

# Chapter One

**T**HERE WAS THAT darkness again, the darkness that had followed Braim Kotogs, a red-haired, former mage and current participant in the Tournament of the Gods, ever since he had returned to life not long ago. The despairing darkness that he had tried to ignore, that he had successfully ignored for a while, but which had suddenly returned full force a week ago.

Braim rubbed the back of his head, where he felt the darkness, but that did not make it go away. Of course getting rid of it would not be that simple. It never was. He wasn't exactly sure what had gotten rid of it before, but perhaps it had never really been gone at all and he had only been granted a brief reprieve from the darkness for reasons unknown to him.

Braim Kotogs currently stood in the streets of World's End, an island city also known as the Throne of the Gods, which was located on the very edge of Martir. All around him, the busy minor spirits who were the primary inhabitants of the island—known properly as 'katabans'—walked and talked among each other. Some glanced at the strange human being who stood on the sidewalk, but most ignored him, because katabans in general ignored humans unless necessary.

That was okay by Braim. While he was an adventurous man who loved excitement, he didn't like being the center of attention, especially the center of attention of the katabans. Most katabans tended to treat Braim with respect due to his status as a godling, but he still found their ways strange and he was all right with having only the most minimal of contact with them.

Even so, Braim couldn't help but stop in the street when he felt the darkness clawing at the back of his head. It was like a very bad itch, except worse because there was no real way to get rid of it. He remembered what Diog, the God of the Grave, had once told him, that the darkness was a sign that Braim was an unnatural being who should not exist.

*That guy was crazy*, Braim thought, shaking his head as he stepped out of the way of a katabans couple coming down the street in the direction he was going. *Just not sure if he is crazier than the Ghostly God or not.*

“Braim!” said a familiar voice behind him, causing Braim to look over his shoulder to see who it was. “Glad to see you!”

It was Malya, a short, middle-aged woman who carried two swords sheathed at her waist. She seemed to be in high spirits today, because she was walking down the street toward him at an unusually fast pace, as if she had very important news to share with him. She was even smiling, which made her look nice and also made Braim wonder just how beautiful she might have been in her younger years.

“Hey, Malya,” said Braim, turning to face her, though he tried not to wince when he felt the pain in his head from the darkness. “How'd you sleep last night?”

“Wonderfully,” said Malya as she stopped in front of Braim. She looked up at the clear sky and sighed. “Doesn't this weather just look great? It reminds me of Friana, except even better. That makes sense, of course, because this island is the home of the gods and all.”

Braim looked up at the snatches of sky visible between the tops of the massive buildings that made up the city. It was indeed very blue, without any clouds in sight. The sun was shining, but to Braim

there was something about the sun that seemed a little darker than usual. He even thought he saw something dark slither across it, though he dismissed it as his eyes playing tricks on him.

Looking down at Malya, he said, "Yeah, it is. But what are you doing here? I thought you were already at the Stadium, what with you being in the next sub-bracket challenge and all."

"I almost overslept," Malya admitted. She looked quite sheepish, playing with the curls of her hair as she said that. "I was training so hard last night for today's sub-bracket challenge that when I went back to my apartment and laid down on my bed, I immediately fell to sleep. And I probably would have slept through the whole day if the owner of the building hadn't woken me up to let me know that breakfast was ready."

Braim had to smile at that. "And then Alira would have been pissed. As usual."

"Oh, I don't want to anger her," said Malya with a shudder. "She can be very bad when she gets angry. I'm just glad that I've never gotten on her bad side. I just remember how angry she got toward Carmaz last week."

Braim's smile vanished the instant Malya mentioned Carmaz's name. Instead, it was replaced with a scowl, one Braim didn't really intend to show, but it came out anyway and he didn't bother to hide it. Just the memory of that traitor was enough to make Braim angrier than he ever had been in his life.

Malya, to her credit, seemed to notice, because she said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Braim. I almost forgot about how you feel about Carmaz. I'm just so used to talking about him like he's a friend, but then I remember that he's no longer in the Tournament, which I still find rather sad. He was a good man, or at least I thought he was, anyway."

Braim forced himself to stop scowling and instead put on a somewhat grudging smile, which was the best he could come up with at the moment. "It's all right. I understand. We all thought Carmaz was a friend. I mean, I did, for sure, but I guess that just goes to show that you can't trust everyone, huh?"

"It sure does," said Malya.

"Anyway," said Braim, glancing at the sky again, "why don't we head to the Stadium now? We're going to be late unless we hurry on quick."

"Oh, of course," said Malya, nodding. "Lead the way, Braim."

Braim nodded and soon the two were walking down the street again, though they both walked a bit more quickly than normal in order to ensure that they would make it to the Stadium on time.

As they walked, Braim could not help but think about Carmaz, despite doing his best to avoid thinking about his former friend since he was sent back to his home island a week ago. Braim had always been told that Ruwans were an untrustworthy bunch, but he had never actually believed that until Carmaz went and betrayed him.

*He helped the Ghostly God kidnap and torture me, Braim thought. No way am I ever going to forgive that. Not unless I completely lose my mind, anyway.*

But from what Braim could tell, most of the other godlings thought of Carmaz's betrayal the way Malya did. They were mostly shocked and unable to understand why he had done it. After all, Carmaz had had a reputation as a kind, heroic, and humble figure, one you could always trust in a tight situation. Braim had especially grown to trust Carmaz after Carmaz saved Alira and several others—including Malya—from the Void, which was not a mean feat by any stretch of the imagination.

Now, however, Braim wanted nothing to do with Carmaz. The last he'd seen of the guy, Carmaz had

been escorted away by a couple of Soldiers of the Gods, who had been given orders to return him to Ruwa. And to Braim's knowledge, that was exactly where Carmaz had been taken, was exactly where Carmaz *should* be, given what he did.

*Though if you ask me, he got off a little too easily for all of the crap he put me through,* Braim thought. He tried not to scowl because he didn't want to make Malya feel uncomfortable. *Grinf should have punished him. I mean, that's a pretty blatant injustice right there if you ask me, helping a crazy god kidnap me for his own insane schemes.*

What made Carmaz's betrayal even worse was how it had resulted in Braim losing his magical powers. Braim had assumed that his powers would return to him at some point (despite having been told otherwise by the Ghostly God), but it had been a full week since he had lost his powers and he was still no closer to regaining them than when he had lost them. Every now and then he'd grab his wand and try to cast a spell, only for nothing to happen.

It was so bad that Braim didn't even carry his wand anymore. It was currently back at his room in the inn he was staying at, locked safely within one of the drawers. He felt awkward without it, even though it would have been useless to carry at this point.

Braim had hoped that some of the gods might try to help him regain his magical powers, but so far not a single one of the gods who called World's End their home had approached him on the subject. He wondered why that was until it occurred to him that the gods were doing their best to stay out of the Tournament and that they didn't want to cross Alira, who would most likely get onto them if she thought that they were causing trouble. Or maybe the gods just thought that Braim could handle the Tournament on his own without magic.

Of course, Braim recalled the Ghostly God telling him that not even the gods could grant magical abilities back to mortals. Only the entity known as the Mysterious One—who didn't even exist on the mortal plane—could do that, and right now Braim had no way of contacting the Mysterious One at all. He had hoped that the Mysterious One would contact him, seeing as the Mysterious One had worked with Braim's old master the Arbiter in the past, but Braim had seen no sign of the Mysterious One recently. Braim supposed that the Mysterious One was likely still in the Spirit Lands overseeing things there, but that didn't make Braim feel any better about it.

*Can't he just come by for a quick minute and give me my powers back?* Braim thought, kicking aside a rock on the street as he and Malya walked past a merchant who was hawking some kind of fancy silverware that he didn't pay any attention to. *Would it really kill him to do that? If he's an Almighty One, surely he should be able to do that much, at least.*

Thinking about the loss of his magical powers also made Braim think about the Ghostly God, who was at least as responsible as Carmaz for Braim's current predicament. The Ghostly God might be even more responsible, considering it had been he who had come up with the plan to kidnap Braim in the first place.

Last Braim had heard, the Ghostly God had been banished from World's End by Alira for the duration of the Tournament. Alira obviously didn't want any of the gods causing any more trouble in the Tournament, which Braim appreciated, even though he was sure that the Ghostly God would come up with some way to get around his banishment. The deity still hadn't learned all of Braim's secrets, after all, so Braim figured that it was only a matter of time before the Ghostly God tried to kidnap him again.

*Well, unless I become the God of Martir, that is,* Braim thought. A genuine smile appeared on his face, though it was a crueler one than normal. *Then I could dissect him. Or at least threaten to do it to him if he doesn't leave me alone.*

That was really the only reason Braim was even bothering to participate in the Tournament at this point. He now understood just how much danger his life was in and how powerless he was to protect himself from others who would harm him. If he won the Tournament and became the God of Martir, then no one would ever be able to harm him again. Prior to the kidnapping, he had only participated in the Tournament because Alira had told him to, but now he was eager to take on whatever challenges showed themselves and win.

And he was willing to do whatever it took to win. This new determination to win actually surprised Braim a bit, but he found that he enjoyed it quite a bit.

“Have you visited Raya recently?” asked Malya, her question snapping Braim out of his thoughts as the two of them turned down a street.

Braim looked at Malya suddenly. “What? Oh, I haven't. Have you?”

“Every day,” said Malya, nodding. “I know that the doctor working on her said that she's going to be fine and that her hand and arm are going to heal, but she just looked so awful when Keeper brought her out of the basement of Anwan's shop. I thought for sure that she would die.”

“So she's doing well, then?” said Braim.

“Better than she was a week ago,” said Malya. “I personally think that she still looks a little pale, but she's got her attitude back and is eating again. The only problem is her hand.”

“The one the Void cut off?” Braim asked as he and Malya stopped briefly to allow two burly katabans hauling a cart between them to pass.

“The new one she got,” said Malya as they resumed walking. “Have you seen it?”

“No,” said Braim, shaking his head. “What's it made out of?”

“Some kind of magical substance that I don't know the name of,” said Malya as they resumed walking. “The doctor told me its name, but it was completely unpronounceable so I didn't catch it. It's bluish-white, though, and quite pretty.”

“You mean they couldn't just use advanced panamancy to reattach Raya's old hand?” asked Braim. “Granted, I'm no panamancer, but I'd think that would be a simple thing for the katabans to do.”

“The doctor said that they would have if she had lost her hand in a normal way,” said Malya. “But the fact that the Void removed it makes fixing it a lot more complicated. Injuries caused by the Void seem a lot more permanent than normal injuries. Even divine magic doesn't seem to work on them, so Raya is having to make do with the fake hand they've given her.”

“How is she doing with it?” asked Braim as they turned down another corner and then went down a steep street. “Is she handling it well?”

“As well as you would expect her to,” said Malya. “She thought it was strange and demanded at first that they remove it, even after they explained to her why they had to do it. But I think she will get used to it eventually.”

“I hope so,” said Braim. “Just a question, but how has Raya handled Carmaz's betrayal and disqualification from the Tournament?”

Malya scratched her chin. “She was extremely distraught, the poor girl. She cursed out Alira and

seemed to think that Alira just did that because she doesn't like Carmaz. I tried to explain to Raya that Carmaz actually did break the rules and that his disqualification, while hard, was actually legitimate, but you can guess how she responded to that.”

Braim nodded. “No surprise there. Do you think she'll be at the Stadium as well?”

“Maybe,” said Malya. “I don't know for sure, though, because despite the magical healing she's received, she still seemed to be recovering the last time I saw her. I'm sure she'll be fine in the end, though. She's a lot stronger than she looks.”

“If you say so,” said Braim.

After a few more minutes of walking, the two reached the Stadium, where they found a handful of stragglers entering the Stadium. Among them were Yoji and Tashir, who stood outside of the Stadium arguing about something that Braim only got to hear the very end of, from the sound of it.

“... No, Limitlessness is *not* sustainable,” said Yoji, who had his arms folded over his chest with an annoyed look on his face. “It is a fact established by centuries of magical research and tradition. Mortal bodies cannot handle Limitlessness for very long.”

“That may be true for some, but there are just as many people who can handle Limitlessness better than others,” said Tashir. “What about Darek Takren? He's supposed to be a Limitless and to my knowledge, he is doing well.”

Braim was surprised to hear them talking about Darek. Darek was a friend of his, one of the few he had, but he had never believed that people outside of North Academy actually knew about him. Then again, Braim supposed it made sense, seeing as Darek was one of the few mages in the world who had achieved the state of Limitlessness, which meant that he had no limit to the amount of magical power he could use. Braim had heard that that was rather uncommon and believed impossible by most mages, though he didn't see what was so impossible about it if Darek could do it.

Of course, thinking about Darek's Limitlessness made him think about his own complete lack of magical ability again. That thought made the darkness in the back of his head even more insistent and painful, but he ignored it as best as he could as he and Malya approached the two arguing mages.

“Hey, guys, what's up?” said Braim as he and Malya stopped before them. “Has the sub-bracket challenge started yet?”

“Greetings, Braim, Malya,” said Tashir, nodding at them both. “But no, the sub-bracket challenge hasn't. Yoji and I had simply gotten caught up in a discussion about Limitlessness.”

“An argument that I am winning, by the way,” said Yoji. “So far, Tashir hasn't made much of a good case against mine.”

“Only because you refuse to look at the facts,” Tashir said, rolling his eyes. He pointed at Braim. “Braim, you know Darek Takren, don't you? The Limitless Mage, right?”

“The Limitless Mage?” Braim repeated. “Is that what they're calling him now?”

“Among us aquarian mages, yes,” said Tashir, nodding. “It was Archmage Yorak who began to call him that, actually. Why? Isn't he known for his Limitlessness among you humans?”

“Frankly, I couldn't say,” said Braim with a shrug. “It's not like I've been back to life long enough to find out what other people call one of my friends.”

“Ah,” said Tashir. “Well, it doesn't matter, because the point is that Darek exists and that his existence proves that Limitlessness is indeed possible.”

Yoji looked quite angry about Tashir's point, but rather than actually refute it, he just threw up his hands into the air and said, "Well, who cares, anyway? We need to go into the Stadium and get ready for the next challenge, anyway. At least Malya does."

Tashir smirked, but instead of pushing the point, he simply nodded and said, "I agree. I would rather not get on Alira's bad side today, though I have a feeling that she will be short with us anyway."

"Why?" asked Braim. "Is she in a bad mood today or something?"

"Yes," said Tashir. "Or rather, she's been in a bad mood all week. I was outside the city walls this morning, training with my sword, when I saw her walking along the beach grumbling under her breath about something."

"Huh," said Braim, scratching the side of his head. "Why was she out on the beach? She never struck me as the kind of woman who enjoys long walks on the beach."

Tashir shrugged. "I do not know. When she saw me, she told me to go train elsewhere because she wanted to be alone. I obeyed her because she seemed likely to kick me out of the Tournament if I refused."

"So you didn't find out anything about why she wanted you gone?" asked Braim. "Nothing at all?"

"Sadly, I did not," said Tashir with a sigh. "I tried to ask her, but she did not want to answer any of my questions. But one thing I did notice about her was how she seemed to be waiting for someone, because when I left she began pacing back and forth on the same few feet of sand, looking out to the ocean every now and then like she expected someone to rise out of it."

"Wonder who she was going to meet," said Braim. "You don't think she has a boyfriend, do you?"

"If so, then I think Samvan is going to be very disappointed," said Tashir. "But truly, no. It might have been one of the gods, perhaps Anke, the Goddess of the Sea, but I am not sure."

"Eh, it's probably not worth worrying about," said Braim, shaking his head. He gestured at the entrance to the Stadium. "Let's just go inside now, because I don't want to be late."

"All right," said Tashir. He frowned. "I forget, which challenge was it again? The Avian Goddess one or the Skimif one?"

"Avian Goddess," said Malya as the four of them started walking toward the entrance. "So that would be me, though I don't know what the challenge will be."

"No surprise there," said Braim as he pushed open the doors and stepped aside to allow the other three to enter after him. "Alira *never* tells anyone what the challenge will be ahead of time. Kind of annoying if you ask me."

"But it's worked out so far, hasn't it?" asked Tashir as he, Yoji, and Malya entered the lobby, which was full of the rest of the godlings, who were still talking among each other and did not seem to notice their entrance. "Though I agree that it would be a lot better if she at least gave us a clue ahead of time so we could properly prepare. The challenge I participated in had nothing to do with sword-fighting, so I did a lot of sword training for no reason."

Braim closed the doors behind them when they all entered and looked at the crowd of godlings standing in the lobby. The crowd was noticeably thinner in comparison to the first day of the Tournament, which Braim realized had to do with the fact that about thirty of the godlings had already been eliminated from the roster so far.

*And once these next two challenges are finished, we'll be down to fifty,* Braim thought. *And I'll*

*hopefully be one of those fifty.*

Oddly enough, however, Braim did not see Alira anywhere, even when he looked above the heads of the other godlings at the platform where she usually stood over them. As far as Braim could tell, Alira was nowhere to be seen at all, which troubled him because Alira was never late or absent for any of the sub-bracket challenges.

“Wonder where Alira is,” said Braim. “It's almost time for the next sub-bracket challenge to start, isn't it?”

“It is,” said Malya, nodding. She rubbed her hands together anxiously. “Perhaps she is finalizing the details of the challenge.”

At that moment, Samvan, with his black, shoulder-length hair and dark skin, walked by, causing Tashir to say, “Samvan! Where is Alira?”

Samvan stopped and looked at them and shrugged. “I don't know. That's actually what I've been trying to do is figure out why she isn't here yet. I thought she'd be here already, but I haven't seen her all day and no one else seems to know where she is, either.”

Samvan did sound genuinely worried for Alira, but Braim was not surprised. He had learned that Samvan had a crush on the Judge of the Tournament, which seemed like a very strange thing to him. Sure, Alira was a beautiful woman, but her cold attitude and almost fanatical adherence to the Tournament's rules made her unattractive to Braim.

*Different strokes for different folks, I guess,* Braim thought.

“This isn't like Alira at all, to be late and to not let us know ahead of time that she will be,” said Samvan. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked back toward the empty stone platform that Alira usually stood upon. “Something must have happened to her, but it can't have been anything serious because I walked past her living quarters on my way down here and I didn't see anything out of the ordinary when I passed.”

“Where *does* Alira stay, anyway?” said Braim. “I don't remember her ever telling me.”

“In the Temple of the Gods,” said Samvan, looking back at Braim. “She wanted to sleep in the Stadium, but it was not built with a living quarters for individuals, so the gods allowed her to stay at the Temple instead.”

“You sure seem to know a lot about her,” Braim said. “Did she tell you that?”

Samvan looked a little sheepish as he scratched the back of his head. “Well, it's more that I learned that stuff through observation, really, rather than conversation with her.”

Braim understood 'observation' to mean 'stalking' in this case, but before he could say anything, Malya grabbed his arm and said, “Do you feel that?”

Despite Malya's petite form, her hand gripped Braim almost too painfully. He tugged his arm out of her hand, but Malya still looked as serious as ever.

“Feel what?” said Braim. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, of course you can't,” said Malya, shaking her head. “What I mean is that spike of divine energy. You probably can't feel it because you lost your magical powers. Sorry about that.”

Braim looked at Yoji and Tashir. The two of them also looked like they had sensed this 'spike of divine energy,' which Braim did not understand. He felt rather embarrassed that he couldn't feel it, as he was certain that he could have felt it if he had still had his magical powers.

“Yes, I felt it as well,” said Tashir. “But that could only mean that one of the gods is—”

Tashir's words were interrupted by a sudden column of white-hot fire exploding into existence on the platform where Alira usually stood. The sudden appearance of the column of fire caused the crowd of godlings to look up at it in surprise. A handful of the jumpier ones started, including Samvan, who nearly fell on his behind when he landed, and Yoji, who dropped his wand onto the stone floor but hastily picked it up before anyone noticed.

Then the column of fire vanished, revealing that it was not Alira who stood on the platform. Instead, a large, muscular man in golden armor, wielding a massive burning hammer, stood on the platform. He had dark skin, like that of a Carnagian, and golden hair. His eyes were literally flame and he radiated so much heat that even Braim could feel it from all the way on the other side of the lobby.

The newcomer looked down upon them all with a harsh, judgmental frown, like that of a judge looking down at a criminal who was obviously guilty of committing a horrid crime. And despite being on his own, the newcomer looked like he could completely destroy them all if he wanted to.

“Who is that?” Braim asked Malya, though he asked it in a whisper because he didn't want the newcomer to hear him.

“That's Grinf,” said Malya. Her voice was disbelieving. “The God of Justice, Metal, and Fire. And also the patron god of Carnag, if I am not mistaken.”

“What's he doing here?” asked Braim. He gulped. “You don't think he's going to punish us for some law we broke a long time ago, do you?”

Malya shrugged. “I have no idea. Let's listen and find out what he has to say. Maybe he will tell us what happened to Alira.”

Braim nodded and looked back to the god. Braim had heard much about Grinf, as he was one of the more famous gods due to being considered the patron of one of the most powerful nations in the world, but this was the first time he'd seen Grinf in person. It was hard not to stare at the sheer power that Grinf radiated, power so obvious that even Braim could sense it.

Grinf raised his mighty gavel and said, in an authoritative voice that reminded Braim of the eruption of a volcano, “Godlings of Martir, my human name is Grinf, the God of Justice, Metal, and Fire, but my aquarian name is Druom. You may refer to me by either name. It makes no difference to me.”

Braim blinked, but then recalled that humans and aquarians had different names for the gods. It seemed confusing to him, but he decided that it wasn't worth worrying about at the moment. He listened more closely to Grinf as the god continued to speak.

“Now, according to the schedule, the Avian Goddess Sub-Bracket Challenge is due to begin very soon,” said Grinf, who glanced at a clock on the walls. “Therefore, I must ask all Avian Goddess Bracket challengers to—”

A hand shot up from the crowd of godlings, which Braim noticed was from Samvan. The former prison guard was holding up his hand as high as he could, even stepping on tiptoes in an attempt to make sure that Grinf saw his hand. It was rather embarrassing to Braim, but Samvan didn't seem to notice or care what Braim thought.

Grinf, however, did notice, though he didn't look happy about it. Still, he addressed Samvan, saying, “Godling, what do you have to say? I do not tolerate unnecessary interruptions, so your question had better be intelligent or I may not allow you to ask another.”

“Yes, Lord Grinf, I understand,” said Samvan, who still held up his hand. “My question is this: Where is Judge Alira? She is supposed to be the Judge of the Tournament, isn't she? So why isn't she here now? Why are you in her place? I mean no disrespect by this question, Lord Grinf, I just don't understand what is going on here.”

The annoyance on Grinf's face vanished, though the god still didn't look happy. He just said, “That is a wise question. I was going to inform you all later, but I suppose there is no further point in delaying informing you all of what happened to her. Very well: Judge Alira is missing and, until she is found, I am to take her place as the Judge of the Tournament of the Gods.”