

Chapter 2

I stood on Koru's balcony. Eight of us, the King of Rats, his daughter Seraphine, wife Astras, facilitator Hoarfast, wife's counselor Dr Simmons, worthless-imbecile-chasing-Seraphine Mithrak, worthless-imbecile's-friend Cole, security consultant Agammae, and emissary Kog, me, had just watched our attempt on the life of Mallens, King of the Gods and Lord of Creation, fail. Jermaine, Koru's son, must now be dead. No one spoke yet. The roar of the river Alph as it fell off Mt Monac and plunged underground provided pleasant background noise.

All of Meru would have been so much better if Mallens had died. I'd long since left prayer behind, given up my wishes, and taken action to make things better. I'd done everything for them. I had found out who could be bribed and bribed them. I'd figured out how Death's scepter could be stolen and stolen it. I had found heretical blacksmiths who would make replicas of All Things Ending and had titan-killing weapons made. I had done everything to make things better.

I had even volunteered to go with Jermaine. I offered. I had been the first to step up when he'd asked among our group. Sickness and death on anyone who said I sat out because I was a coward. Even when Jermaine refused, I hadn't gotten angry, and I'd put aside my resentments for the greater good. While the angels prepared their killing party, I'd been in the streets, learning where Mallens would go, how he went there, who came with, and how we could use it. I had done everything for them!

And we had failed, and the world would fall to darkness.

If I had been there, we would have made it.

Something made a scrape and clatter.

Koru kicked his couch back. Seraphine looked startled to see herself casually pushed aside. "Everyone stay still. We need to decide what we're going to do before anyone goes anywhere or says anything."

Koru possessed age and power out of proportion with his standing as a lesser god. King of Rats was such a minor title, other pantheons might not claim it. Yet a lesser god had this mansion of Shang Du. In this house they did not even put out plates for manna but feasted on honeydew. Normally a hundred servants filled the polished halls, but he'd sent them away for First Light. We had miles of corridors and rooms to ourselves.

His eyes were dull red, his nose was long and too big, and his

mustache looked like whiskers. I think he greased it. All of his proportions were wrong. His arms were as long as his legs, being tall and thin drew attention to the slouch of his spine, and normally, like now, he wore furs to cover up his strange form. I don't know how he and Seraphine were related.

"What do you want to discuss?" asked Hoarfast. "Our mutual endeavor has come to a definite end."

"It has," agreed Koru, "but we are now bound by a mutual secret. No one leaves this house. No one talks to anyone outside this house. We need to decide exactly what we are going to do."

"I still don't see what we have to talk about," said Hoarfast. "We share a secret. We keep it."

"The concern is someone running to Mallens and telling all, hoping for a reward," said Mithrak. "Or at least mercy."

"Mallens isn't the sort to grant rewards or mercy," said Agammae.

"Which is an excellent point," Koru said to her. "Someone might panic and forget that."

"Then again, we have nothing to talk about." Hoarfast squeezed his knuckles. He didn't crack them; he only pressed each fist within the other huge, calloused hand.

Hoarfast was the biggest of all of us and, quite frighteningly, the quickest. He was an old man in a career full of treachery: the arrangement and facilitation of killings. But he dreamed little dreams: money, fine houses, expensive clothes, and fast cars. He didn't desire Seraphine, the most beautiful of women, but rather wanted women to come and go through his life, themselves impressed by his money, houses, and things.

I don't know how Koru came to know him. They certainly didn't move in the same circles. Mallens's third sister Androche was made of iron and had born one hundred children of alloys. One, Kobold, was a fine steel with a pattern like snowflakes on his skin, and he had sired a line of Celestials in the climes of Theony, a northern range of mountains where the ice lies deep and hard enough to be smelted as metal. Hoarfast carried Kobold's blood. He had a coarse black beard like iron filings stuck to a lodestone, gray eyes, and dark hair. He wore gray suits, bespoke shoes, and steel pins in his collar to clasp his tie. I've never seen him carry a gun, but I'd never seen him use his fists either. I'd made sure he'd never mean me harm.

"I am concerned someone might not keep their secrets well enough," said Koru.

Hoarfast looked up at him through his coarse eyebrows. "Then either you take our mere promises or start killing people, King of Rats."

King of Rats met the lesser Celestial's eyes. Even as a lesser god, Koru stood high above Hoarfast's station, but Hoarfast killed gods for a living.

"Let's not go there," said Astras, breaking her own silence. "Once that starts, it does not end. Besides, I have a better idea."

When no one reacted, she pressed.

"Look at me. I can help you both."

After a longer pause Hoarfast said, "Lady of the House," like she wanted to pull his teeth. He turned and nodded.

Koru let Hoarfast look away first before turning to Astras as well.

She had sat back down but didn't recline. The chairs would have made it uncomfortable anyway. "No one knows we had anything to do with it. All of the agents died. They are martyrs for a better world, and we will get them their better world. We have time. But we won't if we turn on each other."

Everyone considered this. I scowled.

"You mean to try again?" asked Hoarfast, raising one coarse eyebrow.

"Of course," said Koru. Hoarfast may have been answering Astras, but the King of Rats answered. "Mallens killed my son."

"Of course," said Astras. She smiled. "Remember, no one outside Shang Du knows any of us had anything to do with it."

She looked magnificent. On credentials alone, I understood why Koru chose her. The Sylph of the River Alph had given up her domain to marry Koru and now wore a deep-cut dress with high slits on either side. She'd crossed her legs, trapping the narrow front-panel of fabric between her thighs and exposing her long, naked leg to the seat of the couch. She wasn't wearing underwear.

"Except for one," said Astras, pointing at me. "Him."

I had done everything for them.