

THE WARRIOR'S GIFT

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As with other cultures, Africa is not without its share of mythological saviors. These gods and goddesses were once believed to be responsible, not only for the earth's survival, but for man's continued existence.

Despite the horrors that rained down with heated anger and little warning, these powerful entities remained feared and revered. Still, their actions remained both questioned and criticized. Speculation might suggest that even gods and goddesses sought the advice of others before moving forward with their decisions to delight or to destroy.

What of these advisors? Little is known of the Gods' Court or the priests and priestesses whose knowledge of much older galaxies surpassed even that of those they served. This magical race possessed an understanding second only to The Creator-the supreme force of the universe. The gods made their rulings by the council of these superior entities.

*The worlds of the elders do not lock all the doors,
they leave the right one open.
-Zambian Proverb*

~PROLOGUE~

The Origin Realm~ 232 B.C.

“When will they strike, Chikere?”

The High Priest Chikere massaged his jaw and considered the God King’s question. He didn’t bother to stand. Inside the Gods’ Court, all were equal.

Chikere sighed heavily, not bothering to hide his dismay from those he counseled. Besides, the time for reassurances had passed.

“I do not know, My King,” The High Priest confessed.

With that admission, the priest Ejiro, kicked a chair of blinding silver across the floor’s gleaming white wood. “Curse Solin for his betrayal!” he raged.

Chikere didn’t attempt to call down his colleague. Ejiro had only expressed what everyone else was thinking.

“We all know betrayal runs in his blood. He’s to blame for this, there can be no doubting that,” Ejiro’s tone was more guttural then as he stood glaring at the chair he’d abused. “Just as there can be no doubting that he’s Shrouding the thoughts and intentions of his new found friends to keep us blind and unprepared,” he went on.

“Calm yourself, Ejiro,” Osanyin, The God of Healing, urged the brooding priest. “Perhaps we’re all gathering too close to the edge too soon. Solin and the others betrayed us long ago. Why are we fixating on this, of all things now, when war is imminent?”

“Because of Jaiya,” the elegant voice of the High Priestess Ife, filtered the vast hall like a potent breeze. “It was Jaiya’s interest in the mortal realm, tracking its progress, its rate of growth and industry that caused her to suspect the resources could fall to critical levels.”

Ife looked from Osanyin to the other males present. She observed them nodding as though lost memories were only then resurging. She didn’t need to engage in mental conversation with her nearby priestesses to know they were sharing thoughts similar to her own. All were equal inside the Gods’ Court, but a woman still had to fight to be heard...and remembered.

"I believe that whatever happened to Jaiya was pre-arranged," Ife continued. "She and Solin were very close before his betrayal. He would've wanted to take one of us with him when he left- especially one as knowledgeable of The Essence and our ideas for its dispersal. Jaiya was that one."

"But he didn't know The Essence might be capable of bringing back his priests," Osanyin said.

"Not even Jaiya knew it could accomplish that!" Ejoro added. "No one who knew would tell him that and allow him to reawaken the abomination of that breed."

"But why go through all this to resurrect the Warrior Priests? The Malevolent have massive legions of their own-our Warriors have been embroiled in battle with them often enough," Osanyin remarked.

"Battles they've been losing," Chikere put in the reminder. "Their legions, no matter how massive, are no match against legions of pure-bred Benevolent Warriors."

"Are you saying Solin Domual has joined with The Malevolent to bring the Warrior Priests to their side? That would be an act of war. What possible reason could he have for wanting to put the Realm through another uprising?" Ejoro demanded.

"The Domual have always been power hungry- it's in their blood," the god Sango mused.

"More than power hunger rests in their blood. The Warrior Priests were put down for a reason," Chikere added.

"But these are moot points, are they not? The Essence can't be controlled," Osanyin said.

Chikere appeared unsettled. "No, but it can be harnessed and dispersed. If Domual finds a way to manipulate its dispersal..."

Ife glanced toward her accompanying priestesses then. "The fact remains that Jaiya knew enough to be very valuable to him. If she resisted...he'd have killed her, friend or foe."

"We may not know when Solin and his new friends will strike, but we know that they will."

The declaration had the priests and priestesses looking to the front of the great hall to the one who had spoken. The God King Olorun appeared as dismayed as his advisors in spite of his glamour. Vibrantly colored robes of gleaming silks draped his powerful frame. A stern and remarkable dark face looked out from beneath an ethereal headdress of velvet feather plumes from the revered Esa birds north of the Realm.

Olorun was a vision as were the gods and goddesses who joined him on a raised gold and platinum dais. Still, concern had effectively doused the breathtaking splendor of the deities.

"After the savagery of the Warrior Priests," Olorun continued, "I thought we'd overcome the height of our unrest. I pray one among this learned group has a plan that will allow us to combat this and fulfill The Creator's charge?"

There was no ready response to the king's query. That a god was feeling summoned to prayer, spoke to the direness of their situation. For some in the great hall, it was still difficult to believe there had been a time when such a 'situation' could ever have been imagined. Additionally, it was difficult to believe a time had existed when all gods and priests acted on one accord with no disagreement or distrust among them. There had been a time. That time was no more.

"Once again I speak Jaiya's name," Ife called out. "Whether we go to war with The Malevolent or not, there is a far more pressing matter we need to decide on. Now, more than ever, Jaiya's suggestion before she disappeared is of the utmost importance to be acted upon."

"The Realm Gates," Ife supplied, in no mood to observe the males scratching their heads to surge memory again. "None of us can argue against the strength of that suggestion," she added. "The gates are all that can contain The Essence and manage its dispersal."

All eyes followed Ife as she moved around the room. Her words stoked memory as well as a sense of duty-a commitment to be honored.

“The Malevolent have become too unpredictable,” Ife said. “Evidence of their dark ways is already coming to pass in the world beyond our realm. There is already proof of them taking position outside our walls. How much longer should we wait? The mortal plane is expanding and it will continue to do so. The Essence should be released now if it is expected to thrive there.”

“You’re suggesting we dispatch priests to the corners of the mortal world now at our most uncertain moment?” Orunmila, The God of Wisdom, looked to the High Priestess with a mix of bafflement and exasperation.

“Are you forgetting that the priests aren’t the only ones who bear the weight of council, are they, dear one?” The priestess Abena addressed Orunmila, who was also her lover.

“Precisely. After all, it’s the priestesses who are charged with this task.” Oya, Goddess of Storms, chimed in while Orunmila bristled.

“Venture to the mortal realm on your own? Out of the question.” The god Sango waved the bejeweled hand he could use to summon the forces of fire and lightning.

The priestess Hiwot was next to speak. “Have you become so indulged behind our stunning walls, Sango, that you’ve forgotten that only a Priestess has the power to unseal such gates in the first place?” She asked.

Ife smiled. “My King, you know it’s the only way,” she said to Olorun while the others brooded. Olorun’s features relaxed as resignation took hold. “I know and I agree. Quiet!” He ordered as murmurs flared from the others.

“Have you all forgotten how young our world is against the rest of the universe?” Olorun challenged his court. “Some are hundreds of millions of years old with magnificent civilizations within and beyond its immortal gates,” he said. “In some worlds, the gods even intermingle with the inhabitants of their planets. But these things did not occur overnight.”

Olorun inclined his head toward the priestess Hiwot. “You are correct. We have become too indulged behind our walls- content with only a distant interest in the world gifted to us by The Creator. How long before he takes it back if we continue to deny our tasks regarding its care?”

No one dared argue Olorun’s perspective. That perspective was, of course, what made them who they were. The Creator hadn’t exactly *charged* them with the tasks of the construction, care and opening of the gates. It was a task they would undertake of their own free will. Those in that vast room had committed to that task. Others...had not.

“So what does this all mean?”

The priests Olujimi and Dayo posed the question in unison while the rest of the court held its breath. All waited, rapt with worry and expectancy when Olorun rose from his towering throne to slowly descend porcelain steps that spanned at least fifty yards across.

“The Priestesses will be sent. But only after-” Olorun paused intentionally when members of his court began to once again voice their concerns. Under the God King’s glare, it didn’t take them long to silence.

“The Priestesses will only be granted travel after the way is secured for them,” Olorun continued, “the gates we need to contain the substance haven’t even been erected yet. Ogun, summon twelve of your most powerful generals. Have them brought to the court.”

The God of War had remained silent during the heated debate between his colleagues. He chose to remain so. With barely a tilt of his head, he pushed his massive frame from an even more massive chair of rich wood and took his leave.

“Once Ogun makes his selections, we’ll meet back here. You will be informed. Until then,” Olorun merely raised a hand to adjourn the gathering.

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“Ife.”

The High Priestess extended her hands in greeting. Babiye was another who had remained silent during the court meeting.

“Don’t worry yourself,” Ife read the concern easily in the woman’s dark and delicate features. “It’ll be quite the adventure to see what our mortal charges have done with their realm so far. Besides,” Ife let a trace of some coy element filter her eyes. “With our ‘security’, I’m sure we’ll be well cared for beyond the realm.”

“And if we don’t make it beyond the realm?”

“Bab-”

“You said it yourself. The Malevolent have become too unpredictable and we’ve already been grossly betrayed. How do we know that this plan to construct and open the gates hasn’t already been perceived? And now we’re to venture beyond our walls with things being at their most critical?”

Ife’s mouth tightened. “You’re beginning to sound like Sango.”

“I assure you that I don’t share Sango’s opinions.” Babiye gave a faint nod to her superior. “I believe we should release The Essence, but given that things are what they are, I believe additional safeguards are needed. Ones known to only a few.”

“Speak plainly, Bab,” Ife’s tension had eased. There was no harshness in her voice, rather a hint of anxious curiosity.

“I’m speaking of old magic. An incantation no longer utilized since women are now more... intrigued by the idea of taking a Warrior for a lover.”

An almost imperceptible sound lifted from Ife’s throat as she considered the talents of the fierce men she’d taken to her own bed. “How does this help our cause?” she asked.

“The Warriors are being sent ahead to begin the process of erecting the gates,” Babiye explained, “we’re to be sent once the process is complete, but if we are delayed, the Generals will need access to every bit of their considerable power in order to care for it until our arrival.”

Ife considered. “Charming their warrior’s cuffs will allow them to call on our power causing it to fuse in alongside theirs from afar, while enhancing their own strength,” she proposed.

Babiye nodded curtly. “The gates are our priority even beyond our own existence. We must leave a way for that task to be fulfilled by others if we cannot.”

“This may require more elements in addition to our Warriors,” Ife’s gaze was fixed as her mind worked. “Gather the others and meet in my chambers. I’ll need to have a quick talk with Chikere. We’ll need to find a way to see Ogun’s Twelve away from the rest of the court. If this is to work, we’ll need a little time alone with them.”

*The Present~ Outside Thurber, Texas*

It was like a drug, Keturah Dyson mused. Silently, she promised to indulge in no more than an additional five minutes of decadent relaxation.

Sensation surged, sweeping through her veins like a living thing. Keturah feared, believed... hoped she would add another five minutes and another five after that before she was forced to relinquish her prone position on the ground. She had a job to do after all. Louis had already threatened to send her an assistant if another week passed without her forwarding any results.

Confidence motivated the smile curving her mouth then. Her boss, Louis Moland, was a master of the empty threat. Keturah was not only his most seasoned employee, she was his most productive when she worked alone.

Still, Keturah was certain that many of Louis's threats to send backup, had a lot to do with the desolate location of her latest assignment. She was also certain that Louis was more than a little impatient for new info, given her excitement when she'd called to confirm the existence of the spot she'd uncovered almost 2 weeks prior.

That she had uncovered an area of free-standing energy, was nothing out of the ordinary. Keturah Dyson was a walking energy detector. Much like paranormal psychologists; who could sense charges of energy left behind by supernatural entities, Keturah's abilities fell along a very similar vein. It was safe to say that she could've made her living in that field had Louis Moland not snapped her up first.

Moland's primary objective however was feeding his ambition. He saw his former lover as a way to that goal. There were no hard feelings on that score. Keturah and Louis had sensed from almost the moment sex had happened, that a love match wasn't in the cards for them. They worked together well at any rate and it was in that partnership where they found their greatest fulfilment.

The search for dark matter or dark energy was intensifying. The unseen cosmic substance was believed to be responsible for keeping the galaxies from spinning apart. Scientists employed bigger and more expensive equipment in hopes of becoming the firsts to uncover what many believed to be a Nobel Prize worthy discovery. The question for Louis Moland was not how to obtain such a lofty honor, but how to mold Keturah's talents into a lucrative cash cow.

For years, Louis had worked on that very idea, brainstorming an array of possibilities. Brainstorming on Louis Moland's level required money and lots of it. A good thing, as the man commanded considerable wealth and privilege. He had the resources to facilitate his plans- all he needed was the perfect plan.

Keturah's abilities, while proven, had yet to reap the kind of energy source that Moland's dreams required. Her skills were impressive enough however, to send readings scattering across the dials in frenzied acknowledgement. What Moland hoped for, was a vast source in one central location-one that would be undisputed.

Keturah's call 10 days earlier, had given the impression that their search was nearing completion and she wanted to offset any thoughts to the contrary. If only what she'd found on that remote stretch of land hadn't been so unbelievably...soothing.

Like a gentle tug, the sensation had beckoned her and Keturah had not resisted its pull. Once it had ensnared her though, the real pull began-this one far beyond soothing. It was stimulating, almost erotic and vibrated deep like an expert massage. The day she'd discovered it, she'd remained in the spot for nearly 2 hours. Voices in the distance had prompted her departure and she'd called Louis from her car while violating several laws of the road as her excitement took hold.

By the time she'd finished telling Louis of her experience, he was as excited as she was. He'd urged her to get readings and forward them ASAP. No problem. It was why she was there after all. Only...she had no interest in completing her assignment once she'd returned.

She continued to visit, varying her dates and times. It didn't matter. The spot taunted her just the same. As for getting her readings, forget about it. Those soothing vibrations were too delicious to consider any other task aside from enjoyment.

That reality didn't surprise her. Given the sorry state of her personal life, it was no wonder that sensations that even hinted at anything erotic were a welcomed treat. Even then, there was more-more that summoned her like the most mind-numbing drug.

Keturah could feel the energy surge miles away. It was faint, with a more potent tug the further in she ventured. At first, she had simply rested her fingertips on the ground to absorb the sensation. Emboldened and craving greater contact, she then rested flat on the earth and all but swooned over the delight claiming her.

It was the power that had her addicted. But why there? What was so special about a stretch of unremarkable land in North Texas that it would feed desires she recognized as basic, carnal and nourishing? It enhanced the power that resided in her blood. It built as undeniably as the hum of energy that called to her.

Now, here at dusk, her lashes brushed her skin as they settled over almond shaped eyes of a translucent hazel shade.

"Five more minutes," she sighed.

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### *Manhattan, New York~*

"You'd spend less time traveling if you just moved out there and came to visit us here when you needed a break."

"If he did that, he'd never visit."

"Ah yeah...scratch that idea, Oz."

Osmium handed off a leather duffle to one of the two men near the bar area. He then went to join his partners who'd called to him from a far alcove in the quiet club.

"Tired of me already?" The fierce silver glint of Oz's gaze possessed equal amounts of curiosity and amusement.

"Why, hell no, Oz!" Borgin's voice was a verifiable roar. "What's a couple of thousand years between friends?" He mused.

Quiet laughter rolled between the three men over the dig. Oz reached across the table and helped himself to a swig of the whiskey his friends had already halfway demolished.

"If you're sad to see me go, you could always tag along. This was, after all, supposed to be a joint effort," Oz reminded the men.

“The ‘effort’ was completed almost two thousand years ago, Oz.”

Osmium looked to Tron who spoke without ever once taking his eyes from the ledger he studied. Oz couldn’t resist a grin. He and his friends had adopted scores of ‘new ways’ over their long years beyond the realm, but some things never changed. For them, pen and paper would always hold sway over digital recording methods.

“Aren’t you two the least bit curious about what’s going on out there?” Oz queried.

Borgin threaded a hand through a thick mass of chestnut brown waves that were almost the exact flawless shade of his skin. “We’ve heard the stories from your guys when they rotate in during their leaves. Unlike you, they look forward to time off.”

“And what about security?” Oz challenged.

“It’s secure,” Borgin’s tone was dry.

Tron finally set aside the ledger. “What exactly do you think we’re securing it against, Oz? Because whatever *it* is, *it’s* taking its sweet ass time getting here.”

“Yeah,” The challenge dialed back a notch in Oz’s tone. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Their friend’s slow agreement had Borgin and Tron exchanging looks. This gentle ribbing was the usual manner of things whenever Oz set off on one of his trips to confirm gate security. The back and forth jibing between the three generals of the War God’s army was usually enjoyed all the way around.

Just then however, Borgin and Tron shared the same silent opinion that even the best jokes wore thin given time.

“So when should we expect you back?” Tron asked.

“Same as usual,” Oz set down the whiskey bottle, “few weeks, tops.”

“Hey?” Tron called when Oz turned to leave. “Apologies,” he said, adding a nod besides. “You maintained your honor even when the rest of us threw up our hands long ago and said ‘to hell with it’.” It was true. Among them, Oz was the only one who’d vigilantly adhered to his responsibilities. Borgin and Tron had long ago stopped being ashamed of the fact that they had not.

“An apology isn’t required, T.”

Tron gave a playful scowl. “Is it just me or are you a touch more agreeable to our opinions today?”

“It’s not just you,” Borgin cocked a brow to Oz. “What’s up?”

Oz’s grin returned. “Even after all this time, I may not be able to push off my responsibilities, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t wondered what the point is in continuing them.” He shrugged. “Guess I’m not ready to accept what that means if I do.”

“It’s why we can’t be there, Oz,” Borgin shared a slow smile with Tron. “Living with that acceptance is hell, but being out there...still hoping that blasted mission has a purpose-”

“Hell multiplied.” Tron finished.

“General?”

The three turned at the sound of the First Lieutenant’s voice. The young man looked to Oz.

“The car is waiting, Sir,” he said. “You should be on your way if you plan to keep your schedule.”

“Thanks Yam,” Oz returned the lieutenant’s nod and then looked back to his friends and extended a hand for shaking.

Borgin and Tron stood to add warm embraces to the shake.

“At least take the jet back,” Tron insisted. “You make us feel like elitist pricks flying private while you take the humble route and go commercial.”

“Mmm,” Oz smirked. “And yet you favor being elitist pricks by *not* flying commercial.”

Tron shrugged. “What can I say?”

Laughter rumbled and the friends drew close for one last round of hugs.

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“You haven’t told them.”

Oz was on his way past the glass foyer that led to the wide brass outer doors. Yam’s words gave him pause. “Better to wait until I return.” *In case I lose my nerve...again*, he added the last silently. Besides Yam, no one knew he’d been planning to relieve his legion of its duty.

Borgin and Tron had withdrawn their forces centuries earlier. Should the day of battle ever arise, the men were obligated to return when their generals summoned them.

“Good luck, Sir,” Yam said, “Is there anything you need me to handle while you’re gone?”

Oz’s grin ignited the flare of his silver eyes. “Handle calling me Oz. It’s been over two thousand years, after all.” That, and the fact that he and the young lieutenant were only separated in age by a mere 9 years.

“I’ll do my best General, uh-Sir.”

Oz’s grin spread as he headed out to the car that waited beneath dreary New York skies.

It was a sad state of affairs when a woman had to resort to meeting her physical needs by relying on underground vibrations for stimulation.

Keturah couldn’t hold onto the shame she should’ve found in that fact. A girl had to do what a girl had to do. Since her discovery of the energy flare, she’d not only been drawn to its power but to its base capabilities as well.

Alas, she had a job to do. Besides, the sooner she got the job done, the sooner she’d get back to the more enjoyable aspects of her assignment. She’d already set up a makeshift work area. The small tricked-out seismograph of her own design was already acknowledging vibrations with fierce efficiency. Though her word on the potency of the activity was beyond reproach, documenting her findings was understandably necessary.

Necessary, yet she hesitated and not because of her desire to lie prone and be stimulated by underground vibrations. Well...not *entirely* because of that. Nevertheless, she did hesitate.

She had never questioned Louis’s motives for their work. She’d always known he’d had an interest in energy pockets. He’d told her himself that he hoped to win the race toward making free energy attainable for the world. That dream, naïve as it may have seemed, was enough for Keturah. Her boss’s moves and grooves toward achieving his goal had often struck her as a tad fanatical. Keturah was sure that despite Louis’s boasts that he was doing it for the good of humankind, adding to his impressive wealth was also a great motivator. She had accepted his way of doing things given that the stakes were so high.

Free and sustainable energy was but one of the earth’s dire needs. Keturah was willing to do whatever she could to help see that those needs were met. Or so she believed.

Since this latest find, she’d been dragging her feet and content to blame her hesitation on selfish desires. She could no longer do that.

This...discovery-whatever lay at the heart of it, was a powerful one. In the wrong hands, it could be catastrophic. As excited as she was to be part of a potentially life changing find, she wanted to be certain that she and her associates advanced with care. Not everyone in the energy business was in it for the good of all creatures great and small. Money and the inevitable power it wrought could make a find of such caliber as inspiring as it was dangerous.

Part of her- a large part-had considered allowing the area to remain undiscovered. It had occurred to her more than once since arriving at the spot, that the area was surprisingly desolate. It was strange,

given the potency of the surface vibrations. One didn't need her special...talents to detect such a space with energy surges that strong.

They hadn't been able to uncover any information on the owners-another strange fact given how vast the area was. Keturah couldn't believe there was any land still unclaimed in the country. As a result, Louis kept quiet about their attempts to confirm the land's ownership. Not surprising, he was impatient to have the property secured in his name. First, he wanted confirmation of its value.

"Which means get to work, Ket."

She went about inserting the sensor plugs into a miniature gauge near the seismograph. She was placing oval sensors to various spots on the ground, when a wolf whistle echoed against the wind.

"Well, well! Say Dowd, did you ever believe we'd be the fortunate ones given the task of finally making this acquaintance?"

"Fortunate." 'Dowd' parroted, dark eyes eerily menacing.

"We've been watching you for a while, beauty."

"And you are?" Keturah lifted her chin, but didn't bother rising to her feet. The men approaching would've dwarfed her even if she had a pair of six inch stilettos elevating her 5'10 inches. Besides, the more humble position gave her an advantage. It was one her new associates would never have anticipated-at least not coming from her.

"Who I am is one who belongs on this property. Unlike you."

"So you say."

"So it is beauty. On your feet."

"I like it down here."

The more talkative of the two hulking men, roared a laugh that seemed to display amusement as well as a call for reinforcements.

Keturah saw more men approach. She couldn't help it, she smiled.

"On your feet beauty," the talkative one insisted.

"On her back," the talkative one's partner 'Dowd' offered his monotone contribution to the conversation.

There was laughter among the others who had gathered.

"No can do, boys. That's *your* spot."

The men's rumbling responses muffled Keturah's. Following her words, her foot shot out and into an arc wide enough to clip the heel of her closest threat. The man hit the ground with a thud that sent dust flying and laughter ceasing among his associates.

The fallen agitator hit the ground with such force; blood began to slowly ooze from the split along his hairline. Bafflement didn't last long among the remaining men. The group converged on Keturah who welcomed the approach. She remained in her crouched position and took out another of the assailants with a fist to the man's knee. She heard the subtle crack as the cap shattered. The man buckled, howling until her fist connected with his jaw, immediately dislodging the bone and rendering him unconscious.

The big talker kept his distance, but pushed his remaining associate into the fray. Keturah dispatched him with a punch to the groin that put him on his back so she could straddle his chest and lay into his face with a barrage of blows that brutalized cartilage and muscle on the way to ushering him into unconsciousness.

She pushed squarely to her feet then, ready to take on the big talker. He was nowhere to be found and she smothered the slice of disappointment streaking through her. She soothed the emotion by looking at her handiwork and frowned while observing the men's dirty and bloodied attire. Soldiers? Strange uniforms, she noted and resumed her crouch to gain a better look.

“Well Louis, so much for the land being deserted,” she muttered and stood to head back to her equipment.

“Fuck,” she groaned as the pain registered at her nape seconds before the world went black.

Outside Ft. Worth, Texas~

They had been sent outside the realm for a job- a mission that never fully materialized. Now, at long last, he had lost interest in the wait. After centuries, Borgin and Tron still fiercely fed their appetites with wine and women. Oz however had longed for an end to their unintended exile.

He'd longed to return home and reap the reward they were promised. The end of their service. The War God Ogun had promised the twelve Generals chosen for the gate job an honorable discharge from the God King's Army. The only thing that could match an honorable discharge was an honorable death in battle.

His kind could only be killed by another immortal of the Origin Realm. While that left many methods of death up for grabs, for a legion soldier, a battle death was the highest honor.

Talk of the Epic Battle had been talk for so long; the unrealized event had become myth. The battle had become so much of a myth; it had even warranted its own Epic Poem.

*Land of Beauty. Land of Life.
Land of Danger. Land of Strife-*

"Seeing you will be good for morale, Oz."

An easy voice carried across the night air that whipped with heightened intensity. That intensity seemed magnified given the manner it surged through the Jeep's nonexistent doors and roof. Oz's Second Lieutenant, served as his ride from the airport and was a welcomed intrusion on his dark thoughts.

"Is it low?" Oz asked.

Elam's cocky grin would've been all but invisible were it not for his perfect and blindingly white teeth searing the darkness. "Morale is always good," he boasted. "Especially around shift change. I believe my fellow brothers in arms take delight as much in its swift arrival as they do in the knowledge of what their time off will bring."

Oz indulged in the contagious laughter that conversations with Elam always promised. "Aren't they already acquainted with every brothel in this and the three closest states?"

"When time off lasts for eleven months; there's time enough to indulge in pleasures that span the globe!"

Oz's robust laughter erupted again and Elam joined.

"Why haven't you been thoughtful enough to share some of your considerable laid-backness with your cousin?"

"Oz..." Elam's sigh was of the theatrical variety. "I would if only the kid knew what to do with it."

There was more laughter, that time at Yam's expense. It was all in fun. Yam was older than his cousin by a mere two months, and Elam loved him beyond measure.

"So you're saying my visit is nothing special since morale always soars above the clouds, eh?"

"That too, but not entirely."

"Guessing games aren't my favorites, E."

Elam gave a staying wave. "It's Walim."

Oz responded to the news with a tight smile that still managed to be humorous. "What's the resident psychic envisioning now?"

"An end to the status quo."

The response removed all traces of Oz's amusement.

"No one's implying that they're eager to step away from their duties, Oz," Elam quickly reassured his superior.

"So if I were to say that I'm here to relieve my men of their duty, you'd argue the decision and ask to remain?" Oz smiled when the Jeep made a quick dip off the road's shoulder. He could sense Elam shedding some of his 'laid-backness' for a more professional manner.

"At ease, Lieutenant," Oz urged. Elam obeyed the order with a nod. "Is that why you're here? Wal-"

"Walim's innocent, but Neptune won't appreciate that you and Yam are aware of this before he is."

Elam blinked, swallowed and flexed his fingers over the steering wheel to caution against any further weaving across the road. "General, why? Now, after all this time?"

"Because it's been 'all this time'. The other two armies were relieved of duties long ago. Time for me to grant the same freedom to my men-give you all the chance to enjoy what you can of a real life."

"Most of our men are enjoying *real life*, Sir."

Oz grinned. "It's called a vacation when you have to get back to your day job, E. I'm talking about doing what you dream for the rest of your days- not living to satisfy the whims of a place and beings long vanished."

Elam was quiet for a time. He could hear the soft lament in his General's voice. It was well known how loyal Oz was to their cause.

"Forgive me for pointing this out, Sir," Elam said once he felt enough time had passed. "Since the majority of your men dream of fucking for the rest of their days, I'd say their real life and vacation are one in the same."

Again, the boisterous roar of genuine laughter surged into the night air.

Neptune had never lost his suspicious nature. Of course that was a favored and much needed skill-set for a lieutenant general in command of 2000 men. Neptune would be forever grateful that he had chosen the right profession.

Still, he knew his suspicious ways were part of his DNA. There had been little to rile the suspicions of one such as he over the course of the last millennia. Things hadn't been completely quiet. After all, this world was not without its share of strife. War was frequent- a refreshing endeavor to keep the abilities sharp when a lengthy stretch of time off came his way.

Time off. He hadn't enjoyed an extended bout of that luxury in a very long time. Not since the other two legions had been withdrawn over seven centuries earlier. It was a solitary life, but solitude had its benefits. This had been especially true over the last 200 years. The world had evolved at a dizzying pace with books, art, music and film becoming some of his prized delights. What of women? Delicious to

be certain. Dangerous for all time. In spite of what the history books said of war, Neptune had been around long enough to know for certain. The seedlings of war sprouted when a man desired a woman who desired another man.

Yes, women were a dangerous, desirable breed capable of inciting the bloodiest encounters. The only thing bloodier than the wars of men, were the seedlings sprung when a woman desired a man...who desired another woman.

Despite the danger, Neptune couldn't resist capturing the female image with parchment and quill. Art had been his preference among the prized delights of his adopted realm. Regardless of its wars and depravities, the world beyond his native home was a beautiful one with a potential still unrealized.

Sadly, there wasn't much beauty in his present location to warrant immortal capture on one of his valued parchments. While the old ways were still the best, parchment wasn't as abundant as it used to be. A subject had to be a true vision to receive the honor of being recreated so pristinely.

True vision, indeed. Neptune thought of the image that had so far, warranted capture on not one, but five of his prized pages. His interest wasn't wholly in his current subject's beauty, which was substantial. Moreover, it was the mystery of *how* his subject had come to be in this particular locale that had him...well...suspicious.

"Sir!"

"At ease," Neptune urged in the cool deep of his richly accented voice. "Report," he didn't bother looking up to address the younger man's urgent call.

"He's here, Sir."

The words encouraged Neptune to make eye contact with the soldier who; despite the 'at ease' order, remained at attention-arms back, shoulders straight. Neptune didn't bother to call him on it. The men were understandably more self-aware given the arrival of their general who was only a mere 9 or 10 years older than many of them.

Regardless of his age, Osmium had crafted a well-known, well-feared name by the time the chosen legions had received the final, damning assignment.

The arrival of his general instilled a sense of pride in Neptune as well. Only 10 years Oz's senior, Neptune had delighted in watching the man who had once served as his lieutenant general. Oz had grown in strength, ability and intelligence. He was a born strategist and that capacity had earned him countless victories on the field both as a Lieutenant General and more once he stood in full command of his own army.

Neptune viewed a visit from Oz as a father might view one from his favorite son or brother given their slight age difference. Pushing back from the long, wide desk of gleaming oak, he stood from the massive chair he occupied.

"Where?" He asked.

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A grin from Osmium had been known to render a woman motionless if she was graced to have it directed her way. Part of the potency most likely rested in the fact that Oz's grins were rare occurrences. His features most often relayed a serious intent. When the intent was playful, the man's killer looks were downright irresistible. Oz's rarely seen playful persona blazed through when he saw Neptune arriving in the officer's tent. The two met for a hug in the middle of the vast, starkly alluring construction.

"I was hoping the men would tell me you were all tucked in for the night," Oz mused when they pulled back from each other.

Neptune's grin brought to life a riveting twinkle in the depths of his vivid green gaze. "You know me," he gave a lazy half shrug while running a hand across a silken crown of closely cropped gray.

"Yeah," Oz nodded slowly. "Yes, I do. Aren't you ready for a break?"

“Let’s see,” Neptune set phony confusion in place. “I seem to have forgotten the meaning of that word.”

“Would you like a reminder?”

Neptune took another step back and regarded Oz with his usual brand of suspicion. “What’s going on with you?” He asked.

Oz shook his head. “Nothing and that’s the problem or...the solution, depending on how you view it.”

“And how do *you* view it?”

“A solution.”

“Oz-”

“Come on, Nep. I’m sick of us wasting our time and I’m not even *here* all the time. Aren’t you ready to-”

“What? Walk away from this? Exactly how do you propose we do that?”

“You know we’ve devised ways to secure and monitor the gate without us having to be here all the time,” Oz’s expression was grim. “No one’s come within a hundred feet of this place in centuries. It’s not necessary for all of us to waste away at the behest of people we’ll never see again.”

“And you’re so sure of that?”

“Well let’s see...” Oz was the one wearing the look of phony confusion then. “It’s been over two thousand years; yeah...I’m pretty goddamn sure.”

Neptune turned away to walk the perimeter of the lamp lit space. His footfalls were muffled beneath the layers of handwoven rugs beneath his feet. “What do you propose the men do after they’re relieved of service?” His tone was quiet.

“How about live?” Oz’s tone was equally quiet. “It doesn’t matter how many months off they have, Nep. They still have to return to a job that has no imminent purpose.”

“Anything that needs to be secured and monitored to protect it from the world at large has an imminent purpose, Oz.” Neptune inclined his head in challenge. “You say you want these kids to live? For most of them, this mission is the closest they’ll ever get to realizing their purpose. We’re bred to fight, Oz. Days, centuries, millennium, eternity. Take that away from them, you damn them.”

Oz had begun to pace the tent as well. Neptune’s argument had him stopping to settle onto one of the long, overstuffed sofas furnishing the space. He valued Neptune’s advice above all others. The man had taught him everything he knew.

A cherished friend of the War God and once the realm’s winningest general, Neptune was a man free from the demands of his ego. Such an attribute had allowed him to choose the greater good over a well-earned life of leisure when Ogun had summoned his twelve. Oz had all but begged for Neptune’s continued council.

“None of that makes this any fairer to them, Nep,” Oz’s voice carried on a cavernous octave that filtered with an undeniable and uncharacteristic weariness. “You and I, we’ve paid our dues in battle. We had the chance to appease the hunger of the beast inside us. Not so for most of those kids out there. It’s bad enough to have that beast caged inside them, worse to have it waiting on a feast that’ll never come.”

“You won’t sell me on your argument, no matter how poetic you make it sound.”

“Gods, Nep!” Oz pushed from the sofa. “Borg’s and Tron’s forces were relieved long ago-”

“And where are they now?” Neptune’s deceptively cool allure at once blazed with an all too malicious fire.

“Some have crafted pretty good lives- rewarding careers.” Oz countered. “We’ve got several authors among us. A bookworm like you can even appreciate that.”

“Sure I can, but I’m more concerned with the majority of us. The ones fat and drunk off wine and women or joined up with the kind of filth we swore to march against. You should want better for your men.”

“That’s what I’m trying to give them, Nep.”

“Well this isn’t the way. Besides, as it happens, the tide may be turning.”

Oz had but a moment to puzzle over that comment, before he and Neptune were interrupted.

“Apologies, Generals,” Elam said.

“What is it, E?”

“Something General Osmium should see,” Elam looked from Neptune to Oz.

“Trouble?” Neptune queried.

“Perhaps, Sir,” Elam’s grin was alive with devilry. “Most likely, yes. The men would prefer to call it a gift.”

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The men were right, Oz thought. The jolting silver of his gaze was a little less intense having gone softer with an onset of captivation. It had rushed in quickly behind the surprise at finding what awaited him.

She was a provocative creation. He was sold on that as fact having only been able to study her profile. The other side of her face was cradled in the pillow. Much of her profile for that matter was shielded beneath her hair. The coarse ebony locks appeared as a dark cloud crowning her head and splaying across the stark white cases of the pillows.

He dared not touch her for fear that he’d wake her and he wasn’t ready for that yet. Playing the observer was a far more enjoyable task. Her features; what he could make of them, appeared delicate. He couldn’t see the rest of her in order to confirm that. She was hidden beneath quilts on the sturdy empire king bed inside the general’s quarters. Her skin was shades lighter than the licorice dark of his. Hers was an even almond tone that provided a flawless canvas for her features.

Delicate indeed, Oz acknowledged while a slow smirk lifted the corners of his wide, superbly sculpted mouth. Delicate, he mused, and yet she’d put three of his men in the infirmary. Above average fighting skills? He wondered. It was plausible, quite plausible. So why did he believe it was more than that?

She shifted and he eased away from where he hunched over her on the lushly dressed bed. The covers; comforters of shimmering champagne satin, tumbled from her shoulders and confirmed his assessment that her skin was a flawless canvas for her beauty. Deftly, he tugged the bed dressings lower to appreciate the subtle flex of muscle along her back, the dip of her spine, the hourglass curve at her waist...

This was a gift to be savored far away from the bleak desolation of his current location. He winced, cursed quietly at the sudden twinge that had him bowing his head to investigate the source of the discomfort along his arm.

He forgot about the discomfort when the woman’s body once more reclaimed his focus. Her upper arm sparkled-no... No, that-that wasn’t right-couldn’t be right, but...it was...

Her upper arm...sparkled, revealing a distinct pattern that encircled the limb like a...cuff? What the fuck?

She shifted again. Awake now, she rolled to her back, glaring up at him with outraged exquisite eyes. Oz indulged in but a moment to enjoy the full view of her face before his eyes made the reluctant drift back to her arm.

“Where the hell did you get that?” He demanded.