

**WATCHER**  
**OF THE**  
**GODS**

**Justin Irabor, 2013**

## Foreword

I really have to thank you, dear reader, for downloading most of my half-finished and work-in-progress manuscripts. I appreciate it. I'm not usually effusive, so you may not be able to read my excitement whenever you holler and go '*yo, I read your work man!*' but it's there. Trust me, it's there.

In this work today, I would like to give a little background story. This 'draft' you are about to read is a tale that has been in my mental back burner since 2011. The first story was a short titled "The Ceremonial Tortoise" and it was a random Facebook post which garnered much comments. I later posted it experimentally last year on my blog ([www.iraborjustin.wordpress.com](http://www.iraborjustin.wordpress.com)) under the title "Dood – An Introduction) and I was urged to make it into a book.

Brethren I have tried.

Twice have I tried since then to convert it into a book, and twice have I failed. I'm working myself up on this one, 'cos I have a cacophony of ideas in my head, each one fighting with the other to feature on my paper. I'm the poster boy for *too much of everything is bad*, people! I have so much ideas I'm stumped. Paradox.

What you're going to read here is two alternative beginnings to the book that I have discarded. I am now working on a better one – with fleshed out characters, less dry humor and more intrigue. I'm moving from kid's storybook mentality to something more....chewy ☺

Remember, soon as you read this, you can always holler on my blog or on twitter with my handle: [www.twitter.com/TheVunderkind](http://www.twitter.com/TheVunderkind).

I like me some reviews ☺

Thanks!

# DOOD

## Prologue

Not everyone believes in myths.

To many, myths are stories to be told to children who would not lap up the last blobs of soup from their plates (“*the unfinished soup monster will have your eyes, Shareena!*”), or to explain a mystery, usually one people are too ashamed to admit they are downright clueless about. Some schools of thought argue that the *Explained Vagueness* theory fuels the tales told to children as a deterrent for bad behavior, but others argue that the reverse is also true.

People have always been curious about death. Historical evidence suggests that the first woman on the lakh had stared curiously at her husband for days on end when he had dropped dead. It was a strange and mildly interesting phenomenon for her, and after she had poked at him repeatedly (and for several days), she had grown bored and buried him in the yard.

Besides he had begun to smell.

A popular scientist (now deceased), *Albert du Adroite*, postulated several theories which caused an uproar in the Great Hall of Debate deep in the heart of the city of Benway. *Albert du Adroite* stated that *there was not one death, but several, each in charge of a geographic demarcation of the lakh*. He explained that when a man died, for example, on a journey, he was taken by the death in charge of the town (or village, or sometimes, brothel) he had died in.

Several scholars argued against his theory, most notable of which was Sir Phineas Argoyle. Argoyle argued that death was a universal constant, and as such, it was preposterous to think that there were “several little deaths running around, which is, as I said earlier, preposterous!”

The Great Hall of Debate had cheered Argoyle and jeered at Albert du Adroite, who had then dramatically fled the hall and headed home where he hung himself.

If Albert had not been too melodramatic about his rejection, he would have cracked a smile at what was happening at King Throvian of Byzma’s dungeon this yellow evening.

King Throvian blinked liquidly at his prisoner, and his prisoner returned the stare, admittedly with a little less moisture.

Deep in the dungeon, there wasn't much light, as the only light supplied was from the lamp in the palm of a slave. As slaves go, this one was particularly well endowed with all the trappings of a slave, for she kept her eyes straight, held the lamp without so much as a twitch in her arm, so the flames danced very little and the shadows in the dungeon were quite stable.

The old king's shadow was hunched forward, while his prisoner's was seated straight, hood prominent even in the silhouette.

The king sipped noisily from his cup.

"The imprisonment would be half bearable if you didn't keep doing that."

The king laughed. "What fun would it be if I cannot annoy you, Fred?"

The hooded prisoner shifted uneasily. "My name is not Fred."

The king threw his head back and barked again. "Have some tea, Fred."

The hood trembled. "No. I am diabetic."

The king was shaking with more laughter. "I know! I know! It's just funny that – " gasp – "that you, of all people, should be diabetic."

"The wages of sin, after all, is death," the prisoner replied coldly.

Both men fell silent. The slave stared on, and anyone observing her at that time would notice the blank stare in her face, as though several years of slavery had taught her to be in the same room with her masters and not hear a single word or even derive personal gossipy pleasure from knowing something other people didn't.

The conversation happening in the dungeon that evening was the same conversation that had occurred once every week, for fifteen years in the city of Byzma, and no one else knew about it.

No one even knew the king had a prisoner in the dungeon, and the king wasn't keen on letting anyone know just yet.

"How long has it been now, Fred? How long ago has it been since I captured you?"

"My name is not Fred!" the prisoner snarled, and for a minute, fiery-red sparks flew out from under his hood. King Throvian drew away, startled, but the slave remained admirably transfixed.

The king smiled maliciously. “How long has it been?”

“Fourteen years, eleven months, and two weeks.”

The king nodded, satisfied. “For someone who doesn’t get out too often, you do keep up with the calendar,” and he chuckled to himself.

“Please, Throvian. You have to let me out. You have to let me out now.”

“Ah. No, Fred. No. I quite enjoy your company here. The people are happier with you absent, and Byzma is finally becoming a place to live in. Do you think I would be a fool to let you out when everything’s going so great?”

The hooded prisoner sighed. “People will die, anyway. If you let me out now, only a few people will die. If you don’t, everybody will die! The whole lakh will die!”

His words did not echo for effect; the dungeon’s walls were too thick for that, but King Throvian shuddered still.

“You lie!” he shrieked, masking fear with outrage. “No one will die! They’ll only die if I let you out!”

“Listen, Throvian. You’ve read everything you need to know about me. You know – I do not lie.”

King Throvian paused. “Indeed, you do not...”

The prisoner leaned forward eagerly. “Let me out. Before it is too late. You have only two weeks left.”

Throvian bowed his head, apparently in deep thought as he weighed the words of the fiery-eyed prisoner.

Finally he spoke. “If I let you out now...will – will I die?”

There was that brief moment of communication, as the prisoner stared into Throvian’s eyes, and although Throvian could not see his eyes, (since the spark in his eyes had long died out, the prisoner’s eyes were once more hidden underneath his purple hood), Throvian felt an understanding flow between him and the person at the other side of the dungeon gate.

“No,” he whispered heavily. “If I release you, I’ll die.”

“Yesss...” the prisoner’s voice came in spine-crawling chills.

Throvian raised his head to meet the hooded prisoner’s eyes(?), and he turned to his slave.

“Rahinka, let us go. This meeting is over, Death.”

The hooded prisoner tilted his head a little higher. He gave the impression that he was smiling under his hood, and his voice registered bitter joy. “I knew you would call me by my proper name one day, Throvian.”

The king did not turn back, but kept walking until he and his slave disappeared, plunging the prisoner into the pitch-blackness he rather morbidly fancied.

Albert du Adroite had been right, and Argoyle was an idiot.

## Chapter One

The forest of Gueth was one of those forbidden forests that were so forbidden that you weren't even allowed to think about it. Once upon a time, it was rumored, a young lad had ventured valiantly into the forest to seek the tree of life, and he had never returned. That was not terrible news in itself, seeing as people had often taken the evening carriage that led from Byzma to Benway and never returned, having been sucked into the characteristic wealth with which the Benway citizens lived. No, it was not worth a town crier's hoarse voice that the young lad had disappeared after visiting the forest of Gueth. What happened had been worse and the citizens of the city often spoke of it in hushed voices while telling ghost tales over camp fires.

The young man – Eloweth, he was called – had gone into the forest to get the tree of life for his mother, who was an old witch the town would have been happy to be rid off (but to young Eloweth, she was the best thing since yeast bread), and his disappearance marked the beginning of politics in the city. His disappearance had roused another man, Alsonae, to organize a search party in search of the boy. While they never did find him (everyone was too terrified to enter the forest), the search party returned, greatly impressed with Alsonae for even having the idea of getting a search party together that he was, quite unceremoniously, made king of the - then – tiny village of Byzma.

Since then, Byzma had grown into a city, with walls and towers and shit, and statutory laws and criminal lawyers and *politics*. It was this politics which arose with the disappearance of Eloweth in the forest of Gueth that caused the mention of the forest – or even the *thought* of it – to be a punishable offence in the city.

Since it has been clearly explained that only a fool would have a heated debate with a friend at a public drinking place over the location of the forest of Gueth, it may be totally redundant to say that Dood, who had that morning arisen with the intent of visiting the forest, was by all definitions a fool.

Dood had set off as early as he could to beat the first sentry, who had become rather sloppy in watching for intruders since he had caught his wife milking his neighbor's cow (and afterwards, his neighbor), and he was well out of the city gates before the first cock crow.

At eighteen, Dood was really a grown man who loved to pretend he was still a child, and his parents found this amusing as they had plans to turn him out of the house at nineteen. He had very few passions, but he was a green-fingered fellow who had a thriving garden in his parents' backyard where he experimented with the properties of roots.

Dood had large, floppy ears, which gave him the impression of being a rather attentive shrew, but he was really a very distracted person who cared for very little in life.

As he set off towards the forest of Gueth, Reason and Logic debated the foolishness of his quest.

Reason said, "Oy, I know he is a fool, but I didn't expect him to be this foolish."

Logic coughed, for logic was proud indeed, and found Reason too patient with idiots. "I surmise that we shall be watching a family grieve tonight."

"Don't say that, Logic. Be nice."

"Premise: foolish son ventures into the forest. Second premise: foolish son never returns home. Conclusion: Parents will grieve tonight. Figure it out, Reason."

"I am just tired."

But Dood neither spoke nor understood the language of Reason or Logic, so he trudged on towards the forest.

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Gismuth stared at his pallid features in the mirror, and managed to convince himself that he was the most handsome person he had ever seen. Licking the tips of his fingers, he slicked back what was left of his receding hairline and smiled at his reflection.

His reflection, begrudgingly, returned the smile.

In about an hour, his father would be awoken, and the administrative horse shit that was required to keep the kingdom running would begin. His father would put on the crown, and he would sit on the throne, and he would rule.

Very few people knew, but Gismuth's father wasn't even content with being the head of Byzma. As he often said, Byzma was what would happen if a city like Benway decided to take a mildly diarrheal shit. The only good thing that had happened in Byzma, Gismuth realized, was the *paucity of death*, as one of the wise men in the palace had called it.

For some mysterious reason, the people of Byzma had stopped dying roughly fifteen years ago. The king had been as befuddled as everyone else, but he had quickly understood the public relations potential it had for the city of Byzma, and he had ordered all the city-wide artists to assemble before the throne, where they were charged to make catchy slogans.

Now, everywhere you looked, you saw sign posts with words like: “Welcome to Byzma, the City that Never Sleeps!”, “Long Live the King (Literally)”, “Byzma – not a great place to be if you’re dying to do anything.”

Byzma’s popularity had flown to every corner of the lakh, and even though very few people believed the story about a city that couldn’t die, some decided to skeptically give it a try, and they found out to their pleasant surprise that immortality embraced them the instant they crossed the gates.

Tourism at its finest.

Old people who wanted one more year to put their house in order paid for expensive trips to the distant city of Byzma, where they found themselves old but alive. True, they were blind, deaf in one ear and usually required a change of undergarments every hour or so – but they were alive!

For fifteen years, the people of Byzma enjoyed the distinct absence of death, and while some people fretted occasionally in the beginning, soon everyone was lulled into a state of invincibility and everyone was happy with everything.

Everyone, that was, except Gismuth.

*(Vunderkind’s note: This ended here, and I started again. Read on; you’re doing fine! 😊)*

## CHAPTER ONE

Gafar was a fat man, and he never had any reason to dislike his figure.

True, sometimes, it took him longer than the average man to fish out his man bits from under the overlapping fold that was his stomach before he could take a piss, but that never bothered him. It was also true that men often sniggered when he attempted to whip the man bits out at public urinals, but he couldn't give two fooks. Instead, he had stopped urinating whenever he went out.

No, Gafar was fat and proud, and he often waddled with his head up high so no one would think otherwise. Never you mind that he had to pay for two seats when he rode the public carriages.

However, on this hot afternoon, Gafar cursed every single lipid wedged possessively in his body. Gafar was running as fast as his legs could carry him – which wasn't that fast, in case you wondered – wheezing, and calling out the names of the gods, complete with their surnames. He was chasing a much younger, less corpulent thief who had made away with a tub of lard only a few seconds earlier.

As the wiry thief leapt across barrels, putting greater distance between him and the sweaty pile of moustache that was Gafar, Gafar crumpled to the ground, on the brink of passing out. But no – Gafar had had just about it with that particular thief.

Last week, the self-same criminal had made away with some sausages Gafar had kept under a bucket with the hopes of having as a light snack later that day. And here he was again, stealing Gafar's tub of lard! *It's almost like he wants me to starve!*

Onlookers tried to stare politely at the fat man that had suddenly toppled in the middle of the market, and no one dared venture to help him up, perhaps estimating his weight in tons and deciding to wait until more people gathered. Lifting the fallen Gafar looked like the job for seven or eight muscular, well-fed men.

Noticing the attention, Gafar pointed a shaky, sweaty and now sandy finger in the direction of the thief disappearing in the horizon.

“Thief,” he whispered hoarsely. “Bastard took all my money. My life’s savings. I’m finished.” And with that grand lie, the great Gafar passed out.

The effect was instantaneous.

Nobody likes thieves. It didn’t even matter that the thief had decided – out of benevolence, perhaps – not to steal from the other people, but everyone suddenly wanted his head on a platter. The crowd of onlookers, in minutes, transformed from a curious bunch to a murderous one, each person suddenly blaming the tattered, fleeing man for their mother’s necklace that had gotten missing last Tuesday, or for the mysterious disappearance of their favorite orange robe.

The thief had slowed to a trot, feeling pretty confident that the fat man had given up the chase. He was humming tunelessly, and kept throwing the tub of lard up with one hand and catching it with the other. Suddenly, he heard a sound that sounded like he had put a conch to his ear and was hearing the sea –

- only there was no conch, and there was no sea, but a seething crowd. The young thief realized that his days would be numbered (in seconds, to be precise) if the crowd caught up to him, so he doubled his running efforts and charged out of the market.

The crowd followed dutifully. Pitchforks and knives emerged out of thin air, and it gave the general impression that man, as a rule, was always ready for violence. One or two people were accidentally sliced by their over-enthusiastic neighbor brandishing his weapon, but it was quickly forgotten over an apology and a determination to catch the fleeing criminal.

“Fook! Fook! Foooook!” is what the crowd would have heard the thief scream repeatedly as he ran, if they cared for what he had to say.

The thief took a turn that led away from the little village and drew closer to the opposite city. The crowd followed, abandoning the schedule for the day, in righteous indignation.

*Suffer not a thief to live, and it shall be well with the world!*

The thief, panting not unlike Gafar a few minutes ago, stumbled, regained balance and tore on towards a dark forest.

“He“s headed for the Forest of Gueth!”

“Why is he doing that?”

“Maybe because we are chasing him?”

“I know, but why is he going into the Forest of Gueth?”

Right beside the forest of Gueth stood a signpost, histrionically strewn with human skulls and bones. The sign read in huge, red letters: “THE FORBIDDEN FOREST OF GUETH. DO NOT ENTER. DO NOT ENTER. DO NOT EN”, and anyone brave enough to look on the other side of the signpost would see that the warning continued: “TER. DO NOT ENTER. DO NOT ENTER. DO NOT ENTER.”

The crowd screeched to a halt, for before their astonished eyes, the thief, obviously oblivious to the signpost, hurtled onwards into the forest, where he was immediately swallowed by the uncanny darkness that hugged it.

“Fook”, came a voice from the crowd.

“Yup”, agreed another. “Fook.”

## CHAPTER TWO

King Throvian sat down and stretched luxuriantly in front of Death. His lush red robes softened the hardwood table he sat on, preventing him from having blisters on the royal buttock – a buttock that had begun sitting on soft surfaces since its first watery stool.

Throvian and Death sat apart from each other in a dungeon deep underneath the palace of Benway. The roof dripped constantly, leaking limestone juice that splattered everywhere – on the walls, on the floor, and a few errant droplets hitting the heavily black hood of Death as he stared at the king.

Well, at least the king assumed Death was staring at him, for there was really no way to know for sure, as the hood annihilated all hopes of finding a head deep within its fold.

In the first few days when the king had first captured death, he had left him unattended to, fearing seeing his prey, and it had taken him more than a week to finally make the jittery trip down the dungeon to confront Death.

As King Throvian regarded his prisoner, a wave of memories came rushing, and he examined them casually, flicking his mind’s finger at his favorite ones.

He remembered how he had valiantly gone in search of Death fifteen years ago, and how Death had put up a good fight. King Throvian smiled now, remembering how the element of surprise had worked quite brilliantly for him, and he had pounced on the Messenger of Darkness.

He remembered Death’s surprised gasp, “Wait – how can you see me? How are you even able to *hold* me?!” He hadn’t thought it possible that one could capture and conquer death, but once he had begun studying, and with a little help from a loyal friend, he had realized that anything could be achieved, if you put your mind to it.

King Throvian had initially captured Death with hopes of releasing him after a few months. A year, tops. Then the fringe benefits started coming in...

And now, fifteen years later, Throvian was staring at his prisoner with the same keen curiosity he had shown on the first day of his capture.

“Ach. Your face. So much excitement. It turns my stomach,” Death said, breaking the silence.

Throvian beamed further. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! You are just...spectacular. I don’t know – so scary and intimidating, and it is a thrill to have you sitting here, harmless, in my little dungeon here.”

Death blinked. Death was not a regular blinker, and it was just as well. Whenever he blinked, it made a sound like the rustling of a thousand bats. No one could see his eyes, of course, so people only heard the sound and assumed he was having a nasty bowel movement. Death usually didn’t have to bother with being embarrassed about his raspy blinking habits, seeing as the people who usually heard him blink were the freshly dead. King Throvian was the first living person to hear Death blink, and even he had no idea that that was what he was hearing. Only Death ever knew *he* was blinking.

“Give me my scythe,” he drawled casually, trying to hide the pathetic plea in his voice. “Just give me my scythe, please. I miss that old thing.”

Throvian laughed heartily. “Nice try. You get full marks for effort, at least. I have read all about you. I know you are powerless without your scythe. Your scythe is locked in a safe place, and you are never going to be reunited with it. In effect, Death, where is your sting?”

Throvian hadn’t counted on Death’s anger, and as Death lunged at him, he shrieked in the most *unkingly* manner as he dived out of the way. If he hadn’t been so taken unawares, he would have remembered that Death was heavily shackled and had been so for fifteen years.

“You bastard! Give me my scythe!” the words bounced off the stone walls, but never left them. Throvian had chosen his prison well. No one would hear Death here.

King Throvian stood up and dusted his robes in as dignified a manner as he could muster, aware of the cold anger that was radiating from Death, only a few feet from him.

“Why are you here, Throvian? To get entertained by your favorite jester?” Death snarled. “If you are not going to let me go, do not torture me with your presence.”

Throvian stood at a safe distance as he replied. “I am sorry. I would release you if I could, but I cannot. You see, people have gotten used to the idea of not dying. It’s been fifteen years, Fred. Fifteen. You have no idea how it’s like out there, outside this dungeon, in a city where there is no Death. By Eloweth, you have no idea what this has done for our city! We are hailed everywhere as the city that never dies. It is...” he paused, thinking for a suitable word, “...it is picturesque.”

Death blinked again. “Life and Death work together. You have done much damage to the balance of souls by keeping me this long. Keep me any longer and you could unleash evil like no other you have ever witnessed.”

The king shook his head, as though trying to ward off evil thoughts. “What do you mean, unleash evil like I have never witnessed?”

Death chuckled. Now it was his turn to have fun. “Pray, tell, great king. Have you found yourself tossing and turning at night? Have you found yourself drawn to come visit me? You who have made it something of a religious obligation to avoid my prison for fourteen years and counting, suddenly show up to have chit-chat with me? I laugh,” and Death proceeded to laugh to show that he meant it. “I laugh, King Throvian. I have lost count of the number of moons that have risen, but I can tell you with an accuracy that surpasses even your best astrologers: evil comes, and it comes from the West.”

Throvian shuddered at Death's words, and the temperature in the dungeon seemed to drop by several degrees.

Death breathed slowly. "Release me. Now. The evil can be prevented."

Throvian bobbed his head in short, jerky motions, and when he spoke, his voice was raspy and dry. "Sorry, friend, but no can do. I must go tend to kingly duties right now. This talk has been most refreshing, dear Fred."

"My name is not Fred."

"You're funny, Fred. Have you considered stand-up?"

The gate of the dungeon shut, and Death was plunged back in darkness. *Just like I like it.*

*When I get out of this pit, he thought, I will take the old goat first.*

Death brooded over the King's visit. True, most of what he said had been calculated to get the king to release him out of fright, but somehow – in a hollow part of his chest where a heart was supposed to be – he nursed the strange, undefined feeling that something was about to happen. He could feel it. It was a tingling in his phalanges that said something evil was coming. And he knew that he had something to do with it. He just didn't know what.

He sighed, and chuckled, and it sounded like cockroaches rubbing against each other. "Evil is coming from the West. Fred, sometimes I wonder how you think these things up. You're creative as fook," and he patted himself on the back.

Literally.

Several feet ahead and above Death, king Throvian was taking the slow, painful steps that reunited him with the world – a world thriving with people full of life. The people above lived, thankful that they could not die, wondering in fleeting moments why this was so, but none examined the phenomenon too closely, for fear that upon scrutiny, the absurdity of their lucky predicament would become so embarrassingly glaring that everything would come undone and people would begin to die again.

The king re-emerged on good old land, breathing in the stale air of Benway. Apparently, life comes with its malodorous commitments.

In a dungeon underneath the palace, Death was getting ready for his evening yoga exercises.

## CHAPTER THREE

The Forest of Gueth rustled in the uneager morning breeze, and it tickled the ears of the antelope as it munched arrogantly on the leaf of a plant, without giving much thought to how the plant felt about being eaten.

If the plant could talk, it would probably have said: *Hey, you brown shitbag. I haven't been standing here, absorbing sunlight and being all green and shit for the last three months just so you could come snack up on me whenever you feel like. Get your teeth out of my life.*

But that plant, like every other plant, could not speak, so it said nothing.

There was a low rumble, and the antelope could have sworn that she felt a tremor pass from under the earth and vibrate through her hooves. She gave the equivalent of an antelope-y shrug and resumed munching on the exasperated plant.

There was a serpentine roar (what a snake's hiss would sound like if it had a little bass added), and this time the antelope pricked her ears, which were promptly burnt off.

Deciding that the loss of her ears had ruined her appetite, she jogged off into the nearest clump of bush, a few seconds before a shiny-faced, wide-eyed and panic-stricken young man burst into the clearing.

Hot on his heels – literally – was a dragon. The dragon was seething – again, quite literally – burning everything in sight, everything but the object of its rage.

The plant which had endured the humiliating nibbles of the now absent antelope observed the unfolding event with keen interest. The dragon was huge, but its size also made it clumsy, whereas the man who ran helter-skelter through the forest was wiry and clutched tightly to a grimy tub of lard. If the plant could speak, it would have said *hah-hah. It's always nice when the hunter becomes the hunted, innit? I fooking hate humans.* But the plant, like every other plant, could not speak, so it said nothing.

The man blundered through a brush, coming out the opposite clearing, gazed up sharply to see a jet of flames lick the tallest tree above him, and he rolled instinctively for cover, crushing the antagonistic plant – *hey! Hey! What are you – fook!* – and diving behind a pile of rocks as flames licked the stones from the other side. The man felt the rocks conduct the heat to his skin, and he pulled away, and swallowed, realizing how much it had hurt. *And it wasn't even the actual fire.*

The man sprang up again, and keeping his head low, he ran towards a dense collection of thorns and potentially dangerous vines. He was hoping the thorns and thistles would deter the dragon from giving chase. His hopes were dashed when he heard the vines snap behind him – he dared not look backwards any more – and he realized that he hadn't been very smart about his assumptions, seeing as dragons were, as a rule, scaly.

He squinted in the distance and miraculously, he noticed that he was looking at the same clump of bushes he had run through when he had hurriedly fled into the forest only yesterday when a murderous crowd had been hot on his heels. Only yesterday, a detached part of his brain sighed wistfully, and here he was again with a dragon hot on his heels (*literally*)...how time flies.

He saw his doorway to freedom, and his heart charged with the promise of escape from the foul beast. He wondered only fleetingly if the dragon would follow him out of the forest and into the village, but he decided that if the dragon did, it wouldn't matter to him. If anything, it may be better for him.

After all, a problem shared is a problem half-solved, and he didn't feel it right to keep the dragon all to himself.

Just as he was quite sure he was going to make it out of the Forest of Gueth without a horrible tan, he kicked against a remarkably large, remarkably smooth and well-rounded pebble and came crashing down.

He turned slowly to see the dragon, cheeks all puffy from brewing a new fireball, ash spewing from its nostrils as its own eyes watered from the acrid stench of its fumes. The bronze-plated scales of its claws gleamed malevolently and it threw its head back in a grand show of power.

The man closed his eyes and hummed the first three lines to the Crusader's Anthem, waiting to be converted to burnt offering.

*Stop being a sissy*, he heard someone say, and he pried one eye open to see if his situation had changed. To his immense disappointment, the dragon was still towering over him, chest malevolently enlarged with the full firepower it was cooking within its body.

Nothing had changed. The dragon was still going to cremate him, the large pebble lay close to where he had fallen and the nagging voice – *stop being a sissy, you sissy* – was still repeating itself, getting shriller by the minute and the man closed his eyes again, wondering if the dragon preferred its humans burnt to a crisp or just roasted.

*Stop being a sissy.*

*Wait*, he thought. He looked down at the pebble. He shook his head. Everyone knew that pebbles do not speak.

“Stop being a sissy,” the pebble repeated, louder and firmly this time, and the man jumped – or did what one could classify as a „jump“, seeing as he was flat on the ground. The dragon was taken aback too; it even stopped arching its back to peer at the pebble curiously.

The pebble lay there, round and curiously patterned, a dull color found in the mouths of chronic pot smokers.

Then a neck extended, and so did four tiny limbs, and the pebble...*stood up*. The dragon was startled, and blew a puff of excited smoke at the pebble.

The pebble, as is the characteristic of short individuals, was quite haughty, and it didn't appreciate smoke in its face.

Turning to the man, it asked, "I wonder, straggler, if this is the beast that is making a sissy out of you?"

The man was too busy sweating to make any coherent response.

The pebble turned to the dragon, which had reared its head, ready to spew the flames within its gut at both man and *rock*.

"Fire breather," the pebble began. "Come hither. Shuddering snakes, Wicked Wasps. A larynxless dragon within my grasp..."

There was a flash, a puff of purple smoke, and the man could see nothing for a fraction of a second, and when everything had cleared up, the pebble and the dragon stood there. The dragon was, if anything, angrier than it had been a few minutes ago. It hated any form of bright light that wasn't coming from its mouth. It bared its fangs to spew its inferno...

...and hiccupped instead. It tried a few more times, spewing ashes and nothing more.

The dragon, decidedly embarrassed, ambled off, but not before casting a reproachful glance at man and pebble.

The man wept.

It was a private emotional moment, and the pebble stood there, looking embarrassed as the man dug deep in his pockets, tugged out a moth-eaten rag and dabbed delicately at the corner of his eyes. The pebble stared at his little claws, taking great care to look anywhere but in the direction of the weeping man. Mercifully, the man soon stopped crying, and without warning, grabbed the pebble unceremoniously off the ground.

"How insolent!" the pebble yelled. "I shall turn you into mushrooms!"

“You saved my life, talking pebble!”

“What the fook? A pebble? Is that what you call me? Of all the ignominious, assuming, pompous, short-sighted and utterly aggravating things I have ever been called. What are you doing in this blasted forest, anyway?”

The man smiled wryly. “Long story. I stole that tub of lard” – he swung the pebble around so it could see the tub of lard, now smashed against a rock – “and the entire village wanted to lynch me, so I ran here. That was yesterday. I got lost, so I wasn’t able to find my way out until now.”

The pebble paused, and the man waited tensely.

“That wasn’t a long story at all.”

“I know, right? I’m like a *chief summarizer* or something.”

The pebble gave him a look reserved for conjugating earthworms.

The man tucked the pebble under his armpit, and the pebble yelled, “hey! Hey! When last have you had a bath, fookin’ bum?”

Apologizing profusely, he held the pebble in front of him, and said in his most polite voice, “shall we leave this forest, sir?”

“About time,” the pebble grinned in spite of itself. “I am dendrophobic.”

“Me too,” the man nodded fervently. “Me too.”

Although neither of them could hear, the trees in the Forest of Gueth darkened by a shade, and deep in the heart of the forest – deeper than even where the den of dragons was situated

– an old evil was awakening...

## CHAPTER FOUR

Gismuth stared at his pallid features in the mirror, and managed to convince himself that he was the most handsome person he had ever seen. Licking the tips of his fingers, he slicked back what was left of his receding hairline and smiled at his reflection.

His reflection, begrudgingly, returned the smile.

In about an hour, his father would be awoken, and the administrative horse-shit that was required to keep the kingdom running would begin. His father would put on the crown, and he would sit on the throne, and he would rule.

Very few people knew, but Gismuth's father wasn't even content with being the head of Benway. As he often said, Benway was what would happen if a city like Glowenduuk took a mildly diarrheal shit. The only good thing that had happened in Benway, Gismuth realized, was the *paucity of death*, as one of the wise men in the palace had called it.

For some mysterious reason, the people of Benway had stopped dying roughly fifteen years ago. The king had been as befuddled as everyone else, but he had quickly understood the public relations potential it had for the city of Byzma, and he had ordered all the city-wide artists to assemble before the throne, where they were charged to make catchy slogans.

Now, everywhere you looked, you saw sign posts with words like: "Welcome to Byzma, the City that Never Sleeps!", "Long Live the King (Literally)", "Byzma – not a great place to be if you're dying to do anything."

Byzma's popularity had flown to every corner of the world, and even though very few people had believed the story about a city that couldn't die, some had decided to skeptically give it a try, and they found out to their pleasant surprise that immortality embraced them the instant they crossed the gates.

Tourism at its finest.

Old people who wanted one more year to put their house in order paid for expensive trips to the distant city of Byzma, where they found themselves old but alive. True, they were blind, deaf in one ear and usually required a change of undergarments every hour or so – but they were alive!

For fifteen years, the people of Byzma enjoyed the distinct absence of death, and while some people fretted occasionally in the beginning, soon everyone was lulled into a state of invincibility and everyone was happy with everything.

Everyone, that was, except Gismuth.

About sixteen years ago, King Throvian had been struck with a wasting disease, and the palace physician had given him one year, tops, to live. King Throvian had had the physician beheaded after he had negotiated with the physician and the physician had, quite resolutely, refused to increase the king's lifetime. The physician was beheaded for being "miserly in dispensing royal years", and another had taken his place. The new physician had been cunning enough to tell the king that he had twelve months left on earth, and the king, quite satisfied, had nodded grimly and begun making plans for Gismuth to take over.

Benway was a primogeniture state, and Gismuth was Throvian's only child.

Gismuth had been gleeful. He had thrown a party titled "My Old Man's Going to Kick It", inviting everyone but said old man, for obvious reasons, and his friends had slipped him discreet notes before the party was over. It wasn't difficult to imagine the content of said notes (as a hint, some of them had words like "marry my daughter", "make me the number one corn supplier in the land," or "let me be your chief adviser"). Gismuth had basked in the attention, and the idea of being a king in less than a year had been a sweet thing indeed.

He would sit by his father, watching the old man read at night (his father had, strangely, picked up a reading habit in his last months on earth, presumably to thrill the promised 72 virgins in the afterlife with his earthly knowledge), smile secretly at the sallow skin that now hung drily over his father's bones, and pretend to be concerned for the old man's plight.

It had been a month to the old man's predicted death when it happened. Gismuth was among the first to find out. He had been on the roof of the tower, rehearsing his first kingly address when he had slipped on wet moss and found himself falling a good hundred feet from the roof. He had felt pain, and snapping of bones, and he had waited for the reaper to come harvest his soul for the Soul Exchange Market.

But the reaper never came. And fifteen years later, the reaper's marked absence lingered.

Sure, Gismuth was grateful during the first few months when the palace physicians had mended his bones and helped his concussion that death had been away, but as he recovered, he realized that with no death came no dead father. And with no dead father came no crowned prince.

He had half-heartedly attempted to poison his father, but the old man had drunk the spiked wine, smacked his lips and proclaimed it the finest wine in all of the lakh.

Gismuth blinked at his reflection in the mirror.

“Fook this shit.”

He wondered if death would ever come, and if he was destined to wait until his father’s eyes were veiled by cataracts and he no longer had his memory on his side before he could finally mount the throne.

“Judging by the way the bony bastard lives, I’ll probably overtake him in old age.”

Which was quite true. Since the great *paucity of death*, king Throvian had taken to morning push-ups, and he had begun to eat the lettuce and cucumbers supplied by the townspeople.

King Throvian had formed a joggers’ club, and he often challenged Gismuth to fencing matches, which he always won.

“Fook this shit,” Gismuth swore loudly again.

He realized that there was no winning this one. It was either the old man went, or he did.

There was a knock on his door, and he watched his father enter his room.

“Son,” he said, smiling hollowly. “Did you sleep well?”

Gismuth smiled back. *Bastard*. “I did, father. You are up early.”

His father sat beside him and was quiet for a long time. When he spoke, his voice sounded like it was echoing from a very large and very empty hall.

“I couldn’t sleep, Gismuth. I’ve been having nightmares.”

Gismuth laughed, and there was no masking the derision in his laughter. “You, father? Unable to sleep from a nightmare? You’ll be wetting the bed soon at this rate.”

Throvian laughed good-naturedly. “This is no joke, son. I have done a terrible thing, and it may be too late to correct it.”

Gismuth sighed. “What have you done?”

“Shut the door,” the king said.

“Come on, father – “

“Shut the door.”

Sighing, Gismuth went to shut the door. He did not return to the bed though. Leaning against the door, he spoke.

“So? What is it, father?”

The king stared at his hands for a long time, and when he eventually raised his head, Gismuth was stunned to see his father crying.

“Father...”

“I did it, son. I am the reason no one can die in Benway.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

The cocks were already crowing, and the young man smiled warmly.

“What’s funny?” asked the pebble.

“Oh, never mind. It’s nothing.”

The pebble grunted and tried to resume his meditation. He was holding on as tightly as he could with his stubby claws on the young man’s shoulder, and he tried not to look down too often.

He regarded the young man. He had reddish-brown hair that nearly totally covered his whole face, but it was easy to see that he had blue eyes, a dimple on one chin (his right one), and a black, thumb-print-shaped birthmark on his neck. The young man was of average height and too thin to be alive, in the pebble’s opinion.

The pebble sighed. “Alright, out with it. Why the fook were you smiling like a deranged monkey?”

“Ah, well. It’s the cock crow, you see. I have a name for them. They are my thief-alarms. Once a cock starts crowing, you know, it’s time to call it a day’s work.”

The pebble grunted again.

“Or night’s work, seeing as...you know,” the young man added, giving the pebble the side eye.

“What is your name?”

“Dood.”

“Dood? What kind of name is Dood?”

“I don’t know. I named myself that.”

“Well, you have a natural gift for nomenclature,” the pebble said. “Way to go, Dood. You get to pick out your own name and you went for Dood. Brilliant.”

“I know, right?” replied Dood, oblivious to the pebble’s sarcasm. “How about you? You say you are not a pebble, so I am curious: what are you?”

“I am a tortoise, smart one. You know, those animals with shells and stuff?”

Dood kept walking for a while, his face scrunched up in deep thought. “Nope, I’m not sure I ever heard of those. Looks like a mythological creature to me.”

“Wait. You know dragons and you don’t know tortoises?”

“No, sorry.”

“Well. Fook me without prophylactics.”

“Are you like an endangered species or something?”

“What the fook? Let’s change the topic, please. You are pissing me off with your ignorance.”

Dood and the tortoise kept quiet for some time, both individuals pondering on the new revelations they had just received. Dood wondered what kind of animal a tortoise was, whether if he sold this one on his shoulder he could retire with the returns and if all tortoises could speak or whether this was a particularly unique specie. The pebble, on the other hand, was perplexed at the immense stupidity of his transporter.

“How much longer until Benway?” the tortoise asked.

Dood squinted, then beamed. “Only a few more minutes, and we are there.”

“About time,” grumbled the tortoise.

“Say, you never told me why it is so important that you get to Benway...”

The tortoise swiveled his small, scaly head to look at the side of Dood’s face. Dood quickly arranged his face into one of pure innocence. The tortoise bought the visage.

“I am going to Benway to anoint a new Watcher.”

Dood's face cracked in an unbelieving smile. He hopped on one foot in excitement, nearly throwing off the increasingly nauseous tortoise on his shoulder.

He knew the legend of the watchers. He knew the watchers were people appointed by The Higher Gods to solve some problem that the Gods were generally too embarrassed to handle themselves. The legend of the watchers was so old, no one believed them anymore.

No one, that was, except Dood. "So you are a messenger of the Eloweth?"

The pebble grunted.

"Sent to appoint a new Watcher?"

"Yes."

"Wow. Wow. So for how long have you been on this journey?"

The pebble averted his gaze and coughed out a reply that sounded something like "weaks fears."

"Sorry," said Dood. "I didn't hear that quite well."

"Six years." The pebble was suddenly shy.

"Six years! Six years. Six years," Dood whistled.

"Look, okay, I am a tortoise. I have been traveling as fast as I could since I was given this mission. Don't judge me." The pebble blushed.

Dood nodded solemnly, then whispered, "six years."

He squinted at the sun. Just ahead of the hill, he could make out the huge signpost:

***WELCOME TO THE CITY OF BENWAY***

***(Not a good place if you're dying to do***

*anything)*

*Long live the king (literally)*

“We’re almost there,” he said casually to the tortoise.

The properly embarrassed tortoise said a prayer of thanks to the Higher Gods.

In minutes, they arrived at the gate of the city of Benway. Dood stopped at the gate and stared at a sign in front which read, *Fifty thousand Mulakhs Entry*.

Dood sighed. “Such an expensive city. I bet everyone who lives here is rich. Fifty thousand Mulakhs just to enter the city? Imagine how much I could steal...”

Dood stared suddenly at the tortoise on his shoulder. The tortoise stared determinedly back.

“Get rid of the thoughts of robbing me, you young prick. I don’t have a single ingrot on me.”

Ingrots and Mulakhs were the standard currencies of the lakh.

Dood sighed. “So then how do you plan on entering the city to anoint the Watcher?”

The tortoise smiled – or gave the tortoise-y equivalent of a smile. “How do you say...? I am just a pebble. No one would notice me entering. Humans have a way of ignoring that which is beneath them.”

Dood nodded, and set the tortoise on the ground facing the city gates. He was aware of a few guards staring at him curiously, probably trying to decide if the mad man in front of the city talking to his pet rock qualified as a security issue.

Dood didn’t let them bother themselves too much on the issue. Turning around, he dipped his head slightly and spoke out of the corner of his mouth to the unexciting brown rock on the ground in front of the city gates.

“See you around, tortoise,” he said.

“I should hope not,” muttered the pebble, but Dood didn’t hear him. He had already gone in a cloud of dust.

The pebble stared at the huge, black gates and at the sentries standing at the walls. He saw the guards with their weapons trying not to look bored with their uneventful jobs.

The tortoise wondered if the guards knew that if he didn’t get to the Watcher as quickly as possible, they would no longer have to bother about their boring jobs.

He wondered if the guards knew that if he, a lowly tortoise, didn’t smear some oil on a random citizen’s forehead in the city of Benway, he wondered if the guards knew that they would die, and so would the rest of the world.

Sighing heavily at the task at hand, the tortoise began to...walk towards the gate.

## CHAPTER SIX

It was night, and everyone in the palace had long signed out of active service. The outsourced hands had returned to their families, and the palace-owned slaves had returned to their rooms, looking forward to another day of tending to another man's whim.

Behind the palace, in a place where the moon never shone, underneath a great oak tree stood a man. It was not his standing which made him peculiar, nor the fact that he was heavily garbed and his face concealed with a thick cloth which draped his features except for his eyes. He was hunched over a mound of earth – a mound of earth he had created with a shovel. The man was digging...

King Throviaan chuckled in his sleep, and rolled over, dreaming of young maidens massaging his scaly back with the finest creams of Askish. Even though he was deep in the land of dreams, he grew tumescent with each second...

The man paused to stretch his aching back, and a few of his bones creaked. He looked furtively about, and resumed digging. He was quite sure he was close. There was no way it could have been buried deeply.

Even as he thought this, his shovel clanged against a piece of metal deep within the hole he had made, and at that moment, king Throviaan woke up, startled, in sweats and in deep terror.

In a dungeon underneath the palace, Death woke up abruptly too.

King Throviaan immediately massaged his turgid member into a state of quiescence, as he pondered upon his dream. As he recalled his dream, his mind wandered faintly into the landscape of young maidens in a milk bath with him, and he smiled momentarily, then the dream which jolted him awake forced itself upon him.

The dream was quite simple. Throviaan had died in it.

He quickly robed himself and gingerly opening his door, nipped downstairs, headed for the dungeon.

The masked digger was headed for the dungeon as well, and he hurried, now holding an immensely long object in his hands, fearing discovery by the king or anyone else who may have the annoying proclivity to awaken right now and disrupt his mission.

Death stretched out bony fingers and gripped the cold bars of his dungeon prison. When alone, Death hardly spoke, but this time he said two words, and they resonated deep within the dungeon.

“My scythe...”

The king took the stairs two at a time, thanking the Higher Gods for his jogging routine, as he didn’t feel the least bit winded once he got to the last floor. Turning sharply right, he descended a less steep flight of stairs – the one that would lead him down the dark path leading to the dungeon where his long-time prisoner was kept.

As he came around the bend, he sighed in audible relief to find that Death’s prison was still locked. He laughed raspily and walked on towards the prison.

“I don’t know what came over me, Fred, but for a minute I was actually scared you had escaped and – “

The king squinted in the darkness enveloping Death’s cage. He wasn’t stunned by what he saw.

If anything, what he *didn’t see* petrified him.

Death wasn’t in his cell.

*He’s escaped*, thought the wide-eyed, frightened king. *He’s gone. No!*

“No, Throvian. I am right here,” the voice of Death said, and the king saw Death materialize out of thin air in front of him.

“You are not supposed to be able to become invisible. Once captured and stripped of your powers, you are not supposed to be able to become invisible,” the king shrieked, frantically clutching at logic in the face of Death.

“Ah,” said Death. “I wasn’t, but then I found this again,” and he showed the king his scythe.

“Long live King Throvian.”

As the king watched the reaper’s scythe tear into his chest and reap his soul, he saw his body – which had procrastinated in dying for fifteen years – disintegrate into dust, but nothing mattered to him anymore.

His only thoughts were for the person who had betrayed him.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Benway woke up earlier than usual the next day. Cries rent the air, as people found their beloved ones shriveled up, with eye sockets staring resolutely at the roof, as though begging their souls to return to their bodies.

It was yet pre-dawn, but the noise in the city was louder than noon-day chatter. In a few households, like in the Balkan family, Death had paid a visit and taken every single person and every single animal in the house.

The people were afraid. The spell had tarnished. The charmed life they had lived was over, and the twine had come undone.

Death was back from sabbatical, and he was working double-time.

People were taking to caves, hillocks and dark forests, all in a bid to escape the power of death, freshly unleashed upon a city that had experienced fifteen years of invincibility. Many people were uncertain about whether they were supposed to have died in the past – were death not absent – so they fled all the same, hoping to escape the eyeless sockets of the Grim Reaper.

As Aristotle, the town drunk had commented when he noticed the uproar close to the barrel he had been reclining against, “you’re fooked, folks. I see y’all. I see y’all and don’t say not a thing. Y’all gets sloppy because Death was no more, and many of ya shoulda died years ago anyway.” He paused to take a swig out of a dirty bottle, and pointed a gnarled finger at a droopy-eyed old man regarding him with a near-imbecilic stare.

“You,” Aristotle addressed the old man/imbecile. “You oughta have died many years ago and done your family the favor. I don’t even get why you even wanna live any longer, old man. You crap your own pants and can’t even walk without someone holding you at both sides – “

“That’s a horrible thing to say, Aristotle!” shrieked a buxom woman. “Come, honey, let us find a place to hide.”

“She only married him for his money, that one,” Aristotle muttered, being quite skilled at stating the obvious.

There was a crowd at the city gates, as people milled about, snapping at the border guards and the bureaucrats whose job it was to regulate the inflow and outflow of people into the city. It was going to be a long day, what with people dropping dead even as they signed their *exeat* granting them permission to leave the city.

It was in the midst of this confusion that the tortoise finally got to the house he had been looking for. It had taken him the whole of yesterday and the early hours of the morning to finally arrive.

He peered into a colorfully-painted house with an image of a dragon painted clumsily on it. The dragon appeared to - instead of belching a stream of fire - be sucking on something which, in the interest of chastity and the promotion of sexual purity, will be called a „lollipop“.

“About fooking time,” wheezed the tortoise. Although humans would not notice, *tortoises could run*, and this one had been running since yesterday. The reason humans wouldn’t notice, of course, was because a running tortoise looked exactly like a strolling, or even a crawling, tortoise. But tortoises didn’t know that, so they ran when they were trying not to miss an appointment.

How cute.

As he negotiated the first stair that would bring him into the building, he felt a foot land rather undiplomatically upon his shell, and the owner of the foot crashed downwards. The tortoise skidded off the stair and hit his head against the side of the building.

He swore in 23 languages known to man, and in five more unknown ones.

The owner of the foot stood up, and swore loudly, “What the fook was that?”

“You took the words right out of my mouth, you animal!” yelled the tortoise.

“Like, seriously, come on! What the fook was that?”

The man squinted and saw the talking piece of rock. “What are you supposed to be?”

“I am a tortoise, and nice to meet you, you piece of shit.” The tortoise was quite offended, and he was not afraid to show it.

The man nodded distractedly. He was looking frantically about, as though afraid something might pounce on him any minute. “I’ve got to leave now. You take care of yourself, whatever you said you were.”

As he turned to leave, the tortoise called. “Hey! Hey. I’m looking for someone in that house. His name is Gnarlworth. He’s a dragon tamer and a great swordsman. He’s supposed to have a tattoo on his right arm?”

The man peered curiously at the tortoise for a full minute.

“Well?” said the tortoise, tapping his foot impatiently on the ground, though it was really no use – no one could really see his foot.

The man grimaced and without saying a word, rolled up the sleeve of his right arm. There was a tattoo of a dragon blowing, ah, *a lollipop*, on his right arm.

“Oh,” said the tortoise. “Right.”

“Gnarlworth. Nice to meet you.”

The tortoise grinned. “Listen Gnarlworth, you have been chosen by the Thurith – the lower gods – to become a Watcher. You will be given power from the gods and a very cool

sword

to go kill the bad guys and stuff. Now, if you will just kneel down, or lie down actually,” and the tortoise blushed furiously and turned away his face, “since I cannot reach your head.

I need to anoint you.”

Gnarlsworth burst into laughter.

The tortoise had come prepared for various reactions to the *Proclamation* (what he called his little speech announcing someone as the Watcher). He had a contingency plan for the possibility of the appointed Watcher saying, “fook, no!” and running for his life. He had a plan for an aggravatingly teary-eyed watcher weeping at the honor of the calling.

But the tortoise had neglected to include a plan for an appointed Watcher laughing derisively.

“You...” he ventured, “You’re not laughing at my height, are you? I am very sensitive about that, you should know.”

Gnarlsworth wiped his eyes while hiccupping still. “What? No. No, mate. I’m laughing because I think you’ve got the wrong guy.”

“No, I haven’t. I have you down to the tee.”

Gnarlsworth sighed. “Listen, chap. Do you even know what’s happening in the city?”

“Apart from the usual city happenings? Nope. I just got in. Enlighten me, mate.”

Gnarlsworth coughed a gob of phlegm and spat it with vengeance at a clump of grass. The grass said, “another man will fook your wife,” but seeing as grasses aren’t supposed to speak, its statement went ignored.

“Listen, mate. There’s death all over the city. It’s bound to get me soon. I need to go hide. I suggest you do the same. Benway is fooked, and I know for a fact that I should have died

about two years ago. Now, unless you're telling me the anointing what you call it you want to

give me is going to make me immortal, mate, I'm going to have to say no, I am not your guy."

The tortoise was having none of it. It had taken him six years to find this man. *No way he was walking away just like that.*

"Of course," he smiled patronizingly. "It will make you immortal."

"For real?" asked Gulliblesworth.

"Yes. I do not lie," the tortoise lied.

The man hurriedly knelt before the tortoise, bowing so his head touched the earth. The tortoise walked towards his head...

That was a minute ago. The tortoise had yet to arrive at Gnarlsworth's head.

"Well? Why are you delaying?" asked Gnarlsworth, head still bowed.

"I'm walking towards your head. It'll take a while."

"What the fook? You're right in front of me! There's only like two meters between us."

The tortoise sighed. He was tired of explaining himself. *It's almost like no one knows I'm a tortoise.* "If you're in such a hurry, why don't you just come and kneel directly in front of me?"

As Gnarlsworth stood up, he raised his eyes to the sky, smiled stupidly at a *lollipop*-shaped cloud, and started to make a remark about the cloud – "Hey, this cloud looks uncannily like

– " – but in that instant, his eyes crossed, and he dropped to the ground, toppling sideways once he hit the dirt, proving irrevocably that he was right, and he wasn't the

chosen one.

If anything, Death had just chosen him.

The tortoise stared, blinked, and stared some more at the dead man in front of him. He muttered an expletive little children aren't permitted to hear until they start accepting sweets from the local pedophile.

The tortoise rolled over on his shell, pointing all four limbs to the sky, retracting four claws on each limb to leave the middle one standing.

“Ye gods, this is for you...fook you!”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The water hit Dood's face and he gasped again. "I wasn't even saying anything!" he yelled.

"I know," leered the guard. "I just did that because it brings me pleasure. Oh, and - " *splash* "that's for yelling when I poured the water on you."

Dood was heavily chained to a tree at the centre of the Byzma market, and a motley group of people were gathered for his hearing. Or at least that's what they were calling it.

Gafar was standing precariously on a makeshift podium constructed from fruit boxes from the market, and he was his own prosecuting attorney.

"This...this vermin over here," and a fat arm waved in the general direction of Dood and his clingy tree, "has robbed me over and over, and must be brought to justice!" and with that grand opening statement, the Great Gafar proceeded to level his accusations against Dood.

Dood's matted hair hung wetly over his face, and he was soaked to the bone. The guard, who had been given a barrel of water and a bucket with which to douse Dood – the accused

– if he made inappropriate remarks, had taken enthusiastically to his assignment. A little too enthusiastically, one might add.

The „trial“ had begun three hours ago, and Dood was feeling sore at the places where the chain pressed him firmly against the tree. He squinted at the milky sun and cursed his luck.

Only yesterday, he had run out of the forest of Gueth with a murderous dragon at his heels. After bidding the strange tortoise goodbye, he had attempted to sneak back into the village. He had been largely successful, of course, and he had returned to his crib (if one could call his makeshift bed made from discarded crates that) to have a good lie-in.

He had awoken to find six unsmiling faces staring at him, with Gafar's being the most prominent. They had dragged him off to the centre of the market, and had hastily organized

a „hearing“. If found guilty, they said, he would be hung by the selfsame tree he was currently chained to.

He cursed softly under his breath. All this trouble because of a filthy tub of lard.

“...I was ready to let it all go, you know,” Gafar was sniffing, his voice shaky as two teardrops chased each other down either side of his face. “I was ready to forgive this bandit standing before you today, but then he struck a blow that I have not been able to recover from.

“My daughter, she is very bright. I value her education a lot, and I’ve been saving up for when she finally had to go to School. I had saved three thousand Mulakhs when – “ he paused to dab his eyes – “when this man broke into our house and stole ALL OF IT!!”

The crowd gasped dutifully and theatrically. Fifty-or-so oily necks swiveled in Dood’s direction.

“What? I don’t even know where he lives!” Dood protested, but the guard beside him gave him another shower. Dood was reduced to a gasping, coughing and sputtering heap.

The „judge“, a balding man who was in charge of market taxes stared fixedly at Dood, his nose upturned in disgust. “What do you have to say in your defense?”

Dood’s chest swelled. Now was his opportunity to prove that he was innocent of all charges. He had already mentally checked his alibis, and he had a few counter-accusations of his to make against Gafar.

“Well...”

“Guilty!” shrieked the „judge“, and he smashed the gavel so hard against the table, it

broke in half.

“Hang this piece of shit,” muttered the „judge“, and Gafar bowed his head. To the rest of the market, Gafar had assumed a solemn pose. Gafar, however, was hiding the wide grin spread across his even wider face.

The chains came undone and Dood collapsed against the muscular arm of the guard. Thoughts of heroic escape scenarios darted across his mind, but he knew they were worthless. If he managed to beat the human steroid that was his guard, there were about fifty50 or more market people with knives and meat cleavers hidden surreptitiously underneath their garments and they each bore the same malicious looks on their faces that assured Dood that no one was in love with his persona.

As he allowed himself to be blindfolded, even as he allowed himself to be guided to stand on the makeshift base, and even as he felt the noose around his neck, Dood could only hold on to one coherent thought: *why the fook am I being hung for the fookin' tub of lard? I didn't even eat it.*

The guard breathed down his neck. “I’ll miss you, buddy.”

“So touching. I’m crying under this blindfold.”

The noose tightened menacingly.

The judge yelled, “Send this fooker to the Great Beyond!”

“STAY YOUR HAND!” a newly-introduced voice yelled.

The people of the market looked down. As unbelievable as it sounded, there was a rock in front of them, a little rock to be precise, and it appeared to be speaking.

“What sorcery is this?” yelled the judge, for he was used to yelling.

The piece of rock sighed. “You will not kill that man.”

Gafar sprang (or attempted to spring, and ended up wobbling on a spot) up at once and coughed, “er, ,scuse me, sir. That man is a criminal. He deserves to die.”

“Very well,” said the piece of rock. “He has robbed me as well, and I do not believe having him hung is punishment enough for this brand of filth.”

“Tortoise?” asked Dood, uncertainly. He was still blindfolded.

“Hush, filth,” said the tortoise. “I have a better plan, and I am sure that you will love it.”

“I am all ears,” said Johvo Arigo, a man whose ears were as large as banana leaves.

“In the forest of Gueth lies great evil, I am sure you know. In fact, as we speak, the great white dragon has awoken from his three hundred and twenty day slumber, and he is very hungry. I propose that we feed this man to the dragon.”

“No! Hang me! Hang me! Hang me!” Dood’s pitiful sobs rent the air.

The judge stroked his beard. “That sounds quite interesting,” he said. “Guards, let us take him into the forest right now.

“Wait,” cried Gafar. “Only yesterday he ran into the forest of Gueth, and here he is, unscathed. How are we sure he will die properly this time?”

Heads swiveled and focused on the tortoise.

“Simple,” he replied. “I know magic.”

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That was an hour ago, and now Dood found himself alone, outside the village with the tortoise. Dood was still wearing his wet clothes, although there was now a silver bracelet clamped on his left wrist.

The tension between them was palpable. Dood was clenching his teeth in unrepressed anger, while the tortoise was trying his best to placate him from his disadvantaged position on the floor.

“Look at it this way. I saved your life.”

“I should have sold you when I planned to.”

“You planned to sell me? The fook?”

Dood scoffed and ran his fingers through his hair. “what do you want with me? Why do I have this bracelet on me, man?”

“That’s my insurance that you will not walk away from me. Look, I have stopped the people of the forest from killing you. Now you just have to help me with this little thing.”

“I will not be a Watcher.”

“Come on. You were excited when I told you I was going to anoint a Watcher.”

“Yes, because the Watcher wasn’t going to be me. Watchers are cool. All that power and stuff, but they always die. I am not a fan of dying, in case you missed that.”

The tortoise sighed. “Look, I had no choice, okay? A lot has been happening so fast, and the original Watcher is dead, and I needed to act fast. I rode a carriage from Benway to Byzma because you’re the only person I can think of who would agree to be Watcher on such short notice.”

“In other words, I’m your last resort. Nice. You say the sweetest things, tortoise.”

The tortoise sighed. "Listen. People are dying. There is death in Benway, and I cannot place my finger on it, but I know this is going to trigger something even worse. The world needs you, Dood."

Dood nodded and gave a sarcastic smile. "The world was trying, only an hour ago, to have me hung. The world can fook itself." And with that, he began to walk away.

"You cannot leave. You cannot," said the exasperated tortoise.

"Watch me."

The tortoise watched Dood walk away from him, and he shook his head sadly. He retracted into his shell and began to count: *one, two, three...*

Fifteen minutes later, he heard the sound of a groaning man, and he came out of his shell to see who it was.

It was Dood, pale and shaking. The tortoise smiled.

"What have you done to me?" Dood gasped. "You have bewitched me."

"That is a proximity charm. As soon as you separate from me, the bracelet on your arm would begin to pump toxins into your body. You will get progressively weaker and weaker, and if you do not return to me, you will die. As soon as you're back to me, however, the bracelet will begin to extract the toxins from your body. It's quite efficient, if I say so myself."

True enough, Dood's color was returning, and he was tottering to his feet.

"You bastard," he breathed. "I'll kill you."

"Kill me, and the bracelet, on noting the absence of my life force, will assume you have left my presence again, and it will pump you with poisons until you die. It is in your interest that I stay alive, Dood."

Dood cursed under his breath.

“What do you want from me?”

“Kneel down. Bow your head. It is time to receive the Watcher’s anointing.”

Dood knelt down begrudgingly.

The tortoise produced a vial of oil out of thin air and poured it copiously until it had totally drenched Dood’s hair.

“Stand up.”

Dood stood up with a frown.

“Nothing’s happened. I feel no tingling sensation. I don’t feel powerful.”

“You haven’t said the Watcher’s creed yet.”

“Oh.”

“When you are done taking the oath, the Thurith will show their approval of you by giving you the Sword of Thurith, the weapon of justice, with which you will bring balance to the lakh.”

Dood nodded, and grinned in spite of himself.

“Repeat after me,” the tortoise’s voice deepened. “I am the One, Chosen by the Thurith.”

“I am the One, Chosen by the Thurith.”

“Built of blood, bone, sweat and fire.”

“Built of blood, bone, sweat and fire.”

“I will restore the balance between good and evil.”

“I will restore the balance between good and evil.”

“Where evil tries to usurp, I will drive it into its hole –“

“Where evil tries to usurp, I will drive it into its hole.”

“With the Sword of Creedius, I will strike.”

“With the Sword of Creedius, I will strike.”

“And strike.”

“And strike.”

“And strike.”

Dood raised an eyebrow, but he repeated nonetheless: “and strike.”

“Fearing not death, fearing not pain.”

“Fearing not death, fearing not pain.”

“I seek naught but Justice.”

“I seek naught but Justice.”

“I shall wield the Sword until there is good again.”

“I shall wield the Sword until there is good again.”

Instantly, Dood’s eyes widened and his pupils disappeared. His eye sockets burned a deep blue, and he muscles tautened. The tortoise watched with mild interest.

Then Dood spoke, but it was not in his voice. The voice which spoke through him was guttural, loud and full of raw power.

The voice said, "Charmagne! You have willfully disobeyed the Thurith! You have bestowed the anointing on an Unmarked One. Prepare to face the consequences!"

The tortoise was frightened by the voice and shrieked, high-pitched, "I was running out of time! What was I to do?"

But Dood had returned to normal, and he was panting and sweating in front of the shivering tortoise.

"That was *intense*, man," wheezed Dood. "I can't believe it. I am a Watcher."

The tortoise forced a smile. "Yes. Yes, of course you are. Stretch out your right hand and say „Creedius“".

Dood did as he was instructed, and both man and tortoise waited for a few seconds.

"Was something supposed to happen when I say „Creedius“?" asked Dood.

"No," replied the tortoise. "It worked exactly as I expected it to."

But the tortoise was worried. Nothing was going according to plan.

*I am the One, Chosen by the Thurith*

*Built of blood, bone, sweat and fire*

*I will restore the balance between good and evil*

*Where evil tries to usurp, I will drive it into its hole*

*With the Sword of Creedius, I will strike*

*And*

*strike and*

*strike*

*Fearing not death, fearing not pain*

*I seek naught but Justice*

*I shall wield the Sword until there is good again.”*

---The Watcher’s Creed

## CHAPTER NINE

He knelt before the bowl of water and stared keenly at his own reflection. The water rippled faintly, and his own face blinked earnestly at him.

He was in his room. Soon the palace would need him, and he would be busy for the rest of the day. This was his only chance to do this.

The water shifted, and his reflection cracked a smile.

“My faithful servant,” said his reflection.

“Master,” he bowed to the bowl of water.

“You bring me news.”

“I have done it, Master. I have freed Death, and he is taking lives with a vengeance.”

His reflection stared at him, unblinking. “Good. You understand why this is important, of course?”

“When Death takes with a vengeance, he does the express will of Darkness. He takes lives to glorify the Master.”

The Master rippled. “Of course. It will only be a little while now.”

“Have I served you faithfully, Master?”

“You have. All you have to do now is await the Western moon, and then you can make the final sacrifice.”

“My reward, Master – “

“Your reward will be given you once I am back in the Mountain of the Gods, for there I wield Supreme Power.”

“Yes, Master.”

There was a knock on the door. “It is time,” a voice outside called.

“I’ll be out shortly,” he muttered and turned back to the bowl. The bowl was still, and his reflection was under his control once again.

He sighed deeply and opened the door.

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