throne room to report on the progress of the portals. "Your Highness."

Talus motioned for the high priest to rise. "We have been told of a mass exodus. We would like to know if there is any meaning to this event concerning our quest."

The high priest responded, "I have heard about the madness and how the city is now void of Galeans." Hallicus became silent as he reflected on the prophecies he had read earlier. "I don't know, but it is most disturbing."

The queen looked at the priest and at her king. "Do you think Teller is going to do something desperate?"

Talus replied, "If that were so, it could mean that he is preparing for The Great Battle. Are we close to having our army enter Celestia?"

Hallicus pondered the emperor's question. "Maybe if we could delay Teller's attack, we can defeat their god before they arrive?"

Talus admired the priest's logic. Looking at the two mystics the emperor concluded, "While we dispatch soldiers to delay the Galeans return, I will need to find a way to prevent The Guardians of Light from stopping us." The high priest, Lacunae, and Talus all looked at each other and smiled.

The next morning the children awoke to the smell of food being prepared for breakfast. As they rose Dalton gave the children each a hide to wear over their clothes, keeping them as warm as they were in bed.

"Wow, this is great!" Mike felt the softness of the fur.

"You know the animal lovers would have a cow." Deavon looked at the girl from China and chided, "So Mike, are you taking yours off?"

"No way, I'll just deny it if I were asked at my first premiere." She pranced as she walked toward the fire as if she were on the red carpet.

As they ate Erin spoke up, "His name is Acromion."

"Who?" Tony asked between bites.

"The spirit who is with us; his name is Acromion."

"Can he get us home?" Erin looked at Deavon sadly having already asked the spirit. "No, he said only The One can do that."

"So is this One going to send us home?" Mike was now interested in the conversation.

"Acromion couldn't say."

"So we're stuck here?" The girl from China stated their worse fear.

"I don't know," whispered Erin.

Tony, having finished his breakfast, spoke next, "Didn't you meet this One?"

Erin, wanting to share her experience, lit up. "Yes, I did!"

"And what did God say?" asked Tony.

Erin looked at Tony. "Nothing. It isn't what The One said but the feeling of peace you get by being in God's presence."

"The feeling." Deavon was trying to imagine God but found it difficult.

"Yeah, it was like everything bad goes away; you're just there feeling..." Erin paused looking for the right word.

"Happy?" suggested Tony.

The youngest child looked at Tony. "No, like all those things that you thought mattered while you were here; well, they don't matter anymore."

"You don't care?" Deavon struggled even more with Erin's concept.

Erin continued to explain. "No, you care because you remember everything and everyone in your life, but you're not sad about it because someday everyone you love will know the feeling and they'll understand. It's like nothing you could ever feel here it's ..."

"What?" Mike was now frustrated, feeling like she did when Deavon tried to explain the soldiers he had found in the tunnel when they first arrived.

Teller entered to conversation. "What Erin is trying to describe is eternal peace. Once gained it removes all remorse and sadness from one's life. It allows those to rest in The One's presence for those who seek it. It is impossible to describe because in human emotions, even love fails to compare."

Erin followed. "I know it's hard to understand, but it's going to be okay. When we die, what we've experienced here allows us to appreciate eternity

and the feeling of peace that goes with it. Everything is going to be okay. That's what God has been trying to tell us all along."

Deavon questioned the girl, "How?"

Tony interjected trying to understand Erin's message. "Is that what God means by hope?"

"Yes, if hope is a question, then this feeling is the answer," said Erin feeling very proud of herself.

"Oh never mind." Mike gave up trying to understand this thing Teller had called God.

Tony and Deavon felt as confused as Erin's sister. The fact still remained that they were far from home. They gathered their things, mounted their horses, and headed east once more.

As they rode a voice whispered to the oldest child, "Mike."

"Huh? Hey Tony, did you say something to me?" The girl from China continued riding.

"Mike, I know a way," said the voice.

"Tony, are you messing with me?"

Her foster brother turned. "No, why would you say that?"

"Because I'm hearing someone calling me and you're the closest," snapped Mike.

Tony pleaded innocence. "It's not me."

"Mike, I can send you home," again the voice spoke.

"All right who's saying that!" demanded Mike.

Deavon and Erin were behind her but until then did not hear her talking to Tony. Both shrugged their shoulders not understanding why Mike was so upset. The rest were too far ahead to hear her protests.

Tony leaned over. "What are you hearing?"

"A voice," said Mike.

"What is it saying?"

"That it can send us home," explained Mike.

Tony got excited. "Keep listening."

The voice returned, "Follow me when I call you and you can go home. All of you can go home." The voice faded as it said home, preying on her desire. She turned to Tony. "The voice says it can send us home."

Tony looked at his sister. "When?"



"It didn't say but it will call me when we can go," said Mike. Thinking for a moment she asked, "Should we say something?"

"To whom" asked Tony?

"Teller?" stated Mike.

Tony looked at the men leading them. "No, we'll keep it to ourselves."

Pharynx approached Flavin. "There has been word of a mass exodus east by all who follow The One."

"Really, that's odd. Do you have any ideas?" asked Flavin.

The spy spoke softly, "Rumor has it of an impending attack on Cornea."

Chordae whispered to the spy who aided him earlier, "Do you think you could join this exodus and find out more?"

Pharynx nodded. "Yes, I plan to go after I arrange a messaging system to keep you informed."

Flavin then suggested, "Maybe Sura would like to join you?"

The spy smiled knowing the meaning behind the question.

"Why she would be the perfect cover, being scorned and all," Chordae continued. "Who'd suspect a man and woman of espionage, especially when the woman just had her parents killed for believing in their god?"

Pharynx departed. The ambassador smiled. "Could we have hoped for anything better?"

"We need to meet. Get Medius, Soma, and the newest members of our resistance. If this goes badly for the emperor, we may be able to free Atrisia from the tyrant's hand."

"Talus?" Chordae answered.

Flavin looked at Chordae. "No, Lacunae."

Talus gathered his most trusted men to enter Celestia with him. They brought all the weapons they could muster to attack the beings protecting The One. Talus went over the plan one more time prior to engaging the enemy. "We will seek one out like a gazelle in a herd. We will focus our attack on it. If others come to its defense, we will retreat if we can not kill the one we are attacking." The men agreed. Hallicus had prepared them for their journey so the shock would not be so intense. The men in single file passed through the doorway with Talus going first. Welcoming the

others, the emperor waited until all had arrived before taking the next step. Spying the heavens, he saw a Guardian of Light within range. The archer aimed at the spirit floating above them. The arrow shot through the presence but The Guardian of Light acted as if it had been wounded, flying away from the men with one wing drooping, wounded by the arrow. The Atresians cheered as they gathered more courage, shooting more arrows. The spirits quickly flew out of range but not before another hit its mark causing another Guardian of Light to crash to the surface of the plains. Talus had seen enough. All he needed to do was prepare the others when the doorway was wide enough. With the spirits out of the way, all that remained was the destruction of The One. The emperor wore a smile as he entered the physical world. Speaking to Hallicus, he put his hand on his shoulder. "It's all up to you."

For Mike, the rest of the day remained quiet. She waited anxiously for the next message that never came. The girl from China began to think she had imagined the whole thing. The troop stopped at a cabin. Unpacking their things, Dalton stated the following: "The children will stay in the back room while we stay in here. That way they can get rest while we discuss the rest of our trip." After eating, the children went to the other room. After hours of silence, Mike gave up and started to fall asleep.

"Mike, it's time," the voice spoke again.

The girl from China sat up. "Tony, it's back."

Her foster brother awoke as if it were Christmas morning.

"Really? Ask it something," said Tony.

"Who are you?" asked Mike hesitantly.

The voice replied, "I am Solus."

Mike frowned, looking at Tony she said, "It's the other guy."

Tony recognized in her tone that it was the one who sought to kill them.

Mike continued, "Why do you want to help us get home when we all know you want us killed?"

The voice melodically answered, "Talus was misguided and regrets to this day his decision. As far as my intentions, it has been Teller who has deceived you."

"How? We got gifts and everything," asked Mike still skeptical.

The voice continued its melodic tone. "He is a powerful wizard who is using you for his own glory. Jealous of Esoph, he wants to be greater than all before him. He thinks by destroying me he can make that claim."

"Why should we trust you?" asked Mike.

"You should trust no one, not even me, without proof. Here, let me show you." The window in the room started to glow. Soon, as if they were watching a screen, Mike and Tony saw the cavern from where they began their journey. Before them in the Polar Caves were Tom and Joan, their parents, along with others calling their names. All within the search parties looked worried, all desperately waiting for a reply. Mike and Tony had seen enough.

"Mike, ask him how we get home?" urged Tony.

The Darkness answered, "Go through the portal and all will be as it was."

Tony woke the others. After explaining what was going on, Deavon was ready to jump through the portal but Erin paused. Looking, using her spiritual gift, she saw the danger before them. There, Solus waited with his mouth open ready to devour those passing through the window. "Stop! It's a trap!" she shouted.

The others looked at her.

"No, not this time. I'm going home," yelled Deavon.

"Tony, stop him!" yelled Erin.

Tony held up his arms. "Wait a minute; we've all got to go together."

Deavon looked annoyed but relaxed his body against Tony's outstretched hands.

Erin continued, "Can't you see?"

Mike retorted, "See what, mom and dad? Yeah, let's go."

Deavon joined in. Looking at his foster brother he said, "You said if there was a way home we would take it. Well..." Deavon pointed toward the window beyond Tony's outstretched arm. "There's our way home."

Tony pulled his arm down. "Okay, come on Erin."

"No! Tony! Please! Please stop them!" pleaded Erin.

Tony paused. Though his mind desired to go along with the others, his heart spoke differently. "Wait, something's wrong. Don't listen to him."

"Oh, come on Tony. Its right there!" shouted Deavon.

"Deavon, Erin is right," said Tony blocking the window with his body.

“Your time is passing; I cannot keep the portal open much longer,” coaxed Solus.

Mike tried to push Tony aside, but he was too strong. Soon the window returned to darkness. The moment passed. Mike hit her brother in the chest. “I hate you!”

Tony slumped. He took the penalty shot Teller told him he would have to take, and there was no goal.

Deavon looked at Tony. “Way to go. If we never get out of this place, I will never forget how you screwed this up.”

Erin looked at the protector of the group. “You saved their lives.”

Tony looked dejected feeling as if he’d let Mike and Deavon down. Inside he cursed Teller for making him believe that he could have made a difference.

# THE NORTHERN PLAINS

The next morning started in silence for the children who slept in the other room. All entered the main room as if they had just lost their best friend. Tony looked as if he had lost two.

Teller turned to Deavon being the last to enter the room. “What happened?”

Deavon gave his patented answer to avoid the question, “What do you mean?”

Mike interrupted, “We had a disagreement last night, that’s all.”

Teller decided to let it go and focused on their agenda. “We need to cross the plains today. The Great Battle will soon occur, and you will need to choose your paths.”

“We get to choose? All we want to do is go home. Is that a choice?” Deavon looked at Teller the same way he looked at Tony the night before.

Teller saw the young man was upset but had no idea why he was so full of anger. “Whether you choose to assist or not, the choices made by others will affect your destiny.”

“Why are we supposed to trust you? I mean, what if you’re playing us? Huh?” Deavon moved toward the old man as he spoke.

“Deavon, come on.” Tony jumped in realizing his brother was taking out his frustration on the old man.

“No, I won’t. He’s been leading us on for weeks like we’re sheep. Maybe Solus was right. Did you ever think of that?” Deavon blurted out the name no one dared to speak.

Tony looked down to avoid eye contact with the exiled leader from Galea.

Teller looked at the foster child from Argentina. “Solus?”

Deavon now was joined by Mike who realized the secret was out and had nothing to lose. “Yeah, he said you’re the one who is trying to kill him and that you’re some wizard of some kind.”

Teller laughed. “Wizard?” Mike continued ignoring the Galian’s response. “We could have gone home last night but thanks to you, Tony stopped us.”

The Galean looked at Tony acknowledging the courage it took in that moment. "What did Erin say when all this was going on?"

Deavon, still angry replied, "That it was a trap. Tony was ready to join us and then all of a sudden he changed his mind, like you have no idea."

The Galean gathered the children. After having them sit down, he continued the discussion. "If you have a question about a person's intention, look at what they do and not at what they say. Is Talus a follower of Solus?"

The four responded, "Yes."

"And have we not fought on more than one occasion those ordered by the emperor to kill us?" continued Teller.

Deavon interrupted, "Yeah, but Solus said he's misguided and regrets delivering us into your hands."

"And yet we are still hunted. Have you asked Erin what she saw?" asked Teller.

Mike and Deavon shook their heads.

"Knowing her gift, why did you not believe her?" persisted Teller.

Mike spoke, "Because you're a wizard making us believe we've been given gifts."

"Have I done anything to make you think that I am a wizard? Would I have allowed all that has happened to Deavon, Tony, or me? Queried Teller.

Deavon wanted to be difficult. "Maybe."

Teller looked at the children. "Even when it would have been in my own interest, have I lied to you?" The children thought about what Teller had told them. Reluctantly, after having nothing more to say, Deavon along with Mike ended their disagreement.

"So, why would Solus want to send us home?" whined Deavon.

Erin spoke up, "He didn't. He was going to devour you."

Deavon looked at Teller apologizing without words.

"He was so convincing," added Mike.

The Leader of Galea continued, "That is why Talus is blind to his own actions. If he could see the pain he has caused, he would no longer follow The Darkness, but he believes in order for goodness to prevail others must suffer in the process."

"So why are we so important to Solus?" asked Tony.

The teacher instructed his students. "You have been given gifts. These gifts can defeat The Darkness, but only if you decide to use them. I cannot force you to join the fight nor can Solus force you to standby. This is why The Darkness seeks to destroy you, so you will have no power."

Mike, now feeling a little embarrassed by her actions, said, "So when do we have to choose?"

Teller looked at all before him. "Each person will be forced to commit themselves to the battle at their appointed time. If one falters, the others will fail so all must decide as one."

Deavon asked the obvious question the others had avoided, "So what does this have to do with us? We're from another place and time. You guys are still using spears while we've got atomic bombs. Let's face it, win or lose, once we're home we get to live our lives and forget this place."

Teller looked at the foster child. "Your weapons may be great, but don't forget the powers you have here. Those who follow Talus will have similar powers in your world. How would ten thousand soldiers of darkness change life in your time?"

The four then realized that Talus' aspirations could not only affect them but those they loved as well.

"Okay, I'm in." Deavon decided if for nothing else, he would fight for his new family.

Teller looked at Tony referring to the conversation they had in the cave. He patted Tony on the back and softly said, "Goal."

Kerato and Phago arrived in Cornea. Neither wanted to return empty handed but news of their experience needed to be shared. Talus had to see the danger growing in the form of these children. The emperor looked in disbelief when the Atresians recounted their story.

"So let me get this straight," Talus tried to imagine the event that he had just heard. "A half lion, half tiger... no...four of them attacked you killing eight of the best hunters in Atresia."

Kerato confirmed the emperor's statement.

Lacunae, annoyed by their failure, spoke in a contemptuous tone, "So, you are here because?"

Phago replied, "Because of the mercy shown by the one who created the beasts."

"Mercy? Fools! They have allowed you to return to mock Talus, and you have done their bidding."

Kerato spoke directly to his friend, "We only returned to make you aware of the danger not to embarrass you or Atresia."

"But somehow you managed to do both," Lacunae continued her discourse. "And where's Carina?"

Phago explained. "She was killed after mortally wounding the one they call Teller with an arrow."

"So, the enemy of Solus is dead?" asked the queen.

Kerato paused before speaking knowing the answer would not please the queen. "The girl with the black hair healed him."

Talus shook his head in disbelief. Having seen them, it was impossible for the emperor to envision these children being the same in the story.

"Healed him? The queen's anger increased. "And you stood by to witness Carina's death?"

Phago glanced at his cohort before speaking, "Yes, being unarmed and faced with magic beyond this world, we had no choice."

Lacunae desired to see them dead but thought better of it. "Leave my sight and never let me see you again."

The Atresians bowed before complying with her request.

After their departure Talus spoke, "I can't believe it. Tony is a warrior of the stature of Radius? Deavon was a conjuror of mystical creatures, and Mike was a healer similar to your father. How can this be?"

Lacunae spoke softly, "Teller is using magic to make others believe they have powers beyond this world. These children are nothing more than those who quaked before you."

The emperor paused. "Do you really think so?"

The queen stroked his hair. "Victory for Solus is at hand. Those who fear him are becoming desperate. By creating legends, Teller can lead more to their death."

Talus relaxed knowing that Hallicus was close to opening Celestia to the Atresians and soon, having already defeated the spirits, he would be able to defeat The One.



Rani was the first to hear and see those arriving from Galea. Having just enough food and shelter for their own people, the new arrivals were not a welcome sight. Rani entered the tent to inform the high chief of the chaos as the hoards of people settled around them. "What are we going to do? They are like grains of sand in a desert. I cannot count how many have settled among us."

Sem nodded. "I will call for Alba immediately."

Alba was found among those who had arrived. He had taken great care to make sure his people did not disturb those already dwelling on the land. Even with that said the mass of people was so great it spanned over a league. The Plainsmen, who were sent to find Alba, brought him back to the high chief. Once in the Sem's tent, Alba was forced to sit down in front of the high chief by the hands of the two warriors who escorted him.

Sem, tired of Teller's manipulations, glared at Alba. "Explain to me, Glean, how could thousands of people arrive in one place all at the same time?"

Teller's apprentice adjusted himself in the chair before responding. "It is the calling prior to The Great Battle."

"Calling?" queried Sem.

"Yes, Teller will arrive shortly; that is why they have come," answered Alba.

Sem was not pleased. "You'll need to gather someplace else. We do not appreciate those who trespass on our land."

Alba looked up at the high chief. "Can we wait until Teller arrives? Once he's here all your questions and concerns will be answered."

Sem knew he had two choices: Wait and persuade Teller to lead his people elsewhere or drive the interlopers off from the Northern Plains. Even if it were done peaceably, it will take more effort than the Plainsmen were willing muster. "They may stay until Teller arrives but if the old man doesn't arrive within the week, I will hold you responsible."

Alba thanked the high chief as he rose from his chair. "I will lead them back to Galea personally." The disciple hoped that would not happen but with or without Teller, The Great Battle would take place soon and he would lead them if necessary.

Teller arrived the next morning with the four strangers, along with Dalton and Salpingo. Dalton separated himself from the rest to look for

Sem while the others followed Teller. The leader of Galea sought to find his disciple Alba in order to ascertain the Plainsmen's desire to follow the children to Cornea.

"I have never seen so many people in one place in my entire life." Deavon could not see the end of the Galean camp.

"Look over there." Tony pointed toward the refugees of Calyx. Their camp was as impressive having spanned a similar distance with their tents as well.

"Are they all going to fight with us?" asked Deavon.

Teller looked at Deavon, "I do not know, but we will leave with those who choose to follow. I hope that when we depart most will decide to join us in our march west."

"So when do I have to make a decision?" Mike looked at Teller to assert her position of importance.

"You have already made it. The only person who does not know the answer is you."

The girl from China sulked not obtaining the response she desired. "Don't I have any say in this thing?"

The leader of Galea turned toward the girl from China. "If it weren't for you, three of us would be in Celestia. Your desire for greatness is born from your insecurity. You are a child of The One. Is there anything greater than that?"

"Well yeah, a little admiration would be nice," snipped Mike.

Teller laughed incredulously. "Every Guardian of Light admires you for being a descendant of The One."

Mike felt like she was now being ridiculed.

The old man continued, "What we accomplish here being great or small, being noteworthy, or remaining anonymous can only be measured by its selflessness and not by how it impresses others."

Mike did not like being reminded of her past discretions, the desire to forsake all others for herself. The girl from China now had to overcome such desires knowing that their survival in this world depended on it.

Erin looked at the old man. "What happens now?"

Teller looked at the youngest child. "We will see Alba and then I will address the council."

Salpingo found a place to make camp between the designated areas. Mike was not happy seeing the structure the guide had made. "Can't you make one like Dalton?"

The guide scoffed, "Salpingo makes a shelter; Plainsmen make a lean-to."

Tony thanked their guide for his effort knowing Mike had offended him. "In this wind I'd rather be enclosed."

Erin took time to venture into the spiritual realm. There, Acromion awaited her return. The child noticed a large storm cloud on the horizon. Calling out to the Guardian of Light, Erin pointed to the darkness in the sky. "What's that?"

Acromion replied, "All of the followers of Solus are gathering either here or in Celestia. The cloud is actually thousands of spirits preparing for the encounter."

Erin looked around hoping to see a white cloud of similar size. "Where are our spirits?"

The Guardian of Light smiled. "We're it."

Erin did not smile back. "What do mean we're it?"

Acromion looked at the child. "You have more inside of you than a mere cloud of demons."

"You're going to help me, right?" asked Erin.

The spirit looked at the child. "No, I will be called to assist another."

"Well, what about the others I saw earlier, where are they?" wondered Erin.

The Acromion opened his arms. "They have returned to where they've been called. Some are in Celestia while others are here with those in need."

Erin looked at the ominous cloud. "So I must protect us against them?"

The Guardian of Light looked at the child curiously. "After all you have seen and done, do you still have doubts?"

Erin looked at the spirit. "Yeah, well I'm scared."

Acromion spoke in an assuring tone, "Fear allows you to pause before moving forward. Sometimes it stops you from doing something reckless. Other times it challenges you when you are uncertain but if you remain in fear, the reason behind it will never be known."

Erin tried to comprehend what Acromion said but couldn't. "So what does that have to do with a 1000 demons and me?"

The Guardian of Light smiled. "If you believe in The One, then trust in The One."

Dalton entered the tent of the high chief. Sem recognized the Plainsman as Vellus' brother so no introduction was needed.

Dalton, knowing that Sem was the last to see Vellus before the battle of Teres, asked, "So how's my brother's family?"

Sem responded solemnly, "They are safe within Hilus Valley. There they are being watched by my tribe."

Dalton sat down, poured himself a drink, and then offered one to his brother's best friend. "I needed to talk to you privately before the others find out about the children."

Refusing the offer of wine, Sem replied, "Children?"

Sem had no idea of the events that were unfolding beyond the plains. Dalton then realized that his brother's friend was in need of the information he was about to impart.

"About two weeks ago, from what I gather, a group of children from another place, some say strangers to our world, found themselves in Cornea. Under the brilliant leadership of Talus, they were immediately imprisoned with Teller. The Galen leader, having been foretold of their arrival, arranged in advance for their escape. Teller then cultivated their abilities. The one they call Tony, I was told, defeated twenty Atresians single handedly. I doubted the story but I have heard from those who have witnessed his ability and will say it is possible. Mike, the older girl, can heal the gravest of wounds. It was said that she brought Teller back to life after an arrow felled him. The most amazing of the four is the younger boy who created beasts unknown to us out of thin air and controlled them. Then, as easily as they were conjured by this Deavon, he made them vanish. The youngest girl has an ability I have yet to understand, but it has to do with the unseen. She's somehow connected to the spiritworld that Teller calls Celestia. I was lucky enough to run across them when I was asked by a follower of The One to guide them here."

Sem looked across the table; still skeptical, he reached for an empty goblet. "I'll take that drink now."

Vellus' brother poured him some wine and handed it to the high chief. "And I'm supposed to believe all this?" asked Sem.

Dalton finished his drink. "Believe it or not, I am telling you what I know." "So how can we use this information to aid Calyx?" asked Sem.

The younger brother of Vellus leaned in toward Sem for effect. "It was predicted by those who follow The One that there is going to be a great battle. All who are here will be asked to join, including the Plainsmen. Those who agree with Teller are going to try to retake Cornea and the Temple of Moralis. As I see it, we have two options: join the Galeans or launch a second offensive on Teres, reclaiming what we have lost."

Sem smiled at the thought of it then he sat back as he pondered the possibilities. "How can we prevent Talus from attacking us again?"

Dalton continued, "Why stop at the border of Calyx? If we advance onto Capnia, the Atresians will revolt against their king and all will be as it was before the ghost-following drunk took over from his father."

Sem nodded seeing the end game. "So in defending Cornea against the Galeans, Talus will lose his crown."

Dalton then added, "And his head."

"So what should I do about these children you speak of?" queried Sem.

Dalton poured himself another glass of wine. "We need to make it appear as if we are supportive to their cause. That way if the children survive, we will not be seen as their enemy but as an ally."

The high chief finished the thought, "Guaranteeing security of Calyx."

Dalton smiled then left to return to the others.

Alba embraced his teacher when they met. "Teller, I am so grateful to The One for your safe arrival. I was preparing to lead those who would follow me into The Great Battle."

"You would have done fine, my dear friend. It's not me who will bring victory but God. So even if I were unable to do so, The One would have been in command," extolled Teller.

Alba looked at the four strangers in awe. "Are these the ones which are foretold of in the prophecy?"

The teacher turned back as he introduced each one to his disciple. "This is Tony, our sword." Then pointing to the youngest, "This is Erin, our shield."

Alba nodded in reverence.

"This is Mike, our redemption."

The disciple clasped his hands as he looked toward the sky.

"And this, my dearest friend, is Deavon who embodies creation."

The Galean could not contain himself any longer. "Praise The One!"

The children swelled with pride after hearing their titles and Alba's response to them.

"When can we share the good news with the others?" asked Alba.

Teller looked at his disciple. Putting his hands on Alba's shoulders he said, "We'll call a Nissl tonight."

"A Nissl?" asked Deavon.

The old man looked at Deavon. "It's a gathering of those who follow The One at which time we will plan for The Great Battle."

"Will we have a say at this Nissl?" asked Mike.

Teller looked at Mike. "Of course, without you there would be no gathering."

The Plainsman returned to the camp that Salpingo had laid out. After making Mike another shelter, to Salpingo's chagrin, Dalton talked about his visit with Sem. "You can stay as long as you need to prepare for the war against Talus."

Teller looked at the Plainsman. "Have you told him of our request?"

"There will be a council to discuss it," answered Dalton.

The Leader of Galea asked his last question, "May I attend?"

Dalton, thinking his attendance would not be a good idea, responded in kind. "I would say a matter of this importance would preclude strangers from attending, but you can ask the high chief."

"Does he know about the children?" asked Teller.

Dalton spoke honestly, "I told him what I have seen and heard, so he'll know the truth without exaggeration."

"And does he want to speak to them?" asked Teller.

Dalton replied, "He would gladly grant them an audience but didn't want to impose upon their time."

Teller motioned in agreement. "I see, then I will discuss everything with him tomorrow. Could you arrange that for me?"

The Plainsman complied, "I would be honored to arrange such a meeting."

# REUNION

Pharynx and Sura arrived the same day as Teller. Having settled in among the Galeans, they were welcomed without question. Rumors had spread among those in the camp about the strangers, but most were born from the imaginations of those who had never seen them. When the Galean leader, along with the children, arrived at the encampment, they were escorted away from the Galeans to prevent any anticipated rush toward them. Alba spoke that night to the believers of The One in large groups, mainly discussing the hope and trials of events that would soon come to pass. The disciple promised that Teller would address them the next day and asked them to allow those with their leader to rest peaceably. Though most respected Alba's request, some did sneak a peek at the children. The Galeans who did were astonished at how unimposing they appeared to be. Sura returned after obtaining a glance of the strangers. "The hope of my revenge rests in these children."

Pharynx kept preparing the food given to them by the Assembly. "Relax Sura, I know things are not as they appear. Teller's strategy is working out perfectly. He says The One has guided him here but let's examine the facts. First of all, he allowed Calyx to fall to Atresia. Because the Plainsmen remain hostile to their occupiers, our king has had to keep a force behind to ensure the peace. Then Talus invaded Galea. Did Teller meet him with a sword? No, and do you want to know why?"

Sura looked at him curiously but didn't respond.

"Because of The Great Battle. Teller may tell everyone that it was written in the stars or that God led him to this moment, but I know better. It's an end game. Teller gave up territory to spread Talus' forces thin, and now he intends to attack our king while he is at his weakest." Pharynx, amazed by the thought of it, stood up. "And in a foreign land no less!"

Sura was not as impressed as her counterpart. "So a bunch of refugees and some kids are going to defeat an Atresian army?"

Pharynx started to become annoyed by her lack of vision. "Look around, have you ever seen so many people gather for a single purpose? And those children you speak of, they are the rallying cry for the Galeans. And if Teller has his way, they will be the instrument in getting the Plainsmen to go along with his plan."

Sura looked around seeing the fires lighting two large cities around her. Pointing toward the various lights, she restated Pharynx's assertion. "So even if they are only rumors, as long as those around us believe in the children, Talus' fate will be sealed in this battle." A smile came across her face knowing that Lacunae would meet the same end.

Pharynx put his arm around her shoulder as he continued. "And we are not only here to support them but to aid Flavin in Talus' downfall."

Hoping to regain her title she asked, "For the good of Atresia?"

Pharynx looked at the commoner once royal. "For the good of Atresia."

The next morning was filled with excitement. Teller was to speak to those who followed him into the wilderness. The Leader of Galea was met with such applause that the Plainsmen could not ignore the followers of The One's admiration. Teller raised his hands. As a hush fell over the crowd, the Glean began to speak.

"My children of The One, we are here on the eve of The Great Battle. Soon all will be asked to join me to free Cornea, Teres, and Capnia from The Darkness that has invaded our world. This battle is not a test of strength but a question of faith. The true lord of Celestia will be known in the trials ahead. I have brought four strangers with me, those who are not of this world. They now know the reason behind their arrival and are preparing to help us defeat Solus and those who follow him."

The crowd roared again to the annoyance of those not involved.

Teller continued, "As we draw closer to that day, I will guide you in our journey and lead us back to our temple. Until then, pray and be at peace with one another. May The One give us strength and hope as we fulfill our destiny."

The Galeans roared once more in approval of their teacher. Teller stepped down from the rock he used as a podium and returned to his camp. As he looked across to where the Plainsmen dwelled, all he could do was hope that The One could change the hearts of those choosing another way.



After spending the morning with his people, Teller went to the high chief. The Galean leader sat after being granted permission by Sem. The Plainsman remembered being in the old man's position and having Teller send him away. As a result, Vellus died defending Teres and Calyx was now a third in size of what it once was.

"I will listen but the memory of our last meeting haunts me. As high chief I must consider all possibilities, even those from people I disdain. So with that said, how can you assist us in regaining our land?"

Teller was not fazed by the Plainsmen's remarks. He did not take it personally. At the time of their last discussion the events had not yet unfolded to reveal Talus' true threat upon mankind.

"Soon," said Teller, "there will be a battle to determine the future of our people. This will be unlike any other since it involves Celestia itself. If Talus wins, Solus will destroy the world and all who inhabit it. Since we are of The One, we are considered the enemy of The Darkness. Whether you choose to believe or not, the fact remains that Solus wants to devour all that was created by the god he despises."

Sem sat listening. Seeing that the old man was passionate and serious, he suppressed his first impulse, which was to laugh. "So I see you're still convinced Solus wants to obliterate humanity. Alba argued quite eloquently your position and the need for us to join in your fight."

Teller remained undaunted. "I have brought evidence in the form of four strangers who are not of this world. They have been given gifts far beyond any conjuror or talisman known."

"You mean the children?" asked Sem.

"Yes, they are in the form of adolescents," explained Teller.

Sem hesitated before continuing his discourse. He did not want to anger the strangers who would be useful to his cause. "I would like to see them, but only if they can spare the time."

The Leader of Galea rose from his chair. "I know I cannot convince you of the crisis facing our people but perhaps they can."

Sem remained unconvinced as he watched Teller depart.

Twelve people, including the children, gathered around the fire. Deavon looked at the unfamiliar faces and asked, "Who are they?"

Teller realized before an introduction was to be made that an explanation of their presence was required.

“These are the people who provide me council with each person contributing to our discussion from their unique perspective. There are three such views at hand here before you: the Seers like Lauric and Myelin read the stars and interpret the heavens; the Sayers like Falx and Psoas speak of dreams and visions; and the Sharers like Alba, Leucine, and Christa of Galli are involved with the community, giving us insight on the concerns and hopes of our people.”

Deavon looked at Teller. “And what about you?”

The leader of Galea smiled. “I am a Teller of The One. My real name was lost years ago as with all who assume the title. I try to do the best for my people while remaining sensitive to God’s desire to bring them closer to The Light.”

“So how does this thing start?” Mike was cold and wanted to get it over with so she could find a warm bed.

Teller then made a proclamation to all in attendance.

“We are here on the cusp of The Great Battle. Our hope is to discover The One’s true desire for us so we may spare the world of Solus’ destruction. The four among us have found their gifts and are ready for the challenges that await them. We must prepare ourselves and those who will follow us against The Darkness.”

Teller then turned to Mike and said, “Something like that usually gets us going.”

Psoas spoke next, “I have seen Talus enter Celestia. It will not be long before he returns to challenge The One.”

Lauric added to the Sayer’s concern, “The stars have revealed to me the same concerning events. Never has there been a time of such a disturbance in the heavens.”

Teller looked at Christa of Galli to speak; The Sharer was renowned for his work beyond Galea, having traveled as far as Annular to teach those about The One. “I have never seen such battered spirits as those who have followed us here. They have nothing but the belief that we can restore their lives once The Darkness has been eradicated from our world. I fear that once in battle the Galeans will grow weary and lose

heart. If that happens we will fail in reclaiming the Temple of Moralis, which lies in our capital city. Without spirit, a hundred Atresians could defend Cornea.”

Myelin added, “Then we must find a way to encourage them.” The Seer looked at the children. “And that is why you are here.”

Deavon didn't like being known as encouragement. To him that was a nice way to say, “Use the kids to get the people to fight for us”.

Tony bristled over the fact that they intended to have him lead those who followed into the breach. A position only a fool would take knowing they would be the first to fall.

Mike looked confused and stared at the various people who spoke. “So why are we here?”

Deavon and Tony looked at their sister in agreement, having wished that they thought to ask first.

Teller spoke among those who were seated, “We are here to discuss the possibilities and challenges that are facing us. Some are easy like our need to return to Cornea to defeat Talus. Others are more complicated like convincing the Plainsmen to follow us when they desire to fight for their own homes instead.”

Tony spoke next, “So why the talk about us like we're tools of your god when all we want to do is go home?”

“Yeah, is that why you brought us here?” Deavon was just as annoyed as his brother.

Erin quelled the discussion. “You don't understand, Tony. These people see only bits and pieces of a giant puzzle while trying to make sense of it.” Erin then looked at the followers of The One. “Tony is right. All we want to do is find our way home. Along the way we have been given gifts that can help you, but those gifts were given to help us, too. What ever happens in this big battle will happen. So can we talk about helping each other instead of how we can help ourselves?”

The Nissl became silent.

Lauric was the first to respond, “If we do not defeat Solus, then there will be no hope or home to go to.”

Teller smiled at Erin. “Before we continue on this path let the child speak, so my dear Erin, what do you see?”

The girl continued, "Acromion has told me that Talus has invaded Celestia and plans to attack The One soon but that is not our concern. Ours is simply to free those here from the emperor who has taken over your land. Talus is not a bad man; he is just being misled. Most people are, you know, misled. He has been convinced that our cause is evil and that we want to control everyone. By not listening to each other and saying, 'It's God's way this or it's God's way that, are we not just proving him right?'"

Lauric interrupted her, "If we are not to instruct those who are blind, then how do we teach people about the ways of The One?"

The girl's passion did not waver. "By living as if we believe. Our examples are God's message. We are supposed to help people see that The One loves everybody. To think God doesn't care about some while caring for others would be like asking my mom or dad to choose which of us kids they want to take home. My parents would never leave any of us behind nor would God."

After a pause Leucine spoke next, "So with that said how do we help each other?"

Erin looked at Tony and Deavon. "They're right you know. We need to help them. They won't stop Talus without us."

Myelin softened his approach. "She's right. What can I say or do to convince you?"

Tony was about to speak when Deavon interrupted, "You can all stop talking about us like we are not even here."

Christa of Galli replied, "You're right, my friend in The One. We can easily see how you can help us but the question remains: how are we able to help you?"

Teller spoke once more, "The will of The One will make itself known once all has been fulfilled. Until then, we can only plan for what we know."

Mike retorted, "Well, I'm not going to be some Joan of Arc for Galea or anyone else for that matter."

"Really, it's a great role. Heck you might win an Oscar," said Tony.

Mike laughed, not only at Tony's joke but at herself.

Tony spoke once more to the Nissl, "Okay, we'll help but on our terms. All right?"

The followers of The One looked at Tony in agreement. The only thing left was to see who would follow the strangers back to Galea.

While the Galeans discussed the spiritual world, the Plainsmen talked about the physical one. Sem had arranged to have a council that night so Teller could not attend.

Sem spoke to the chiefs who had assembled, "An opportunity has arrived in the form of Teller and the strangers. Dalton has informed me of the unusual powers that these children possess. The leader of Galea is planning to return to Cornea and defeat Talus. We must decide how this can be used to free Calyx from the Atresians. I have been given two options, but others may be offered. The first is to follow Teller to Cornea and help defeat the enemy that occupies our land. The second is to retake Teres and then continue our march onto Capnia. Whatever we choose, we must not alienate these children, because their loyalty lies with Teller. My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council."

The Chief of Elad spoke next, "I am a Plainsman and as a native of this land I believe in fighting for what is ours. How can we reclaim our land by attacking our enemy in another's backyard? No, our opportunity is in returning to Teres and if needed, attacking Capnia. How could we look at ourselves if we join Teller and fail? No, let me die on my own soil. My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council."

Que from the city of Turcica added to the older chief's thought. "Our opportunity lies in Teres. If Teller was to fail, we would still have our foot on our enemy's throat. Talus would no longer have a kingdom, and his strength would be in those who survived Teller's onslaught. The so-called emperor would be too busy trying to save his own neck to bother with us. The only problem I see is convincing these strangers that we are joined in the same fight. My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council."

Zeis from the southern mountains provided another view. "If we miss the opportunity to defeat our enemy where he dwells, then we are open to his revenge. Better to kill him in a foreign land than allow him to attack us in ours. By cutting off the head, the beast will die. The Atresians would return to their homes having no desire to defend a land not their own. If Teller becomes victorious, he will remain in the temple.

Calyx would be again at peace. Atresia would be in disarray with no king or heir apparent. I say let's join Teller. The children will be our allies, and we will lose less of our people in battle. I understand the concern of those who would rather defend our homes, but the threat remains if Teller loses. If Teller wins, then Calyx would be free. My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council."

Tensor, the chief of Celia, echoed a similar sentiment. "Talus is our true enemy not Atresia. Was it not Clavius who spared Vellus' life? Were we not at peace until Talus rallied his people against us? So who threatens us? If we stop the emperor, we stop the madness that has taken over our world. If we attack Capnia, the Atresians may rally behind their king, making Talus stronger. My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council."

After several more comments, it was clear to all that the council was split. No majority could be reached. Sem would have to decide. Rani spoke having a perspective different than those who stood earlier. "We are rushing to decide the fate of our people without the benefit of the facts. Perhaps we should see these children and what they are capable of doing. If they have powers beyond this world, we should consider joining them. It would be a great loss if they were killed and Talus survived because we failed to choose the right path. If they are just stories made by people full of imagination, then we will know our course lies in regaining Teres. Maybe a test could determine the truth behind the rumors we have heard. I believe Sem should meet these strangers and learn more about who they are. Then we can meet again to determine our destiny. My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council."

Sem ended the discussion after listening to all of those who wanted to speak. "I'll visit with these strangers and determine our next course of action. If needed, a second council will be held, but I am confident that it will not be. As Plainsmen we will do what is best for Calyx and as your high chief I will give my life for her people. I will make my decision after learning all there is about these strangers. Not only am I concerned about the days to come but also how this will affect our children. May the Spirit of our Brethren be with us." When the council ended, Sem returned to his tent.

The high chief found Dalton was waiting for his arrival. "So how did it go?"

Sem was not happy. "The council was torn between reclaiming Teres and seeking Talus in Cornea."

"So what happens now?" asked Dalton.

The high chief grabbed a goblet and filled it with wine. "I must see these strangers of yours and determine our next course of action."

"So we're heading to Teres, right?" asked Dalton.

Sem looked at Vellus' brother. "If I had my way, I would, but it's not about me. Calyx must be united in any decision I make; if not, we will fail."

Dalton joined his brother's friend in partaking of the wine. With nothing more to say, they quietly drank.

Fulcrum returned having gathered the information Lacunae demanded. "They have gathered on the Northern Plains. Teller will lead his believers in an attack on Cornea."

The queen laughed. "Oh really, and how are a bunch of farmers and a few shepherds going to defeat an Atresian army?"

The captain again was in the unfavorable position of telling the court more bad news. "There's more." Fulcrum cleared his throat. "They hope to convince the Plainsmen to join them."

Lacunae remained amused. "And how do you think Teller will manage that?"

The soldier braced himself for the queen's anger to what he was about to say, "The strangers have been seen to have amazing powers. A child named Deavon even has the ability to conjure animals from thin air. Teller intends to display these powers to the Plainsmen."

The mystic was no longer smiling. "What?"

Fulcrum repeated all that he had heard. Lacunae looked at her husband. "So the stories are true. I thought Kerato made up the story to spare himself from your sword. I will seek guidance from Solus on this matter."

Fulcrum, being dismissed, sought Osseous to inform him of the impending assault. Not only did they have to plan for an attack from the Galeans but from the beasts created from a boy's imagination.

Lacunae brought Talus into a small room where she called upon her master. Talus looked upon her as she entered her trance. Waiting for a reply from The Darkness, the mystic returned, smiling. "It's going to be okay. Our master has confirmed that the strangers have indeed grown

since you last saw them, but they cannot change the outcome that will occur. Prepare your troops to enter Celestia. All is going as planned. Your father will be free from The Light and all will know the truth.” Reassured, they returned to the throne room.

As Hallicus entered he asked, “How can I be of service?”

Lacunae spoke first, “The strangers have grown powerful. So much so that Teller feels confident in regaining Cornea. We need to eliminate The One before they arrive.”

The high priest frowned. Looking at the king he replied, “We have been able to create more portals to Celestia but none bigger than the one you entered.”

Talus responded, “I see.”

The king thought for a moment. “How many could we send through the existing portals?”

The mystic looked up as if he was visualizing Celestia itself. “We have ten maybe twelve portals opened. We could send forty or fifty through each portal before they would begin to draw the attention of those who exist there.”

Lacunae looked at Talus. “With Solus beside you, would that be enough?”

The emperor looked at his beloved. “I will need to lead the first assault, but we would need to have others follow to attack in waves, four or five thousand at least.”

Lacunae questioned her husband, “How many spirits do you think are out there?”

“Hundreds, thousands, I don’t know for sure. All I know is that we can hurt them. If Solus joined in our attack, we could hold them off until the others arrived.”

Lacunae nodded as she looked at the high priest. “Hallicus, continue to punch holes into Celestia. The more Atresians who can enter the spiritual plains, the better for Talus.”



# TOTCHPAK

Sem called upon Teller the next day. “The council wished me to inquire more about the strangers among us.”

The leader of Galea sat down. “That would be best for everyone. I will arrange the meeting. Can we return this afternoon?”

The high chief looked upon the old man with suspicion. “We?”

“Yes, if I were not present, they would not feel comfortable.”

Sem submitted, “Very well, but I ask that you do not interfere with our discussion.”

Teller looked at the high chief. “Of course. I have nothing more to offer since our last conversation.”

As the sun turned westward, the children entered the high chief’s domicile. Enough chairs were placed for those who were in attendance. Mike noticed the stove in the middle of the tent and quickly became envious. The four sat down at the request of their host. Teller sat beside Erin while Mike sat closest to the warmth.

After being introduced, the high chief spoke to his guests, “The people of Calyx want to know you better. I have asked you here to see if we can help each other meet our objectives.”

“Objectives.” The girl from China looked at Tony. “We have objectives?”

Tony looked back and then turned toward Sem. “Our main desire is to stay alive and eventually get back home; it seems that Talus has an issue with that.”

“I see, so why do you follow Teller?”

Deavon interjected, “Because he has been the only one so far who has cared about us.”

The high chief then asked, “Where is home and how do you hope to get there?”

Mike couldn’t resist. “Home is where we have heat at our command by turning a switch. Our houses are made of wood with soft furniture and beds.”

"I don't completely understand, but it sounds nice. How do you plan to get back?" Sem asked the girl from China who now was hovering over the stove.

"I don't know; ask Tony." Mike sounded dejected having no answer.

The high chief looked at Tony. "Do you have any ideas?"

The young man responded, "No. We're hoping that when we accomplish whatever we need to do here, an opportunity will open up for us."

"Who told you that," asked Sem.

"Teller kind of said it, but he didn't promise us anything," Tony spoke confidently trying to not reveal their insecurity about the situation.

"And what if you remain here? What do you plan to do," asked Sem.

Deavon interrupted, "We'll keep looking for a way home."

Sem continued, "What do you feel you need to accomplish?"

Tony looked at the high chief. "It seems like we're part of this war. I guess we need to finish it before we can move on."

"Do you feel you need help from us to win this war?" asked Sem.

Tony responded, "The Galeans are not soldiers."

"And you feel that our warriors could make the difference?"

Deavon jumped in once more. "Well, I don't know. Have you looked around? The Plainsmen haven't done a bang up job by themselves."

Sem did not appreciate the comment but tried not to show it. The high chief looked at Tony. "Some of us have thought that by attacking Teres at the same time it would divide the forces Atresia has between two fronts."

The leader of the four strangers thought for a moment. "Why would you attack Teres instead?"

"It would be easier for me to rally my people to free our capital than to enter another country and free theirs," said Sem.

Tony nodded. "I understand."

Erin looked at her older brother. "What about Solus?"

Tony looked at his younger sister before speaking to Sem. "There's only one problem. If we were fighting Talus that would make sense, but he is being led by a spirit who doesn't care about Atresia or its king."

The high chief looked disappointed at having his best argument shot down. "And how would that affect Atresia's response to our attacks on

Teres and Cornea?" Sem was hoping to persuade the elder child after hearing his thought on the subject.

"If Talus was working alone, your plan would work, but Solus cares only for the destruction of Celestia. The Darkness would rather see Talus lose his head than risk losing this opportunity. If anything, Talus would be convinced to pull out from Teres to defend Cornea," analyzed Tony.

"Then we could continue toward Capnia pressuring the Atresians to retreat," countered Sem.

Tony didn't bite. "I'm sorry but even if you occupied the castle and sat on the throne in Capnia yourself, Talus would not yield. Cornea is where Solus has focused his attention. The emperor is committed to the very end."

Sem knew he had lost the first volley. The high chief then changed his line of questioning. "You have put me in a curious position. How do I convince my people to forsake defending their own home for the sake of another's?"

Tony responded, "I don't know but if we fail, no one will survive Solus' reign, not even Talus."

The high chief thought. "I heard from Dalton that you all have certain abilities. Is there a way you could prove them to us?"

Deavon interrupted once more, "Mike ain't healing anyone. Remember the last time? She'd be here all month curing everything from earaches to hemorrhoids."

"Eeeeeew!" Mike shuttered at the thought.

Tony refocused on the question at hand. "Could Deavon create something?"

"I'm sorry but some would accuse you of magic or slight of hand. In either case, the Plainsmen only respect one's physical ability in battle," challenged Sem.

Tony was at a loss. He didn't know how to persuade the high chief and without the Plainsmen, the battle would be far more difficult to win. If the strangers could not prove their worth, how could they expect Sem to convince his warriors to join their fight?

"How about Totchpak," Sem cocked his head having heard a voice different from the rest.

"What," questioned Sem?

Teller continued, "The people of Calyx revere their champions in this particular game. If Tony were to, say, meet a challenger and prove his worth to your people, would that help?"

Sem was caught off guard and he knew it. "Well, it would go a long way but victory in a pit would not preclude absolute loyalty to your cause."

The Galean continued, "But it would allow me the right to address your council on our behalf."

Sem felt pressured but in the council he would still have the upper hand. "Yes, if Tony could either defeat our champion or defeat three Plainsmen at once, as our champion has done, I would honor your request."

Teller responded, "Tony will do both."

The foster child from Argentina looked surprised. The Galean had done it again. Not only did Tony have to win at a game he never heard of but take on three challengers and then their champion. Under his breath he whispered, "Way to go Teller."

That night the news spread through both camps. An arena was created using the terrain surrounding them. All was set for the event to start at midday. Tony sat by the fire muttering to himself.

"How hard could it be?" Deavon tried to encourage his brother.

The Argentinean glared at his cohort. "It would have been easier if you created a freakin zoo."

The Leader of Galea walked by, giving Tony an opportunity to question him. "Teller why did you do that? Wasn't it enough to just beat their champion?"

The old man sat down next to Tony. "If it were a wager I would say so, but we need to convince a thousand hearts."

Tony just shook his head feeling like he was caught in the middle again. "I'm going to bed."

The next morning Tony awoke feeling the crushing weight of other's expectations upon him. The fate of Teller's world and their hope of returning to theirs depended on what he did in a pit.

Salpingo drew a circle in the ground. The guide did not want to waste valuable time digging through the frost.

"Tie rope around your waist," instructed Salpingo.

Tony did exactly what the guide had shown him.

"You will be in a pit four feet deep ... first person to get out wins," explained the guide.

Salpingo tried to teach Tony some basic moves, but the strategy was lost by having to take on three opponents. After more than an hour they stopped.

"Salpingo can help you no more," the guide untied the rope attached to his waist to signal the end of Tony's training.

It was then Dalton walked by. "Anything goes within the arena so be careful." The Plainsmen was not offering advice but trying to play on Tony's mind.

"Thanks for the warning," gasped Tony who was still trying to catch his breath.

Teller walked over after Dalton had left. "Tony, remember you are not alone; The One has been with you. I would not have made such a bold statement without knowing the outcome."

Tony smiled hoping that the old man was right. The Argentinean looked down as he paused, taking a moment to prepare for the challenge he was about to undertake. Then, clasping his hands together, he said, "Okay, let's do it."

The high chief spoke to the four Plainsmen before entering the arena, "My brothers, we have an opportunity to free Teres. Our hope rests with you. If you fail, we may have to follow Teller to Cornea but if you win, no one can deny our desire to reclaim our home. Do not underestimate this child. He has abilities that transcend his age. I know you all have waited for an opportunity to prove yourselves after failing Vellus. This is your time."

The four who had allowed Vasa to escape walked out of the high chief's tent to the cheers of the Plainsmen who had gathered. Myx, Pons, and Keto would enter the pit first. If they were to fall short, Trochanter would be waiting. The hope of Teres rested on their shoulders so for the stranger who challenged them, there would be no mercy.

Tony walked with those who had been with him since the beginning. No one spoke, allowing him to gather his thoughts. He had hoped that in the aftermath nothing would be broken or worse. "In any event," he thought to himself, "Mike could fix it."

The crowd had cheered ecstatically for the Plainsmen. The Galeans, those who managed to get close enough, supported Tony but all knew the

three Plainsmen had the home field. Tony entered the pit for the first time. Four feet felt like forty as he descended. The ropes lay before him. Dalton stood between the three warriors and the novice. "Once you tie the cords around you the match begins. The first person to leave the pit wins."

Tony tied the knots tightly and pulled the ropes securely knowing that if it were to fall off, he would be disqualified. The young man was ready and the match was on.

The three charged the child. Tony avoided Keto but took Myx's blow. Keto flew over the boy who was falling down at the time. Holding his ribs, Tony scrambled away from the Plainsmen. Using his momentum, the young man got to his feet. Pons immediately ran to the edge of the pit as Myx and Keto charged again. Tony split the two while pulling on the rope that was attached to the one trying to win the match. The Argentinean paid dearly having been punched in the back as he passed through the combatants. Finding the ground once more, Tony separated himself from the warriors by scratching his way to the other side of the pit. Tony clung to the wall while keeping the three in view. The Plainsmen tried to surround him but were unable to draw Tony away from the edge. The men from Calyx then moved synchronously away from the stranger and started to lift themselves from the field of battle. Tony, purely by instinct, took them down by pulling on the ropes as they each started to lift themselves to the edge. The Plainsmen looked at each other.

So far, each attempt the Plainsmen made failed, but Tony had not made a move to win the match. That soon changed as the three warriors made a fatal mistake. For a brief moment they huddled together, allowing Tony to take advantage of their position. The foster child ran towards the group of Plainsmen. Flying feet first, he hit Myx who stood in the middle. Rolling away from Keto, he ran towards Pons who was caught in Myx's cord. Knocking over Pons, he pulled on the cord to his left causing Keto, who was caught in the rope, to trip over Myx before him. Jumping as if his life depended on it, Tony hoped that there was enough slack to make it to the edge. Rolling until the ropes became taught, he found himself on the outside looking in. Tony had won.

The Galeans cheered as the people of Calyx stood in silence. Tony had proven himself worthy to fight Trochanter, which made the upcoming

match even more interesting. Both contestants knew what was at stake for all who attended the match: For Sem it was a way to lead his people toward Teres without alienating the strangers, and for Teller it was an opportunity to save their world from its ultimate destruction. Tony was given time to quench his thirst and to rest.

"Are you okay," asked Mike who sounded concerned.

Tony looked at Mike. "Yeah, my ribs are killing me, but I can manage."

The girl from China looked into the young man's eyes. "Are you sure?"

Tony nodded. "Mike, I'm okay."

Deavon handed their new Totchpak champion some water. Tony half poured and half drank the liquid as he raised the goblet above his head before turning it downward.

Salpingo offered some advice just before Tony got back in the pit. "This man is strong and knows a lot of moves. Don't let him get a hold of you."

Tony smiled sarcastically. "Thanks."

The crowd cheered ecstatically as Trochanter entered the pit. The three men who had entered earlier were dwarfs compared to the giant who stood before him. Tony looked at the massive man before him, remembering Salpingo's sage advice. "Oh yeah, if he gets a hold of me, I'm dead."

The Plainsman tied the rope to his waist, leaving little to spare. Trochanter was taller than Talus and built like Vasa. The man from Calyx waited patiently for the young man to take the rope and wrap it around his waist. Tony stared at the massive figure as he tied the knot that would seal their fates. The man stood motionless until Tony seemed set.

Without warning the Plainsman pulled the rope toward him, causing Tony to lose his balance. In that moment of vulnerability and fear the sensation returned. The Argentinean began to see everything slow down. Twisting away from the Trochanter's large foot, a plume of dust rose where the boy's body was seconds before. Tony then kicked at his opponent's knee, allowing himself time to get up. The Plainsman limped as he reached for the cord between them, slowly pulling his victim into range. Tony ran head first into the man's stomach, causing the Plainsman to stumble more out of surprise than from force. Realizing he was in reach, Tony tumbled back taking the length of rope with him.

The first round was over as they took positions at each end of the cord and began circling each other. Trochanter pulled the line quickly while Tony countered by rolling forward. The child then attempted to kick at the Plainsman's bad leg, hoping to knock Trochanter off his feet. It was at that time Tony realized Salpingo's worse fear. The Plainsman picked up the child, lifting him over his head. Cheers erupted from the partisan crowd. Sem looked on hopeful of the expected outcome. Tony was helplessly sprawling in the air. Just as the Plainsman was about to deliver a crushing blow, Trochanter's knee, the one the Argentinean had kicked earlier, gave way. The mountain crumbled. Tony flew from the Plainsman's arms, knowing his only chance was to jump. Diving for the edge, Tony felt his body being pulled back. His face hit the hard dirt on the edge of the pit. His cheek stinging, he rolled to the right just as Trochanter approached the now vacated spot. As the Plainsman turned to grab the child before him, Tony scrambled between his legs. Then as Trochanter moved to catch him, the Argentinean ran around him before diving once more between the warrior's legs a second time. It was then Trochanter realized what the boy was doing. As the Plainsman tried to free his legs from the rope tangled within them, Tony pulled for all his worth, causing Trochanter to fall. The young man then ran towards the human mountain. Tony stepped on the Plainsman's chest just as Trochanter started to get up. Reaching out with his hands, all the Plainsman could grasp was air. The match was over. Tony had reached the edge. Teller looked at the high chief who appeared stunned by the event. "Please let me know when I will address the council."

Talus overlooked the city, imagining when it was a great power in the world. At the top of the palace he could see beyond its gates to the mountains looming south.

Turning to his general, the emperor spoke as they walked back inside, "So, they are planning to attack. The question is where and when."

Osseous followed his commander and chief down the stairs. "There are two possibilities, Your Highness; either the Galeans will convince the remnants of Calyx to join them, or the Plainsmen will take advantage of the Galean assault and try to reclaim Teres."



Talus, heading to the throne room, replied, "So what are we going to do to discourage them?"

The general headed to a table with a map of the territory. "In either case our best defense is to attack the Plainsmen where they are. If we allow them to approach Teres, the inhabitants may join the fight. To avoid this scenario we should send Oris to meet them. If those of Calyx choose to join the Galeans, the Governor of Lateralis can attack while their combined forces are still on the march."

Talus was impressed. "So in either case we can concentrate on a weaker force approaching Cornea."

The general affirmed the emperor's conclusion. "Correct, having only the Glean army or a combined force harassed by Oris' assault, Teller will fail to meet his objective."

Talus put his hands on the map. "Soon all will be free from The Light that enslaves us. Send a message to Oris and tell him of our plan. If needed, he can pull troops from Capnia to ensure his success."

"Very well, Your Highness," said Osseous accepting his orders.

Colostrum entered the room where Solus presided. "Master, it seems that The One has gained a foothold and soon will bear its weight upon your vessel."

The Lord of Darkness sat before his subordinate who stood on the floor below. "Oh really, and you know the mind of your master?"

The beast cowered. "No, My Lord."

"Do you have any idea the care and time it took to get to this point?" demanded Solus.

The spirit lowered himself more, "No, Master."

"I assume you would like to know." The lower being perked up. "I would be honored."

Solus got up from his throne. Looking at the floor, he glared at the sycophant. "What do you see?"

The beast tried his best to analyze the action below. "It seems that Teller will succeed in returning to Cornea with the Plainsmen either joining the battle or separating from the Galeans to attack Teres. In any event, Talus will have difficulty maintaining his control over the world in which he exists."

Solus laughed. "Fool, do you think I am depending on a mere human to determine my success or failure?"

Colostrum shook before his lord. "No, Master. That would be foolish."

The Darkness approached the being before him. "Yes, it would and am I a fool?"

The beast lowered his head to avoid eye contact. "No, Master."

Solus, still annoyed over the loss of Necrosis, tried to explain to the simpleminded minion, "Talus is a tool like all humans. They are simply to be used for my pleasure. When The Great Battle occurs, it will be me who is victorious regardless of the outcome below. Do you understand?"

Colostrum nodded. "Yes, Master."

Solus sent him away cursing The One who took the only being who could appreciate his brilliance.

Deavon patted Tony on the back. "That was awesome! How did you come up with that move?"

The foster child shrugged his shoulders. "It just happened, that's all. He had me, you know. I got lucky."

The children retired to their camp where Teller was waiting. "You have done well, all of you."

The guide jumped in, "Salpingo taught Tony. You are the best ever."

Tony shied away from the others. It seemed that his family's dependence upon him was greater than he wanted. He became concerned by what he would have to do next, take on the entire Atresian army? He felt he was luckier than he was skilled. Mike had saved his life once and his ribs were now killing him, not the results a great warrior would have after battle. He was human and as such capable of getting hurt or worse. If Mike, Deavon, and Erin relied on him to get home, he'd have to do better. It seemed the stakes were getting higher with each confrontation and with it, the difficulty associated with succeeding.

A Plainsman entered the campsite of Teller and the children. "The high chief has sent me to give you a message. The council will meet tomorrow morning where you and the children are asked to attend. Sem also wants to send his respects to the one called Tony, as he impressed all who witnessed the match."

Teller thanked the messenger and went into his tent. Salpingo started to prepare dinner as Mike huddled by the fire. Deavon had fun with Erin playing a game with the small animals he had created for her. Tony had walked off being consumed with his thoughts.

A child ran up to the foster child. "You're one of the strangers foretold in the stars, aren't you?"

Tony looked down at the little Gaele. "Yeah, you could say that."

"I heard that you came to save us from The Darkness ... is that true?" asked the small child.

The young man rolled his eyes. "Well, that's not necessarily true; I ..." Tony paused to correct himself. "I mean... we are lost and are trying to find our way home. In the meantime we are caught up in this war."

The child looked up a little sadder after hearing what Tony had said. "My mother told me that if The Darkness wins nothing will matter. Imagine living your whole life only to have it end with no hope of living beyond the here and now. If you could never see how your life affected others, everything you did would mean nothing."

Tony was shocked. Who was this child? Did Teller transform himself? The foster child lowered himself to the child's eye level. "We will do everything in our power to make sure The Darkness doesn't destroy your world."

The child responded, "It's not only my world but any that The Darkness touches that I fear will be lost."

Tony patted the child on the head and returned to camp where the others huddled by the fire.

"Are you all right," asked Mike?

Tony looked at Mike. "Yeah, I just had another moment in the land of Oz."

Teller met all the next morning at the fire for breakfast. "Today, we will know the fate of those who follow The One."

Just then four men entered the camp. Myx, Pons, Keto, and Trochanter approached Tony. The Argentinean was apprehensive having no idea why they had come to see him.

"We are here to honor you with our loyalty." The largest Plainsman spoke for the rest, "Only a true warrior could have done what you did in the arena. With that said, if you go to battle we will join you."

Tony stood up making the scene even more awkward by being the smallest among those who fought the day before. "Thank you."

The four walked off as silently as they had arrived.

Deavon smiled as he wrapped his arm around Tony's shoulder. "Wow, you've got yourself a posse."

The foster child shook off Deavon's arm. "All right that's enough."

# ALL THE SAME

Teller led the small processional into the tent where the council was to be held. Five chairs were placed at the front to the right of Sem who presided over the meeting. Erin, Deavon, Mike, and Tony felt the awkwardness of being on display while Teller sat patiently beside them.

Sem stopped the murmuring among the chiefs who stared at the children before them.

“My brothers and sisters of Calyx, we are here at the request of our Galean neighbors. Soon they will depart these lands to battle Talus and this darkness that Teller states controls the King of Atresia. I have doubted this since the beginning and even with the boy’s exhibition in the arena, I continue to remain unconvinced. Teller wanted to address you in hopes of having us join his cause, which I have granted before their departure. In this way when we choose our path, there will be no hesitation among us. Since I do not want outsiders influencing our decision, I will hold my judgment until they leave. Until then, I will remain silent. My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council.”

The Chief of Elad spoke next. “Because of the yesterday’s feat, many of our warriors are eager to swear an allegiance to the young man you call Tony. He has proven his worth among us. With that said, it would be better for him to join us than to remain with you. Having no home, he would be welcomed as one of us with the honor given to those who prove themselves in battle. He and his family would become part us. As far as Talus is concerned, he is a man, and like all men, can be defeated. Alba spoke eloquently about this darkness of yours to no avail. The spirit we worship is all we need to believe in. I am saddened that you still desire to convince us. We of Calyx must follow our own path. My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council.”

Teller remained seated and waited for another to speak.

Rani stood and faced the Glean. "Why do you think it is necessary for us to join you when by attacking Teres, we would be accomplishing the same purpose?"

Teller continued to sit as he responded, "If our battle was with Talus or with Atresia you would be correct, but it is with Solus and Cornea is where he is the strongest. Since we are all a part of The One, The Darkness hates us all. If Solus succeeds, then the human race will no longer exist. We could continue to discuss retaking Teres or even occupying Capnia, but it would be a hollow victory. We would all meet the same fate, even the Atresians who are convinced that they are the chosen ones."

Rani continued, "Why are you so convinced of this darkness that you speak of when we have no record of such a being in our legends?"

Teller looked as if he were discussing theology with his disciples. His demeanor remained relaxed as he replied, "If there were not good and evil among us, how could we have the freedom of choice?"

Rani responded, "We are like all who inhabit the earth. Those who rail against the earth and its inhabitants will find no peace, while those who respect life will. So good and evil are not beings but nature itself reflected in each of us."

Teller countered, "But as human beings we determine our paths in life where other animals are destined by nature to their own fate. If this were not true, why does the sheep continue to remain with the shepherd after being sheered?"

Rani addressed those around her. "This is why we are different from those who dwell among us. To the Gleans, nature is a tool to be used when we as Plainsmen see it as our teacher and provider of life. When the land is ruined and our water has turned sour, would their god restore its goodness? My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council."

The Glean commented, "The chief is correct. If we choose to offend nature, then we will live with the consequences of those choices. The difference between us is simple. Where the Plainsmen believe that nature is the beginning and end of life, I say that nature is an expression of something greater."

A buzz of opinions permeated the council. So much so that Sem had to quiet the discussion.

Tensor stood along with the other chiefs who wanted to speak. Sem called on Rhodo's successor. "What guarantee do we have once Talus is gone that Teres will be freed by Atresia?"

Teller looked out to all in attendance. "Once The Darkness has lost his grip on Atresia, the people will no longer have a desire for other's blood. We would march to the border, giving them a choice. Return Calyx to its original form or face the wrath of those who defeated Talus. Those who remain in Capnia will yield knowing their army could not withstand an assault."

The Celian chief looked skeptical. "And who is to say you will do what you say when Cornea is freed?"

Tony spoke to the surprise of all seated next to Sem, "I will lead the warriors into Capnia myself."

More murmuring from the chiefs resumed. Tensor continued over the din, "The child who defeated our best has spoken. I do not believe in Teller's spirits, but I do trust in the one they call Tony from Argentina. My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council."

Slowly the clamor stopped. Zeis remained standing, as the others sat, having gained the attention of the high chief. "We need to choose the right path. Do we follow Teller at the expense of ignoring our own beliefs, or do we trust in what we know and risk that the Galean is right? The fact that we have a common enemy is unchanged. Talus has invaded both our lands. The reason is not as important as the fact that we have been forced from our homes. Do we divide to conquer or overwhelm our enemy by our numbers? I am a Plainsman and as such I cannot shed my skin or the faith of my fathers. If I were to ask a Galean to forsake his god, would he? Yet Teller requests that of us. We fear no one or thing that keeps us from our lands. The problem I see is losing ourselves in the battle. What would be gained if we no longer hold sacred those things that make us Plainsmen? My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council."

The chiefs spoke one by one until none were left standing. Teller answered the questions asked of him and patiently sat through the comments of the others. Finally, when everyone had their say, Teller stood to address those around him.

“Many have expressed their concern over their need to abandon their beliefs for mine. I can assure you that this is not true. The Atre-sians believe that they are the chosen ones and are superior to all those who dwell among them. If this were true, then why are we all the same? Have we not two arms and two legs? Have we not a heart, and do we not breathe the same air? If there were a chosen people, would they not have abilities beyond the rest, proving their superiority? We see the same God from different views, but there is only one who created us. If this was not true, would we not be vastly different. When we are sad, happy, angry, or grieving, how can one understand how another feels without experiencing similar emotions? I am not asking you to abandon your faith or to accept The One as I know it to be, but to simply open your minds to the possibility that we are in the care of a single being. Whether God is being expressed in nature, in the temple, or in your heart, your relationship with the one that created us is the most important facet of our lives. It is in knowing God that we can choose the right path and allow The Light to guide us. If you do not seek The Light, The Darkness will use your fears and your selfish desires to lead you astray. So the choice I ask of you is not to accept The One as I do, but to accept that God could be greater than to be of your or of my understanding.” Teller turned toward Sem. “My voice has been heard. My peace remains with this council.”

The high chief concluded the council. “We will meet again tonight to decide. In the event a majority cannot be reached, it is my right to choose what is best for our people.” Sem thanked the children and Teller for attending. His motivation was to simply create an appearance that he cared. His true desire was to avoid offending the strangers who could someday be convinced to live among them. The council dispersed. Teller would have to wait until the morning for an answer. Until then, he would prepare the Galeans for battle and the march toward Cornea.

Oris was delighted by Talus’ request to engage the Plainsmen in battle. Nothing would be better than to leave Teres and hunt down those who represented Calyx. By taking the offensive, Oris could use the chariots and the horsemen to his advantage. How could the Plainsmen defend themselves in the open field? Oris looked forward to a blood bath. He would



secure this result by requesting the added cavalry residing in Capnia. He would surprise the Plainsmen who would be expecting a defense of Teres and not an assault. Within a week, Lateralis, the occupied lands that were once part of Calyx, would be secured and he could return to Capnia.

Flavin wore a look of concern as he read the message from Oris. The capital had been quiet since Talus' departure but now with this request, another battle was imminent. Pharynx had reported that Teller was ready to march, but did the Plainsmen choose to attack Teres instead? This did not bode well for the Galeans who would be half the fighting force and far less skilled. The chief of staff wanted so badly to send a message to the high chief to have him join Teller, but the risk of its discovery would be too great.

"Damn it," cursed Flavin.

Chordae looked puzzled not knowing what the dispatch read.

"Talus has anticipated Teller's move and so is preparing an attack prior to their engagement at Cornea," reported Flavin.

The ambassador who remained bewildered asked, "How?"

Flavin put the parchment down. "I don't know but if the Plainsmen choose to separate from Teller, they will be struck down on their own hunting grounds."

Chordae continued, "And?"

The chancellor finished, "And if they follow Teller, then Oris will surprise them from behind while they are marching toward Cornea."

The perplexed ambassador questioned his friend, "Can we warn them?"

Flavin turned towards Chordae. "How? By the time we sent word it would be too late, and if it were discovered by Lacunae, she would have our heads. Then where would Atresia be?"

Flavin gathered his courage knowing his moment was at hand. Standing by the window, he waited as he pondered all the possibilities. "No, I have an idea." The chief of staff paced as he thought. "I'll send the horsemen as ordered but a little later than expected. By then I hope to have bought Teller and the Plainsmen some time and maybe a warning as well."

That morning Talus inspected the four hundred who would follow him into Celestia. Each would be a captain to lead a squad of twenty into the spiritworld known as Celestia. Talus still had not answered the most

significant question of his quest. How do you kill God? He doubted that arrows or swords could inflict the damage needed to destroy the keeper of misled souls. If only there was an incantation or a magical weapon that could be created for such a purpose. Lacunae would need to help, but for now he needed to prepare those who would join him in establishing a beachhead in a world of angels and demons. From there, eight thousand would swell their ranks and the invasion would begin. The emperor spoke to the captains in small groups. It took longer but the detail, along with the needed confidence given to each soldier, was imperative. The invasion would occur once the emperor's question on how to defeat The One was answered by Solus. Talus hoped he would not have to wait long.

They awoke to a cold morning. Everyone on the Glean side was preparing to leave not knowing if the Plainsmen would join them.

Dalton entered the campsite where Mike huddled by the fire. Approaching Teller he spoke, "The council has decided by majority rule to follow you to Cornea. The compelling reason given by Sem was their belief and trust in the boy named Tony."

The old man smiled as he looked up praising The One.

Dalton remained unimpressed.

Turning to Mike, the Plainsman reassured her. "I will make sure you remain warm."

Mike, pushing the envelope, said, "Could I have one of those stoves the high chief has?"

Dalton laughed and then losing all expression he replied, "No."

The mass of refugees began their march toward Galea. The horsemen rode the perimeter while the women and children huddled in the middle of the formation.

"How long will it take us to get to Cornea," asked Deavon.

Teller looked at Deavon. "A week if we remain vigilant."

The strangers were not enthralled by the prospect of walking in the cold for seven days, or maybe longer, before fighting for their lives against a trained army. Tony rode with his new posse keeping the end of the column in pace.

"I don't understand. Why are you so impressed with me?" queried Tony. "I was just lucky. Trochanter had me several times while Pons, Keto, or even Myx could have bested me alone. I think being in the arena together without a strategy actually worked in my favor. I just don't get it, that's all."

Trochanter spoke as he towered over the young man as they rode on horseback. "Our people do not honor the strongest, or the biggest, or the fastest. We pay tribute to the one who can utilize all that they have in the heat of battle. Totchpak was created to allow a smaller opponent to outwit a larger one or a slower combatant to defeat a faster one. The rope is the balance between the two in the ring. It is a weapon and a hindrance. It is a bond that once shared can never be broken. You won because you were the one who used the rope wisely. It's that wisdom that prompts us to honor you. You are young and inexperienced and prone to make mistakes in the coolness that is life. But in the heat of battle, it is you we will follow."

Tony smiled not knowing how to respond. All he could hope for was to not let them down.

The days went by slowly, each one blended into another. Deavon entertained the throngs at night with whimsical creations. The giraffe was the animal that delighted the people most. Mike sat by the fire almost having to be pried from it every morning when the march would resume. Erin would vanish into the spiritual world hoping to see more than an ominous cloud in the distance and Acromion floating around her. It was during one of these times that she saw the cloud dissipate and move toward her.

"Teller, Teller, they are coming! What should we do? They are coming."

Teller knew when ever the demons attacked, humans were soon to follow.

It was just then that Pharynx approached The Leader of Galea. "I just got word from a friend in Atresia that Oris is leading chariots against us."

Teller quickly summoned Dalton and Salpingo. "Go to the back of the column. Salpingo, you shall ride left, and Dalton will ride right. Gather the horsemen along the way and meet Tony to face our threat."

Salpingo did as he was told peeling off the first layer of warriors from the line. Dalton did the same but made sure to inform Sem of the development. "How did you come to know this?" asked Sem.

Vellus' brother told him of Pharynx. "He is either a spy for Atresia plotting against Talus or a liar who seeks to see us die on this frozen ground."

Sem formed a second line of defense to protect the families of Calyx being the closet to the battle. True to Pharynx's word, a cloud of dust soon appeared from behind racing toward them.

Tony gathered what information he could and then formalized a plan. "We stand no chance if we remain spread out. The chariots will overwhelm us. Our best hope is to form a line and attack directly. Then once behind them we can fan out and take them when they are vulnerable."

Dalton raised the question, "Who will lead?"

Tony never hesitated, "I will."

Erin remained in the spirit world while the others focused on the Atresians who were racing toward them. The cloud began to reform before her. To others it looked like a thunderstorm but to her it was far worse.

Acromion flew to her side. "Tony will be too far away for you to care for him. He will need my protection. In the meantime, they will focus on the others from your world."

The girl was genuinely frightened. "I don't understand? How can I stop them?"

The Guardian of The Light smiled to assure the child. "Remain at peace. Focus on the feeling you experienced when you were with The One."

Teller interrupted the unseen dialog. "Erin, I will stay with you."

Teller settled in next to her. Crossing his legs, he began to meditate. Erin could see his presence in the world that was closing in on her. She yelled over to Deavon and Mike who were trying to find their way through the confusion, "Sit next to me!" Mike looked mystified seeing Teller and her sister sitting while others were running around them. Deavon grabbed the girl from China and sat next to the old man. Keeping his focus, Teller spoke to the children, "Think peaceful thoughts. You need to remain calm among the chaos around us."

Deavon and Mike closed their eyes trying to follow the Glean's lead. They could feel a light envelope them but did not know its source. Erin was not as lucky. She could clearly see the demons charging toward her. Their grotesque faces contorted even further by the hatred they carried for the children of The One. The light surrounded those who brought the

wrath of The Darkness to them. Erin felt each implosion with every failed attempt to penetrate it. Some got closer than others, but all met a fate of nonexistence. The minutes felt like hours for the child who held off the storm. She wanted to scream, cry, and hide away all at the same time. Finally, the cloud left, returning to previous position. One last attempt was made by Sepsis who could not bear to see the child victorious. Mike and Deavon had finally reached the plain that Teller had summoned them to. Though she could not see the creature, Mike felt its chilling presence as Sepsis met his demise. The experience was unsettling.

"What the hell was that?" Mike shuttered as she opened her eyes to look at Erin and Teller.

Erin, now free from the torment, relaxed. "That was The Darkness you wanted to trust before Tony stopped you from going through the window."

While Erin protected those around her, Acromion raced ahead of the demons desiring Tony's soul. Using his sword, he swatted away those who tried to beat him to the Argentinean. Once there, he hovered above the child who now was riding like the wind. The Spirits of Darkness made futile attempts, but The Guardian of The Light was quicker and stronger than those who opposed him. Finally after seeing the others retreat, they followed suit having little if no success themselves.

The mass began to panic; the chariots were now visible to all involved in the march. A thousand in all were racing to annihilate the followers of The One. Tony had five hundred horses at his command with another thousand following Sem, if he were to fail. The fate of two hundred thousand people rested on a boy's ability against a trained army. Tony led them in double file. Salpingo, who carried his arrows, rode beside him. There the guide could hand him an arrow to fire without Tony losing stride or his balance. The charge into the breach had begun. The foster child got his horse up to speed and upon full gallop, stood as he lifted himself from the beast's back using the hemp stirrups to maintain his footing.

Taking aim Tony began to fire upon the chariots directly ahead of him. Slowly, he managed to adjust to conditions he was forced to shoot in. Once in range, his arrows struck with deadly results. The Atresian riders fell leaving the unmanned chariots to turn right or left, clearing a path for the young man riding into it. The five hundred followed suit know-

ing once surviving the charge, they would have the upper hand. The twenty rows of war wagons collided into others, making it impossible to close the gap. Tony had made it through. There in the distance was the army of Oris waiting to pounce on the mass contained by his horsemen.

The tide turned quickly as the warriors fanned out and took the soldiers by surprise. The engagement was disastrous for the Atresians suffering half its casualties to its horsemen. The worst part was their inability to form a line to prevent another assault with equal results. Oris, seeing his chariots fail, sent his cavalry into battle. Sem responded quickly by leading warriors to prevent Tony's defeat. The Atresians were no match for the Plainsmen on horseback. Even though Sem was outnumbered two to one, they carried the day by driving the cavalry back, allowing Tony's warriors to regroup.

Tony, along with those who followed him, commandeered the remaining unmanned chariots. The foster child once again proved his prowess in battle. Now along with Sem, Tony led the charge into the heart of Oris' army. The archers and spikers were ineffective against the horse driven machines. Dividing the troops, Tony ran a swath through a section of the Atresian force, leaving death with little or no casualties to those who followed him. Time and time again, the Atresians failed to recover with each attack.

Oris screamed out of frustration just before sounding a retreat to free him from the onslaught that was occurring. Tony held the warriors back, allowing the Atresian soldiers to disengage. The conflict was over. Ramus' friend had failed. Cheers rung out from the crowd witnessing the battle. Sem turned to the young man named Tony. "I doubted you. I will not doubt you again." Trochanter, Myx, Keto, and Pons protected Tony as people wanted to get close to the child who led them to victory. The celebration lasted into the night. The next day the march would continue to Cornea. Christa of Galli no longer concerned himself with the spirit of the Galeans entering battle. Tony had given the Galeans the confidence they needed.

Teller smiled at Tony. "You have managed to impress all around you. I hope you see that it is not your gift, but who you are that brought you glory today."

Tony didn't understand. If it weren't for the gift, he would have chosen a different path.

The Galean, seeing the young man's countenance, explained further, "Did you not speak up for what was right at the council meeting? Did you not lead the warriors into battle because you wanted to show them you were as one, and did you not demonstrate mercy to those you defeated? None of these choices were made by your gift but by your heart."

# THE GREAT BATTLE

Talus awoke in a sweat. “Lacunae.”

The queen opened her eyes then turned toward her husband. “Solus visited me in a dream,” continued Talus. “I know how to destroy The One!”

The mystic smiled. “When do you plan to invade Celestia?”

“Tomorrow,” said Talus.

She kissed Talus and then fell back to sleep. The emperor got out of bed and walked toward the window. Looking at the temple, he whispered, “I’m coming, Father.”

The next morning Talus called for Hallicus.

Hallicus bowed when he entered the throne room. “How may I be of assistance, Your Majesty?”

The emperor began to walk toward a window facing the temple. The high priest dutifully followed. “I saw Solus last night. He has shown me a way to eliminate our enemy.”

The mystic looked out of the window. “Oh, really.”

“The Light lures those in with a feeling of contentment. Being at peace, those who harbored any ill will, or in life suffered, no longer associate pain or remorse with those memories. This makes them defenseless. Without volatile emotions like anger or hate, The One can absorb them into itself. To weaken the beast we must enter The Light while keeping our darkness alive.”

Talus turned to face Hallicus as he concluded. “It’s our feelings that will wound the beast corrupting Celestia. If enough of us can penetrate its presence, it will falter.”

Hallicus was impressed. “How many will we need to follow you into The Light?”

“Think of this creature like a balloon,” continued Talus. “The air being the spirits trapped inside. We would be punching holes allowing the air or spirits to escape.”

Hallicus nodded. “So the more holes, the sooner the balloon deflates.”



Talus finished his thought, "The sooner The Light fades into darkness. So it's not a matter of how many but simply a matter of time."

Hallicus smiled. "I will prepare the portals."

Talus gathered the eight thousand. "Our time has come. By the end of the day we will have our victory. I have gathered you here to explain how to kill the creature we seek." Talus then put his hands on the soldier in front of him. "Do not give into the peace that it will use to persuade you, remain angry. Think of how The Light has stolen your loved ones. How those within the beast suffer by being trapped within it. With your hatred, you will free those lost to our enemy. Once we free those from The One, the light will dim and succumb to The Darkness. Then we will know the truth that Solus has promised."

"As you know there will be Guardians of Light. These beings appear to be superior to us, but they are not. I have witnessed their frailty. Our weapons will repel them. We must focus on the being we seek to destroy. Everything else must be set aside. You were chosen to receive this glory. Make all of Atresia proud. To Solus! To Atresia! To the destruction of The One!"

Talus left the soldiers to prepare themselves and returned to the palace to say good-bye to Lacunae. Even though he felt confident, he could not bear to enter the field of battle without expressing his love for her.

When Talus returned, he marched his army into the temple. There, Hallicus blessed each one in Solus' name as they passed through the opening leading to Celestia. The landscape looked more ominous as Talus saw each side of the plain lined with spiritual beings. The Guardians of Light readied for an attack by The Followers of Darkness with Talus and his army in the middle. Talus looked upon the beings of Darkness. "There is our support. Solus is with us. Attack!" The eight thousand ran towards The Light bracing themselves for the impending assault from those protecting The One.

The demons flew overhead giving the impression that they were leading the charge until they suddenly vanished below the surface of the plains itself. The Guardians of Light, who were rushing to meet them, followed leaving Talus and his army in complete solitude. An eerie silence surrounded the remaining warriors. Talus looked around trying

to comprehend the event that had just occurred. The soldiers surrounding their king trembled, witnessing The One for the first time.

Teller looked upon his home. His time had come. Even though the strangers were ready, The Great Battle would be like no other known to man. This was orchestrated by Solus himself and not the desire of men bent on power or wealth. His concern was for those who followed him. What would the world look like with The Darkness as its ruler if he failed? Sem readied his warriors. Tony was responsible for the chariots. The horns blew and the charge began. Deavon led the assault with a herd of elephants. The Atresians, standing guard, sounded the alarm. Osseous, who had designed Cornea's defense, set his plan into motion. The sound was deafening as the mass of men and animals stormed across the field of battle.

As they approached the ground gave way, plunging the attackers into ditches filled with spikes. The wounded elephants wailed, but Deavon acted quickly to make them disappear. The chariots were made useless being caught in the rods of wood. The riders climbed out only to face the Atresian war wagons approaching from the city. Sem acted quickly sending his warriors to rescue those on the ground. The Atresian captain led the chariots toward Teller's army, which was slowly advancing. The assault would have been devastating, having lost the only weapon that could have stopped them. As they advanced, Deavon created a group of rhinoceroses to slow and topple the riders chasing them.

In Celestia, as the Atresians slowly walked toward The Light, their world was revealed below. Talus, along with the others, looked down where they saw the battle between the spirits ensue. It was then that the emperor saw Teller's force closing in on the city of Cornea. The army was larger than he had anticipated. Did Oris fail to attack the enemy while they remained vulnerable? The moment was at hand. Talus knew to gain victory he needed to destroy the source of human misery. Raising his sword, he called for his soldiers to charge towards the thing they call The One.

Talus marched toward The Light. The force dwindled as the Atresians got closer the horizon itself. Fear started to grasp the soldiers. Soon small groups peeled away, running back to the portals. Talus remained

unfazed by their cowardice. Looking around him, the emperor encouraged those within earshot, "Follow me to victory!" Looking down at the world below, Talus saw that The Followers of Darkness joined the battle for Cornea. Teller had failed. The One would soon be destroyed. The emperor picked up the pace. The Atresians were now running toward the horizon of light.

Erin looked upon the battle from the spiritual realm. What she saw disturbed her. The cloud that had gathered earlier was joined by a mass of darkness from Celestia. The form it created rushed toward the humans marching toward the city and The Temple of Moralis.

Erin tried to envision peace but the scene was so frightening, it sent her into a panic. "Teller they're attacking!"

The Leader of Galea saw the storm cloud approaching and knew it was The Followers of Darkness. Erin closed her eyes shielding her face from the grotesque forms with her hands.

Mike looked at her sister. "That's not a good sign." Then yelling to all who could hear, "Get down! All of you to the ground now!"

The soldiers quickly lay on the ground. Those who didn't hear followed those who did. Soon hundreds of thousands disappeared from Cornea's view.

Sem, who had Tony with him, yelled, "What is Teller doing?"

Tony looked back beyond the chaos involving the beasts Deavon had created and saw the approaching storm. "It's the cloud. It has to do with the storm." Tony leaned into the high chief. "We must out run it."

The Darkness descended upon those who fell behind. The Plainsmen were engulfed by the storm. As it approached, Sem and Tony heard the screams of the warriors captured within it. The horsemen drove their steeds faster, knowing that death was trying to consume them. Just as the Plainsmen realized they could not out run The Darkness pursuing them, a force collided with the storm with such ferocity that it knocked the riders and horses off their feet. The chariots that were not harassed by the rhinos were toppled by the impact of the collision above them.

Erin opened her eyes trying to discover the meaning behind the quaking earth beneath her. There above her were The Guardians of Light, too many to count, engaging The Darkness. The battle was fierce, knowing

that the victim's would face nonexistence. Flashes like lightning shown for all to see. Teller stood as the flashes of light continued above him. "Attack!" The warriors rose and moved toward the city once more.

As Teller marched toward the city, Talus rallied his troops in Celestia, the thousand who remained loyal. As Talus was about to enter The Light he said, "For Atresia, for man, and for my father!" Those on the edge witnessed Talus entering, but none saw the result of his foray into The One.

There he met Clavius. "Son, why are you here? You are not dead."

"I am here to free you from the beast that enslaves you," said Talus.

Clavius looked puzzled. "Beast? My child, you are wrong. I'm not a prisoner nor am I trapped. I am here of my own free will."

Talus became angry at the vision that was portraying his father. "Leave me. I will not succumb to your lies!"

Clavius left knowing that Talus was beyond reason.

Fossa appeared next. Talus looked up into to the air as if he were talking to The One directly, "What, another attempt at beguiling me?"

"No, Tal, stop. You have no idea what you are doing," pleaded Fossa.

Talus looked at his friend as if he were an illusion. "I have brought with me the hate and anger of a nation. I will destroy you and all that The One represents!"

Fossa grabbed his friend by the arms; the effect was palpable. "Listen to me! You are wrong! The One is life! If Solus succeeds, all you'll be doing is bringing death upon the world and those you love."

"Lies! All lies! You are not my friend! You are a lie!" screamed Talus.

Fossa let go of Talus' arms. His body reflected the rejection of Talus' heart. "Go on then, destroy us. Rid your world of all hope; then you will know the truth when you rule what is left."

Talus remained shocked having his friend speak to him in such an irreverent manner. "Huh?"

Fossa saw a moment of indecision on his friend's face. Encouraged, the stableman's son continued. "Solus doesn't care about you or Lacunae or anyone else. All he cares about is himself. Those who follow him are hoping to gain favor from a narcissist. Does that sound like a god who nurtured mankind, or one who seeks its destruction?"

Fossa echoed Teller's words convincing Talus that The One was speaking through those he loved and remained true to his cause. "Leave me! I will not yield to your temptations!"

The soldiers waited for Talus to return but as time passed, their desire to engage The One waned. As if being called by name, each soldier departed for the portal until hundreds were left standing.

The peace of The One overwhelmed Talus. He saw the truth for what it was and was sickened by it. Was he so wrong to betray his nation, his friends, and his family?

Finally, the last of the spirits arrived; Ramus appeared before his brother.

Talus pulled back from the ghostly apparition. "No, I can't take anymore."

Ramus took his brother's hand. "It's okay. I understand. You are forgiven."

Horried by his brother's tone, Talus pulled his hand away. "No, what I did was unforgivable."

Ramus shook his head. "It's not only me who forgives you but The One whom you seek to destroy."

Talus tried to reclaim his anger but it was lost, overwhelmed by guilt. Finally, as he accepted defeat, he returned to see the hundred or so standing just beyond The Light. The emperor, now despondent, led the soldiers back to their world leaving Celestia desolate.

Solus had waited all along for this moment. The humans were now an afterthought. The final stroke in his plan was to corrupt The Light with his presence. The One, being pure, could not withstand the violation. Like a virus, The Darkness would slowly overtake the body of The Light, having no defense against it. All that remained for Solus was to cross the heavens while the spirits battled below. The Darkness focused on his objective as he started to approach his enemy for what would be the final time.

Solus looked down upon the world. Laughing, the sound echoed throughout the deserted castle. As The Darkness walked passed the walls, they wailed with the agony and remorse from the victims who created them. Looking out upon the plains, he saw that Celestia was desolate. Solus had achieved what he had planned all along, an unimpeded path to his enemy.

Teller looked at the girls beside him. "I must go; tell Alba to stay the course."

"Where are you going?" asked Mike.

The Leader of Galea looked at Mike. "Celestia."

The girl from China looked at the old man. "What?"

Erin pulled at Teller's cloak. "Let me go with you."

The old man turned toward the child. "You must seek your own path. I must go alone." Teller then vanished as if he never existed.

Mike sought Alba to deliver the message as Erin returned to the spiritual realm. There, the flashing of light was almost too intense to perceive. The spirits were in a war beyond comprehension. The wounded were hacked into nonexistence by The Darkness since there was no mercy given or offered. The Guardians of Light, who were weakened or could not continue, offered themselves to strengthen others in order to protect The One. The ordeal, in comparison to the hail of arrows now being showered at the warriors, seemed surreal. Here a man fought for temporary gains while above all was eternal. Erin could not stand back any longer. Departing for Celestia herself, she hoped to assist Teller in his task.

After bearing severe losses, the Galeans had reached the walls of Cornea. Slowly they ascended the ladders at the expense of life and limb. Osseous had another trap waiting for the enemy. At the base of the wall were holes. Vats of oil were hung overhead in order to be released into burrowed openings. Once lit, the oil was dumped, which spewed upon its victims scaling the stone. The warriors fell back once more.

Talus, along with the hundreds who followed him, exited the temple. The emperor, back to his reality, focused on the war at hand. Now exposed to the chaos in the city streets, Talus saw The Gate of Victors burning. The emperor led his soldiers to the entrance and extinguished the flames. After succeeding to thwart Sem from penetrating Osseous' defense, the door to the city was still in need of reinforcement. Quickly, Talus arranged for a wall of stone to be erected to prevent the Plainsmen from breaking through.

As Solus approached the horizon of light, he thought of every encounter he had with the soon to be vanquished being: The moment he became aware of his own existence, the battle that created the plains, which he was now traversing, the castle where he keeps those who feared seeing the truth in their own lives. All culminated to this moment—the destruction of The One. It was at the halfway point between the light and dark when Teller stood before the beast. Solus laughed at the man who looked old and frail. "Who dares to stand in my presence?"

The Galean looked up at the darkened form before him. "I am Teller of The One. I have been summoned by The Light to prevent your passing."

The Darkness laughed in response toward the human's sheer audacity. Taking his hand, Solus swatted the old man away removing him from his sight, continuing on his path.

Erin arrived to see the encounter. Having first thought to join Teller, she decided to hide in the castle instead until she could think of a way to help. Solus was stopped once more by the old man's presence. Annoyed, The Darkness clutched the old man in his fist and began to squeeze. Beneath the weight of his grasp, Solus felt Teller's bones splinter. Opening his hand, the old man was still alive and appeared unharmed. Dropping the creature like an insect, Solus shook his hand to clean it from what he thought would be the Galean's remains.

Erin continued deeper into the castle. She was terrified by the tormented walls, but still walked towards the throne room. Looking around, she could see the vast ceiling hundreds of feet in the air. Statues of Solus in various forms surrounded the room: a serpent, an angel, a warrior, and as God. When she looked down, she saw the world and the battle occurring below. The warriors were about to make another assault. The Guardians of Light had just out flanked The Followers of Darkness, and Mike was shaking the hell out of Erin's body, which Erin had left behind. It was then she saw the door just beyond the throne room. Pulling the door open, a rush of cold air blew past her. The darkness started to fade as the light invaded more of Solus' domain.

"Noooooooo!" Erin could hear Solus scream from beyond the castle walls. The Darkness had turned to see the souls once held captive freed. The castle became completely illuminated as a result. Solus no longer thought of The One but of the creature that would feel his wrath. The Darkness transformed into a flying serpent and started his ascent. The Galean grabbed his tail. Though it was a futile attempt on Teller's part, it was enough to have Solus turn and swallow him whole. Now the two were joined, the physical and the spiritual. The beast spiraled down to the earth below, being unable to remain in Celestia. Erin returned to her body now feeling the retching caused by Mikes shaking her body.

"Stop it!" The girl from China was taken aback by Erin's forcefulness.

"Where were you?" shouted Mike.

"I was with Teller," explained Erin.

"And where's Teller?" asked Mike.

Erin pointed to the enormous snake that had just landed beyond the city. "In there."

The battle, both on the ground and in the air, paused momentarily with Solus' descent. The beast began to rise once more using its wings to support its weight. Tony knew it was not one of Deavon's creations; his imagination could not invent something so disturbing. Leaving Sem to assault The Gate of Victors once more, Tony rode his horse toward the serpent. By the time the foster child arrived he could see the task was overwhelming, even for him. The beast was fifty feet in length. It would have been difficult to combat the reptile if all it did was slither or slide, but this ancient serpent could take flight. Solus slowly oriented himself to the world around him. Teller had tricked him into swallowing the Galean whole, causing his fall from the heavens. The Darkness now found himself surrounded by those he had manipulated into battle. Taking to the air, he saw Tony charging. Having no patience with those who followed The One, he descended to kill the child. Myx knew he was Tony's only chance. Taking aim, the arrow penetrated the right nare causing Solus to flinch, missing the young man beneath him. The serpent's fangs dug into the dirt just to the left of the Argentinean rider.

Taking his sword, Tony swung at the monster. His sword struck the last wing, which lifted the tail. Until then, it was imperceptible. The reptile's wings were similar to those found on a dragonfly. To lift the creature, the wings had to flutter at an amazing speed. Only after accidentally striking one did Tony see how the snake became airborne. Keto joined Trochanter in the assault as Myx continued to provide cover with arrows. The serpent with one damaged wing was not by any means defenseless. Taking his tail, he swatted at the one who wounded him. Tony flew in the air with no hope of landing without injury. Mike, knowing her brother would be too far away to rescue, cringed at the anticipated impact. Solus then turned quickly towards the Plainsmen spitting venom at the warriors. The effect was instantaneous. All became lifeless within the poison's path, including the Plainsmen who charged the beast. Myx continued to hail arrows as Pons prepared to avenge his brothers.



Solus took to the air again, bringing fear to those on the ground. Landing within a group of Galeans, The Darkness spewed venom again killing even more. As a result, confusion permeated those who followed The Light. Deavon tried to create an animal to combat the serpent but nothing came to mind. Finally after several attempts, Deavon sent a herd of bulls toward the beast. Solus dispatched them quickly and then looked in Deavon's direction as if to mock the boy who tried to challenge him. It was then Deavon saw Tony in midair descending to ruin. The boy who claimed to be creation began concentrating in the hopes of saving his brother. No bird was large enough to carry him. Deavon was running out of time. He thought harder. Maybe he could create something beyond the animal world.

Tony closed his eyes preparing for the painful blow when he landed on a bed of moss. Pulling himself out of the fungus, he knew Deavon was responsible for sparing his life from across the field of battle. Tony had another chance to destroy the serpent, but this time he would be cautious. Grabbing a horse that had broken free from the chaos, he rode back toward the others. "Myx! Aim just to the right or left of the snake's body. It has wings!"

Pons handed the weapons of the day to Tony. "Here! Take these!" Taking a sword, shield, and a bow, the Argentinean headed toward the serpent once more. The boy warrior and Pons were able to get into range using Myx's arrows as a diversion. The arrows slowed the snake as its wings started to fail. Using their swords, Tony and Pons finished the job by eliminating as many appendages as they could see. Solus soon found himself grounded. The Darkness became frustrated at not being able to free himself from his physical shell.

Needing to stop those afflicting him, Solus attempted to catch Tony with his fangs only to have the foster child jump upon the beast's head in hopes of decapitating it. Tony used his sword to penetrate the snake's scales. Pons, who had followed Tony, joined in the beheading of the beast. The serpent twisted and turned in an attempt to stop those from killing it. Hanging onto their blades, Tony and Pons completed the job; the snake now lay lifeless before them. Falling off the beast, Tony tried to catch his breath. Solus, now free from the physical world, yelled as he ascended

back to Celestia. His followers retreated with him being pursued by Guardian's of The Light.

Erin ran over yelling at Tony, "Teller's in there. Get him out!"

Tony got up still struggling to breathe. Using both arms, he cut the serpent open with his sword.

Teller crawled out reddened by the acids of digestive juices. The old man looked at the boy who freed him. "Thank-you."

Erin looked for Acromion only to find he had vanished along with the others. All that remained were the humans.

Talus readied his force against another assault upon the Gate of Victors. Sem, with those who followed, had started the burning of the gate once more using flaming arrows. The smoke grew more intense as the warriors waited, seeing the wooden frame begin to weaken and collapse before them. The emperor acted quickly by mounting a counter attack. Assembling as many Atresians as he could, Talus charged through the flames to meet the invaders. Sem was taken by surprise as the Plainsmen were forced to retreat under the support of the Galeans. Talus had bought enough time to secure the gate. The day had ended without conquest.

Sem met with Tony and the others who were involved with the assault. The fire burned brightly allowing everyone's face to be seen clearly.

"So what do we do tomorrow?" asked Sem.

Tony responded. "If we could get through one of the gates, the battle would end, but so far Talus has stopped our attempts."

Teller then spoke to the council, "Solus has abandoned them, and Talus is on his own. Cornea will fall sooner than later."

Tony looked at Teller. "With Solus gone, do you think Talus will surrender?"

Sem became angry at the insinuation that the emperor should be spared. "If we let Atresians retreat, Talus must die."

Teller responded, "Once we take the temple all will be lost to him, and The Darkness will not prevail."

As they talked, a messenger invaded the council. "Teller, a lone man has stepped out of the city. He shows a crimson cloth. He is calling for the children."

Teller looked at the four children who were now peaked with curiosity.

Deavon spoke before the others. "Who is it?"

The messenger replied. "It looks like Talus."

Sem rose. "Tony, you can end this. Kill him before he returns to the safety of Cornea's walls."

Tony looked at Teller. "What should I do?"

Teller spoke with the four. "A crimson flag is one of peace. To violate the code would bring dishonor to those who broke it. Talus desires to talk. About what I do not know, but only you can decide to listen."

Sem, Dalton, and Teller joined the four. As they proceeded toward Talus, they heard the emperor shout toward them. "I came to talk to the four who trembled before me, no one else."

Teller looked at Tony. The Argentinean looked back as if he had it under control. Turning to Sem, he responded to Talus' request, "Let us hear what he has to say."

The four walked out to meet Talus. The emperor did not look surprised by the four or by their new found confidence. They had adjusted to his world and somehow manipulated it.

"I came to offer you a way home," offered Talus.

Mike spoke before Tony could respond, "Too late, you should have thought that through before you attempted to kill us. How many times? Oh let's see in Galea, somewhere near Calyx, and oh, if I am not forgetting, on the way back here?"

Tony pushed Mike back as to have a clear view of his adversary. "Okay, how can you do that?"

Talus spoke as if he still had a trump to play, "The gateway to your world lies within the temple. If I am defeated, the gateway will vanish and so will your hope of returning home."

Deavon spoke next, "Nice try, but Solus already played that card while trying to kill us. Why should we believe you, huh?"

Talus became insulted, "As emperor of all you see, and on my loves' life, I have never lied to you."

Devon continued the attack on his character. "So what's stopping you now?"

The emperor shook his head. "I came to offer you a way out. Doubt it if you may, but Teller cannot give you what he does not have. I can, simply because I have the ability right now to do so."

Tony looked at Erin hoping to get her opinion.

Erin looked at Talus. "I believe him. Or should I say he believes what he can offer us."

Talus relaxed his stance feeling that he had made his point.

Erin looked at the emperor. "And what happens when we leave?"

Talus spoke without emotion. "You have said you wanted to go home. I will offer no guarantees after you leave."

"If you surrender...."

The emperor looked at Tony. "I would rather die." Talus then looked at the others. "My offer stands. In another moment the offer will walk back with me. Alone or with you, it's your choice."

The four discussed their options. The bottom line would be to allow Talus his victory or remain in this world, knowing that theirs was safe. Finally, after a minute or two had passed, Tony spoke for them all, "Your offer is generous but unacceptable. If we were to forsake those with us for our own desires, what would there be? A world of darkness without hope or a future. We may never get home, but we would rather live here with hope than return knowing that our days would be numbered."

Talus saluted the four and then turned to walk away. Talus was convinced that Teller had corrupted them beyond reason; all the more to regret their imprisonment while they were still in his hands. The gate opened for the emperor. The battle resumed.

As they returned to the camp, Deavon developed a plan. "Tony I know how we can defeat Talus and maybe keep the portals open to get us home!"

Tony, Mike, and Erin were all ears.

After reaching a consensus, the strangers returned to the fire and unveiled Deavon's strategy.

As the night wore on, rodents by the thousands scampered across the sand. Gnawing on the wood that secured the bolts, along with the beams that secured the remaining gates, the rodents weakened the structures that barred intruders. After the damage was done, Deavon made the rodents vanish.

The horns and drums sounded once more. The march to Cornea resumed. Sem led the Plainsmen to the west facing The Way of Esoph, while Tony led the Galeans to the east towards The Door of Anconeus.

Just as they were about to charge, Erin looked up only to see the sky. The physical world for the moment continued without the spiritual one.

Knowing the gates had been weakened, Tony and Sem orchestrated their assaults. The Atresians were caught off guard as the gates fell before the warriors.

As pandemonium ensued, Talus ran toward the palace to find Lacunae. "They've broken our defenses. The Darkness that Solus sent has fled. What shall we do?"

The queen was bewildered. Solus was in control and yet the chaos ensued. "The temple, we will escape through the portal."

The emperor and his lover entered the tunnel just as the Plainsmen took control of the city. The rush of warriors was too much for the Atresians who faltered.

Hallicus looked at Talus and Lacunae. "The portals, they've changed. We can no longer enter Celestia."

Lacunae responded, "Teller has broken through our defenses. We must try to find a way to reach our master."

The high priest led the couple to the last remaining stable doorways. There they kissed, taking separate paths in hopes of finding Solus. Others soon followed because for them, the unknown was better than certain death. Hallicus was the last to leave having witnessed the Galeans reclaiming their holy place. The lights faded. The portals closed. The great battle was finished.

# THE AFTERMATH

The Atresians retreated to the palace. Osseous was left to contend with those who sought Talus. Sem surrounded the structure, readying the warriors for their final assault.

The high chief called out; "Talus is the one we want. Deliver him and you'll be spared."

Osseous, to his displeasure, found his emperor had disappeared. Turning to the captain of the guard the general ordered, "Fulcrum, request a truce."

The captain attached a red scarf upon the hilt of his sword and walked out the door. Sem allowed him to approach.

"Talus is not with us. All within the palace plea for peace," said Fulcrum.

Sem scowled. His desire was to see the Atresians punished. Without Talus, he wanted a surrogate. "Who's in charge?"

The captain replied, "Osseous is our general. He is the one who sent me."

Sem sent Fulcrum back in exchange for Osseous. He would humiliate the Atresians by executing the general before them.

Osseous walked out alone. "To whom am I addressing?"

The Plainsman answered, "I am Sem, the High Chief of Calyx. I desire Talus but if you cannot provide him, I will settle for your head."

The general was saddened by Sem's request. "I have nothing to offer but my own life."

Sem readied his sword as Osseous kneeled before him when Tony stepped up. "Sem, no! There has been enough bloodshed. He is more useful to us alive than dead."

Teller addressed the high chief having followed the Argentinean. "Talus is no longer in our world."

Sem lowered his weapon. Then raised it once more only to see Tony standing in front of him shaking his head. The high chief then lowered his eyes. After composing himself, Sem stared at Osseous. "Leave the city. Let whoever assumes the crown know that we'll be seeking an audience."

Teller then spoke to the general. "We require a resolution to this war. Calyx must be returned to its people, and those who fled Atresia must be allowed to return unharmed."

Osseous looked at the old man. "I will deliver your message personally and require a reply."

The Atresian soldiers marched solemnly out of Cornea as the warriors looked on.

Looking at the procession, Sem turned to Tony. "You will keep your promise, won't you?"

Tony continued to look at the battered Atresians leaving when he spoke, "I will keep my promise."

Seeing the victims of the battle lying before her, Mei Ling could no longer ignore her calling. There were no recognizable uniforms, only men and women writhing in pain. Kneeling above them, she began her work. Without an audience or fanfare she approached all that could be saved. Her mission was to relieve the suffering. She expected to become ill but felt no effects from her gift. As the others gathered their belongings, she continued to lay her hands on all she could find. Hundreds turned to thousands as the hours passed. Slowly, those around her began to witness her work. The people began to gather those in pain and brought them to her.

Erin saw two Galeans arguing over a wounded Atresian. "He is the enemy and doesn't deserve her favor. Weren't they the one's who killed the innocent of Linea and Haustra?"

Erin interrupted, "Mike is a stranger to your world. Do you think she cares where those she is helping came from? To her, they are all human and in need. If you choose to offer one help without doing the same for another, you are just as bad as those you accuse of evil. It is not your place to judge another but to trust The One who does." Erin began to push the reluctant men aside when they relented. Picking up the soldier, the Galeans brought the afflicted man to the healer. The girl from China committed to giving relief to all without hesitation. It was her moment. The choice Teller had told her she had made earlier.

Pharnyx returned to the camp after the battle had ended. "Sura! Talus is no longer our king!"

The lady looked unsure. "Is Lacunae dead?"

The Atresian spy responded. His smile never wavered. "They disappeared. Even if they were to return, they would do so in disgrace."

The woman who suffered under the hand of the king and queen smiled. "I may never regain what I lost, but I can now rest in peace knowing another will not meet my fate."

Pharnyx at that moment swore an oath to Sura to protect her from any further harm.

Flavin received the message from an associate prior to Osseous' arrival. Talus was no longer king. Flavin, in fact, was now the most powerful person in Atresia having the final say in the succession of the crown.

Chordae looked at his friend. "With no blood relative, how are you going to determine Atresia's next heir?"

The chancellor smiled. "By the one who will allow us to remain in power."

Chordae answered, "Lord Medius?"

Flavin laughed. "You jest; he would be the first to rid the court of our presence."

The ambassador thought for a moment. "Then who?"

The power broker held up the letter he had just received. "Why the one who needs us most."

The assembly met just beyond Haustra. Sem, Teller, and Sura, now the chosen Queen of Atresia. Flavin had played his hand well. Using the fact that she was betrothed to Ramus, she was the closest to the lineage of Clavius. She also knew and survived the wrath of Talus and would be sensitive to those who were persecuted for their faith. Though others argued their right to the throne, including Medius, it was the best political choice. Flavin remained as Sura's chief advisor, Chordae his second. Pharnyx, in order to allow him to keep his oath, became captain of the guard. This also provided him access to his new love, the queen, who now resided in the castle.

They gathered at the table, all wanting a resolution to the conflict. Lateralis was given to Sem. In exchange, Oris, along with all the Atresians, were allowed safe passage home. Teller saw that those who believed in The One were able to return safely to Capnia without repercussions. All were



satisfied having undone what Talus had created. The only question that remained was the fate of the strangers.

Sem walked out to meet the children. Looking at Tony who was flanked by Myx and Pons, he addressed the strangers. "We are grateful for what you have done. Though we cannot get you home, we can offer our hospitality. You will be free to roam all our lands until you find a place of your own. If Teller fails in finding a way back to your land, Calyx will welcome you as one of our own. We are poor, but we are deep in tradition. If you choose to stay, you would be as one with us."

Salpingo smirked having nothing to say.

Tony spoke for all of them, "We thank you, but our hope is still to get back to our world. It is Teller that continues to provide us our best opportunity. In the event that we shall fail, we shall consider your kind offer."

Tony, along with others, had no desire to stay in a world that was not theirs. Now that the war was over, they hoped that The One would grant them a way back. Sem departed along with those who followed him.

Sura was the next to approach the strangers. "I am the least of those who know you, but it is our people who owe you the most." Deavon, Mike, and Tony all looked at each other mystified by her statement. The queen knew she needed to explain. "My family was killed for their faith. Others met the same fate. Talus had convinced our people that we were greater than we truly were. As a result, we brought misery to all who opposed his vision. It was you who allowed the truth to destroy the lie created by our king. If we can assist you in any way, please allow us to us to help you." Sura left escorted by Pharnyx.

The last to arrive was Teller. "As you can see, we owe you all a great debt. With that said, I feel your desire to return is greater than any glory you could receive here."

The children agreed.

The Leader of Galea continued, "The One has allowed me to offer you a way home. Is there anything you want to ask or do before you leave?"

Mike spoke before anyone could ask, "Is this a joke? Are you saying that we could have gone home at anytime we felt like it?"

Teller looked at the girl from China. "No, the journey you have taken has not been by my design. If that were true, I would have given you a choice long ago. All I can do is offer what has been presented to me."

The children were dubious but eager to return to their world. They followed Teller back to Cornea where they would spend their last night.

Teller, along with the children, stayed in the palace. The accommodations were the best Talus could provide. The leader and teacher of Galea sat with the children by the fireplace before retiring to bed.

"Before you return home, I need to prepare you for the journey. So much has happened that you are no longer the same people I met in prison over a month ago. We need to discuss all that has happened so you will remain at peace after you leave here."

Mike looked at the old man. "Why? When we get home, we settle back into our lives and forget this nightmare."

Teller smiled. "If it were that simple, all involved in battle would rest easy at night. But instead, those who have witnessed the horrors of war reflect upon it for a lifetime."

Deavon then asked the most poignant question of the night. "Are we going to be okay?"

The leader of Galea looked at the young man. "Yes, as long as you have each other. No one can understand except another who has experienced this world."

Tony looked around the room. "Okay, so we will look after each other."

Teller nodded. "I wish that was all that was required, but each has been given a gift and soon that gift will no longer be with you."

Mike tried to present an attitude. "So, if I never had to lay my hands on another bloody person, it would all right by me."

Teller questioned the girl from China. "Oh really, I have no doubt that you are tired, but it is not the physical act that I am concerned about but the mental well-being of having gained and then having lost."

The children looked confused, a look that Teller was familiar with. "Once you return, you will be as you once were. The memories of this world will continue and so will your longing to do something greater because of it. Take what you have learned and apply it in your lives. It has

been not the gifts but your desire to serve others that has made you great." Teller looked at Tony. "When you return you will no longer be the warrior, but you will no longer fear the thoughts of those who question you. What have you learned from the gift you received?"

Tony looked around. "I learned that those who love me would do so even if we disagree. That it is better to stand alone for what is right than stand among the many who are wrong. For in the end it's ultimately you who must look in the mirror and live with the one looking back at you."

Teller smiled. "Very good. So you are still planning to be a..." The old man searched for the words, "Soccer player?"

Tony smiled. "Yeah, that's what I want to be, but now it's not a matter of being the best on the field but simply being true to myself."

The old man looked at Mike. "Mei Ling from China what have you learned?"

The eldest girl thought and then answered solemnly. "I learned a lot from Talus and this stupid war. When we focus only on our own concerns, we can lose our humanity. Before we entered this world, I just wanted to be better or have more than someone else; I didn't think about others: what they need, how they feel, and the pain I caused."

Teller was surprised by her answer. The persona she had created hid her true nature. "So Mike, are you still going to be famous?"

Mike was embarrassed. "The thought of being admired or becoming famous seems hollow to me now. No..." Mike paused. "I want to be a doctor."

The other children looked astonished. Deavon spoke before he realized the words had come out of his mouth, "Why?"

The girl from China remained unfazed by his response. "Teller was right. Our greatest gift is our ability to share ourselves with others. When I touched all those people who were suffering, they touched me as well. As a doctor I may not heal with my hands like I did here, but I'll still be able to touch people's lives."

Teller was proud of the growth Mike had made. The girl who had offered all the others for her freedom now understood the true nature of The One.

The Leader of Galea looked at newest foster child. "Deavon, what will you take back?"

The young man looked at each person as he spoke, "Before we arrived, I was alone. I was told I was loved but never shown that love. Then Mike saved my life, even if it did make her sick to her stomach. Tony fought off an army and almost died trying to save us. And Erin stopped us from being a serpent's lunch. I didn't know what a family was until now. When we return, they'll probably take me away like they always do. I am just glad to know that someday I might have a family I can call my own, you know."

The young man started to cry. His mom had let him down. The system let him down, but the strangers who traveled with him not only offered support, they also risked their lives for a person they hardly knew.

Tony spoke once more for the rest who were crying with him. "Family is not about who or what. It's about people wanting to care and accept each other, no matter what happens. You may leave us but you'll always be part of our family, and we'll do everything we can to keep you."

Deavon looked up seeing Mike and Erin both nodding. "Thanks" was all the foster child could say.

Teller bent down and wiped Erin's tears. "So, my child, is there a God?"

Erin composed herself. "Yes, but God is not what I expected or was even told. In the moment I sat in the presence of God, I knew no matter what happens or what choices I make that I will always be loved. Knowing that, all I want to do is share that with others."

The old man smiled. "And for that very reason, I am a Teller."

He guided them all to bed for the last night before their departure. The Galeans who remained in the city sang an old lullaby to honor the strangers who saved their world from The Darkness.

Sleep well my children. Sleep well tonight.

May your slumber bring sweetness 'fore morning's light.

In God's care, be there, through out the night.

Sleep well, my children. Sleep well. Good-night.

The sound echoed throughout the city as thousands sang. The four then realized they would never experience these moments again in their lifetimes.

Once they arrived back home, no one would ever understand or imagine this world that they were a part of or had saved. Tomorrow they would be just children at home in South Portland, Maine. Slowly they drifted off to sleep, the song wafting in the air. As they remembered the lullaby, they would feel the love of the thousands who sang it.

# HOME

The next morning began with the sun piercing through the drapes in the palace windows. Teller awaited the children at the table where breakfast was being served. "Please take anything you desire with you."

Erin, having already received a book, held the doll she had been given in Ganglion. "I have all I want."

Mike, wearing her necklace, thought of taking a crown but decided better of it. "May I have some gold?"

Deavon and Tony looked at the girl from China as if all she said earlier was meaningless.

Teller's voice never wavered, "Yes, of course, may I ask what you intend to do with it?"

Mike looked at the boys who were now waiting for her to reveal her true nature. "Medical school is like a million dollars. It would be nice not to have my parents pay for it."

Teller looked at the young men. "You are truly a daughter of The One."

Tony knew if he took a sword, there would be questions. He looked around. Talus had left a shield in the corner. "I would like to take that." Tony walked over and placed it next to the shield he was given earlier. Tying them with a rope, the young man stated, "These will represent the countries of which I was once a part."

Deavon looked at Pea and Pod. "I guess I get to take a couple of sticks."

Teller gave him a hug. "My heart will always be with you."

As the four left the palace, the street was filled with people wanting to see the heroes of Cornea. Upon reaching the temple, Alba and Salpingo opened the door. Inside Dalton, Myx, and Pons saluted the children as they headed down the stairs. The tunnel was glowing, but it no longer had an ominous hue. The strangers knew that once they passed through the portal, they would be safely home. Erin looked for Acromion. As she began to enter the glow, she could see The Guardian of Light pulling the door open to her world. Erin mouthed the words "Thank-you" as they passed by him.

The spirit smiled. "Farewell, Your Highness." The portal became dark. In the distance they could hear people calling their names.

Mike yelled out first, "Here, over here!"

Flashes of light came closer. "Erin, Mike?" The flashlight blinded the children as the sheriff confirmed to himself that these were the ones who they were searching for ... "Mike, Erin?"

"Yeah, I'm Mike O'Reilly," said the girl from China as she pointed to her right "and this is Erin."

The officer looked strangely at the four before him.

"Hey, what are you looking at?" asked the girl from China.

Deavon nudged Mike with his elbow. "Have you taken a look at yourself lately?"

Looking down she saw why the constable was so bewildered. After a month of traveling among the Galeans, she had become accustomed to wearing hides and boots. Now, being back in their world, she looked ridiculous, especially being the middle of summer.

Tony thought fast. "We fell into a crevasse, an old Indian burial ground. It was cold; our clothes were ripped by the rocks."

The officer accepted the story just to keep from inquiring further. "Your mom and dad are worried sick. I'll lead you back to the entrance. The four followed the sheriff through the caverns.

Several people stopped to look. "Are those the kids?"

The officer replied, "Yeah, call off the search."

"How long have you been looking for us," asked Tony.

The sheriff looked surprised but answered Tony's question. "Twenty-four days. Your parents called us the night you were lost weeks ago."

When they reached the opening, the news of their rescue had already arrived. Tom and Joan, along with news crews from the area, were waiting. The light from the camera's made the children squint. Shielding their eyes, the children ran to their parents. The news crews followed. The parents of the lost children hugged Erin, Mike, and Tony. Deavon once again was the odd man out. Mike grabbed the foster child and pulled him into Joan's outstretched arms.

"I am so glad you're okay," said the O'Reilly's Mom.

Mike spoke to all in the huddle. "We are home. We're all home."

A woman broke into the hug fest. "Can you make a statement?"

Tom pulled himself away to shield the others from the intrusion. "We're just grateful that they are safe. We want to thank all the people who searched these last few weeks for our children."

"Obviously they did not come to the Polar Caves dressed like that; is there any explanation?" asked the reporter.

Mr. O'Reilly stood in front of the camera to make it difficult to get a shot of the children. "They found some Indian artifacts. When we get home, they'll be returned."

Tom looked at the newswoman as if to say the interview was over.

Getting the message, the cameraman turned the light on her. "The search is now over, and the children appear to be unharmed. Did they truly get lost playing among the ruins they had found? And how did they survive as weeks went by without calling for help? We may never know. This is Ashley Wilkes for WGPV News."

The O'Reilly's were escorted to the hospital where the children were evaluated. Upon their release, they were allowed to return to Maine. On the way home, the four finally relaxed. Joan, turning to the children in the back seat, began her interrogation.

"All right what the hell happened? You entered the caves looking normal and come out looking like The Last of the Mohicans! Someone had better do some explaining and no stories!" demanded Joan.

The four looked at each other not knowing what to say.

Erin spoke up. "I met God and Tony fought off an army of Atresians. We need to adopt Deavon, and Mike wants to be doctor. Oh by the way, as a thank-you for saving their world, Teller gave her gold to help pay for medical school," explained Erin in a matter of fact tone.

Joan was taken aback by her daughter's reply. Mike handed her mother the bag of gold. Tony revealed the shields hidden by the burlap, Deavon put his arm around Erin, and the youngest handed her mom the book that Teller had given her.

Tom had trouble keeping the car on the road being distracted by the events around him.

Joan handed the things back to their owners. "So, you all expect me to believe this?"



The children's reply was mixed but eventually they unanimously agreed on the affirmative.

"You're all grounded," said Joan ending the discussion.

After baths and Mike's several showers, they retired to bed after eating half the kitchen, including the frozen vegetables. Joan and Tom reviewed the artifacts they had brought home.

"Do you think this is real gold?" asked Joan.

Tom looked at his wife. "About as real as Mike's desire to become a doctor." Mr. O'Reilly picked up a shield. "I never knew Indians to carry these things, and they definitely didn't have crests. I don't know; there is something strange about all of this, but I don't think we'll ever get to the truth."

Mrs. O'Reilly was not so sure. "Tom, I haven't allowed the children to lie to me, and I am not going to start now."

Joan's husband picked up the book, which seemed incredibly old. "Oh my God, Joan, look at this."

Tom handed his wife the book. The writing was not recognizable, yet it could be understood if you concentrated on the letters on the pages. The first few pages talked about Atresia and a prince named Talus. "You have to admit this is strange. I am going to take one of these coins to a friend of mine. Maybe he can tell me what they are."

"Okay, then we will gather them tomorrow and get to the bottom of this," said Joan.

"Sounds good. I've got an hour or two before bed; I am going to research these crests," added Tom.

Joan kissed her husband good-night and took the book to bed. Tom sat at the computer until he was too tired to continue. His effort produced nothing.

The children gathered in Tony's bedroom knowing that there would be questions. They invented a story that didn't include demons, portals, or mystics.

The next day the children relaxed enjoying the warmth and the safety that their world provided. A visitor interrupted the tranquility; Sandra had arrived to investigate the incident. Wearing her department of human

services badge on her blouse, she knocked on the door. "Hi Joan, I appreciate you taking the time to see me."

Mrs. O'Reilly welcomed the social worker. Sitting down at the table, she began the meeting.

"Anytime the word foster child hits the news, the governor freaks out. It's hard enough to do our job but then everything becomes even more difficult." Sandra leaned in towards Joan. "There's even talk of a lawsuit."

Mrs. O'Reilly reared back. "They were lost! How could someone sue us for that?"

Sandra chuckled. "Oh, not you. Us. We should have known better."

"That's ridiculous," said Joan.

The social worker sipped from the cup of coffee Joan had made for her. "I know but once lawyers get involved, politicians get high handed. They want a person to blame, and I am here to find fault with you."

Joan was incensed. "You're kidding me. I've been in foster care for fourteen years, even when it cost Tom and I money to do so."

Sandra shook her head. "I know; that is why I am being so upfront with you. Not only do they want a scapegoat, they want me to find grounds to remove Deavon and Tony."

Joan was truly concerned. "What can I do?"

"Most likely they'll take away your license. That will make it look like they did something. Then they can appear to have the best interest of the children at heart."

Joan felt helpless. "When there's no one left to help those who need it, then what will the children do?"

Sandra looked sympathetic. "That is why so many of us leave the system. We get burned out having too many cases and not enough resources to help. Then they drive people like you away who find the system works against you instead of for you."

"Tony has been here seven years. It would kill him to get shuffled out. Who's going to take a fifteen-year-old boy? He'd end up in a group home." Joan was near panic.

The social worker looked down at her cup. "Yeah, I know and Deavon finally started getting comfortable. Do you know how hard it's been to supervise his care? In and out, never having a place he could call home.

Now his mother is hoping to sue to get him back. The State will comply, you know, regardless of what my concerns are.”

“So what’s the next step?” asked Joan, trying to quell her emotions.

Sandra smiled having a plan to thwart those trying to protect themselves. “First, I’ll interview the children. Then after reading my findings, they’ll revoke your license. In the meantime, Tony is old enough for you to work on your adopting him without having this investigation interfere. Deavon is another matter. I can’t guarantee a positive outcome, but I do have a friend who might be able to arrange something between you and Deavon’s mom, Moira. That may take some time but in the end, there’s hope.” Sandra handed Joan her business card and got up. “Is there a place I can interview the children?”

Joan offered the living room. Mrs. O’Reilly then excused herself after gathering the clan, knowing she could not be present for the proceedings.

Sitting on the couch, they looked at the social worker with suspicion.

Sandra smiled and turned toward Deavon. “Would you like to introduce me?”

Deavon looked at the others. “This is Ms. Sandra Hall. She’s been involved with my case since I was three. You could say she’s been the only person, other than my mom, who knows me.”

Sandra looked disappointed. “Is that all you can say?” Looking at the other children she said, “This child cost me two vacations and a promotion.” Then the social worker looked at the young man. “And still after all these years he still refers to me as...”

Deavon spoke sheepishly, “The Dragon Lady.”

The others laughed.

Sandra gained their attention once more. “Now this is how we’re going to do this. We’ll talk about what happened in the cave. Then from there I will need to talk to you separately about what happens here. My job is not to punish or to judge. I am here to help you and in some cases, I protect children from those who would hurt them. But most of the time you talk and I just listen. Then I’ll go away until you need me. But at least you know I am there if you feel you’re in trouble.”

Sandra then opened her notebook and grabbed a pen. So what happened in the Polar Caves that you ended up lost for a month only to come

out looking like extras from the *Land of the Lost*?”

As rehearsed, Tony started first. He explained how Erin fell into a hole. Mike dove to grab her but slipped. Deavon and Tony followed. Not thinking of getting help, they became trapped as the entrance collapsed. Fumbling through the dark, they became wet, cold, and muddy. Finally, they reached an opening where they found a torch. Deavon happened to have a flint stone he had bought at the souvenir shop. Once they lit the torch, they saw they were in a tribal burial ground or something like it. There they changed clothes and began looking for a way out. Having snacks and water to drink, we managed until we found another opening to the surface. There we wandered for days in the woods eating and drinking what we found. After several minutes of storytelling, Tony concluded. “And then we got so lost we ended up back where we started and found our way back through the caves. There the sheriff discovered us.”

Deavon knew the Dragon Lady well. Just telling the story would have been obvious for her to see the children’s fabrication. Devon orchestrated timely interruptions to make the story more genuine. All had little side tales to tell to embellish Tony’s narration of the events. In the end, they had not convinced the social worker but had provided enough of a plausible explanation for her not to inquire further.

Sandra sat with Erin first. After asking the standard questions, she looked at the child in front of her. “Now that we’re alone, is there anything you want to say to me? Anything you felt you couldn’t say in front of the others?”

Erin looked up. “Can Deavon stay with us?”

Sandra looked curious. “Why do you want Deavon to stay?”

“Because he’s family,” said Erin.

“Family? Deavon has been here, what ... maybe two months. Why do you think of him as family?”

Erin looked at the social worker intensely. “It’s not a matter of the time you spend together but what people do for each other that makes a family. Deavon has been a brother to me. He helped me when I was scared. He watched over me when I was in the cave. He means a lot to us. I don’t want to see him go.”

Sandra looked at the child. "Oh, I see. I don't know. I will try my best to ensure Deavon's future. If he can't stay here, I will make sure he's going to be okay. I promise."

Erin smiled. "I just want Deavon to be happy. May I go now?"

The social worker thanked the child and asked for Mike.

Mike was more suspicious of the lady interviewing her. "So what do you want to know?" Mike spoke defensively. "Was I abused? Do I use drugs? Oh, here's a good one; do I blame my mother for going bad?"

"What?" Sandra knew this was not going to go easily so she used a direct approach. "All right let's get right to the point. I am not here for you. I am here for Tony and Deavon because they are under the care of the state. The department of health and human services sent me to find out what went wrong. If all goes well, I might get the O'Reilly's to adopt Tony before they lose their license. Deavon is another story."

Mike took the chip off her shoulder. "Lose their license? What do you mean?"

The social worker, now having obtained the girl's attention, made her point. "The moment those television cameras showed your faces and mentioned foster care, DHHS got nervous. My bosses demanded action. To them, the O'Reilly's are to blame and need to be punished. That way everyone can go on camera and look like they've done something. Capeesh?"

"Tony and Deavon need to stay. They can't leave," stated Mike.

Sandra shook her head. "I have no say in the matter. The O'Reilly's have been great but once lawyers threaten to sue and action committees start meetings, it's all about watching your backside instead of doing what's best for those involved."

Mike started to cry. "Deavon can't leave. It would kill him. He's one of us. Can't we do something to stop this? Like ... go on Oprah or something?"

Sandra touched the girl's hand. "He was assigned here for the summer. The hope was that his mother would create a home for the both of them. The O'Reilly's knew that from the start."

"It's not fair! What if Deavon wants to stay?" cried Mike.

The social worker looked at Mike. "This is why my job is so hard. I know you're concerned about Deavon, but what about his mom? Doesn't she deserve a chance?" questioned Sandra.

Mike slumped. "Yeah, I guess so."

Sandra ended the interview. "Okay, is there anything you want to add before we conclude?"

Mike looked the social worker in the eye. "If Deavon ever needs a place to stay, he will always have a home here."

Sandra finished writing her notes and then called for Tony.

The foster child sat down. Sandra looked at the adolescent. "Nice story earlier. Deavon's getting better. Nice touch using the rabbit trails."

Tony tried to look innocent. "What do you mean?"

Sandra put down her notebook. "Something traumatic happened to the four of you. If I didn't know better, you all act like veterans of some war. That's the type of bond you all seem to have with each other. Now I could ask Deavon but he won't talk, even to his detriment. So are you willing to tell me, or will I just go with the story you concocted?"

"Will it help Deavon?" asked Tony.

The social worker turned toward the young man. "He is the one client I couldn't let go. So with that said, I'll do anything in my power to ensure his well-being."

Tony tried to assess the person in front of him. Finally, he took a chance. "We were abducted."

Sandra reared back. "By whom? And don't say aliens."

"No, we entered a portal of some kind transporting us to another place and time. It seemed like we we're gone forever. With everything that was happening, we lost track of time. And yeah, we were involved in a war. We had to watch out for each other. Deavon needed us, and we needed Deavon."

Sandra didn't write a word. "I see." Leaning into Tony, Sandra continued. "Is that the best you can do? Well ... I suggest you stick to your original story."

The social worker's expression became more businesslike. "I talked to Joan. She will no longer be allowed to be a foster parent."

"Why?" asked Tony. "What did she do?"

Sandra simply continued, "Nothing, but it has already been decided. The plan is for her to adopt you. So the only person affected will be Deavon. Now before I call Deavon, is there anything you'd like to say?"

Tony was discouraged. "No."

The social worker asked for Deavon. The other children gathered upstairs and compared notes. Their conclusion was not good.

# DEAVON

The social worker looked at Deavon. "You're getting better. The last time was not as convincing. Having accomplices does help."

"How did you know?" asked Deavon.

"I didn't until Tony started telling me about some portal and this other world crap. Then I realized I was not going to get the real story from any of you. I don't know what happened, but you have managed to gain their devotion. That's good. It means you must have reached out beyond yourself and allowed them in."

The young man looked disappointed. He wondered why Tony broke so easily.

"Unfortunately, it doesn't matter what I say; your fate is out my hands," continued Sandra.

Deavon looked at the Dragon Lady. "What do you mean?"

Sandra looked down at the child to whom she had dedicated her career. "Ever since I saw you, I knew I had to look out for you. I did my best. All in all, you turned out okay. You're a good kid and there's hope that you can overcome this and live a good life. I won't be able to help you anymore. Your mom is suing the state with the help of some group calling themselves the 'Parent's Rights of Maine'. The bottom line is that your mom will regain custody. Only the next time you need help, I can't be there. They'll assign someone else. Not only are they blaming the O'Reilly's, but they are also blaming me for placing you here in the first place. I am sorry."

Deavon looked at Sandra. Letting his emotional guard down, he confessed to what she already knew. "I want to thank you for everything you've done for me. Bringing me here changed my life." Deavon gave her a hug. "I love you, Dragon Lady."

Sandra teared up while laughing at the same time. The social worker composed herself, wiping her now mascara streaked face. "Okay, okay there's one last thing we can do ..."

The children were gathered one last time before Sandra left.



"How long do we have before they take Deavon away?" Tony wanted to make a plan to keep Deavon as part of their family.

Mike spoke up. "Tony, its not like he's going to jail; he's going to live with his mother."

Sandra concurred with the girl from China and assured the children that they would remain in contact with each other. The social worker ended the conversation by thanking them and proceeded into the kitchen to meet with the Joan to say goodbye.

Erin looked at the foster child. "Are you okay?"

Deavon looked at his comrades in arms. "I'll be okay until my mom starts drinking again. Then it gets tough, but I'll manage. I always do."

Tony spoke for the others, "What can we do?"

Deavon smiled. "Stop telling people about the other world and the time portal."

Tony looked embarrassed. "She didn't believe me anyway."

Deavon looked at his brother. "I told you she was good. Besides, she wasn't looking to get us. She just wanted a story to write for her report, and we gave her one."

Mike cleared her throat. "So, what happens after you leave?"

Tony interjected. "Nothing, we remain a family, no matter what happens."

Deavon appreciated Tony's dedication but spoke more realistically. "They will never send me back here. So, I need to convince my mom to allow you guys to be part of our lives."

The youngest spoke next, "How can you do that?"

"The Dragon Lady hopes to arrange a deal between my mom and yours so that I'll be free from the system. If my mom slips, I stay here."

Tony spoke without thinking, "I hope she slips."

Mike rebuked him with a look. "We're not talking about Talus here; it's Deavon's mom."

Tony looked at Mike and then at Deavon. "Sorry, I just don't want you to go."

The foster child smiled. "Its okay. I'll be all right. "

Erin said what the others were only feeling. "You might be, but we won't."

Hours later Tom arrived from work and ran to his wife. "You are not going to believe it! Mike is rich. Well, not rich." He then grabbed Joan

with both hands, "VERY RICH!" Letting his wife go he revealed the coin from his pocket. "It's gold. The markings are similar to one's from the fifteenth or sixteenth century, and they are definitely not Indian. They are closer to European. But the markings are not familiar to any George had seen before. He even called a friend who came over at lunch. They're real."

Joan remained unfazed by the news.

"What's wrong? What happened?" asked her husband.

Joan made Tom sit at the table. "Sandra came by and it wasn't good."

The two got up after their conversation and gathered the rest. Over pizza they discussed, as a family, the events that changed their lives. The entire story was told. By the end the pizza was gone, the popcorn was eaten, and soda had been consumed. Tom and Joan sat dumfounded.

"And all this happened while you were away?" asked Joan.

Tony looked at his mother. "Well, we had Teller who looked out for us and then Talus who wanted us dead."

"That is why I got the book," piped in Erin.

Joan held the book that Erin was given, her hand on the cover. "I notice that even though the writing and language were strange, I was able to comprehend it."

Mike spoke next, "It was like that everywhere we went. They spoke differently but yet we understood everything."

Tom spoke with concern, "Will there be anymore portals? I mean you're not going anywhere else, are you?"

The children laughed.

Mike spoke up through the noise, "Not if we can help it. Our traveling days are over."

They all agreed.

Joan looked at her children. "You went through hell. Are you all okay? I mean you're not having any nightmares or anything, are you?"

They all refuted her concern.

Deavon looked at his second mom. "Because we all learned about each other and ourselves in the process, we seem to be okay. If we didn't have Teller to guide us, it would have been different. He made sure we were all right before returning home."

Mike added to Deavon's thought. "That's why we need to stay together. We're the only ones who can understand what we experienced. It's like a bond no one else can share."

"Mike, we may need to hire a lawyer to help Deavon. Can we use some of the gold?" asked Tom.

The girl from China spoke without hesitation, "Use it all. I'll just get loans for medical school. Deavon comes first."

Tom and Joan looked at each other. This was not the same child who thought of nothing but her own needs. "What happened to you?"

Mike responded to her mother. "You could say I learned the truth about myself and others."

Tom ended the council. "Okay, then let us get some sleep."

The following days went as Sandra predicted. Joan and Tom had their foster parenting license revoked. Tom took out a loan against his 401(k) for the lawyer needed to adopt Tony and to help Deavon. The O'Reilly's thought better of using the gold since it would have raised too many questions. A trip to North Carolina or the Florida Keys would work out well after all was said and done to announce their discovery of a treasure while scuba diving off the coast.

Deavon was now living in Portland with his mom. All were grateful for their ability to see each other and talk on the phone, but it was still not the same. The action committee comprised of bipartisan legislators reveled in their success. The politicians made their various speeches about being for children and the world continued to revolve. Days turned to weeks, weeks to months.

It was then, after losing the spotlight, that Moira began to stumble, becoming afflicted once again by her illness. For the last two weeks, Moira had been getting worse. Deavon talked to her about her drinking, but each time another promise was made and was soon broken. Deavon realized his life needed to change. He had concluded this after seeing his mother on the couch for the second morning in a row. Moira never made it to her bed.

Picking up her head she looked at her child. "Hey, baby."

In the past, Deavon would have yelled or screamed in anger, accusing her of loving the bottle more than him. In the past, he would have

removed the evidence to protect her and create a facade for Sandra who'd drop by to check on him.

He no longer felt angry but sad for the woman who was a victim of other's choices to profit from another's weakness, unable to choose a better path for herself. Deavon spoke softly and with compassion. "Mom, you're drinking again. I can't stay if you continue. They will come and they will take me away from you."

Moira fought her pounding headache to sit up. "I'm sorry, baby. I won't do it again. I promise. I had a bad day."

"Momma, I want you in my life, but you can't take care of me if you can't take care of yourself."

Deavon's mom squinted trying to see who was talking to her. It sounded like her son, but the words were unfamiliar. "I'll do better, baby."

Deavon bent down and looked his mother in the face. "If they take me away, we may never be together again. I love you, Momma, but I need to take care of myself. I am going to call your sponsor, and then I am calling Mrs. O'Reilly."

The meeting between the plaintiffs was brief. The lawyer Sandra had suggested drew up an agreement. The coffee Moira's sponsor had made sobered Deavon's mom up enough to understand the consequences of her actions. A protection order was signed allowing the O'Reilly's to prevent Moira from visiting Deavon if she was drunk but if sober, she would be allowed unlimited access to her child. The State would no longer be involved. The adoption would make Deavon safe and allow Moira to focus on her illness without the added scrutiny of DHHS hanging over her.

Deavon hugged his mother. "I love you, Momma."

Moira held her son as tightly as she could. "I love you too, baby." The door shut leaving her alone with her sponsor; the rest was up to her.

Deavon looked at Joan. "Are you sure you want me?"

Joan looked at her new son. "As Teller said, 'you're family'."

