

# Riddle of the Great Beings

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## Chapter 1

Tarduk blinked the sweat out of his eyes. Times like this, he wished he didn't have to work in full helmet and armor. But even here, so close to the free city of Atero, it was a little too dangerous to be out in the desert on your own and unprotected. His task here was routine: along with Agori from various villages, Kyry, Crotesius, Scodoni, and Kirbold, he was in Atero to help prepare the arena for the coming tournament. Even with care throughout the year, there was always a need to do minor repairs before Glatorian from all over descended on the place.

Of course, Tarduk hadn't kept at that work for very long, not when there were ruins not far away that he could explore. Making an excuse about getting some supplies from his wagon, he had slipped out of the city and found a likely spot to dig. It was hard work, and hot work. He could have used a helper, but that wasn't doable. Kyry was much too dedicated to the work in Atero, Kirbold just wanted to get

done and get back to Iconox, Scodoni was kind of a creep, and Crotesius he barely knew.

No, he decided, he digs best who digs alone. His tool hit something, buried about four feet down in the sand. Fishing it out, he found it was a square of metal, about twice the size of his hand and obviously broken off of something larger. Inscribed on it was a circle with a much smaller circle inside and at the bottom of it. Tarduk frowned. He had run across things like this before, with similar symbols. He had no idea what they meant, and neither did anyone else, so far as he knew. If they were a language - what language and spoken by whom? It was frustrating, because he had not found enough samples to even begin trying to decipher the symbols.

He turned the piece of metal over, hoping there would be another symbol on the back. Instead, he found something quite different. A map had been scratched into the metal. Some of the places on it he recognized, some he did not. At the bottom of the map was a mountain chain that looked a great deal like the Black Spike Mountains to the north. The features drawn just below the mountains seemed to bear out that it was the same range. Most of the map was areas north of the mountains, though, a region he was not familiar with. All he really knew about it was the Skrall were said to come from there. At the top of the map, there were two more symbols, but a bit different from the ones he had found before. One was just a mesh of interconnected lines

looking almost like a net or a web. The other was a star. What made that last interesting was that it was the only symbol that was colored. The star was red.

A red star, thought Tarduk, Whoever heard of such a thing? It was certainly fascinating but impossible to investigate, at least on his own. By traveling north-west, he could skirt the black spikes and reach the northern region, but the map indicated raging rivers and other natural hazards along the way. Going up there without aid would be beyond dangerous, and no Glatorian would hire out for the job this close to the Atero tournament.

"Hey!"

Tarduk turned. Crotesius was walking over, looking a little annoyed.

"Are you going to help, or play in the sand? What's that you have?"

Tarduk showed the Vulcanus Agori what he had found. Crotesius didn't bother to take it - just looked at both sides and then shrugged.

"So what? It's a piece of junk. Maybe you could use it to patch your wagon, but other than that..."

What a Vorox... muttered Tarduk to himself. Aloud, he said "You're probably right. I mean, that red star - what's that all about? After all, everyone knows there's nothing valuable up

that way. No hidden treasure, no city, and no Water Stones, nothing."

This, of course, was a tremendous lie, and Tarduk knew that Crotesius would never believe it. In fact, he was counting on that. Rumors flew faster than grains of sand in a sandstorm about what might be to the north. In Iconox, they said the mountains were covered with valuable Exsidian. In Vulcanus, they said there were entire valleys of Water Stones, those valuable rocks that could be split open to reveal pure water inside. As for Tajun, well, they were pretty imaginative there, and the Agori of Tesara just didn't want to even talk about it.

Now Crotesius reached out to take the piece of metal and take a closer look. "You know, if you like, I could take this... um... scrap metal off your hands, maybe you'd like to trade?"

Later on, Tarduk would be unable to explain just why he said what he did. Maybe after years of digging in the sand and finding pieces of a puzzle, but no way to solve it, he had just had enough. If he didn't take a chance, he would never find any answers. "Sure, I'll trade you," he said. "You can have the piece of metal... if you go with me to find that red star, whatever it is."

"Go up there? Are you crazy?" said Crotesius.

"That's the offer," Tarduk said firmly. "We have enough time before the tournament starts to get there and get back." He actually wasn't sure that was true, but wasn't going to tell Crotesius that. "Think about it," he continued. "What if there's something really valuable up there, something that changes everyone's life in Bara Magna? We'll -- I mean, you'll be a hero."

Crotesius smiled. As a vehicle pilot in the arena, he was just one more Agori fighter in a world dominated by Glatorian. But if he did something truly great, well, Raanu wouldn't live forever, maybe he could lead Vulcanus someday.

"Okay Tarduk," Crotesius said. "I guess you can join my expedition, but we're going to need more help. See if you can recruit a few more Agori, without telling them about the star. And we leave at dawn."

Tarduk walked away, a grin spreading across his face. Sure, he hadn't been completely honest, but sometimes you have to take shortcuts in the pursuit of knowledge, right? Little did Tarduk know that shortcut was about to lead him right into a nightmare.

## Chapter 2

In the end, only Kirbold was willing to come along with Crotesius and Tarduk in search of the Red Star. Scodonius said it was crazy to go off on some wild Rock Steed chase so close to the date of the tournament. And Kyry was in a hurry to get back to Vulcanus.

Crotesius suggested they take vehicles north, but Tarduk vetoed that suggestion.

"Vehicles can't go where we're going, even tracked ones," said Tarduk, "plus they make noise, and noise attracts Bone Hunters. No, we'll use Sand Stalkers."

It took a certain amount of wheeling and dealing to borrow three of the beasts from an Iconox trader, especially since Tarduk wouldn't say where they were going with them. But within in short time, the three Agori were mounted and ready to start their expedition.

The shortest route would be to go east to the Dark Falls and then north toward the volcanic region above the Black Spike Mountains. But the presence of Skrall, Vorox, and Bone Hunters up that way made it also the most dangerous. So Tarduk led the small party northwest, past the village of Tesara and Elbow Peak and into the White Quartz Mountains. Kirbold, being a native of Iconox, knew this region fairly well. There were paths that traders took

through the peaks in search of anything of value they could sell.

It was cold here, even worse than the desert by night. More than once, the Sand Stalkers almost lost their footing on the smooth face of the crystal and rock. Although it made all three Agori nervous, they had to travel by day: it would be too easy to stray off the path in the dark and possibly tumble right off a cliff.

After two days, that had moved far enough north that they were in completely unfamiliar territory. Whatever creatures lived in this region would never have been in the desert to the south, since they obviously thrived on cold. Crotesius was on constant alert. That was why he was the first to notice that they were being stalked.

"Should we stop?" asked Tarduk.

"No," snapped Crotesius, "that's the worst thing we could do. We need to go faster. Maybe we can lose them."

Tarduk doubted it. He had spotted one of their pursuers. It looked a little like one of the wasteland wolves that lived in the desert. Their paws had evolved to be able to traverse across the loosest sand and they were highly effective trackers. But, Tarduk reminded himself, though it looked like one, their stalker wasn't one of those creatures. For one thing, this beast was half made of metal. Tarduk had never seen anything like it.

"How many?" asked Kirbold.

"More than one," answered Crotesius. "Six or eight, maybe. They're hard to spot."

Tarduk was unsure how anything could move through the White Quartz Mountains unseen like this. As the day wore on, that became the least of his worries. No matter how fast the party moved, the wolves kept on their trail. No matter what trick they tried to evade pursuit - sending one Sand Stalker off in another direction, doubling back on their own trail, even leaving some of the precious supply of food on the trail to distract the pack - the wolves kept coming. "What are those things?" Tarduk asked for the third time.

Now they had to ride through the night, like it or not. Kirbold shared Tarduk's mount and Crotesius led the way. Although it probably wouldn't matter anyway, Crotesius refused to light a torch, figuring the wolves would see the light. Tarduk argued that they were probably tracking by scent, but it did no good.

They wound up on a narrow, winding trail. On the right side was the face of the mountain. On the left, a sheer drop into darkness. The good news was that there was no place for the wolves to hide here. They would have to follow the trail as well or give up, it seemed. The bad news was that even the Sand Stalkers were having a hard time finding their footing. One slip, and someone wouldn't be coming back from this trip.

Moving as quickly as they dared, the three Agori made their way down the trail. Once, the mount carrying Kirbold and Tarduk stumbled and one pack of tools fell off and into the abyss. The sound of it striking bottom never came.

Kirbold looked back. In the bright light of the moons he could see no sign of their pursuers. "I think we lost them. Do you think we lost them?"

Tarduk glanced over his shoulder. He didn't see anything either, but said, "No, I don't think we lost them."

"Neither do I," agreed Kirbold.

The trail began to widen, becoming more of a plateau. Dawn was breaking, the first rays of light reflecting off the quartz peaks. Crotesius reined his Sand Stalker to a stop, and Tarduk did the same. They looked behind. There was no sign of the half-dozen fur-and-metal-covered wolves that had been following them.

"Maybe they didn't make it across the trail," said Crotesius, "or they found easier prey. Either way, I'm glad they're gone."

"Um, there's one other possibility," suggested Tarduk. "They stopped following because they didn't need to anymore."

Crotesius turned at the sound of a low growl, a hollow metallic sound that echoed throughout the mountains. Lined up on a ridge ahead were not six of the wolves, but

sixty. They had evaded a hunting pack only to ride right into the den.

## Chapter 3

The three Agori sat on their mounts, frozen with fear. Before them stood dozens of wolves, their bodies a weird mixture of muscle and fur and dull metal. Their eyes were gleaming points of savage light in the darkness. Tarduk could smell their musky odor, mixed with the scent of cold iron.

"Watch out," whispered Crotesius. "They'll try to circle around us so we're surrounded. Then they'll attack."

"Thanks for the nature lesson," Kirbold answered. "How do we get out of this?"

"Ride through them?" suggested Tarduk. "Maybe we can, I don't know, outrun them."

Crotesius patted the flank of his Sand Stalker. "I don't think these animals are going a step closer to those things if they can help it."

Tarduk wished he could come up with another idea. Going forward was out. Going backward meant trying to race across a narrow trail with a pack of wolves at their heels. If they didn't fall into a bottomless abyss, they would have the fun of being eaten. He couldn't believe their journey was coming to an end so soon, and in a such a horrible way.

Crotesius was the first to spot a new arrival. Something, no, someone, was coming up behind the wolf pack. The figure

was bent and twisted and walked with a bad limp. He carried a staff in his left hand and seemed to be relying on it to stay upright. Even with the moonlight, it was impossible to see the armored being clearly. But then he spoke.

"Down."

It was a simple word, but delivered in a voice that sounded to Tarduk like the limbs of dead trees scraping against a shelter. To the amazement of the three Agori, the wolves crouched down against the frozen ground. The figure started hobbling forward, moving unmolested through the wolves. All Tarduk could think of was Malum, who, rumor had it, now lived among the bestial Vorox. But it wasn't Malum coming toward them. Tarduk heard Kirbold gasp in recognition. The Agori from the ice village of Iconox said, "Sure! But you're-"

"-Dead," the crippled warrior said. "Close to it, perhaps, but still among the living. Lost in the chaos of war was I, and left behind, bent and broken, when the fighting moved on. And here I have been ever since."

It was too much for Crotesius to take in. "You've been living in these mountains with these ... these ... things?"

"You are of the Fire people," Surel said, as if seeing the Agori's red armor for the first time. "So you wouldn't know about the Iron Wolves, one of the Great Beings' more ... efficient creations. I trained this pack, led them into battle,

and when the world shattered, they stayed by my side. It was the wolves who brought me food and protected me from harm. And there were many in these mountains who would have done me harm."

Surel reached down and petted one of the wolves, brushing his hand across fur and metal.

"Maybe you have forgotten, or you never knew, how things were before. Armies marching across the deserts, the jungles, the mountains, battling to claim the energy in the core of the world. The Element Lords led us into war, and when their actions destroyed the planet, they were trapped. Yes, they were trapped."

Tarduk shivered. Was it getting colder or was it fear that made him tremble? It would have been easy to blame the presence of Surel and his pets, but no, it was getting colder. The wind was picking up and snow had begun to fall, lightly at first, then more heavily. Soon he could barely make out the ancient warrior and his wolves through the storm.

"Wait a minute," said Kirbold, "I remember the war. I remember how it ended and I remember the Element Lords. But you said 'were trapped?'"

Surel nodded his head, a painful exercise due to his injuries. "I do not know why you have come here, but I tell you now to turn back. The Element Lords walk this planet once more, and the fortunate among you will die first."

A roar filled Tarduk's ears. He looked towards the source of the sound. A massive wall of white was surging down the mountain, an avalanche of snow from which there could be no hope of escape, and standing atop of the mountain, watching as doom rushed down toward the Agori, stood a warrior made of ice.

## Chapter 4

Tarduk closed his eyes tight. A massive avalanche of ice and snow was roaring down the mountainside toward him and his allies. There was no way to outrun it or evade it. He and his two fellow Agori, Surel and his Iron Wolves, were all doomed.

In what he was sure would be his last few moments of life, he thought about all the artifacts he would never discover, all the mysteries he would never solve. Most of all, he thought about the map that had brought him north into the mountains, the one with the carving of a red star upon it. It would be easier to die if he could at least know the meaning of that symbol.

There was a flash of light so bright he could see it through his eyelids, and a wave of almost unbearable heat. Tarduk opened his eyes to see the mountainside ablaze, the flames so intense they melted the snow to water and turned the water to steam in an instant. The Iron Wolves growled and backed away, Surel going with them. The two Sand Stalkers the Agori rode reared up in panic and it took all the riders' skill to keep them from bolting.

Tarduk peered through the flames to try and see the ice warrior he had spotted before atop the peak. Yes, the crystalline figure was still there, his body language speaking

of unbridled rage. "We need to get out of here, now," Tarduk said.

"What convinced you," asked Kirbold, "the avalanche or the firestorm?"

"The possibility of meeting the cause of either one," Tarduk replied.

This time, there was no need to worry about riding into the midst of the Iron Wolves; the fire had driven them all away. Surel, however, had lingered in the area. As they rode up into a pass, he emerged from behind a rock and hailed them.

"Go back," Surel implored. "There is nothing for you beyond here. Go back to the safety of your homes."

Crotesius laughed bitterly. "You obviously haven't been to one of our homes lately."

"That jet of flames," said Tarduk, "that wasn't natural, was it? That was the Element Lord of Fire who saved us."

Now it was Surel's turn to laugh. "Saved you? You are dust to him, not even dust. That was an attack on his frozen enemy. You were simply caught between them."

"Wait a minute," Crotesius interrupted. "I remember the Element Lords, and the armies, and the war, but the war ended more than a hundred thousand years ago."



Surel shook his head. "It ended for you, for their soldiers, and it ended for Spherus Magna, as all things did in that one horrible moment. But for the Element Lords, the struggle goes on."

Tarduk glanced behind. He saw no sign of anyone following them, and so thought it safe to continue. "A struggle over what?" he asked. "The core war was fought over energies from the heart of the planet, but the planet no longer exists. What is there left to fight over?"

Surel said nothing, simply raised a withered arm and pointed toward the north. Tarduk felt a chill run up his spine. He didn't bother trying to convince himself it was just from the cold. He dug into his pack and produced the fragment with the map. Surel glanced down at it; Tarduk heard a sharp intake of breath.

"The Red Star," he muttered. "The Valley of the Maze." He looked at each Agori and turned. "You seek the same secrets as the Element Lords, and you risk the same fate. The heart of the Maze holds the last riddle of the Great Beings. Many have entered the Valley in hopes of solving the puzzle. None have ever emerged again."

"Let me guess," said Crotesius. "You think we should turn back."

Surel shrugged, not easy to do with a body so badly twisted. "I think the Red Star burns in your eyes and your heart as it

has for so many before you. I think you will go on, no matter what warnings I give you. And I know, I know you will die."

Tarduk glanced at Crotesius and Kirbold. Neither looked afraid, or maybe they were just hiding it well. And he knew Surel was right. He had to discover the secrets hinted at on this map, even if it meant riding into danger.

"You're right," Tarduk said, "we will go on. Can you help us, tell us anything about what's up ahead?"

Surel was silent for a long time, then he shook his head and said, "We live in a broken world, Agori, and in such a place, nothing stays whole and untouched. The stream of life gets diverted, dammed up, misdirected, and even," he said, glancing down at his own ruined body, "distorted beyond all imagining. What awaits you to the north? A realm of lies, a place where a beauty hides a rotten heart, where trees provide no shelter, the air no cooling breeze, and where water does not quench your thirst. And the moment where you believe what you see or hear, touch or taste, it will be too late for you."

"Stop speaking in riddles!" snapped Crotesius. "If you have nothing useful to say, get out of our way."

In a flash, Surel drew a dagger and had it at Crotesius' throat. Tarduk could not ever recall seeing even a prime Glatorian move that fast.

"I could kill you now and spare you the horrors to come," said Surel, eyes blazing. "But you don't deserve such mercy. Ride on, Agori. Beyond this path is the Forest of Blades. All who travel through become one with nature, and beyond that the oh-so-welcome waters of the River Dormus. And if you survive, the Maze waits for you."

## Chapter 5

Tarduk, Crotesius, and Kirbold had been riding for a full day. They had left Surel, his Iron Wolves, and his dire warnings behind, but none could forget his words. Kirbold had been silent since then, lost in his own thoughts. Tarduk was more watchful than ever, hoping to spot the next attack before it was too late. For his part, Crotesius had decided that Surel had gone mad after so many years in the mountains, and there was little point paying attention to the ravings of a madman.

Tarduk paused to glance at the metal fragment he carried with the strange map inscribed upon it. Yes, they were almost far enough to the north. Soon, it would be time to turn east, and head for where the symbol of the red star was located on the crude chart. Kirbold abruptly reined the Sand Stalker to a halt.

"I've changed my mind. I want to turn back," he said.

"We're not turning back," Crotesius answered without turning around.

"I don't even know what we're doing here," snapped Kirbold. "Who cares what's beyond the mountains? We have our own problems at home."

"Maybe the two are connected," offered Tarduk. "Maybe there's something up here who can help us deal with the Bone Hunters, the Vorox and the Skrall."

"We're here for a weapon?" Kirbold asked. "If there was something that powerful up north, the elders would have sent Glatorian to get it."

"Maybe they didn't want something like that in the hands of Strakk," muttered Crotesius. "Or Kiina, for that matter."

"Shut up!" said Tarduk.

"Hey, I have a right to say what I think!" replied Crotesius.

"No, I mean shut up, I think I hear something up ahead," Tarduk said.

All three went silent - now they could all hear it. A harsh, keening sound like the song sung by a chorus of the dead. It seemed to coming from a forest in the distance.

"It's the wind," said Crotesius. "You know, big blast of hot air, enough to knock a person over. Sort of like Scodoniun after a win in the arena."

"I know it's the wind," answered Tarduk. "I just never heard wind like that before."

"The Forest of Blades," said Kirbold. "Up ahead. Maybe that's the place Surel was talking about."

"I don't see any blades," said Crotesius. "I see trees. That means maybe there's some fruit or something else we can eat. I'm hungry enough to eat Thornax stew at this point. Even cold Thornax stew."

Tarduk started to say something back, but even the thought of cold Thornax stew was so nauseating that he had to swallow hard to keep from getting sick. Crotesius had spurred his Sand Stalker on, and was riding ahead. Kirbold hesitated for a long moment before following. Sitting on the animal right behind Kirbold, Tarduk felt a moment of relief. He didn't want to lose a team member, and he doubted Kirbold would be able to make it back to Iconox safely on his own. They needed to stick together.

As the small band rode closer, they noticed something strange. Faint sunlight was glittering off what appeared to be swords sticking out of trees. It almost looked as if the forest was armed, as strange as that seemed.

"Must be a weird kind of tree to grow branches like that," said Kirbold. "I guess we know how the place got its name."

"Do we?" said Tarduk. "Look closer."

Kirbold peered through the morning mist. What he had thought was just a gleaming branch was in fact a sword, and it wasn't sticking out of the wood. It was held in the hand of a warrior trapped halfway inside the trunk of the tree. Kirbold gasped. He suddenly realized that there were

scores of warriors here, their bodies merged with the wood of the forest, still clutching their weapons. It was as if the trees had reached out and grabbed them and wouldn't let go. He couldn't tell if the warriors were still alive or not.

"That's... horrible," he said.

"What do you think?" Tarduk asked Crotesius.

The Fire Agori just stared at the awful forest for a long time. Then he said, "No natural forest behaves this way. I hate to say it, but Surel was right. The Element Lords were here. This is power over plant life at work. These warriors might have been here since the War, for all we know."

"If they're alive, we have to save them," said Tarduk.

"That means going in there," replied Crotesius.

Tarduk nodded. Kirbold yanked on the reins, turning the Sand Stalker around.

"You can get off right here, Tarduk," said Kirbold. "I'm going back."

Tarduk knew he should argue with him, but he couldn't think of a good argument. The sane thing to do was to head back to the desert and try to forget this terrible place existed. But something told him there was more at stake here than just the discovery of new knowledge or the solving of a puzzle. More and more, he felt like they were on a mission, and a vital one.

Without a word, Tarduk jumped down from the Sand Stalker. Then he climbed up onto Crotesius' mount.

"Be careful, Kirbold. The way back might be more dangerous than the way here."

Kirbold nodded towards the Forest of Blades. "Same to you, friend. I think you're crazy to go in there, but... I'll make sure everyone back home knows you were trying to help others... and..."

His voice broke and he stopped speaking. Tarduk leaned over and shook his hand. In their hearts, both believed they would never see each other again.

Tarduk waited until Kirbold was well on his way before asking Crotesius to get the Sand Stalker moving. Together, they rode into the cool, green shade of the forest. They were so close to the warriors that Tarduk could have reached out and touched their armor, but he did not. He was doing his best to be brave, but he knew if one of the trapped warriors should suddenly move, he would have to scream.

None of them did. The two Agori rode deep into the forest. It was silent. No birds sang here, no rodents scurried across the leaf-strewn floor in search of a meal. It was a garden of sorts, but it was not a place of life. At least, that was how it seemed to Tarduk and Crotesius, right up until the moment when the wind gusted again, the howling noise

rose, and the branches all around reached out to seize them both.

## Chapter 6

Before they could react, Crotesius and Tarduk had been yanked from their Sand Stalker. The forest around them had come to life, branches reaching out to grab them, and vines knotting themselves around the two Agori. In a matter of moments, they were tied to trees. Crotesius looked around, the countless warriors whose bodies merged with the wood of the forest, and wondered if that would be his fate, too.

"I've got a little knife I use in my digging," said Tarduk. "Maybe I can cut the vines and get free." With some effort, Tarduk got his hands on the blade, and sliced deep into one of the vines. The plant reacted instantly, wrapping one of its tendrils around his neck and squeezing until he was sure he would black out. It wasn't until he dropped the knife that the pressure eased. "I guess they don't want us to leave," he said.

Not far away, a mini-cyclone whipped leaves into the air. More and more plant matter was drawn into its wake until an entire segment of the glade was filled with leaves, vines, and branches, spinning furiously in the grip of a tornado. Then a being emerged from out of the storm itself.

At first glance, Tarduk thought he might have been made of plants. He was tall and green, with thorns jutting out from his arms and legs and intertwined roots crisscrossing his chest. His eyes were an emerald so dark they were almost black. His arms were long, with thick vines wrapped around them, and more thorns served as his claws. Even his sword

looked like it was a green and growing thing, though sharp and deadly.

It was only when he took a closer look that Tarduk began to have doubts. Perhaps this being was a living plant creature, or perhaps it was simply armor that made him seem that way. Regardless, Tarduk had no doubt who he was: the Element Lord of Jungle, Master of the Green.

The newcomer looked at Tarduk, then at Crotesius, then he gave a gentle shrug, which sounded like the snapping of twigs underfoot. "You don't know the way," the Element Lord said. "You are of no use to me."

Tarduk was going to ask just what it was he was talking about, but Crotesius spoke first. "How do you know we don't know the way? Why do you think we're here?"

What are you doing? thought Tarduk.

The Element Lord walked up to Crotesius and scraped a thorny nail across the Agori's helmet. "You're Fire," he said. "Fire only knows how to destroy. I have seen Fire try to penetrate the Maze and fail time after time." He turned to Tarduk. "You came here by accident, but you are of the Green, Agori, so I will let you go. Your companion must remain, however, and join my Forest of Blades."

"I remember you," said Tarduk. "Before the war, you led my people. You made things grow. You brought life. How can you just kill, as if it means nothing?"

The vines abruptly released Tarduk, and he tumbled to the forest floor. When he looked up, the Element Lord's eyes were blazing at him. "Have you ever been to the deep forest, Agori?" he asked. "There the creatures live in perpetual darkness because the roof of the woods is too thick to allow sunlight to pass through. Vines strangle the trees, leeching the life from them so they can take their place and capture whatever light they can find. Every living thing profits from the death of another."

Tarduk spotted a faint gleam of light in the distance beyond the Element Lord. He didn't know what it was, but if there was any chance it was help on the way, he had to keep talking. "What are you that you could do this?" he asked.

"Once I was a warrior, like the ones held here," the Element Lord answered. "Then I and five of my brothers were chosen by the Great Beings for the honor of leading the villages of Spherus Magna. We were changed by their power, made one with our elements, and given armor and weapons to defend our people. We were no longer like Agori, or anyone else. We became nature itself, as benevolent, giving, ruthless, and indifferent as that can mean. We-" The Element Lord's eyes suddenly went wide.

He let out a ragged scream and whirled around in rage. Behind him, Kirbold had appeared, carrying a torch. He had lit the vines that had bound Crotesius on fire, and the Agori was free again. But the Element Lord had felt the pain of his creations, and Tarduk suddenly doubted very much any of the three villagers would make it out of here alive.

"The torch!" Tarduk yelled. "Throw the torch!"

Kirbold hurled the flaming stick. It landed at the Element Lord's feet, among the leaves. Yellow-orange fire erupted, feeding off the plant matter all around. In seconds the Element Lord was surrounded by a blaze burning out of control.

"Run!" shouted Crotesius.

The three Agori took off as fast as they could, dodging trees and leaping over rocks. Only Tarduk looked back. The Element Lord was gone. Not dead, he was sure, simply vanished back into the forest. Possibly he was wounded, but more likely he was marshaling his power to stop the fire before it consumed the wood.

Tarduk saw trees and brushes and vines burning, all so that he and his two friends could escape, and he wondered about the Element Lord's words: that every living thing profits from the death of another.

Those words would echo in Tarduk's mind for a very long time to come.

## Chapter 7

Tarduk, Crotesius, and Kirbold had left the woods far behind them, if not the memories of what had happened there. They had traveled in silence for the better part of the day. Tarduk had not even bothered to ask Kirbold why he had come back. He was just grateful the Ice Agori had changed his mind.

For much of the past several hours the group had been riding along the banks of a river. Tarduk had no doubt this was the River Dormus that Surel had spoken about. It certainly did not seem dangerous in any way. It was a placid and calm body of water without even any rapids visible. That alone made Tarduk a little nervous. His experience on Bara Magna was that anything that looked safe and welcoming usually wasn't either. At the same time, having spent much of his life in a desert, the sight of running water was an appealing one.

Eventually they reached a point where the river had to be forded if they were to keep moving north. Tarduk scouted until he found a spot that looked shallow enough.

"We'll cross here," he said. "According to the map, we're not too far from where we're going."

"That's a pretty old map," said Crotesius. "How do we know that 'Red Star' thing is even still there? Or anything else? The Skrall probably stormed all through this area

before they came to Bara Magna. I doubt they left much standing."

"You just don't want to cross the river!" joked Kirbold. "You Fire types don't like to get wet, right?"

Crotesius frowned. He walked right up to the edge of the water and turned around to face his two companions.

"Right, I made it past the mechanical wolves and the hungry trees and everything else on this trip, and I'm scared of a stream? I'll cross it right now, and then..."

There wasn't time to shout a warning. Behind Crotesius, a giant hand made of water sprang from the river. In the blink of an eye it had seized the Fire Agori and pulled him below the surface. Tarduk and Kirbold rushed to the spot heedless of their own potential danger.

"Do you swim?" asked Tarduk.

"I'll manage," said Kirbold. "What's the plan?"

"We go in after him," Tarduk answered. "Let's go!"

The two Agori had taken three steps into the water when the hand appeared again. This time, it grabbed both of them. The next moment, they were being pulled down into the river. To Tarduk's amazement, he wasn't drowning. Some air had been pulled down with them, and suddenly he had a bad feeling he knew why.

The Element Lord of Jungle wanted information from us, he remembered. If this is the Element Lord of Water at work, maybe he wants the same thing, and we can't tell him anything if we're dead. But what happens when he finds out we have nothing to tell?

The water was dark and cold. Tarduk focused on a pinpoint of light up ahead. As they rapidly grew closer, he could make out Crotesius suspended in the water inside an air bubble. Soon, he and Kirbold were floating beside him.

Before them, the underwater current began to twist and writhe. The waters reshaped themselves into the semblance of a face easily as tall as one of the Agori. Its hollow voice came at them from every side.

"Do you know the way?" it said.

"One of your brothers already asked us," said Tarduk. "You are the Element Lord of Water, right?"

"I have that honor," the Element Lord answered. "And what did you tell my brother?"

Tarduk glanced at Crotesius. The Fire Agori gave the slightest of nods, signaling that he would back whatever play Tarduk wanted to make. As it turned out, Tarduk didn't have to decide what to do next—Kirbold spoke up.



"The same thing we'll tell you," said the Ice Agori. "Sure we know the way. Would we have come this far out if we didn't? But why should we tell you?"

The Element Lord of Water paused, as if he was actually considering his answer.

"Self-preservation," he said, finally.

This time, it was Crotesius who answered. "Highly overrated. Better a dead hero than a live coward, I always say."

This seemed to set the Element Lord back a bit. He and his kind weren't used to backtalk. Around the three Agori, the waters began to churn.

"Do you know how it feels to drown, villager?" asked the Element Lord. "To feel your lungs fill up with water and your vision go black? I could make you feel that a thousand times, and worse, never knowing when you will be allowed to finally die."

"Sure you could," said Tarduk. "But if you try, we'll make sure it goes that one step too far. Dead, we're of no use to you. Dead, we tell you nothing, and you'll never know the way. But maybe if you tell us why you're so desperate for the information, we could make a deal."

The Jungle Agori couldn't quite believe what he was saying. All this being had to do was increase the water pressure and

he could crush them into paste, but after such a long journey and so many dangers, Tarduk had had enough of riddles and threats. Whatever their reasons, the Element Lords were desperate for knowledge, and it was time to use that against them.

"Why?" asked the Element Lord. "Because at the end of the way, there is power to be had. Power enough to end the war the only way it can end. With a victory for one of us."

Tarduk started to point out that the Core War had ended a hundred thousand years ago, but then remembered something Surel had said: how the war had ended for the Agori and the soldiers, but not for the Element Lords. Their hate still burned, even in the depths of the water.

"We can't tell you," said the Jungle Agori. "It's too complicated. You know, if you make a wrong turn, well, that would be that. We would have to show you." Tarduk held his breath. The Jungle Element Lord had almost seemed able to read their thoughts - if this one could as well, they were doomed.

But the Element Lord of Water did not attack, or rage at them. Perhaps none of the Element Lords were able to read minds after all. Perhaps Jungle just assumed no Agori would be carrying this kind of knowledge.

"Very well," said the Water Element Lord. "You will go forth, and the waters will go with you. You will show me the way, and in return..."

The three Agori never got to hear what their captor was willing to trade. The temperature of the waters around them suddenly plummeted. Crotesius looked downriver, and his eyes widened. The water was freezing rapidly and the effect was racing right toward them.

The Element Lord of Water let out a yell of rage and frustration. Ice had found him again. Now his essence would have to flee the river, or risk being frozen to death. Before the eyes of the Agori, the face in the water dissipated. Their captor had vanished, leaving them behind.

"It's moving too fast," cried Kirbold. "We'll never make it to the surface in time."

"I'm sorry," said Tarduk. "I'm sorry."

A few feet away, the river water turned to solid ice, the surface to the bottom. Any living thing unlucky enough to be in the waterway was frozen instantly. That was about to include three very brave Agori.

## Chapter 8

The first thing Tarduk noticed was that it was hot. Really hot. That made no sense; the last thing he remembered was being beneath the River Dormus, about to be frozen solid by rapidly advancing ice. The second thing he noticed was that his mouth was full of sand. He was face down in the stuff. That ruled out lying on the banks of the Dormus, since there was no sand there.

With a little reluctance, he lifted his head. He was in the desert, surrounded by ruins. It looked like there had been some huge battle here not long ago.

Tarduk got to his feet and swayed, overcome by a wave of dizziness. When it passed, he started looking around. Right away, he saw Crotesius and Kirbold. Both were unconscious, but alive and apparently uninjured. Kirbold was lying next to a big chunk of stone, half-buried in the sand. It had writing carved on it. Tarduk cleared away the sand and read: 'Atero Arena.'

What? thought Tarduk. It can't be. When we left to go north, the Atero Arena was whole, the Tournament was about to start. What could have done this?

Tarduk searched the ground frantically for some clue. He saw Glatorian armor and weapons scattered all around, obvious signs of a struggle. And one thing more: a Skrall shield, planted in the ground like a victory banner.

That was it, then. The Skrall had attacked Atero and destroyed it. And now... what? Were they attacking the villages? Or had they perhaps gone north to find the same place of power he had been seeking? He had to find out.

Words rang in his head, then. Someone, not long ago, had said to him, 'Rock is already unyielding. Give it the power of the Great Beings to wield and no world is safe.' But who had said that, and where?

He had a vague memory of an archway, a slab of stone, and someone speaking to him. And then he walked into the archway and... suddenly it all came back to him, a flood of memories surging into his brain. Yes, he had been underwater with Crotesus and Kirbold. They had been captives of the Element Lord of Water. Then the river began to turn to ice, as the Lord of that element attacked. The Water Lord had been forced to flee, and moments later, the air bubbles that had kept the Agori alive vanished as well. But they would freeze long before they drowned.

Desperately, the three started swimming for shore. Even as they did so, they could feel a disturbance in the water coming from upriver. Tarduk turned and saw a huge black shape racing toward them underwater. As it got closer, he saw it was a massive slab of rock. He barely had time to register that before he was flying up and out of the water, along with his two friends. Tarduk landed hard on the muddy shore. He turned in time to see three pillars of rock retreating into the water. The next moment, there was the

sound of a great impact, and shards of ice flew up from beneath the river. The huge rock had smashed the oncoming wave of ice to bits.

Tarduk stood up. At first, he thought he must have hit his head when he landed. Standing before him was a mirror image of himself made from rock. But when it spoke, it was not his voice, but the unmistakable tones of a Skrall.

"Go back," said the duplicate Tarduk. "You do not belong here. The Maze is mine to conquer, not yours."

"We're not looking to conquer anything," said Tarduk. "We're just looking for answers."

"And some of us aren't even sure of the questions anymore," added Crotesus.

Tarduk expected the rock-thing to threaten them, or even attack. Instead, it just nodded. "You have encountered many dangers coming here, have you not? You are missing your homes."

Crotesus and Tarduk said nothing. Kirbold just nodded.

"Then I will not delay your journey," said the Element Lord of Rock, for who else could it be. "But I will warn you. Rock is already unyielding. Give it the power of the Great Beings and no world is safe. That power will be mine and no one else's. Travel on, learn what you must. Take nothing back

with you. And never return." With that, the rock statue of Tarduk crumbled to dust.

"Maybe it is time to go home," said Crotesius.

"No, not after we've come so far," said Tarduk. "We're close, I know it."

The three Agori traveled along the bank of the river, keeping a watchful eye out for another Element Lord attack. A few hours later, they had reached the headwaters. There before them was a massive archway decorated with ornate carvings. Written across the top in Agori were the words 'Spirit's Wish.'

Tarduk was stunned at the sight: "I thought that was just a legend."

"You've heard of this?" asked Crotesius.

"Read a carving once that referred to it," Tarduk replied. "According to the story, anyone who passes through it gets the dearest wish of their spirit, or something like that. If it works, maybe we can get where we want to go right away, instead of more traveling on foot. It's worth a try."

"Doesn't look like we have any choice anyway," said Kirbold. "There's no way around it. We have to go through."

Steeling themselves, the three Agori walked beneath the arch. There was a flash of light, a horrible sickening feeling

and then utter and complete darkness... until Tarduk woke up in the sand. And now it made sense. The arch wasn't some magical wish-granter, it was a teleportation device, just the sort of thing the Great Beings would build. It was designed to scan the mind of anyone passing under and send them where they wanted to go. Or maybe where the Great Beings wanted them to go. There was no way to tell.

But why did I end up here? wondered Tarduk. I wanted to go to the Maze. I wanted answers. Or was the Element Lord of Rock right? Did I somewhere, deep down, just want to go home? And so that's where it sent me.

Crotesius and Kirbold were on their feet now, looking around at the ruins of Atero in shock. Tarduk knew that they would want to head back to their villages and so did he. But once he was certain Tesara was alright, he was heading back north. He had to. This time, he would make it through the arch and find what he was seeking. This time, he wouldn't waver. Even if he had to go alone, he was making the journey. He had set out to solve a riddle, and it seemed some pretty powerful beings were trying to solve it too. It was still out there, tantalizing him, a question without an answer. But he would answer it somehow - and soon.

Tarduk looked to the north. His destiny lay that way, he knew. And nothing would stop him from achieving it.

**THE END**