



# *A Tale of the Gods*

*First Cycle - Part One*

*by Marc H. Wyman*

*© Chris Boques*

*A Gushémal Story*

**Other Tales**  
**From the World of Gushéal**

- Call of the Dragon, Parts I & II
- Ruins and Hopes
- Shield Maiden
- Warrior Eternal
- Childhood of a Fighter
- The Pledge
- The Miracle of Solstice Day (serial)

**Visit our site on the web to read these tales:**

<http://www.gushemal.com/stories.htm>

**Also read the Travellers' Tales in The World!**

**Download from the following site:**

<http://www.gushemal.com/si/download.htm>

---

© 2002 by T.I.P. Entertainment

This text may be freely distributed, provided the copyright notice and the names of the authors are included (or alternatively, the integrity of the text has not been altered).

If you have any comments about this story, please send an e-mail to [marc@gushemal.com](mailto:marc@gushemal.com). We always look forward to hearing from you! (If so indicated, your comments may be published on the website.)

---

---

# INDEX

I.	The Arrival .....	1
II.	The Maiden.....	4
III.	A New Face.....	7
IV.	An Empty Cave.....	10
V.	A Sentence Delivered .....	13
VI.	The Closing Gate .....	17
VII.	Mortal Concerns.....	22
VIII.	The Tiny and the Divine.....	25
IX.	Dwarven Mystery .....	28
X.	In A Marble Cage.....	32

---

## I. The Arrival

---

The gate was open. Dependable Haguen stood in front of it, his gaze resting as every day on the meadows beyond the Eternal City. Waves of green stretched out like the rolling surface of the sea, until they merged with distant mountains. Perfection. Beautiful and lush. Ideal.

Truly this was a land of the gods. Made by the gods, made for the gods.

Haguen breathed in deeply the rich air, scented by the flowers nearby, with a light taste of moisture from the river that gently curved through the hills, its blue waters speckled with traces of sparkling green. Mannanan was so proud of this achievement, Haguen thought with a smile. He could still go on for hours how exactly he had done this, not to mention on how he had created the soft, tranquil noise.

This was the way Haguen knew life to be. The eternal existence in the realm of gods. The peace, the serenity. His duty at the gate. He stood there every day, guarding the gate, even though there had never been any threat. Occasionally, there might be a visitor, once in a millenium of mortal years. Never unannounced of course. That would have been a breach of protocol, and personally, Haguen detested that. Duty, that was the foundation of existence, whether it was the duty to defend the Eternal City, or a simple sign of civility, the duty to your brethren.

Like every day, Haguen wore his shining cuirass, gleaming like diamond cast into supple form. His halbard rested against one valve of the gate, never more than half a foot from his hand. Naturally he knew every measure of the weapon, knew how to use it properly. Once he had gone to the mortal world, lowered his superior strength to the mortal level and slain two emperor dragons in a single fight. Granted that he had still worn his cuirass and shield, which had protected him from most of the force of the dragon's fiery blasts and their sharp claws. Nonetheless, he had learned more about his halbard that day than in the eons before. Duty. He had taken no pleasure in delivering the dragons' souls to the midrealm, it had been necessary.

The light was fading from the land. Dusk was setting, the time to rest. The time when Haguen allowed himself to close the gate and spend time with his fellow gods. He was looking forward to finding out what they had done today, how they had progressed with the world of the mortals.

Sighing he bent over to pick up his halbard and shoulder it. When he straightened back up again, he saw a man on the meandering path before him. Haguen froze for a moment, shocked by the impropriety of this. His halbard shook from the shoulder, he grasped it firmly in his hand and challenged the arrival, "Who are you? Which abode do you hail from?"

The man was old, wearing a coat that was bleached so much its original color was difficult to guess. His frame was still firm, his eyes a clear blue, as cold as frozen water. Weariness and fatigue suffused his face, the lines and wrinkles pronounced heavily. "I have no name," he said calmly. "I come from a place that no longer is. It was abandoned by its children, and I am alone."

---

Haguen frowned. No abode of his own? No people he had a duty to? No *name*? “A dreadful tale,” he said cautiously. “What do you want?”

“A place of shelter,” the man said with a sigh. “Perhaps some company.” He leaned on a walking stick, bent more from fatigue than age. Despite the weariness, his eyes were actively watching Haguen for his reaction, and the guardian felt strangely uncomfortable under the gaze. Perhaps even a bit guilty, though he had no idea why he should feel that way.

“From what,” he asked, “would you require shelter? This is not the world of the mortals, old man. And why do you wish to take this appearance? There is no need for it.”

The old man smiled. “Perhaps there is,” he shrugged. “Perhaps all our appearance is born from how we feel, mine as much as yours. Perhaps it is because of how I feel that I require shelter. Or, if that is more acceptable, a place to rest. I have been walking for a long time. Since the day my abode was abandoned.”

It must have been a long time, Haguen thought. The man was old indeed, the guardian could feel it in the emanations from the newcomer. It wasn’t just a show, and neither was the weariness. “Why have you not sought for shelter earlier?”

“Oh, my young friend,” the old man said and swept his gaze over the meadows around the Eternal City, “I have done that. Life without anyone to talk to, save the ghosts of your memories, that is not life. I have walked every inch there is in this realm. Even here, I have walked, before your city was built. Before the hills were here, before the grass, before the river. The beauty of this place does not touch me as deeply as the fact that I am speaking to you right now.”

“So,” Haguen closed his fingers tightly around his halbard, “if you have asked for shelter at other abodes, why didn’t you stay?” He was troubled by the old man’s claim to have been here before the Eternal City. Of course Haguen knew it was possible – despite the name, Haguen himself had helped build their settlement. One of the mountains on the horizons was his own, although it gave him little reason to brag about it in the manner that Mannannan was so fond of. Nonetheless, to be reminded of this fact was unsettling.

The old man sighed. “Does it truly matter? I did not find the peace I was looking for. None of those abodes offered me a resting place.” A twinkle entered his eyes. “Do you think I could pose a danger to you? I did not think that my appearance was that frightful.”

“Appearance is irrelevant.”

“Yes,” the old man nodded, “that it is. But mine does not hide a purpose but the one I have stated.”

Haguen felt odd. He had rarely experienced something like this, being at a loss for a proper answer. The old man sounded credible, his words honest. And lost. “I cannot promise that you will find any peace in our abode,” Haguen said slowly.

“I do not seek for promises. It is hope that I seek, an opportunity. Should I not meet with the acceptance of the denizens of your abode, I will leave and resume my walk once more.”

Haguen lowered his halbard a bit, squinted at the old man. “You have sixty days. At the end of that period, our lord Decirius will speak and decide on your fate. Do not misstep, the eyes of Haguen are on you.”

---

“By that,” the old man chuckled, “I take it that your name is Haguen. Happy to meet you, young friend.” He held out his hand, and the guardian shook it automatically – and while touching the wrinkled hand, he suddenly realized that he himself had breached protocol. Civility demanded that he should have introduced himself earlier!

The old man smiled as if he could sense the discomfort in the guardian’s mind, then he slowly put forward his walking stick and strode past Haguen through the gate of the Eternal City.

The guardian frowned after him, then he shouldered his halbard and followed after closing the gate and locking it for darktime.

---

---

## II. The Maiden

---

Maidoyú loved walking the streets of the Eternal City at darktime. The marble ground looked so different without the resplendent light of day. The buildings seemed to loom so much taller, their façades dark and almost menacing. Even the gargoyle statues that she found so cuddly and cute in daylight seemed ready to spread their wings and fly off their perches, much like their living counterparts in the mortal world. She remembered the flock of gargoyles she had joined a while back, having taken their shape, and how she had played with them. In form like them, their tough, rock-like skins had felt so soft and pleasing.

A pity that her current form disallowed her that pleasure. Oh, she preferred this shape, much like everyone else in the Eternal City, including even dismal Shenaumac. Mannannan might change into a fish or some of his more bizarre sea creatures now and then, but most of the time he held onto his bipedal form.

As did Maidoyú. She felt most like – well, most like herself with two legs and two arms, two eyes and two ears, one nose and one mouth. Wearing a light yellow dress, white sandals on her feet, and a smile on her face, that was so comfortable and pretty. Some of the others might call her carefree, and Koultirsp had compared her more than once with Alyssa. Not that the comparison was apt, but what did Koultirsp know? She was so concerned with her own business of toying with the mortal creatures, flinging fire their way or inciting them to hurt each other. Oh, yes, Koultirsp was the one to levy judgment on others, sure.

Maidoyú grimaced and shook her head violently. She didn't want to think about things like this now. Not when darktime was so nice, and when she could permit herself to feel thrilled by the menacing shapes around her. Sometimes she pretended she was mortal, and that she could not defend herself against an evil foe, against a monster, and that she would have to cower in fear. That was fun!

Of course, she thought a bit more soberly, there had been more than one occasion when she had lost herself in that scenario of fright so much that she had truly felt threatened. And then her self-defense had kicked in, so that she had lashed out at her surroundings, leveling several of the blocks of buildings around her.

Every single time Decirius had called her to his place and told her that she should finally stop playing. "Find a purpose for yourself!" he had shouted in the end, throwing up his hands in exasperation. "You can't just walk around all day and play! You are a goddess, Maidoyú. Try to prove yourself worthy of what you are."

That had most definitely not been fun. Why should she even *want* to find a purpose? The other eight had selected their own preferences, and that was fine. Their purposes reflected who they were – Mannannan, the sea lover; Decirius, always oh so just; Haguen at the gate, with his sense of duty; Koultirsp who always enjoyed the pain of others; Darawk who loved knowledge so much that he could spend mortal years studying a single plant; Shenaumac, the brooding one who always

---

blustered about how strong he was; Taurkémad, the frail one; Lonapal, the airy, effervescent one; Alyssa who... Well, she also liked to toy with the mortals – but unlike Koultirsp’s playing, the mortals usually seemed to enjoy her games. As far as Maidoyú knew, anyway, which wasn’t a lot. Somehow that topic – romance, love, and so forth – had lost a lot of its appeal to her once Alyssa chose it for herself.

She walked over to a plaza, adorned by a beautiful fountain, water spewing in magnificent colors from shells. She watched the water rise and then fall in its arc into the pool, its iridescence sparkling in the darkness. “Why would I need a purpose?”

“Because you’re a goddess, that’s why,” the fountain said.

Maidoyú grimaced. “Will you stop listening all the time? I wanted to be alone.”

The water stopped spewing, instead it flowed together into a humanoid figure that slowly stepped out of the fountain and coalesced into the shape of a fully human male, with tanned brown skin that seemed wrinkled by long exposure to light. He wore a dark leather shirt and short breeches of a blue cloth Maidoyú didn’t know. Behind the man, the water resumed its merry flow once again. “You must not forget what you are,” Mannannan said and folded his arms before his broad chest. “That is what we are all concerned about, child.”

“Don’t talk to me as if I were younger than you!” Maidoyú shouted and pointed an accusing finger at the marine god.

“You act as if that were true,” Mannannan replied calmly. Water dripped from his breeches, forming a pool around his bare feet. “Look at yourself. You run around the Eternal City at darktime and pretend that you’re mortal. That there is some reason to be afraid. Why? Because it’s *fun*?”

Maidoyú rolled her eyes. “You wouldn’t understand,” she muttered and turned away to leave. It was bad enough that she couldn’t have just enjoyed the sight of the fountain, now there was one of her fellow gods pestering her with this endless tirade. If it had been Shenaumac, that might have been well enough. *His* purpose was so ridiculous, The Great God of Sharpened Things. What good was that for, anyway?

“Try to explain it to me,” Mannannan challenged her. She turned around to look at him with a sneer. He raised an eyebrow, then sighed and said, “Please.”

Maidoyú opened her mouth to speak, but then she closed it again. Pouting, she leaned against the nearest wall, staring past Mannannan at the fountain.

The God of the Sea shook his head, raised his hands exasperatedly – and dropped them when he realized how much that gesture made him resemble Decirius. At least, that was what Maidoyú thought. How *could* she explain herself to him? Or to any of the other gods. She didn’t quite know herself why she hadn’t selected a purpose to dedicate her existence to. The others hadn’t dawdled much, after all. Not even Shenaumac!

But Maidoyú had enjoyed herself too much to care about that. There was always something new to explore, be it here, be it in the midrealm, or in the mortal world. Her fellow gods were so busy creating new things every day, and she wanted to see them all.

“Please,” Mannannan repeated and sat down on the edge of the fountain.

---

Again Maidoyú was about to speak, but stopped herself. "You're annoying me."

"And that is supposed to be an answer?" Mannannan shook his head. "Don't you want to do something with your powers. A goddess should not waste herself like that. Child, look at this fountain! You adored it before, I know. So often have you looked at it and enjoyed it, this that is my creation. Don't you want to give an experience like this to others as well? You have it in you to be a creator! Use it."

*Would I then have time to still enjoy the sights? Maidoyú wondered. Or would I spend all my time being 'creative'?* She shrugged emptily.

Mannannan got up from his perch, slowly came over to her and placed his hand on her shoulder. She flinched a little, but his grasp remained strong. "Try to find something for yourself, child. Please do that. Don't make everybody worry. All right?"

"Why *should* you worry?!" Maidoyú exploded and shook out of his grip. "I am a *goddess*, as you are so fond of reminding me. What *need* do I have of this fabled purpose of yours? A goddess needs nobody, hear me?"

"Child..."

"And stop that condescending attitude!" Maidoyú yelled, then ran down the nearest road to someplace else. It didn't matter where that someplace was, as long as it was away from Mannannan. Or any other of her pompous fellow gods.

---

---

### III. A New Face

---

“Ho there, brother, a new face!” Alyssa cheered.

Darawk, seated next to her at the stone table on the dais overlooking a small park, nearly dropped his pen in surprise. As it was, ink squirted from the pen and splotted onto the paper. “Dear sister,” the God of Knowledge sighed, “you pay so much attention to appearances. Who is it now that is wearing another face?”

“Nobody I know,” the hazel-haired Goddess of Love grinned.

That caught Darawk’s attention, and with a frown he raised his eyes to see the lone figure ambling down the road between the tall buildings. An old man, by the looks of it, wearing clothes that had seen better days. Not the way any self-respecting god would choose to look. Darawk himself appeared to be an elderly gentleman, but clad in fine clothes, with a cloak the color of darktime, but rimmed with iridescent lining.

“Neither do I know him,” Darawk shook his head. That was very odd. If another abode had decided to send an ambassador, should Decirius not have informed them all? One could always rely on Decirius to do so. Or could one? Had the old boy let this one slip by? “Have you heard of a visitor being announced, dear sister?” he asked, gracefully trying to wipe the splotch from his paper. When his sleeve failed to work, he sighed and removed it by his mind’s power.

Alyssa chuckled. “Who cares about announcements? It’s someone new, that’s all that counts.” She jumped from her chair, leaped over the balustrade of their dais – her dress fluttering up her long legs – and then looked up with a mischievous grin on her face. “Don’t you care about *learning* who this man is? I thought you’re the God of *Knowledge*, brother of mine?”

Darawk sighed again. His sister knew just how to handle him, didn’t she? Slowly he finished the line he was writing, then rose, rolled up the paper before him and tucked it into a pocket of his vest, then he took the stairs and walked over to join Alyssa and the stranger. The goddess turned her beaming eyes to him and joyfully announced, “Imagine that, Darawk, he doesn’t have a name!”

“No name?” Darawk pursed his lips and cast a questioning glance towards the old man, strangely aware that they were of about the same height though Darawk felt as if he towered over the stranger.

The old man shrugged. “It has never seemed important. I know who I am. Is that not enough?”

“A valid point,” Darawk allowed. “But for the sake of conversation it seems a necessity.”

“Does it really?” The old man smiled wryly. “As we speak at this moment, each of us knows who is addressed. The only time when a name is needed in conversation is when someone is not present. What is spoken of him or her then, when he does not learn the contents of the conversation?”

Darawk frowned, caught off guard.

---

Before he could try and reply, Alyssa chuckled and gently rubbed his arm. "My, my, my, dearie, it seems you've found somebody to talk to! Really," she turned to the old man, her hand sliding down to entangle Darawk's, "you sound just like my brother!"

"Your brother?" the old man inquired. "Forgive my surprise but I have found it odd to hear of such a connection between gods. That is more like a mortal's way of observing the world."

Darawk crooked his head. "It is who we are."

"Well..." Alyssa drew out the word, pressed her brother's fingers more closely. "He *is* right, you know. I'd never dream of calling Decirius my brother."

"Of course not!" Darawk exclaimed. "He is our lord! Why would —" He stopped himself, aware of the inquisitive glances of not only the stranger but also Alyssa. A shade of red crept onto his face, when he nodded jerkily and said, "Obviously you have more insight than I credit you for, dear sister. Please, pardon me for my arrogance."

"Oh, you're pardoned, you old parchment sniffer," she laughed. "For now, anyway."

"Be that as it may," Darawk regained a bit of his composure, "it is a thought I will ponder more on. Thank you, stranger, for pointing out a topic I need to investigate."

"It is an honor." The old man nodded graciously. "Giving reason for thought, that is one of the prime functions of our existence."

"Indeed it is."

Alyssa was switching her glance quickly from one to the other, a smirk implanting itself ever more firmly on her lips, before she broke out in laughter and raised one hand to her chest. "You should see yourselves, you two!" she laughed. "You're so alike, it is you who should call yourselves brothers!"

Darawk blinked, smiled irritably. "It is simply a similarity of minds, that is all."

The old man nodded slowly. "After all, is it not the goal of all to find knowledge? To expand one's awareness of the world?"

"Absolutely," Darawk seconded eagerly. "Without knowledge, we are nothing. We are as the primal spark that first appeared in the void; it is knowledge that has filled the emptiness with being."

"Ah!" The stranger raised his hand and smiled. "But what *is* being? Is it the state of existence, or is it the creation? Gods are, by our nature, creators. What of the mortals? What of the gargoyle that travels the skies of the mortal world, does it not create? The sight of its stony wings, aflight despite its weight, the trails it leaves on the heavens, that is also a creation. And what of the dragon? Let's take an emperor dragon, with a breath so fiery that it turns coal to diamond. Is it not also a creator? The maker of something new and precious from what was mundane and ordinary before?"

Darawk disentangled his hand from Alyssa's and paced up a few steps, his brow furrowed in thought. "Creation as the purpose of being, that is what you are saying, is it not? Creation of fresh knowledge, in a way. The quest for knowledge would remain of paramount importance, for without knowledge, the creation of something unique and new would be cast in doubt."

"In doubt perhaps, but does that take away the beauty?"

"Beauty?" Darawk blinked.

---

“Yes,” the old man confirmed. “Consider your sister,” he nodded with a smile to Alyssa who immediately threw back her head and let her hazel hair fly, “her image is not a fresh creation, I assume, yet she is aesthetic and quite pleasing to observe. Beauty is a value of its own, it is not required to be new, or even unique.”

Alyssa laughed then, stepped inbetween the two and cast a firm glance on each of them. “I think the two of you will spend the next couple of millenia discussing one or the other detail. As for you, stranger,” she raised a finely drawn eyebrow, “this image is of my own creation. It *is* unique, and trust me, there is detailed knowledge in that image which would require a long time to learn.” With that, she pushed both of them further apart, stepping through them and walking away with a wide smile on her face.

The old man followed her with his eyes. “An interesting person, your sister is.”

“Interesting,” Darawk shook his head, “hardly describes her. A question, stranger, if I may ask? Do you intend to stay here long?”

The old man sighed, returned his gaze to the other god and leaned on his walking stick. “I do not know yet.”

Darawk nodded. “Then I believe we should quickly return to our discussion. Where were we?”

“The purpose of creation, and the quest for knowledge,” the old man answered with a sparkle in his eyes.

The same light burned in Darawk’s eyes, and with glee both of them continued their discussion which would indeed last a long while, though not the millenia Alyssa had assumed.

---

---

## IV. An Empty Cave

---

"You must come with me to the midrealm!" Taurkémad shouted, barging into Decirius' study.

The study was a vast room, its edges lost in twilight, with only an occasional wisp of light – from a torch? from a window? from some other source of light? – twinkling in the distance. From outside, the study was located at the top of a narrow tower, slenderly rising above the Eternal City, higher than any other building, seeming more like a thin needle when observed from the ground. No furniture could be discerned, except for a large, semi-circular desk and a single chair behind it. Both were somewhere in the study, but with the twilight it was hard to say where exactly they stood. Sometimes they seemed to change their location, even when you were standing next to them.

"Decirius?" Taurkémad asked, her urgency evaporating slightly when she saw that both desk and chair were vacated. Nervously she looked about herself, tugged the light coat tighter around her narrow shoulders. She was sure she had heard somebody speak when she came in, absolutely sure. But there should have been a sign of somebody. Anybody.

"What *is* it?" the strong voice of the chief god came from somewhere in the twilight.

Taurkémad turned to the source of the noise, focused her sight. And still she could not see her fellow god. Did he have to do this? she wondered. She knew his strength exceeded hers, the same was true of every other god. That's why he was their lord, after all.

"I can't hear you," Decirius' disembodied voice asked.

Of course he couldn't. She hadn't spoken. "Uhm, I... Could you, please, come over here, I..."

"Yes?" the voice asked patiently, and suddenly his dark frame stood before her. Clad in a dark blue robe, open at the front and revealing dark red breeches and shirt, his face was a pasty white, with eyeballs as black as darktime. As usual his face looked friendly and open, if one could ignore the melodramatic additions he liked.

Taurkémad swallowed hard. "I... You really have to come with me, Decirius. It's... Something's happened you need to see!"

"In the midrealm," Decirius nodded. "Excuse me, Taurkémad, but I'm rather busy at the moment. Tell me what it is, and I will look into the matter."

"You have to *see* it!" Taurkémad insisted. "It's really, really important."

Decirius stared at her from his black eyeballs, then he shrugged and looked off into the twilight of his study. "It seems that I must postpone my other affairs."

"Yes, you have to!"

"Very well," Decirius shrugged. "Lead the way." He held out his hand and clasped Taurkémad's. A smile flashed over her face, when she nodded and concentrated on transporting both of them to the midrealm.

---

The change was abrupt when they suddenly stood in the midst of a cave, lit by fire burning in niches in the wall – much like torches, but with no real source. The stone itself seemed to burn. Decirius raised an eyebrow, looked around quietly. “The cave of the dwarves, isn’t it?”

Taurkémad shook her head in frustration. This was important, and it was obvious that this was the dwarves’ dwelling. None of the walls retained their natural design – she had fashioned the original walls herself, she should better well know what they used to look like –, instead all had been worked on with tools. Statues and reliefs were carved out of the walls, the most diverse of depictions, all of them as perfect as one could wish for. The same was true of the ceiling and of the floor, the latter seeming smooth to her bare feet, yet the eye revealed intricate patterns. Patterns with no particular meaning, except aesthetics. The niches of the burning stones had been treated so that they looked like flames themselves, eternally frozen in their rocky shapes

“And where *are* the dwarves?!” Taurkémad shouted and waved her hands about. “Tell me that!”

“Where they are?” Decirius frowned. He took a step towards the opening to the next cave and stopped for a moment when he realized there was an abyss, with only a tiny strand of rock leading across the yawning gap to the next cavern. His gaze seemed taken up with looking down into the abyss, noting every single element that the dwarves had hewn into the stone, then he shrugged and nonchalantly walked across the tiny bridge. Taurkémad worked hard to contain her frustration as she followed him.

They walked through several caves. Decirius was very taken with the stoneworks that the dwarves had created, but there wasn’t the slightest sense of worry in him. Taurkémad took deep breaths and told herself that would change soon. As soon as they came to the main cavern.

Her frustration rose to new levels when not even that sight altered Decirius’ attitude. She herself had nearly jumped through the roof when she had come here. At first, perhaps, the main cavern looked no different than it had appeared the past couple of eons. Oval, the longest distance from one wall to the next some four hundred feet, the nearest distance no less than a hundred and thirty feet. Sculptures abounded in the cavern, some as tall as sixty feet, with details so intricate that a square inch could depict an entire life span. There were more burning stones, most of them arranged into works of art themselves, with every flickering flame assuming a new part in a mosaic that told a new story. There were the four beds in the center, slabs of stone that were arrayed to a square, with a stool next to each where the *gad’nú* axes of the dwarves were put each darktime.

“So?” Decirius asked gently. “Is this what you wished to show me?”

“No! *That* is!” Taurkémad said and pointed her finger up to the roof.

Decirius’ glance followed the direction, and his eyebrows rose slightly when they beheld the hole in the ceiling. One of the sculptures was right below it, the lower two thirds as beautifully worked as everything else. But the top only held steps leading up to the hole, the rest as naturally rocky as Taurkémad had created it.

Slowly Decirius clambered up the sculpture, his pace as fast on the lower part as on the steps. Finally he stood at the top, looking with interest up into the hole. It led to a tunnel, slightly sloped, with hand and footholds dug into the walls. “I assume this is where the dwarves have gone.”

---

"Yes, that's right!" Taurkémad shook her head. "Don't you find this disturbing? Don't you – oh, Decirius, don't you even want to know *where* they've gone? Or why?!"

Decirius reached out to take the first handhold, then reconsidered and floated himself up into the tunnel. Taurkémad quickly followed him, not bothering with any physical activity either. "Do you see how long this tunnel is? Do you?"

"Yes, of course," Decirius nodded. "I would say it has taken the dwarves quite a little while to dig this shaft. Interesting."

"Interesting?! They've *run away* from their cave! And they've –" She caught her breath, infuriated by her chief god's dispassion. "Decirius, they've gone to the mortal world! None of the dwarves is still in the midrealm, they've gone to the *mortal world!*"

"So it would seem."

"So it – Decirius, how could this have happened? You were speaking to them all the time, you took care of them. And now you... don't care anymore."

Decirius stopped his floating, held out a hand to gently touch Taurkémad's shoulder. "I do care about the dwarves. Have faith in me, please?"

"I... Decirius, they weren't supposed to go to the mortal world," Taurkémad insisted. "What will they *do* there? Dwarves – amidst the dragons, gargoyles, and the other creatures? And they're mortal themselves now, they'll – they'll be eaten! If," her voice choked, "if they aren't already dead."

"Well, then," Decirius shrugged, "they would be back in the midrealm by now, wouldn't they? And besides, I would know if one of my dwarves had died. I am the God of Death, am I not?"

They were somewhere in the tunnel. Its angle had changed, not as steep as before. A little below them, there was a niche that looked as if the dwarves had carved it from the stone to rest for a while. How *long* had they been carving this tunnel? And how could Decirius not have known about it? Or had he known? If so, why hadn't he done something about it? Why hadn't he told the others? Especially herself! This cave was Taurkémad's creation, and she had taken a major part in making the dwarves. She *should* have been told!

"But if they die, they won't be the same they were before," Taurkémad said. "They must not stay in the world of mortals, that is – wrong."

Decirius shrugged. "Dear Taurkémad, what could possibly happen? I know the dwarves, they are hardier than you allow them for. They will survive, and in a few years they will tire of the mortal world and return to their cave, where they belong. Really, it is not as important as you believe. And now," he sighed, "I have kept my business waiting for too long. Until I see you again."

With that brief explanation he vanished. Taurkémad felt that he had returned to the Eternal City, and she felt more frustrated than before. The dwarves had gone to the mortal world, and Decirius didn't even *care*. Those were *her* dwarves, and she could not leave them alone.

Determined she continued floating along the tunnel, much faster than before, off to the world of mortals, to find her dwarves and return the little ones to their cave.

---

---

## V. A Sentence Delivered

---

“Intriguing creatures,” the old man said and whistled softly.

Darawk nodded eagerly and prodded the pile of sand before him, motes of red scattered amidst the yellow grains. “Crimson divers,” he repeated the name. “They feed on even tinier creatures within the sand dunes of the hourglass-shaped desert. They are much like the crabs you find in water, yet they subsist in the arid environment of a desert. Fascinating. I have spent years studying their behavior.”

“Why did you not ask their creator?” The old man leaned back in his chair on the dais next to the plaza and folded his arms before his chest. “That would appear to be much easier.”

“Easier?” Darawk frowned. “The one responsible for the divers belongs to a different abode. I don’t even know whether it was just one creator or a group effort!” He shook his head and sighed. “Sad, isn’t it? That the abodes rarely communicate with each other. We are all gods, we rule the heavens and the midrealm as well as the mortal world, yet we do not talk to each other.”

The old man shrugged. “I have seen that you are right. In my travels I have seen many of the abodes, and not one truly knew of the other. A few names, a few events, not much more. They are all diverse, and much there is that they could learn from their differences. What, my good friend Darawk, do you think is the reason for the lack of communication?”

A wistful look came over the God of Knowledge’s face as Darawk looked out across the plaza, raising his gaze slowly to encompass the high buildings. “The fear of war,” he said softly. “We do not understand the others, and we don’t think they will appreciate much what we are doing.”

“Ah,” the old man nodded slowly. “I believe,” he said with a light smile, “that you have pierced the shell of your own minds. It is always the fear of the new and the fear of the different that propels aggression. I have seen it before.”

“You have?” Darawk perked up, looking with marvel at his interlocutor. “An outbreak of aggression? Among gods?”

The old man sighed, and his glance slid to the floor. “Yes, I have. Once. A very long time ago. A dreadful event it was. One I have no wish of ever seeing again. But, please,” he looked up again and forced the smile back onto his face, “let us talk of more cheerful affairs. It is such a rare occurrence for me to be able to talk to somebody.”

“That occurrence will grow rarer still,” a new voice interferred, and Darawk automatically frowned when he recognized it as belonging to Decirius.

The chief god was standing before their table, not having bothered with slowly approaching. Civility was not a habit he had grown accustomed to. The old man looked with a trace of concern at the new arrival, studying the pasty and still face of the chief god interestedly until his glance locked onto the black eyeballs. The old man sighed. “I take it that you do not appreciate my presence?”

---

"That," Decirius said coldly, "is an understatement. This abode is closed. No embassies are allowed at this time, and much less unwanted visitors such as you. Hagen has told me that you do not belong to any abode." He raised an eyebrow. "I also understand that you are looking for an abode to accept you. This one will not."

Darawk had been listening to the words of his chief god with rising anger. Now he leaped up from his chair and confronted Decirius. "Why would you say that? We have never spoken about anything like this! You can't just make a decision like that, not without..." His voice faded away, withering under the icy stare of Decirius.

"Are you quite done?" the God of Death and Justice asked.

"No, I'm not," Darawk insisted, still fuming but weakened from the stare. "This man is alone and lost. He has much to offer to our abode, believe me. His knowledge and experience are fascinating, his thinking, it's –"

"Darawk," Decirius said, "sit down and be quiet."

"I –"

This time it was the old man who interrupted the God of Knowledge. "Please, my friend, don't. This is about me, not you." He rose as well, motioning for Darawk to sit down. Frowning, the other god did as he was asked, while the old man looked at Decirius. "I am sorry if I have given offense by entering your Eternal City. From the words of your guardian, Hagen, I assumed that I was free to spend sixty days here before having to leave. It is all I ask for at this point, the chance to speak. Is that so much to ask for?"

"Yes, it is." Decirius stared at him unrelentingly, but where Darawk had melted away, the old man held firm. It did little to change Decirius' grim mood. "As I said before, no visitors are allowed into the abode at this time. Therefore you will either leave, or be destroyed."

"Destroyed?!" Darawk exclaimed, ready to leap up and join the conversation again. The chief god sent an angry glare his way, but it was the old man, quietly holding up his hand, that made Darawk stay in his seat.

The old man nodded slowly. "Destruction," he said. "That is a serious threat you are making, Lord of Death. Very serious." He shrugged. "At one point in my past it would have mattered to me. That point is past, though."

"Would you rather be destroyed right here?" Decirius taunted him.

"It is worth the thought," the old man smiled briefly, then shook his head. "Not particularly, no. If I am not welcome, I will leave. Since you say that no visitors are welcome at this time, perhaps you might tell me when that will change?"

Decirius squinted at him unpleasantly. Darawk couldn't help but feel that with those last words, the old man had scored some kind of victory over the chief god. Which one exactly? What had Decirius meant when he said that no visitors were permitted now? Up to now, Darawk had assumed he knew all of the proceedings in the Eternal City – after all, it was his business to learn about things. Of this decision, though, he hadn't known anything.

---

Neither did he have any idea *why* the abode would be closed off to other gods. And that, truth be told, didn't suit him very well.

Slowly Decirius turned away from the old man and looked across the plaza. In the opening of one of the roads, Haguen stood at attention in his glittering cuirass. Decirius stood silent for a while, then he said without turning back, "Haguen gave you sixty days, did he not?"

"That he did."

"And I assume you would return the very moment I allow an outsider to enter the abode again."

"That I would."

Decirius took a deep breath. "Then you shall have the sixty days, measured from the moment you stepped across the threshold of the Eternal City. Use them wisely. Talk to those who would answer, if you wish. Go where you please but do not try to enter my home. By the same token," he turned around and focused his black eyes on the old man, "do not ask why this abode is closed. The same applies to you, Darawk. It is a matter that is of no concern to either of you. Am I understood?"

Darawk frowned at that. By his nature he was drawn to uncover any piece of knowledge he had not yet learned; having it forbidden only heightened his interest. Yet this was Decirius. The god who had always led the Eternal City. "I understand," the God of Knowledge said slowly.

The old man remained silent, but acknowledged the words with a small nod.

"Good," Decirius said. "If I find that either of you do not follow my commands, you shall be expelled from this abode." He paused for a moment, then continued, "Both of you."

Before either of the other gods could speak up, Decirius vanished and reappeared next to Haguen, talking to the guardian in a low voice.

The old man sighed and returned to his seat, absentmindedly stroking his hand over the pile of sand. "It is the same everywhere, I suppose," he mumbled.

"The same?!" Darawk exclaimed furiously. "He threatened to throw *me* out of the abode! My own lord! I cannot believe he just said that!"

A soft smile playing on his lips, the old man leaned back in his chair and raised his hands. "Dear friend, do not concern yourself with that threat. I believe he merely wants another pair of eyes to watch over me, and he believes that you would be most likely to stay at my side. Since I do not intend to disobey the commands of your lord, there is no reason for worry."

"I'm not worrying about being banished!" Darawk said, and with a slight gesture made the sand disappear from the table between them, along with the crimson divers. "It's that he *threatened* me; that's what worries me. What is going on here?"

The old man leaned forward and raised his eyebrows. "Whatever it is, dear friend, it seems wise not to ask about that."

"Yes," Darawk said unhappily, staring across the plaza to Haguen. Decirius had disappeared again, presumably returned to his study, but the guardian god was still there, standing like a statue in the twilight of darktime. Why, Darawk wondered, had the guardian not been informed of Decirius' new ruling? After all, he could have turned the old man away at the gate.

---

So Decirius had a secret, didn't he? One that he didn't want Darawk to find out about. "We'll see about that," he muttered.

The old man shrugged, giving no indication whether he knew what those words meant. He looked up towards the roofs of the Eternal City with a resigned mien. "Sixty days," he sighed. "Sixty days."

---

---

## VI. The Closing Gate

---

The village was quiet. If one listened closely, one could hear soft snoring from more than one of the huts, buildings that looked as if they had grown from the grassy ground. They hadn't, of course, Lonapal knew. His fellow gods had created them along with the ground, given them a shape that they had felt pleasing. One that the villagers had taken to happily, the God of Light smiled.

He walked through the single road bisecting the circular settlement, towards the central plaza. The only source of light in darktime came from there, a ball of blue fire that hovered over the marble tiles. This was where the villagers worshipped the gods, every morning, every noon, and every evening. They were faithful and good, Lonapal knew. The villagers loved their existence, and they loved their gods.

As well they should. The gods loved them.

Well, Lonapal did.

Filled with a sense of mirth and belonging, he suddenly stopped when he saw somebody standing under the ball of fire, completely unconcerned that her head was doused by the blue flames.

"Alyssa?" Lonapal cried in surprise.

"Shhhh," the goddess grinned and put a finger to her lips. "You don't want to wake the locals, do you?"

He rolled his eyes exasperatedly. Alyssa was one goddess he never knew how to approach. The others, well, in the past millenia he had come to understand them rather well. Or at least, he thought he had. Alyssa, though, surprised him more often than she did what he expected her to do. Nonetheless he liked that about her. Much more than her brother Darawk who could always be counted on to dive like a hawk at any piece of knowledge and envelop that piece for next to an eternity until he knew everything there was to be learned.

"Come out of there, please," Lonapal said and sat down on one of the stone benches arrayed around the plaza. He patted the bench next to him. Alyssa grinned, then she walked over, her hazel hair completely untouched by the blue fire.

"Come here often?" she whispered as she sat down next to Lonapal and let her arm droop over the back of the bench.

Lonapal took a deep breath. "As a matter of fact, I do. I like these people."

"So do I. Fine creations." Alyssa frowned, looking at one part of the village where a hut used to stand. Now a blackened skeleton of support struts remained, the remains of furniture an ashen white amidst the rubble of stones. "What happened there?"

The god sighed. "Koultirsp. What else? She claimed that the villagers hadn't praised her enough during worship, and so she punished them."

"Koultirsp," Alyssa said sourly. "She's one spoilsport. What did the villagers do?"

---

A smile crept onto Lonapal's lips. "They decided not to worship Koultirsp for a whole day. Stubborn little folks, these are."

Alyssa chuckled.

Lonapal laughed, put his arm around her shoulders. The goddess leaned against him, her arm sneaking up to embrace his shoulders as well. "Could it be," Alyssa grinned at him, "that your presence here has something to do with that?"

"Oh, absolutely not," Lonapal said. "And neither does the fact that Koultirsp is currently pouting somewhere in the Eternal City because the rest of the huts haven't gone up in flames as she'd wanted to."

"You do spoil these villagers," the goddess laughed.

"As do you," Lonapal said and tickled her shoulder. Alyssa quickly moved away from him, darting a half-angry, half-amused look at him. Lonapal laughed again, then frowned and smiled, "You look like one of the villagers!"

Alyssa raised one of her thin, exquisite eyebrows. "Don't I always? I dropped the elven look a *long* time ago, Lonapal. That is so... well, so much the last millenium."

"No," he chuckled. "I meant your clothes!"

"Oh?" She looked down at herself, wearing a simple, brown cotton dress that – of course – fitted her perfectly. A red belt was wound around her hips, riding rather high, with a simple oval buckle at the front. The simplicity only managed to enhance her beauty. "I wanted to be suitably dressed, that is all," she waved the thought away, then reconsidered and asked coyly, "Did I succeed?"

Lonapal was about to answer when one of the doors near to the two of them opened a crack, and a pinkish face peered cautiously out at them. Graciously Lonapal leaned forward and smiled at the villager, giving her a slight wave. The woman's face paled suddenly, and she fell to her knees, folding her hands quickly and murmuring a prayer.

The god's face fell. "Oh, please..." he whispered.

Alyssa patted him on the shoulder, then got up and walked over to the villager, a serene light gradually starting to outline her frame. "Rise, woman," she said gently.

The villager woman stayed on the floor, her eyes fastened to one of the tiles of the plaza.

Alyssa knelt down as well, reached out one hand to touch the villager's arm. "I have told you to rise, have I not?"

"But... you are..."

"Yes, I am," Alyssa confirmed and laughed heartily. "So you'd better obey, isn't that right?"

Now the villager looked up, straight at the open and merry eyes of the goddess. "I..."

Alyssa softly stroked the woman's arm. "There is a time for worship, and there is a time for rest. Darktime is meant for the latter, little one. Tell me, what is your name?"

"My..." The woman nearly choked on the words, entranced as she was by the look of her goddess' face, so close to her own. "Caltraya," she finally whispered.

Alyssa's eyes brightened. "Caltraya," she repeated. "That's a pretty name. I like it. Now, Caltraya – may I call you Callie? Callie, go back to bed and sleep. Remember us at worship, will you?"

---

“Of course, of course, my lady!”

“Now go back, Callie.” Alyssa gave her a slight push, and the villager woman hurried back inside her hut. Slowly she closed the door, so she didn’t offend the goddess by slamming the wood in her face, but Caltraya still managed to do this very fast.

The goddess was still laughing lightly when she returned to the bench and Lonapal.

Lonapal shook his head. “You know that from now on she’ll insist that everybody addresses her as Callie, don’t you?”

“Well...” Alyssa shrugged. “That sounds pretty, too. As pretty as that girl is. Do you have any idea who made her?”

Oh, yes, only Alyssa could have asked something like that, Lonapal thought affectionately. He himself had never wondered about that, not that he could remember right now. And with a tinge of disappointment he had to shake his head and say, “I have no idea. Sorry.”

“Ah, whoever it was,” the goddess smiled and leaned back against him, “he or she did a good job. I like her.” She pulled his chin towards her. “Look out for her tomorrow, all right? Just in case Koultirsp tries something again?”

Lonapal nodded graciously. “You know that I would have done that without your plea.”

“So?” Alyssa grinned. “At least now I can pretend you do something for me.”

How, Lonapal wondered, gazing into those deep, brown eyes of her, could she ever consider herself the sister of *Darawk*? Oh, yes, Lonapal liked the God of Knowledge, as much as anyone could like somebody as singlemindedly devoted to garnering new information. But he was so meek, so boring, whereas Alyssa – she was bold and dashing, always after a new adventure, wherever she could find it. She was so vibrant, so alive! And yet she spent so much time with her brother...

Lonapal just didn’t understand. Maybe he should ask her?

Instead he wrapped his arms around her, enjoying how she pressed herself against him, and neither said a word.

Not until the ball of blue fire in the plaza suddenly changed its hue, turning golden for a moment, and then seemed to disgorge the familiar figure of Haguen. The guardian wasted no time with looking at his surroundings but marched straight towards the other two gods.

Both disentangled themselves quickly from each other. “What is the matter?” Lonapal asked quickly.

Haguen paused to nod an acknowledgement to Alyssa, then turned to the God of Light. “You are all required to return to the Eternal City now. Decirius has decreed that all the gods have to stay inside the city for the next sixty days. No visits to the midrealm or the mortal world are permitted.”

“Excuse me?” Alyssa shot up from the bench. “What in blazes is this about?! I am *not* going to stay cooped up in that marble cage for sixty days! And why should I?”

“Because Decirius has said you must,” Haguen said simply.

Lonapal rose and faced the guardian. “That is not sufficient. Surely Decirius has given a reason why this would be necessary?”

---

Unperturbed Haguen shook his head. “No, he hasn’t. Decirius is our lord, and it is within his powers to command us back to the city.”

“Oh, it’s that simple?” Alyssa shouted, barely noticing that her voice was loud enough to wake up every single villager. “Well, he can just forget about that. Go back to the city and tell Decirius that –

Her voice was cut off when the fireball turned golden once again, and now the chief god himself emerged from the flames. “What,” his icy voice asked, “should Haguen tell me?”

His appearance might have cowed Darawk (Lonapal certainly thought so), but its only effect on Alyssa was that she pushed Haguen aside and strode right over to confront the chief god. “Just one thing, Decirius. Lighten up! Stop this charade, and tell me whatever possessed you to come up with this idiotic order!”

Decirius lowered his head slightly. “I am sorry if you think this little of me, Alyssa. I am aware how much this is an infringement on your freedom as a goddess, and it pains me having to curb those liberties. Nonetheless, it is necessary.”

“Oh, yes? And what makes that necessary?!”

“That, dear Alyssa,” Decirius said and raised one hand, “you will learn when it is time. As of now, my word is enough. And my word says...” His hand suddenly fell down, and instead of the village’s plaza, all of the gods were standing at the gate of the Eternal City, its barred valves only a few feet away. “My word says,” Decirius said coldly, “that you are to remain here for sixty days. That is all you need to know.”

Alyssa wildly looked about herself, then stepped forward to grab the lapels of Decirius robe and shout, “How dare you –“

His cold voice interrupted her, “I am the God of Justice, and I am your lord, Alyssa.” No sooner had he finished speaking that Decirius stood five feet away from the goddess, completely calm and unruffled by her outburst. The goddess’ hands were clasping empty air, and with a look of growing fury she glanced towards the chief god. “Alyssa,” Decirius continued, “I understand your outburst, and I forgive it. That is just. It is also just that noone is allowed to leave the Eternal City for sixty days. Please, do not try it. Haguen, lock down the gate and all the other exits. I want every path in and out of the Eternal City barred.” He gave each of the other gods – including Haguen – a hard look, then he nodded to himself. “That will be all,” Decirius said. And disappeared, off to his study.

Lonapal frowned. He felt odd. Like... No, he knew of no comparison that was apt to this situation. Somehow he wasn’t free to do all he pleased to do, and... he didn’t like it, as little as Alyssa did.

And, with some surprise, he realized that Haguen didn’t appreciate the order that much, either. The guardian composed his face into a mask of dutiful obeisance, but there was a tinge of disbelief and lack of understanding behind that façade. With a slight jerk to his motions he walked over to the gate, stroked each valve, his fingers leaving a slight sparkle behind. Lonapal could feel the sparkle resonate in himself, could feel the nature of the gate change to something impenetrable. And Haguen walked on, trailing his fingers over the wall next to the gate, clearly intent on making the circumference of the Eternal City, closing it as he had been told to.

---

Nothing like this had ever happened. Decirius, proving his superiority over them in this manner? No, it had never happened. It had been inconceivable.

And yet, it had just occurred. Lonapal shook his head, walked frowning away from the gate, back to his home. He half expected Alyssa to run after him, involve him in a conversation about this. As a matter of fact, he would have liked that. But she didn't. Lonapal had to think about this alone, and perhaps that was the best way to do this.

Back in the midrealm, in the village, a woman stood frozen at the window of her hut, staring at the empty plaza and the ball of blue fire. Despite the loudness of Alyssa's scream, none of the others had dared look out their windows. Only this woman had seen how three gods had been whisked away against their will by another god, a dark and ill-boding figure. And one of those deities had been kind to her.

Caltraya clasped a hand to her chest. "I... will worship you tomorrow, my lady Alyssa," she whispered and wondered frantically what to make of the scene she had just witnessed.

---

---

## VII. Mortal Concerns

---

“Wants to shut me in, does he?” Maidoyú grinned victoriously and greeted the coming day with a whooping cry of joy. She was standing by the creek rolling through the hills outside of the Eternal City, the one that Mannannan had tinted with green. Ah, yes, a few hours earlier, that pesky god might just have been listening to her and once again pestered her about purpose this, purpose that.

Not now!

Decirius had ordered the gate closed, so that all the gods were to stay inside the Eternal City. “Forgot about somebody, didn’t you?” Maidoyú propped her fists on her hips and glared towards the glistening city walls. She had been lucky, she knew that. When Decirius had talked to Hagen, given the guardian the new orders, Maidoyú had been in a nearby house, watching the conversation between Darawk and the stranger. She had been wondering whether she should have asked who that old man was – he intrigued her, was somebody new, and Maidoyú really wanted to talk to somebody else. Just for a change, mind you. Only to find out how somebody else felt about all this purpose stuff.

But she hadn’t quite pulled her courage together – and then she had heard of Decirius ordering the abode closed off.

Now that was something she just didn’t care for. She *needed* to go to the mortal world every now and then, play at being one of the mortal creatures! She really, honestly *needed* that. As much as she loved the Eternal City, there were too many of her fellow gods about, and they were all so serious, so... ahhhhh, purposeful!

So, after hearing Decirius’ words, Maidoyú had hurried off to the gate and rushed out. It had felt so good standing outside the walls, preparing herself to jump to the mortal world and assuming once more the guise of a gargoyle, to soar through the skies. But just when she had been about to leave the divine area, Maidoyú had realized that she couldn’t leave the gate open. That would have been a clarion call to Decirius that one of the gods had gone missing – and she really didn’t want the chief god to find out very soon. He’d only try to track her down, she was sure. And then he’d be raining another tirade down at her that she was irresponsible.

No way she would accept that. Neither then nor now. So, she had angrily gone back inside and barred the gate again. Slamming a hand against one of the valves, she had cursed the fact that only Hagen and Decirius knew how to open and close it from outside, then Maidoyú had quickly hurried off to the midrealm, to the elven forest. She had stayed only a few moments, then jumped over to the mortal world, back to the heavens, over to the midrealm, then to the doors of a foreign divine abode, sticking out her tongue at the trio of gods standing guard, only to leap to some other location.

Maidoyú herself had lost track of all the places she had gone to in a very short sequence, and that alone was proof to her that Decirius would have an awful time trying to follow her. Then, as a *coup de grâce*, she had come to the Eternal City’s area – sure that this would be the last place Decirius would ever start a search.

---

And, she whooped again, she had been right!

The gate was still closed, although the light of day was filling the area with colors. Hagen hadn't resumed his guard position, and with a sneaky grin, Maidoyú thought that he might be trying to pursue her right now. "Hah, try he might!" she said smugly and imagined how Hagen would spend a long time searching each of her visiting points for a clue where she had gone next or what she had done.

Whatever. A fun image, all right, but now there were important things to do. The mortal world, Maidoyú reminded herself. Finally, she could enjoy herself!

Not caring to wait any longer, Maidoyú propelled herself on to the skies of the mortal world, reappearing there with the rocky wings of a gargoyle, already spread to fly on the winds. Bright sunlight shone down on her, Lonapal's blessing warmth creeping through the cold of her stone body.

Yes, this was *it!* She shrieked, her voice now a harsh and grating sound that seemed to run the course around the world. Far below her she could see the land, a brown and gray mélange of rock and dirt, suitably enhanced by the mound of a volcano slowly seeping dark red flows of lava down its sides. The smell of sulphur rose into her nostrils, its refreshing burn rushing up straight into her silicone brain.

Another shriek, then she swooped down, circling towards a nice patch of jagged rock, a precipice over a stream of lazy lava. Her claws found easy purchase while she tugged her wings in and looked around whether any other gargoyles were in the area, perhaps feasting on the tasty morsels the volcano was spewing.

None were around, despite the fact that there were quite a few of the still warm rocks around. "More for me!" Maidoyú laughed. The words were barely understandable, distorted as they were by the gargoyle throat she now possessed. But Maidoyú enjoyed that sound all the same, particularly when she didn't have to worry about anybody else reminding her to speak better. Oh, right, just imagine Mannannan now! *"You are a goddess, child. It does not matter which form you take, you must always behave like a goddess."*

Very un-divinely she threw herself at one of the rocks, hacked it into maw-sized pieces with her claw and scooped them from the ground greedily. They were terrific. Filling and nutritious. Forget about nutritious, she wanted more!

For a while Maidoyú hastened about the rocky ground, searching for more of the special stones with the singlemindedness of a true gargoyle, focused only on more food. But then she started to feel sated, and only indulged herself with a few pounds more. Enough to give a real creature a bellyache, but goddesses didn't have to bother with that kind of a nuisance after all.

Eventually she dropped down on an oblong piece of rock, carved out by streams of lava years ago, spread her body out fully, the tips of her wings drooping over the edges of the rock, her head propped up just so on the front. "Take that, Decirius," she muttered, enjoying the warmth and the sulphuric vapors around her.

The claws on her hindfeet lazily scratched patterns into the rock, while she looked around – and froze all of a sudden. "Now this is different," Maidoyú whispered, gathered her body up again – the

---

pesky body protesting that a couple more rays of sunshine wouldn't have hurt – and leaped a couple of yards off from the rock.

She landed on dirt ground, muddy from recent rain and not yet dried. Not all the way, at least. Right before her, there was something very intriguing and strange.

Footprints.

Footprints that looked much like those of a god. Except that this one must have had long claws, on both ends of the foot. And they were pretty big, too.

Maidoyú changed back into her usual form – and regretted it right away when the vapors started to choke her and send bile up her throat. With a curse she forced down the urges – she *was* a goddess after all -, then she carefully put one of her bare feet into the print in the mud. The print was a goodly two inches wider on each side.

But the shape was roughly the same.

Which creature of the mortal world could have left this print? Not gargoyles or dragons or any of the others she had seen so far.

Maidoyú whooped with joy, switched back to her gargoyle appearance – better suited to this environment, anyway – and started to follow the footprints. There was something new to see, something new to play with!

---

---

## VIII. The Tiny and the Divine

---

“Do you know what this is?” Shenaumac grinned, his squat figure seated on a couch in his large, airy home. The entire building he had claimed for himself consisted of only this single room, eerily reminiscent of Decirius’ study – except that this place was bathed in light, the walls clearly visible, their stark walls rising to a ceiling hundreds of feet above them. On Shenaumac’s lap, a ball of orange fur lay curled up, purring sounds issuing from somewhere within the ball – presumably where the head was.

Koultirsp hissed, “It’s a cat, that’s all.” She raised up her lithe figure, let her three tails beat the ground behind her restlessly. “Little good-for-nothings, that’s what they are. Couldn’t make it in the mortal world more than two or three heartbeats. Herbivores! They can’t even hunt for their food! Whoever was so foolish to create these – these things?!”

Shenaumac smiled, stroked gently the cat’s fur. “Oh, they are worth something. You know, Tirspie, I’ve made a few enhancements to them. Just a few. I’ll ask Decirius whether I be allowed to take care of them. What do you think?” The latter he hadn’t addressed to the goddess but rather to the cat, holding it up by its forelegs and grinning into its little face. The cat hissed, disappointed that the stroking had ended, but Shenaumac nudged its little nose with his own. In gratitude, the cat buried its teeth in his nose – unable to pierce the god’s skin, of course.

Koultirsp didn’t pay any attention. She was shaking her head, her tails intertwining nervously. “Would you stop playing with that? There’s more important business at hand!”

“Business?” Shenaumac asked, let the cat drop back into his lap and patted it softly on its head. “Has something happened that I should know of?”

“Has something happened?!” Koultirsp screamed angrily. “Decirius has locked us in! We’re not to leave the Eternal City for sixty days! Sixty bloody days! We can’t even go to the midrealm – and those villagers there, I’ve still got some issues with them!”

The cat started to purr again, hesitating at first, but then it grew more comfortable, and its noise grew louder. Smiling, Shenaumac stroked its head. “Well, is there a reason?”

“How can you be so calm?” the goddess whirled around and pointed a finger at him. “Haven’t you understood what I just told you? Are you dumb? We can’t leave! I’ve spent all morning trying to find an exit, but that idiot Haguen has sealed up the entire circumference. We’re stuck here!”

“Oh, Tirspie, it’s –“

“Don’t call me that!” Koultirsp exploded. “You know my name! And you will use it! Or shall I destroy your little plaything, your *cat*? You know you can’t stop me!”

Shenaumac calmly continued stroking the creature. “Would you prefer me to grovel for its survival? Is that why you’ve come here? You can’t play with the beings in the midrealm, so you pick on me. Get it over with, I’m busy.”

---

“You won’t be busy for long!” The goddess raised her hand, ready to throw a lightning bolt at the cat, burning it out from Shenaumac’s lap. “I thought you had some common sense, but you don’t, you fool. Now pay the price!” She started laughing, then twitched her fingers and sent gleaming fire shooting through the air, straight at the cat.

The lightning bolt dispersed before it hit its target, flaking apart into tiny sparks that burned black holes into the couch and the walls. The cat looked up at the disturbance, without any real interest in the lightshow, then started licking its fur. Shenaumac clucked happily, watching the cat’s every move enthusiastically.

“How...” Koultirsp muttered, glancing down at her hand as if it had withered away. “You’re the weakest of all of us, you’re just the God of Sharpened Things. You couldn’t have –“

Shenaumac rubbed his nose on the cat’s head, mumbling, “Looks like I did, though.”

Emptily the goddess shouted, “But you can’t!” She knew it was futile, but she tried to fire another bolt of lightning. It fared no better than the first. Enraged, Koultirsp turned around and rushed towards the exit – remembering halfway there that she had a better way of leaving and vanished into thin air.

The moment she had disappeared, Shenaumac sighed painfully and raised his head. Beads of sweat were gathering on his forehead, a grimace of pain embedded on his face. “Thank goodness she’s gone, little one,” he muttered to the cat. “The next one would have fried the both of us.”

Ignorant of the meaning of the words, the cat rolled around on its back and offered its belly for some good scratching. Shenaumac took a deep breath, then obeyed the cat’s commands. “What I don’t do for you, my little one. Well, now,” he then said, rolled the cat back over – it mewed petulantly – and put it on the ground. A protesting stare from the feline later, Shenaumac gave his right hand a twist – and a mouse appeared dangling from his fingers.

The cat immediately perked up, focusing its eyes on the mouse.

“Can’t hunt,” Shenaumac repeated Koultirsp’s words sarcastically and flung the mouse a few feet away. The rodent immediately skittered away, piping in nervous fright.

For good reason, it turned out a few heartbeats later when the apparently lazy orange cat suddenly transformed into a streak of lightning shooting over the floor, claws clattering on the floor. The mouse zig-zagged, tried to escape, but the cat wasted little time before one of its paws landed heavily on the mouse’s tail. Fangs bared, the cat proceeded to sniff the creature, before letting it go again. For a few moments, the mouse resumed its frantic course, then the cat shot into action once more, just as determined and effective as before. This time, though, hunger won out, and the fangs sunk into the mouse’s flesh.

“Herbivores!” Shenaumac laughed. “You should have asked me about the enhancements I made, Tirspie. Poor little Tirspie, you have *no* idea what ‘sharpened things’ can be good for!”

The mouse had vanished by now, and the cat looked back towards Shenaumac, as lazy and immobile as it had seemed before. Shenaumac chuckled, twisted his hand twice, then he flung two mice in opposite directions. At first the cat was entranced by the skittering, wild movements of the

---

mice, looking in vain for some hiding place. Then, slowly, the cat got up and trotted in the direction of one rodent – suddenly leaping on it.

Holding his aching side, Shenaumac settled back on his couch and watched with utter glee how the cat played with the mice before devouring them.

---

---

## IX. Dwarven Mystery

---

Furiously the hydra's many jaws snapped at Taurkémad, parts of her dress hanging slashed from its fangs. The goddess held the creature back with her hands, exasperatedly looking at the ground for what she had been trying to inspect when the hydra had shot from its nearby hiding place. Taurkémad had grown three more arms, each of her slender hands on one of the hydra's snouts, effortlessly keeping it at bay.

One of its heads reared back, reddish eyes glaring in uncomprehending anger at the tiny morsel of food before it – a morsel that it could not reach, whichever way its heads tried to snake around, find a place where there wasn't a hand already waiting for it. The hydra screamed.

Taurkémad shouted in frustration, "What are *you* complaining about? I haven't hurt you, have I? Now let me look at this, will you?"

The hydra wasn't in the mood to comply – amongst other things because it couldn't understand the words –, and its heads continued their onslaught, its own frustration rising.

Taurkémad fought down her urge to just slay the creature and be done with it. It would have been easy, of course. Snuff out the spark of life, send the hydra on to the midrealm and whatever Decirius would want to do with it then. But she didn't enjoy doing that. There was a reason why creatures were sent to the mortal world, why they had been made mortal in the first place. It was a precious gift, life was. It should never be willfully taken, by anyone, for any reason.

And that reason for life was a good one. She had never delved too deeply into that philosophy, but she knew it was very sound and important. So very much she had never felt she needed a precise explanation.

Taurkémad frowned, subconsciously continuing to fend off the hydra. Why had she never asked for that reason? Decirius had to know. She could have asked him at any time in the past millenia, yet she had never done so. Was it because of his ill-boding nature, his moodiness? No, certainly not, she chuckled – only adding to the hydra's confusion. There had been plenty of occasions when she had bothered the chief god with something he deemed unimportant. Just like this incident about the dwarves. But the question of why there was a mortal world, and why the creatures of this place had to die sooner or later – it never had seemed important enough to even consider. Not even in her own mind.

Come to think of it, she still didn't want to ponder it. Life. Death. Topics that did not concern a god. Perhaps Darawk, but that one was interested in the silliest of things.

One hydra head made it through her defenses, bit its sharp fangs deep into her right leg. Or rather, its fangs tried to. All they managed to do was shred her dress even further, exposing the long stretch of her tanned leg which somehow proved impenetrable to the teeth.

Taurkémad looked down at herself. Her dress had been turned into a rag, barely hanging onto her body. Most of it was in the hydra's jaws. She shook her head, reached out with two of her hands –

---

both instantly formed – to grasp one of the massive reptilian skulls and looked deeply into the red, maddened eyes. “I am sorry for what I am about to do. You will feel a bit disoriented, but that will be all your trouble. There’ll be a new place for you to hide. And don’t worry, I won’t send you to Decirius.”

The creature howled through its jaw locked tight in Taurkémad’s grip. The head that had failed to bite into her leg was shaking itself, snapping its jaws emptily at the air as if checking if it still worked. The others were futilely trying to break through the defense of the many-handed goddess.

Then Taurkémad smiled softly and nodded at the creature. That same instant, a soft glow formed around the hydra, seeping into the creature’s lizard hide – and it was gone. Hundreds of miles away, in a forest clearing, the same glow appeared, slowly dimming and leaving behind a hydra that nearly tied its heads into a knot trying to understand what had just happened.

Finally alone, the goddess folded her arms before her chest, then annoyedly looked down at the folds of arms before her (and along her sides and her back). She sighed, shook her head, and most of the arms save for the traditional two vanished. The same moment a new dress, resplendently decorated with gold embroidery on a soft, velvet green, appeared on her body. The shreds of her previous clothes fell to the ground, joining the other remainders.

Taurkémad smiled, created a mirror out of the air to look at herself. “Not bad,” she said, as she took a few steps sideways to observe how the velvety cloth underlined her movements. She also liked how it looked in front of the backdrop, the lush tropical forest surrounding her.

The dwarves’ tunnel from their cave had exited some seventy miles to the east of here, at the foot of a mountain. If they had chosen a slightly different angle, they would have continued digging for a good while longer. As it was, they had come out to a place of breathtaking beauty, full of plants and animals. A constant cacophony was in the air, birdsong rivaled by the deep screams of dragons and so many other creatures. Flitters, the tiny rainbow-colored creatures, rushed about through the air, beating their wings fast and urgently, blurring together into a maelstrom of colors.

The poor little dwarves must have been stunned when they saw this, after their long existence in their cave. It couldn’t be called austere anymore, not after how the dwarves had enhanced it with their artwork, but compared to this realm of light and life, the caves were dark and dull.

She wondered how long the dwarves had stayed at the mouth of the tunnel, staring in amazement – and perhaps fear – at their new surrounding. The mountain, she thought, must have given them a bit of support, something rocky and familiar nearby.

There had been the remains of a campfire, wood felled by their *gahnú* axes. They had spent darktime there, probably exhausted from their long digging. Perhaps more than one darktime – there were the remains of quite a lot of plants and animals scattered around the campsite. As much as that sight had revolted her, she understood only too well how the dwarves must have felt, how they had needed to see all these wonders around them up close. And, yes, look at their insides, too, apparently.

And consume them.

---

Taurkémad shuddered. She knew that was the way of the mortal world, to kill something and eat it, be it an animal or a plant. To take life, to sustain one's own. To a degree, the same was true of the midrealm. There, of course, the kill immediately was given a new, living form somewhere else. There was little pain involved, and Taurkémad could almost accept the midrealm way of hunting. Almost.

Be that as it may, this was the mortal world, and her little dwarves had to live.

She sighed. At least following their tracks had been easy. Very easy, in fact. The dwarves had cut a deep gash into the rainforest with their *gahnú* axes, tearing down mammoth trees (the remains of which would feed generations of other creatures, she assuaged her concerns) in the process.

The trail had led here, to a rockier place. A small hill rose next to her, at its bottom the cave where the hydra had been hidden. Only a few of the giant trees grew here, most of the vegetation small bushes, with a small stream peacefully running through the green ground. A stony lip ran along the creek's edge, overgrown with moss. It was probably the closest the dwarves could feel to home, with this much stone and relatively little plant life around.

But what had they been doing here?

Taurkémad knelt down and reached out for the object that drawn her interest before the hydra had appeared. It was a stone, small and sharp. Not natural, obviously. It was vaguely oval, and the top half of it looked as if it had been cut off by an axe, trying to form an edge.

Why would the dwarves need stone edges? They had their axes, had they not? Nothing could withstand the *gahnú* – the rocks in their midrealm caverns were proof enough of that. But there were more stones on the ground, looking much like the one she was holding. Some were bigger, some smaller, and all showed signs that an axe had been trying to work it. Trying to create a sharp edge, one that could cut. Some remainders of wooden logs were scattered around here, too.

She frowned. If she didn't know better, she would think that the dwarves had been attempting to build new axes for themselves, from the materials that this place offered.

Why would they do that? There was absolutely no reason. And, she shuddered again, if they were to rely on stone axes rather than *gahnú*, what were their chances in this world? How could they possibly survive the assault of a hydra? They weren't gods, they were only mortals now!

Taurkémad dropped the stone and looked around. There wasn't a trace of the axes. The dwarves hadn't dropped them. Good. So they hadn't ignored that line of defense. Why, why, why?

She shook her head. She had to find the dwarves and guide them back to their safe caverns in the midrealm. Then she could also get all the answers she needed.

First, though, she had to resume the trail. It wasn't as easy as before – no clear gap cut into the treeline, no nothing. Taurkémad looked at the mossy edge of the creek. There were footprints in the moss. Of course! Why work hard and cut down trees when you could just walk along the edge?

Triumphantly she followed the trail, whistling a tune to herself that sounded a bit like the songs of the birds in the rain forest. Two flitters shot by her, barely avoiding her face, the little creatures eagerly racing for a flowering plant in the middle of the river. Taurkémad spent a moment watching as the flitters settled on the plant, each in a separate bud of orange flower, to suck it dry of nectar.

---

Then she whistled and walked on, looking occasionally at the mossy ground before her lest she lose the tracks. At some point, she suddenly halted and stared at the prints before her. Had the dwarves doubled back?

No, they hadn't. Their footprints would have to be reversed in that case.

Still, what she saw was not possible. There were only four dwarves, each bearing a *gadnú* axe.

But there were the footprints of *eight* dwarves in the moss before her, and four of those pairs of feet were markedly smaller and more slender than the others. Whatever could that mean? she wondered, pushed out her jaw and floated up to follow the trail faster than her legs could.

She would find her little dwarves, and then those four fellows had a *lot* of explaining to do!

---

---

## X. In A Marble Cage

---

Alyssa was pacing up and down the granite top of the stairs, her steps falling hard and fast. She was still wearing the villager's clothes she had two days ago, Lonapal noted with concern when he walked up the slightly rising ramp to the oval plaza, adorned with statues of all the gods, arrayed in a star formation.

The old man was sitting at the foot of the granite stairs, absentmindedly tapping his walking stock in rhythm with Alyssa's footsteps. The building behind both of them was a meeting place the gods had favored a few millenia ago, with benches to lie on and consume some delicacies from the mortal world while talking, and listening to Taurkémad or Decirius singing. Lonapal remembered that he had always been amazed at Decirius' love for song, particularly the cheerful, jaunty ones.

Over time, though, they had drifted to other places, like Mannannan's miniature ocean or Haguen's watchhouse. Lonapal wasn't sure when he had been on this oval plaza the last time. It must have been a very long time ago.

Yet the sight seemed very familiar. Seven of the benches had been moved onto the plaza, along with some of the tables. Two paintings hung in midair, their colorful displays a strangely comforting sight to Lonapal's eyes. On one of the benches, Mannannan sat, wearing a skintight blue suit that perfectly blended into his elven-style blue skin. He watched his own statue, showing him holding a pool of water in his hand, and right now, the stone had turned to real water, churning and turning inside the statue's hands. Apparently absorbed by this sight, he paid no attention to Haguen sitting on the next bench, before a table laden with fruit from the mortal world. Haguen's cuirass was on the ground, while its owner heartily bit into a slice of melon.

Very familiar, and Lonapal would have gladly joined Haguen in his feast. There were a few faces missing, most conspicuously that of Decirius. He was quite happy that Koultirsp was nowhere in sight – she most certainly had not forgotten her anger at him because of the midrealm villagers. Darawk's absence was unsurprising; he probably had found some trivial detail that he needed to investigate thoroughly. But where was Shenaumac? He used to be always close whenever the other gods gathered, trying to join in the conversation every now and then – even though his remarks usually didn't warrant any attention, of course. That he was not here, in this strange circumstance, was troubling to Lonapal.

So was the fact that neither Taurkémad nor Maidoyú were in the plaza, either. When he had sensed this gathering, he had hoped that Taurkémad would be here, to grace them with a song or two.

"Hello, Lonapal," Haguen greeted him with a wave of his hand – holding the green shell of his melon.

Lonapal smiled and shook his head at the sorry sight. "Haguen," he acknowledged him and strolled towards one of the free benches. "Can you spare any of those fruits?"

---

“Why, certainly,” the guardian god nodded and moved half the contents of his table to one close to Lonapal. The God of Light gladly pulled the table to him and looked it over for a fruit that particular appealed to his fancy.

Before he could finish taking stock, Alyssa’s voice bit through the air, “There you are, Lonapal! Where have you been the past two days? Moping, or what?”

“I beg your pardon?” Lonapal looked up and found that Alyssa was suddenly standing before him, glaring angrily at him.

“Save the begging for another time,” Alyssa rolled her eyes. “Now explain yourself. Please.” The last word was an afterthought, obviously.

Well, Lonapal appreciated that she thought of that word at all, and shrugged. “I have been thinking. With all that has happened, I felt it was necessary. Did I miss something?”

Alyssa opened her mouth to say something scathing and furious, but Haguen interjected, “Maidoyú and Taurkémad have escaped. Decirius thinks they’re in the mortal world.”

Lonapal stared at the guardian god – and suddenly realized that he didn’t look happy at all. He had only seemed so at first sight, digging into his food as he was. Yet now Lonapal noticed the creases of worry in his face, that his eyes were drooping. “If that is the case,” the God of Light asked slowly, “why are you here? Has Decirius not ordered you to fetch the two of them, as you have brought Alyssa and me back to the Eternal City.”

“Exactly!” Alyssa said and pointed over her shoulder to the central statue of Decirius. “He’s charged Shenaumac with that task. Shenaumac! The little twerp is the only one who has been *allowed* to leave the Eternal City. Poor Haguen had to open a gateway for Shenaumac to pass through, and then close it, rather than go himself.”

“It was Decirius’ choice, and it is my duty to obey,” Haguen said in a low voice.

“It is your *duty*,” Alyssa said forcefully, “to guard the gate and our city. Including its inhabitants. Decirius is ignoring that duty!”

Haguen shrugged. Lonapal could tell that the shrug did not come easily. “He is our lord, and the lord’s will be done. It does not become me to question his decisions.”

“Well, I for one find it very becoming,” Alyssa hissed. “You could do with some backbone, Haguen. You should be the one asking why the gate is locked. Why you are sitting here and stuffing your stomach full of fruit instead of standing at the gate – *or* looking for our fellow goddesses.” She whirled about, darted a glance at Mannannan who twitched his pointy ears slightly. At the stairs, the old man slowly got to his feet, leaning on his stick and watching the discourse with great interest. “We have to do something!” Alyssa shouted. “Are we gods or are we creatures of the midrealm?! We have a will of our own, and mine tells me that I want to leave this town.”

Haguen reached out for an apple – and froze in astonishment when Alyssa slapped the apple away from him. “Stop that! You can eat later on, all right? It’s not like you *need* to eat.”

“No,” Haguen said and rose from the bench, towering over the smaller goddess, “I do not have to. But I *want* to. Are you trying to curtail my freedom of will?”

---

If he had thought to intimidate her, he failed miserably. Instants later, Alyssa grew to twice the guardian god's size, folded her arms before her chest and said in a booming voice, "If I am, it is only for your best. Don't try to use my own words against me. Now sit back down, and let's talk about what –"

"No." Haguen quickly matched Alyssa's size, so he could look her straight in the eyes. Below them, Lonapal moved the tables and benches aside with Mannannan's help. If they were to continue to grow, they might wind up breaking something. Lonapal shared a quick glance with the God of the Sea, but Mannannan only raised his arms and rolled his eyes.

Moments later their fears proved right, when both Alyssa and Haguen doubled their size again, this time enough that their legs threatened to smash two of the statues. What were they trying to achieve? Lonapal wondered and listened in amazement to the next exchange of angry words that kept revolving about Alyssa's need to do something and Haguen's desire to eat.

So meaningless! So ridiculous!

Near the stairs, the old man was watching silently, his face a still mask. Lonapal had heard about him, of course, only a short while after the stranger had arrived at the Eternal City, but he hadn't spoken to him. Right now, he felt embarrassed that this man was witnessing this spat between Haguen and Alyssa. No foreign god should ever see this!

Not to mention that Lonapal himself didn't want to see this.

Before the two gods could grow again, he put a cheerful face on and shouted, "How about a game, everyone? Let us play charades!"

"What?!" both Alyssa and Haguen boomed down from their enormous height. Alyssa alone continued, "That isn't going to solve anything!"

Haguen asked distractedly, "And what *are* charades?"

Lonapal smiled at Alyssa who didn't look too knowledgeable either. "It is a game that the villagers of the midrealm enjoy. One person makes gestures that indicate parts of words, and the others have to guess which is the true meaning of each of the gestures and the complete word or phrase. The villagers are quite apt at this, and they often play it in the evening, before darktime."

Alyssa shook her head, slowly shrinking to her normal size. "You mean Callie's people?"

"That is true," Lonapal nodded eagerly. Yes! She was forgetting about her anger! Joy shot through him, anticipating that they all would be smiling in a few moments, laughing at the antics of one of them trying to gesture some obscure word. Just like the villagers! "The game will be fun," he assured her, also looking around at the others.

"A game," Alyssa echoed, her lips drawn tight. "Lonapal, I'm not in the mood for games."

"How uncommon," Haguen guffawed, still at his enormous size.

The goddess craned her head back to look up at the guardian god, clearly unimpressed. "Once you quit playing, I might talk to you again. Hope for that moment, Haguen. And there's my statue. Pray to it, that might help. Old man," Alyssa fired a glance over towards the stairs, "accompany me, please. I want to go look for my brother. He's liable to be better company than any of you."

With that she strolled off, not looking around to see if the old man followed her.

---

Slowly, shaking his head, the stranger did just that, leaning heavily on his walking stick with every step.

The remaining three gods watched them leave. Mannannan patted Haguen's calf, currently as tall as the entire God of the Sea. "Do charades sound fine to you, my overgrown friend? At this size, you could eat fruit trees and not be sated, after all."

Lonapal's heart sank. Mannannan only wanted to lighten the situation, he was sure, but Lonapal also had a better view of the guardian god's face. "I have to inspect the walls," Haguen said, already stalking off – in the opposite direction of Alyssa. He didn't bother to reduce his height, not even when he realized that the road he wanted to take did not fit his broad shoulders. Regardless he walked on, tearing deep gashes into the stone walls and raining debris onto the ground.

Mannannan frowned and shook his head. "He does not take this well, does he?"

"No, he does not," Lonapal agreed. He made a gesture with his hand, sweeping the debris up and merging it back into the buildings. "It has only been two days. What will this city look like after the sixty that Decirius has decreed?"

***TO BE CONTINUED***

---