

God of Manna

By Daeus Lamb

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A Customary Notice

Dear reader,

It is my custom to list potentially objectionable content in a book from the get-go. I say “potentially objectionable” because, while I’m a realist, I never write anything just for shock value. However, some people will inevitably have stricter standards than I do. If any of the content listed below would offend you, you might be better off not reading *God of Manna*, and I wish you well finding other quality stories that fit your preferences.

Content:

The main character swears a couple times by his city’s deity.

One scene depicts a murder, though not in terribly graphic detail.

For the Curious Reader

The story you are about to read has a secret purpose. On the outside, it masks as just another fairy tale. Actually, however, it is a response to a famous piece of literature.

It began when I was reading *The Way of Kings*, and the author mentioned a fantasy culture where farmers were treated as the highest members of society. As one naturally fond of soil and plants, this sparked my imagination.

I began to develop a utopian society like a garden of Eden. Soon, I decided this paradise had its own god, and *God of Manna* was born.

As my thoughts took shape, I was surprised to discover that everything about my story was shaping itself as a direct response to *The Grand Inquisitor*, a short story within Fyodor Dostoevsky's famous novel: *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The Grand Inquisitor is the story of a Spanish inquisitor who tries to persuade Jesus that he should *not* have resisted the temptations in the desert. This story has always fascinated me. For one, how much does it reflect the mind of Dostoevsky? Dostoevsky was one-of-a-kind. I've heard he was a Christian, but he was also renowned for how brilliantly he wrote atheist and skeptical characters. Also, the ending of *The Grand Inquisitor* is incredibly cryptic. I've always wondered how to interpret it. Finally, the inquisitor's arguments are complex, unique, and mind-bogglingly deep.

Perhaps I could never really get the profundity of the story out of my head. Whatever the case, it inspired *God of Manna*.

God of Manna is far from a rewrite of *The Grand Inquisitor*, nor are its characters or plot similar. I do, however, examine the same themes, looking at them from different angles, giving my own perspective.

God of Manna can easily be enjoyed without reading *The Grand Inquisitor*, but, if I've piqued your interest, *The Grand Inquisitor* is worth a read in its own right.

Prologue

The Secret of Elysigard

On the brink of death, a man made a pact with the Wind, selling his soul for the fulfillment of his deepest yearning.

No one knew that the Wind accepted souls. No one could have imagined a ghostly existence, nor would they have dared try it. The man counted the perils, but he clung to his contract—every night henceforth, his soul would fly over the fair city of Elysigard. Imagining that almost sustained him as he thrashed on his bed, the cold sweat drying on his brow.

He gripped the sheets as if to prevent them from leaving, that he might not be alone when the time came. Surely the Wind would soon claim him, and he would soar from this dusty village to Elysigard and find answers. Maybe he would even find rest.

Elysigard glowed bright in his imagination. As a slave to the God of Manna—as an *outsider*—he had never beheld the blessed land, but he could picture the endless trees and bubbling brooks. Until now, his only hope had been the weekly food distribution.

And why had he bothered to eat the food and keep living? He wasn't sure.

Darkness swathed the house, and in an adjacent room, relatives wept—not because they loved him, but because death is always shocking. The sobs, undeterred by other sounds, crawled through his bed curtains like mice and sent shivers down his spine. “Stop! Stop!” he wheezed through clenched teeth. “Grant me one moment of peace before I die.”

But he his relatives didn't hear and couldn't have helped. No peace on earth could hold his wretched corpse together as it jerked free from his soul. As his life-flame flickered and spluttered smoke, he fell into a coughing fit and a prayer rode out on its coattails.

“Lillia, my daughter, forgive me.”

His little girl was dead, and the time was nigh for them to be reunited.

Faster than a blink, the man’s soul rocketed from his body, nearly touching the stars. He spun windmills and discovered that his body was now amorphous. The ground, however, gave him no time to marvel. It drew him down, whispering threats of eternal imprisonment.

Cold arms caught him. “Like always! Just in time,” chuckled a sky-stretching voice. “The Wind is *never* late for an appointment. Why, you should see my schedule. The way I deliver lightning bolts and floods all over the globe puts the Elysigard mail system to shame.” The Wind traveled even faster than he spoke, and for a moment the man couldn’t breathe. His village faded behind him.

“Y-you’re amiable?” he stuttered once he finally inhaled.

“Well”—the Wind swooped playfully over a little village—“I’m generally too busy to be *sociable*, but I’m no *God of Manna*, if that’s what you mean.”

The man wanted to express his unspeakable relief, but at the sight of the barren landscape passing below, his stomach sickened and his thoughts shattered like the dry ground. Perhaps he was fortunate to be seeing it at midnight, for the homeland he had known was like vomited dust rippling in lethargic waves. Lonely hills stood as monuments to the desolation for those who failed to notice it beneath their own feet. In the lowest valleys, a thorn bush or two eked out a living.

The scene was nothing new, but the anguished faces of the thousands who were slaves to the God of Manna seemed to rush at him. He imagined he could see past the rooftops into the beds where bright-eyed children dreamed about mounds of food. Not freedom, because that was too much to hope for.

He was too speechless to even curse.

“The view isn’t pretty, I’ll admit,” said the Wind. “I’ve learned to ignore it.”

The Wind could easily ignore the hardships. He’d never experienced them. Outside Elysigard, under the God of Manna’s shadow, people were as

living dead. The man shivered.

"But the conditions weren't always so cheerless." The Wind dove into a wide valley. "Right here, I remember when a stream once bordered a meadow."

"Stop it!"

The Wind jerked like a skipped heartbeat before slowing his pace. "Beg pardon?"

"You're lying to me," the man cried. "Why, next you'll say that the God of Manna herded sheep here!" That was an irrational accusation, but perhaps it was fair. The Wind's etiquette was as bad as telling an urchin he had once been the son of a wealthy and kind merchant, but his father and all the treasure had burned up in a fire when he was born.

"I-I don't believe in the God of Manna," said the man, choking on his words. "The priests invented him to control us."

The Wind was infinitely broad, but he could not wrap himself around this argument. Finally, he ventured, "Well...didn't you worship him?"

The man hung his head, staring down at the endless desert that resembled a giant, festering sore. "Yes," he whispered. "He's God in a sense, for he wields the matchless power of manna. Nobody can resist that."

His vision blurred, and he blinked rapidly as a memory gnawed at him. He shuddered, though not from the altitude's chill.

In the night, priests pounded on his door. "Will you worship the God of Manna, outsider, with that which is dearest to you? Ascribe worthiness to him, or you and your village will starve."

"Oh, yes, yes! Do not let us starve! Don't let me die! I'm a mere man!"

They dragged Lillia away. She called for him. His vision blurred with tears.

The next day, his village received food. Everything settled back to normal. Except a small bed in his house would never be slept in again.

"Your daughter?" the Wind asked. "I...was there. So sorry."

The man waved the sympathy away. "It's over." Perhaps the memory was etched more starkly upon his heart than he had realized, though. Perhaps that

was why he, unlike those before him, had defied the clutches of doom. The more he was beaten, the higher he raised his head.

“Get ready,” said the Wind. “For one used to drab plains, this may hurt your eyes.”

The man gasped.

Spanning the horizon from east to west, the walls of Elysigard loomed as proud as kings and as mighty as the Wind himself. Like both a friend and a rival, the Wind charged the barrier as if in a joust, then leapt over it at the last second.

Elaborate gardens, built upon millennia of lore, spread endlessly through Elysigard. Ribbons of water danced through the hair of their lover earth in long caresses. The terrain burst with pride till not a speck was left uncovered by foliage.

The Wind was right. The man’s eyes clouded with moisture. “My wretched life is beautiful! Oh, I am going to die.” In his ignorance, he blessed the inhabitants of Elysigard for being beloved by the God of Manna. Men who lived in such a place could not possibly have any wants. For a fleeting moment, the lush landscape eclipsed his dark past.

The Wind, like any good companion, dragged his intoxicated passenger along, taking the highway. He had to make this visit short lest the man faint straight out of the sky and land on someone’s prized blueberry bushes.

Below, a lonely priest shuffled along in the shadows. The Wind spared him a glance, but the man was studying the green-stalked plants that flanked the highway. The blossoms captured light of every color. Were they the rumored flowers? Or droplets of magic carelessly spilled from a broken jar? If he ever found the jar, he swore he would drink it dry.

Another priest dotted the highway, but did the man notice him? Oh, no. He was too busy counting the flowers by bunches of thousands. Focusing on simple wonders was much easier than acknowledging extensions of the God of Manna’s power. Such fiends did not belong in Elysigard and weren’t even worth considering.

As the terrain changed, the magic flowers blurred into the background. Life here was unrestrained, like a lion no hunter could snare. The gilded mansions of the insiders were replaced by grass huts hidden like peeking eyes in the darkest shadows. By some, priests stood in trances.

A veil blacker than mold and scandalously beautiful hovered over the jungle ahead. Within the swampy murk, an unsteady and sharp tune oozed as if from a wound. The music was not bittersweet, but *bitterly sweet*. Drunken and alluring, it belied the ominous presence within.

The Wind veered to the west, but the path forward became drudgingly slow. The air rumbled and shook, and the Wind went limp. "Oh...I did not expect this. Surely he is not..." They sunk toward the heart of the darkness.

"What?" whispered the man, not daring to raise his voice.

The Wind only muttered and the music continued to wail.

The land dipped into a deep valley where the heart of darkness beat a steady rhythm. *Doom, doom, doom*. The place reeked of truth, of reality. No magic flowers grew here. Memories of the man's past returned to him in phantom shapes.

A row of priests flashed below, startling the man. They had seen him, he was certain, and they were not surprised. They waved bones carved in twisted symbols and chanted in a language he had never heard but understood with a primal instinct. He wished for cotton to plug his ears.

Long grasses waved, pointing down into the valley's soul. They passed row after row of priests. Only at the bottom did the grasses recede to expose dusty earth. The mouth of a cavern yawned, twelve stone altars guarding its feet.

The man went cold. *Lillia*... "Oh no. Oh no." How many times he had envisioned the altars before. But never in blessed *Elysigard*. "Turn back! Turn back!"

"I...am...sorry," said the Wind, low and slow, as if each word were hardly worth speaking. "I didn't know this would happen. You see, while I am no slave, I am not entirely my own master, and the God of Manna is pulling on

me.”

Inch by inch they floated among the dying, and each face assaulted the man. The blood on the ground poured into the cavern. They entered the pit.

He whimpered.

Sitting in the darkness, so tall he filled the hole, the God of Manna glared down at them. He was almost invisible, but his silhouette morphed from bat to ox to tiger to vulture until all the creatures swirled together in one formless beast.

“Your daughter must have whet his appetite,” muttered the Wind, “and he craves more.”

“Forgive me. Food—ah! I only did it to live!” The man wept. “I didn’t—this isn’t... *They took her from me!*”

The God of Manna stretched out his hand, dispelling the man’s deception.

For this was the secret of Elysigard: The God of Manna was no myth but ruled the world with the power of manna. Yet he was always hungry. He fed his slaves, and their souls fed him.

Who could save the world from this bondage?

Chapter 1

The New Lord Turnthral

One bright day in Elysigard, a young man waited with his mother for the God of Manna to take away his father's soul. His hands sweated, but aside from occasionally dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief, he stood still. Though his face resembled a blank piece of paper, his thoughts skittered in all directions.

The dead never returned. Never. Wasn't his father already gone? The corpse seemed a silly thing to revere. Why was he even at this ceremony? It was like pausing to respect a caterpillar crawling across the ground or a pebble that happened to resemble a cauliflower.

He coughed softly and glanced around as if he didn't know where he was. In the trees at the perimeter of the small, circular garden, bluebirds chirped. Bees buzzed from flower to flower among the herbs. The scent of the blooms and the moist soil imbued the air with life. In the garden's center, his dead father lay on a stone table.

Three months ago, his father had sat at the head of a walnut table, host of a lavish feast. With his body swallowed by his stuffy velvet coat and polished brass buttons, his bulldog face had stuck out with wide eyes never resting. He had a way of looking shocked and out of place in the most normal circumstances, and he seemed to have died with a monumental, unanswered question on his mind.

Though the young man's eyes were dry, he rubbed them again as the priest poured incense into the braziers on each corner of the table and muttered incantations or prayers. This was for his father's sake, yet the bald, wizened creature never even looked at the corpse.

Without a whisper of warning, the sky dimmed. The flowers trembled,

curling inward, and the bees bumbled away between shivering leaves. The young man's gut clenched, and he reached out to squeeze his mother's hand. He looked into her stoney face and she looked back.

The Passing swooped in.

A clammy wind pummeled the young man's back, enveloping the garden in a shadow that swirled above his father's corpse. Darkness exploded, blotting out the world for a second. A wave of numbness seized the young man's spine. Then, when he blinked, the darkness dispersed.

"To dust," the diminutive priest squeaked, shuffling over to the stone table with a broom. The body of Lord Turnthrall had been reduced to ashes. Only his cane, the mark of his rule, remained unblemished, perched like a forgotten trinket atop the ashes.

The priest knocked the ashes off the slab and picked up the cane. Few had need of it more than he, but he held it in both hands and inched his way toward the new Lord Turnthrall.

The rigid form of the young man shifted, and a muscle in his cheek twitched. He swallowed, dampened his lips, and set his jaw like a grim hero chiseled out of stone. He received the cane, then stepped back and nodded.

He belonged with a cane. His eyes and famed austere jaw radiated nobility, while his nose, lips, and hair had a fine quality that lacked real beauty. This appearance led strangers to assess his age at forty, though he was actually twenty-eight. Even his name sounded old and somber—Mortristan.

While the priest gathered his instruments, Mortristan studied his cane and tried to remember the kind but aloof father who had once carried it. Already, though, the memories were fading.

So soon! Mortristan scanned the garden, wondering where the memories could have fled. Shreds of gloom wafted along the fringes as if the God of Manna felt his job yet unfinished. Or perhaps Mortristan was mad like his distant relatives who had hallucinations.

One last time, Mortristan stared at the stone slab where his father had

been. This was not his farewell to the subject of death but more of an introduction—a nod signifying they would converse again.

Finally, he offered his arm to his mother, and they followed the cobblestones to the street. Beneath a grape arbor with hyssop and lilies embracing the vines, he stopped. “I will walk home.”

He released his mother, motioning her toward the carriage. She nodded her blessing and waited by the door. Her eyes, sharp and knowing, locked onto his. But he spun away and chose a more circuitous route.

Once he was alone, his thoughts expanded. The quiet roads bordered by gardens and forest canopies toppling over each other were ideal for meditation, but he hurried along. Nothing could enchant him today.

He focused straight ahead until he arrived at a pool glistening like a topaz charm beside the road. He peered over the edge, but the man in the reflection was a stranger—a clone with his father’s bulging and perplexed eyes. In the background, the skies blazed with molten-gold sunbeams that stung his eyes till his vision swam. Staggering back, he wiped the sweat from his brow.

What a weighty inheritance. The unanswered question belonged to him now!

Had his father once stood by a corpse and watched his perspective of the world unravel like a sweater caught on a branch? Had his father been an ordinary person before that day?

“Well...” Mortristan stroked his chin three times. He ran a hand through his hair, then lifted his cane and resumed his stroll, swaying once or twice before steadying himself.

He approached the walls that shielded Elysigard from the outside lands. The night his father first fell ill, he had climbed the east tower. Tomlin, the half-lame sentry, raised his hand from the alcove where he ate his lunch. “Good morning, your lordship. It’s unlocked. Please make yourself at home.”

Tomlin was of lower rank, but Mortristan still bowed.

Round and round the staircase spiraled like a top, spinning his thoughts in

circles. He trudged upward until blue skies seemed a myth. When he emerged at the top, he leaned against the parapet to catch his breath.

The outside lands stretched away from him, wrinkled and faded like a giant spider had sucked the color out with its fangs. Houses clustered in small villages. They looked burnt to a crisp. Maybe a little more sun exposure would incinerate them. Dried weeds reeled drunkenly through the dust. Carnage from a dead horse was the sole evidence of wildlife. Then again, Mortristan couldn't distinguish details in the distance. Perhaps more animal carcasses rotted in the desert.

The sight of the wasteland gave him something to cling to, for the reality of decay was the secret that had tormented his father. When he had surveyed a banquet scene with those startled eyes, he was seeing beyond the extravagant clothing and smiles to the desolation lurking with knives hidden beneath its cloak. He'd treated every pond, earthwork, and vineyard he built as if it could turn to dust any moment.

Despite the bitterness, Mortristan feasted on the stunning grey world of the outsiders. *Dust to dust*, echoed the priest's voice in his head.

"God of Manna," he cursed under his breath for the first time in his life. He grasped his cane like a weapon and methodically scrutinized every inch of the plain below. Surely there was something in the world that couldn't be torn from him.

For several minutes, he contemplated the drop from the wall, though he didn't intend trying it. Somersaulting three hundred times downward was hardly a grand way to die. But breaking ancient law by teaching the outsiders farming—*that* would be historic.

He stiffened and glanced over his shoulder. Nobody was watching him. Besides, people couldn't read thoughts. He tugged at his collar.

Sighing, he turned back to the view with a sly, easy smile. According to legend, the outsiders were half-human beasts, but he suspected that was an exaggeration. Insiders and outsiders had been separated for millennia, and time tended to blow facts out of proportion. The outsiders were forbidden to

farm, but that didn't mean they couldn't learn. Their plight was the God of Manna's fault. He enslaved the outsiders and fed them with the quota he levied on the insider's produce. In return, the outsiders gave him offerings and sacrifices, as well as rough materials to satisfy the insiders. Everything centered around the God of Manna.

Yes, Mortristan could almost dare to step on the God of Manna's toes.

The God of Manna would swallow him alive, or have him burned at the stake. Sparks would fly like fireworks, but the experience—ah, it would repay him in full. Mortristan began mapping out an oasis in the desert when footsteps sounded behind him.

"Thinking?"

He whirled to face his mother. Her straight posture signaled that she'd had no practice bending to anyone. Though she stood a head shorter, she seemed to look down at him. If he confessed his ambition to throw away his life in a melodramatic prank, how would she respond? Scold him?

The first bit of warmth that day crawled into Mortristan's cheeks. He smiled. "So you've followed me all this way? Pray, are you accustomed to disobeying the Lord Turnthrall when he sends you home in his carriage?"

He had always been poor at jokes.

"You're unwell," she snapped.

History paused at that moment to gape at this most blunt mother. It scratched its head, bit its fingernails, and then admitted that such mothers must exist.

"Ah, how could that be? The scene is so lovely." Mortristan gestured to the land behind him that was as dead as a cow skull with one eye socket plugged by grime. He knew he was unwell, but not if he would ever recover.

The matron aimed for the kill. "This is where you came when we discovered your father was ailing. You stayed up here all day, remember?"

Mortristan parried quickly. "I was mostly amusing myself with plans for a new fishpond in the western pasture. It required detailed planning."

"You're coming directly with me. I promised Elysha a visit from you today.

She'll talk some sense into you." This was a violation of the rules. It was like stabbing an opponent in the boxing ring.

Mortristan bowed his head. He preferred isolation at the moment, but if his fiancée expected a visit, he was bound to it by cords as strong as Hades. "Very well, Mother. You win."

Thus began the epic war in which Mortristan played both hero and villain.

Chapter 2

Paradise

Smoke plumed against the green vestments of a field in Elysigard. Its incense cleansed the foul air over the homestead of one who had lied to the God of Manna. After escaping investigation on an accidental miscalculation, the rebel had grown bolder and withheld half the quota required of him in produce. He'd raced toward the flames that consumed those who clung to the fruits of their labor.

In the field, priests swarmed like carrion fowl on a battlefield. One chopped down a tree, another scattered salt, and a third plowed it into the soil. A song that didn't belong under the light of day drummed to the rhythm of their movements. The tongue was not of men, but it boasted in the desolation that would curse the ground for ages, of the thirst that rain would never quench.

As a carriage drove by, one priest crouched like a vulture on a high stump. Unlike the other priests, he was a paradox of withered skin and strong limbs. A desert could not be more parched than his red-as-hellfire complexion. Beneath his black hood, a shadow covered his eyes. Whenever he removed that shadow, his fellow priests fell prostrate and screeched.

The carriage stopped, and a young man with squared shoulders and a cane stepped out. His eyes roved over the scene. Upon reading the sign announcing the rebel's sin, his shoulders dropped half an inch. He set his jaw like sharp, chiseled stone. Looking up, he met the high priest's gaze.

The high priest shifted. He had seen such firm, sparkling eyes before, but not in centuries. He had dealt with them. Lowering the veil of shadow, he flashed his own eyes.

The young man held the gaze and slowly nodded. He rubbed his chin,

then a minute later he climbed into his carriage and drove off.

Long after the carriage left, the high priest remained fixated on the road. Finally, he rested his hands on his perch, and the stump glowed with ribbons of flame. He leapt away as it exploded behind him.

* * *

The carriage rumbled along, kicking up pebbles in a rhythm as untraceable but sure as birdsong. Since witnessing the rebel's punishment, Mortristan and his mother had not spoken. Mortristan stared unseeingly through the window as the memory replayed its horrors. Fire, priests, those eyes. Hardly any difference existed between that raped field and the outlying wastelands. Destruction had descended with a snap of the fingers.

The shadow from the passing lingered in his peripheral vision. Was he going mad? Was the God of Manna stalking him? That couldn't be. The shadow was only a vestige of power, not a real presence.

In the middle of a bumpy road lined with hyacinth, he caught himself studying the dark vapor like a scientific phenomenon, testing different theories instead of wondering if he should see a doctor.

Only when the carriage wheeled down Elysha's lane did he jerk straight and wipe his brow. Flower boxes decked the round windows of the two-storied stone cottage where Elysha lived with her father and mother. The warped shingles glittered in the sun like the scales of a plump and friendly dragon.

Why concern himself with losses when he approached the enchanted land where his fairy lady waited?

With a heart full of dreams, Mortristan exited the carriage. But when he proffered his arm to his mother, she folded her hands and shook her head. "You must go alone or you'll never be cured of this melancholy."

He shrugged and turned as the groan of the carriage was replaced by harp music. It sounded like the soul of the garden singing. He smiled and walked

forward. At a fay gate, he paused to listen before loosening the latch and heading down a footpath overgrown with thyme and ivy. A dark vapor flashed in the air, but as Mortristan rounded the corner, it disappeared.

The canopy encircling the small clearing formed an emerald cove where surprises abounded. Every blanket of moss secreted a new species or a curious rock. In a cranny, a bent dwarf tree served as a throne for a girl who plucked a small harp while gazing at the sky. Or was she a woman? Mortristan rightfully thought of her as a fairy, for her soul was of a magical substance. Sunbeams seemed to brighten upon touching her.

Without any sign of noticing him, Elysha sang two stanzas of Althus and Lethinia's bittersweet lay. Then she cut off and sprang to her feet, almost dropping her harp. "Ah!" she exclaimed, spreading her arms as if moderation was a foreign concept to her. But instead of embracing him, she flitted off to inspect a butterfly that had landed on a stone pillar.

Elysha could forget anything, and when she did, Mortristan graced her with a look that belonged to her alone.

After he had memorized the picture, Elysha's glowing face clouded. "A Passing." Her words fell to the ground like petals, torn, scattered, and pretty. Nature cooed while the couple allowed time to elapse until the sadness of the past withered.

"You are now in my garden," Elysha declared, and joy again burst from her face. She twirled.

Mortristan sucked in a breath, warmth radiating through his body and tingling in his fingertips. He rose briefly on the balls of his feet and basked in the sunshine filtering through the leaves. Could this place be categorized? The question dizzied him.

"Oooh!" Elysha hopped over and tapped his cane. "Why, you're a lord now!" She pranced back to her harp and plucked two strings. "Please be seated, my lordship." She put on the air of a little girl, plucking a nearby leaf and examining it from different angles. She hid behind it, then poked her head out, grinning.

Mortristan played along by bowing and obeying her command. He sank into the chair-swing with a sigh. With a push that set him rocking, he closed his eyes. As a warm gust brushed his cheeks, he daydreamed of an arbored gate, song birds trilling on either side. Through the gate, fairies danced in a meadow. He entered, and when he looked back, the gate was gone and fairyland extended forever.

“You’re smiling! Tell me what about.”

Mortristan cocked one eye open, still half in fairyland. Elysha leaned forward, absently smoothing her skirt over her knees. He opened the other eye and planted his feet, jerking to a stop mid-swing. “I think I enjoy watching you.” A smile quirked at his lips.

“Oh, no!” Elysha clapped her hands, blushing. “None of that.” She hid her face for a second, then showed it while it was still red and her eyes sparkled. “Here, let’s talk to each other. I want to know you better. What makes you most happy?”

He stroked his chin. A beetle buzzed loudly as the silence stretched between them. For Elysha, he could give only the true answer. “I...” His upper lip trembled. Out spilled the words in thick clumps. “I have *never* felt so happy.” He formed a fist and broke eye contact.

“And why? Why, Mortristan?”

He laughed breathlessly. Somehow, the answer was out of reach, shrouded by the memory of a Passing and a melodramatic decision to commit a crime he could never get away with. *Why, Mortristan? Why, why, why?* Elysha’s steady eyes seemed to impart a message into his thoughts. *Leave it all. Cast yourself into the spell of the garden.*

“Ooh!” Elysha jumped up. “I have something for you.” She sprinted off, and her absence dragged on until a faint *snip, snip* tickled Mortristan’s ear.

Half concealed by the thicket, an old man in common clothes pruned a branch with shears. He waved, his smile bold and his eyes mischievous. He had never worked there before. Mortristan might have called out except he was starting to believe he suffered from delusions.

“Here, love.” Elysha skipped back into the garden.

Mortristan glanced from her to the old man, but he was gone. Yes, the gardener must have been an illusion. He smiled at his fiancée. “What have you there?”

She gently pressed an object into his palm. “So you won’t forget.” Her eyes pulled him in.

Mortristan searched for his breath. “What do you want me to remember?” he gasped.

“That—that...I’m here. Whatever happens, I am always here. When you look at this, forget all else and remember me.” The moment broke traditional limits by a long stretch. Nature blew kisses and flashed its most scandalously bright flowers. Finally, she stepped back.

Mortristan spun the grey-streaked, violet stone in his fingers.

“Keep it in your pocket,” she said.

“Always?”

“Always.”

Mortristan complied with her request. From the same pocket he withdrew a handkerchief and dabbed his eyes. He exhaled. “Shall we take a walk?”

Chapter 3

The Fruit Thief

Mortristan stayed with Elysha until the crimson hues of sunset painted the sky, and during that time he desired nothing more. But when his visit drew to a close, none of the pleasure he'd experienced seemed to matter.

Their walk had not lasted long enough, nor Elysha's inquiries about her diseased apple tree and his analysis of it, or their conversation about childhood hideaways and friends and pranks, or her harp playing and giggles at the images it conjured in his mind, or her insistence that she pack a dinner for him and him suggesting they picnic in the garden instead.

As Mortristan stalled by the roadside, each of the memories faded like the grey outside Elysigard's walls, and his father's shocked eyes and decaying body rushed to the forefront of his mind.

Mortristan kicked a stone. What had he resolved on the walls? Wasn't it to find something that couldn't be snatched from him?

In the distance, a stooped figure approached with an all-too-even stride that reminded him of the high priest. Mortristan didn't care to learn what they would say to each other if they met, so he wished Elysha's grounds farewell and set off briskly.

A crescent moon hung like a sickle overhead, and an early-rising bat zipped figure eights through the trees. As the last sun rays dripped blood on the horizon, Mortristan broke into a jog.

At last he came to a fork in the road that marked the border of his estate, each path tracing the perimeter in different directions. The closest one veered alongside a pumpkin patch and an orchard of mixed fruits, berries, and nuts.

"Oomph!" Out of an apple tree plopped a short man who sprawled on the ground. Several apples rolled out of the makeshift pouch in his overlapped

work shirt. "Poor knees," he sputtered, gathering up the apples and dumping them in an overloaded wheelbarrow.

Mortristan tripped over an apple the man had missed.

"Evenin'." The old man flashed a grin through his wild grey beard. "You look like someone who could use some guidance in life." His voice was both a laugh and a lullaby.

"You..." Mortristan's mind split in a million directions as he regained his balance. He certainly did not know the man, but his voice and being rang with familiarity.

"I am the one with the pruning shears who waved to you." The old man swept a quick bow.

Cold moonlight shone between them. As a breeze stirred, the shadows shifted. "So"—the old man chomped into an apple—"nice day?"

Mortristan stepped back. He blinked, but the old man continued to study him with eyes that shone like twin moons. For some reason, he wanted to probe the old man for the answer to the question in his father's eyes. Where in frosty heavens, Sheol, or the end of the earth could he find something truly imperishable?

The old man's eyes glowed with a bright, cool light. It was almost too much to be natural.

"Who are you?" Mortristan shivered.

"Ooph!" The old man spit out an apple chunk and his eyebrows rocketed up. "Aiiikes! Mustn't tell that." He coughed till his breath steadied, then he wagged his head. "That's *secret* information."

Mortristan's face flamed, and he shook his cane at the wheelbarrow. "What's this? Are you stealing from my lands?"

The old man paused mid-bite. "Steal? I wouldn't dare!"

"What then? You're a spy?"

The old man laughed.

More heat flooded Mortristan's cheeks. "Is this my property or not?"

"True, true." The old man wiped away tears of laughter. "But, as I recall,

the property belonged to your father before you. And his father before him, and his father's father before that, and so on until—"

Mortristan grunted.

"Sorry. The point is, my right to a portion of your produce is beyond your petty challenges." The old man grimaced apologetically, threw his half-eaten apple over his shoulder, and bowed. "At your service."

Mortristan folded his arms. He was a strict man, but also kind. The two sides of his personality glared at each other with fists curled, socially awkward. "Why *have* you confiscated my property, then?"

"For the Hiddletons." The old man ceased smiling and nodded. "The father works in the mines. Dust has made him sick so he can't work much. The family's ration has been cut."

Mortristan darted up an eyebrow. "Outsiders?" Again he suspected that he was hallucinating. No one could leave Elysigard except through guarded gates, and the punishment for smuggling food was death.

"Outsiders," the old man repeated. He repositioned two pears and a handful of nuts that were on the verge of toppling out of the wheelbarrow.

"I've considered helping the outsiders..." The confession slipped out of Mortristan's mouth unbidden.

"Helping them, or getting caught in the act?"

Mortristan narrowed his eyes. "Who are you? Really?"

Smiles had worn creases in the old man's face. He didn't need to grin to show it. "I'll tell you," he said, grabbing the wheelbarrow handles. "I am He Who Goes Before. I prepare the soil and plant the seed."

As the old man proceeded down the road, Mortristan tracked him by the squeak of the wheelbarrow. When the sound had grown faint, the old man's voice echoed from a spot of utter blackness. "Oh, a friendly warning, Lord Turnthrall. When you come to your mansion, be prepared for a commotion. This is the season for happenings. You can hardly get a good night's rest anymore!"

Chapter 4

A Manhunt

As Mortristan crossed his estate, his cane acted as an extra appendage, alternating between a third leg and an arm gesturing in the air. The mark of responsibility didn't burden him as it did others. It supported, animated, and enthralled him. Generations of Turnthralls had carried a cane, yet their names were all but forgotten. Mortristan vowed to do better. Until the day he captured something lasting, though, power was all he possessed.

"Feeding the outsiders indeed!" he muttered, swinging his cane. "I let a common fruit thief escape because he spun a good story." Leaders were expected to be more discerning. He resolved to hold himself accountable.

Yet he couldn't deny that the fruit thief had prophesied correctly. His monstrous dwelling lay slumbering ahead, not a window blinking with light. But women and boys carrying lights and cudgels scattered across the front porch and garden as if preparing for battle.

Mortristan lengthened his stride.

"Mortristan, sir!" Out of the broiling shadows stumbled a silhouette that materialized into his steward, Holtin.

Mortristan struck his cane an inch into the ground. "What's this, Holtin?"

Holtin wrung his hands tighter and tighter. "Mercy on us, sir! An outsider has been spotted. Might be anywhere on your estate. Ah!"

In one day, these outsiders were playing a larger role than in all of Mortristan's prior years. *This is the season for happenings. You can hardly get a good night's rest anymore.* The fruit thief couldn't have predicted that! He must be going insane.

"Yes, it's terrible." Holtin's cheeks drooped like a melting snowman's. "I'm glad someone agrees. 'Holtin,' they keep telling me, 'calm down. We'll

catch him in a minute.' Aie!"

Mortristan brushed past the windbag, bending his head toward his shoulder to conceal his face. *Madness, madness, madness!* No, not madness!

A stable boy brought him Charger, and as he accepted the reins, Holtin chattered on. "Bruster took the men out five minutes ago. If you hurry, you can catch up. Do be careful! Those outsiders are monsters!"

Face straight ahead, Mortristan hooked a foot into the stirrup and bounded onto his horse. Charger threw his head back, whinnying and dancing forward a few feet. "Nonsense, Holtin!" Mortristan yanked on the reins, straining against Charger's angst. "Don't believe every old wives' tale. Outsiders are simply..." He swallowed. Why did that word grate in his throat? "They don't belong here. That's all."

He kicked Charger's flanks and galloped past the mansion in a blur. Monsters indeed. Outsiders were human. Perhaps the trespasser was monstrously *stupid though*—the penalty for invading Elysigard was death.

In the moonlight, the trees, pastures, and waterways on his property transformed into a mass of overlapping shadows that mimicked rows of soldiers advancing, clashing, and collapsing in death. Each one was a fugitive from the light. He had intended to snatch the outsider from the darkness. He should have known better from his father's Passing. Shadows were the predators, man the prey.

He began quoting from an epic he'd often read on winter nights as a child.

*In halls beneath the world of men,
Where gods and monsters make their dens,
The hero traveled to the hold
On backs of wandering, listless souls
He guided by his skillful hand
Unto that dark and dreary land,
Where gems that hold the power of youth
Hide beneath the mountains' roots.*

“Where gems that hold the power of youth...” Mortristan repeated. He tugged on the reins and Charger slowed to a halt beside a pond. Moonlight, pale like bones, rose and fell on the inky surface. Crickets chirped and a frog croaked.

“Food. The outsider must be after food.” He laughed lightly, his breath forming into wisps. “Yes, it’s the only explanation.” He dismounted and poked around in some bushes with his cane. Memory served him correctly: a grapevine grew on a trained mulberry. He plucked a grape and held it to the moonlight.

“Gems that hold the power of youth.” He laughed louder, then clamped his mouth shut. Swinging his cane, he paced to the other end of the pond. If the outsider had managed to scale the walls, one meal wouldn’t satisfy him.

Lips pursed tightly, he paced back and climbed on Charger. Like the hero in the epic, he accomplished his greatest feats by riding on the backs of ghosts. In this case, the vivid picture of the outsider that plagued his mind. What if he was a monster? A killer?

Earth clods flew as Mortristan beelined for his mansion. In minutes, he stormed into the front garden like a gale. Servants rushed to him, wide-eyed as if they expected him to be dragging a dead ogre on a rope. Mortristan scanned them quickly. “All well?”

“All well with the *hunt*?” his mother’s brassy voice interrupted. Her fists pressed against her waist.

Mortristan slid to the ground as his servants showered him with questions. “The others are still searching. I’ve thought of something I want to check.”

“Oh!” A little maid latched onto his arm. “You don’t suppose *he’s* nearby, do you?”

Mortristan grimaced at this standard caricature of a female, who wilted whenever the sun wasn’t shining. He kept moving, and his mother followed him with a frown. She disapproved of distractions, but when he opened the front door, she called for silence. Mortristan shut it behind him. That gave him silence sure enough. His ancient, empty mansion was cousin to a

cavern. It swallowed him and made him wonder whether he'd ever reemerge.

On a nearby stand, a single candle burned. Mortristan's shoes clicked as he walked over and lifted it.

Stairways and furniture tangled like arms and legs, and a clock face peered at him out of the corners of its eyes. Corridors twisted in a never-ending maze. His mansion contained every type of room imaginable, plus three without classifications.

He knew much *about* the outsider. But what separated an outsider from an insider besides walls? Did the answer matter? The rebel's desolated field and the high priest's eyes swirled through his memory again.

Mortristan held the candle farther forward. "Hello?" His voice quavered. "Is anyone here?"

Beyond the candlelight, the shadows tiptoed like priests in long robes. Almost, *almost*, he heard chanting. Whispering.

One shadow lengthened and drifted into the light. The cloud from the Passing. Never had it lasted for more than a second. A void as empty as the wastelands and as cold as a starless night sky threatened to suck him in.

Mortristan retracted the candle and bolted into the adjacent sitting room. "Must find the outsider. *You* are the hunter," he breathed, backing against the wall as invisible, foggy hands tightened around his mind and muddled his thoughts. No shadow appeared around the corner, but he sensed its presence. Gasping, he marched into his library, scanning the towers of books with their ghostly bindings and golden embossing.

Mortristan skimmed room after room, but at one servant's entrance, the knob refused to turn. His servants never bothered to lock doors. Perhaps it was a coincidence—or the habit of someone who didn't belong.

Rather than face the room where the shadow had originated, Mortristan ascended a flight of stairs. At the top, he passed a massive oil painting of a great ancestor with an austere face and uncanny eyes that seemed to harbor a secret. The frame itself was worth a whole village of outsider houses.

If the outsider thought that the expansive mansion would shelter him while he abated his starvation, he had made an ironic choice, for a shadowy void no hunger could equal haunted the halls.

In a hallway next to his own bedroom, Mortristan stopped and turned this way and that. He'd forgotten where he was. Clenching his jaw, he thrust his candle at the wall as if to reveal an enemy. The epic he'd begun earlier sifted through his lips again.

*And there beneath the graven arch,
A stone of fire and glowing sparks,
And round it seven mighty heads,
The rulers of the sleepless dead,
Whose eyes are silver, cold, and bright,
Whose forms are clothed in endless night
And guard the jewel with grim delight,
Unruffled in their peerless might.*

Clutching his cane, he plunged on. But no outsider hid on that floor. The confrontation eluded him while shadows, whether in his mind or in reality, murmured in his ears. Eventually he would flush out the intruder or prove his hunch false. Behind him, the dark vapor loomed, and nothing could convince him it was only madness.

The final floor, small and used only for guests, took mere moments to inspect. Mortristan placed his foot on the bottom rung of a white ladder that led to the only chamber he hadn't yet investigated—the attic.

As the events of the day converged upon him again, he fished in his trousers for the purple stone from Elysha. Massaging it, he almost forgot about everything and abandoned his mission. But then, without losing his smile, he replaced it in his pocket. Using his cane to pull himself upward, he fortified himself with more of the epic.

*And there he lay and kissed the ground,
Swearing that if his fate was bound
To turn to dust, then he was glad,*

*Aye, glad for all the wealth he had,
In rocks and trees and dirt and stone,
A garden to call all his own;
Fine years he lived, then died at last,
And into song his legend passed.*

Mortristan pushed open the attic door with his cane. Crawling through the hole exposed him to attack, so he hurried to settle his feet on the rafters and stand.

The ceiling arched at an uncertain height, echoing every noise. A stench ruled the air, built by eons of a mouse grandsire's descendants and their dust mite slaves. His candle revealed empty space except for where shadows guarded four corners. And what choice had he but to invade?

He poked his candle into the first and second corner, but they were vacant. Deciding his intuition was probably wrong, he tried the third.

Curled into a ball was a creature with matted hair and muscles that bulged through ragged clothing. Mortristan sucked in a breath. His heart pounded and his body turned to jelly, rattling the candle holder in his hand. He rarely thought of himself as young, but at twenty-eight, he had never seen this class of humans.

He rubbed his chin. The law declared that all outsiders in the city must be killed. Shaking, he extended his cane inch by inch, then withdrew it and nudged the outsider with his foot instead.

The outsider rolled onto his back, blinking his large brown eyes open, and Mortristan jumped.

The outsider tilted his head. "You citizens visit your attics often?" He had a thick, dumb lilt like a big child and a brawler combined.

"N-no, this just seemed like the perfect refuge, though I wasn't sure you knew about attics. You have them?"

The outsider nodded.

Despite the draft, a bead of sweat trickled down Mortristan's face. He cleared his throat. "Now, look here. I have no options. This is a good

hideaway, but it won't work forever. When you're found, the God of Manna will take—he'll take *everything* from me."

The outsider doubled over like a sick man.

A muscle in Mortristan's left cheek jerked, and his upper lip quivered. "I'll make the blow swift and clean, I promise. Just kneel so I can get a proper strike."

"My Meshik," the outsider mumbled.

Mortristan leaned forward. "What?"

The outsider bent lower. First the water poured from his eyes, then the hurricane hit and he clawed again and again at the rafters. "His. Meshik is his now."

"His?" Mortristan steeled himself for another intruder to leap out of the fourth corner.

The outsider's whimpers changed to moans and then growls. "No *Meshik!*" He jolted to his feet, arms flailing. "No Meshik! You cannot have him! He could live many years yet. Take me!"

Mortristan lurched back, but the man was not after him. A nightmarish memory had gripped the outsider. "God of Manna..." Mortristan whispered, for he understood. "They took your son."

As the man crumbled and his tears continued to stream, Mortristan swayed like a tree in a storm. "You knew he was chosen for the God of Manna, but you wouldn't give him up—even if your whole village starved..."

"He was all I had."

Mortristan's mind swam. He couldn't remember ever having so little control of his body, which burned inside as if his bones were melting and dripping.

In a flurry, he set down his candle and seized a clump of the outsider's hair, dragging him forward. "*You hopeless wretch.* Don't you know who you're fighting and that he will claim you in the end? Did you hope for mercy?"

The outsider blinked thrice and frowned at the floor. "The God of Manna

promised to provide all my needs.”

Mortristan gritted his teeth. “Well, didn’t he? The God of Manna supplies all our needs! We may not have much else to call our own, but at least he gives us our places in life. You had nutritious food provided at a reasonable price. You could have lived to be eighty, but you threw it all away!”

The outsider squinted with his mouth slightly agape. “Everything I... need?”

Mortristan gripped the outsider’s shoulder. “Yes. Yes,” he insisted, half trembling, half smiling. “Everything you need!”

The outsider hung his head. “Oh.”

Mortristan did not wait for the outsider to kneel. He dropped him, and instantly the attic snapped into vivid, dark colors. Each groove in his cane dug into his hand, and his heart thudded. The breeze from his swing summoned the dark vapor to creep closer. Closer.

Crack!

The sound of the impact rang in his ears.

Over and over again.

* * *

That night, the high priest trailed the scent of an outsider to Turnthrall’s mansion, but the outsider wasn’t who he sought. Time had taught him to smell a rebel almost as well as he tracked prey.

A stiff matron answered the door and said to wait. A minute later, the young lord stumbled into the doorway. “So you heard about the outsider? Have him.” He deposited a body on the threshold and slammed the door.

For three minutes, the high priest didn’t stir. Mortristan Turnthrall had obeyed the law?

Finally, the high priest slung the corpse over his shoulder and slunk away. But he kept glancing back.

Chapter 5

A Breath Before the Plunge

Mortristan climbed a jagged, barren mountain. The dark clouds above boiled and spit streaks of lightning. A harsh voice commanded, "Climb!"

"But it's a volcano," Mortristan cried, clinging to a hold. The lava's glow reflected in his face.

The voice's presence surrounded him, thick and murky so he couldn't distinguish right from left. "Mortristan Turnthrall, greatest of men. Would you be like any animal? Would you have your end be the same as your father's? Climb!"

"I-I, but...the fire?"

"Climb!"

"I have only my cane!"

A resounding crack—that rang in his ears—shook the ground and sent him reeling.

Mortristan woke in a sweat. He threw back his covers and sat up, gulping in air. Shivers tingled up and down his spine. His hand flew to his neck, then he checked his chest, forehead, and eyes. Something about him had changed, but he couldn't pinpoint the source. He heaved out of bed and performed his morning toilet in record time.

Dressed like a gentleman, Mortristan jogged downstairs. Breakfast aromas aggravated the growl in his stomach, but he bypassed the dining room. *I'll be fine*, he assured himself as he grabbed his cane from its place by the front door and painted on a smile. *After all, nothing has really changed.*

He opened the door and stepped into a world oppressed by motionless grey clouds. A wind too chill for the season cut through his clothing. His cane slipped from his hands, and though he was not a forgetful person, he

left it behind as he treaded down the flagstone path with his hands in his pockets. He burned with energy, yet his legs labored to move as if chains weighed down his feet.

Last night, the dark vapor had touched him. But he detected no sign of it this morning. Had it dissipated at last, or—his memory was foggy—entered inside him?

He had killed the one free person on earth. The outsider, though trapped in a walled city, had still felt himself free. Didn't he understand that he was only trading one death for another? Perhaps a paradise more wondrous than Elysgard lay behind the pall of clouds above, and *everyone* on earth was an outsider.

Fifty yards from his mansion, Mortristan stopped, fixing his eyes on the overcast sky that imprisoned him. He could never outrun the gloom, for he had been born into it.

He wobbled and might have sunk to the ground if a bright spot hadn't appeared on the outskirts of his estate. Elysha cascaded toward him like a star falling from heaven, with her streaming hair the tail, and her face the glowing centerpiece.

Slowly, Mortristan stretched out one trembling palm like a beggar.

"Mortristan, I wanted to see you." Elysha's voice traveled ahead of her in a cheerful peal that ended in a tremor. "I sensed something was wrong." As she neared and skidded to a halt, her cheeks flushed pink.

Mortristan flung his hands behind his back and squeezed them. Words froze like icicles on the tip of his tongue until a spark cracked the ice and a smile gushed through. "Thank you for coming," he stammered, and his last words plummeted from his mouth. "I am well." He swallowed. "Why did you run all the way here?"

"It's a lovely day for a walk, don't you agree?"

Mortristan melted some more. His gaze roamed over the landscape. Beneath a hickory with eighty years of life in the soil, a sparrow hopped among the herbs. "Yes...yes, I suppose so."

“Well!” Elysha sprang to his side. “Off to the farthest reaches of Elysigard. That is, wherever you want to go, Captain.”

“I would be happy just to reach that fountain.” He fumbled for his cane before remembering he had dropped it. Men will never admit it, but they need something to lean on.

At the fountain, the couple sat on one of the four white marble benches guarded by strawberries, lavender, and herbs beyond count, each like miniature castles defending their patch of ground. A statue of a maiden poured a bottomless pitcher of water into the small pool. What it would be like to never run dry, only that maiden knew, and her mouth was sealed. Mortristan imagined she had been turned to stone by a jealous witch who ruled a desert.

Instinctively, Mortristan sought Elysha’s hand beside him and clasped it. With her hand in his, he had authority. He breathed deeply and closed his eyes. On the exhale, burdens that didn’t belong in his mind washed out. “Our wedding is an eternity away.”

When he opened his eyes, Elysha was looking at him askance. He chuckled at her puppy-eyed expression. “I wish you would never leave. That sounds selfish, but our visits are always unbearably short. I have two states of existence—one when you’re around and one when you’re not. When you’re here, I don’t think of myself.”

Elysha held his gaze for a long time and then she squinted. She rose, pulling from the handhold he hadn’t realized he had formed, and her lips parted in a gasp. “Your face! Why, it’s pale. I didn’t notice it, but now... Oh, what’s wrong? May I help?”

Mortristan winced and fingered the hem of his waistcoat. “It’s...nothing much. I suppose the news hasn’t traveled to you yet. Last night I found...an outsider fugitive.”

“Oh, Mortristan.”

“Please, don’t be bothered. It was only—”

She embraced him.

To say that Mortristan started would be insufficient. He had doubted that even she would dare touch that dark part of him. It went down as The Great Hug of his life. "I, oh—nothing, nothing at all. It was just a part of life. I..." His words refused to untangle.

Elysha slid her hands down into his. "Forget. Forget it all, Mortristan. That shadow is past!" She took a small step back, releasing his hands.

"Yes, yes. Of course." Mortristan coughed into his hand, blinking all traces of moisture from his eyes. "Thank you. It is easy when you are here."

"But I am always here." She grinned childishly. "Your stone! Remember?"

Mortristan rummaged in his pockets until his fingers closed around her gift.

"Whenever you doubt, Mortristan, remember the stone. And when you remember it, remember me. You can do that." She tittered.

"I can." Mortristan winked, feeling that they were merely playmates for this brief moment.

"Good." She wrapped her arms around herself as the wind gusted. "I won't be worried now that I'm leaving."

Mortristan's muscles tensed.

"To finish my dress." She smirked.

"Oh." Mortristan relaxed. "Elysha, when I said I couldn't wait, I didn't mean to literally rush things."

She shook her head. "Nevertheless, your wish is my command, Captain. Come tomorrow and visit me? Perhaps I will finish it by then."

"Yes, I will."

"Then I will go." Elysha patted his hand. "Remember me. And remember to forget."

Mortristan relished the tingle in his fingers and the tinkle of her laughter as she scampered away, but had he listened, he would have heard the whispered plans of the gods, the wails of the outsiders, and the groaning of the earth that bore it all. The ticking clock was about to strike.

Chapter 6

Into the Whirlwind

Mortristan ambled to Elysha's the next morning, leisurely swinging his cane. Sunlight broke through the branches like a liberated prisoner, and nature shouted with its many voices. When he trespassed onto some gentleman's property to catch his reflection in a pond, his eyes were his own again. No horrified stare. No unanswered question. At last he had found peace, even under the God of Manna's reign.

Upon arriving at Elysha's cottage, he soaked in the scene. The friendly flower boxes, the glittering roof tiles, the path inviting him to the garden—all of it was untouched by time. The old fairy gate waved to him in the breeze, and when he touched it, ghosts of his previous visit floated through his memory with all the bittersweetness of a farewell. Closing his eyes for a second, he inhaled the fragrance of blossoms, then nudged the gate open and rounded the corner.

Ribbons looped from tree to tree and vases of flowers decorated every nook in the garden. At the center, a table had been set for two with every sort of dainty and glass jars containing beverages.

In one chair, the fruit thief was stuffing his mouth with pastries and washing them down with juice. The matching chair, and the rest of the emerald cove, was vacant.

Mortristan hung in the entrance like a hat on a peg, stunned. He raised his cane, then lowered it. What did the trickster have up his sleeve?

"Oh, you've arrived." The fruit thief set down his cup so fast it was a wonder it didn't shatter. He leapt out of his seat and bowed with a grin. "Charmed."

"Where is Elysha?" Mortristan tried to make his voice boom, but instead

each syllable squeaked.

The fruit thief wiped a few crumbs from his mouth. "Oh, she's out. I think she'll be back shortly"

"If this is supposed to be a pleasant surprise, it's not."

The fruit thief chuckled. "Sorry. It's my fault she's detained, but you have questions and it's my job to answer them. I couldn't miss the opportunity."

Mortristan snorted. "Oh, really? What questions do I have?"

The fruit thief's face shone as if he had swallowed a star and it was leaking through him. "Oh, like if the outsider was right and you were wrong."

The color drained from Mortristan's face. But in his head, colors swirled and the stable world careened. His father's Passing, the dark vapor, his death blow to the outsider, and the endless wastelands crashed intermittently through his memory. Elysha was not here to chase them away. Without her, this garden felt desolate. Leaning on his cane, he crept over to the empty chair and sank in like a stone. "What do you know?"

"Enough." The fruit thief plopped down and offered him a bowl. "Cucumber salad? It's good."

Mortristan rubbed his aching forehead. He played in a chess game so broad that he couldn't even see the pieces. "Um, no. Look, I... Where is Elysha anyway?"

"Not quite sure."

Mortristan clenched his jaw. The fruit thief was impenetrable. Just one question, then he'd go look for Elysha. "Then answer me this or I'll leave. My father spent his life with an enormous burden on his mind. What was it?"

The fruit thief reclined in his chair, shaking his head. He scrunched his brow as if deep in thought, then he chuckled. "I declare, you almost had me. But, thankfully, I met your father once. He was a historian, even read some banned books where he discovered a disturbing fact." He coughed and stroked his mustache. "I don't know how else to put this. Your father was the descendant of a traitor. Every day, he worried that the one who was betrayed would return for vengeance."

Mortristan froze in the act of getting up and spluttered “Who was betrayed?”

“The God of Manna.”

Quickly, Mortristan downed a cup of juice. He poured himself another and guzzled it. “It’s a fairy tale,” he snapped, liquid dribbling down his chin. “If it were true, I wouldn’t be alive.”

“It’s real history. I tell you solemnly, some of the witnesses are still alive.” The vivid glow in the fruit thief’s eyes seeped into Mortristan’s soul, opening doors and examining records.

Mortristan blinked. Why was he staring so intently at the fruit thief’s eyes? Something had caught his attention, but the memory was missing. He sat down. “You’re saying *you* were a witness?”

The fruit thief linked his hands behind his head. “Mmm. You know, God of Manna is only a title. Back then, it belonged to someone else. But of course they never taught you that.”

Mortristan stared into his empty glass. “You blaspheme,” he muttered.

“In a way, but just you wait. The scandal gets worse.” The fruit thief scratched his chin and munched on a peach slice before reminiscing. “The real God of Manna loved Elysinril—that’s what Elysigard used to be called. He was a pastoral God, but not timid. Call Him that and He might strike you with a lightning bolt! He could have fought, but when the blessed ones of Elysinril turned on him, He left instead.”

Tension built in Mortristan’s chest. His execution of the outsider—the blow and the sickening crack—replayed again and again. If any of the fruit thief’s account was true, he did not want to meet the original God of Manna.

The fruit thief wiped away a tear. “The foreign god convinced a few inside the walls to support him in exchange for a position of lordship that would grant them greater riches, though they had no cause to be discontent. The traitors spread propaganda, and soon all of Elysinril’s citizens were either outrightly disgruntled with their Lord or willing to consider another. On a moonless night, they opened the gate to the enemy, and a massive, roiling

black being with serrated armor and a sword surged in.”

Mortristan strained so far forward that his chair almost tipped. Half of him longed for the fruit thief to announce that a challenger appeared to mercilessly slay the black invader and deliver the people. Yet, his heart pounded with a primal thrill at the notion that perhaps, in their thirst for power, the traitors had murdered the original God of Manna and buried His body where it could never be found.

The fruit thief tapped his chin. “In the fairest regions of Elysinril, the God of Manna walked His final rounds. When the citizens welcomed the new god, gold light streaked through the sky like a comet. He let them choose their own way.”

The fruit thief rested his hand on the table and gazed at Mortristan as if he were a son. “As you guessed, the first traitor was a Turnthrall. Now you know the truth. What will you do about it?”

The words rested between them. Mortristan rose shakily. He swept his arm in a wide arc as if to clear the table. “So some god abandoned us? Is that the moral of the story? How am I the responsible party? Good day.” He scowled and strode toward the exit. Reaching into his pocket, he rubbed Elysha’s stone. *Forget, forget.*

At the gate, the fruit thief waited for him. He sat in the same chair, almost with the same posture. “Were my words so offensive?”

Mortristan wheeled round and peeked into the garden. The fruit thief wasn’t there. Neither was his chair. “What trickery is this!”

The fruit thief didn’t *roll* his eyes, but he lifted them as if they were heavy bags of sand, then set them down. “No trick. This is a last warning. You see, you still don’t understand some pieces of the puzzle. The outsiders are the ones who grew displeased with their new lord and resisted him. In turn, he made them rue the day. *Once* they could transform a desert into a paradise like you, but farming has been illegal for so long they have forgotten how. But...” The fruit thief leaned forward, his eyes sparking faintly, and whispered, “*He is returning.*”

“Ha!” Mortristan pointed his cane at the fruit thief. “Maybe He’ll finally exact vengeance on us traitorous Turnthralls. Maybe He’ll kill me and save me from your endless moralisms. You’ve done nothing but distract me. I intend to report you to the priests, and I *will* find Elysha.” Yes, Elysha. That was why he had come here.

He rushed through the gate and out onto the road. The world darkened, though whether from a mental, natural, or supernatural source, he couldn’t discern. When thunder roared overhead, he shouted, “Am I doomed to my lot? Is that fairness?”

The clouds only laughed and breathed down his neck.

Mortristan ignored the first raindrop. At his current pace, he would reach his mansion in twenty-five minutes. Running could cut some of the time.

A few more drops splashed onto his cheek. Like most trials in life, the pelting began gradually. Four raindrops multiplied to eight, then the eight doubled and tripled.

The sky crumbled and fell, drowning out Mortristan’s cry of dismay. He broke into a sprint, hair splayed across his face. The fire inside him fizzled and died, leaving him cold and gasping.

The god he worshiped claimed to control the weather. He punished rebels with famine, but never with whirlwinds. But what about the original God of Manna? He could dismiss the fruit thief’s story as nonsense, couldn’t he?

He wasn’t timid. Call Him that and He might strike you with a lightning bolt!

As light pierced the heavens, the earth lurched, and Mortristan tumbled to his knees. He pitched this way and that like a seasick sailor in a tempest trying to regain his footing.

A tree limb tore from its trunk and landed in the middle of the path. Mortristan scrambled over it. Against the drag of his drenched clothes, he slogged on. Lightning struck so close that it shook his bones.

“Help!” he yelled, clawing at thin air.

Only thunder answered him.

But then, through the downpour, he glimpsed a familiar tree. It sheltered a tenant's cottage on the outskirts of his property.

He raced toward the door, so near though hidden by the curtain of rain. His blood and legs pumped faster and faster.

But not fast enough.

The flash of lightning burst open the gates of death, and an acrid scent singed his nostrils as he flew off the ground and crashed into the door. "Save me! Oh, God!"

Blackness, enough to last a lifetime, enveloped him.

Chapter 7

The Watermelon of Doom

The afternoon following the storm, Mortristan sat on a chair on his front porch, staring at the horizon with glazed eyes. Purple bruises mottled his pallid face like a ghastly child's painting. The fruit thief carted a load of produce across his property and waved, but Mortristan never twitched or shifted.

When the wind blew, trees and flowers swayed like slender dancers in bright robes. But all Mortristan saw was the lightning strike and him slamming against the door, punctuated by the resounding crack that rang in his ears.

The sky faded to a dark canvas tinged with orange, red, purple, and blue strokes that only God could paint. With a field mouse, a cat, and a few crickets as the sole onlookers, the spell broke, and a single tear trickled down Mortristan's face. Never had he beheld such a beautiful sunset.

He slept soundly that night, and though he resumed his vigil on the porch the next day, this time he listened to the boisterous bird chatter and counted sixty-eight different species. When he had a spurt of energy, he wrote a letter to Elysha and had a servant deliver it rather than waiting for the post.

At last, a reply came.

I am as well as could be. No, that fellow didn't so much as touch me.

He's not dangerous in that way, but beware, he is a great troublemaker.

Anything he told you, forget. I can explain more next time we meet.

Please come soon. The weather is fair, and you will make it fairer.

Mortristan jotted a response.

Dearest Elysha,

I am glad you are well. I have been recovering from an illness and

thinking much. I have urgent tasks I must tend to, but I will surely visit you as soon as I can.

You are the dawn, and I wait for you like a watchman.

The fruit thief passed by again after supper. He raised his cap, bowing in Mortristan's direction. Mortristan crawled some fingers into the air as a wave.

* * *

When the fruit thief sauntered by on the third day, Mortristan motioned to him. Behind a bush, a servant waited with a dangerous item Mortristan had instructed him to stash in the fruit thief's wheelbarrow. Mortristan prayed the scheme would work.

The fruit thief cocked his head and raised his hands as if to ask, "What have I done?"

Mortristan gestured more vehemently.

Leaving his wheelbarrow, the fruit thief ran up to the porch and removed his hat. "What is it, Lord Turnthrall?"

"Your theft." Mortristan coughed. "What makes you think you can do this?"

The fruit thief showed a lopsided grin and shoved his cap back on his head. "The god of this city takes your produce, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but—"

"There you have it! Proper authority!" The fruit thief winked and returned to his wheelbarrow, which now carried a stowaway—a watermelon implanted with a jar containing seeds and a note describing where to meet if the outsiders wanted to learn to grow them.

Why did Mortristan do it? He asked himself that a thousand times. Common sense? No, it was certainly *uncommon* sense. But it seemed a relatively safe way to ease his conscience.

Chapter 8

Fishing from the Wall

Only the stars witnessed Mortristan's criminal act. Hand over hand, he lowered his bait into the pool of air that swam with a thousand dreams and nightmares. Tremors shinnied down his rope with every inch. Would someone be waiting at the bottom? If not, what then? Maybe the night would swallow his bait and pull him into the abyss.

After he had unfurled countless lengths, the basket bumped the ground and the rope slackened. Pivoting on his heel, Mortristan glanced right and left. One sentry patrolled in his direction with a lantern, so he changed from a miscreant to a young lord spending a holiday on a villa among the stars. He sat, covering the rope with his body, and flipped open a novel to the fourth chapter.

Five minutes elapsed before he realized that he had merely reread the first three paragraphs over and over again. With a start, he dropped the novel and checked the sentry's whereabouts, but the flare from the lantern floated in the distance like a misplaced star.

Mortristan retrieved the rope, closed his eyes for a few seconds, and tugged it. For a moment, it lay still, then jerked and slithered back alive.

"Aha!" Mortristan reeled in his line with the air of a skilled fisherman. His lips formed a fierce, razor-edged smile.

The catch of Mortristan Turnthrall proved to be words on paper, but what could be more perilous?

The lantern and matches he had sent down were gone, but the pen, ink, and paper remained. Someone had exchanged his elegant handwriting for a note with blockier letters.

With bated breath, Mortristan held his own lantern up to the note. His

dark clothes contrasted sharply with the rich golden light and delicate paper. He clutched a priceless treasure: written words from beyond the walls.

When Mortristan finished reading, his eyes sparkled and his cheeks were ruddy. Quickly, he scrawled an answer.

You are correct. Water is needed to grow vegetation. Not much falls out there, but I guess you get ten to twelve inches a year. That's enough. The soil is like iron, so you'll have plenty of runoff. We can divert it into productive areas, capture it, and soak it into the soil. Focus on trees for shade and a ground cover for the soil. I'll teach you about soils and fertilizers. We could create so many systems—I'll have to elaborate another time. Find a secluded spot that won't be discovered. A ravine perhaps?

Fifteen seconds later, the high priest stood before Mortristan, who had crossed his legs and buried his face in a book. "Good evening, sir." Mortristan smiled. "Do you like this spot for meditating as well?"

After a minute of glaring, the high priest turned and left. Mortristan lingered for half an hour, then gathered his things. Taking one last look over the parapet, he decided the air was a dark pool of dreams, not nightmares.

Chapter 9

The Cry of the Hungry

The sun peeked nervously through the windows in the dining room, tiptoeing across the cream-colored walls and tiled floor. Mortristan chewed on a bite of roast beef at the opposite side of the table from his mother. She stared at him, but he stared at the ceiling. If eyes were the gateway to the soul, then his soul vacationed in the clouds. Mother and son had become so distant that they belonged to separate worlds, but neither said goodbye.

The room's spaciousness allowed Mortristan to stretch his thoughts out. He imagined a wasteland everywhere, and from it sprouted a paradise.

His mother pushed her plate forward with one finger. "Mortristan, I attended Dortimer's party yesterday and talked with Elysha."

"Oh..." Mortristan squirmed, but he didn't meet her eyes. He pretended an outsider sat beside him, gobbling down vegetables the man had grown himself.

His mother folded her elegant hands with the brooding smile of a lioness. "I told her you would visit her tomorrow."

Mortristan's soul crashed into the real world. His fork clattered onto his plate, and he knocked over his soup bowl with his elbow. "Mother? Why did you do that? I'm occupied."

"You're also twenty-eight." That was three years behind on her timetable.

Mortristan raised an eyebrow. "The wedding date is set. You needn't worry."

"You're still twenty-eight." She had trained her son to act, not to dawdle in his dreams. But did she suspect she had lost him forever? "What have you been doing these past two days? I hardly know where you've been, and from what you say, Elysha was gone when you visited last. It's your *duty* to follow

up with her.”

Mortristan froze. When he had thawed a little, he danced aside. “You’re right. I will pay her a visit soon.” Emptying his glass of cider, he stood and made the ultimate escape—a physical one. After all, she was the lord’s mother, and he was a teacher of outsiders.

“Mortristan Hambirk Turnthrall!” She rushed after him, but she drew the line at tossing a full-grown son over her shoulder and hauling him away.

“Goodbye, Mother!” He waved with his heart in it as he fled her. “I’ll be back tomorrow!”

Mortristan kept his word. He returned to Elysigard the next day.

In an iron carriage.

* * *

Two guards bound Mortristan as the sun’s pink hues crept across a grey world. A crack marred the earth as if a giant had struck the wasteland with a hammer. Mortristan’s fresh earthworks mutilated it like long scars. Shovels lay abandoned to rot in hope’s boneyard, and seed bags burned as effigies of the idea that the hungry should be fed.

The outsiders’ eyes were like shattered glass as they shrank away from the armed priests. Their cries beckoned to Mortristan. He had sworn to do anything for them. Anything.

Mortristan winced and strained against his guards. They jerked him back.

From his perch, the high priest glanced at Mortristan and nodded, folding his arms.

The condemned lined up for the axe. The priests would claim that the outsiders had all they needed. The God of Manna required only their weekly donation: sometimes metal work or carpentry, sometimes coal or precious metals.

Sometimes a child.

Tears slipped down Mortristan’s cheeks. The outsiders’ wails carried more

than the fear of death. This was the wail of those damned to hunger. All their lives they had eaten but were never full. Was anything worse than starving all one's life? Of that sinking weight in the stomach that never digested? Of that scream inside that said something was missing, but never knowing what it was?

The last head fell, and the high priest descended.

Mortristan collapsed on the ground. His guards dragged him to a carriage and locked the door. "Straight to the God of Manna," one of the priests said, and the carriage lurched forward.

Chapter 10

Bread

Drums beat rapidly as a guard prodded Mortristan down two lines of priests who formed a tunnel. A carpet of blood paved his way. The shouts of the priests rose like a tidal wave that washed over him and left him breathless.

Mortristan held his head high and ignored the sneering faces on either side. He lunged forward, hauling his guard along by his bonds. Blood pounded in his ears. *Rush! Rush, Mortristan.*

The mouth of the cavern gaped wider and wider. At the end of the tunnel of priests, Mortristan stumbled to a stop, his chest locking and his knees swimming. Something moved inside the darkness.

“No, not there,” his guard hissed, shoving him to the right.

Mortristan stooped to enter a much smaller hole. Inside, he straightened and discovered what blindness felt like. Echoes multiplied his breath like the footsteps of a massive beast far away. “W-where am I? What do I do?”

“This way.” His guard pushed him. Sometimes Mortristan climbed upward through mazes of rocks, and sometimes he struggled to maintain his balance on a downward incline alongside a precipice. His first foretaste of death settled into his mouth, and he could not spit it out.

“Here.” His guard jingled keys, and when Mortristan put out his hands, he met cold iron. “Inside.”

Mortristan obeyed. The door banged closed, followed by a click. “Am I to have a trial?”

The guard laughed. “Yes, this is your trial.” His footsteps retreated.

Mortristan sank to the ground, which he was thankful existed—he had half expected to fall forever. He measured the cramped cell with his hands and

bumped into a cot and a pitcher of water. "Wait, where is the food?" he called out. "Guard?"

* * *

Day Two

Beady eyes and soft, scurrying feet invaded Mortristan's solitude. Thought-mice, a rare breed of rodents born of the imagination, whose sole purpose was to consume the human mind one bite at a time. Hundreds of the critters watched him from every angle, but they avoided sneaking close as long as he remained in control of his faculties. While he slumbered, they chattered about how delicious he would be and how he would sustain their offspring till the next one arrived with tottering sanity.

* * *

Day Six

Mortristan sought the refuge of sleep as much as possible, but the distinction between consciousness and unconsciousness blurred in the eternal night. The dimension he drifted through seemed to be a spirit realm. Within the intangible space, monsters dwelt. It was a labyrinth of nightmares.

"Why am I here?" he moaned. "All I did was help the hungry. Help me. *Please*. I am going to die in this place."

As he walked round and round, his garments swooshed like the robes of a priest. But the priests wore loose robes. His clothes had always fit.

Somewhere in the uncountable hours that passed, Mortristan staggered off his circular course and touched a cold, hard object. He dipped his hands into the pitcher and splashed water on his face, then sank to his knees among the garments that had become too large for him. His stomach growled. *Oh, don't whine. We'll survive. Don't whine.*

The darkness pulled him in deeper and deeper, and when a soothing melody filled his eardrums, he believed he had died. Tears welled in his eyes.

Trembling, Mortristan rose and clung to the bars. Light soaked the dungeon like rivers of gold. Voices chanted like bells. Warmth radiated through Mortristan and out of him. The mad priests had locked him in the kingdom of life where goodness overflowed!

Geysers of song shook the cavern.

Taste the fruit of the broken!

Eat and be restful at last.

Your spirit when it is woken

Never remembers the past.

Life is a death everlasting,

But sweet is the death you'd be living.

Never more fear or fasting,

Never a vague misgiving.

Offer your all to the Master;

See then how richly he pays!

Everything you can ask for,

Food throughout all your days.

The music ascended to such heights that it fractured into a thousand pieces. One fragment shone like a subterranean star and alighted on the palm of a priest. In the other palm rested a platter.

Taste and be our brother;

Give to us your soul.

You will never find another

Path that makes you whole.

The priest raised the platter as the music became a breathless, quavering chant.

Mortristan accepted the fruit, unlike anything he had ever seen. Words wouldn't form in his mouth, so they came out his eyes as tears, and he wiped

them away. In agony, he gasped, "Why do you give this to me?"

In answer, the chanting softened and became more insistent. The priest stared at him with characteristically blank eyes. "To change you."

Mortristan closed his eyes. *Taste and be our brother...*

"Thank you. Thank you." He sniffled. "I cannot eat it. I want to keep my eyes." Awkwardly, he plopped the fruit through the bars.

The music and light died.

Mortristan crawled through the nothingness. Was it all a dream? When he splashed his face with water, the fruit's sweet scent flooded his nose.

* * *

On the fourteenth day, the God of Manna visited Mortristan.

"You have an exceptional mind. Losing it would be a shame."

His mind? Mortristan lay on his cot, one arm functioning as a pillow and one leg dangling over the side. He spent every waking moment hunting thought-mice, and his stomach howled with the desire to devour itself. How did his mental capacities matter?

"In light of your abilities, I think I should let you go."

An unseen, misshapen hand slid across Mortristan's cell like a snake slithering through grass. *Click. Creak.*

Mortristan heaved himself to a sitting position. "I can simply walk out?"

"If you take a royal position as my second in command of Elysigard, yes. Haven't you noticed my shadow? I've been following you for weeks. My priests have also investigated you. Your lands produce more than any other. You're cunning. With you as ruler, this city could *double* its production. Moreover, I will support you with agricultural knowledge that only a god can possess."

"That is..." Mortristan imagined the God of Manna leaning in to hear him finish his sentence. Sweat leaked all over his dry skin and brought a wave of goosebumps. Contrary to the God of Manna's claims about Mortristan's

intelligence, his brain rattled like a bucket of stones stirred by a twig. “That would mean”—the twig snapped and he had to find a new one—“the outsiders would have more food?”

“Precisely! And I give my word that they can have this abundance for the same quota they pay now.”

“But...*why?*” Mortristan cried.

“Perhaps I appreciate efficiency?” The God of Manna chuckled. “You erred by undermining my authority. But you now realize that my ways are superior. As for the *moral* reason behind this arrangement, I have promised to provide everything my people need.”

Mortristan’s brows pinched together as his brain started to function again. “You provide...all they need...” With emaciated arms, he gripped the edge of his bed, shaking, panting. “When I killed the outsider, he didn’t think so.”

The God of Manna lowered his voice to a rumble. “When you killed him, you became mine, and *my shadow* entered you.”

Mortristan set his jaw. “I do not trust your plan.”

“Mine,” the god repeated. A burst of air blew through the bars that Mortristan couldn’t breathe. Metal scraped and clanged.

A shape darker than the darkness swirled outside his prison. It seeped through the cracks.

“Mine.”

Mortristan’s eyes and lips widened in a voiceless scream.

* * *

Mortristan remained unconscious for three nights. In his dreams, a dark vortex pulled on him with the force of a hurricane, but a glimmering light kept him suspended.

When he awoke, his lungs creaked in and out like heavy burlap bags. Without opening his eyes, he roved his hands over his body to check his condition. A few more days of shrinking and he would disappear completely.

He hoisted himself up on his elbow and blinked at the lantern outside his cell. He rubbed his eyes, but the light didn't dim.

Beside it, a figure huddled like an ancient stone or a stubby tree rooted to the ground. Rumbles came from the creature's nose.

"Hello?" Mortristan whispered.

Snores slammed into his prison bars. What should he do with this creature?

At last he devised a strategy. Three pebbles from the floor provided him with ammunition. The first two missed. The third set off explosions.

"Ahoy! The rightful ruler comes! Prepare the peoples, plant the seed. To arms!" Up jumped the fruit thief, swinging his arms and his wild hair bouncing. He knocked over the lantern.

Darkness spilled everywhere.

Mortristan sat up. "I assume my guard heard that."

"Humph," the fruit thief said, "when you're old, *no one* listens to you. Besides, your guard isn't here. I...suppose I'll relight the lamp." He took his dear time with it, explaining that his many years entitled him to some leisure.

Finally, a splotch of orange spluttered and coughed, revealing the fruit thief's ancient face. He stared at Mortristan with drooping brows. "This is... oh dear. If only you were not his."

Mortristan licked his lips childishly. "Are you still stealing food for hungry people?"

"Sorry. Not why I came."

"Oh." Mortristan leaned over and slurped water from his pitcher, then he curled up in his bed and pulled the blankets over him.

"Hey!" The fruit thief banged on the bars. "Don't you wonder why I *am* here?"

Oh, of course I do. I just live for curiosities! Mortristan groaned.

The fruit thief pressed his face against the bars. "I'm allowed to give you one wish. What do you want? Anything."

Mortristan craved food to fill his stomach, but he verged on death and

madness, so he couldn't be blamed for botching the opportunity. "I want to be whole."

Tears sprinted down the fruit thief's cheeks. "Yes, yes, you are the one. Your wish will be granted. I swear to you solemnly that I will give you a proper burial."

"A what?" Mortristan didn't know that word.

"It's like a Passing, but in some ways not at all. It's special. You'll see."

Mortristan could have sworn a dark vapor swept in from the lurking blackness of the cavern. It settled on his brow, and he wiped away a sheet of sweat. He groaned. "I perish, yet you leave me here!"

The fruit thief shuffled in a vain attempt to dodge the echoing sobs. "If only, if only," he kept repeating. Mortristan could not be consoled, so the fruit thief picked up his lantern and waddled away. After a few yards, he turned back. "Mortristan... *He* is going to visit you soon. He will say it better than I can."

* * *

Mortristan awoke on the third week of his captivity with aching joints and an image of the outsider's corpse on his mind. "Why, oh why did I murder him?" He could scarcely erase the memory—never the fact.

After lapping up some water, he grabbed a prison bar and dragged himself to his feet. Imagining that the bars acted as markers on a vast field, he focused on reaching the corner. Crowds cheered as he vaulted the first, the second, and the third pole. He'd be crowned a hero for his speed and agility!

At the turn, Mortristan wheezed, and his flight staggered. To gain the prize, he needed endurance. One more bar. Another.

Three short of the corner, Mortristan clung to the iron, swaying back and forth. Sound and touch faded into oblivion, and when his beloved fairy lady glided in, he did not care to know whether he hallucinated or not.

Her dress matched the blush in her cheeks, and her dark, smooth eyes met

his. Light radiated from her.

He shook, his blood flowing and his heart swelling with a power that his thin frame could hardly contain. He whispered her name.

She ran to him with arms out, and the prison bars could not restrain her.

“Elysha!” he cried.

“Mortristan!”

Mortristan’s hold slipped, and she caught him. “You’re here,” he breathed, melting into her soft yet strong embrace. He didn’t have to support himself. He was safe.

“Hush, hush. Yes, I sought you. I want to rescue you,” she choked.

Mortristan rested his head on her shoulder. “I’m glad you’re here.”

She stroked his cheek. “*Mortristan!*” Never was his name so richly spoken. “Come with me to my garden. The table is set. The wine is prepared. I will make you happy!”

Happy. Nothing could break a man like happiness. Mortristan’s lungs rose and fell like bellows, pumping out water from his eyes. He leaned farther into Elysha’s arms. He longed to be trapped there forever. In his mind, they were already running through flowering fields. He no longer starved or languished in the darkness.

His heartbeat thundered along until it crescendoed, and a doubt lodged in his stomach like a spear. His face contorted in a swallow. “Elysha, the God of Manna will find and recapture me.”

Elysha’s love brimmed in her eyes. “All that I am is in you.” She kissed him, and her tears dampened his cheek. “He will never take you. Don’t you see? By my love I passed through these bars, and by my love I will keep you out of them. *Forever.*”

Mortristan did not see, but he didn’t say so. “I don’t understand why I have to be here. All I did was teach other humans.”

“Oh, Mortristan.” Elysha’s squeeze pained him, but he didn’t mind. “I wish you could care for and feed all the world, but it simply can’t happen. Please, let me take care of *you*, and let’s drink of all the world has to offer.”

"I—" Mortristan stopped. He drank in the cool air, imagining the bliss she described. He sensed that something was missing from existence, and so had the dead outsider. Mortristan's throat ached. So much hopelessness, so much hope. Maybe Elysha held the cure for life's draught. Could he bid farewell to the outsiders and say hello to love?

"I...I—"

Hello, Mortristan, said a voice in his head. I'm here.

Mortristan fainted.

* * *

"...I looked and looked, but there was nothing lasting."

"Indeed."

"How is anyone to find their way when the world is shrouded in darkness?"

"The time is coming when men must not ask that, for the light will shine on them."

* * *

For the next eighteen days, Mortristan was bedridden and his guard proclaimed him mad. Between bouts of sleep in which he lay still as a stone, he mumbled and railed in syllables stranger than an infant's. Sometimes he whimpered, and sometimes he curled up peacefully and sweated buckets. The guard had to pour water down his throat.

Mortristan fought the greatest battle of his life as he traveled his greatest journey. Slowly, he began to accept the destination and let himself be led by the hand.

On the fortieth day of Mortristan's captivity, words foreign to the priests echoed from the cavern, and the aching cry resounded with such force that it vibrated in the bones of the priests working outside, who jerked and stiffened.

“Oh, the glory! Oh, the majesty!”

The god formed of darkness recognized the voice of his prisoner and shivered. He dashed through the cavernous passageways and into Mortristan’s cell.

He froze. The aura of death still lingered in the air, but the body was gone.

Chapter 11

Outside Elysigard

The stars waited at a respectful distance while the fruit thief stabbed the ground with his shovel again and again. The world hushed, and no wind stirred the pile of loose dirt beside him, but the air quivered. The crescent moon watched him but pretended not to.

Wiping his brow, the fruit thief leaned against his shovel. In the vast desert where no birds bothered to forage for seeds, he stood out like an insignificant scarecrow. But he protected one *large* seed for which he had dug a hole the size of a small bathtub.

Miles of wall grimaced down at him, and the city gate clenched its iron teeth, but he paid little heed as he returned to his task. After all, he was older than them. He labored fast, but not fast enough.

A woman floated through the gate like a thundercloud regally grinding over the atmosphere. Her shoulders shone bare above a white dress that shimmered with each graceful step.

Sighing, the fruit thief faced her and jabbed his shovel into the ground. "Greetings, fairy queen of the earth."

She folded her arms, eyeing him with the reservation of a spider. Her pursed lips parted only long enough for her to utter an accusation. "You have stolen my beloved."

The fruit thief ruffled his hair. "Yes, yes, Elysha, I suppose I have, but not everyone can have a happily-ever-after. Rest assured that your fiancé is better off now." He lifted his shovel and gestured to Mortristan's corpse.

The shriveled young lord gazed unseeingly at the sky, his mouth curved in a smile as if he were laughing at a joke told by the constellations.

The queen wilted, and the fruit thief pitied her. She hugged her arms

against her bosom, chanting softly. Her words were like icicles: some cold and bitter, some shattered, some melting away every drop of life.

For a while, the fruit thief ignored her. At last, when his hole was almost done, he stood upright and stared at her.

Worm-like, a smile crawled across her face.

He turned pale. "That's just like you, isn't it? All you care about are the treasures in your kingdom—which don't last. I forbid it! You cannot destroy his body, and you shouldn't destroy yourself either. That's no way to be reunited."

The queen's eyes hardened, and she wailed like someone who was falling and knew no one was at the bottom to catch her. She had spent years with Mortristan. She had nourished and cherished him. But when he was ripe, another had plucked him from the branch.

The fruit thief frowned. "All the earth is yours, so I am showing you extra patience. Your fairy spells have no place here. *Do you understand me?*"

All the earth was hers, but that had not been enough. *She* had not been enough. Why had Mortristan abandoned her? Her words kept flowing in a freezing, wretched river.

The fruit thief set aside his shovel.

White light exploded, and Elysha's scream rushed away past the horizon, leaving only a black-painted sky with twinkling dots and a smiling corpse waiting to be planted in the ground.

The fruit thief hurried to remove two more shovelfuls from the hole. He tucked Mortristan in and covered him with a blanket of soil. "There you go. I've kept my oath. Goodnight, my friend."

Fair earth had failed to keep Mortristan, even with all its enchantments. The fruit thief had won.

When he left, the moon yawned and started to nod. *What an eventful night*, it thought. It took a quick doze and missed the most exciting part.

A sprout spread its arms from the top of Mortristan's burial mound.

Chapter 12

They Shall Feast Evermore

For thousands of years, the hungry had lined up in front of Elysigard's gates for the weekly distribution. The outsiders gave their sweat, blood, and souls in exchange for food. Strangely, upon receiving their quota, they never smiled or said thank you. The joy of accomplishment withered on the vine when it should have ripened.

Priests bustled to and fro with spears or thick ledgers, enforcing the proper offerings. "Here is the lumber I have sawn," an outsider would say, and a priest would hand him a sack of grain or vegetables or eggs.

Near the front of the line, a large man with buggy eyes leaned this way and that, trying to take in every detail of his surroundings. This was odd behavior for an outsider waiting in line. Tubber was odd though. He'd once dunked his face in a puddle of mud to see what might be swimming down there.

He elbowed his neighbor, Denturk. "Remember that time I told you I thought I saw a real dragon?"

Denturk's mule face never changed. He hooked his thumbs in his belt. "The bat?"

"Yeah, well, this isn't nothing like that. This is a magic *tree*."

Denturk's eyes widened. "Say, now. That one with the old man underneath it? Wasn't there last week. Must be a fancy artificial replica for the insiders." He scratched his chin. "Can't be one of them *mirages*, can it?"

Tubber lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone. "Now that *would* be something! Suppose we go and see?"

"And lose our place in line!" Denturk spluttered.

"How many chances do you get to investigate a mirage?" Tubber plopped

one foot out of line.

“I swear I won’t save your spot.”

Tubber kept inching away with a wink. “Are those fruits on the tree?”

“You fool,” Denturk grumbled half to himself, half to his friend. “Would be perfect justice if you broke some rule and got assigned extra work for the week.”

Denturk believed in the safety of protocol: stay in line, take what he was given, don’t ask for more. Don’t go looking for magic or mirages. Questioning one’s lot in life only brought trouble.

* * *

The fruit thief always felt old. He felt old when he overheard conversations about children. He felt old when he spent three days under a tree sorting through memories. He felt old when shaking his head at young people who repeated the mistakes of their ancestors.

Tubber made him feel as young as a leggy sprout. It was their first meeting, but he hoped it wasn’t their last. “Hungry, young man?” He smiled and plucked a fruit from a hanging bough.

Tubber rubbed his belly. “Oh, *always*. Me wife berates me of it often. But”—he wrinkled his knobby nose—“I haven’t much in the way of payment for rare foods of this sort.”

“Catch!” He smirked as the fruit tangled in Tubber’s clumsy hands. Giving away free food was *deliciously* sinister. “Oh dear. You’ve caught it with your dirty hands. Now there’s no returning it. Oh well. I guess you’ll have to eat it.”

Tubber gaped at him.

“Well, shoo! And you’d better enjoy it!”

The fruit thief chuckled as Tubber lumbered away, timidly nibbling one corner of the juicy miracle. “Huh. If there were two or three types of hunger, I’d say this satisfies all of them. It’s as if... Can a fruit be as endless as an

ocean in one bite? It's utterly fulfilling. Uncanny!"

Tubber's voice faded, but the fruit thief let its music ring in his ears for a minute longer. Finally, he grabbed a branch and pulled himself up. "And that, my friend," he said, patting the tree, "is all we're here for."

The tree agreed.

Thanks for Reading

If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads. Reviews are not only encouraging, but help increase a book's visibility.

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