

WELCOME INTO: ANTEK'S LAIR

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Sidenote: I chose to change a couple details in translation. Seeing each
work of art is only finished when abandoned, this is the final
version (Third time is a charm.)
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There's many influences, wrong choices and natural twists bringing me to this manuscript. It all started with my aunt. Another one of those late evenings, one of Those nights I struggled with my curse, which the majority calls life. That same night the *book* was born. I met up with her, we started talking and I just broke.

That evening, laying helpless in tears, we came up with an idea.

This wasn't a big step for me since I wrote texts for fun for, well ,several years now. Meanwhile, puzzling and tweaking words had become a sort of second nature. That same thought stayed stuck for a week or two until the idea disappeared into my unconsciousness. I resumed my life, the thought of writing a book turned out to be a distant past. When, on a hot summer afternoon, a few weeks later, I impulsively started to write.

I was bored, made me an Irish coffee, went outside, into the blazing sun and wrote through the afternoon. The first version was an English one, I soon gave up on this... One thing led to another. Six months later I had written a chapter. A couple of weeks or was it months later I couldn't go to work due to a severe pain in my ribs. I impulsively, out of boredom, sent the chapter to several publishers.

Four of them didn't even bothered to answer. The one publisher who answered me was not impressed. Seeing it now, I understand why... The woman told me it was far from a book but that she could put me in touch with someone who was going to help me turn it into one. That's how I learned to know Ambilicious, my "publisher." The

collaboration has brought this fruit into the world, a fruit nourished by blood, sweat, tears, and an infinite feeling of helplessness. Unfortunately, due to circumstances and differences of opinion, this cooperation was stopped. It was hard, for both.

Ambilicious, my apologies. I stood with my back against the wall. Thus the beginning of the end of an era came in sight. The end of that same chaotic quest. I combined my band, my work, my chronic illness and my writing.

When the guitarist kicked me out of my band, the Pillars Of Humanity/Helcyon, a project I started myself, which I worked hard on for several years, I decided to take full care of the art of writing.

Some Eastern and Western philosophy mixed with own experiences, ideas, and disillusion.

Inanna,

"It's a mysterious world where Khaos has more order than previously foreseen.

This is, I think, a beautiful definition of life, of this planet, of the universe. “

I hereby want to thank Tom, Ruben, Stein, Sven, Lisa, Maarten and Michael (FR),

Thomas, Mathieu, Tristan, and everyone I forgot. They're the ones who have supported me in my search for years. Those who always believed in me. It took me 10+ years to bring something on the market, 10+ years where I had a rough, I mean extremely rough time, 10+ years where I could count on them.

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I want to thank my parents for their endless support.

Together we have had to overcome two generations of bullshit, which made my past unstable, yet this past they could not control, along with their unlimited *love*, made me whom I am today.

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My sister and my little brother...

You're a bunch of arrogant jackasses but I *love* you.

All is forgiven, not forgotten.

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Liwhé (FR)... Thank you for coming to my sickbed.

I'll never forget you.

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Willy, Mamie R.I.P

I have, given the circumstances, done my best.

I'm sorry.

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Mamie, my rock, my pride. You will forever be THE example to me.

You were a pearl, you were an angel enlightening our lives.

You were a hero, a warrior, you were my grandmother.

Thérèse Lenglet (1937-2017)

I don't need any words for you...

Unfortunately, the two of you never saw my book being published.

Georges dejonckére (1935-2017)

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And last but not least...

I thank the majority who never believed in me.
The majority that couldn't see beyond the surface,
they taught me how to fight; thanks to them,
I started believing in myself.

Thank you.

Chapter 1: The deafening silence.

A deafening silence nudged me out of my endless sleep, the glow of the sun made its way through my eyelids. Slowly my body came to life. I pulled my hair into place. I opened an eye, followed by a loud moan and a blinding flash. The sun radiated its warmth on this freezing planet. The heat desecrated my face. Images started developing themselves, blurry symmetrical shapes appeared. My vision restored.

I gazed at the distance. Mountains exercised their natural power. Proudly reigning over the horizon. A dominating rock formation with excessive cacti within a meaningless void. The view prevailed over the pain. I, who was exhausted, forced myself up. A couple of attempts later I stood wobbly but straight. Motivated by a hungry, dehydrated body. I needed a source of water, anything that would save my miserable life. My only hope turned out to be to follow one of the roads slandering over and around the mountains.

Frightened, I gathered my courage for a seemingly endless road laid ahead of me.

Miles and miles that, by the looks of it, led nowhere. The sun gently died while the moon appropriated itself the now darkened sky, illuminating this barren landscape.

My other senses took over my orientation, a sharpened hearing, a extremely sensitive step. Crickets sang their battle hymns, white wolves howled away their sorrow. The landscape came to life.

I needed a place to sleep unable to fight nor flight, any confrontation would bring me down.

I noticed three palm trees in the distance. Dancing to the rhythm of life, adorning a small puddle of water; the wind quietly blew them from left to right.

My blistered lips screamed for water, my empty stomach for food. I ran as fast as I could, diving into the puddle. The water cooled me down. I felt myself relax. This same feeling flowed down my throat, into my stomach. I came out of the water, climbed into the palm trees, picked some leaves, and let myself sink to the bottom. I ate what I had plucked, after which the night descended upon me.

The next morning arrived faster than expected. One final jump, one last sip. It was time to continue exploring the unknown. The path laying in front of me had been neglected for years, the wind had almost wiped it away. The still

visible edges guided me through this sinister drought. I had left a few miles behind me. I noticed a shadow. Adrenaline shot through my veins, taking over my body and all other senses. The courage took away all ailments. With renewed strength my legs carried me towards an unprecedented appearance. It was of no use, the shadow disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

The effort exhausted me, the heat became unbearable. My last drips of sweat turned out to be a gift straight from heaven. I saw nothing but sand on and around the surrounding mountains. I reached my breaking point; It dawned on me this trip could be my very last one. Every goddamn second felt like an eternity. Vultures encircled me.

These Silent Hunters; Silent Death.

Quietly they awaited my imminent death, the moment my soul would leave my body.

Prepared to use what remained as food.

Here I laid, about to reward their patience.

The bit of liquid still contained in my body gathered itself behind my eyes. I fell to my knees and pulled myself forward. Tearing, my arms were shaking, I had a headache. In a state of despair I tried to absorb every drop; nothing could get lost.

Giving up was not an option!

white grains of sand carried on by a bitter wind floated among, a strong gust of wind forced me to turn my head to the left. It wasn't long after, when the sand finally pressed down, that I saw the gate appear. Seemingly crafted out of the mountain itself, engraved with ornaments in a, for me, unknown language. It must have been at least 50 meters high and 20 meters wide. At the bottom I read "Si vis Pacem, Para Bellum" My body gave up. My limbs felt heavy, I fell to the floor. Closed my eyes for a second and understood I needed some shade, some rest, and a whole lot of luck. I noticed an opening in the rocks not far from me, I crawled back up and hurried there as fast as I could.

Thinking about my next step, the best way to get out of here my mind wandered. Staring at the overflying clouds I dreamed about a soft bed, a meal, anything that would quell my hunger. For that, I would have committed a murder.

The clouds over my head split themselves into two. The wind blew harder, a fierce thunderclap echoed throughout the valley, giving birth to a tornado. The tail of it sank to the gate. Before I knew what happened the gate and everything around it had been destroyed. There where shards flying everywhere.

Frightened, I crawled as deep as I could into the shallow cave.

From the debris a turtle and a hare appeared, the *stone* gave way to life.

Sucked up by the tornado this mesmerizing work of art came to be after

which it entered the eye of the storm.

An epic play of darkness and light unfolded in which both halves of the gate fought for their lives until the rivalry stopped. The opposites stared at each other before a symbiosis occurred. A second, larger tornado developed itself from within the void. Its tail came flying towards me. I hesitated; the fear paralyzed my body. I stared death straight in the eyes. I couldn't do anything, the wind had me in its grasp. I was shot into the air like an arrow. The mountain shrank before vanishing into thin air. The wind carried me up and above the clouds only to fall down and crash against the ground a couple of seconds later.

I woke up in a bed filled with hay in a tiny room. River *stones* radiated simplicity and perfection. Each had its color; its own story. Seducing every one of my senses.

To my left stood an oak cupboard filled with old silver pots and pans. A sunflower brightened it all up.

I looked up and around me. Not a single hole. Nothing except a closed door. I checked my body for bruises, the number of burns was unbelievable. Several questions haunted me, the answers laid outside of these walls.

The door opened. A young, slim woman entered the room. It was only when she approached me that I noticed her yellow dotted portals to the soul. They radiated a natural imperfect harmony; the kind of perfection only visible to some. Glossy blond hair sprawled around her long, thin neck. She came walking in with a smile.

"Ah, you're awake," she whispered.

"You were in a bad shape. You may thank my stepbrother. He's the one that found you. My name is Linwhé."

"I am Surion", I spoke with a slight stutter.

"How did I end up here?"

"My stepbrother picked you up while hunting at the Velnia. He tried to wake you. When he couldn't, he loaded you onto his cart and brought you here." For once luck was in my favor. I thanked her.

"That is not necessary. I'm making lunch. You're welcome, if you manage to get up." She said. I couldn't resist, I had to share the table with this dazzling beauty. She offered me her palm, her delicate fingers clung onto my blistered hand. She pulled with her full weight while I pushed myself off the bed. I Gradually, managed to stand on both feet.

The scent of supper made its way to me. I staggered up to the table, lowered myself into a chair. She took several plates, filled them to the brim: some freshly fried chicken, rice, and some blood-red tomatoes. I should have waited, out of politeness. What, at that time, was ridiculously impossible. As a bloodthirsty hunter I devoured the chicken, the rice and the tomatoes became my next victims. Nothing on that plate would survive my appetite for destruction. Lost in my thoughts and hunger quenching, I only noticed

afterward how Linwhé silently stared at me. Once my plate was empty I raised my head, followed by my eyes who ended straight into hers. My heart sank, a painful silence settled in. Linwhé noticed it as she immediately smiled and asked me if I had had enough.

"Linwhé, where am I?"

"You're in Akuma, located in the Arckas province. The only village surviving the great drought. Where are you from Surion? What brings you to this godforsaken land?"

"I don't know. I remember a village, a world. Waking up in the desert. That's all."

"Do you know your village's name?"

No, my memory is playing tricks on me."

"Your memory will come back. I'm sure of that." Linwhé poured the glasses full.

The sun bowed underneath the horizon, the window in the kitchen exposed to us this phenomenal sight. I tried not to stare at her, which she took pleasure from.

"My father is our village elder, the shaman. If you want I could introduce you? He may be able to help." She added.

"I will now excuse myself to my room, I am tired and have had an exceptionally long day. Are you sure you will be able to get to your bed alone?" She asked. I nodded.

"OK then, Have a good night. Surion."

After which she walked towards her room, stopping a bit further to point at a maple made chest.

"There's more than enough material to keep you going through the night, if needed." She turned around and disappeared. I, who was also tired, decided to follow her example. I put out the candles, and went to sleep.

Days, which felt like weeks, it took before my body healed. Linwhé, without any second thought took care of me. Every morning she brought me some fresh fruit, every afternoon she cooked my food. Until I managed to crawl out of bed without any help.

The day I reached the kitchen table on my own was the day I decided to go out for a walk.

It was time for me to stretch my legs and simply breathe some fresh air. The house was built on the top of a hill, from there I could see all the surrounding homes.

Some houses seemed enlightened, others showed no sign of life. I decided to follow a narrow dirt road down to the edge of a field. The many kinds of fruit growing there created an aroma I had never experienced before.

The road split into two; I decided to follow left. A tenuous road escorted me, I was nothing but a humble visitor. There was a fork taking me to an abandoned laundry room. The long walk had exhausted my fragile body. Had I been overconfident? I sat down at the edge and quietly enjoyed the magical

surroundings.

The stars supported the moon; which shone in its full glory, covering the light blue landscape.

I was bored, as usual, and decided to go home. I did not know I had chosen the wrong direction, I ended up at the border of the village. There death, drought, and the desert took their rightful places. I was tired, it was time to crawl into bed. I made a U-turn. I, hoping not to disturb Linwhé's peace, slipped straight to my room.

I opened my eyes as soon as I had closed them. I waited until my body was ready to get up, I walked to the kitchen. Linwhé had left a note next to my breakfast.

"Take some strength, I need to introduce you to someone. Come and meet me when you're done, Linwhé." What a great way to start a day, I taught to myself. I don't know if she knew it, expected, or had calculated it but by the time I made my last bite the front door opened.

"Come," she grabbed me by my arm and dragged me outside.

"I'd like to introduce you to someone." There was an old barn behind the house. The high temperatures caused the hunter green paint to flake, the wood squeaked from underneath. I followed her on the run.

"I'd like to introduce you to Arion," she said enthusiastically before opening the barn.

A black-winged thoroughbred horse appeared. His wings stretched from wall to wall. Proud and strong, the muscles bulged out from under his skin; a model for beauty and raw animal strength. I took a few steps, gathered my courage and reached out my hand to pat him. His blood-red eyes pierced my soul. I tripped. The sudden movement scared him off. He jumped on his hind legs, his front legs clawed in the air, he whinnied loudly. Linwhé gestured to keep quiet, she asked me to make every movement as noiseless as possible.

"Put your palm on his head, look into his eyes, into his soul. I know he'll recognize the good in you, just like I do. I know he'll trust you." His muscles softened, the stress and anxiety left his body. I observed his wings up close, seemingly carved out of the darkest thunderclouds. His feathers were a dazzling natural work of art. The short, not so pleasant encounter resulted in a wonderful conversation. She asked me for help. Setting up the saddle was not an easy task to do.

"Today I'd like to introduce you to my father," she said while gesturing me to crawl on Arion's back.

I wasn't sure if I trusted this animal enough. I watched Linwhé acrobatically jump on the saddle. I tried to imitate that, in vain. I fell to the ground, pulled myself up. Once firmly balanced on his back we stepped outside. Her stepbrother Atar, who was working in the field below us, waved us goodbye. Before I understood what was happening we flew above and beyond the

clouds. The wind came to be a *Godsmack* in this blazing heat, there where *legends rose*. The thin air found its way deep into my lungs, breathing became difficult. Arion unexpectedly swung from left to right before diving downwards, *pleasure*, freedom and fresh air disappeared into thin air. I clung on as a tenacious bee... Gravity had me in its grasp, I let go. During this endless fall I noticed Arion above me. His collapsed wings and his downwards-facing head cleaved like an arrow through the air. Occasionally he clapped his wings, increasing in speed. Linwhé seemed to enjoy every bit of it. Falling side by side he stretched his wings to slow down. It was of no use. Linwhé reached out, she missed. The ground, came in closer and closer. Seeing my chances of survival diminish by the second I noticed Arion taking one final thrust. Making him faster than me, positioning himself underneath and catching me as we slowed down to land.

We landed in a volcano near a small house. Dizzy, I crawled off Arion's back to meet the solid ground underneath my feet, which I could now kiss. I lost my balance, fell to my knees, and threw up. Linwhé jumped back. She waited until my stomach was empty before she came any closer and helped me get up.

"Are you okay? I didn't want to exaggerate," she said worriedly.

"This is where my father lives, I'll introduce you."

Inside she gestured to sit in silence. Her father stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by a pile of pillows. He stood still. With open but dead eyes he stared at the wall while we were waiting for him to emerge from his comatose state.

It took me about five minutes to detect any movement.

What started as a slight shiver, several moving fingers, ended up him regaining control over his entire body. There he stood, an old bearded man, completely disoriented with white eyeballs.

Linwhé jumped straight. She walked up to her father and hugged him.

"Linwhé, I'm glad to see you. Who is this young man?"

"This is Surion." Linwhé's father studied me from head to toe, he gave me a worried look.

"Welcome." He walked to the cupboard opposite the entrance, fetched three glasses, and filled each glass with water and herbs.

"What's your name again?" he asked.

"Surion."

"Pleased to meet you, Surion. I'm Knudson." He turned to Linwhé.

"How can I help you?"

"Atar found him in the desert, he suffers from amnesia. We're hoping you could help him."

"I'll see what I can do. Make it yourselves comfortable. The summoning of ghosts may take a while."

Knudson turned around and positioned himself. Did I hear that right? Calling upon ghosts? Tense, I waited to see what would become. I sat down upright. His lips moved; it looked like he was talking to someone. The whispers grew louder and louder. His body moved, with full white eyes he dragged himself through the room. A small wound appeared on his neck, bleeding heavily. He fell backward on a pile of pillows.

Struggling, strangles appeared on his neck. I prepared myself to intervene, help her father out of trouble. Linwhé stopped me. With a trembling look she said,

"There's nothing we can do." I turned to him and waited impatiently. The strangles disappeared as abruptly as they appeared. Slowly he came to life. Dazed, he looked around, took an old rag, placed it over the open wound, and shouted,

"Wow, that was a long time ago!"

Stunned, I looked at her. I expected to get that same trembling look, I was wrong. It was clear she had experienced this spectacle several times before. Knudson calmed down.

"I can help you but you have to promise me you won't tell anyone." He took a short breath.

"Not even Linwhé. What you will see can take on many forms. As in a dream, this is never accurate. As a pendulum guiding you in between sense and nonsense, not right nor wrong. It will guide you towards your path."

Without uttering a word I looked into his eyes and nodded. He walked up to a wooden board nailed to the wall, picked up a glass goblet, and placed it on the ground in front of me.

"This one's been standing here collecting dust for years. Once upon a time, I brewed this, the day has finally come to use it. Surion, drink this," he said before blowing the dust off the vial.

"This is the last of its kind. Before the drought came there was a plant growing everywhere: Wormwood. By brewing this into the mixture I can take you out of your dream at any moment; bring you to the world of the living. To start with, you have to take off your shoes." He bent down and loosened my laces.

"How could this be dangerous?" I asked.

"I don't want you dirtying my pillows," Knudson sneered.

Linwhé looked amused.

"Put your head on this pillow, empty the vial, and lay on your side. It'll take a few minutes to take effect." Carefully I opened the glass jar. A disgusting smell of old fish, which had been rotting in the sun for weeks threw itself at me.

I gagged, squeezed my nose, and drank it as fast as I humanly could.

A few seconds later ice-cold water flowed through my toes. I felt my body shivering, soaking wet trousers shocked my eyes open. I was within the heart

of a dark swamp. The chill environment pierced my still weakened soul. It felt as if the wind was speaking to me, it was trying to pass on a message. It was as if death whispered my name. Fear took the upper hand. I panicked. I had to get out of there. Bushes with thorny branches blocked the access to the shore, an inaccessible bank-led me straight ahead. Step by step, surrounded by wilted trees I walked deeper into the swamp.

I sighed a sigh of relief when I noticed an exit a bit further, that same exit brought me to a hexagonal square. The square, paved with bones, bore the stench of death. For safety's sake I decided to make a U-turn, going back into the swamp looking for a better way out.

My first steps into the swamp had just been taken. A black shadow appeared. The shadow encircled me, a perpetual motion forced me back towards the bone-strewn elephant graveyard after which it moved away from me to crash before my feet. The blow went through my entire body, making me collapse upon myself.

The impact grew like a seed. A human form appeared out of thin air, a green aura surrounded her elegant shape. Her dark red eyes betrayed the demon in her veins.

I watched passively as the situation unfolded while it felt as if she was piercing my soul. I felt naked, weak, helpless.

"At last I meet the *Guardian*," she whispered in a shrill voice. The wind picked up and blew me over, back on the floor. I stared into hundreds of skulls. The skulls melted, the released smoke made its way to my lungs while an invisible force lifted me. I floated *parallel* to the ground, her right hand unfurled in my direction. I hesitated before putting my hand into hers. The touch released a borderless, palpable energy. My veins started hurting, light shone out of my eye and my mouth. The shadow smacked against the ground; the transformation created hundreds of smaller particles flying around me. One last scream pierced my soul.

"Go, before it's too late!" The ghost vanished into thin air. Gravity kept me in its power. The earth trembled beneath me, a crack grew. I tried to crawl away with all I had left of strength. That wasn't enough. The black hole swallowed me up.

"He's awake," I heard Linwhé shout.

"What did you see, did it help?" Knudson asked,

"no-one must know what you saw." His sullen face lit up.

"Come on, get up. Some food and water are waiting for you, enjoy."

"Father, we don't have time for this. We have to go home. Arion is getting impatient, he wants to go home," Linwhé grumbled. Did she feel hurt because I couldn't or shouldn't tell her what I saw? A short farewell later we crawled on Arion's back. Distant, lost in my mind, I followed her. Something was bothering me. Knudson whispered something to me while saying goodbye. I didn't get it completely but he secretly handed me a letter. Back at her house

she crawled into bed. I took advantage of the silence to go to my room and read. Taking a candle with me, locking the door, tearing open the letter. There I found a second, smaller envelope and a piece of paper in it.

"To the one who reads this. The answer you seek lies in Argus. This letter is the key, don't open it. Someone will be expecting you there." I removed the secondary letter from the envelope, kept it as close as possible to the candle but didn't detect anything unusual. A short while later Linwhé knocked on the door.

"Surion, are you asleep?" she whispered.

"No, what is it?"

"I can't sleep. Would you be interested in a walk?"

I put the letter away and went outside.

We walked through the village, talking about everything and nothing. Enjoying that late-night evening smell. We reached the village's boundaries, she looked at me.

"Our family is subject to an eternal curse," she said.

"I remember the day my mother disappeared. My father hopelessly tried to explain the curse to us. He was trying to help us give it a place. It was that day he made us a promise, a promise he keeps to this day. He guaranteed us he wouldn't give up breaking the curse. That is why he became a shaman. The constant fear I will disappear still haunts me.

Atar and I have learned to get some courage out of it. In a way, this curse makes us stronger. We learned to enjoy every day, good or bad. Every day could be our last." Linwhé became emotional.

"It was my nineteenth birthday. Every second of every day I hope she shows up unexpectedly; so I could talk to her, hug her, tell her that I love her. Most people in our village will never admit they are afraid that if they hang around with us they will disappear. Atar and I have learned to deal with this. It hurts us all the time; the thought that we are considered outsiders in our own village. I can't imagine anyone being closer to each other than we are. I would die for Atar and he would die for me, I'm sure of that." She filled the ensuing silence with a forced smile, followed by a tear that involuntarily left her eye. I stared into her eyes, smiling comfortingly at her. I tried to get closer, she pushed me away.

"Listen," she said. I pricked my ears, focusing on the background.

"We're here," she shouted with renewed energy.

"Follow me, it's not far." Our steps increased in intensity. I followed her through the darkness. The moon gave us just enough light. One meter ahead of us, darkness reigned over the horizon.

"Wait here." She stepped into the night, made a campfire. We were in the middle of an oasis. To our right, a steep mountain rose. The tiny waterfall culminated not far from where the fire lit.

"I ran away shortly after my mother's disappearance, that is how I accidentally

ended up here. Arion was a few yards away. Exhausted and dehydrated, he had crashed less than a meter from the waterfall. It was *love* at first sight. I took care of him for the next few days. Together we survived our mutual dark period. We returned to the village, where my father took Arion under his care. I come back regularly. It reminds me that I must never give up. Why I must never stop hoping this curse will one day disappear and that someday, somehow, we will live a normal life.

It's largely thanks to Arion that I was able to come to terms with the loss of my mother. He is, after my family, the most important thing in my life." She settled down on a leaf-covered *stone*. I took a seat on the one next to it. Together we enjoyed the night sky.

"Thank you," She whispered.

"Why?" I asked a bit drowsy.

"For listening." Occasionally birds flew by; the fluttering sometimes came frighteningly close. The surrounding world disappeared into thin air. Time froze. Only the oasis and its visitors remained. I knew inside that I was staying where I needed to be. I felt it, I was in the right place at the right time. The moment the breeze slowly rocked us to sleep, as we rose to fall, we realized we would better go home before dawn.

Spending the night here would be an impossible task; That same burning sand, at night, turned into a icy coffin. Once home we wished each other a good night, before disappearing into our room. The next day I, while walking into the kitchen, got greeted by Atar and his skimpy yet masculine voice.

"I hope you feel better"? Linwhé feared the worst. I knew you'd get better. I'm glad to see you awake. Sit, Breakfast is ready."

The atmosphere lifted our moods and the food filled our stomachs. It was time.

I had to address Argus without giving it too much attention.

Since I have no tact at all, I clumsily asked where the city was.

"Argus, my dear Surion. Is a secure underground fortress. Nobody comes in or out uninvited. Why do you want to know this?"

"I have to get in," I said perplexed. My words caught Linwhé's attention.

"Did my dad give you this idea?" With a lump in my throat, I answered negatively. Linwhé's attitude changed, she knew I'd lied.

Atar took the word.

"I can show you the way. I mean, if you really want to go. This gives me a reason to come along, a reason to finally leave this village and to see what life is like outside of these walls".

We left the table. The meal turned into a meeting. Working out every detail together, bent over the map that was on the table in the living room. It didn't take her long to let her voice be heard.

"I'm coming with you! I won't let Atar go alone."

Atar, who tried to challenge the ill-considered decision, was quickly silenced.

She didn't take no for an answer. She wanted to join us at all costs. The three of us would face the unknown. Atar disappeared to return a few minutes later with a map of the surrounding valleys, a compass, and some pencils.

"Here's Argus." He drew a cross on the map. He marked the village in a different color.

"It's a 10-day walk. I'll prepare a food supply for two weeks. I have to warn you, there's a good chance we won't be let in."

The desire for the unknown made us anxious. Fortunately, that same fear had been replaced by the enthusiasm to explore the unknown. We gathered together and enjoyed each other's company. Enjoying the last hours off before our departure, before crawling into bed. That night I couldn't sleep. I kept tossing and turning until I, early in the morning, finally fell asleep. The next morning everyone was busy. Atar walked around like a headless chicken. Linwhé on the other hand was extremely quiet. A few hours later we had packed the last of our stuff. Linwhé and Atar made the last arrangements outside the house. We set off in good spirits.

Chapter 2: Perfectly imperfect.

The sun welcomed us unto the open desert.

"According to the map," Atar said,

"We must walk towards the ikiḍanā impasse. Once there, follow the northern mountain to find the entrance to the city." The village had been left behind, disappearing in no time as we out of sheer enthusiasm rushed ourselves towards the unknown. We had been on the road for a good week when we noticed Atar started to have a rough time.

The sweat dripped from his forehead, every step he took made him pant harder, his legs trembled heavier by the second. He seemed to be approaching his breaking point. Too proud to admit that he was fighting his way through the trip he kept on going, and going, against the stream. Doing anything, whatever was needed to relieve some of his pain.

While not getting caught, of course. He tried to laugh it off. That's when Linwhé and I decided to take a break, we wanted to relieve him from his stuff unseen.

This would benefit all of us.

A couple of meters further we noticed an old tree. We decided to take a quick break. The great green gave us more than enough shade.

Linwhé used this moment to extract information from me about my dream.

"So, what did you see? You looked defeated when you came back."

"Well." I hesitated. The three of us were cut off from the outside world, what could possibly go wrong? I threw my rules overboard. The decision to tell them everything seemed, at that time, more appropriate than keeping it to myself.

They both stared at me with their eyes wide open. What had to be five minutes to catch our breath became a long conversation until time silently caught up to us; If we were to reach the gate we had to proceed without any hesitation. We finished the conversation, grinning in how he didn't notice a thing and left for the ikiḍanā impasse.

On the road again. It took its time and a couple of unforeseen circumstances but we finally arrived there in the middle of the night. With the pass, the marble gate in sight. We decided to end the trip for today. The long walk and the heat had exhausted us beyond repair. It must have not been long after, our camp was halfway up, dark gray clouds took over the Allmight sky. Those same clouds brought heavy rain with them, an overwhelming bang echoed

throughout the valley, a flash of deadly lightning illuminated this All-might place.

We panicked, picked our stuff before the strong winds tore everything apart and ran towards the edge of the mountain. Looking for some kind of shelter we almost got lost. I stumbled, needed to pick up everything that had fallen, after which I ran towards the others.

By the time I caught up with them they had located a small gap within the mountain, which turned out to be a cave. There, we found ourselves some wood, we started a fire and made it ourselves comfortable.

The ember slowly took shape, nurtured by us and itself, changing into a fully grown fire, raging as a newly born star illuminating the night. The storm still hung over our heads. There is no power as strong as nature, this catastrophe, this neverending story. There was something I couldn't explain. I felt how this ancient, immortal phenomenon hypnotized my senses. In that awe, I felt myself relax. Amidst khaos, I felt myself calm and so small.

I hadn't realized Linwhé had walked deeper into the cave. It wasn't until she called our names that I came out of my fiery induced hypnosis.

"Atar, Surion, I need you to see this."

I looked at Atar, he waved me away.

"Can you go? I'm done for today. I don't have the courage for this right now." I stood up and stepped into Linwhé's direction.

"Look," she said fulfilled by wonder. There was a hidden wall.

"Do you take the torches? Are we investigating this?"

"Why not," I replied and walked to the fire to get me a torch while Linwhé tried to get Atar to come along. He looked at us, completely bored.

"I'm fine here, go on, I'll see you guys later." His forced smile spoke volumes.

We turned around and walked into the darkness. Each step we took muffled the external khaos a tiny bit more. We had no choice but to walk deep into the bowels of the beast. We, at some point, heard a loud bang coming from the entrance behind us. We didn't hesitate, we simply took a run for it. Panicked Linwhé yelled,

"Atar! Atar! Do you hear me? Answer me!" We heard nothing, no response.

We rushed back. Once in a while, we stumbled over a boulder, helping each other straight to continue our path through this half-blinded, constant darkness. Which, at some point had mixed with the dust cloud fleeing from the entrance. The adrenaline rushed through our hearts. We heard him screaming in the distance.

"Help! PLEASE, help!"

The obscure dusty space held back the little light that had the opportunity to survive within this cave of despair. Once there we saw Atar buried underneath a thick layer of rubble. We jumped straight into it, little by little, we tried and freed his leg. Every thunder brought more débris and the storm was getting heavier by the second.