WarZone Entertainment presents

**Chronicles**

**#2: A Tale of Two Apprentices**

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**Chapter One**

 A loud bang rattled Simon's ears as the small canister he held in his hand started smoking. The tiny device he had been working on, had exploded. This was nothing new, as Simon's inventions regularly went haywire. He had a knack for building crazy and out there things that sometimes were revolutionary, and other times disastrous.

 He looked around his laboratory at all his previous creations as a self powered toy Pegasus flew around the room. Simon had invented the flying toy a few years back and it still worked. It would fly around in circles all day and night. Truth be told, Simon had no real idea how it worked, just that it did. That was true of a lot of the things he build. He would come up with an idea, something he wanted to make and somehow he would know how to put it together. It would just come to him in flashes. Sometimes they would work and others they wouldn't.

 The smoking canister in his hands was an example of them not working. He let out a sigh as he put it down. It was back to the drawing board. He scanned over his notes, his hand writing unruly and hard to read, even for himself. That would have been bad enough, if it wasn't for the fact that his writing desk was also insanely unorganized. He had dozens and dozens of notebooks filled to the brim with notes on thousands of projects, and that wasn't counting all the loose paper that was thrown about.

 Slowly he started to shift through all the paperwork, looking for the notes on his newest invention, or well, idea. It wasn't an invention yet, but once it was finished it would make his life so much easier.

 Almost on cue the door at the top of the stairs swung open as his little brother called down to him. Simon was the middle child of the royal family of Infera. The invisible child. His older brother, Finn, was the crown prince. He was regal and charming and much loved by all who knew him. His younger brother, Toma, was the warrior brother. Brave and conning. He picked up a sword when he was merely six and bested his instructor within a year. He was the pride and joy of their father. Simon, on the other hand, was invisible. He was always down in the old dungeons working on weird inventions that no one understood or cared about.

 “I know your down there! I can smell the smoke.” Toma said with a laugh. As if Simon failing an experiment was some kind of a joke. Although, Simon supposed that it was to Toma. No one ever took the time to ask about his work, it was just Simon wasting his life away.

 “What do you need?” He called up, already knowing the answer.

 “Sir Dale sent me to fetch you. You're late, yet again. I'm the carrot brother, don't make him send the stick.” With that Toma turned and marched away, leaving Simon to his thoughts.

 Sir Dale was the man-at-arms of their castle. He was tasked with training the princes in the art of war. Simon was his least favorite student, it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say he hated Simon.

 He let out a low sigh as he removed his lab coat and started up the stairs. He would much rather stay down in his hide away and attempt once again to make his experiment work. He had hoped to perfect it before the next training session, but Toma's words were a threat. There would be hell to pay if Simon didn't make it to the yard in a hurry.

 The “yard” was so much a yard as it was a training ground, not just for Simon and his brothers, but also for the guards. His father was the king of, well, no one would call Infera a kingdom. It was a tiny little village, that centered around this castle which had once been home to a much larger kingdom, back when the many tribes of gods were one. As the gods broke apart into smaller tribes and went their own way, so too went the humans. The landscape of the old world was shifted time and again over the eons, until Infera was one of the last strongholds near the great sea. The surrounding land did not fare as well the castle, but it was still home to a great many people.

 Not half as many as Darkah, the great kingdom forged by the demigod Hercules centuries before. It was one of the few kingdoms of man that had grown and grown as man's place in the world was diminished, that is until the war broke out. When Atlantis declared war on the tribes of the gods, they demanded that the kingdoms of man join them. Darkah denied their demand and was destroyed for it. Not invaded, not attacked. Destroyed. There was nothing and no one left standing afterwards. The Atlantians had used them as a message to the gods. Their age was done, the age of man was at hand.

 This was a painful new reality for the many humans living under the protection of the gods. They were punished for the crimes of their brothers, new and stricter laws were put into place. Life had become very cruel, even for those in positions of power, such as Simon's family. It was the main reason that his father had offered up Infera as the site of the great gathering. A meeting of the many gods of war, where they will plan their grand final battle with the armies of Atlantis.

 Their father was a nervous wreck as he filled them in on everything that was expected of them while the gods were here. Simon's tasks mainly consisted of showing up, looking presentable and shutting up. He was after all the embarrassment of the family.

 Simon exited the castle's grand doors and made his way around back, towards the “yard” where Toma was already sparing with three of the guards men and winning, while Sir Dale watched on, beaming with pride.

 “I'm here sir.” Simon said, keeping his eyes downward as he walked over to the man-at-arms. Sir Dale didn't so much as look at Simon as grunt. He motioned behind them, to the rack of practice swords. It had been years since Toma had used a practice sword, yet Simon still used them daily. He wasn't ready for a real sword. He was told this time and again. Part of him wanted to try a real sword just to prove them all wrong, but deep down inside he felt they were right. But all of that would change when his experiment was finished. It was a small comfort knowing that he was already working on fixing his lot in life.

 The comfort was fleeting as he made his way towards the barn, where a wood dummy was placed in the middle of the room, with a practice sword for an arm. Sir Dale ordered Simon to practice on this dummy every day until he was ready to move. Simon felt like a fool when he was given this task, but he followed instructions like a good prince. For the first few days he tried and tried to improve, and when he felt he had mastered some kind of form, or well, not mastered, but he wasn't dropping the sword as much, he told Sir Dale that he was ready. The man-at-arms didn't even look at him as he told him that he would decide when Simon was ready. That was close to a year ago and Sir Dale had never been in to check on his progress even once.

 This was all a waste of Simon's time, and yet he was expected to spend hours each day out here. All for nothing. He resented it, but there was nothing that could be done about it. His grandfather had won a revolution in Infera and his father was a hero of countless campaigns. In his family, war was the only way to honor.

 He put his practice sword down and made his way towards the back of barn. Past the last of the stalls, where he entered into a little study that he had built for himself. After the first couple of weeks, when he realized that his hard work was never going to be apprenticed. That no one cared about his progress because they had already written him off, he started sneaking out here at night and building this little hide away. He would spend his days reading and studying the ancients.

 It always amazed him how far the humans had fallen. There was a time when the gods had treated humans as their brothers, allowed them to control their own destiny. To learn and grow, to become better versions of themselves. It all changed when Atlantis pushed too far.

 A great deal of the books Simon read were now outlaw by divine law. But that didn't stop him. Knowledge was to be gained and passed down, not lost to time. At least that was his views on the matter, not that anyone would listen.

 Simon made himself comfortable, not the easiest of tasks. This secret study was a far cry from the castle library or his laboratory, but it made due.

He sat at his desk and opened up a small book about the death of the titans and the rise of Zeus and Odin. It was written by a human during the early days of man. Just before the age where man started to elevate to the status of godhood and were knocked back down to the mud by the gods.

 The book glorified them. The writer sat down with the god-king himself. So the story was mostly from Zeus' prospective. Odin was nothing more than a side-note. Simon glanced over at the books he had next to him, the top book was imported from Asgard, and told the story from Odin's viewpoint. Simon was eager to dive into it and spot the differences. He was sure there would be many.

 He opened the book and began reading when he heard a low creaking sound. It was the sound of the barn door opening. His heart dropped, no one had ever come to check on him in the many years he had been out here practicing. Why would they start now? He tossed the book down and rushed back to the main hold, where the sparing dummy was, only to find Sir Dale, his brother and the men in training all waiting for him. His brother had the biggest grin on his face that Simon had ever seen. The troops had a mixture of expressions, from amusement to fear. With a deep dread, Simon forced himself to look at Sir Dale, who looked ready to exploded.

 “Where the hell were you!” Sir Dale's voice rang with a fury that Simon had never heard before. It was enough to chill him to his bone. He thought he would melt under his gaze. “Answer me!” He demanded when Simon didn't answer. It wasn't from a lack of wanting to answer, it was an inability to form words.

 “Maybe I should go and find out?” Toma asked in a taunting voice.

 “Pissing!” Simon blurted out. It was the only thing he could think of to explain his hiding in the back.

 “Truly? And why not just use the shitter in the castle like everyone else?” Toma asked, knowing full well why. He was just tearing down his big brother for shits and giggles. He had always resented Simon for being older than him. As if that was something that Simon could control.

 “I didn't want to let you down.” Simon said, looking up at Sir Dale, an intimidating man when in a good mood. Downright terrifying when angry.

 “You've let me down since the day I was burdened with your training.” Sir Dale said, making Simon feel even worse about himself.

 “I'm sorry sir.” Simon said, lowering his head in shame. He could feel the joy radiating off of his brother in waves.

 “No sorrier than the king must be when he thinks of you.” Sir Dale said. Simon felt tears well up in his eyes, but he tried to keep them from coming out. The last thing he needed was another excuse for them to call him weak. Not that they needed much.

 “I do not mean to be such a disappointment.” Simon said.

 “Do you know what happens in a weeks time?” Sir Dale demanded. Simon nodded slowly. The Great Gathering was rapidly approaching, it was all his father talked about. “Good, so then you know what is at stake here?”

 “Everything.” Simon said weakly. Repeating what his father had drilled into their heads time and again.

 “The god of war, not just of the great Olympians, but of every tribe of gods, are coming here. For a war council. As the son of the king, there will be a lot expected of you. Not the least of which is how to use a sword.”

 “I'll be ready! I've been practicing!” Simon lied, hoping that he could finish his experiment before the gathering started.

 “Allow me to test him.” Toma said, stepping forward, drawing his sword as he did so. Simon stood there, defenseless, his training sword, his wooden training sword leaning against the wall. “Don't worry big brother, I'll let you get your weapon.” Toma said with a laugh.

 Simon nodded and slowly made his way towards his training sword, every step feeling like his last. He didn't think his brother would kill him, but he was sure whatever he had in mind would hurt. He picked up the sword and turned to face his brother, lifting it up in what he hoped was the right form. The laughter from the others dissuaded him from that illusion.

 “Enough!” Sir Dale yelled, pulling the training sword from Simon's hand. “Get out to the yard and find a sword. Today you show us what you've learned.”

 “Two days. Give me two days.” Simon pleaded. It was all he needed to finish his experiment, he was sure of it.

 “What difference could two days make?” Sir Dale asked.

 “None. He could have a hundred days and he still wouldn't stand a chance against me!” Toma said, swinging his sword around, as if he was about to strike.

 “Two days and I could take you down!” Simon said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. He could hear how badly he missed the mark in his own voice.

 “Than surly you could at least hold your own today. Now fetch your blade.” Sir Dale demanded as he turned and left the barn, his students following him out, all but for Toma. Who waited for the others before clearing out.

 “Today is going to be fun big brother. Father's coming to watch.” He said, before turning and following the others out into the yard. Leaving Simon alone. With a heavy heart Simon followed him out. There was no escaping his fate. He was going to be made a fool in front of his father.

 Sure enough, no sooner had he made it out to the yard than he noticed his father, older brother and any number of their nobles waiting for the sparing match to begin.

 “I expect a great match between you my sons!” Their father called out.

 “I'll do my best father.” Toma said, slashing the sword in front of him. Simon said nothing, instead he just picked up a sword off the rack. It was heavy, far more so than the training sword he picked up every day. It took both hands just to hold it up. He turned to face his brother, his hands shaking as he lifted the sword up.

 Sir Dale let out a painful sigh as Simon took a few steps towards his younger brother. Toma's expression was one of pure glee.

 “After you, big brother. As the elder of us, you should be allowed the first move.” Toma said.

 “I don't need any favors.” Simon said, attempting to hold his sword upright. The thought of swinging it was out of the question. Toma lowered his sword and took a few steps towards him, the sword swinging lightly by his side.

 The crowd watched on, no one saying anything. After all, clearly the fight had yet to start. Or so they would have hoped. Toma walked right up to Simon, whose arms were starting to tire and swung his sword up in one quick motion, knocking Simon's sword from his hand and causing it to go flying. In the same motion he swung the sword back, stopping it inches from Simon's throat. He pressed it right up against his Adam's apple.

 “What a show we put on dear brother.” With those words he cut a thin line of blood from neck. “Game, set, match.” Toma said, stepping away from Simon and putting his sword in it's scabbard. He walked over to their father and Sir Dale, who were deep in conversation. Simon knew it was about him, about how pathetic he was. All he needed was two more days. It would have changed everything.

 Simon's father didn't say a word on the way back to the castle. Simon went to his chambers and cleaned his cut before changing for supper. Not that he was sure he was even welcome.

 He slowly made his way down to the dinning room, where the great table was all set up, waiting for them. There was far more food than the four of them could ever eat. It was a feast made for a king, but Simon had no appetite. No one at the table would so much as look at him. He picked at his food, he mind as well have been alone.

**Chapter Two**

 Aral sat on the castle wall with Nil and the other orphans, watching the king and his sons eat. They had a table packed with more food than any of them had ever seen and they ate only a small portion of it. Aral felt a sense of anger boil up inside him as they left the table, most of the food left there untouched.

 “What happens to all that food?” Cal asked.

 “The staff picks at it.” Cratus said, as the servants started to clear the table.

 “The servants eating the kings food. They'd be put to death. No, that food is tossed aside or fed to the hounds.” Nil said, getting to his feet. The others followed his lead.

 “Why would they just waste all that food? Don't they know we are starving out here?” Jason asked. He was the youngest of the orphans. His mother had died in childbirth and his father died of the flu. He was only ten years of age. Still so young and innocent. Not that Aral was old and wise. He had just turned 15 on the last moon. But those 15 years had taken a toll on him.

 “Because we mean less than nothing to them. They use us and discard us.” Aral said, kicking a lose stone off of the wall.

 “That's not true. He's our king.” Jason said, no one said anything. They all knew Aral was right, but no one wanted to disillusion someone so young. He had more than enough time to learn just how cruel and heartless the real world was. That wasn't a lesson he needed to learn just now.

 “Let's go.” Nil said, leading the others along the wall. The plan for the night was simple. Break into the kitchen and steal as much food as they could get their hands on. The other orphans back at the temple were counting on them. Food was getting harder and harder to come by back in the village. In large part due to everyone preparing grand feasts for the many gods who were even now marching this way. The tiny village was going to be over run with outsiders, both from the many kingdoms of Olympia as well as from foreign lands.

 Aral had no love for the gods. His father had died in the war with Atlantis, fighting for the Olympians. He had served under Ares himself. In return for his father's sacrifice, he and his mother were kicked out of their home and forced onto the streets. It didn't take long for his mother to get a job at the local tavern. They were allowed to stay in the small room above the bar itself. It wasn't much, but it was home.

 At least until the outsiders came to town. They wanted a little more than just drinks for entertainment that night and when his mother wouldn't agree to it they killed her. But not before they had their fun. Aral was 11 when it happened. He saw the whole thing. He wasn't supposed to leave their room, but he couldn't sleep. He missed his mother and had made his way downstairs to see her when he spotted the men.

 His mother wasn't the only one who died that day. So too did his innocence. The owner of the tavern kicked him out a whole 3 seconds after they found his mother dead.

 He had nowhere to go, so he just wandered around, looking for food and somewhere to sleep. No one wanted to help him. Everyone just went about their lives as if he didn't exist, as if he wasn't there. Everyone but for Nil, who took him in. He wasn't much older than Aral, just 14 at the time, but he knew the city like the back of his hand. He had been living on the streets for years by that point. He gathered Aral and the other orphans up and took them to the old temple set up in honor to Orion, the demigod who Infera was built to honor. The temple had gone dormant many generations ago, after his death and the end of the age of demigods. Infera had moved onto worshiping his father Poseidon. A new, much larger temple was built in his honor. The old one left to rot.

 It was massive and had more than enough space for all the orphans. It was their own little kingdom, with Nil as their king. He was a good man, all of 18 now. He made sure they were all safe and fed. It was far more than the king or the gods had done. No, all they did was take from the people. They never gave back, it just wasn't their way.

 They made it to the nearest tower. Nil had scouted out tower the week before and had the guards schedule mapped out to the second. Or so he kept insisting. Aral had no reason to doubt him, not that that kept his heart from racing. Any number of things could go wrong and spell doom for all of them. And if anything were to happen to them, than all the other orphans back in the temple would be screwed. They needed this night to go off without a hitch.

 Nil stopped in front of the door and counted to himself. The orphans exchanged looks, none of them really knowing what he was waiting for. Cratus opens his mouth to say something but Cal just shook his head. Two seconds later Nil pushed open the door, entering into a passageway that was dimly lit by candles down below. He turned to look at the rest of them and smiled, before backing into the tower.

 “We're in.” He said as he turned and started down the stairs.

 “Here goes nothing.” Cal said. He sounded as nervous as Aral felt. Jason was sweating horribly. Aral had insisted to Nil that Jason was too young to come with them, but Nil didn't want to hear it. The world was a hard place and the sooner everyone learned to fend for themselves the better. He wasn't going to always be there to look after them. It was a depressing thought that Aral had never thought about before. It was foolish of him. After all, everyone he had ever relied on had been taken from him.

 The candle lights grew brighter as they made their way down towards the base of the spiral staircase. Nil stopped three steps short of the bottom and motioned for them to back up a few steps and to get low. Jason opened his mouth and Nil quickly put his hand over his mouth. Seconds later the

 door opened and a guard walked into the tower. He walked passed the staircase and kept walking. They could hear his feet growing fainter and fainter by the second. Followed by a creaking sound and then nothing.

 Nil moved his hand from Jason's mouth and motioned them forward. They made their way down the rest of the stairs, Nil slowly pried the door open. Aral spared a glance back towards where the guard had disappeared to. There wasn't time to worry about that now. He followed the others out of the tower door and carefully closed it behind him.

 Nil and the others were already a ways down the yard, running to the castle wall. Aral took off at a sprint to catch up to them. His eyes scanning the courtyard for any sign of guards, but there didn't seem to be any.

 Nil and the others were already slowly making their way down the wall, pressed against it, crouched down low, so as to present as small a sight as possible for anyone up on the castle wall who might look down. They walked for what felt like an eternity, until Nil finally stopped, holding up his fist. He put all five fingers and slowly put them down, one by one.

 Aral could feel his heart racing, faster and faster. It felt as if it was going to burst out of his chest. He tried to steady his breathing, but that was easier said than done. For the life of him, he had no idea how Nil did this day in and day out.

 Nil lowers his thumb and pushes the door open to the kitchen open. It was empty, not a soul inside. Steam was still coming from the stove as faint footsteps could be heard fading down the hall. Whoever was working in here must have just left. Perhaps to take a snack to a member of the family.

 “We have five minutes. Get as much as you can!” Nil ordered them, being careful to keep his voice low as he pulled out the bags he kept in his back pocket. He handed them out to each of them. Cal and Cratus rushed over towards the bread case and started stuffing as much as they could in. Jason ran towards the fruits and veggies as Aral and Nil started cutting into the meat that was stored in the ice box. They took as much ice as they could, to try and keep the meat good as they made their way back towards their temple.

 “Let's go!” Nil ordered. They all rushed towards the exit. Each carrying giant bags of food. As they made their way back out towards the yard and started slowly towards the tower that they had come out of, they moved a lot slower. Each of them fearing the moment that cook came back to the kitchen to notice everything that was stolen.

 When they made it to the tower, Nil looked around and then ran towards the door at the foot of the tower. They all followed him one by one. Nil wasted no time in pulling the door open and rushing inside. No sooner had Aral pulled the door close behind him than Nil, Cal and Cratus ran back downstairs. Jason was about to say something when Nil shook his head and rushed passed them, down the walk way that the guard had moved down when they had first left the tower. He pulled open a hidden door, the others followed him inside. Closing the door behind them.

 “Where are we?” Jason asked. It was a good question. It was a long dark room, with a few flickering candles lit along the wall. A large table with cards and chips laid on the table. It was a game room for off duty guards.

 “Fuck.” Nil said to himself. He was pacing back and forth. The night had gotten out of control. Something had happened that messed up his plans.

 In the distance Aral could hear bells going off. It was some kind of alarm. He could hear people screaming and rushing about. The guards of the castle were out there looking for them. Getting out alive, with the food was not going to be easy.

 “What do we do?” Aral asked, breaking the silence that seemed to stretch on and on.

 “We're going to die.” Cal said. His voice cracking.

 “We're going to be fine! Nil has this. Right?” Cratus asked. Not sounding so sure.

 “Nil?” Aral asked, concerned that they were trapped in this tiny room. The look on Nil's face told him he was right. Aral had never seen him look uneasy before. It chilled him to his core.

 The others seemed to be freaking out as well. Jason sat against the wall and started crying. Cal sat down next to Jason and opened his bag, pulling out an apple. Aral was about to tell him off, but thought better of it. If they were going to get caught, they mind as well go out on a full stomach.

 Cratus was standing next to Nil, expecting him to say something. He didn't. Nil just kept pacing back and forth, trying to figure out what to do. This was all going to end badly, Aral could feel it in his bones.

 “Okay.” Nil said, suddenly stopping. He didn't say it to any one in particular. It was almost as if he was talking to himself.

 “Okay? Okay what?” Cratus asked. He was starting to sound as scared as Cal, who was half way through his second apple. Nil turned to look at him, almost as if he forgot he was there. The look only lasted for a moment before it was replaced with Nil's normal cocky grin.

 “I need the lot of you to stay here. In this room, don't move and don't be loud.” He looks at Cal, finishing the second apple. “And no more food. That's for everyone.” Nil finished.

 “And what are you going to do?” Cratus asked. He sounded as unsure as Aral felt.

 “I'm going to find a way out of here.” Nil said. He looked at each of them in turn. “Then I'm coming back and leading you all out. But. . .” He turns to look at Cratus. “If I'm not back in 20, ditch the food and get the others out of here.”

 “What about you?” Cratus asked.

 “If I'm not back in 20, they got me. I don't want them to get you too.” Nil said, his hand on Cratus shoulder as he locked eyes with his friend. Aral could hear his own heart pounding. It was deafening, he was sure they could hear it all the way back in the castle. He tried to steady his breathing, but it wouldn't work. He was too nervous.

 “We can't just leave you.” Cratus argued, as Nil started towards the door.

 Nil turned back to look at them as he opened the door. “If I'm not back in time, you will. But don't worry, I always come back.” He said with a wink and he was out the door, leaving the four of them alone.

 “We're all going to die.” Cal said, almost to himself as he pulled out a third apple. Cratus snatched it out of his hand and put it back in the bag. Jason wiped the tears from his eyes.

 “He's coming back right?” Jason asked, no one answered. They all just exchanged looks and looked towards the door, expecting Nil to rush back in. Time seemed to stretch on and on.

 Cal wraps his arm around Jason, who seemed to be on the verge of a breakdown. The overconfidence of just an hour ago all but gone. The alarm blaring and shouting coming from outside the tower wasn't helping any. Aral hadn't been this terrified since the night his mother was murdered.

 Out of the corner of his eye, Aral saw Cratus slowly counting to himself. Time had to be almost up. It had felt like hours since Nil had left. Aral knew enough about how time worked to know that it hadn't really been that long. It was just the fear that was making time drag on and on.

 “Okay.” Cratus said. Finally finishing his count.

 “Already?” Cal asked, looking up. Jason started crying again.

 “Yeah, I even gave him a little extra time. But we have to go.” Cratus said. The defeat in his voice was evident, Aral could tell he hated himself for even suggesting they leave Nil behind, but what else could be done? Nil hadn't returned. He could have been caught, or worse killed.

 “What about the food?” Jason asked, his voice cracking.

 “We leave it. It'll slow us down.” Cratus said, trying to sound firm. It didn't work. He started towards the door. Cal slowly got to his feet, helping Jason up. Aral took a deep steadying breath before following after Cratus.

 Cratus stopped in front of the door and just stood there. Aral knew he was psyching himself up. He couldn't imagine how hard it must be to be responsible for the lives of others.

 After what felt like forever, Cratus took a deep breath and pulled open the door. No sooner had the door opened then Nil rushed through it, his breathing hard. Sweat pouring down his forehead.

 “Nil! You're back?” Cratus said, he was overflowing with relief. Nil smiled.

 “I told you I'd be back. Quick, get the food. We have to hurry.” Nil said, grabbing his bag and turning to head back out the door. Aral snatched up his bag and followed him out. The others right behind him.

 Nil lead them up the stairs, not a soul in sight. They made their way back onto the castle walls, once more, there was no one on the path. They made their way along the path. Within twenty minutes they were back into town and heading towards their temple. Not a guard in sight they whole way.

 “How did you pull that off?” Aral asked, not for the first time. Jason was back to his happy go lucky self. Cratus was unceremoniously quiet. Aral knew he felt guilty for the choice to leave without Nil. Cal on the other hand seemed to be enjoying every second of the night air.

 “I started a fire in the kitchen.” Nil said with a laugh.

 “Wait what?” Aral asked.

 “You didn't!” Cal asked, his carefree attitude gone in a second.

 “I needed a distraction to get us out of there. I started the fire and ran through the house. It took me a while to lose the guards and make it back to you guys. They will be looking for me for hours to come.” Nil said, a false sense of pride in his voice. Aral had spent enough time around their leader to know when he was putting up a brave front for the others. His voice always went higher in pitch, just short of manic. It was unsettling.

 “But they are going to storm through the village looking for us now. They won't stop!” Cal said, worried.

 “We have the food, that's what matters.” Cratus said. He moved ahead of them, Aral felt for him. Cratus never wanted to be in charge, Nil leaving him behind to make the hard calls took a toll on him. It was a feeling that Aral hoped to never face.

**Chapter Three**

 “What do you mean they escaped?” Simon could hear his father scream from down the hall. He had been on a rampage for hours. Ever since word had reached them that someone had cleaned out the help's kitchen. Simon didn't really see the problem. There was more than enough food in the castle to still feed everyone, but his father wanted heads to roll.

 Simon had made his way back to his lab after dinner, he had hoped to get some more work done. He was just making headway when the fire in the kitchen broke out. That put the castle on lock-down. Guards had stormed into his lab and forced him back to his room. He was under strict orders not to leave the room till they gave the okay.

 He could hear the guards making small talk outside his room. The only thing he couldn't tell, was if they were there to keep the intruders out, or keep him in. Either way it didn't really matter, he wasn't going to get anything else done tonight.

 He walked out to the terrace, overlooking the grounds, taking in the fresh night air. He couldn't help but wonder who had stolen from them, it was easy to figure out who set the fire. It had to be the same people, using the fire as a chance to escape.

 Simon always hated his room, if it was up to him he would spend all his free time down in his lab. Even sleep down there. He had once or twice, but his father had put a quick stop to that. It wasn't becoming for a young prince to sleep in a laboratory. He should be in bed each night and train in the yard each day. It was the way of things.

 It made no sense to Simon, he was the middle child and not much loved by his father. He was a prince in name only. Not even the guards and staff took him seriously. He was the joke of the castle, no one even pretended differently for his shake.

 “I want the head of who ever robbed from us. This can not be allowed to stand!” His father's voice drifted up to him from the yard below. Simon leaned forward and saw his father talking to the head of the guards as well as his lead general.

 “My lord, I understand your concern, and we will find the thief. I promise you. But, we have more pressing concerns. Perhaps if your guards were more competent, I wouldn't have to always clean up after them.” The general, Jin-La, said. He was a tall muscular man from an eastern kingdom, outside of Olympian rule. He met Simon's father during some battle or other and the two became fast friends. He had served his father ever since.

 “I know my job outsider! I ask, nor need, any help from you!” Spat the commander of the guard, Martel. He was a man who saw the inside of the kitchen far more than the training yard, let alone battle. He was as fat as Jin-La was muscular. His father was the former commander of the army before Jin-La came to Infera. The two men never much got along, more often than not dragging Simon's father into their fights.

 “So where is the thief?” Jin-La responded. His tone mocking as he pretended to look around. “I must have missed when you captured them.”

 “I'll find them!” Martel snapped!

 “Enough! Martel, find them. Bring me them alive. I wish to kill them myself!” Simon's father ordered.

 “With pleasure.” Martel said as he took his leave of the others. Clearly through with the conversation. Jin-La had the right of it and everyone knew it. Martel had no business being in charge of anything, let alone the safety of the castle. It was out of loyalty to his father, who had died saving Simon's mother from a raid during the war, that kept him his position. Simon's father was anything but sentimental, but for this one instance.

 “Everything is going along smoothly for the Great Gathering, my lord. We just need your leave to clear out the location and we shall be ready for their arrival.” Jin'La said, waiting for Martel to be out of earshot.

 “You have my leave.” Simon's father said. He turned and started back towards the house before stopping. “And Jin'La.”

 “Yes, my lord?” Jin-La replied.

 “If you find the thief among those hiding out in the temple, bring them to me.” His father said, his tone firm. He was not in happy spirits. Not that he ever was.

 “What about everyone else, my lord?” Jin'La asked.

 “Kill them.” Was all his father said.

**Chapter Four**

 The master thieves made their triumphant return to the temple to many cheers from those left behind. It had been some time before those under Nil's care had a feast on their hands. The great hall, where everyone in Infera use to come to warship was massive. The ceiling was domed, the top of which you had to squint your eyes to see. Hundreds of children fit into the massive hall, with room to spare and each and everyone them was overjoyed to see them. This was a great moment. . .for everyone but the five who had gone out for the food. They knew what the success of their mission had cost them.

 The journey back had been a tense one. Cal was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, not that Aral could blame them. There was no way that the king's men were just going to let the burning of his kitchen go unpunished. Missing food was one thing. It might even go unnoticed, but arson, that wouldn't be allowed to stand. Nil had to have known that when he made the decision to set the fire.

 Aral understood deep down, why he had done it. The rest of their lives were in jeopardy and he was responsible for getting them home. Any consequences that came from it was a concern for a future date. But it was short sighted and as Cal kept insisting the whole way home. It could very well spell the doom of their makeshift family.

 Nil didn't offer up much in his defense on the trip back, he left that to Cratus, who miraculously kept from hitting Cal, tho Aral suspected he came a lot closer to it than he would admit. Jason had broken down in tears numerous time over the course of the infighting, each time needing Aral to step in and play the role of big brother. A job he was not much suited for. Normally it would have been Nil or Cal who played that role, but Cal was too busy fighting with Cratus, while Nil was walking off on his own feeling sorry for himself.

 What had started out a great adventure, had quickly turned into a massive disaster, but as they handed out food to the others in the temple it didn't feel that way. It started to feel like the win it should have been. Even Cal and Cratus started to warm up to each other. Jason seemed to be back in high spirits, telling the other younglings about their close call with the guards and how he heroically saved the lives of the others. He was going into massive details about events that never happened, at least to Aral's knowledge.

 Only Nil seemed to be unaffected by the sudden good spirits. When they had first returned home he seemed like his old self, telling everyone that they had got the food and to dig in, but as the lines started he had taken off, and hadn't been seen since. No one really questioned it, everyone was too busy eating and enjoying the moment to even really notice.

 Aral quietly made himself two plates of food and snuck off from the crowd. He had a feeling that he knew where Nil was hiding. He slowly made his way up to the top of the temple, where the old bell had once hung. It use to be used to announce the arrival of Orion, back in the early days of the village. Back in a time when the Olympians, or their demigod children, cared for the humans of the land. A time long since passed.

 Over the years since the temple was abandoned, the bell had fallen into disrepair. Half of it had fallen clean off, while the other half was rusted and cracked. When Nil had taken over the temple to use as their new home, he had cleared the bell tower and made it into his own little apartment. It gave him a beautiful view of the kingdom, it also allowed them to see if anyone was approaching the temple. At a time like this, when the king was looking for them, it was the best spot in the house.

 At least that was Aral's train of thought as he made his was up the long spiraling stairs. It wasn't an easy trip on the best of days, much less after all the running and climbing they had just finished back at the castle. Not to mention making the trip up there with two plates full of food. But Aral knew Nil hadn't eaten and he didn't want his oldest friend to go hungry just because he felt guilty about saving their lives.

 Sure enough, when Aral pushed open the latch that led up to Nil's room he found him sitting at the window, looking out over the city. He was deep in thought, so much so that he didn't even seem to notice Aral entering the room.

 “I brought you some food.” Aral said, holding out a plate for him. Nil didn't even glance at him, just motioned for the floor next to him. Aral put the food down when he indicated.

 “Thanks.” Nil said, not looking away from the window, even for a second. It made for a very uncomfortable silence, when seemed to stretch on and on. Aral just stood there holding his own food in his hand, wondering what he should do. Part of him wanted to go back downstairs, just to escape the tension he was feeling, but at the same time, he didn't want to make that journey. His food smelled so good and his stomach had been growling most of the way up here.

 Nil picked up his plate and started eating, all the while keeping his eyes open for any threat. Aral took that as leave to dig in, so he sat down, with his back against the wall and started to help himself to his own food.

 The two of them sat in silence as they ate their food. In all the years that Aral had known him, Nil had never been this serious before. It was worrisome, but there was nothing to be done. A serious threat to all their safety had just taken place. If Nil wasn't concerned, that would be a bigger problem.

 “Fuck!” Nil said, jumping to his feet. Knocking over the food he had yet to eat.

 “What?” Aral said, getting to his feet, carefully placing his food on the ground next to him.

 “They're coming!” Nil said, real panic in his voice for the first time.

 “The Imperial guard?” Aral asked, his mind flashing to the guards they barely escaped with their lives. For the first time since entering the room, Nil turned to face him, his face pale as if he had just seen a ghost.

 “Worse, the Imperial army!” He said, the words made Aral's heart drop. The king was so pissed that he sent the army after them. There was no way they were going to escape this.

 “What do we do?” Aral asked, his voice high pitched and whinny. He had never been so scared in his life.

 “Run! We get everyone down to the tunnels and out to the city as quickly as possible.” Nil said, his mind racing, trying to think of a way out of this. Aral was about to ask where in town they were supposed to go but Nil had already pulled open the latch and jumped down.

 Aral had no choice but to follow suit. He raced down the stairs, as fast as his feet would take him. All thoughts of the wariness that had plagued him on the way up were gone, now he was bursting with energy.

 He made it back to the lobby of the temple, just in time to see everyone in full on panic. Nil and Cratus were trying to keep everyone clam and moving towards the tunnels, but it wasn't really working. The fear in the room was palpable. Cal was doing a much better job of getting the younglings in line and moving towards the temple.

 Aral could already hear the marching of the approaching army. If they didn't get into the tunnels soon it would be too late. The last thing they would want is to lead the army right to the others.

 Nil stopped and looked towards the door. His face grim, it was too late, they were here. He climbed onto the food table and cleared his throat. Everyone in the room stopped to look at him.

 “Close the tunnels. Cal, get everyone already down there to safety.” Cal nodded, going to into the tunnels and closing the passageway behind him. Panic seemed to grow in the room. “Run!” Nil screamed, pointing towards the back doors. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the front doors flew inward with a bang and soldiers started storming the castle. Nil jumped off of the table and ran for the exit. Everyone followed his example. The soldiers rushed forward, attempting to cut down anyone they caught. Aral, from the foot of the stairs watched on in horror. The whole world seeming to run in slow motion.

 Dal'na, a young woman with whom Aral had tried more than once to work up the nerves to talk to was running with her little brother An'da when a soldier swung his blade, cutting clear through her head. Blood spraying all over her brother's face. He was all of 5 years old.

 Aral fell backwards at the sight, all the energy left his body. It took everything he had not to fall to the ground. A feat made all the harder when the same soldier lifted his blade into the air and brought it down right into the head of An'da, right between the eyes. He pulled his blade out of the child with a laugh as he licked the blood off the blade before looking for his next victim.

 They were enjoying this slaughter. It was fun for them. The thought made Aral sick to his stomach. He never thought he would witness anything worse than what had happened to his mother, he was wrong.

 “Aral! We have to go!” Kando screamed in his face, suddenly the world jumped back to normal speed. All around them his friends were being slaughtered. Aral took it all in before allowing Kando to pull him away from the stairs. The blood thirsty soldier closed in on some of the younger kids, who didn't make it to the tunnel. He had a crazed glee in his eyes as he brought his blade down, only it didn't strike flesh. It hit wood.

 Cratus had deflected the blow with a long blank of wood, which the blade had made short work of. The blood thirsty soldier did not look happy at having his kill taken from him. Cratus ordered the kids to run and faced the man with the blade head on with what was left of his wooden staff.

 Aral stopped running, his eyes transfixed on the confrontation. Kando pulled him forward just as the soldier chopped off Cratus's arm. His cries echoing throughout the temple. His wasn't going to be a slow death.

 They made it outside where the slaughter was even worse. The soldiers had swarmed around the temple to cut them off. Cutting down as many of the kids as they could. In the distance Aral saw a few of his friends running, seeming to have gotten away. They must have made it out before the army made it out back, they were surrounded on all sides by soldier's cutting down anyone who dared moved too close. They were hoarding them back inside the temple.

 “Over here!” Kando shouted to him. Aral turned to look as Kando made for a small clearing in the bloodshed. Aral followed him, not knowing what-else to do. The sounds of death and cries for help came from all around them as they made it passed the temple grounds, out towards the forest nearby. A few others were up ahead, still running as fast as their feet would take them. Kando looked back and gave Aral a sad but hopeful smile as he took off after them. Aral did the same.

 It was well passed daybreak by time they had come to a stop. They were deep in the woods, the village they had all known as their home since birth laid far behind them. They had stopped in a dense part of the woods, where there were already nearly 30 others from the temple huddled around a small camp fire. Some of them had had the foresight to bring some of the stolen food along. Everyone was exhausted, but no one was sleeping. The Imperial army could find them at any moment, besides, how do you sleep after witnessing all your friends being butchered?

 Kando had taken off almost as soon as they made it to camp to try and see who else had survived. Aral was about to do the same when he saw Nil off to the edge of camp. A fresh scar running down his check. Blood still flowing from it.

 Despite everything Aral had just seen, it wasn't until seeing the scar on Nil's face that it truly sunk in. Nothing was ever going to be the same again.

**Chapter Five**

 Simon woke bright and early the next morning. Anxious to get as much work done in his lab before Toma came to collect him for drills. He had a very important projects he was hoping to finish. It was a special sword that would fight his battles for him. Guiding his arms to the right position to defend and attack.

 Or at least that was what he was attempting. So far all he had been able to do was create a sword that cut everything in it's path in half. It was uncontrollable. Not of any real use in the yard. He may not like Sir Dale or his little brother much, but the last thing he wanted to do was hurt them. He needed to find a way to get better control of the sword before trying it out in the field. He was sure he could accomplish this task, he just needed some time left alone.

 He closed in on the door to his laboratory when he was startled out of his thoughts by a loud crashing sound. Followed by another and another. It was coming from his lab. Simon took off at a run, worried about what could be happening to all his precious experiments.

 When he made it to his lab, he quickly noticed that the door was ajar and laughter was accompanying the crashes. He pushed open the doors to find two of the imperial soldiers smashing all of his experiments. They seemed to be having a great time with it.

 “What do you think you're doing!” He demanded. Not something he would normally do. He wasn't brave or bold, even when he knew he could be. Yelling at the soldiers was the most extreme thing he had ever done. They turned to face him, not the least bit concerned with his anger.

 “Your father is looking for you boy.” The guard said, a grin on his face. “He is not pleased with you at all!” He smashed a shelf full of ingredients to the ground, along with a flying wheel that he created to lift things to the top of the castle. It flew just fine, but couldn't hold any weight. He kept going back and trying to improve it. Now it just laid in ruins on the floor at the guards feet.

 Letting out a sigh, Simon turned and started toward the king's study. The guards weren't going to stop just because he told them to, and he had no real way to force them to stop. Besides, if his father demanded his attendance this early in the day, it had to be bad.

 The whole way to his father's study he thought long and hard about what it is that he could have done to anger him so, but nothing came to mind. Except for his poor performance against his little brother. His father had been most displeased with him throughout dinner. Would that have been enough for him to destroy everything Simon had ever created?

 He made it to his father's study, pausing just for a moment to collect his thoughts before pushing open the door and stepping inside. His heart racing as he did so. His father was not a man to anger.

 His father's back was turned to him, he was staring into the fire place, where a large fire was crackling. The room, which normally was perfectly ordered was a mess. Things had been thrown around and smashed. Blood was dripping from his father's hands. For a moment Simon wondered if he had been wrong, if this wasn't all about him. Those thoughts were tossed aside when his father turned to face him, his face flush with anger, tears in his eyes.

 “You!” He spat. He had never been his father's favorite son, nor even much liked by the man, but he was never hated by the man. But there was no disguising the pure hate in his voice or in his eyes.

 “Y. . . you asked to see me?” Simon said, more terrified of his father than he would have ever thought possible. After all, it was just a few hours ago that he heard him order the death of homeless people throughout the kingdom.

 “Do you have any idea what your *'toys'* have done to my poor sweet Toma?” His father demanded.

 “My toys?” Simon asked, confused.

 “Toma went to your lab, in an attempt to make peace with you! When your *sword* came to life and attacked him!” He stood inches from Simon's face as he screamed. Simon was positive that he was moments from being hit, or worse.

 “He touched the sword? It wasn't ready!” Simon said, fearing the worse. There was no telling what damage the sword had done to his brother. It still had so many bugs that needed to be worked out.

 Without warning his father's hand shot out, back handing him across the face and knocking him to the floor. A sharp searing pain shot through his face as he put his hands to the spot where he was hit. He glanced up at his father, who if anything, looked more angered than before.

 “What were you playing at boy?” He asked, each word louder than the last.

 “Nothing, father. I swear. . .I just. . .I just wanted to be able to hold my own in a duel. To make you proud. That's all.” Simon said, each word feeling like a weight being lifted from his soul.

 “By maiming your brother? It took his arm! The greatest warrior this family has ever known and you robbed him of his arm!” His father screamed, kicking Simon back to the ground with a force far greater than Simon would have guessed he was capable.

 “His arm? Oh gods. It wasn't ready! It still needed work. I swear father, that wasn't what it was supposed to do!” Simon swore, after catching his breath. He was in a great deal of pain from where his father had kicked him.

 “But it's what it did!” His father thundered.

 “I'm so sorry!” Simon cried.

 “Sorry doesn't bring your brother back his arm! I'm only grateful that it is all your wickedness cost us.” His father said, turning away from him.

 “What? What do you mean?” Simon asked, slowly getting to his feet. Fearful that he would be knocked back down any moment.

 “Do you know what is happening next week?” His father asked, turning back to face him. The anger replaced with concern.

 “The Great Gathering.” Simon replied. It was all anyone would talk about around the castle.

 “The Great Gathering.” His father said, taking a seat on his chair near the fireplace. For the first time in his life, he looked a man his age. The larger than life attitude that cloaked himself in was gone. He seemed nothing more than a tired old man. “The many gods of war and their armies, coming here, to my kingdom to figure out a way to beat the Atlantians.” His father said, talking more to himself than Simon, who just stood in the doorway, not knowing what he was supposed to say or do.

 “A nation full of man who invited weapons to give them the powers of the gods.” His father went on, he looked up and locked eyes with his son. All hate and anger gone, replaced with fear and sorrow. “And you picked now, now of all times to make weapons to fight for yourself. You, my son, are playing a dangerous game. Messing with the very ideas that have brought this world to war. If the gods were to learn of your experiments, it would cost us, and our people, everything.”

 The words hit Simon like a ton of bricks. He had never thought of it like that before. He was messing with forces beyond his understanding to a large extent. He would just come up with crazy ideas and instinctively know how to build it. It wasn't always perfect, like the current version of the sword. But he could always figure it out if given enough time. But it was very much in line with what the Atlantians did on their island. The invented weapons that gave them powers and skills, much like the ones that the gods were born with.

 Without even meaning to, Simon had committed the worse sin a human could make. He had attempted to play the role of a god. If this had happened during the Great Gathering, it would have spelled doom for everyone involved.

 “Leave me. And your lab is done. Know this.” His father said, defeat hanging onto every word. With a heavy heart Simon turned and headed back to his room. The weight of the world seeming to crush him as he did so. His experiments were the only things that ever made him feel alive and they had cost his brother, his little brother, his purpose in life and had almost cost the kingdom everything. All for Simon's need to create.

**Chapter Six**

 The day seemed to stretch on and on as a few more kids from the temple made their way out to the woods. But by noon it was clear that no more were coming. No one had heard from Cal or the younglings since the raid. Which left an uneasy feeling in Aral's stomach. What if they had been captured? Would the Imperial soldiers really kill them? They were nothing more than children, although as he looked around, he couldn't help but think that they were all just children. As were all the ones killed back at the temple.

 Nil hadn't moved from his spot since Aral had arrived. Aral walked over to him and attempted to talk to him, but Nil had nothing to say. He was broken. Not that Aral could blame him. They had been witness to a slaughter. And not just any slaughter, but one comprised of their friends.

 Aral found himself crying, not for the first time that day. There was nothing else to do. Just sit and wait for the other shoe to drop. There was no way the soldiers were just going to stop chasing them. They wanted to make them pay for setting fire to the kitchen. They wouldn't stop till they killed them all.

 A lot of the survivors started to fall asleep, something that would never happen to Aral. He really didn't believe he would ever fall asleep again. Any time he closed his eyes he would see the flashes of his friends being killed again.

 Kando had found a few of his friends and made the best of the new status quo they found themselves in. Aral admired that, he wish he had that. He didn't know how he would ever get passed this moment. But part of him knew he would. He survived the death of his mother. That was thanks in large part to Nil. He owed it to him to try and help him in much the same way.

 Aral got to his feet, a sudden wave of dizziness washing over him. He didn't realize how exhausted he was, he had had a long day after all. He pushed the thoughts out of his mind and started towards his friend.

 For a moment he thought Nil had drifted off to sleep, but as he closed in on him he saw that his eyes were open. He was staring off into the distance with tears flowing down his face.

 He neared down next to him, putting his hand on his shoulder. Nil didn't even flinch. It was as if he was dead inside. The guilt from everything that Aral was feeling had to be nothing next to the mountain of guilt that Nil was going through.

 “Nil, we have to go back to the city.” Aral said. It wasn't what he came over here to say, but it was the only course of action that came to him. Someone needed to go back to Infera to find Cal and the kids, and who better than Nil. It would give him something to do, a purpose that would get him back to being himself, instead of living in guilt.

 “Back to town? Why?” Nil asked, looking up at him. His eyes were blood shot. He looked worse than Aral had ever seen him.

 “We have to find Cal and the kids. They never made it out here. We never told them where we were going. They are still out there, alone!” Aral said. Nil nodded as he listened. Understanding dawning on him that he had sent the most vulnerable of them back into the lion's den.

 “We have to save them.” Nil said, getting to his feet. For the first time since they got here, he was starting to seem like his normal self.

 “Do we get a team together?” Aral asked, looking around and wondering who they should take. Nil shook his head no, not even looking at who was still with them.

 “Just me and you. I don't want to put anyone else in harm's way.” Nil said. Aral just nodded. They put Kando in charge of the others and made their way back towards Infera. They didn't talk much on the way. There was nothing to talk about. Everything had gone so wrong since they stole the food from the king's castle.

 Aral knew that saving Cal and the kids was the only chance they had of snapping Nil back to his old self, which in turn was the only chance any of them had of surviving. But if they were too late and the army had captured, or worse, killed them, than it was all over. There would be no saving Nil.

 As they approached the temple they were expecting to see the remains of their friends, instead what they found was the imperial soldiers hard at work cleaning up the mess they had made. Craftsmen were hard at work fixing up the temple. Something that hadn't been done in living memory.

 “What are they doing?” Nil asked. The first words spoken since they started back towards Infera.

 “It looks like they are repairing the temple.” Aral said, he was at a complete loss. The imperial army wasn't out looking for them, like he thought they would. Instead they were fixing up their home. There had to be a reason for it.

 “They weren't after us.” Nil said, speaking more to himself than to Aral.

 “What?” Aral asked, not sure what Nil was getting at.

 “They didn't come to the temple for us. It had nothing to do with the fire.” Nil said, his voice sounding more and more like the old Nil. Almost as if the guilt was leaving him.

 “Than why did they come? What are they doing this for?” Aral asked.

 “The Great Gathering.” Nil said. Aral had heard people in town talking about. The gods were coming to the castle to plan the next step in the war with Atlantis.

 “What does that have to do with our home?” Aral asked, not putting it all together.

 “Think it through Aral. The king isn't hosting it at his home. They are using our temple to hold their meeting.” Nil said, bitterness seeping into his voice.

 “What do we do?” Aral asked.

 “We find Cal and the others.” Nil said. He started past the temple, careful to stay out of sight. “Come on.” Aral started after him.

 Once they made it back into Infera proper, the Imperial Army ceased to be a problem. They were concentrated mainly at the temple, getting everything ready for the arrival of the gods. The citizens of Infera didn't pay them much mind, not that they ever really did. It was city full of self involved people, who were more concerned with their own lives than that of their fellow man.

 Aral thought back to how cold everyone was towards him right after his mother died. The second he was no longer apart of the economy of Infera, he ceased to matter in their eyes. Never mind the fact that he was only 11.

 The memories left a sour taste in his mouth. He didn't like to think about them, whenever possible. It was just too painful. Life hadn't been easy for him, but that was the case for most people at the temple. The Younglings with Cal must have been terrified. They had to find them and get them out of the city quickly, because the sad truth was, no one else would care what happened to them.

 A few feet ahead of him Nil stopped and looked around. He wore a grim expression. The concern that Aral was feeling had to pale in comparison to that of Nil's. After all, he was their leader.

 “Where do the tunnels come out?” Aral whispered, breaking the silence that seemed to stretch on and on between them. Nil looked at him, but didn't answer. Instead he looked at the different streets they could take, as if he was trying to answer that question himself.

 “All over the city.” He finally answered, a sense of defeat in his voice. “That's kind of the problem. It's not about where they would come up, it's about where they would go.” It was a fair question, and one that Aral had never bothered to think about. In his head, Cal and the younglings were still down in the tunnels. Waiting. But there was a very strong possibility that they weren't. That they had come out, back into the city. In which case, they could be anywhere.

 Before Aral could say anything else, Nil took off down the street to their left. Aral had to jog to keep up with him. The farther they went along the streets, the more deserted the shops became. This part of town hadn't been in use much since the war. When a large part of the population had died off. Now the people who did come out this way, tended to be those who had things to hide. It was a dangerous place to live, something that Aral knew all too well.

 When he was little and his father was still alive, they had lived near here. The first thing he had done when his mother had been murdered had been to return here, to go home.

 The months he spent back here were best left forgotten. Sometimes, no matter how badly you wish to return home, it is forever lost. If it wasn't for Nil, that might have been the end of his story.

 “Come on!” Nil yelled as he took off running. Aral could hear the desperation in his voice. Nil was no stranger to the dangers that surrounded them. He carried more than a few scars from this part of town. It was one of the things that cemented their friendship. Shared trauma that neither dared speak aloud.

 Aral did everything he could to keep up with him, but Nil was a great deal faster than he was. He turned down an alley at the end of the street. Aral arrived there moments later to find that Nil was gone.

 He stopped, his breath caught in his throat. This was not the place to be left alone. He opened his mouth to call out to his friend, but stopped himself. The last thing he wanted was to be heard by people who would do him harm. He took a deep breath, attempting to calm his nerves and he started down the alley. Keeping his eyes peeled for any sign of Nil. None was to be had.

 “You lost?” A voice called from behind him. It stopped Aral dead in his tracks. It was a deep, gravely voice. More mocking than concerned. Aral took a step forwarded when another voice called out from behind him.

 “He's ignoring you Jan.” Low laughter accompanied the words. It was clear that there were more than a few people behind him. He started to walk faster, praying to the gods that they would leave him be.

 He could hear them following him, talking amongst themselves. Aral took off running as fast as his feet would carry him. His heart pounding in his chest.

 “Hey, wheres you thinks you going?” The first voice called out, causing the others to burst into laughter. “Get him!” He yelled. Aral could hear them start to run after him. He ran faster.

 The alley opened up into a row of houses, Aral took a right and kept running. At the end of the street he made another right, as if he was going to run down yet another street. Instead, once he was out of sight, he ran to the house itself and attempted to hide behind it. Moments later he saw 3 men in rags, who looked as if they hadn't bathed in years run by.

 They did not look like nice men. Aral fell back against the wall and let out a sigh of relieve. He had lost them, for now. He had to hurry and find Nil, before they found him again.

 Slowly he got back to his feet and looked around. Making sure that he didn't see them coming back. He took a step forward when a pair of hands grabbed him from behind. He wanted to let out a scream, but one of the hands covered his mouth. A moment later 2 more men in rags walked by. One swinging a sword around as if it was a toy.

 “You ought to be more careful, young one.” A smooth charming voice whispered in his ear. The hands let him go, moments after the two men vanished down the streets. With great dread, Aral slowly turned around to face the man who had saved his life.

 He was surprised to find a tall, dark handsome man, in the finest clothes he had ever seen standing before him. He wore heavy furs, but they some how looked fitted and styled, not that Aral knew much about the fashion of the rich. He just knew this was it.

 “Are you okay?” The man with a strange accent that Aral hadn't really noticed before asked. He opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out. He was too scared. No one in this world ever did anything out of the goodness of their heart. Except for Nil. This man wanted something and Aral was afraid of what it could be.

 Instead of answering he just nodded his head. The man offered him a knowing smile. From behind his back he pulled out an apple, almost from thin air. He held it out as an offer to Aral, who just watched him, not daring to reach for it.

 “Go on, you look hungry.” The man said, putting the apple into Aral's hands. Aral looked at the apple for a moment before taking a bite. It was nice and juicy. One of the best apples he had ever tasted. “There, isn't that better?”

 “Thanks.” Aral said at last, as he took another bite.

 “So you do speak.” The man said with a laugh. “I am Loki, prince of Asgard.” He said with an exaggerated bow. “At your service.”

 Aral stared at him, not knowing what to say. He had never seen a god before, let alone one of their princes. His first reaction was disbelief, but who would dare impersonate a god? Which only led to more questions, such as, what was he doing here? The gods from other lands weren't due here for another week and even then, it was just the gods of war. Of which, Loki was not.

 “Let's get out of here, what do you say?” Loki said with a wink as the he snapped his fingers a blinding light encased them. He could feel himself becoming lighter than air, leaving the whole world behind him. He had never been so scared and yet excited in his entire life.

**Chapter Seven**

 One day blurred into the next as Simon sat in his room, waiting for a punishment that never came. In fact nothing happened, his life has ground to a stop. His laboratory was sealed shut, not that it was needed. The guards had already destroyed everything he had ever made in there. Turning it all to ash. The only other refuse he ever had was the barn, which he would read in during the hours he was supposed to spend training. But ever since his brother's accident, he was no longer required to train.

 He got the distinct impression that he was no longer welcome to train. There were imperial guards outside his bedroom doors, which followed him everywhere he went. He was given no free time, no chance to get into any more trouble. Three times a day food was sent to him. He was no longer allowed to dine with the family.

 The isolation was enough to drive anyone mad, but Simon found it almost peaceful. The truth of the matter was that he had never really got along with the rest of his family, or anyone in the castle for that matter. Social obligations had always taken a toll on him, one that he seemed to finally be free of.

 The new situation would have been perfect if only he had something to do. His room was always kept bare, he had always spent all his free time in the lab. An option that was no longer offered to him.

 As the days ticked by, he could feel the tension in the castle start to rise. They were growing closer and closer to the Great Gathering. It had everyone in the castle on edge. He even heard the guards express concern more than once.

 It was nearly a week after his new imprisonment that he started to go a bit stir crazy. He couldn't help dreaming up new ideas for inventions, ones that were far more fantastical than any he had dreamed of before. He had a vision, in perfect clarity, of a ring that could be pressed against any surface and create a door to the other side.

 He spent hours looking through all his things until he found the right ring. It was an old ruby ring with a sea blue I in the middle of. On the side of the ring was a carving of a man riding a wave on the back of a giant sea-turtle. Simon had to imagine the man in the craving was Orion, the warrior god of the sea. But it was impossible to be sure. All cravings of him were burned after the public sentiment turned against demi-gods.

 Simon believed that some drawing of him might still hang in his old temple, but he had never been out there. It was deemed unseemly for a prince of the royal family to visit a temple of a disgraced demi-god.

 He went to work using what little chemicals and potions that he had in his room. Most of it a decade old, hidden under his bed when he was very young and first started mixing potions to improve the toys he would make for himself. He always enjoyed making his own toys if he could help it.

 The truth of the matter was, he had no idea what these chemicals were. One was bright pink and smelled of sulfur, while another was lime green and smelled of rot. The last one he had was pure black and smelled of nothing. Truth be told, it hurt to even look at it. He poured some on his hands and watched as it touched him, but he felt nothing. It was a strange sensation to say the least.

 He dropped the ring into the container holding the black liquid before mixing it with the pink solution and dropping just a pinch of the green in with it. He closed the lid and shook it. He wanted to test it out right away, but instead he put it on the window sill. He left it there all day, just baking in the sun. He wasn't sure why, it just felt like the right thing to do. That night, under the full moon he walked over to his window and picked up the tiny container. It was now empty but for the ring. He knew he should have been shocked but he wasn't.

 He put all three containers back under his bed, in case he needed them again and walked over to the wall on the far side of the room. If he was going to try this, he wanted to be as far removed from the guards as he could.

 When he was in front of the wall he took a deep breath and slowly placed the ring on his right hand. The ring looked more or less just as it had before he placed it in the liquid, and yet it looked completely different as well. It wasn't a change he could see, just one that he could feel. In his bones.

 He placed the ring against the wall. The second the ring touch the wall, the wall started to melt away. Almost as if it was rotting away at it's core. Panicked he pulled his hand away in a hurry. The last thing he wanted was for his wall to collapse, thus giving his father yet another reason to hate him. Surprisingly, the moment he pulled the ring away, the wall stopped rotting. It was back to normal, as if nothing had happened.

 Simon couldn't believe his eyes. It was the most fantastical thing he had ever seen. None of his experiments ever worked this well. Normally he would spend weeks and weeks studying the forbidden books on how to make something before even attempting it. More often than not he would get partially though a project before he would alter the instructions. He never meant to, it was almost as if a voice inside his head told him to do something different. He would then be forced to start over. It made the whole task that much harder.

 But this time, with no guidance, nothing telling him what to do, he had perfected his idea the first try out. It was mind-blowing. He couldn't help but feel a giant sense of pride as he looked down at the ring.

 Once more he pressed the ring into the wall and it dissolved right before his eyes. Opening a doorway to the second story of the great library. Slowly he walked through the passageway, coming out the other side in the middle of a bookshelf full of books on the history of the Olympians. He looked behind him, half expecting to see his room. Instead he found the bookshelf, fully intact. As if nothing had happened.

 He let out a small hoot of joy before looking around. The room was dark, but for a bit of light coming in from the moon. He carefully made his way to the stairs leading to the first floor. His laboratory was in the lower levels of the castle, next to the dungeons. It was only place his father would allow him to have.

 He exited the library and made his way towards the cellar doors, expecting to be caught at any moment, but the hallways seemed to be deserted. He stopped in front of the large oak door and started to pull on the handle, causing it to squeal in protest. He quickly stopped and looked around.

 Somewhere in the distance he could hear footsteps approaching. It seemed his good luck was about to run out. He pushed the door closed and placed his ring against it. Instantly it melted away, allowing him to hurry through it, silently. It was back the second he was through. He ran down the stairs, fearing the guards would open the door to check. Luckily he never heard the door open back up.

 His laboratory's door was boarded up. Once more using his ring he entered into the room. It was pitch black. He almost tripped over his own feet trying to get down the stairs. He turned and made his way back to the door. If he was going to see the damage that was done, he was going to need some light.

 Twenty minutes later he was back in his laboratory, with a candle burning brightly. It was worse than he had feared. There was nothing left. All his hard work, that had taken him years to create was just gone. As if it had never existed to begin with.

 He took one last look around before walking back up the stairs. His father had erased his life work, as if it was nothing. It was a heavy blow, he knew it shouldn't have come as a surprise, but it did. Part of him thought he would be able to rebuild. Put it all back together, but that was no longer an option. He was going to have to start from scratch.

 Once he was back in the castle proper, he blew out the candle. The last thing he wanted to do was draw attention to himself. He just wanted to go out to the barn and collect his stuff. Before Sir Dale found them.

 He quickly made it to the barn, but he wasn't prepared for what he found inside. Nothing. Nothing but scorch marks on the walls. The inside of the barn had been lit on fire. Burning all of his things. Every forbidden book he had stolen from the restricted section of the library. Every note or journey entry he had written. It was all just gone.

 It was an overwhelming sensation, to truly feel alone. Something that he hadn't felt till now. Now that everything he had was taken from him. Now that he truly had nothing.

**Chapter Eight**

 There were moments in everyone's life that changed them on a fundamental level. Aral had had more than his fair share of those. His father being drafted to war, him never coming back. Losing their home. His mother being assaulted and killed before his eyes. Being tossed out onto the streets. Meeting Nil and moving into the temple.

 All of those were important moments that helped shape Aral into who he was, and they all paled in comparison to the moment that Loki teleported him across the world to his home in Asgard. It was an amazing feeling that just felt right to him. As if it was something he should have experienced long ago.

 The first day they had arrived in the massive castle he couldn't contain his excitement. He had so many questions, and every answer brought out more questions. Loki was kind and understanding, doing his best to answer each one.

 At long last, when Aral had tired himself out Loki spoke. He told Aral about a time long ago, when mankind wasn't afraid to embrace their own powers. To take their place among the gods. He told him about how his fellow gods grew jealous of the mortals with powers. Even those of mixed blood and cast them out. It had been some time since a mere human had been blessed with abilities, but Loki sensed it in him. It was the reason he had gone to Infera.

 The thought seemed ludicrous to Aral, after all, he was no one special. Just some kid who was tossed out on the streets after being made an orphan. Just one more example of how hard and cruel the world could be. The notion that he was special, that he had gifts and talents that others couldn't even dream of seemed impossible.

 No matter how hard he tried to explain to Loki that he had to be wrong about him, that he was no one important, Loki just wouldn't listen. He would just smile and ask him questions about his youth. About all the times he had been so close to getting himself into trouble and somehow got by unnoticed. Or the times when something impossible seemed to happen at the last second, as if some outside force had made it so. That was magic, and anyone could access it. There was nothing preventing anyone from learning of its arts, but far and few between, were people, like Aral, who were born with gifts. With a natural access to the magics that made the world turn.

 Those were the people that Loki had been looking for, but had never managed to track down. He came close once or twice, but before he had a chance to approach them, they were found out by the other gods and put to death. It was after all, a serious crime for a mortal to harness powers that were only meant for the immortal Olympians.

 However, Loki had never believed that. He saw great worth in mortals with access to gifts and abilities that matched those of the Olympians. After all, there was knowledge and power that could only come from fear and what greater fear was there than of death? Of ceasing to exist, at least in the form you are use to.

 Aral had never thought of that before, not in any real sense. Everyone he had ever loved had been taken from him. Gone to the grave far too soon and yet, he had never really thought about death. It had never really crossed his mind that one day he too would parish.

 Before he had a chance to collapse entirely into his existential crisis, Loki pulled him back out of it by offering to train him. It was an exciting proposition that once again, had altered his entire existence. From this moment on, he would never be the same.

 The training started that very afternoon. It was hard and intense. Loki had many books and scrolls on the subjects, but he kept insisting that they were for those who needed help. People like Aral should work off of instinct. He needed to feel the power inside and learn to harness it in his own way. Not the way long since dead people harnessed it centuries ago.

 It was hard and slow going, at least at first, but after a few days he started to get the hang of it. He had mastered little tricks like making objects float or created fire out of thin air.

 The more he learned the more he felt. It was a weird sensation, one that wasn't entirely new to him, but one that he had never really noticed before. Not really. It was always there but he never paid attention to it. Now that he knew what was, he started to listen. To explore those feeling and the more powerful he felt. He could feel the very energy of the world around. He could see with perfect clarity how much everything was connected. It was all one and the same.

 It was both scary and exciting at the same time. He would have been happy staying there and studying for the rest of his life, but each night as he drifted off to sleep, instead of dreaming about all the new and exciting things he was learning about, he dreamt of Nil alone in the city. Still looking for Cal and the younglings. Lost and scared. He would dream of the imperial guards closing in on him and every morning, without fail, he would wake up screaming as he saw Nil slaughtered.

 Loki was sympathetic, he wanted Aral to stay so he could keep teaching him. After all, he had waited a long time for a mortal student, but at the same time, he understood what it was like to lose someone you loved. It was a story that interested Aral, it wasn't everyday that a god spoke about losing a loved one, but Loki wouldn't speak about it. It was the one subject he was closed off about.

 Aral asked him to send him back home, to Infera. He knew it was dangerous, more so now that the Great Gathering was about to start and gods from all over the world would be showing up, but he couldn't leave Nil out there alone. He just couldn't. He had to save him. No matter what it cost him.

 In an attempt to put both of them at ease, Loki swore to Aral that he would attend the Great Gathering. It would put him close to Aral, so as to look out for him. It may very well cause problems with the other tribes, what with him not being a war god, but if anything, that made the idea seem all the more fun to Loki. He was after all, the god of mischief.

 Aral was transported back to the very spot that Loki had saved him from, behind the old beat up house. There was no sign of the dirty unwashed men who had been hunting for him days ago. Although, even if they were around, there was every chance they wouldn't recognize Aral. He hardly recognized himself, and it wasn't just the face, clothes and fur that Loki had gifted him. It was the confidence and the way he held himself. He was a new man, transformed by the things he was taught.

 He set out at once looking for Nil. He had no idea where to even begin looking. Nil had at least an idea of where to look for Cal and the others, but Aral didn't even have that. He just had some bad dreams, that could just have been bad dreams. For all he knew, Nil could have saved Cal and the others and been back at the camp. If the camp was even still there, it could have moved on already.

 Alternatively, they could all have been rounded up and killed. It was a sour, sobering thought, but one that Aral needed to acknowledge. It served him no good to cut himself off from bad possibilities. It would only serve to leave him exposed. Something that he hoped to avoid. The last thing he needed to do was draw attention to himself, now that his very life was a crime against the gods. The very gods who at this very moment were headed there to figure out a way to kill humans with gifts.

 Just thinking about it was enough to send chills down his spine. He shook it off and kept looking. At first he tried to think logically about where he would go if he was Nil, but that lead to nothing but dead end after dead end. So he switched it up and tried to think about where he would go if he was alone with a group of terrified children. Again that led to no results.

 He was on the verge of giving up when he started to think about all that he had learned in the few days he was training with Loki. He was a natural. He needed to stop thinking so much, stop relying on what other people told him and start following his gut. Listen more to the tiny voice in his head.

 So that is what he did. He started walking, not thinking about where he was going or why. If he felt like taking a right, he took a right. If he had an urge to stop and backtrack, than that is what he did. It was relaxing. As he made his way through the streets, he not only felt the worries and stresses that he had been carrying for so long, leave him, but he also started to feel more himself. More himself than he had ever felt before.

 Loki had told him that great power could come from being scared, but Aral was starting to learn that great power could also come from being at peace. From not worrying or stressing out about a million little things. From just being one with the world around you and letting go. It was an amazing feeling.

 He almost forgot why he was out here when he heard it. It was Nil's voice, crying out in pain. Aral ran towards the screaming, worried that he might be too late.

 The dirty men who had tried to mess with him days before, now had Nil pinned down as their leader, the one who had first spoken to Aral, was twirling his sword in a threatening manner. He was like a cat toying with it's food before going in for the kill. If Aral didn't hurry it would be too late. His nightmare would come to pass.

 He summoned everything he had learned from Loki and manifested a ball of fire. He had done it dozens of times under Loki's watchful eyes, but never on his own and never when so much was at stake. At first nothing happened, but after a few moments a tiny ball of fire appeared. Much smaller than the ones he had conjured before, but it didn't matter. It was something and it was all he had.

 With all his might he threw it. Right at the leader. It wasn't a hard enough throw and he wasn't close enough. The fire ball started to descend too soon and too rapidly. Aral cursed his luck, but in doing so, was premature. Suddenly the fireball changed direction, once more ascending and heading for the target.

 Just as the leader lifted the sword high, preparing to go for the kill, the fireball struck home. Hitting him center mass. Knocking him back a few feet, as he dropped the sword and his clothes caught on fire. The men around him started to panic, looking to the sky for more fireballs. After all, where there was one, there was bound to be more.

 Aral wasted no time. He sprinted forward and grabbed Nil's hand, pulling him to his feet. Wordlessly they took off at a run, leaving the dirty men behind to watch for fire rain as their leader tore off his shirt and tossed himself onto the ground in an attempt to put out the fire.

 When they were a safe distance away they finally stopped running. Nil was still in the same clothes that he was wearing when Aral had last seen him. He looked harried and worn out. Nonetheless, Aral was glad to see him.

 “You okay?” he asked. Nil just nodded looking back the way they came.

 “What happened back there?” he asked, before turning back to face Aral and looking him up and down, taking stock of his new look. “And what happened to you? One second you were right behind me, the next you were gone. It's been three days, I've been running around looking for you!” Nil screamed.

 “I'm sorry.” Aral said, the words feeling hollow. What was he supposed to say? How do you tell someone the most extraordinary thing that has ever happened to you, when you still don't believe it is real yourself.

 “I would ask if you're okay, but judging by your clothes, I can guess the answer already.” Nil said, he sounded annoyed but revealed at the same time. Which as far as Aral was concerned, was a start.

 “Have you found Cal and the younglings?” Aral asked, hoping to change the subject. Nil nodded solemnly.

 “They were right where I expected. Near the old the schoolyard. It's the easiest exit point, which is kind of important when you have a ton of younglings with you. Not to mention, it's where Cal lived when his parents died.” Nil said. Aral was surprised to hear that, tho he wasn't sure why. Everyone at the temple was an orphan. He just never really thought about what happened to their parents. No one there really ever talked about it. It was the ultimate sore subject.

 “Are they okay?” Aral asked. Worried by the look on Nil's face what the answer would be.

 “Most of them. A few died during the escape and the gang you saw back there got a few more.” he stopped talking for a moment, his hand coming up to his mouth, as if to prevent himself from being sick. “They uh, they ate them.” He said, before losing his composer and vomiting into the bushes near their feet.

 Aral didn't know what to say. It was terrible, not to mention gross. What kind of monster ate other people, let alone children. He couldn't help but think that it would have been his fate if Loki hadn't saved him from them. It was just one more thing he owed the god.

 “Where are they?” He asked, his voice breaking up as he did so. He could feel the tears starting to well up in his eyes. A fact that was mirrored in Nil's.

 “We've been making our way back to the camp slowly. Trying to avoid being seen. A few hours ago, while we were making out way they ambushed us. I tired to fight them off while Cal took the kids and ran. I don't know where they are, but Cal knows where the campsite is. He should be headed that way.” Nil finished. Aral nodded. It wasn't an answer, but it was a start.

 The best thing they could do, would be to head back to camp. Keeping an eye out for Cal and the others as they did so. Once they got to camp, if Cal wasn't there, they would start to head back this way. Moving slow in an effort to find them.

 “We'll find them.” Aral said, Nil just nodded. They had a busy few days ahead of them. He just hoped they all made it back to the camp safely before the Great Gathering started.

**Chapter Nine**

 The last few days before the Great Gathering were some of the worst of Simon's life. He had never felt so helpless, so powerless before. His father had stolen everything from him and left him nothing. Not even the fake comfort of family.

 He spent the next few days, after discovering the ruins in the barn, waiting for his father to punish him for reading from the forbidden books. Or at least to send someone to punish him, but nothing ever happened. It was as if he wasn't important enough to punish.

 He came to wish that he would be punished, just to have some kind of human interaction. Instead he was left to his own devices in his room. Meals brought to his door three times a day. It was no life.

 He made a few more inventions, and each time was surprised to find new materials under his bed. He invented a time piece that he could wear around his wrist that would alert him to how long he had before he would run into someone. It allowed him to move around the castle after dark with much more ease.

 To farther aid in his nightly adventures, he created eye glasses that allowed him to see in the dark. It was a marvelous trick that rid him of the needs of candles.

 Each night he learned more and more about the castle that had been his home his entire life, but that he had never really seen before. It was an incredible place, full of secrets that he doubted even his father knew.

 He had explored his wing of the castle as well as much of the main building, but he had big plans for that night. His whole family, as well as many of the guards were set to go to the old temple that had been rebuilt to house the Great Gathering. The royal family was expected to greet them and then stay out of the way. Nothing more than a PR stunt to make the masses feel involved, but to hear his father talk about it, it was the greatest honor a human could ever ask for.

 The one good thing that had come out of all this mess, was that there was no way the king would wish for Simon to join them. It was an honor after all, and his waste of a son was not worthy of such an honor.

 Which is why Simon was in such shock when Sir Dale arrived at his door, informing him that he was to attend the Great Gathering. The royal family, the whole royal family was to be there. Otherwise it would be a slight on the gods and that was the last thing they needed at a time like this.

 “You are not to speak to the royal princes.” Sir Dale told him for the hundredth time as they made their way towards the carriage that would carry them towards the old temple. He was expected to stand in the middle of his two brothers, as his place in the linage would dictate and great each god, but nothing else. As far as everyone else was concerned, he wasn't there.

 Which was made all the more clear by the way that Sir Dale kept talking about the royal princes, as if he wasn't one. It was enough to make his skin crawl, but what was he to do? He had no say in the matter. He never did.

 As they exited the castle, Simon expected to see the royal carriage waiting for them. It wasn't. Instead one of the Sir Dale's men handed them long hooded brown cloaks, they were worn and riddled with holes. They were fit for beggars and bums, certainly not the son of the king. Sir Dale put his on and lifted the hood over his head, to hide his identity and waited for Simon to do the same.

 Then came the long walk through Infera, all the way to the old temple. It was not only a punishment, but also a sign. His father wanted to send a clear concise message. He was no longer part of the family. It was heartbreaking for him to see just how far he had truly fallen from his father's graces.

 After what felt like an eternity they made it to the temple. It was a far cry smaller than the temple he usually visited with his family, but there was something elegant about it. It was built with love and devotion, not money and haste.

 The last time he had seen the temple, it had been in disrepair, falling apart. Paint chipping off the walls. The garden was overgrown with weeds, as if no living person had ever set foot in it.

 Now however, the temple looked brand new. The walls were freshly painted, the support beams were reinforced. The garden was perfectly maintained. It would seem that Jin-La and his men had done a good job fixing the place up.

 Once inside the temple, Sir Dale removed his hood and held his hand out for Simon's. Simon slowly removed his hood and handed it to him. Sir Dale placed it over his own, holding it draped across his arm. He looked around the temple before locking his eyes back onto Simon.

 “Your father and brothers are in the main lobby. You are to stand in the middle of your two brothers, as would be your place in order of ascension. But heed these words boy, you are not to speak to the royal family, nor make any motion to indicate that you are there.” Sir Dale said. Each word feeling like a dagger to Simon's heart. It was becoming more and more clear that he was no longer apart of the family. Even the words Sir Dale used, 'would be', as if he was no longer in the order of ascension. Something he had assumed even before this latest turn of events.

 “When the war gods come in, you are to great each one of them, as is your duty as a son of the royal Mala family, but say no more. Is that understood?” He finished. Making sure to drill each word home for Simon. Making sure that he understood that he was nothing more than a prop, to make the Mala family seem whole. Nothing more.

 “I understand.” Simon said, his eyes lowered to the ground.

 “Good, there are clothes for you to change into, see that you look the part of a prince and be gone from my sight.” Sir Dale said, turning and leaving Simon alone.

 He made his way to the washroom, where sure enough there were fine silks waiting for him. He changed into them and headed out to the main lobby where his father was standing with Toma and their older brother, the crown prince, Fin. He was a tall handsome man, who seemed worldly in a way no one else Simon had ever met had. Which made sense. Fin had traveled the world, studying in different kingdoms. Dined with kings and gods alike, not just here in Olympia, but other places as well.

 He was everything a king could want in an eldest child, while Toma was everything he could want in a second child and Simon was nothing anyone would ever want. With a heavy heart he made his way towards his family, where his two brothers were catching up. Toma's right arm was missing, his shirt was pinned up, so as to not flap at his side. Simon felt a pang of guilt as he saw first hand what his invention had done. He looked down at his ring and time piece, wondering for the first time if his inventions were worth everything they cost him.

 He stopped a few feet behind his brothers, not saying a word. He was to stand in-between them, but not talk to them, or do anything that proved his existence to them. That meant the only thing he could do was stand here and wait. Wait for them to finish talking and take their places.

 If Simon had thought the walk to the temple from the castle was a nightmare, than this was pure hell. Just standing by silent while they talked and talked.

 Fin had always been kind to Simon. The only one in the family besides their mother who didn't seem him as a waste of space. Unfortunately, shortly after her death is when Fin started his journey around the word, leaving Simon with his father and Toma. He had longed for Fin's return, only for it to happen now, when he was shunned.

 A little ways off, his father spoke with his council, making last minute adjustments before the arrivals. Never once glancing back at his sons. Owned and disowned. Once or twice Toma would glance at Simon, rage flashing behind his eyes as he did so.

 The third time he did so, Fin followed his glaze and saw Simon. He gave him a sad smile and stepped aside, moving to his spot. The smile told Simon everything he needed to know. Fin knew everything, and while he loved Simon, he wasn't going to go against father on his shunning. Not when it had cost Toma his arm.

 Toma too moved aside, taking his spot. Allowing Simon to step forward. This was where he belonged. In the middle of a family that wanted nothing to do with him. Obligation preventing him from striking out on his own, but neglect keeping him from any sense of purpose or joy. His was to be a hollowed existence. This was proof of that.

 Slowly nobles from the kingdom came in and greeted the king and princes. Simon could tell who was in favor and who was not, by the nobles who dared to speak to him. Some houses like Na'Tas, walked right passed him, as if he was a plant. They were one of the oldest, wealthiest families in the kingdom. Rumored to have more money than Simon's own family.

 Most of their money had come from the early days of Olympia. When Zeus and Odin ruled side by side. The first Na'Ta started capturing demons who had stayed behind and harvested them for energy. They invented all kinds of machines that were powered on dark magics.

 They amassed a great kingdom for themselves in those early days, but the Olympians had no love for demon-spawn and made sport of hunting them to extinction. Which in turn brought an end to their glorious machines. Without which, they couldn't hold onto their control of the kingdoms of man. They fell out of power, but not wealth. They turned their attention to building crafts for war, that could be powered by wind and might. They weren't as effective but it kept the Na'Tas as the wealthiest family in all of Olympia. Providing the means of war, not only for the kingdoms of man, but also Ares many wars as well. In the days of the demigods, it was said that Ares had more than a few bastards in the Na'Ta family.

 Not every family was in good standing like the Na'Ta, there were some like the Gargals, who were shunned almost as much as Simon himself. A noble family with a waning influence. At one time they were royals themselves. Ruling over a great kingdom that a century ago fell in battle, leaving nothing alive but for the last son of the Gargal family, who made his way to Infera with a great deal of wealth. For a time he was well loved and treated with the honor of a king, second only to the Mala family. But as he produced offspring, who became discontent with their status, the family as a whole became less tolerated. Not to mention that until their new patriarch rose to power, the family did nothing but live off the wealth that they brought with them. Kim'ta, was a young proud man, who wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. Despite living in one of the biggest castles in all of Infera, he opened a blacksmith shop.

 Unfathomable to most of the other nobles, he started working them himself. As an apprentice. He hired the greatest blacksmith money could buy and learned all he could from him. Then in a move many found insane, he gave the blacksmith the shop and opened a new one for himself. His children now work under him learning the trade.

 Many of the other nobles believed that his new found trade should exclude him from events like tonight, but the truth of the matter was, the Gargals were still one of most well known families in the kingdom and their coffers were filling up faster and faster each day. To exclude them would be a political nightmare, more so if the gods were to learn of it. They might see it as an offense. In short, Kim'ta and his family were here, for much the same reason as Simon. For appearances.

 Even still, it was a good feeling when Kim'ta stopped and greeted Simon, spoke with him for a few minutes and made him feel important. Something that almost every other noble had done with his brothers. A few lesser nobles also spoke to Simon, but none made the show of it that Kim'ta did. It was a tiny bright spot in an otherwise bleak day.

 At long last the trumpets outside blasted. The gods were here. Instantly everyone straightened up. The nobles stood on the other side of the room. They were there to be seen, but not acknowledged. Toma attempted to show his left side off, despite his right side being the first thing they would see as the gods entered. A stern look from Sir Dale put a stop to that rather quickly. Toma stood straight up as was his duty. As it was all of their duty. Yet only Simon felt truly out of place, here among the elite, for which he was born into, but never belonged.

 Simon could hear them before the door even opened. Loud footsteps, step lock with each other. Precision on a scale that Jin-La would kill for. Simon looked over at the general, who was standing next to Sir. Dale, Martel, the master of coin named Brock, as well as ancient Kurn. He was said to be as old as Infera itself, dating back to the age of demigods. Simon knew enough to know that was an exaggeration, for if that were true, he would have had to have been a demigod himself. Nonetheless he was a wise old man who saw not only to the education of the royals and notabilities children, but to the needs of his king in all matters. He was the chief advisor to Simon's father.

 As the footsteps neared the door, Jin'La turned to look at his men. They were lined neatly behind him in rows stretching back to the walls. Outside the temple many and more of his soldiers were in similar lines. It was an impressive display, more so when viewed next to Martel and the imperial guards, but Jin'La did not seem happy with it. But before he could bark at them the door swung open and Simon saw why he was upset.

 A man with broad shoulders and a grim look, with a goatee that was perfectly trimmed and an air of power about him walked in. He was no taller than Jin'La and yet seemed to tower over everyone in the room. He was an intimidating sight to see. Behind him were rows of warriors in perfect formation, each with a sword at their waist. Each one bigger and more fearsome than the last, and yet somehow, they each paled in comparison to the man in the lead, who could only be Ares himself.

 Sir Dale had drilled what to expect into Simon's head on the way to the temple, the soldiers were only there for a show of force. The vast majority of their armies would wait outside the temple. Setting up tents and camp for themselves. Only the honor guard of each war god would enter the temple. None but the war gods would speak to them, introducing themselves to each member of the royal family and waiting for the other war gods to arrive with their honor guard. Taking note of, but never acknowledging the nobles. Which is why it was a shock to everyone in the room when the first person Ares spoke to was Mia Na'Ta, the matriarch of the Na'Ta family.

 Simon could see the anger flash across his father's face, but in reality, it should have come as no shock to anyone in the room. Ares did quite a lot of business with Na'Ta family. There were even rumors that he and Mia were lovers in her younger days. Simon never dared to question if those rumors had any validity, but he saw no reason to doubt them.

 They spoke for a few minutes sharing a laugh, his men standing perfectly still behind them. Simon glanced a look at his father's council, Jin'La kept glancing back at his men, as if he was willing them to straighten up. Next to him Martel looked as if he was going to be sick. His face had an almost greenish tint to it. He was never the bravest of men and being this near to a war god and his prized warriors must have been more than he could handle.

 The king looked ready to storm off, if the guest had been anyone other than an Olympian, Simon suspected he would have already. His father was not a patient man, and he did not take way to insults. Perceived or otherwise.

 At long last Ares turned from Mia and started towards the royals. He stopped before Toma and eyed his missing arm. Simon could see his brother start to blush. The tension in the room begin to mount when the war god put his hand on Toma's shoulder.

 “Don't ever feel embarrassed from an injury caused in battle. You have a true warrior spirit. I can sense it in you.” Ares said, his voice commanding attention and respect. Toma stood up straighter and no longer seemed ashamed of his missing limb. He seemed possessed of a new found confidence, given to him by the war gods words.

 Ares turned from Toma and started towards Simon, he glanced him up and down. Almost as if he was looking into his very soul. It was a look that seemed to stretch on and on, feeling him with dread. He felt a powerful urge to run from the room, or curl up in a little ball. To do damn near anything other than stand there before the war god.

 “You have power, but lack courage.” with those words the war god moved onto his brother. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw Ares speak to Finn, but he didn't hear what he said to him. Nor what he said to his father as he moved onto the king. Simon was too busy replaying his words over and over again in his head. “You have power, but lack courage.”

 What could that mean? Obviously it meant he was a coward, everyone knew that. But what power did Simon possesses? His first thought was the power of his birth, he was after all the second born son of the king, but no one treated him like it. Even less so since Toma's accident. Besides, the power of a royal meant little and less to a god, let alone the Olympian god of war. No, there had been other meaning behind Ares' words. He just couldn't figure out what they were.

 Ares took his place at the front of the room, in what use to be the shrine to Orion, where the his men following in line behind him. Simon was sure he could slaughter every man, woman and child in Infera with just the few dozen men he had with him in this room. He could tell by Jin'La's stance that he was correct.

 “On behalf of the Olympians of Mount Olympus, I would like to thank his royal highness, King Mince Mala of Infera, for hosting the Great Gathering in his kingdom. May we have a fruitful gathering!” Ares said, his voice echoing throughout the temple. The crowds amassed broke out into cheers, Simon took it all in.

 It was nothing more than self congratulating on a grand scale and everyone knew it. The rich and powerful elite of Infera patting themselves on the back for doing a good deed. One that they had no choice but to do, and one that only served to keep mankind subservient to the Olympians.

 Simon pushed those thoughts out of his mind. It did him no good to dwell on that now. His duty was to stand there and make his family, who hated him, look good. It was the least he could do after what Toma had lost.

 No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't keep from feeling a bit bitter at his little brother. For if he hadn't gone into his laboratory uninvited, none of this would have happened. He wouldn't have lost his arm and Simon wouldn't have lost his life's work along with the books needed to recreate them. Not to mention his family.

 On the other hand, if it wasn't for Toma, he wouldn't have been forced to become more creative with his inventions. He wouldn't have learned that the vials under his bed held all kinds of stuff inside them. Pretty much whatever he needed to bring his ideas to life, right when he needed them. He had never been this successful before, even when following the masters to a t.

 It was a trade off, and he still wasn't sure if it was for the better or worse, but he would be lying if he didn't admit he liked the newfound confidence he had in his skills as a creator. For the first time, he was starting to see value in himself, which was ironic as it coincided with his family losing any sight of his value.

**Chapter Ten**

 Nil's head spun in every direction as they made their way back to camp. Aral had wanted to make straight back to the camp, in an attempt to get there before the war gods arrived, but Nil was insistent that they find Cal and the younglings on their way if at all possible.

 It wasn't that Aral was against that. In fact he was growing more and more concerned for them with each passing moment, so it wasn't that he was apathetic to their plight. He just thought the worst thing for them to do was wonder around the outskirts of Infera when the Imperial army, Imperial guard and any number of war gods personal armies were running around. It was inviting trouble, which they would be hard pressed to prevent from passing on to their friends back at camp.

 Nil wasn't hearing any of it. He was too wound up in his own guilt to think rationally. So it was up to Aral to keep them out of trouble. It was a task that Aral wasn't sure if he was ready for. Normally it was Nil who kept them all out of trouble, but ever since the fire things had been off with him. It was a hard thing for Aral to accept, but it was rapidly becoming clear that it was a new fact of life.

 Most of the journey back to the campsite had been uneventful. A stray guard or soldier would pop up from time to time, but they managed to stay out of sight. Luckily Nil had enough sense to avoid the temple that was their home. It was the most dangerous place in the world for them right then, besides, Cal would know better than to go back to the place they had just escaped from.

 Instead they went the wide way around the temple, through the remains of the old wall that surrounded the city. It had been breached in battle years ago and a larger, more fortified wall was built to replace it closer to the city proper. The ruins of the old wall were left to gather dust and became a frequent hang out spot for many of the children from the temple.

 Aral himself would often come out there to play when he was young, or to think the important life questions he started to explore as he got older. Most of which revolved around Dal'na and the feeling he had for her. He paused for a moment, a smile on his face as he thought about all the times he would come out here, trying to plan ways to get her attention or ask her out.

 The joy of the happy memories were quickly replaced with a great sorrow as the image of her smiling face was ruined with that of an ax splitting her head in two. Followed by her brother receiving the same fate. For a moment he thought he would bust into tears, but they didn't come. Instead he felt hollowed out. As if his insides had gone on vacation and forgotten to inform him. His lungs were clearly missing in action because no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't catch his breath.

 He fell to his knees, his hand grasping at his throat as he attempted to force air down it to no avail. Was this how he died? The thought came unwelcome and served no purpose other than to stress him out farther and cause him more problems with breathing.

 “Breath, just clear your head and take a breath.” A voice pierced through the sounds of his gasping for air. At first he couldn't make out the voice of who was speaking, let alone see who it was, but as they spoke and he listened, they came into focus. “It's going to be okay Aral. You just have to keep it together.”

 Aral's breathing came back into focus as he looked up at Nil who was at his side, his hand placed on Aral's shoulder. He was speaking calmly, attempting to break through the panic. It worked.

 “I'm okay.” Aral said at last, getting to his feet. Nil smiled at him, for the first time in a while he almost seemed like his old self again.

 “Glad to hear it. Come on, we have a lot of ground to cover.” Nil said, turning away from Aral and continuing over the ruins of the wall. Aral took a few deep, steadying breaths before following.

 No sooner were they over the walls than they saw it. The most impressive yet terrifying sight they have ever seen. An army that stretched on and on for what seemed to be forever, mostly on horse back, they had long flowing hair of blonde and wore fur woven into their armor. A few days ago, Aral would have had no idea who these people were, but after meeting Loki, it was clear. These were the warriors of Tyr, the Asgardian war god. Which meant that not only was the Great Gathering at hand, but that Loki was close at hand.

 He felt his heart rush with excitement at the thought, but only for a moment before he thought about what it would mean if they found Cal and the others first. They would be crushed. He glanced over at Nil, who seemed to be coming to the same conclusion. They were out of time.

 “Fuck!” Nil hissed, as he changed direction, heading towards the campsite, as he quickened his pace. Aral had to run to keep up.

 “Where are we going?” Aral asked, as he struggled to keep his breathing leveled. Not only from exhaustion at the pace they were moving, but also from the burgeoning panic attack that was about to once more set in. His mind flashed to Loki, who had promised to train him. He thought back over the spells he had learned while with the trickster and wondered just how much magic he truly had.

 Without even meaning to he stopped running. So lost in thought that the whole world faded from existence. He was alone with his thoughts, nothing else mattered. He focused on Cal and the younglings, running in the woods, scared for their lives and Nil guilt ridden, looking for them. In his minds eye he saw them running into each other on the way to camp.

 He knew it was stupid, that he was just wasting time. Magic didn't work that way. You couldn't just wish for stuff and make it happen, but it was the only option they had left.

 He opened his eyes just as Nil started shouting for him. He was up ahead on the top of a nearby hill. If Aral didn't know better he would have been sure that the man was excited. He ran up the hill, taking note of just how steep it was. As he neared the top he could hear voices from the other side, they were as excited as Nil, but had a bit of confusion and worry mixed in for good measure.

 Aral made it to the top just as a few of the younglings did. Cal bringing up the rear. He looked the worse for wear, but seemed generally happy to see them.

 “You guys are okay!” Nil said, pulling Cal into a hug. At first he resisted but only for a moment before embracing him back.

 “Yeah, it wasn't easy. Honestly I thought we were lost.” Cal said, as Nil let him go. Cal gave Aral a smile.

 “We were near the caves and suddenly we weren't!” One of the children said, a lot of them murmured in agreement. Nil seemed confused, but Aral couldn't help but wonder if his makeshift spell had worked.

 “What?” Nil asked.

 “We were chased off of the path you showed us and I couldn't find my way back. I figured the best thing to do would be to hide out in the caves till it was safe to venture out.” Cal said slowly, as if he didn't believe what he was saying.

 “The caves?” Nil asked, looking back Aral as if to confirm his confusion. “Those are on the other side of Infera. How did you end up here?” The younglings all looked up at Cal, who just shrugged.

 “Honestly? I have no idea, but I can't complain. I'm just happy to be found.” He said, his voice unsteady. Aral could only imagine what he had gone through since the invasion.

 “It's okay. You're safe now. Let's get back to camp.” Nil said, everyone nodding in agreement. Aral wasn't sure if Cal and the others saw that the Great Gathering had already begun, but it was a conversation that was better left for back at camp, when they could get everyone together.

**Chapter Eleven**

 The day seemed to stretch on and on for Simon as one by one the war gods arrived. Each one attempting to out do the others. The next group to arrive after the Olympians were the Asgardians, which was only proper, as they were the first off shoots of the Olympians.

 As they came in, war drums sounded as the doors burst open. A tall elegant man, with an aura of wisdom about him entered the room. All about him massive men with flowing blonde hair and brute savagery that was illuminated all the more by the calmness of their leader. While some had swords, like those under Ares' command, others wore axes and battle hammers. Simon knew from his studies that he must be Tyr, the Asgardian god of not only war, but of law. He was said to be stern but just. Caring more about what was right than winning. A drastic change from their own war god, Ares.

 As was custom, he bypassed the nobles and made towards the royals. Giving each of the princes a nod, but not a single word. When he made it to the king he stopped and sized him up. It was a tense moment where none dared make a sound. It was before memory since any outsider gods had walked through Infera, protocol was not of much use to anyone involved, least of all Simon's father, who seemed far more nervous than a king had any right to be.

 “Thank you for your hospitality.” Tyr said at last before moving to join Ares near the front of the temple. The two war gods started to converse and the tension lifted. The rivalry between the two tribes of gods were legendary. After all, their kings were brothers who had slain the demon hoards and freed the Olympian race from slavery, before coming to blows on how to rule their people. The war of the brothers broke out and it created a shift that never seemed to stop.

 After Odin lost, he and his followers were cast out. They found new land and founded Asgard, but not before some among their rank splintered off. Olympia wasn't spared the splintering of new tribes. Many a god wanted nothing to do with Zeus or his wars and made their own way in the world. Thus the tribes of gods were created and never since have so many come together. This was a historic occasion and one that had a very real chance of blowing up in all their faces.

 The sight of Ares and Tyr getting along went a long way towards relaxing the atmosphere in the room. If all the tribes got along this well, it might be a good gathering. Maybe even bring an end to the war, as was the goal. Which would be great for the kingdoms of man, which had lost countless lives in this conflict.

 After the Asgardians there was a long wait for the next tribe to arrive. Simon's legs grew wary, but he knew better than to make any show of discomfort. It would be seen as an embarrassment to his father in the best of times, but doing so while in front of the not one but two gods, would be too much for him to handle. Simon would go from being dead in his father's eyes to being dead by his father's hands. No, the best thing for Simon to do was to stand perfectly still and pretend like nothing was bothering him. It was the princely thing to do.

 He hated being a prince.

 Once more they could hear footsteps nearing the room. As the door opened Simon was surprised to find those standing there much unlike anyone he had seen before. They were of darker complexion and were lightly dressed when compared to the warriors of the other war gods. Instead they were slim yet still muscular. Many of them had spares in hand instead of the swords carried by those who came before.

 They were led by a man with the head of a falcon and a large golden crown resting on his head. In fact, most of his men wore gold in the forms of jewelry. The falcon man was known as Montu, Simon didn't know much about him, other than he was a fierce warrior and could channel the sun much like his father Ra.

 Unlike the other gods, he did not come alone. Just behind him stood the most beautiful woman Simon had ever seen. There was something about her that was both entrancing and terrifying. She wore a golden necklaces with a cat's face inside a bright yellow sun. The way she walked made it clear she was just as much a warrior as anyone else in the room, if not more so.

 On the other side of Montu was a jackal who walked and dressed like a man. Unlike Montu himself, who had the head of a falcon but the body of a man, this was a real jackal. Simon couldn't believe his eyes. The Ennead tribe of Olympians was unlike anything he could have ever dreamed of.

 When the last of their warriors entered the room, Montu removed his head, reviling a handsome face with penetrating eyes. He looked around the room and smiled with a confidence that even Ares must have been envious of.

 “I am Montu, chief war god of the Ennead.” He said, his voice loud firm. It seemed to fill the entire temple without him having to raise his voice even a bit. “With me are my fellow gods of war, Sekhmet” She nodded as Montu said her name. “And Wepwawet.” The jackal said not a word as he was introduced, he just scanned the room and took them all in. His eyes stopping briefly on Simon, before moving on.

 “I suspect there being 3 of us may strike as unfair. Altering the balance of power. To that, I say oh well. We are not here to play politics and fight amongst ourselves to see who is the greatest, we are here to defeat the Atlantians!” He finished, his men hit the bottom of their spares against the floor in unison.

 The room was silent, no one said a word. Every human in the temple was waiting for Ares reaction. The Great Gathering was his idea and he meant to rule it as a single voice. The Ennead coming with three voices was a threat to his authority. The whole thing could implode, depending on how Ares reacted.

 Simon turned to look at the war god of his people. Hoping to catch some glimpse of what he could be thinking. He was surprised to find him smiling. The sight of it sent shivers down his spine. It was a most unsettling thing to behold.

 “Welcome, one and all. The Great Gathering is for all gods of war! In the coming days there will be glory and bloodshed for all!” Ares said, the crowd broke into cheers as he finished.

 Montu nodded before replacing his falcon head. He then moved to his spot near the other armies, never once acknowledging the royal family. Simon could tell his father felt slighted, but there was nothing to be done. After all, they were just humans.

 The insult was soon forgotten as once again the doors burst open admitting the Deva. Simon knew it was them by the strange sight of a peacock with a colorful array of tail fathers walking next to the leader. A scholarly looking man, in fine silks and armor. While he oozed off a sense of wisdom he also had an edge to him. He wasn't someone to mess with. To make him even more perplexing, he didn't seem to be any older than Fin. Maybe even a year or so his junior.

 Behind him, his men wore gold plated metal chains linked together. With hats that seemed to wrap their hair up beneath it. They were a sight to see. Simon searched his memory as he tried to recall their war gods name. It wasn't until he neared Toma that it came to him, Kartikeya.

 “I thank you for your kindness young prince.” Kartikeya said to Toma, before moving onto Simon. “I thank you for your kindness young prince.” He said again to Simon. Saying it once more to Fin.

 When he made it to the king he stopped. He seemed to be looking almost through him, gaining a measure of who the man was before he chose his words. Kartikeya looked around the room, for a moment it looked as if he had six heads, each looking in a different direction before turning back to the king.

 “I understand your grace, that this gathering of war gods from the many tribes of Olympians, is a terrible burden to put upon your kingdom. For that I offer my sorrow, but know, that this is for a glorious cause. One that must be undertaken and your contribution shall not go unrewarded. Throughout all of the world, the gods themselves will owe you a debt.” He finished, patting the king on the shoulder before moving his men to their spot among the others.

 As hard as he tried, Simon could not read his father's expression. It was a powerful statement that Kartikeya had just made. It had to have had some impact on his father, but before Simon could dwell on it any farther his attention was captured by a single white dove that had flown in from somewhere up above. It circled around the room once before taking off back to where it had come.

 The doors to the temple opened once more, in through the door walked men with giant red shield, spares in hands, swords sheathed. They wore gold armor over their chest and what looked to be red skirts in place of pants. Atop their head they were silver helmets with a row of red feathers. It was an odd sight.

 The man in lead, who could only have been Mars, carried neither shield nor spare. Just his famous sword sheathed at his side. His head was bare from the odd feathered helmet. Instead showing off his dark full set of hair. He looked around the room and smiled. It was a smile that was filled with more ego than confidence.

 “I am Mars, and I am here. At last the war can begin.” With those words he marched passed the royal family and took his place among the gods. Simon could see Ares and the others were not amused.

 Mars was the war god of The Twelve. A tribe that was founded by twelve Olympians who believed the rest of Olympia was holding them back. They set off on their own to create their own legacy. The most impressive thing about Mars was the sword he held at his side. Legend has it that early in the war he was off drinking with the Asgardian prince Thor when they stumbled across an Atlantian outpost.

 They slaughtered their enemies and found a machine, before they destroyed it, it gifted them with their own weapons. Weapons that grant the wielder powers. It was the very cause of the war. Humans who could give themselves the powers of the gods and here these two gods were, gaining access to those same powers.

 Thor's was said to multiply his power over the elements as his fighting prowess. Whereas, Mars was given a sword which suited his ego. Whenever he pulled it from it's scabbard his foes would feel an uncontrollable sense of fear. All who faced him felt cowed before him. It gave him an edge in battle that none other could boast.

 Simon would have loved to get his hands on that sword. The legend of his sword was what made him come up with creating his own sword. He glanced sideways at Toma and his missing arm, remembering what that attempt had cost not only him, but his little brother as well.

 For the first time since he learned of the accident it started to dawn on him just how foolish he had been. It was one thing for Mars and Thor to have Atlantian weapons, but for a human to possess one, one that he himself had made. That would be crossing a line the Olympians would not be able to overlook.

 Toma invading Simon's laboratory and going through his stuff may have cost both of them personally, but it also may have saved the kingdom. If his being ostracized from his family was the price of the continued survival of everyone else, so be it.

 The doors opened as the last of the war gods arrived. In the lead was Hachiman, a tall muscular man with dark black hair, tied back in a ponytail. He wore armor over his left arm and legs, while his right only had armor over his forearm. A white dove sitting on the exposed shoulder. The sword at his side was slender when compared to the often board swords of the other gods.

 The men behind him were covered from head to toe in armor, with demonic face masks covering their true face. They carried swords just like that of the war god, often times more than one.

 Hachiman made his way over to the princes and bowed before each one. Not saying a word as he did so. When he stood before the king, he bowed once more before righting himself.

 “I thank you for allowing us into your home.” With those words he turned from the king and found his place among the gods. His men following after him. A hush spread across the room. The Great Gathering was here. The major tribes of Olympians had all sent their war gods to figure out a way to victory. What happened next was for them to figure out and had nothing to do with man.

 Simon's father stepped forward and cleared his throat. All eyes in the room turned to look at him. From where he stood, Simon could see sweat start to descend his father's face. He was nervous, not that Simon could blame him.

 “I am Mince Mala, king of Infera, and I welcome you, one and all, to our glorious kingdom. It is an honor beyond words that you selected our kingdom above all others, as the sight of this historic gathering. May the events that unfold here be fruitful.” His father finished bowing before the gods.

 “We thank you, King Mala.” Ares said in return.

 “We leave the gods to their work.” Simon's father said, turning to face the humans in the room. At once they started towards the door, but before they could reach it a blinding lightning strike hit just outside, accompanied by the deafening sound of thunder.

 It took everyone present a few second to get their bearings, but before they could resume their exit of the temple, the doors once more swung open. This time standing there were two men, clearly of Asgardian origins. In the lead stood a man with long flowing blonde hair and fur laced armor, yet he still managed to show off his bare chest. Attached to his back was a war hammer unlike any Simon had ever seen.

 The man behind him was much smaller in nature. He wore fine silks and had an elegance about him that was beyond words. Mummers rippled throughout the temple.

 “What is the meaning of this?” Ares voice demanded from behind them. Simon and the rest of the humans hurried out of the way, giving the two prince gods a clear line of sight. For these new gods had to be the legendary Thor and his brother Loki.

 “Ah cousin, it is good to see you once again.” Thor said. His accent thick but not unpleasant.

 “This is a gathering for war gods. Is Tyr not here on your behalf?” Demanded Ares.

 “Aye, he is. And he never let me down. But I know thee cousin and while I trust none can best Tyr in battle, he has yet to face off against you in a power struggle.” Thor said, walking towards Ares. Loki a few steps behind him.

 “What are you implying cousin?” Ares spat.

 “That if Asgard wants to be whole when this is done, than my place is here. Tyr will speak for us in military decisions. I, in all else.” Thor said. His voice firm, booking no arguments.

 “Come now, cousin, aren't you glad to see us?” Loki said with a laugh. Ares ignored him, instead he kept his eyes locked onto Thor. For a moment it looked like Ares wanted to protest, it appeared none of the other gods had a problem with it, so instead he nodded his agreement.

 While all of this was going on, everyone in the room had their eyes glued to the two goods. But for Simon who couldn't help noticing Loki staring at him. Nothing could be more worrisome than the trickster god himself locking eyes with you.

**Chapter Twelve**

 Aral and the others made it back to camp without running into any more soldiers. Cal and Nil were deep in conversation about what their next move should be. All their animosity forgotten.

 Aral brought up the rear, making sure to keep an eye on all of the kids. A lot of them were incredibly young and all of them were petrified of everything that was going on. The whole way back to camp, Aral's mind kept flashing back to the way he had made his wish come true.

 Before sending him back to Infera, Loki had told him he was going to attend the Great Gathering and to meet him outside the temple. Which in and of itself posed a problem. There were too many people around the temple that the odds of getting caught were far too high, but all he could think about was learning more about the power.

 It was intoxicating. The stuff that Loki had taught him in their short time together was the most exciting experience of his life. Add to that the rush of bending reality to his will, even on a small scale like that, and it was no wonder that he wanted to learn more. Even at the risk of getting caught.

 As they arrived at camp it erupted into cheers. It seemed that a lot of people had given up hope of their return. Aral didn't think they were gone for that long, but the Imperial Army came in full force to clear the temple. There was no telling if that was where they were going to stop.

 “What do you think?” Nil asked, he had made his way over to him after the younglings had started to reconnect with their friends and loved ones. It was a happy time in camp, one that they all knew couldn't last. Not while they were homeless.

 “I think we have a lot to figure out. Not the least of which is, where do we go?” Aral answered. His mind playing out different scenarios on how to sneak back to the temple.

 “No one is going to want a bunch of homeless kids on their doorsteps. We'll be chased out of anywhere we go. At least here, well, it's our home.” Nil said. It was a fair point, even if it felt false after being chased away the way they were.

 “I don't want to leave either. This was where I lived with my parents. I don't want to let that go.” Aral said. His voice cracking as he spoke. “But we can't return to the temple.”

 “No, no we can't.” Nil said. The air going out of his sail. He leaned back against an old oak tree next to them. “And there isn't anywhere else large enough in the kingdom to house all of us. At least not anywhere that isn't currently occupied.”

 Aral let out a sigh, the weight of the situation starting to set in. Their

whole lives were upset by this turn of events and there was nothing they could do about it. Not really.

 “Well, what if we just wait?” Kando asked, walking over to them from the celebration.

 “Wait?” Nil asked.

 “For what?” Aral followed up.

 “For the Great Gathering to finish up.” Kando said. Aral and Nil exchanged glances. “It isn't going to last forever, and once it's over the temple will just be abandoned again. We can just move back in, once they are gone.”

 “How long do you think the gathering will last?” Aral asked. Nil seemed to think it over.

 “There's no telling.” He answered at last. His eyes glazed over as they tended to do when he was deep in thought. “We need to keep an eye on the place.”

 “I can take first shift!” Aral volunteered. Having his excuses to leave the camp provided for him.

 “You did your part.” Kando said. “You only just got back. You need to rest. I'll take the first shift.”

 “I don't mind.” Aral said.

 “No, he's right. As much as it pains me to admit, we both need to get some rest. Kando can handle tonight's watch.” Nil said. Settling the matter. Aral wouldn't be able to sneak off to see Loki tonight, or if he did, he would have to be extra careful.

 Kando being out there keeping an eye on the temple would mean he not only had to make sure that the Imperial Army didn't catch him, nor any of the war gods men, but also that Kando didn't see him. Nil and the others wouldn't understand him meeting with Loki. They would see it as a betrayal. And maybe it was, he couldn't help thinking to himself. They were his family, the only one he had since the death of his parents. Doing anything that might bring harm on them was inexcusable and yet that was what he was doing.

 Loki had drilled into his head what would happen if anyone found out about his powers. They would hunt him to the ends of the Earth and kill him, along with anyone who helped them. The best thing for him to do was to forget he had ever met Loki and stick with the plan that he agreed to with Kando and Nil.

 Instead, Aral waited for Kando to leave for the temple and Cal to pass out what little food they had left. Then he faked being tired and headed away from camp to find somewhere quiet to sleep. Only he didn't sleep. Once he was sure that no one was following him, he made for the temple. Careful to keep an eye out for anyone that might be nearby.

 More than once he almost bumped into people along the way. The first was Sintle and Yasmin from camp. They were about the same age as Aral and madly in love. Just ask anyone from camp and they would tell you. It was an epic love story, of which everyone was tired of hearing about. They were not far from camp, making out under a tree on top of a torn blanket. In their eyes it must have been the very definition of romantic.

 Aral had to back track and find another way past the camp site, although, he was fairly sure he could have walked right over them and they wouldn't have even noticed, but it was better not to take the chance.

 A bit farther out into the woods he found some of the Imperial Guardsmen around a camp fire having a few drinks with a few soldiers from the Imperial Army. They were far enough away from the temple that Aral was sure they weren't supposed to be doing it. He passed by them, sticking low to the ground in order not to be seen. Not far away he saw some men in strange armor, demonic heads made of steel sitting at their feet, or in their hands. They spoke in a strange tongue that Aral had never heard before.

 He moved silently passed them, when he almost ran right into some men in large fur covered armor. He backed up slowly and prayed they didn't turn around. They didn't. Every which way he went there were more and more men, from all over the world. Each armed with swords that would make quick work of him.

 Fear started to sink in, not only for himself, but also for Kando. All it would take is one slip up to get caught. If that were to happen, the best they could hope for was a quick death. If they chose to question them first, well that would spell the end for everyone back at camp as well. Something that none of them wanted.

 After quite a while, Aral manged to find his way to the edge of the woods, near the temple grounds. If he thought the woods were crowded with men, it was nothing next to the yard. Whole cities made out of tents surrounded the temple. It would seem that each war god had brought his own army, and Infera had marched their army to the temple as well.

 He always knew that getting into the temple was going to be a problem, but this was next level. It was going to be all but impossible to get passed all of them without getting caught. For a moment, just a moment, he thought about turning around and heading back to camp, but then he remembered the rush he got when channeled the powers that Loki had exposed him to.

 He needed to learn more, no matter the cost. Loki had told him that he had a natural gift for avoiding detection, if that was true, he had a chance. A slim one, but it was something. He was going to have to be careful and be quick about it. The longer he was out in the open, the more chance he had of getting caught.

 Aral took a deep breath and started out of the woods, leaving the cover of the trees behind. He was hardly a step out when he was pulled back in. His natural response was to let out a scream, but no sooner had he opened his mouth than hands had moved to cover it.

 “Shut up!” Nil hissed from behind him. The hands let him go and Aral turned around to find an angry Nil standing there. He had seen Nil pissed off more than once, but never at him. It was a scary sight to behold.

 “Nil?” Was all Aral could think to say. His mind had stalled, he was caught, his powers that he had such faith in had failed him. The only bright side was that he was caught by a friend and not someone out to kill him, tho by the look in Nil's eyes, that might not be the case for long.

 “What the fuck do you think you're doing?” Nil demanded. His voice a whisper, yet still somehow carried the weight of screams. Aral felt himself sink into the ground. He was a child again, a scared confused child who had just gotten caught red handed.

 “I. . .I” Aral started, not knowing how to answer. He couldn't tell him the truth. That wouldn't end well for him. Most lies wouldn't either. Nil had ordered him to get some sleep, what reason could he have for disobeying and coming out here anyways?

 “You what?” Nil hissed, taking a step closer to Aral. His eyes looking through Aral, he wasn't going to let this go. Aral swallowed hard, he could feel sweat start to pour down his face. He was nervous, truth be told, he was more nervous about lying to Nil than he had been when he was about to walk through the temple yard field with men out to kill him.

 “My mom, she had a journal. Kept it all her life. When she died and I was kicked out, it was all I kept of hers.” Aral said, remembering the old book she use to always write in when he was young. “But. . .but when they stormed. . .stormed the temple and we ran. I forgot it.” He said, altering from the truth.

 He had kept the journal when he was kicked out of the bar. It was his most prized possession. He would read from it every night, until some kids from town, kids that he had used to be friends with and play with every day when his father had been alive, had found him sleeping in an alley behind the local deli. They stole the journal from him read it aloud, mocking his mother and her memory.

 When he had tried to fight for it back, they beat him black and blue and left him crying on the floor. That sound have been the end of it, they should have thrown the book back in his face and walked off, back to their happy lives. Instead they were cruel. They pulled out a box of firesticks and lit the journal on fire right in front of his eyes. He fought like hell to get it back from them, despite the excruciating pain he was already in, but they just knocked him back and laughed. They took pleasure in watching him cry. In taking away the last connection he had to his mother.

 Aral could feel himself crying then, as he stood in front of Nil. He couldn't help but hope that the tears, that came from real pain and loss, helped to sell the lie. For a long moment, Nil just watched him. Almost as if he was reading him, looking for the lie.

 Suddenly without warning, Nil pulled Aral into a hug. A tight hug, as he patted him on the back. After a moment he let him go and nodded, as if he understood.

 “You came out here to try and get it back. That's why you wanted the first shift?” Nil asked. Aral nodded, thanking his lucky stars that his lie worked. “I can't imagine what it must be like to lose something that valuable to you.” Aral nodded, not trusting him self to speak.

 “Let's go get it back.” Nil said, a determined smile on his face. Aral's heart dropped.

**Chapter Thirteen**

 Tension was high in the great hall for what remained of the ceremony. It was clear as day that Ares was displeased with Thor and Loki arriving, yet he didn't want to admit weakness by banishing them. It made for an interesting show.

 Far more than the ceremony itself, which really just consisted of each war god making a vow to do all they could to win the war and putting their differences aside. Some thanked his father, most did not. It went on for what seemed an eternity to Simon and he caught Toma fidgeting more than once.

 Finn, much like their father, appeared to be enjoying it. Simon didn't buy that for a second, but his brother played the part well. He was born to be a politician and would one day make a great king. Perhaps even greater than their father. Which to be fair, wasn't that high a bar.

 Throughout the rest of the ceremony Simon caught Loki glancing at him more than once. It grew more and more unsettling as the night progressed. The trickster god had taken an odd interest in him, and that could only spell trouble, of that, Simon was certain.

 At long last, Ares called the other war gods into the council chamber. Originally it had been the temple priest's ready room. Simon's father's men cleared it out and brought in a massive oak table, with jewel encrusted chairs around it. Their honor guards were to stay in the main lobby along with the king's best men.

 After the war gods had all entered the council chamber the royals and nobles were free to leave. A fact that Simon was overjoyed about. The farther he could get from Loki, the happier he would be. Truth be told, that was only one of the reasons he was so glad to leave this temple. The other being, that this day had been dreadfully boring and tedious. Standing around all day, doing nothing but looking the part of a dutiful prince. It was not a role that Simon could pull off without great effort.

 Once outside of the temple, Simon followed his family to the royal carriage that was awaiting them. It was massive, built to house at least double their numbers, with the family crest on the side. A golden trident over a field of fire. In the front sat their driver, marshaling the six horses that were to pull them on their journey.

 A man in a fine suit stood in front of the door, holding it open for the royals. Simon was glad to finally be able to sit down, his feet were killing him. The king was first on the carriage, as was his right, followed by the crown prince Finn. Simon was to be next, but Toma marched right past him into the carriage.

 Letting out a low sigh Simon moved to follow him. It was no use getting upset over it. After all, he was the black sheep of the family. On that account all could agree. Besides, his invention cost Toma his arm, the least he could do was let him enter the carriage first.

 Just as Simon made it to the door for the carriage, the door handler slammed it closed. He didn't so much as look at Simon before taking his seat next to the driver. Simon stood there in stunned silence as he watched the horses pull his family away. Leaving him to walk home, as he had walked here.

 “You didn't think you'd be riding with the royals, did you?” Sir Dale asked from behind him. Simon hung his head low as he turned to face his former instructor.

 “No sir.” Was all Simon could say.

 “Good. Now let's get a move on. We have a long walk back to the castle.” Sir Dale said, walking past Simon, after the carriage. With a heavy heart, Simon started after him. Wondering if he would ever be accepted by his family again. His life with them had never been great, but it had never been this bad either.

 It was well passed midnight when they finally made it back to the castle. He found cold food, covered with flies awaiting him in his room. It seemed the staff chose to feed him at the same time as the rest of the family, whether he was home or not.

 He swatted the flies away, before picking up the bag and walking it out of the room. He made his way out to the grounds. Throwing the food outside, for the dogs. They could still enjoy it.

 He started back to his room, his stomach growling at him, demanding food. He ignored it. There was no point to eating. No point to anything. With each passing day, his life became more and more pointless.

 His family had dragged him out, made him play the part of dutiful son, so that they would look good in front of everyone else, and for his service, he was forced to walk to and from, without any food. It was an indignity that he thought beyond even his family. It would seem he was wrong.

 Once back in his room, he packed up his emergency supplies under the bed, put on his ring, grabbed a candle and made his way through the wall. He wasn't sure where he was going. He just knew that he needed to find some place quiet, where he could get back to working on his experiments. It was the only thing that ever made him feel whole and after today, he needed that more than ever.

 Making small stuff in his room, like the ring, was okay, but if he really wanted to work he needed more space. He had originally planned to wait until the Great Gathering was finished and then ask for permission, but today showed him what the answer would be. He wouldn't be surprised if he was thrown out on the streets when all was said and done.

 Simon had no idea where he was going, just that he needed to find some place large and empty. Somewhere that no one would stumble across by mistake. Somewhere far enough away that no one would hear anything explode.

 That was the tricky part, which really only left the dungeons and the outer tower. The dungeons, while having more room, was also where his last lab was and he had to believe they would be making sure he didn't set up a new one. So it left the tower as his only hope.

 The biggest problem with the tower was how far away from his room it was. It was in the opposite wing of the castle and in order to get there, Simon had to walk past everyone's rooms. It made for a dangerous journey. One that he would have to take twice everyday if he was going to make his lab up there. Once on the way there, and once on the way back.

 Logic would dictate that he turned around and headed back to his room. But if he did that, he wasn't sure if he could make it through another day. He wasn't sure if he would want to.

 Silently he made his way through the castle, opting for walking through deserted room, rather than out in the halls. He figured there was less of a chance of him getting caught that way. He had never been so on edge in his entire life. Every little sound that he heard would cause him to jump. He wasn't sure what his father would do if he was found out of his room, but he was sure it wouldn't be good.

 He made it to the outer tower without running into anyone, but it didn't put him at ease. He still had to find somewhere to work. The tower hadn't been in use since before he was born. He wasn't sure if his father had even set foot in there.

 The tower was pitch black, the only light coming from the candle he held in his hand. There were cobwebs everywhere. He slowly made his way up the spiral stairs.

 Up ahead he could hear someone moving about. His heart stopped, who could be in this end of the tower? As far as Simon knew, no one had been in here since before his father's reign.

 Slowly, Simon started backing up. Careful to not make any noise. He could see the light from his candle illuminating the wall in front of him. If he didn't hurry, whoever was coming would see it and he would be caught.

 The footsteps grew closer and closer, if he didn't do something fast he would be caught. He put his ringed hand on the wall to his right. It slowly dissolved, revealing the open air. He cursed under his breath and moved his hand back, the wall springing back into place as the footsteps stopped. In his heart he knew he was late.

 There was no time to try the other wall, he turned and ran down the stairs. He made it only a few steps before he tripped and stumbled forward.

He landed hard on the stair in front of him and started rolling, dropping the candle as he did so. It fell to the ground, almost in slow motion. Just as it hit the ground and went out, he saw the source of the footsteps; a tiny mouse, no larger than his hand.

 Simon only saw the mouse for a second before the candle crashed into the ground and the flame went out. The tower was engulfed in total darkness as he kept rolling down the stairs, hitting his head and arms on every stair on the way down. He finally landed at the foot of the stairs on the ground floor. His entire body aching.

 “Fuck!” He screamed out in pain as he cut his hand on what was left of the vials. He had heard the glass shatter almost as soon he had fallen, but he hoped against hope that it had only been one of them that broke. It would seem that he was wrong.

 His hand hurt horrible, he could feel the blood pouring out. He tried to put pressure on it, but it was hard when you couldn't see. He didn't want to give up when he had come so far, but there was no point in attempting to keep looking for a laboratory without any light to guide the way. He put his hand on the wall, only nothing happened. The wall stayed perfectly intact.

 It was only then that Simon noticed that his ring had fallen off in his fall. He cursed under his breath and felt around on the ground around him. He crawled around on his hands and knees for what felt like an eternity, with no luck.

 He felt around for the foot of the stairs. He ran his hand across it, still nothing. He took a deep breath and started up the stairs, on his hands and knees. Sweeping each step with his hand before moving up to the next one.

 He did this, step after step. More than once cutting his hand again on shards of glass from his broken vials. It was hard, painful work, but he persisted. After all, getting back to his room without the ring would be all but impossible and without the vials, he would never be able to recreate it. If he didn't find it, everything he wanted was lost to him.

 He made it almost back to where he had fallen before he finally found it. It had rolled into the corner of the stair. He let out a sigh of relief before putting the ring back onto his finger.

 He placed his hand on the wall and watched as the wall dissolved, allowing the night sky to shine in. He got to his feet, sliding his hand up the wall as he did so. The missing section of the wall moved along with his hand. He started back up the stairs, sliding his hand along the wall as he did so.

 It wasn't until he made it to the top of the tower and moonlight started to shine through a window in the top of the room that he felt safe to move his hand from the wall. He found himself in an old storage room. There were chests on top of chests all around the room. Against the far wall was a large desk made out of solid oak. A large lamp rested on top of it, next to the lamp was a box of matches.

 He lit the lamp, filling the room with light. It was massive, with more lamps spread out along the walls. He took the time to walk around the room, lighting them all, bathing the place in light. At the back of the room he found a wall full of books, older than any in the family library. This was the perfect place for his new laboratory. He could hardly contain his excitement at the thought of setting everything up. His mind started racing at all the possibilities of what he could do with the space.

 “This is some space you have here.” A voice said from behind him. Simon's blood ran cold. He was caught. Taking a calming breath he slowly started turning around to face his fate.

 Standing in front of him was none other than Loki. He was dressed in a fine silk suit, a devious smile on his face. There was an aura about him that sent chills down Simon's spin.

 “Cat have your tongue?” Loki asked, playfully mocking him.

 “Loki? Ho. . .how. . .how did you find me?” Simon asked, all the while racking his brain on ways to escape.

 “I have my ways.” Loki said, taking a seat on the edge of the oak table.

 “What are you going to do with me?” Simon asked.

 “Teach you.” Was all Loki said, but Simon knew the second he heard those words that they would change his whole life.

**Chapter Fourteen**

 Aral found himself standing in the shadow under his old home, standing next to Nil, wearing the uniforms of palace guards. It had taken them hours, but they had managed to steal the uniforms from a tent close to the woods and make it to the temple, past the legions of soldiers camped out all across the yard.

 They had more than a few close calls, but Nil had gotten them through it, just as he had ever since he saved Aral from the streets. Which just thinking about caused a sense of guilt to well up inside Aral. He hated lying to him, hated even more that he was using the memory of his mother to sell the lie, but he needed to get inside the temple. He had to find Loki.

 After all, learning all he could about his abilities was the only way he could keep everyone safe. The limited skills he had picked up so far had already proved more than useful.

 Nil motioned for him to follow his lead as he moved along the side of the temple. If anyone could get Aral inside the temple and allow him to move around freely without getting caught, it was Nil. No one knew the castle like he did. Which caused another problem for Aral.

 There was no journal for him to find and it wasn't likely that Nil would leave his side until they were back out in the woods safe. Which meant finding Loki and having a conversation with him would be all but impossible.

 Nil stopped just under a window looking into the kitchen. He scanned around the yard, stopping to watch the nearest camp site, some 20 yards to the left. They were dressed in heavy furs and metal helmets, marking them as warriors of Asgard.

 Each tribe's warriors had stayed to themselves across the yard, at least so far as Aral could tell. The palace uniforms that they wore now wouldn't do them a lot of good if they had to go through Asgardian territory.

 Surprisingly, instead of moving towards the Asgard camp, he knelt down and moved the dirt around, reviling a wood door. Nil looked up at Aral and smiled, before pulling on the door. It lead down a dark staircase which seemed to go on forever.

 “Hurry up!” Nil said. Aral didn't waste any time rushing headlong into the darkness. He could hear Nil follow after him, followed almost immediately with a bang and an extinguishing of the light from above. Throwing the whole room into utter darkness.

 “Just keep going. We have a bit of a walk till we hit the bottom.” Nil said from right behind him. Aral let out a shriek at the sound of the voice right in his ear. He had no idea Nil had closed the gap between them that quickly. “Shut up! I don't know how thin the roof is!” Nil snapped, pushing Aral forward.

 “Sorry.” Aral whispered as he started forward, Nil right at his back. They made their way down countless stairs before leaving out onto an even floor somewhere under the castle. Almost at once he was struck by the smell of something rotting. The darkness was absolute, making it very hard to move around. Aral took a few steps just to make sure that Nil didn't bump into him.

 “Now what?” Aral said, turning to face his friend, despite not being able to see him.

 “Stand back.” Nil said from a few feet in front of him. Aral did as he was told just as sparks appeared from a firestick striking against the wall. It caught fire, illuminating Nil and lighting up part of the large underground room they were in. It housed what looked like supplies, with creates and creates of food. Nil headed along the wall till he found what he was looking for, a torch hanging from the wall. He lifted the firestick up and lit it.

 He moved along the room, lighting more of them as he went. There were more creates of food, along with an old table with a ruined shrine to Orion. The entire place was covered in cobwebs. It was clear that no one had been down here in a long time.

 “What is this place?” Aral asked, watching Nil light the last one. The room was now bathed in light. It was a refreshing change from the pitch black darkness of moments before.

 “It was a staging room during the temple's glory days.” Nil said. “In the early days I would come down here to find food for us, but it's long since gone bad.” Which explained the smell.

 There were several passageways leading out of the room. It was clear that there was a whole network of tunnels that no one other than Nil had known about. Aral couldn't help but wonder why he had opted to keep it to himself.

 “Do these passageways lead everywhere through the temple?” Aral asked. Nil smiled and nodded.

 “We can move around behind the walls and pop out where ever we need to.” Nil said, walking towards him. “So the only question left, is where did you leave the journal?”

 It was the question that he had been dreading since Nil had invited himself along. What answer could he give? What would happen when there was no journal there? How would he sneak away to find Loki, let alone find time to speak with him?

 “Well?” Nil asked.

 “Under my pillow. I always liked to keep it close.” He spit out, not knowing what else to say. Nil nodded, his mind clearly racing behind the scenes. “Is something wrong?” Aral asked, fearing the worst. Nil shifted uncomfortably in front of him.

 “Nothing.” He replied, clearly lying.

 “Nil, what is it?” Aral asked, wanted to get whatever was coming over with. Nil stood there looking uneasy for a bit before he finally started to speak.

 “Look, I don't want you to worry, but I was kind of hoping you kept it hidden, hidden.” Nil said. Aral felt a sense of relief, he was sure that Nil had spotted his lie.

 “What does that matter?” Aral asked.

 “You saw the same thing I did.” Nil said. Dragging out the bad news he had to drop. “They cleared this place out to make it ready for the gathering. There is a good chance that the journal is gone.” he finished. Sympathy seeping into every word.

 Aral knew that Nil was feeling sorry for him, but this news actually made him feel better. It solved his problems entirely. If they really did clear out the living quarters it would get him out of this mess and he could always come back using this hidden tunnel system another time.

 “We have to try.” Aral said, doing his best to sound upset. The truth was, he wanted to learn as much about the tunnel system as he could for when he came back. Nil nodded, putting his hand on his shoulder.

 “Of course.” Nil said, attempting to reassure him. “Let's go.” He moved off towards a passageway off to the right of them, picking up the torch on the wall nearest it. Aral followed close behind.

 The passageway seemed to twist and turn at random. They went up one staircase and down another. It truly was a maze in every sense of the word and yet, somehow, Nil seemed to know where he was going.

 After what felt like forever he stopped behind a door and motioned for Aral to stay still. He slowly pushed it open, reviving the dormitory. It seemed that the room had retained it's original purpose. It still housed row after row of beds, only it wasn't the same thrown together cots that Aral and the others slept in. These were nice beds that even from a distance looked comfortable. Despite the new beds, the dormitory wasn't much neater than the one that predated it. It still had dirty clothes thrown all about, only now weapons and armor was added in to the clutter. There didn't seem to be any worriers inside at the moment, which was a nice relief to Aral and Nil.

 “This is all new.” Nil said, stating out loud what Aral was already thinking.

 “Which means. . .”Aral let his sentence trail off. He had to play the wounded role if he wanted to convince Nil that the fictional journal was all he was after. Sure enough, Nil put his hand on Aral's back.

 “I'm so sorry.” Nil said, the sorrow coming through clear as day in his voice. Aral pulled back, both, to keep up the appearance of being hurt, but also out of a sense of guilt. Nil was his oldest friend. One of the only people who had ever truly cared about him, at least since the death of his parents. Lying to him didn't set well with him.

 “It's fine. We should go.” Aral said, heading back the way he came. He wasn't sure if he remembered the path back, but he wanted to test it out before he came back later that night.

 “Aral.” Nil called out to him. Aral stopped and glanced back.

 “What?” He asked, not knowing if he wanted to hear what he had to say.

 “Are you going to be okay?” Nil asked.

 “I guess I'll have to be, won't I?” he asked. Nil walked toward him, clearly concerned for his friend, which only served to make Aral feel even worse.

 “I'm serious Aral. I'm worried about you.” Nil told him.

 “Well don't be.” Was all Aral had to say.

 “I don't want you to do something rash. Something reckless.” Nil said, with more urgency.

 “Like what? What could I do?” Aral demanded. The anger was real, after all these people stole everything from them, he had every right to be pissed.

 “I don't know, and that is what worries me.” Nil said. Aral didn't respond. He made his way back down the path, doing his best to keep it all straight in his head.

 Nil followed close behind, not saying a word, except to put him back on the right track the few times he made a wrong turn. Before Aral knew it they were heading back up the stairs to the yard.

 He waited for Nil at the top, not wanting to start the long journey back to camp by himself, not to mention crossing the soldiers that would be spread out along the way in the makeshift camps.

 “I'm sorry.” Aral said as Nil came to a stop under the hatch.

 “For what?” Nil said, the stair case was pitch black, even standing right in front of Nil, Aral couldn't make out his face, but from his voice he seemed annoyed. Clearly their conversation bothered him, if he wanted to admit it or not.

 “I get you were just trying to look out for me. I shouldn't have bit your head off.” Aral said, not wanting to go back into danger while they were upset with each other.

 “You just lost something that is irreplaceable. Tension is high.” Nil said, without another word he pushed open the hatch and bathed the staircase in sunlight. He made his way, holding it open for Aral and closing it after them.

 “You ready?” Aral asked, looking at the tents blocking the path back to the woods. Nil graced him with his famous smile, feeling him with confidence.

**Chapter Fifteen**

 Days blurred together after awhile. Simon's family left him to his own devices, pretending as if he no longer existed. It wasn't all bad, it gave him more time in his lab. Which was a blessing now more than ever, since for the first time in his life, Simon wasn't figuring it out as he went. He had an instructor.

 Loki had found him just as he was exploring his new lab and explained to him what he was, a sorcerer. He was born with innate magical powers, powers that he had always believed reserved for the gods. The kind of powers that Zeus had forbidden. If he was found out, his life would be taken from him in the most painful of ways, along with the lives of his entire family.

 That was one of the first things Loki had taught him. A healthy fear of being discovered. It turned out that his father destroying his original lab had been for the best. Even if he didn't understand that at the time.

 His whole life Simon had fancied himself a scientist. He believed he was inventing great devices that could bring his imagination to life, when in reality he was willing them into being. His lack of training was the reason so many of them worked half-assed.

 Loki was a hard instructor but he knew his craft. Even after just a few days he could already see an improvement in his inventions. Each new day he grew more confident in himself. For the first time in his life, he actually enjoyed waking up in the morning.

 This new found joy was added to by the fact that he more or less had the castle to himself, well but for the servants, they were always around. But his family spent most of their time at the temple, playing the part of host. outside the conference room, attempting to look important. That mental

 From what Loki had told him, their days consisted mostly of standing outside the conference room, attempting to look important. That mental

 image brought him many hours of enjoyment. image brought him many hours of enjoyment.

 “How is my prized student latest endeavor coming along?” Loki asked, startling Simon. He didn't hear him enter the room, he was too immersed with his latest creation, a cloak of invisibility, to notice much of anything going on around him. Although he wasn't sure if he would have heard him enter even if he was paying attention. Loki could move through time and space as if it was nothing.

 Simon had been hard at work on the cloak of invisibility since Loki had left two days before. He figured that his days of roaming the castle unmolested weren't going to last forever. Once the Great Gathering was finished things around here would return to normal and he would need a way to move around undetected.

 “I think it's almost ready.” Simon said, as he lifted the simmering cloak up from his work station. He had taken an old cloak from his father's room, with the family crest embroiled across the chest. It was large enough to cover him from head to toe, which was the soul reason for him picking one of his father's cloaks instead of just using one of his own.

 It had started out bright red, with the family crest embroiled in blue. After days of working on it and coating it with different elements that filled the vials that Loki had gifted him to replace his broken ones, it had turned a bright pink. Not at all what Simon had been going for, but when he tried it on, as he did now for Loki, he became almost transparent. While you could still see him, you could also see through him. He was almost there.

 “Still needs some work.” Loki said, laughing as he watched Simon take it off. “But a nice start.” He added, making Simon feel a bit better about not having finished the cloak yet.

 “It's missing something, I just can't figure out what.” Simon said, looking at the cloak he now held in his hands.

 “I trust you will figure it out.” Loki said, walking around the room, looking at the many inventions Simon had already finished over the past few days.

 “What's next?” Simon asked. Loki stopped and turned to look at him.

It was an unsettling look that sent chills down his spine. He was unsure what to expect, but he knew whatever it was, he wasn't going to like it. Loki's look told him that much.

 “It's time for you to make amends with your kin.” Loki said, as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

 “Easier said than done.” Simon said, wishing that it was doable. “But they hate me. Won't even look at me.” He said sitting down at his desk. All excitement from a few moments ago vanishing. Loki turned to look at him, studying him for a moment.

 “You say your family hates you?” Loki asked, making his way closer to Simon, who just nodded. “Because of what happened to your little brother?” Once more Simon nodded, as Loki stopped right in front of him. “Which happened right before the Great Gathering?”

 “Yes.” Simon said, feeling increasingly nervous as Loki looked down at him.

 “An event in which they needed you around for appearances?” Loki asked.

 “Yes?” Simon asked, not sure where this was going, but already knowing that he wasn't going to like it. Loki leaned forward until his face was inches from Simon's own.

 “So what do you think they will do when they no longer need you around.” Loki said. It wasn't a question so much a threat. His meaning was clear, as soon as the Great Gathering was finished and all eyes were no longer on the royal family, Simon became disposable.

 “Wh...what do I do?” Simon managed to get out. The tremble in his voice giving just a small indication to how terrified he truly was. Loki stood back up and turned away from Simon.

 “You make peace with your kin, as I said.” he replied. Simon got to his feet.

 “Yes, but, how? They hate me!” Simon pointed out. Loki stopped and turned around.

 “Truly?”

 “Yes!” Simon shouted.

 “All of them?” Loki asked. It took Simon a few seconds to understand what he was getting out. In truth only his father and Toma hated him. He had always gotten along well with Finn.

 “Maybe not Finn.” Simon said.

 “The crown prince.” Loki said with a smile. “He is your life line. Create a tighter bound with him and you will be welcomed back.” Loki said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

 “He hasn't spoken to me since his return.” Simon said, remembering the first day of the Great Gathering. Finn had been kind to him, but had refrained from speaking to him. “He may not hate me, but he would never risk father's wrath on my behalf.”

 “Perhaps I can help with that.” Loki said with a grin that sent shivers down Simon's spine. Before he could ask how, Loki was gone in a whirl of smoke.

 Simon fell back into his chair, suddenly feeling exhausted. He had no idea what Loki was planning, but he just knew it was going to be bad. He could feel it in his bones.

 Different scenarios played out in his head over and over again. Each one worse than last. He took to pacing around the room as if he could out run his fear by walking in circles fast enough. Needless to say that proved useless.

 All his pacing managed to do was exhaust him to the point of collapse. Not just physically but mentally as well. He had never felt so tired, or so defeated in his entire life.

 With a heavy heart he started to make his way back to his room. He was too preoccupied to get any more work done tonight. It was pointless to even try. What had started out as a great night, full of promise had turned into a night of dread. He had no idea what was going to happen to him when the Great Gathering ended, which could be at any time. It had no set time limit. It was just a meeting of the war gods to come up with a plan. It could go on for years or be over in the morning, no one knew. Not even the gods themselves.

 And then there was the issue of Loki and what he had planned. Simon was sure that his new mentor only wanted the best for him, but that didn't mean that whatever he had in mind would work. There was every chance that it would blow up in Simon's face and cause him more problems. Maybe even speed up his imminent demise.

 By the time Simon made it to his bed he was sure that he would pass out immediately, for he had never been so worn out in his life. He could barely move. Everything hurt, even his brain. Yet, once in bed he found himself restless. He couldn't get comfortable, no matter which way he moved. He would try different positions but nothing seemed to work. At one point he even got up and moved to the floor.

 The sun had already risen by time he finally drifted off to sleep. But it wasn't a restful sleep, in fact it was far more troubled than even his waking thoughts had been. He had one nightmare after the next, most involving his family hunting him as if he was some kind of animal. Usually it was Toma in the dreams killing him, but sometimes it was his father or Sir Dale. Once it was even Finn.

 Simon was cornered in his new laboratory, with Finn standing over him, a look of pure hatred on his face as he stared into Simon's eyes. He had chased Simon through the castle, killing anyone who had gotten in the way and now at last he stood over him, their father's broadsword in his hand, stained with the blood of the help.

 “Get up!” Finn ordered him. Only it didn't sound like Finn. “Get up now!” He screamed. Simon recognized the voice, but couldn't place who it belonged to.

 “If I have to tell you one more time to wake up, I am going to toss you out this gods damn window!” Finn screamed into his face, the sword inches from his throat. It was only as he finished the threat that Simon placed the voice with a face. Finn's face slowly changed into that of Sir Dales.

 “Ow!” Simon yelled as he felt a sudden kick to his side. He awoke suddenly to find himself laying on the floor next to his bed with Sir Dale standing over him.

 “Bout time you got up!” Sir Dale yelled, going red in the face. He grabbed Simon's arm and pulled him to his feet, far harder than was necessary.

 “What's going on?” Simon asked, rubbing his shoulder which now hurt thanks to Sir Dale.

 “Your father wishes to speak with you.” Sir Dale said turning to leave. He stopped in the doorway to look back at Simon, who was still standing in the same spot. “As in now! Not when it's convenient for you. Get dressed and head to his study.” With that Sir Dale was on his way, leaving Simon with a sense of dread.

 What could his father want with him? It had been since the destruction of his lab that his father had even acknowledged him. All of Simon's instructions from the family since had been threw Sir Dale, who made it clear that he was no longer part of the Mala family.

 Slowly Simon got out of his clothes from the day before, which he had slept in, and started to pull on fresh clothes. He dragged his feet as much as possible in getting ready, which he knew would anger his father, but he was too frightened to do otherwise. Nothing good could come out of this meeting, of that Simon was sure.

 When at last Simon could no longer justify getting ready, he made his way through the castle to his father's study. Each step felt as if he was marching through quicksand, sinking him farther and farther into the ground. The stress from what was to come had started to manifest in a sharp pain in his back, right between the shoulder blades. It got to where he couldn't even turn his head without wincing in pain.

 At long last he came to a stop outside his father's study. He could hear Finn and his father arguing on the other side of the door, but couldn't make out what was being said. He momentarily thought of pressing his ear to the door to better hear what was being said, but his heart was pounding so loudly in his chest he was sure they would be able to hear it.

 With great effort he forced himself to push open the door, all but announcing himself to his father. Who sure enough was standing in the middle of the study screaming in the face of Finn, who seemed to be just taking it. As the door opened he stopped and shot daggers at Simon with his eyes. Finn merely smiled, it was a sad smile, but still a smile. It put Simon at ease. Not completely, but far more than he had been a moment before.

 “I'll leave the two of you to speak.” Finn said, making his way towards the door. Their father just watched him leave, the anger radiating off him like steam from a hot plate. When Finn passed Simon, he stopped for a moment and put his hand on his shoulder. “It's going to be okay.” he whispered before continuing out of the room, closing the door behind him. Leaving Simon alone with the king, who said nothing. His eyes locked onto Simon as if he was a cat about to pounce on a mouse. Which was fitting because Simon felt about as big and powerful as a mouse. Which is to say not at all.

 “You wished to see me, father?” Simon asked, his voice barely about a whisper. His father kept staring at him. All Simon could think, was that he was grateful looks couldn't kill, for if they could, he would be dead on the spot.

 “Sit down.” His father said, through gritted teeth. In all his life, Simon had never seen him so upset. It was deeply unsettling, but Simon did as he was told. It wasn't easy since every instinct he had was screaming for him to run from the room.

 “Is. . .” Simon started to say, but the look on his father's face told him to shut up, so he listened. Whatever was about to happen was about to happen. There was no need for him to make it worse.

 At long last his father tore his eyes off of Simon and looked out the window as if in deep thought. Simon did nothing but watch. He wasn't sure what the right thing to do was, so he figured he would let things unfold on his father's time table.

 “Your presence has been requested.” His father said, as if each word caused him great pain. Simon wasn't sure he understood what the words meant. Who would request his presence?

 “I'm sorry?” Simon said, not sure what he should say. It quickly became clear that that wasn't it as his father spun around in a wave of fury.

 “You damn well are!” He spat at him. “The trickster asked for the two eldest princes to join his table for dinner.” At last it all made sense to Simon. Loki had forced his father's hand. The king couldn't refuse a request from a god, even one of Loki's rank. It put Simon farther in his father's crosshairs, but it would give him a chance to reconnect with Finn which might be the only way to save his life. At least that's what Loki believed.

 “I tried to give your invite to Toma, but the damn fool insisted.” His father continued. “Forcing my hand. So help me, boy, if you think for a second that I'm going to let you back into this family, you have another thing coming.” His father was in his face now. He picked Simon up by the shirt and pulled him to his feet, his face inches from Simon's. “You died to me the second you cost my son his arm.” Each word sent spit onto Simon's face. He didn't dare look away. “You go, make us look good and I'll make sure your fed in the dungeons when this said and done.” With that he threw Simon into his desk, which Simon hit it hard on his side. Pain shot through his body causing him to scream out in pain as he landed hard on the floor.

 “Fuck up, and I'll feed you to the dogs myself.” His father said as he stormed from the room, leaving Simon alone, more so than ever before.

**Chapter Sixteen**

 The walk back to the camp was filled with awkward silence. Aral knew it was caused by Nil being too afraid of saying something to upset him after his 'loss', which only served to make Aral feel worse about his decision to lie. But he couldn't tell him the truth, that he was a sorcerer, or that he went back into the temple to train with one of the gods who had displaced them. Nil would never understand, never forgive him.

 They heard the campsite before they saw it, and Aral had never felt such relief in his entire life. He said a quick goodbye to Nil and took off on his own for the other side of camp. Both to get away from the guilt, but also to plan his trip back into the temple. He kept replaying the passageways that Nil had shown him over and over in his head. He didn't want to forget a single moment of it. One wrong turn inside could prove catastrophic.

 Over the next few days he volunteered for each shift watching the temple, but Nil always passed him up. Each and every time, without so much as looking his way. It wasn't until Kando started off on his second night's watch that Aral decided that he had to say something if he ever wanted his chance to get inside the temple again. After all, you can only practice a plan so many times. He needed to act, and soon.

 After Nil dismissed the council they had put together to run the campsite, Aral had run after him. He wanted to talk to him alone, in part to not cause more discomfort to the man who saved his life more times than he could remember.

 “Nil! Nil!” He called after his friend, who at first tried to pretend he didn't hear him. After he called out a third time, Nil finally stopped but didn't turn around.

 “Yeah?” he asked, his voice heavy. He clearly knew what this was about and didn't want to deal with it. For a moment, Aral considered saying nothing, just walking away, or making something up to let his friend off the hook. He knew deep down that was the right thing to do, after all, Nil was only trying to protect him. It wouldn't be forever, sooner or later he would let Aral watch the temple, he knew that for a fact. He just had to wait. Only he couldn't help asking himself, what if he waited too long? What if the Great Gathering ended before he got his shot to get back in there? That was a risk he wasn't ready to take.

 “I'm ready for my turn to stand watch.” Aral said. He could hear his voice shaking. Nil lowered his head but said nothing. “I can do it.”

 “I don't know. I think you're ready to go back there.” Nil said. “Not yet.”

 “I can't not go back there!” Aral said, he could feel his eyes welling up with tears. “Just staying here at camp all day, it's killing me! I need to do something productive!” He screamed the last part. He didn't mean to, but the frustration was boiling up inside him. Nil turned to look at him, he looked as if he was going to cry as well.

 “You are doing something protective, you're helping me run this camp. Not an easy thing to do. Let the others worry about the temple.” Nil said, he was trying to let Aral off the hook, but Aral didn't want to be off the hook. All he wanted was to get back to the temple and find Loki.

 “Tomorrow night, it's my turn to do my part.” Aral said, ignoring his friend's words. “That's final.” With that he turned and walked off, leaving Nil standing alone in the woods. He kept bracing himself for Nil's reply, but none came.

 Aral made it back to his makeshift tent, really just a tiny clearing against an old tree with clothes piled against the base to make it more comfortable. He laid down and looked up at the stars. In 24 hours time he would be making his way back to the temple, finding Loki and starting his training back up. He allowed his mind to wonder, thinking up all the new skills and powers he was going to be able to learn before finally drifting off to sleep.

 The next morning he woke up, bright and early, full of excitement, but the day seemed to drag on and on. He spent most of the day avoiding Nil, worried that he might rethink allowing Aral to take his turn monitoring the temple. When Cal returned from his turn watching the temple Aral set out. Eager to hurry on his way before anyone could stop him.

 He was barely out of the camp when he heard a voice calling out to him. The voice wasn't hard to recognize, it was the same voice he had been avoiding all day. He slowly turned around and sure enough, Nil was rushing over to him.

 “Hey.” Aral said, his nerves on end. He was wasting time, the Great Gathering could end any day and if it ended before he found Loki again, any chance he had at more training would come crashing to an end.

 “I was worried I wouldn't catch you in time.” Nil said, stopping in front of him and bending over to catch his breath. He was sweating a bit, clearly he had run after him from the camp.

 “You didn't have to run, you knew where I was going.” Aral said, trying to play it cool. He kept his eyes locked on Nil's, despite wanting to look anywhere else. He didn't want to give off any hint that he was lying.

 “I know, I just,” Nil said, standing up straight and locking eyes with his friend. “Wanted to give you one last chance to back out. I'll take your turn if you don't think you are up to it.”

 “I'll be fine. I told you, I can handle this. Just have a little faith in me.” Aral said, trying to keep his impatience out of his voice. He knew that Nil was just trying to look out for him, but it didn't stop it from being annoying.

 “I do have faith in you. But I also know how hard this all must be, and I worry. I won't apologize for trying to look out for you. That's my job, but if you say you can handle this, I will trust you.” Nil said. Aral had never felt so guilty in his entire life.

 “I can do this.” He forced himself to say and turned around and started back on his way without another word. Each step he felt more and more weight on his shoulders till it felt like he would collapse. Nil told him that he trusted him and he repaid that trust by lying right to his face. Aral felt like scum.

 He pushed those thoughts aside as he continued on his way. He would have time to feel like a garage person later, after he met up with Loki. After all, he was doing this for Nil and the others. Once he mastered his gifts he could protect them. Give them a home and security that they never had before. He was being selfless.

 Or at least that's what he kept telling himself.

 The truth was that he enjoyed the power that he felt when he wielded the magic that was his birthright. He wanted more of that feeling, even if it meant lying to the only person who had ever really been there for him. He wasn't sure how knowing that made him feel, so instead he kept trying to convince himself he was selfless, he was doing it for them.

 Before long he made it to the lookout spot. The grass was patted down from where the others had been sitting for days. A few cans of food littered the ground around him. A few of the branches from nearby trees had been broken off to make the space more livable.

 The original plan had been to head straight into the temple, not wasting any time, but Nil stopping him on the way here changed that. He needed to make sure that he wouldn't be seen by his friends heading into the temple. They would never understand.

 He waited a few minutes, glancing back the way he came. After he was sure no one was walking up to him, he started back towards his campsite, hoping that if Nil or one of the others had followed him, they would take this as an opportunity to let him off the hook and show themselves.

 He wasn't sure what he would have done if someone did come out and offer to take his place again, but no one ever did, so he saw no reason to worry about it. Now that he was sure he was alone, he headed back towards the temple.

 He made his way back towards the temple yard. He moved back to the spot where he and Nil had left the temple. The stolen uniforms they used to sneak in last time were still sitting there, waiting for him. He carefully put the uniform back on, wiping off a few bugs who had made it their new home. Next came the hard part, he had to remember where Nil had covered up the entrance. It was covered in such a way that if you didn't know what you were looking for, you would miss it.

 It took Aral far longer than he would have liked to find it, but find it he did. After taking a quick glance around to make sure h was alone, he pulled it open and let himself in.

 As Aral started down the pitch black staircase, he pulled out a firestick from his pocket. He was ready this time. He held the light in front of him, illuminating the way. It wasn't long till he was back in the underground lobby, which led to every secret tunnel.

 Now came the hard part. He had no idea where Loki was. He would have to walk around the temple, which, thanks to the stolen uniform shouldn't be that hard. The only problem he foresaw, was that he had no idea who anyone here was, which god he 'worked' for, or where he was allowed to go.

 They were all things that he would have to figure out as he went along. He looked around the room, he had no idea where any of the tunnels led, but for the one on the far end of the room. It would take him up to the dormitory. With no clear idea of where he should start, it seemed as good a place as any.

 He quickly made his way down the twisted hallways until he came to the end. He placed his ear to the door, listening as close as he could. When he was sure no one was on the other side, he slowly pushed the door open. His breath catching in his throat. If he was wrong, if there was someone in the room, it would all be over before it started.

 Once the door was the tiniest bit open he looked out, only able to see in one direction, it was clear. The room was far neater than it had been last time. Not a thing out of place. He slid out, forcing himself to squeeze through, so as to not open the door any farther than he had to.

 He only made it a few feet from the statue that guarded the door when he heard a shout from the other side of the room. His blood ran cold at the sound. It was in a language he had never heard before. He quickly turned around to find a man who was clearly not from anywhere near here. He was half undressed in bed, but shot out of bed and pulled a long thin sword out of a suit of armor next to his bed. The armor was black and had a head piece that made it look alive, as if a demon had come to this very temple.

 The man kept shouting, walking towards him, swinging the sword as he did so. Aral glanced at the passageway door, with just his eyes, making sure it was shut all the way. It wasn't. It was open, but just an inch.

 With no time to think, Aral ran, knocking himself into a pillar on the other side of him and exaggerating the result, throwing himself in the opposite direction, allowing himself to bump into the wall, knocking the door closed, before falling to the floor.

 The man was almost on top of him now, sword in hand. Aral knew he was going to die, he had just given up his only chance at escape. But he knew it was the right thing to do. He came in here to be selfish, to chase after what he wanted. He couldn't let his selfishness cost the others everything. This was his penance.

 “Stop!” A voice cried out, just as the man started his downward swing of his sword. The man looked up, just as the command was screamed out a second time in his own tongue. With a fluid motion, the man placed the sword at his side and stepped back. “Get up!” The same voice cried out.

 Aral did as he was instructed and turned around to find Commander Martel standing before him. Aral had only seen him once, years ago, when he was still a child. He was one of the men who had come into his mother's bar after hours. He raped and murdered his mother in front of Aral's own eyes. He had always thought that he was an outsider, but he wore the markings of the Imperial guards commander. The man known as Martel.

 Aral's whole world was rocked. His mother wasn't murdered by outsiders. She was murdered by the height of power inside the kingdom. The king's right hand man.

 Every instinct in his body was screaming at him to lunge at Martel and beat him to death right then and there, but another voice in his head begged him to stop and think. Martel had just saved his life, he was Aral's only chance at getting out of here alive, he just needed to play nice.

 “What are you doing in here?” He demanded, as more voices came from the other side of the room. It seemed the strange man had friends, and they had just come home.

 “I. . .I. . .uh. . .I got lost.” Aral managed to get out, which wasn't an easy feat when his own heartbeat nearly drowned out the question.

 “How did you end up on this side of the temple at all?” Martel demanded, clearly not a happy man. Aral had no idea what he was supposed to say, but was spared having to answer when one of the new comers demanded something from Martel in their tongue. Martel responded, before turning back to Aral. “Get out of here, come find me in about an hour. There will be an explanation and hell to pay!”

 Without waiting for a reply, Martel stepped forward and started screaming at the foreigners. Aral had no desire to witness how it turned out, he jetted from the room and took off down the hallway.

 Now that he was inside the temple itself, he knew it like the back of his hands. With one exception, clearly the temple was divided up and he had no way of knowing what parts of the temple he was allowed in, or where Loki would be. Added to the top of that, he now only had an hour to find out before Martel came looking for him.

 The temple was radically different, while being exactly the same. The whole time that Aral had lived in the temple, they had never really changed much. The kids would bring some stuff from their old lives, but most didn't have much. Other than that, most of the décor was what survived from the days of old when the temple was in service to the followers of Orion. Now that the king and the many gods had taken over, they hadn't changed much of anything. The old painting and statues of the demigod still stood, while the few personal items that Aral and his people had bought were trashed and tossed out, replaced by warriors from all over the world. Each group had their own style, setting their part of the temple up like their own little slice of home.

 Each time Aral entered a different part of the temple, he was shocked to see just how radically different each culture was. It was jarring, but also a bit exciting. He had always believed that the whole world was more of the same. That no matter where he went, things would be the same. The rich profiting off of the suffering of the poor, but the more he saw how different these other cultures were the more he began to hope. To hope that he could find happiness elsewhere. That the world wasn't all the same, maybe there was somewhere in the world that people were respected as human beings. No matter their wealth.

 That was Aral's new goal, he was going to train with Loki, master his powers, save his people, avenge his mother and then set out and explore the world. See all that there was to see and find his place in it. This new found purpose filled him with a sense of joy that he had never experienced before.

 He set about finding Loki with a newfound sense of purpose. For the first time since his mother was murdered, he had something to look forward to. It made all the difference in the world to him.

**Chapter Seventeen**

 Simon wiped the tears from his eyes as he exited the castle. Finn was waiting for him, outside of the carriage. He greeted Simon with a smile. It was unsettling, not because Simon believed that his brother meant him any harm, but because it was the first time anyone in the family had been kind to him in longer than he could remember.

 “You ready little brother?” Finn asked, patting Simon on the back. He couldn't help but return his older brother's smile. It felt good to be treated like family again.

 “Y...yes.” Simon said, he could feel the tears welling up in his eyes again. Finn looked around and ushered him into the carriage.

 “Let's get going.” He followed Simon in and took a seat across from him, pulling out a handkerchief as he did so. “Take this.”

 Simon nodded, wiping the newly formed tears from his eyes. He voiced a thanks to his brother, but he wasn't sure how audible it was. Nonetheless, Finn just nodded, the smile still on his face.

 “Don't ever let them see you cry.” Finn told him kindly, as the carriage started to move, taking them towards the temple and the dinner with Loki and Thor.

 “I'm sorry.” Simon said, wiping the tears away once again. The smile faded as Finn shook his head.

 “Never apologize. You did nothing wrong.” Finn said. “I'm not telling you not to cry, I'm telling you, to not let them see you cry. We are the children of Mince Mala, we can not afford to look weak.” Finn said. He glanced out the window, as if looking for something just out of sight. “We have many enemies, who would love nothing more than to use it against us.”

 “We do?” Simon asked. In his whole life he had never heard of any enemies other than the Atlantians. His brother's words brought forth dozens of questions, but he bit his tongue. He had learned long ago that asking too many questions would be rewarded with pain.

 “Father rules with a strong hand. He books no question to his leadership. It keeps people in line, but it has many drawbacks. Which is why, when I rule, many things will change. But till such time, we have to play by father's rules. You understand little brother?” Finn asked. Simon nodded, learning at last, that he wasn't the only one in the family with secrets.

 The rest of the carriage ride was filled with small talk. It was nice, just like old times, back when they were kids. Before Finn ran off to study all over the world and Simon started taking a backseat to Toma in the family rankings.

 The carriage pulled to a stop in front of the temple. As Simon got out he found hundreds and hundreds of soldiers in the various uniforms of the different tribes that they worked for. Each tribe had massively different training styles. It was a sight to behold. The men who followed Ares, used brute force against each other. Attempting to over power their foes, while the followers of Hachiman fought with a grace and speed that Simon would never have thought possible.

 The men wearing Mar's armor fought with the same aggression as the followers of Ares, but with far more discipline. They fought as units rather than as individuals. It was unlike anything he had ever seen.

 Mixed in were the men who followed after Tyr. They looked more the part of brutes than warriors, and yet they were masters in combat. Well trained and almost immune to pain. They would get hit and jump right back into the fray, unfazed.

 The men with the spears fought with a grace unlike any Simon had seen. Their movement seemed to be as fluid as the wind itself. Their fighting style was more like art than war.

 Each style was unique, formed together through countless generations of trail and error. Simon had never been a fan of fighting, or the art of war and yet he couldn't help but feel in awe of all he saw. He started to feel a binge of disgust at his father's men. Whatever style they may have, it lacked any of the honed skill that these warriors possessed.

 “Impressive huh?” Finn asked, watching the fighting with as much awe as Simon. He was the crown prince, he had traveled all over the world and yet he still stood in awe at the training taking place before his eyes.

 “Yeah.” Was all Simon could muster as he watched one of the men with a spear spin it in his hand. The staff moved so shifty it looked to Simon as if it was spinning under it's own power. It was elegance personified.

 Across the yard four of Mar's Legionary turned to watch, just as captivated of the spare spinner as Simon was. A smile graced the man's lips as he caught the spear in his hand and took off at a run in the direction of the four men, who exchanged quick glances with each other.

 As the spear wielder leaped into air, the four men moved closer to one another, lifted their shields, which were long and think. Both the top and bottom ended in points. In unison the four men keeled down, lifting the shields over their head, just as the spear wielder came flying down on them, just as the spear was to hit the shield he pulled it back and shifted his weight in the air so that his feet landed on the shield's instead of the spear, he kicked himself back, back flipping through the air and landing on his feet.

 The four Legionary got to their feet, moving the shield slightly to the side, so that they can see. The spear wielder spun the spare as he moved it behind him. The Legionary started forward, moving in sync. Each of them drawing their swords as they did so.

 The spear wielder took two steps backwards as they closed in on him, without warning he then rushed forward, planted his spear in the ground and pushed himself off the ground, flying over their heads. He pulled out a knife as landed behind the Legionary and placed the blade at the throat of the middle Legionary. The spear wielder said something to them and they lowered their weapons.

 “Quite impressive is it not?” A voice said from behind Simon and Finn. They both turned to look in surprise, only to find Loki standing there, a grin on his face.

 “Loki, sorry for our tardiness sir.” Finn said, bowing as he spoke. “We were just”

 “Admiring the skills of all the fine warriors. I can respect that,” Loki said, cutting off Finn. “But why don't we head inside before my brother starts to get cranky. He doesn't like waiting around.”

 “After you.” Finn said, once more bowing before the trickster god. Simon followed his lead.

 The trickster god lead inside the temple, Finn making small talk with him as they left the battling warriors behind. Simon, however, couldn't take his eyes off of the spear wielder disarmed yet another foe.

 “Owe!” Simon let out as he walked into the door. He had been so busy watching the battle unfold that he had not paid attention to where he was walking. Finn rushed over to him.

 “Are you okay?” He asked, with genuine concern. Simon nodded, feeling the blood rush to his face with embarrassment. He must look the fool in front of everyone, behind his brother he could make out Loki's grin. The trickster god was on the verge of laughter at his expense. Just what he needed.

 “The show will be here when we adjourn for the day. Think you can tear yourself away to feast with we mere gods?” Loki said with a laugh. Finn looked at the trickster horrified, clearly missing the taunting way with which he spoke. “I know we don't put on the same flashing show as these fine men, but I have been informed that I can be quite witty.”

 “He meant no disrespect my lord.” Finn said, quickly, jumping between the trickster god and his little brother. Simon felt his face redden once more. It was all too much for him, he wanted nothing more than to retreat back into his laboratory with his experiments and his isolation. It was much more pleasant.

 Loki waved Finn off as he walked passed the crown prince. He bent down and helped Simon to his feet, a light smile on his face as he did so. Behind him, Finn watched on with baited breath, waiting for something bad to happen.

 “Although, if great battles are what you seek, my dearest brother has scores of tales of yesteryear to fill the dull night.” Loki said. Finn seemed to relax a great deal as Loki put his arm around Simon and lead him inside the temple.

 A great deal had changed since the start of the Great Gathering. The temple was much more lived in. The warriors had made the place their home. Blood lined the walls, telling Simon that the cultural differences of those inside were not all forgotten just because there was a larger issue at hand.

 The three princes made their way past a few of the imperial soldiers, who were standing around, gossiping no doubt. They paused their conversation as they saw Finn approach. Their poster changed as they attempted to look professional. It was a pitiful attempt that did nothing but drive home just how pathetic they were, more so when compared to the warriors that had traveled here the war gods.

 Simon could see the disappointment in his brother's eyes as they passed. While Finn had never been a fan of the imperial guards he held a great deal of respect for the soldiers. As the crown prince, he served in the military for some time before heading out on his diplomatic missions. He also spoke of those times with a sense of nostalgia. It was an experience that Simon never wanted to partake in, but he respected his brother enough to keep those thoughts to himself.

 Jin-La was a frightful man, who was quick to anger and booked no disrespect from anyone, yet he seemed to have taken a liking to Finn, just as Martel had a taken a liking to Toma. Or at least he had before the accident. The fateful day when everything had changed.

 “At last.” Loki said, opening a door that opened to a small dinning room area, with food spread out across the table. There was more food than Simon had ever seen, which was saying something when you grew up in a royal household. “Brother, we have returned.”

 Simon looked up from the food and spotted the Thor standing near the wall, looking out over the training battle outside. Simon had been so memorized by the sight of the food that he missed the lightning god altogether.

 This was the second time that Simon had seen him, and he couldn't believe how much more intimidating he was up close. His muscles had muscles and there was an air of electricity that seemed to flow all around him. He was more than a man, he was the living embodiment of lighting.

 “Finally brother.” Thor said, turning to face them. His very words seemed to crack with the force of thunder. “Let us feast.” he said taking a seat, not waiting for a reply. Finn mumbled out some greeting and bowed once more. Thor didn't so much as look his way before grabbing a turkey leg and biting down.

 “Thank you for having us here.” Finn said, taking a seat across from the lightning god.

 “Thanks Loki.” Thor said, taking another bite and tearing the meat off with his teeth. Loki sat next to Thor as Simon took his seat next to his own brother. “This was his doing.”

 “I thought it would be a nice gesture dear brother. To feast with our fellow princes.” Loki said, shrugging off Thor's remarks. Finn seemed to be deflated by the remarks, Simon couldn't blame him. Thor was a hero of many a battle. On top of being the future king of Asgard and dealing with diplomatic issues. He was everything that Finn hoped to be.

 “Be that as it may, it is a great honor to sit with the mighty Thor.” Finn said. Thor ignored him, instead opting to take another bite of his turkey leg. After a moment, Finn tried again. “I have made it a point to study your battles your highness. In particular the battle with the Atlantians near Vintel, where you. . .”

 “Breached their stronghold and used their toys against them!” Thor said, with a mighty laugh as he lifted his hand up and his hammer appeared in his hand as if it had been there all along. “It birthed the greatest of all weapons, Mjollnir.”

 Thor went on and on as he told tale after tale of his many great battles. Finn was wrapped up in the stories, loving every moment of it. All of it was beyond boring to Simon, thankfully Loki provided far more interesting topics for conversation.

 The night seemed to pass in an instant as Loki told Simon tale after tale of the many feats he had managed over the years with his magic. It gave Simon hope for his future, if only he could get away from his family. The king would never let Simon leave, even if he did hate him.

 “That sounds glorious!” Finn exclaimed from his seat as he traded war stories with Thor. If Loki's plan worked, Finn would forgive him when he became king and might even allow him to travel the world as he had done. It was a small hope, but one that Simon was holding onto for dear life.

 “The plan will work, my young apprentice. Just stay the course.” Loki whispered into his ear, giving Simon the eerie feeling that he could read his mind. He always seemed to know what other people were thinking and how to handle them. It was unsettling. Simon gave him a smile and quickly changed the subject, asking the question he had been wanting to ask since meeting Loki.

 “Where does the power come from? I never. . . I never looked for it. I always thought it was science. I didn't even think magic was possible. I thought that was just the purview of the gods.” Simon confessed to Loki.

 “Only because we convinced you so. Magic in no more or less than life its self. Some people, through time and effort can learn to master that life force to harness the power of the gods. But every once in a while, every once in a long while, a human is born with these powers. You are one such human.” Loki told him. Simon felt himself swell up with pride at his words. He was special, it was the first time in his life that he ever truly felt that way. His family had always gone out of their way to make him feel anything but.

 “That was some dinner, wasn't it?” Finn asked him as they made their way back to the carriage waiting for them outside the temple. They finished the dinner with brother gods and were headed home. It seemed that Finn had gotten just as much out of the dinner as Simon had.

 The two brothers spent the whole ride back talking, bonding, for the first time since they were young. Since before Toma was born. It was a great night.

 The rest of the week was a whirlwind unlike any that Simon had ever experienced before. Finn took him into his confidence, brought him to important meetings of the state, a fact that did not go unnoticed by their father, even if it did go unmentioned. Meeting after meeting went by, sitting two chairs down from his father and not a word was said. It was almost enough to ruin the mood. Almost.

 Finn seemed to take great pleasure in teaching his younger brother all that he had learned while he was away. Simon was once more welcomed back at the dinner table, a fact that was not taken well by the youngest among them. The first day that Simon sat back at the dinner table, Toma screamed and shouted. Their father said nothing, it wasn't till Finn asked him if he was finished and sent him away.

 The next day Toma never even showed up for dinner, the day after that he showed up and ate in silence. It wasn't till near the end of the week that Toma started to partake in the conversation, even joking around with Simon. At long last it seemed that Toma had, if not forgiven him outright, at least warmed up to Simon.

 It was the greatest feeling that Simon could remember in quite some time. Simon thought it would be a hard victory to top, only two days later that topping happened. He was at a meeting with the nobles. Sitting next to Finn as he sat at his place by their father's side.

 “Simon, sit at my side a while. Learn the responsibility that is yours by birth.” Their father said, after whispering with Finn for a few minutes. Simon was smart enough to see it for what it was, Finn pressuring their father into including Simon. Not that it mattered. Their father was acknowledging him, for the first time since the accident. Simon's place in the family was back on good footing. It was something he never thought would happen, nor was it even something that he thought he wanted, but now that he has it, he realized that he had never wanted anything more.

 Simon spent the rest of the meeting at his father's side, in the seat normally occupied by Finn. It was a seat of honor for anyone, but it was more than that to Simon. It wasn't just his father acknowledging him again, it was his father embracing him as a son for the first time in his life.

 The good vibes continued on into the night as the family sat down for dinner. Everyone joked around and had a good time, for the first time since their mother had passed from this world, they felt like a family. It was everything that Simon had ever wanted. He should have known it wasn't to last.

 The next morning he woke as he always did, and got ready for his day. Finn had promised to take him hunting and teach him the lay of the lands outside of Infera. Simon had never left the kingdom, Sir Dale had always told him that he wasn't ready. It made no difference that Toma, his younger brother, had left the kingdom numerous times. It seemed that today was finally the day that he could prove himself a man.

 They were to meet in front of the caste at just passed 9. Simon rushed down the stairs, taking two at a time. His spirits were high, higher than they had been at anytime in his life. Only the front of the castle was clear.

 Down the yard Toma was training with Sir Dale, as he did everyday. He was clumsy with a sword so he had taken up using a training sword again, now that his dominate arm was gone, but he was improving. He could parry an attack before getting knocked down. Simon felt conflicting emotions watching him. There was both pride and guilt. His brother's handicap was a burden that Simon would have to live with for the rest of his life, but that fact that Toma kept his training up, proved how strong he was. Simon couldn't help but wish that he had that resolve.

 “Prince Simon.” A young maid that Simon had never seen before said as she ran up to him. It wasn't uncommon for Simon to run into help he had never seen before, his father employed so many. Often times replacing multiple staff within the day, depending on his mood.

 “Yes?” Simon asked as she stopped in front of him. She was an older woman, a bit of a hunch in her back. A tiny mole on his cheek, with teeth more rotten than Simon would have believed possible.

 “Your brother tasked me with finding you.” She said, bowing before him.

 “Finn?” Simon asked, guessing the only logical answer.

 “Yes, me lord. He was summoned to the temple, at request of the great war god, Ares.” The maid said. “He tasked me to find you and bid you to find him, there.”

 “Thank you.” Simon said, causing the old woman to smile. He turned and headed through the gate. It would seem he was once more walking to the temple, though this time, it wasn't a walk of shame.

 He couldn't help but wonder what Ares could want from Finn, surly the god of war wouldn't waste time with trivial concerns. If he requested Finn, it had to be important. Simon couldn't help but feel a bit of excitement well up inside him. Whatever the war god had tasked the crown prince with, Simon was to tag along. It would be a glorious adventure. Something that Simon had spent his whole life sure that he would never be apart of.

 He was well used to the route to the temple, having traveled enough times over the last few weeks. His journey was so uneventful that he hardly remembered any of it after setting off. He soon found himself at the foot of the temple, his excitement boiling over as he entered the temple.

 There were members of all the different armies walking the halls, a sight which still filled him with awe, even after all this time. As he walked the halls he would catch bits and pieces of conversations in languages he couldn't begin to understand even if he spent a life time trying.

 He walked passed them all, looking for any sign of Finn. He made his way back to the conference room where they always met, but Finn was no where to be seen. Simon figured that he must still be with Ares, already hard at work on whatever task had befallen them.

 Simon spent the better part of the morning wondering the halls of the temple, not seeing hide or hair or his brother. His over abundance of excitement was rapidly souring. He knew the most likely place his brother would be, the grand hall, where the war gods were holding the Great Gathering. It was only logical that if Finn was here for Ares, he would be where Ares was, but Simon had no desire to be proven wrong and risk the wrath of not one, but many war gods.

 He made one more pass around the temple before giving up hope of escaping the inevitable fate. He made his way towards the great hall, a growing sense of dread swelling up inside him.

 As Simon neared the great hall a pair of hands grabbed him from behind, covering his mouth and throwing him against a wall. Simon wanted to let out a scream but stopped himself once he saw the face of his abductor. It was Loki, and he seemed worried.

 “Simon, what are you doing?” Loki asked, his voice a whisper, filled with concern. He moved his hand, allowing Simon to speak.

 “Finn asked me to meet him here.” Simon answered, unsure why the trickster god was acting so oddly.

 “So you haven't heard?” Loki asked, his eyes scanning around the room.

 “Heard what?” Simon asked, struggling to free himself from Loki's hold. He was rapidly growing wary of whatever game Loki was playing.

 “Your lap exploded, Finn's body was found inside, holding some of your experiments.” Loki said, looking concerned.

 “That's impossible! He is here! Waiting for. . . “ Simon yelled, until he was cut off mid-sentience by Loki's hand once more.

 “Silence. The king is beside himself. He ordered all of the Imperial guard and army to hunt you to the ends of the earth. Your brother was indeed here this morning, at the crack of dawn. Having finished the meaningless tasks set forth by the war god he rushed back to wake you. I can only make a guess as to him arriving after you left, causing him to roam the castle looking for you, as you roamed this temple looking for him.” Loki said, Simon's mind was wheeling. That must have been why he had no luck tracking down his brother, he was already gone.

 “Finn?” was all Simon could muster. All energy drained out of him. First his experiments caused Toma his arm and now it caused Finn his life. There would be no going home for him. His time was finished, it was only a matter of time. Seeming to read his thoughts, Loki told him as much and ordered him to flee the temple, waiting for him in the woods nearby. Simon couldn't even remember answering him or leaving his side, tho he must have, for before long he was sitting near a tree a few yards inside the woods, just out of sight of the temple.

**Chapter Eighteen**

 Aral watched as Loki pulled the middle prince aside and whispered to him. He didn't know what to make of it, surely as a guest of the royal family Loki would have met with everyone of the royals, but there was something in the way the two of them spoke to each other that struck Aral as odd. Almost as if they had some kind of relationship.

 He slowly inched his way closer to the two men, trying to overhear their conversation. He had no such luck, for as intense as their conversation clearly was, they were having it in hushed tones.

 Aral closed in as near as he could without being seen, using the nearby wall to hide behind. He pressed his back against the wall and strained his ears. He could make out the sound of their voices, but not what was being said. He cursed under his breath and risked a glance at them, just in time to witness the prince run off.

 Taking a quick look around to make sure they were alone, Aral moved out from his hiding space and called out to Loki. At last he had found his master and could restart his apprenticeship.

 “Aral! You're alive! I had worried so when I ceased to hear from you.” Loki said rushing over to him, pulling him into a tight embrace.

 “I had difficulty getting away. We moved far out into the woods, attempting to stay one step away from the mad king and his men.” Aral said, speaking in a hushed voice, so as to not be overheard.

 “And yet here you are.” Loki said, a hint of pride in his voice. Aral couldn't help but feel pleased with himself at the praise. He had worked so tirelessly to get back to him, only to have it rewarded so. It made it all worth it, all the lies, all the going behind Nil's back. All worth it.

 “Can we start training again?” Aral asked Loki. “I managed some pretty cool stuff since I last saw you, but there is still so much that I need to learn.”

 “Indeed you do, but, and this is important, that is a good thing. For when you believe yourself a master, you cease to learn and grow. Once you stop growing, you die.”

 “And I don't want to die.” Aral said, with a laugh.

 “No one ever does.” Loki said, his voice wistful, it was off-putting to Aral, but it was a mystery for another time.

 “So we train.” Aral said, attempting to push the issue that he came here for. “I need to get better, that way I can help my friend. We were run out of our home, into the woods where we live like animals. I can't leave them out there.” He felt tears welling up in his eyes as he spoke.

 Loki put a hand on his soldier and locked eyes with him, looking into his very soul. Somehow it had the effect of calming Aral down, making him feel like everything was going to be okay.

 “Trust me, with my help, they won't be sleeping out in the woods for much longer.” Loki told him. “I'll take care of everything.” It felt as if the words lifted a massive burden from him. Aral felt lighter than he had in years. It was an incredible feeling.

 “When do we start?” He asked, hopefully.

 “Tomorrow.” Loki said, Aral attempted to mask the disappointment he felt from his face. He had wanted to start immediately. “The Great Gathering is coming to a head and I need to take care of a few things before I can get away.” Loki told him, almost as if he could read the disappointment steaming from Aral.

 “Okay.” Was all Aral could manage.

 “Go back to your friends and get some rest, my young apprentice. I will come and fetch you in the morning, but first, you must tell me how to find you.” Loki told him and Aral complied. Telling him the quickest path back to the campsite.

 After final goodbyes, Aral turned and made his way back through the hidden tunnels and out of the temple. He spent the rest of his watch, thinking over all the things he wanted to learn and plotting his revenge on the royals. It made the time fly by. Before he knew it Kando had come to replace him and he started his long walk home. He wasn't sure how he was going to get any sleep that night, for he was far too excited for the promises that came with the morning, but somehow he managed it.

 He found himself drifting off to sleep and dreaming of the day he would return to Infera and confront the king himself. He would blow through the kingdom and make everyone pay.

 He found himself in the bar that his mother worked at, floating in the air in front of him were the men who had harmed her.

 "Please! Please just let us go!" Commander Martel cried out, while his friends just cried. Aral smiled, a grim sense of satisfaction filling him as he lifted his hand up, channeling the mystic forces that swirled around him, causing the skin to slowly burn off his vicitms. Their screams were deafing, but Aral soaked it all in. He enjoyed every moment of their agony.

 “Is this what my mom felt, when you broke her? Is that even a fraction of the pain that you have caused others over the years? You're a monster, now fill the power of vengence!” Aral screamed as the three men were consumed in flames. He laughed and laughed as the bar burned to the ground around him. He floated out of the ashes and turned towards the great castle in the distance.

 “I'm coming for you King Mala! You will not escape me!” He flew towards the castle at faster and faster speeds, laying waste to everything behind him. The Imperial Army took their place just outside the castle, swords and bows at the ready. They meant to guard Aral off, no matter the cost.

 Aral let out a laugh as the whole army disintegrated, leaving nothing behind. Aral landed in the midst of what was once a great army, bending down and scooping up a handful of dust and holding it up to his face, he blows it towards the wall in a low sideways arch. Everywhere the dust hits the wall it explodes, crumbling down. He walks through as the Imperial Guard rushes at him. Before they can even get near him they start grabbing at their throats. Falling to the ground as they choke to death.

 Aral walks passed the dying guards, raising his hand and tightly closing his hand, as he does so the front of the castle crumbles. The king stands alone in his study, looking scared. Aral turns his hand and motions for him to come to him. The king floats into the air and is lowered down towards him.

 “Aral!” The king shouted. It felt good to hear the king sound so terrified. “Aral, please!” He yelled again, only this time he didn't sound so much like the king.

 “Wake the fuck up Aral!” The king yelled in a voice that was not his as a hand that wasn't there slapped him in the face. He opened his eyes as he spotted Nil standing over him, he suddenly recognized the kings voice. It was Nil's. He looked terrified.

 “What's wrong?” Aral asked as he slowly sat up. Before Nil had the chance to reply, Aral had already figured it out. All around him the Imperial Army was slaughtering his people.

 “What do you think?” Nil screamed, pulling him to his feet.

 “How did they find us?” Aral asked, as Cal threw himself in front of two younglings, only to have his head sliced off. “Cal!”

 “Those bastards!” Nil yelled out.

 “Why didn't Kando warn us?” Jason asked, he was standing behind them, looking as scared as Aral felt.

 “The only reason he wouldn't, was if he couldn't.” Nil said, Aral had already suspected as much, but hearing it out loud didn't make him feel any better.

 “What do we do?” Jason cried.

 “We get everyone we can and flee!” Nil said. Before they even had a chance to turn and run a voice called out.

 “That's him!” It was an old frail voice, which belonged to an old woman with far more wrinkles than Aral had ever seen on one person before and she was pointing right at Aral.

 “Is she pointing at me?” Aral asked.

 “Looks like.” Nil said, his voice shaking. The bravest man that Aral had ever met seemed scared.

 “That's the man who killed the crown prince!” The old woman told the man at her side. He turned to look at Aral.

 “I want him alive.” The man who was clearly in charge shouted. “Kill everyone else.” He said in a throwaway manner, as if their lives were meaningless.

 Two soldiers started towards them, pulling their swords out as they did so. They were surrounded on all sides by the slaughter of all of their friends, they had no where to run.

 “Get behind me!” Nil yelled to Jason and Aral, stepping before them. He made to confront the two armed men with nothing but his hands. Scared as he was, Nil was still a hero. The first of the soldiers swung his sword, Nil ducked down, allowing the sword to swing over his head. Nil sprung up, hitting the soldier with an uppercut and knocking him back. The soldier dropped his sword as he fell backwards, allowing Nil to catch it and use it to block the attack from the second soldier. It all happened so fast that Aral had a hard time following with his eyes. It was a sight to see.

 “We have to go!” Jason told him, pulling on his arm. Aral nodded, taking one last look at Nil who was battling the soldier.

 “Run!” Aral said, allowing Jason to pull him. They started to make their way through the many battles and wholesale slaughter that was happening all around them.

 “They are getting away!” The old woman screamed. Aral cursed under his breath as they ran. Every part of him wanted to stop and help, but he knew that would only lead to more people dying.

 Jason stopped dead in his tracks, causing Aral to run into him from behind. They were both out of breath, Aral opened his mouth to ask him why he stopped only to figure out the reason for himself. Right in front of them, the younglings were backed against a row of trees as the soldiers cut them to pieces, killing even the youngest among them.

 “Oh god.” Jason yelled. Aral grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

 “We need to go!” He ordered as they turned and ran back the way they came. They only made it a few feet when a large soldier stepped into their path, blocking their way.

 He was a giant of a man with dark black hair and a scar that ran down his left cheek. He smiled at them, half his teeth missing or rotting. His right eye was pure white while the other was the darkest of blacks. He lifted his board sword and swung it down, right towards Jason's head.

 Just as the blade was about to hit it's mark a hand shot out and grabbed the blade. Aral looked over to find a battered Nil, he forced the blade back with his hand as the blade began to cut into it, causing his blood to run down the blade. With his free hand he ran his sword through the giants side, numerous times. The giant dropped his blade and staggered back, yelling in pain. Nil wasted no time, pulling his sword from the giants side and swinging it up, cutting through the giant's neck and out the back of his head. The giant coughed up blood before falling to his knees.

 “Miss me?” Nil asked, turning to look at them. Jason ran and gave their friend a hug.

 “What now?” Aral asked, not sure what more Nil could do. What more anyone could do. Jason staggered back from Nil, his hands on his stomach as Nil let out a scream. At first Aral wasn't sure what happened, but then he noticed the arrow sticking through Nil's stomach. It had shot clear through him and stabbed Jason, who was hugging him.

 “It hurts.” Jason cried as he fell to the ground. Nil stumbled forward a step before a second arrow went through his leg knocking him to the floor.

 “Ru....” Nil started to scream, but cry was cut short as a third arrow went through his eye, ending the life of the greatest friend Aral had ever known. He stood in shock as he collapsed to the floor. Aral knew he should run, to do anything else would only mean his own death, but he was too in shock to do anything.

 Within moments, two guards grabbed him roughly from behind and pulled him away. Even as he was dragged across the camp, he couldn't take his eyes off of his friends. Their bodies left in pools of their own blood. It was a sight he would never forget for the rest of his life. No matter how long that proved to be.

 The man in charge turned and started to march out of the camp, the old lady at his side. Aral was dragged between the soldiers who followed close behind them. All around them, the last remains of the kids from the temple were cut down. Aral had no idea if anyone had made it out before the slaughter started, he could only hope.

 “Please! You have the wrong man!” He screamed, to no avail. No one seemed to care. The old lady had pointed him out as a prince killer and that is all that mattered. Innocent or not, they had the killer and he would pay for the crime.

 The trip back to the temple was both the largest and shortest of his life. He tried everything he could to convince them to let him go, but they paid him no mind. When that failed he tried to pull himself free, but their grip was too strong. He used his foot to catch a tree root, but all he ended up doing was losing his shoe.

 Step by step they dragged him to his death, the old lady looking back from time to time, grinning from ear to ear as if this was the greatest sight in the world.

 “Thought you were get away with it, didn't you?” She asked, her voice high pitched. “Thought no one would be the wiser to what you did to them princelings! But old Bertha, I saws you.” She said with grim satisfaction.

 “What are you saying? I did nothing to the prince!” Aral shouted. The leader of the troops stopped and turned around to face him.

 “You don't speak of them!” He demanded as he slapped him across the face. Aral could feel the slap even after his attacker turned and started his march once more.

 It wasn't long before the temple came into view. The courtyard outside it was filled to the brim. It seemed that all of the different armies were standing at attention. The Imperial guards creating a pathway through the middle, lined up on either side. At the front a platform had been erected, where the king and the youngest prince stood with the war gods.

 The old lady and the leader of the troops stopped before the platform, stepping aside to reveal Aral and the soldiers holding him. He could feel all the eyes in the yard on him. His heart was pounding beneath his chest, feeling as if it was going to burst at any moment.

 “For you my king.” The man in charge said.

 “Are you sure it is him, Jin-La?” The king asked, rising to his feet. All others on the platform did the same.

 “I have only the word of our witness as to his guilt, but I see no reason for her to lie.” The man in charge, Jin-La said. The king nodded, turning to look at the old woman.

 “Truly you saw him in the act?” The king asked, his voice sounding heavy.

 “Truly my lord. I saws it with me own eyes. It was horrible.” She said with a shudder. Aral couldn't believe was he was hearing. They were assigning him guilt without even speaking to him. It was far too much to take, even for someone who had gone through as many hardships as Aral.

 “This is lies! Nothing but lies!” Aral shouted, forcing himself to his feet. No sooner was he standing on his own two legs than one of the soldiers kicked them out from under him, forcing him face first into the dirt.

 “Pick him up!” The king thundered. The soldiers did as they were ordered.

 “Please! You have the wrong man!” Aral shouted again, he turned to look at the old woman, tears streaming from his eyes. “Why are you doing this to me?” He demanded, she let out a low laugh, which started out in her frail high pitched voice only to shift to a more masculine laugh. One that Aral had heard before.

 As the laugh shifted the world around them froze and the old woman shifted. She grew and become more full in frame. It wasn't long till the whole world was at a stand still but for them two. Just Aral and Loki, standing where the woman once was. Aral was speechless.

 “Cat got your tongue, my young apprentice?” Loki asked, taking a few steps towards Aral, who try as he might, couldn't move anything but his head. His body was just as frozen as the rest of the world.

 “Why?” Aral asked at last, not knowing what else to say. Loki stopped a few feet from him, a sad smile on his lips.

 “This endless war bores me, almost as much as the power structure I find myself stuck in. The elder gods make no room for the next generation to take our rightful place at the top.” Loki said, almost as if he was giving a well rehearsed speech. “I found a way, a way to end it all and open a path to success. To power that should rightfully belong to me. But I couldn't do it alone. No, I needed help. I needed an apprentice. One with power. No wizard would do. Nor a warlock, least of which because they are oh so untrustworthy. I should know, I've made more than a few. No, I needed a sorcerer. One born with powers to rival the gods ourselves.” Loki said.

 Aral opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out. It seemed that he was only allowed to listen, not partake in the conversation. It was maddening. The man who had given Aral everything he had ever wanted, a purpose, hope, had betrayed him and taken away the only family he had left. He wanted to scream, to shout! He wanted, no, needed to know why.

 “A feat that has never been easy, but with the elder gods outlawing human magic it has been all but impossible. That was until I sensed the power coming from Infera. It was so powerful, so pure. I knew the source was just what I was looking for.”

 “I convinced the war gods to use your little kingdom as the sight of their great gathering, to give me a legitimate reason for coming here. Once I arrived it didn't take me long to find you.” Loki said, running his hand through Aral's hair in an affectionate way.

 “I have never seen such power in a mortal before. I was sure you were my goal. After all, sorcerers are so rare in this world, what would the odds be of this nowhere town have two?” Loki laughs to himself as he looks around the temple's yard. Locking his eyes on the king and young prince.

 “Alas, just as I was about to whisk you away, I met the prince. Not the crown prince or the young warrior, but the loser middle child. He had within him power unlike any I have ever seen. He was a creature,” he turned back to face Aral. “Far more enticing than I could have hoped for. But now you see, I had a problem.”

 “If my plan is to work, I need the strongest and as much as I like you, you are not the strongest. He is. And if he were anyone but a prince, I would be glad to have you both. For what could be better than one powerful sorcerer? Why, two of course!” Loki said.

 “But my dear, dear Aral. He is a prince. And a prince can't go missing without the whole kingdom being up in arms. That kind of attention would get even the gods attention, and that, that is attention I don't need. No, I need a reason for him to be gone. Death seems like a good enough reason.”

 “Here is something you might not know, my dear Aral, gods can smell power. It's a sense we have. You radiate it. Every god here can sense it, and will no problem believing you killed the two eldest princes. I even gave a witness and a reason. You wanted to strike out against them for the death of your parents.”

 “Of course you didn't kill either one of them. It was an accident. Or, at least that is what I lead Simon to believe. I had to help the accident along. After learning what happened to his little brother, it wasn't hard to come to a plan.”

 Loki walks back to where he was standing before the world froze, slowly turning back into the old lady once again. He/she turned to look at Aral, giving him a sad smile.

 “While we have been talking,” Loki said in the frail voice. “The world has moved on, you have been telling us all about how you did it and why. Confessing it all.” Loki looked down, Aral was sure he could see tears in the tricksters eyes. “I will miss you.”

 No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the world started moving again. Only everything had shifted. The king was standing before him, sword in hand, looking down at him with pure hatred in his eyes. Aral didn't even have a chance to scream before the sword came swinging down, ending the life of a young man who knew nothing but pain and suffering in his short life.

**Chapter Nineteen**

 Simon stared out the window of Loki's tower. He had been here for a little over a month and still spent every day wondering when the Infera army would come storming into the city in search of him.

 After all, there was no way that the king or new crown prince would let Finn's murderer go free. Loki had explained everything to him. After Finn finished everything that he was tasked to do at the temple he came back to the castle to find Simon, who had already left. One of the servants told him that Simon liked to spend his free time in the tower, so Finn took off at once to track down his wayward brother. Once there he started to go through Simon's stuff, causing an accidental explosion.

 Simon had killed Finn, just as he mutilated Toma. The guilt alone was enough to consume Simon's soul. To send him to a depression that he could never escape from, if it wasn't for Loki. Who went out of his way to help Simon deal with his grief. He trained him in ways to deal with his pain and gave it life. Expunge it in ways that Simon would never have thought possible.

 Stepping away from the window, Simon looked around his new bedroom. In the far corner was a tiny bed, but besides that, you would never be able to tell anyone lived here. The room was a giant laboratory, far larger than any he ever had back in the castle.

 Throughout the room were all of Simon's new inventions. He had built more in the past month than he had in his whole life. Every day he could feel himself grow stronger and stronger. Before he would have an idea and spend months trying to figure out how to create his idea and give it life. Now it took him hours.

 Sometimes the ideas would come from Loki. The trickster would challenge him with new ideas. It was exhilarating to say the least. This was the life that Simon always wanted, he was just sorry that it came at so high a cost.

 He took a seat at his work station and set to work on his newest project, one of Loki's ideas. A portal to an altered reality. An idea that Simon had never even thought possible until Loki showed him a vision of not one but millions and millions of such realities. But getting to these dimensions wasn't his task. Loki wanted Simon to create his own dimension. It was taunting and would take some time to accomplish, but Simon was eager for the challenge.

 After all, Simon had nothing but time.

The End