

GODS OF ENERGY

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*When order reigns, time remains,
but order is inconstant.*



CHAPTER ONE

THE PRISONER

Being a prisoner had its perks. Arun sat unattended in the middle of a rotting hut, sturdy enough to shield him from the rain, thunder, and cold winds that plagued the longlight months. He twiddled his naked thumbs on a creaking wooden chair, mindful that his captors had taken his gloves along with his books and pocket scope. His scope would have once peered into the sun and the stars—mythical bodies hidden beyond the clouds. It was now resigned to spotting rival scavengers from afar; not much use in a windowless hut.

A door stood closed, straight ahead, only brought to light by dim rays spread through the hut from the slits high in the slatted walls. To Arun's right: a mountain of unlit candles, symmetrically arranged. To his left: a bed. It'd been years since he'd last seen one, let alone lay in one. His ears could only capture the same sound he'd heard since waking—rain pattering against the hut and dripping through a crack in the corner. He was surely far from any town and anyone he knew.

Arun couldn't remember a single face from his last moments as a free man wandering the fields. There were no chains nor rope around him, but scavengers would always bind, so the hut must have belonged to reclusive Hillfolk or fearless Hunters—bone-crunching cannibals that strayed in and out of town. Either way, it wouldn't be a fair fight, and a wry smile lifted on one side of Arun's face.

Knock, knock, knock—and the peace was shattered.

Arun's thoughts dispersed. Three knocks broke the spitting rain, echoing through the hut with no time in between. Showtime. He crunched his knuckles and fingers back and readied himself for yet another fight. Living life as a lone scavenger didn't teach him much, but it certainly taught him how to defend himself.

The door opened as Arun remained seated, never the aggressor, never the first to throw a fist. Muted daylight made its way past two cloaked figures standing beyond the doorway as rain fell around them—one tall, one small. Arun's pupils needed little time to adjust, but the sharp, cold breeze brought a shiver as it glided past his neck.

'So, this is him,' croaked a deep voice. 'I am a little underwhelmed, I must say.'

'The feeling's mutual,' said Arun, clenching his fists on his lap. He peered into the shadows, attempting to recognise a face. 'Who are you?'

'I am who lives here,' replied the tall, shadowy figure. 'This hook is where I hang my cloak. That bed is where I lay my head. So, who do you suppose you are? One of Aerkin's men? Or just a petty thief?'

Ah, *thief*, the word thrown at Arun whenever he found himself held hostage. 'Humour me. What did I take? Some of your precious candles?'

'You know precisely what you have stolen.' The floorboards creaked and cracked as the figures made their way inside. The small captor wore a hood and stood to the side, and the tall one stepped further forward, revealing a grey beard and wavy, long, receding hair to match—a man, an older man, hunching slightly underneath his black cloak. His middle finger on his left hand twitched, and his nose pinched, sniffing the damp air. It was both a charm and a curse for Arun to notice every minor element of a person's detail. The man wouldn't put up much of a fight dressed like that.

The realisation then hit him. Long, black cloaks. These *were* the Hillfolk: marauders and meddlers of the west. He'd never come across one in the flesh, but he'd heard the stories of torment and torture. That must be why they kept

him here; they wanted to convert him. His body pinched with the same tingle he felt hearing footsteps at night, his heart beating through his chest. He rose from the chair, topping his adrenaline with a spike of headrush. He took in every second of this feeling. He loved it. 'I think it's time I left. Which one of you is gonna try and stop me?'

A chuckle escaped the man's lips along with a warm, misty breath that the incoming cold air quickly absorbed. 'You would leave without your gloves?'

'I only need my books and my scope. Keep the gloves. Something to remember me by.'

The two mysterious figures looked at each other, the man's fingers making a flurry of signals by his side.

'Kate...' The man nodded to her before turning back to Arun with his hands behind his back. 'I happen to be a glover, a career that rather handed itself to me in this new world. As you can imagine out here, I do not have much to work with but with what I do have I do extremely well.'

Arun was left confused by the man's winding words, but his eyes were instantly drawn to the second figure, presumably named Kate, stepping forward alongside her companion. Her shaded hand slowly unfurled to reveal a tiny yet bright blue light nestling in the centre of her gloved palm. Arun's eyes were fixated. The only brightness he'd ever known came from a human-made flame or the dulled daylight from the skies. How was she doing that? He'd never seen a glow like this before, clattering the wooden walls with a glistening blue. Yet somehow, it looked familiar. He stared deeper, noticing its radiance materialise bolder and brighter, sparkling in circles.

The man continued, 'My gloves are dear to me. Years of my life have gone into making a material so precious that even a single, loose thread curses me with sleepless nights.'

A faint humming noise vibrated the hairs in Arun's ears as the light continued to fizz in his eyes. It shook, horrifyingly beautiful, taking the shape of the hand of which it was born.

The man orbited Arun at a distance, eclipsing the blue light for a moment.

‘So imagine my horror these last few years knowing a pair had gone missing. So tell us—’

‘Where is she, and when did you steal the gloves?’ Kate’s sharp, deep voice cut the air for the first time. The blue light brought a glisten to her face. Pale brown mud and dark brown hair covered her cheeks and forehead, but her pupils shone the same blue as the light.

Arun fell back onto the chair wide-eyed, snapping out of his daze. These light tricks must be how they converted people. Don’t panic, Arun. ‘Where’s who? And I didn’t steal them. I found them; under some rocks near where I live.’

‘Tell us the truth.’ Kate approached as the man continued his orbit behind Arun. The vibrating hum of light cupped Arun’s ears; it’d breached his confident, cocky defences. His chest bounced with the roaring beat of his heart. Why couldn’t they have just been simple Hunters?

‘What’s that light?’ mumbled Arun, fighting the torment of the glow.

‘We’re asking the questions,’ said Kate.

‘Perhaps we are dealing with an ignorant scavenger, after all,’ said the man. ‘His face is straining as if he might relieve himself. I would rather that not occur in my abode.’

The blue light softly dissipated in Kate’s palm. ‘Scavengers can’t hold the light. I saw it, Nicholas, with my own eyes. He used it to block his weight in falling rubble—he’d be dead otherwise. He’s not telling us something.’

Falling rubble. Emerging light. Arun remembered: searching the rubble of an old building, finding a boy, bricks collapsing from above, crashing down as a wave of solid matter, only to be broken in its fall by that same blue light spread across his hands akin to a shield. His gloves must have created that light and saved his life. But how? Did he cause the light to appear? That’s the last thing he remembered before waking up on the splintered floorboards of the hut.

Arun took a moment to process his memory. Without a touch of subtlety, he lifted his hand to the tip of his forehead. Ouch! Damnit—his skin mimicked a volcano unearthed from his skull, throbbing with a small, open wound

swelling in the centre. A moment's flinch gave way. 'Wait. How'd you find me? Were you following me?'

Kate crossed her arms. 'Never let your enemies out of your sight.'

'Enemy? I don't know you! Just keep the damn gloves. I'm leaving.' Arun stood once more.

Kate turned to glance at Nicholas, Nicholas stared back, and Arun's eyes darted each way as he awaited a response before heading for the door. Stalemate. Seconds passed without a word.

Nicholas approached Arun's right shoulder, now within reach. The slight shine from outside brought one side of his face to light, one eye gleaming light-blue. A deep, piercing stare emanated from his bushy beard and scruffy hair. He ran his open palm over and down his beard, pulling his sleeve back slightly to reveal a dimmed reflection on a circular, slick glass surface with three lines and twelve numbers, ticking intermittently. Arun had never seen one of these working before; there seemed no reason to need one.

'How old are you?' asked Nicholas, meeting Arun's gormless gaze.

Arun's fists clenched a light coat of sweat, still awaiting his moment to strike back. 'Twenty. Why? You like them young?'

The muscles in Nicholas's face relaxed. 'So you were born in the year 0 ADE. That is a first.' He turned to the mound of candles, pensive. 'So be it. If you feel you must leave, then try. Let us see how far you make it.' Nicholas held his palm out towards the door.

Arun's shoulders pinched together. Without saying a word, he ambled to the door between the two Hillfolk as if he were walking a tightrope. Their sour sweat shot through his nose to the back of his throat, almost tripping his stride. He walked through the open door staring back at the two, wary of a trap, but they didn't move a muscle.

Freedom, hopefully. Taking no more than two steps outside, Arun brought himself to an immediate halt. He opened his eyes wide as his short hair wiggled in the external wind. The greenest, long, flowing grass swayed down a hill's steep slope in front of him, flickering in the rain. Vibrant shades on the

trees emerged from the ground into the faraway hills. Knee-high walls of stone partitioned the land, with abundant, multi-coloured crops surrounding the perimeter.

Small, basic huts and sheds scattered around a cottage, entirely untouched by the devastation of time. Arun couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a building from the old era standing in one piece. Had the endless quakes not reached this far? The fresh air brushed his nostrils, and a slight, crisp gale carried the only familiarity: the songs of waves of birds ringing in Arun's ears, migrating from branch to branch as the drops of late-afternoon rain fell from the leaves. This hill appeared more beautiful than any place he'd ever graced—a truly peaceful land.

Footsteps grew ever-present, thumping the sound of the songbirds away. Nicholas stepped out alongside Arun as high-pitched voices trickled from the edge of the hill. To the right, two children ran, escaping from the crowd of trees as if in slow motion, laughing with one another: life emerging from the dark. Arun could count on one hand the number of young children he'd seen before, aside from his younger self. There were only two elder women in his town, but even if there were more, the idea of bringing up a child in this world seemed bleak to him at best. The children on the hill bounced and bustled, kicking a chestnut towards another couple of figures emerging from the hut. The couple embraced the children tight in their arms, sealing their eyes shut with genuine expressions of joy. He'd never seen this before; he'd never seen a family.

What was this place?

'I know what you are thinking—it looks a little bit different to your Toss, I would imagine.' Nicholas used the term Toss: an acronym for town-of-sorts, largely heard from the mouths of lonesome farmers scattered far around the outskirts. Or Loners, as Arun called them. Nicholas must have been wary that a scavenger would take offence to the less than pleasant duality of the word. 'I assume that is where you live.'

Arun stepped away from Nicholas with caution, wary of any menacing tricks his cloak may hide. Those back home would have Arun believe the

Hillfolk lived in mudholes, kidnapping and torturing even the most innocent of people, not giggling across fields of glorious green. Had he been lied to? All this time?

Arun's mind dwelled on the vision he usually encountered upon leaving his lone shelter. Sliding the sheet of metal that acted as a door, every blink of an eye would bring something frozen in despair: a crumbled wall, a pile of broken glass, or scattered metal from old vehicles. There would always be a constant, harrowing reminder of the society that descended to their end despite having riches beyond any imagination. A time where survival was merely an afterthought, never mind the purpose of each passing day. It had never made sense to him, and he felt it never would. Yet for one lasting moment, as he stared across the hill, he'd seen how life could be as peaceful as in the books he collected. 'It's so beautiful here. It's how I always pictured life once was. I don't understand—where am I?'

'Home,' replied Nicholas. 'There are no bees to buzz, nor fragrance from flowers, but the absence of time rids us minutes and hours.' Nicholas spoke to a tune, a lighter tone than in the hut, with a sly grin to one cheek. 'If you believe in miracles, this is where they belong—at Berkley Hill. A place where forgotten time stood still.'

'I thought nobody kept track of time anymore.'

Nicholas's head darted. 'The horses are hungry.' He hummed to himself. 'You must be an impressive fighter to have made it this far as a scavenger without any significant disfigurement or facial wounds. Though your hands could do with a touch more care.'

'I got lucky, I suppose,' replied Arun in a daze, wary of Nicholas's senseless sentiments. 'Why d'you say I wouldn't make it far? Just be straight with me—am I your prisoner, or am I free to leave?'

'You are as free as you are allowed to be.' Nicholas breathed in a lungful of fresh air through his impressively large nose. 'But what reason would one have for not escaping their prison, with no lock on the door? You may wish to pretend it was the warmth from the cold or the roof from the rain, or even to

play prisoner to excite yourself for a fight. But your arms were not tied, and a flimsy door would not stop you. We took what we needed from you: our gloves, yet you did not escape. You do not want to return home. You travelled the fields with all your possessions, not looking back once.’ With a slow tone and a deep voice, he turned to Arun and uttered, ‘I wonder why.’

Arun’s jaw clenched. Nicholas could see right through him. The thrill of theft and a well-crafted storyline were the only comforts Arun enjoyed amongst the scavengers with whom he shared nothing in common. No friends or family awaited him back home. He’d ventured away with no intention of turning back, searching for a better life, never knowing where he’d end up. But never in his wildest dreams did he dream he’d end up here. ‘Why treat me like a prisoner if you’re so certain about me? That woman acted like she wanted to kill me.’

‘Oh, she does. Her worries are not with the gloves as such but with the person who wore them. And I still believe you to be a thief, hence why we brought you here, but a crime is not what interests me now. You interest me. I wanted to test a scavenger’s character.’

Nicholas held his hands behind his back and tilted his chin to the sky. ‘You will have to forgive Kate. Those gloves you stole—’

‘Found.’

‘Yes. *Found*. They are very dear to her heart, and we have not seen them in years. Then you waltz through the Moorlands wearing them, using their power seemingly without prior knowledge, running from a home that’s barely a home. You can hardly feel surprised at our suspicion.’

Arun caught Kate leaning against the door, listening in. Her eyes pierced through his.

‘That brings me to now,’ said Nicholas. ‘We are always in need of help, and you are seeking new pastures. What others would call fate is simply a coincidence, one that benefits us both. Wouldn’t you agree, nameless one?’

‘Arun. Arun Owondo.’ Arun was used to being the smartest of the scavengers

but found himself searching for words here. 'What d'you need help with?'

'It is a pleasure to be a part of your story, Arun. I am Nicholas, and we need help fighting a fight far bigger than that of any scavenger squabble. Perhaps a fight that transcends this physical world.'

A fight that...what? An aged smile etched over Nicholas's face as if he found pleasure in Arun's blank expression. The gaze of all cognitive abandonment. Brain cells jumping ship into a black void. Arun still had no idea what Nicholas spoke of, and his nerves hadn't settled. 'Yeeeah...I dunno. What makes you so confident I'll choose to stay and fight your fight?'

Nicholas laughed. 'You have consciously chosen to have no choice. That is the beauty of *dark energy*, from the very first moment you lay eyes on it. Now, there is much to discuss. I will leave you with Kate, as I have a quick matter to attend to.' Nicholas turned to his hut.

'Dark what? Is she gonna try and kill me?' asked Arun frantically, directing his eyes anywhere other than towards Kate.

'Perhaps. If it turns out you are indeed lying,' Nicholas smiled. Arun scorned. 'But if I know anything about a scavenger, it is that they would much rather fight their way out of a situation than waste timeless time with lie after lie. And you seem no different.' A calm look of contentment replaced his grin as he returned to his humble hut. He lent a loud whisper to Kate before disappearing. 'Be nice to him.'

As the drizzle continued to dampen Arun's hair, a silence filled the air. Kate remained motionless and speechless: a mannequin in disguise.

Arun cleared his throat to deepen his voice. 'Hi...so...that's some nice mud you're wearing.'

'Don't play games.'

'I'm not. I'm just trying to figure out why I'm here and what that light is and what I'm getting out of any of this.'

'What you're getting? Two things. And you've been wearing them on your hands until now.' Kate brushed past Arun and walked the meandering path down the hillside. She left Arun with no choice. He didn't even know where

north or south was, let alone which way led to safe passage. Arun breathed in and shrugged his shoulders.

‘What’s dark energy?’ he shouted.

‘Won’t find out if you don’t follow me.’ Kate didn’t break her stride.

Bugger.