

# Chapter One

**B**RAIM KOTOGS—A tall, green-eyed, red-haired mage who had been told that he was a necromancer—was pretty sure that he had been resurrected wrong.

It was a feeling that had plagued him for the past couple of months or so, ever since he had returned to life in the graveyard of the Arcanium, the main campus of North Academy, the most prestigious magical school in the world, which was located in the Great Berg, well to the north of the Northern Isles. He had at first tried to ignore it, thinking it might just be a normal part of the resurrection process (although, being the first human to come to life, he had no idea what was 'normal' about coming back to life). But it seemed to follow him wherever he went and whatever he did, like his own shadow.

Yet Braim had said nothing of it to any his friends. He had not mentioned it to Darek Takren, a fellow mage who specialized in pagomancy, or ice magic, nor had he mentioned it to Aorja Kitano, yet another fellow mage, although that was probably because she had vanished a couple of months ago and no one knew where she was. He was glad that she wasn't around anymore, however, because the others had told him that Aorja was an escapee from the most secure prison in the world and very violent.

And he still said nothing of it as he walked through the pure white streets of the island city known as World's End, or the Throne of the Gods, along with his friends. Darek Takren was in the lead, wearing the pure white robes that all Xocionian Monks—that is, mages who served the god Xocion, God of Ice—did, in conversation with Jenur Takren, the current Magical Superior of North Academy and Darek's mother (or adopted mother, according to Darek).

Jenur was a middle-aged woman, though her dark, curly hair made her look a bit younger to Braim. According to Darek, Braim had once known Jenur prior to his first death thirty years ago, when the two of them had been younger. Or, rather, when *Jenur* had been younger, because Braim's body was still the exact same age as it had been when he had died years ago.

Although Braim had had his old body back for a few months now, he still looked down at it every now and then to make sure it looked normal. He was wearing the black-and-red robes that all North Academy students wore, not because he himself was a student of that school, but because it was the only clothes that they had on hand for him when he returned from the dead. When he had been a ghost, Braim had worked entirely without clothes, but Darek had reminded him that nudity was generally not tolerated among the living, so Braim had agreed to wear the robes in public.

Even so, Braim found them stifling. While the robes kept him quite warm up in the freezing north, World's End was located in the warm southern seas, and the sun was out today. He tugged at the collar of his robes, trying to let his neck breathe, but that did little to cool him off. It didn't help that the huge skyscrapers that towered around them reflected the sun's rays and increased the intensity of the heat, but neither Darek nor Jenur seemed to notice or care.

As for walking, it was a task that Braim had learned quickly, but still he found it harder to walk with a solid, flesh-and-blood body than with a ghostly one. As a ghost, he had been very light, able to jump great distances with ease. As a human, however, he was largely restricted by physics and his own weight. Magic wasn't of much use to him, as he no longer remembered what specific branch of magic

would allow him to jump like how he did as a ghost.

As a result, Braim was highly aware of how awkwardly he walked. He was made even more aware of it by noticing how naturally Darek and Jenur walked. The two of them certainly did not give much thought as to how they walked, which made Braim slightly jealous, despite the knowledge that he would learn how to walk more naturally with time.

Another thing that Braim found hard to deal with were the intense sensations that assaulted him from every direction. As they walked through the streets of World's End, Braim heard the odd clicking sounds that the native katabans—minor spirits who served the gods and who called World's End their home—made as they walked among themselves, smelled his own somewhat sweaty body and the delicious scents wafting from what appeared to be a katabans bakery as they passed it, and was aware of how tightly his shoes clung to his feet. He supposed he had gotten used to these strange sensations prior to his first death, but even after two months of living, Braim was sometimes still overwhelmed by the information that his body's senses fed his brain at all times.

*Stop thinking about yourself so much, Braim thought. You're a living being now, not a ghost. Every other living being on the planet doesn't think about walking or any of this other stuff. Go with the flow. Take it easy.*

Of course, whenever Braim did that, he became aware of all of the dozens of katabans watching him and his two friends as they made their way through the city's streets. The katabans *looked* human enough, except for their wild and crazy hair colors and styles that no human had. One katabans in particular had hair that looked like the remains of a hair explosion, sticking up in every direction and looking like a mess.

But even if the katabans had normal hair and hair colors, Braim could have told that they weren't human right off the bat. The way they stood, the way they watched him, Darek, and Jenur walk ... it wasn't the typical way some humans might view foreigners in their midst. No, these were the eyes of completely alien creatures watching intruders on their domain, intruders who they could do nothing about.

*What a silly thought, Braim thought. Us, intruders. Don't these katabans know that we were invited to World's End by the gods themselves?*

That was the truth. Only a week ago, a messenger from the gods—some horrific titanic creature, its head covered in smoke and its body constantly oozing the worst smelling slime that Braim had ever had the displeasure of smelling in his life—arrived at North Academy with an invitation to World's End for Darek Takren, Jenur Takren, and Braim Kotogs. Braim recalled it because he had been standing in the sports field, watching the students practice makhaimancy (a magical discipline that combined magic with swordplay), when the titanic messenger appeared out of nowhere and invited Braim, Jenur, and Darek to World's End.

At the time, Braim hadn't understood why the titan had come to him with the message first. Jenur was the Magical Superior. Surely she should have been the first to receive the invitation, shouldn't she have?

But now, since he and the others arrived on World's End about a day ago, Braim finally understood why. The three of them had been met by a katabans named Hashan, a chubby little man with long, purple hair that looked like snakes. Hashan had told them that he was going to be their guide, as none of

them knew their way around World's End very well, which seemed like a good thing at the time.

Until Hashan began grilling Braim on questions about the afterlife. The questions had been rude and invasive. In fact, they had been so annoying that Braim had pulled out his wand and attacked the katabans with a fire spell. Braim barely remembered it, mostly because his memory as a mortal was poor, especially whenever he was under any kind of stress.

All he remembered was Jenur stopping him before he could kill Hashan, and Hashan himself running away for his life. After that, the three humans received yet another message from the gods informing them that they would not be receiving another guide and that they could simply go straight to the Temple of the Gods the next day.

But Braim had read between the lines of that message. He knew that the gods were interested in him, even more so than they were in Jenur or Darek. And the reason why was as plain as the sun: Braim was the first ever human to return from the dead. He wasn't just a reanimated corpse, but a true blue, flesh-and-blood living human being. His heart beat, his lungs needed air, and he could tell when his shoes were too tight on his feet. It was the only thing about Braim that was special or unique, and the only thing that would make him stand out to the gods in general.

As for why Darek and Jenur had been invited, that was easy. Darek had helped save the whole world from the villainous Uron, an evil spirit that had used Braim's own body for a while to commit great evil, so the gods respected Darek a great deal, even considered him a hero to an extent. And Jenur was the Magical Superior of North Academy, a position which gave her a unique link to the gods and which was respected by the gods in general.

Despite that, however, none of them knew what the 'momentous event' mentioned in the original invite was supposed to be. Darek had spent the last week or so running down a list of possible events, ranging from a simple thank you ceremony from the gods for what they did to save the world from Uron all the way to an ascension ceremony in which one of them would rise to godhood as a reward for their efforts.

*The Powers know that we could use new gods, though,* Braim thought grimly as he followed Darek and Jenur around a corner. *Or at least I think they do, anyway.*

During the conflict with Uron, five gods had been killed by that monster, including Skimif, the God of Martir himself. Aside from Skimif, none of the other gods had been particularly prominent or important. The Northern and Southern Pantheons of Martir, however, had existed in a very fragile balance for a long time. With both the death of Skimif and the deaths of members of both Pantheons, Braim was surprised that another Godly War had not started yet.

*Not that I'm complaining, of course,* Braim thought. *Uron already did a number on the world. We don't need a divine conflict among the gods to make things even worse than they already are.*

Braim found his thoughts becoming too depressing for his tastes, so he said aloud, "Hey, Darek, how much longer 'til we get to the Temple? My feet are killing me."

"Not much longer now, I think," said Darek as they went up a small slope. He held a map of the city before him, which he had received yesterday from Hashan before the katabans ran off. "According to this map, we should be arriving at the center of the city, where the Temple is, any minute now."

"Good," said Braim. "Say, have either of you two ever been to the Temple of the Gods before? I've heard about it, but have never actually visited it."

“I have,” said Jenur, glancing over her shoulder at Braim, although he noticed that it wasn't with a smile on her face. “Years ago, before I even met you. I went on a voyage to the southern seas with King Malock, King of Carnag, on a trip to this very island, though that was before he became King.”

“You did?” said Braim. “What happened when you got here?”

Braim knew that he had asked the wrong question the moment those words left his mouth, because the stony silence from Jenur radiated from her like the heat from the sun above. What made Jenur's silence worse was that Braim had no idea what the matter was, as it seemed like an entirely innocuous question to him. And based on how puzzled Darek looked, Braim could not rely on him for help in this matter, either.

Finally, Jenur said, “Let's not talk about it. That was a lifetime ago, literally in your case. Let's instead focus on the reason why the gods invited us here. We have all had enough tragedy in the last several months. You don't need to be burdened with the tragedies of the past, too.”

Braim was none too sure about that, but he remembered enough about basic social etiquette not to push the point. Besides, he decided that it wasn't really relevant to their current situation.

“But I must say,” said Jenur, frowning as the slope evened out, “World's End seems very different from how I remember it. Of course, I am getting older and my memory isn't what it used to be, but I don't remember having to go up a slope before.”

“Well, World's End was attacked by Uron when he was here,” said Darek. “Remember? He led an entire army of half-gods to destroy the place. No doubt they've had to make a lot of repairs on it, which is probably why it looks so different.”

“That is true,” said Jenur. “But they must have had access to the original blueprints, because despite the differences, the city still seems familiar to me. It is both familiar and foreign, I guess, is how you'd put it.”

“Familiar and foreign,” Braim repeated. “Same here. Except it's just foreign to me, like everything else I've seen since coming back to life.”

“I wonder if we'll get to stay here any longer after the big announcement,” said Darek, excitement in his voice. He looked around at the large skyscrapers like they contained the deepest secrets of magic behind them. “I mean, think about it. This is the Throne of the Gods itself. We could learn so much about magic and the gods here and bring back so much knowledge with us to improve our teachings. We could advance our magical knowledge by a century at least.”

Braim rolled his eyes. While he liked Darek well enough, he thought that the guy was a bit of a dork sometimes, always going on about the minutiae of magic and the gods anytime anyone gave him a chance. Braim didn't have a lot of interest in that stuff, despite being a mage, but then, he had found that he had interest in very few things, ever since returning from the dead. Most of his days felt quite aimless, because he barely remembered anything about his past life and his past interests, not helped by the fact that North Academy had little records about him and his original life in general.

“I just want to go home as soon as it's finished,” said Braim. He leaned in closer to Darek and Jenur as they walked and whispered, “I don't think the katabans like me very much.”

“Katabans don't like humans in general,” said Jenur. “I wouldn't take it personally. In my younger years, I knew a katabans who I did not get along very well with, due to the fact that she tried to feed me to her goddess once.”

“You don't think that's what the gods have summoned *us* for, do you?” said Braim with a gulp. “Because I just got back from the dead and I really don't want to go back to the Spirit Lands any time soon.”

“I doubt it,” said Jenur. “After all, only the southern gods eat humans. If they tried to eat us, the northern gods would probably put a stop to them.”

“Yeah, but aren't we beyond the Dividing Line?” asked Braim. “Doesn't that mean the southern gods can eat us, if they want?”

“Don't worry about it,” said Jenur, patting him on the shoulder. “The southern gods are not very subtle, so it is unlikely that this is an elaborate trap set to kill us. It's not worth worrying about.”

“If you say so,” said Braim.

The party of three rounded one final street corner and ended up in a wide-open plaza that took Braim by surprise for a moment. It was probably the abrupt change from the narrow streets to the wide-open plaza that had taken him by surprise, especially when he saw the huge building in the center of the plaza.

It was a massive temple. Not as massive as the skyscrapers of ruby and emerald that towered around them, perhaps, but so large that it made the Arcanium of North Academy look like a rundown shack in comparison. A shallow moat, full of water so clear that it looked like shiny air reflecting the rays of the sun, surrounded it, with more water pouring from the channels along the sides of the building. A tiny bridge of gold crossed over the shallow moat to the marble and pearl gates, reflecting the rays of the sun from above.

Not only that, but the building had dozens of turrets arranged along the top, such as one that resembled a lightning bolt and another that resembled a raging fire. A massive glass dome rose from the midst of the turrets and towers, while the building itself radiated the energy of all of the gods of Martir. It was almost too much for Braim to handle.

“Wow,” said Darek. “It looks even more amazing than I thought it would. Does it look like how you remember it, Mom?”

Jenur nodded, her eyes fixed firmly on the beautiful Temple standing before them. “Yes. It looks almost exactly the same as I remember it.”

But Jenur didn't sound happy when she said that. There was an unmistakable tinge of sadness in her voice and she looked at the Temple the same way that a person might look at the grave of a deceased one. She even looked older, as if the mere presence of the Temple was enough to age her considerably.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” said Braim, causing Darek and Jenur to look at him in surprise. “That's where the gods said the big announcement is supposed to take place, right? Let's head on in, then. Don't want to be late.”

They crossed the plaza and the tiny bridge over to the massive gates of the Temple itself. Braim was at first confused about how they were supposed to open the large gates before the gates opened inwards on their own without warning, allowing the three of them to pass through without delay.

The lobby of the Temple was immense, almost as wide-open as the plaza was. Huge marble columns supported the ceiling, while thousands of stone statues of the gods—similar to the ones in the Magical Superior's study on World's End—stood on pedestals everywhere, although there was a clear red-carpeted path from the front door to the end of the lobby.

But as Braim, Darek, and Jenur entered, Braim immediately noticed that they were not alone. Standing about halfway between the front door and the doors at the end of the room were five people who were probably not katabans or gods, standing together in a group chatting among themselves idly.

Two of the five people he recognized immediately: Archmage Yorak, an aquarian mage with a whale-like head, who was also the headmistress of the Undersea Institute, the best magical school in the Undersea, and her pupil and student, Auratus, another aquarian mage whose head resembled a goldfish's head. He had met the two shortly after his revival, as they had been helping defend North Academy from Uron at the time, but he hadn't gotten to speak with either of them long, as they had left for the Undersea Institute shortly afterward.

As for the other three, Braim did not recognize them at all. One was an old, almost elderly, dark-skinned man with piercing gold eyes, leaning on a fancy black cane with the head of a golden hammer for its tip. Braim pegged the man's race as Carnagian based on his dark skin and light hair. Not just Carnagian, but Carnagian royalty, because he wore fancy red robes with the symbol of Grinf, the God of Justice, Fire, and Metal, on them, and a golden crown topped his head. His face was horribly disfigured, as if it had been badly burned at some point. Nonetheless, Braim imagined that the man had probably been extremely handsome in his youth and would probably still look good today if not for his face.

Standing next to the man, wearing bright yellow robes like the butter flowers Braim had seen a botamancy student summon once, was a much younger woman, probably in her early thirties at the oldest. Though her blonde hair was hardly alarming, Braim sensed that she was a kataban. He found it odd how she held the Carnagian man's hand, as if she was his wife.

And finally, standing next to the female katabans was a young girl, probably no older than eighteen, who looked like the old man and the young katabans put together. She had darker skin, like the old man, but also strikingly blonde hair like the female katabans. She wore dark red robes, just like the man, but she held herself more like the female katabans, with an air of haughtiness that made her seem unfriendly at first glance.

As a result of not recognizing those three, Braim held back, while Darek waved at Auratus and Yorak, saying, "Hi, guys! What are you doing here?"

Auratus noticed Darek and waved at him with a large smile on her own face, while Yorak cut off her conversation with the elderly Carnagian man and turned to face them. The man, the katabans, and the young girl looked at them as they approached as well, the man with a large smile on his face.

"Jenur Takren? Is that you?" said the man. Despite his age, his voice was strong and firm, but also friendly, which sounded odd coming out of his disfigured mouth. "How are you doing?"

Braim looked at Jenur, who was staring at the old man in surprise.

"Malock?" said Jenur, the disbelief etched in her voice as she, Darek, and Braim came to a stop before the other people. "What are *you* doing here? I didn't know you'd be here."

"I was invited by Lord Grinf himself," said the old man, who was apparently named Malock. "But I didn't expect to see you here, either. Were you also invited by the gods?"

"I was," said Jenur, nodding. "They sent me an invitation, but they did not say that they had invited anyone else."

Then Malock's eyes darted toward Braim and Darek. "And who are these two young men? I don't believe I have had the pleasure of meeting either of them before."

“Oh, excuse me,” said Jenur. She rested one hand on Braim's shoulder and another on Darek's. “This is Darek, my adopted son, who you met years ago during the Katabans War when he was much younger, if you don't remember. And this is Braim Kotogs, the man who just recently came back to life. Darek, Braim, I would like you two to meet King Tojas Malock, the King of Carnag.”

Darek, as friendly as ever, held out a hand and said, “Pleased to see you again, Your Majes—”

“Hold on a moment,” said King Malock, his eyes fixed on Braim as if he was the only thing that existed in the room at the moment. “Did you say Braim Kotogs? You mean *the* Braim Kotogs, the only man to ever return from the dead?”

Braim normally liked to be the center of attention, but for some reason he found Malock's gaze unnerving, perhaps because it was coming from such an ugly, distorted face. It didn't help that the female katabans and the young girl were staring at him as well. Especially the young girl, who was watching him as carefully as if she was trying to figure out how to fit him into her own little plans, whatever those may have been.

“Yes, that's him, all right,” said Darek. He still held out his hand. “Anyway, pleased to see you again, Your Majesty. It's been a long time since we last met, but I still remember you very well.”

“I'm sure you do,” said Malock, although Braim was under the impression that Malock was not paying much attention to Darek. “This is quite an honor, Braim. I did not expect to meet the man who came back from the dead. You are famous throughout the whole world, you know, from the highest king to the lowliest peasant, for having returned to life.”

“I am?” said Braim, scratching the back of his head. “But I've never even left North Academy until yesterday.”

“Word travels quickly along the sea winds,” said Malock. “Even into the ears of old men like me.”

The female katabans coughed loudly, causing Malock to start and look at her.

“Oh, yes, how rude of me,” said Malock. He gestured at the female katabans and the young girl. “Please meet my wife, Queen Hanarova, and my daughter, Raya Mana.”

Queen Hanarova smiled at Braim and Darek, though it reminded Braim of that same patronizing look that the katabans in the city earlier had given him and the others on their way to the Temple. “Hello, you two. It is quite an honor to meet the man who came back.”

Darek, as with Malock, held out a hand and said, “Pleased to meet you again, Queen Hanarova. I —”

“So you really *did* come back from the dead?” Hanarova asked, interrupting Darek as if he hadn't said a word. “Truly?”

“Yep,” said Braim, nodding, not sure what else to say. “I did. You can ask Darek. He was there when it happened.”

Darek puffed out his chest and said, “Yes, I was. I could tell you all about the Spirit Lands, if you'd like.”

“I don't care,” said Hanarova, without missing a beat. She then gestured for the young girl to approach. “Come and introduce yourself to the most famous man in the world now, Raya. Don't be rude or shy.”

Much to Braim's surprise, Raya curtsied him and said, “Hello, Mr. Kotogs. I am very pleased to meet you. You are far more handsome in real life than the descriptions of you suggested.”

“Really?” said Braim, perking up. “Well, no surprise there. Words can't describe this.” He gestured at his face as he said that.

“And quite humble, too,” said Raya.

It took Braim a second to realize that she was mocking him, but before he could respond, Queen Hanarova looked at Jenur and smiled, although it was hardly a friendly smile. “Hello, Jenur. I almost didn't notice you. You've grown quite a bit quieter with age, haven't you?”

“Hello, Hana,” said Jenur. She sounded polite, but she stood as straight as a board, like she was trying to keep herself from doing something she would regret. “As untactful as ever, I see.”

“Tact is a human construct,” said Hana. “If anything, I would suggest that *you* should show some tact to me, seeing as I am royalty.”

“And I'm the Magical Superior,” said Jenur, “which means I know all sorts of ways that I can make your day worse without even thinking about it.”

“Cute threat,” said Hana. She hugged Malock's arm. “If you tried anything, Tojas would simply order the Carnagian Army to tear your silly little school apart. Right, Tojas?”

Malock now looked rather uncomfortable with both Jenur and Hana looking at him. “Er, ladies, why don't we move the conversation to something a bit more ... lighthearted? I mean, it has been many years since we have all been together like this. Why not enjoy it, rather than fill it with petty insults?”

“Mal has a point,” Jenur said. “I really don't have any time to spend arguing with an old katabans, anyway.”

“*Old?*” Hana said indignantly. “I am only one hundred and fifty years old. That's young in katabans years.”

“Hold on,” said Braim, causing Jenur and Hana to look at him. “You really *are* a katabans?”

“Of course,” said Hana, tossing her hair back. “What else would I be?”

“And you're married to a human king,” said Braim, pointing at Malock.

“Indeed,” said Hana. “I am just going to assume that your resurrection must have messed with your ability to notice the obvious, so I won't hold your denseness against you.”

Braim didn't know what to say to that. So he pointed at Raya and said, “And this is your daughter? As in, your actual, blood daughter?”

“Yes,” said Hana.

“So that makes her half-human and half-katabans, then,” said Braim.

“Of course,” said Hana. She looked at her daughter affectionately. “And she's the best daughter in the world, best child in the world in fact. You would have to be a fool not to see her greatness.”

“I didn't even know it was possible for humans and katabans to, uh, mate like that,” said Braim.

“It is very much possible,” Malock assured him with a wink. “And no, Raya does not suffer from any deformities or terminal illnesses as a result of her upbringing. She used to be quite ill as a child, but I had only the best doctors and healers in the Northern Isles to take care of her, and she has been a healthy girl ever since.”

Braim scratched his chin and looked at Raya. She seemed too quiet for his tastes, but he supposed that she might just be shy. In any case, she certainly didn't look like she was sickly or suffering from any physical deformities that one might expect from an inter-species hybrid, so maybe it was not worth pushing the subject further.

Darek, on the other hand, said, “So can Raya access the ethereal and stuff? Can she live as long as a human or does she have the typical lifespan of a katabans? Furthermore—”

“Do shut up,” Hana said to Darek, glaring at him as if he was intentionally annoying her. “Our beautiful daughter is not some unusual specimen for you mages to study and dissect. If you want to talk to her later, you can do so, but right now your questions are obviously distressing her. See?”

Hana was right. Raya looked rather stressed, as if every one of Darek's questions had been as difficult as a complex mathematical formula. She had pulled her hood over her head, which seemed rather over the top to Braim, not to mention rude. He certainly didn't like how it hid her beautiful features, as Braim was of the opinion that a beautiful woman should never be afraid to show her beauty wherever she was.

*Then again, she is a princess, Braim thought. She can do pretty much whatever she wants, regardless of what we think.*

Darek looked a little annoyed at being told off by Hana, but he nodded and said, “All right,” before turning to face Auratus and Yorak, neither of whom had said a thing during this entire exchange.

“I'm glad to see you two again,” said Darek. “How's the Undersea Institute?”

“Wonderful,” Yorak said. Unlike other aquarians Braim had met, her voice lacked the distinct gurgled accent that all aquarians who learned Divina as a second language spoke with. “We have just recently built a new dorm to house the large number of new students we've received over the last couple of months. We named it the Kuroshio Dorm.”

Darek nodded solemnly, although Braim had no idea what that meant. He figured that Kuroshio was the name of someone important who must have died, but he decided to ask Darek that question later, after the announcement.

“We were just speaking with King Malock and his family while we were waiting to be let into the rest of the Temple,” said Yorak, gesturing at the Carnagian Royal Family. “But we certainly did not expect to see you three here.”

“Same here,” said Darek. “We thought we were the only ones invited to the Temple.”

“Clearly, you were wrong about that,” said Hana, brushing her hair out of her eyes, “although I don't understand why they invited you five, aside from Braim, of course.”

Darek—whose patience with Hana seemed to be running thinner and thinner—folded his arms across his chest and said, in a strained tone similar to Jenur's, “Well, it can't *possibly* be because I helped save the whole world and the gods themselves, now can it?”

Jenur put a hand on Darek's shoulder and shot him a warning look. Darek looked at her and said, “What?”

“Your mother is obviously trying to tell you not to speak that way to royalty,” said Hana. “That honestly surprises me, though, because Jenur hasn't exactly had a sterling record when it comes to showing respect to royalty herself.”

“Sorry, Hana, but you aren't exactly right about that,” said Jenur. “The truth is, I was simply trying to let Darek know that he shouldn't be wasting his time responding to such obvious bait.”

“Bait?” Hana repeated. She put one hand on her chest. “Me? I would never bait anyone. Baiting people is quite uncouth, especially for royalty such as myself. But if I *were* to 'bait' anyone, it would be you, Jenur, because you are so easy to bait that I don't even have to try.”

Jenur shot Mallock a look that clearly said, *What did you see in this woman?*

Mallock shrugged sheepishly and said nothing. Braim decided that Carnag was probably a very good place to live, if Mallock was wise enough not to get in between two fighting women. Perhaps he'd move there once he got fully acclimated to the physical world again. Braim had heard that Carnagian women were quite beautiful, after all, which seemed as good a reason to move there as any.

“Queen Hanarova, I do not approve of you speaking so unkindly to Jenur,” said Yorak. “While I don't know the history between you two, I do know that Jenur is the Magical Superior and is thus my peer. As a fellow mage, I do not like to see her treated in this way by anyone, even by royalty such as yourself.”

“Fine,” said Hana. “I was getting tired of talking to her, anyway. Does anyone know when the gods will call us into their meeting chamber?”

“Good question, Hanarova,” said a familiar deep voice above them, causing the entire group to look up toward the ceiling in response. “The answer to that question is, very soon.”

At first, Braim saw nothing on the ceiling, but then a large figure slowly materialized into view. The figure lacked legs. Instead, he had a wispy, ghost-like tail. He was also heavily armored, with fingers like chains and a human-like face that lacked a nose. His green eyes and crooked teeth only added to his creepy appearance, especially as he floated down toward the front of the group, blocking off their path to the doors at the end of the hall.

Though Braim had not interacted with this particular god often, he still recognized him, although it was Darek who said, “Hello, Ghostly God. I didn't expect to see you today.”

The Ghostly God, God of Ghosts and Mist, smiled. “And a good day to you, too, Darek. You seem as a rude and disrespectful as ever, which surprises me, seeing as you still owe me eight years of service.”

Braim looked at Darek in surprise. “Eight years of service?”

“Long story,” said Darek, without looking at Braim. He then put his hands on his hips, looking up at the deity floating before them. “What are you doing here, Ghostly God? I thought they were going to send a katabans to fetch us.”

“This is the Temple of the Gods,” the Ghostly God pointed out. “And seeing as I am a god, it should be obvious why I am here. It would be sort of like asking why the Magical Superior lives in North Academy.”

“You still didn't answer my other question,” Darek said.

“Yes, well, I decided to give you all a hero's welcome,” said the Ghostly God, in the least convincing voice Braim had ever heard anyone use. “Everyone here today, perhaps with the exception of Princess Raya, has contributed to saving the world at some point or another. I believe that heroism should never go unrewarded. Therefore, I wanted to greet you all myself.”

The Ghostly God was not nearly as good a liar as he thought himself to be. He didn't make any eye contact with any of them the whole time he spoke, but that hardly surprised Braim. The gods—especially southern gods such as the Ghostly God—tended to think they were too smart for mortals to notice when they were lying. It was one of their annoying tendencies, though you usually didn't point it out unless you wanted to get punished for speaking disrespectfully of the gods.

Anyway, Braim suspected that the Ghostly God had really arrived to greet them because of his in-

terest in Braim. When Braim had come back to life two months ago, the Ghostly God, who had been at North Academy at the time, had grilled Braim on what the afterlife was like. Braim had answered the god's questions to the best of his ability, but the Ghostly God still dropped by the school every now and then to interrogate him about it, though Braim had learned how to hide from the Ghostly God whenever he showed up unannounced like that so he wouldn't have to waste time answering more useless questions.

“So you are the Ghostly God, then,” said Malock, looking up at the god with curiosity. “Jenur told me about you in a letter she sent to me recently.”

“And you are King Malock,” said the Ghostly God, “the first mortal to reach World's End and live, if I am not mistaken.”

“My crew and I in my youth, yes,” said Malock, nodding, though he didn't sound happy about it. “But we never visited your island on our voyage.”

“That is because my island is not along the route that your crew took to reach World's End,” the Ghostly God said. Then he looked at Braim, despite Braim's best efforts to not draw the deity's attention to himself, and said, “Greetings, Braim. How have you been recently?”

“Fine,” said Braim, as tersely as he could. “Is it time for us to go in now?”

“Straight to the point, I see,” the Ghostly God said. “Anyway, yes, it is. In fact, I came out here in order to tell you all that you may now enter the main chamber. After all, that is what you are here for.”

The Ghostly God gestured toward the doors at the end of the room, which then swung open on their own. It was hard to see what lay beyond the doors, however, due to the fact that Braim stood on the opposite end of the lobby from them.

“Any special instructions or orders we should be aware of before we go inside?” said Darek.

“Simply step through the open doorway,” said the Ghostly God, waving one hand in the direction of the doors, “where you will shortly hear the most important announcement that any of you have heard in a long time.”

With that, the Ghostly God vanished. Braim looked around to see where the god had gone, but he was nowhere to be seen. Still, Braim felt like he was being watched by an unseen individual, as if the Ghostly God had simply turned invisible rather than vanish into thin air.

King Malock, on the other hand, didn't seem to notice or care. He simply began walking toward the doors, with Hana and Raya by his side, followed by Yorak and Auratus. Jenur and Darek then took after them, so Braim walked to join them as well. He was glad he was at the back of the group. He had a feeling that the other gods would be interested in him as well, and right now he didn't want to be the center of attention of the gods.

When they all stepped through the doors, Braim looked up at their surroundings to see what the chamber they had stepped into looked like.

The Throne Room of the Gods was a massive chamber, much bigger than any room that Braim had ever been in (not that that was saying much, considering how little he remembered of his past life). The room was as wide-open as a field, with a sandy floor and a huge crystal glass dome above, the same dome that Braim had noticed earlier. The dome was so clear that it was like standing outside, and if Braim hadn't know any better, he would have said that there was no dome at all, that the chamber was just open to the blue skies above.

All around the perimeter of the room stood hundreds if not thousands of thrones at varying heights. Upon each throne sat a different god or goddess, all of them talking to each other, the combined volume of their voices almost deafening. As far as Braim could tell, every god in the Northern and Southern Pantheons was present, which was impressive, because it was rare for them all to be in one place like this.

For example, Braim saw the Ghostly God taking a seat next to Ranama, the God of Language, who was one of the other gods that Braim had met shortly after his resurrection. Ranama was recognizable due to his tentacle beard, his glasses that showed two intelligent blue eyes behind them, and the book hanging off his neck. He was currently reading the book, so absorbed in it that he barely paid any attention to the argument between two gods that Braim didn't recognize occurring next to him.

Seeing so many gods and goddesses in one place was an exhilarating experience, especially as a mage, because Braim could feel their power even more so than most non-mages. Yet there was also a deep sense of worry and terror, as if all of the deities gathered here today were trying to avoid focusing on some uncomfortable event that just happened recently.

In fact, Braim noticed how all of the gods and goddesses were pointedly avoiding looking at the massive throne on the opposite end of the Throne Room from him and his friends. While it wasn't the only empty throne in the room (Braim spotted one near Nimiko, the God of Light), it was the largest and most obvious of them.

Braim understood why they were looking away from it, of course. That had to be the throne of Skimif, the previous God of Martir, who had died during Uron's attempt to destroy Martir. The other deities were probably avoiding looking at it because it reminded them of Skimif, whose death had affected everyone on Martir in some way or another.

Then Braim noticed Malock leaning on his cane and staring at the empty throne. It was like Malock was looking at the coffin of a dead friend, which made Braim wonder if the King had once known Skimif prior to his death.

As for the others, they were reacting to the presence of so many gods in one place in different ways. Both Jenur and Hana looked at ease, probably because they had been here before, while Darek, Auratus, Yorak, and Raya were looking around like they could not believe what they were seeing. Darek in particular looked excited about seeing so many gods in one place, while Raya seemed rather put off by it.

It was then that the Ghostly God reappeared next to them, quite without warning, and said, "Oh, yes. I almost forgot. You mortals should be up on the balcony, not down here. Silly me."

The Ghostly God snapped his fingers. A second later, Braim and the others no longer stood on the sandy floor of the Throne Room. Instead, they stood on a balcony well above the thrones of the gods, which gave them a bird's eye view of the entire chamber. The sudden teleportation made Braim feel a little woozy, but he recovered quickly enough and ran over to the railing to look down.

"Wow," said Braim. "We're up high."

He looked over his shoulder at the others. Most of them seemed to handle the teleportation fairly well, except for Darek, whose face was vaguely green and whose hands were on his stomach. Braim recalled that Darek didn't react to heights very well, though Darek was already waving his wand over his stomach, probably applying a healing spell to keep himself from getting too sick.

The others joined Braim at the balcony's railing, looking down at the gods below. Braim noticed that some of the gods were looking up at them. Or rather, they were looking up at *him*. He saw one goddess—who resembled a little girl with mismatched clothes—watching him with curious eyes, while another one, a woman made of water, was also looking up at him, although she seemed less curious and more annoyed at the presence of so many mortals in the Throne Room of the Gods.

Then Princess Raya leaned against the railing to Braim's right, saying, “Are they going to make the announcement soon? I'm getting *so* bored.”

“Don't worry, Raya, I am certain it will be soon,” said Malock. “While the gods can sometimes be very slow, I was given the impression that this was going to be quick and to the point.”

“All right, Father,” said Raya, though she didn't sound convinced. “But how much longer, do you think, will we have to wait?”

Malock opened his mouth to say something, but then Jenur—who had been watching the gods below—suddenly pointed at Skimif's empty throne. “What's that?”

Braim looked down at the empty throne. A single ball of light glowed over the throne's seat. In fact, it was growing bright enough to attract the attention of every deity in the room. All conversation died out as the light grew brighter and brighter, before suddenly dimming and then vanishing out right, giving Braim a clear view of the throne, which was no longer empty.

Two beings stood on the throne now. One of them was a skeleton wearing auburn robes and carrying a wand of crystal and gold, with a magic stone wrapped around his upper right forearm. Braim recognized the skeleton as the Mysterious One, a powerful entity from the Spirit Lands who had pretended to be the God of Mystery and Magic for many years, but had since returned to the Spirit Lands in order to lead it. Even though it had only been two months since Braim had last seen the Mysterious One, it felt like it had been much longer.

As for the second being, she was a woman who wore thick, severe-looking glasses and carried a thick tome against her chest, but Braim couldn't read the tome's title because it wasn't facing him. She wore a shapeless silver robe and her hair was tied in a bun. She could have been pretty if she didn't look so judgmental.

“Father, who is that?” said Raya, pointing at the woman standing next to the Mysterious One, who was now eying the gods with a rather judgmental glare. “Another goddess? I don't remember Teacher telling me about that one.”

Malock leaned forward over the railing, though not too far. He squinted his old eyes, then shrugged. “I do not know. I have never seen her before. Hana, do you know her?”

“No,” said Hana, shaking her head. “But I don't like the look of her one bit.”

A cursory glance of the other four told Braim that none of the others knew the woman, either. That made Braim wonder if she was even from Martir at all.

Darek pointed at the robed skeleton. “Hey, I think that's the Mysterious One. Was his mission to find the Powers successful after all?”

Braim wasn't sure. According to Darek, the Mysterious One had promised to contact the Powers—that mysterious group of entities that had created all of Martir—to get replacement gods for the deities slain by Uron. That had been two months ago, but Braim had thought that the Mysterious One had given up searching for the Powers well before then, seeing as they had not heard from the Mysterious

One since the day he made that promise to them.

“Perhaps he found them after all,” said Jenur. She sighed in relief. “Thank the Powers.”

“But if that's the case, then why did he bring that one woman with him?” said Yorak. “Is she the new Goddess of Martir? But what about the other four deities we lost?”

“Shh,” said Hana, holding one finger up to her lips. “Listen. The Mysterious One is talking.”

Hana was right. The Mysterious One was talking. In fact, he sounded like he was standing right next to Braim, even though the Mysterious One was all the way below him on the other side of the room. The Mysterious One was probably using magic to amplify his voice, but whether he was or wasn't, Braim listened intently.

“Welcome, gods, mortals, and katabans,” said the Mysterious One, waving at everyone. “I am pleased to see all of you today. I was worried that I might not return in time to help, but it seems that Martir is still functioning even with some of its gods dead. That is good, but Martir still needs both the Northern and Southern Pantheon complete if it is to survive and function as the Powers intended.”

Braim wondered if that was part of the reason he felt so off. One of the gods that had died by Uron's hands was a deity known as the Human God, the God of Humans. Braim had not noticed any negative effects toward humans as a result of the Human God's death, but he supposed that the creeping depression that struck him at random might have been partly a result of that god's death (even though he himself had been dead when the Human God died).

“It took me sometime, but I finally succeeded in tracking down the Powers,” said the Mysterious One. He lay one bony hand on the woman's shoulder. “And the Powers agreed to give Martir new gods to replace the ones killed by Uron. My mission, I am happy to say, was a success.”

Darek shared a fist bump with Auratus, while Jenur, Yorak, Malock, and Hana sighed with relief. Raya, meanwhile, yawned, as if it the Mysterious One had simply announced today's weather. Braim didn't understand that at all, seeing as this was easily the most important piece of news that Braim and everyone else had heard in years.

“I spoke with the Powers and explained to them the situation,” said the Mysterious One. He then patted the woman standing next to him on the shoulder. “And this was their solution.”

“What?” rang out the harsh voice of one of the gods, the source of which Braim quickly located: A short, green-skinned man with vines for hair and red eyes. “An uptight woman with bad eyesight? How, pray tell, O Mysterious One, is she going to help us? Is she going to scold us for not being well-behaved, maybe threaten to give us a time-out if we don't listen to her like children?”

That lone god's harsh words caused several of the other gods to snicker. Raya actually smirked at the god's words, while Malock glared at that god as if he could cause him to spontaneously erupt into fire by sheer force of will alone. While Braim agreed that the joke was rather tasteless, he thought that Malock had to have some sort of grudge against him, based on how harshly he glared at the god.

The Mysterious One, to his credit, didn't look disturbed at all by the god's joke. He opened his mouth to speak, but then the glasses-wearing woman held up a hand. Much to Braim's surprise, the Mysterious One closed his mouth and gestured for her to speak instead.

The woman adjusted her glasses and then, focusing on the god, said, “You are the Loner God, the God of Solitude, the Jungle, and Animals, correct?”

“Yep,” said the deity, who still chuckled at his own joke every now and then. “That's me, though I

don't know how you found out my name, seeing as I haven't even introduced myself yet.”

“No need,” said the woman. “The Powers gave me complete knowledge of the gods of Martir when they created me. I know the names, domains, and abilities of each and every deity in this room. I also know of the Godly War that divided the gods between the Northern and Southern Pantheons eons ago, including the Treaty that the Powers wrote up to govern relations between the two Pantheons.”

“Yeah, yeah, so what?” said the Loner God with a sneer. “That's common knowledge by now. Are you just going to keep stating the obvious or is there a point buried somewhere in your blather?”

“I was simply going to say that the Powers had neglected to mention to me how rude you gods can be,” said the woman. “Your attitudes and jokes are not very godly, if you ask me.”

“We gods are the ones who define what is 'godly' and what isn't,” said the Loner God, jerking a thumb at his bare chest. “I don't think you're even a god, anyway, so where do *you* get off telling *us* what is 'godly' and what isn't?”

“It is true that I am not a god or goddess of any sort,” the woman said. “But that doesn't mean I can't judge for myself what kind of behaviors should be expected from the deities that rule this world. Gods should be held to much higher standards than mortals ... and I am sad to say that all of you gods must have been held to very low standards for a long time now, if this attitude of yours is any indication of your general behavior.”

To say that all of the gods, northern and southern alike, appeared offended by her words was an understatement. Half of the gods looked ready to jump out of their thrones and smite her for her blatant disrespect, while the other half muttered among themselves about how disrespectful this woman was. But none tried to attack her, probably because the Mysterious One—who was stronger than any of the other gods in the room—stood next to her.

The woman did not seem to notice the gods' reaction to her words, because she continued to speak like the gods had not reacted at all. “But that is all the more reason for me to raise the low standards to the level at which they need to be. By doing so, I can perhaps make it so that the gods of Martir earn the respect that they claim to deserve.”

“Is that the Powers' answer to the deaths of our brothers and sisters?” said the Loner God. “Just raise the standards and that will somehow restore balance among the gods?”

“No,” said the woman, shaking her head. She patted the book she held against her chest. “This is what will help us.”

“A book?” said the Loner God. “That's even worse.”

“It isn't just any book,” said the woman. “It is a book written by the Powers themselves. It is the key to bringing new gods into existence in Martir.”

“What does the book say?” said the Loner God. “And, forgive me for my 'rudeness,' but you haven't even given us your name yet, woman.”

“My name is Alira,” said the woman. She then raised the book above her head, though it was still too far for Braim to read its title. “And this book is the Rulebook for the Tournament of the Gods.”