Soul of the Colossus

by ColossusRider1994 (Lugialvr1994)

Summary

The baby was not Wander. In fact, the young warrior had unwillingly departed the mortal world. In the realm of powerful souls, Wander faces the judgement of the colossal beings he slew, one-by-one. The ancient creatures have a plan for how their prisoner is to atone for his crimes.

Notes

First off, this story is heavily inspired by a story I read on Fanfiction.net years ago. The story, titled Afterlife of the Colossus only lasted four chapters before being “left for dead.” It was discontinued around ten years ago, in 2008. I was very upset that Afterlife of the Colossus had never been finished. The story’s core concept, that of Wander and sentient versions of the sixteen colossi being stuck in the afterlife together with Wander being forced to aid his former victims in some way, intrigued me. With the launch of the PS4 remake of SOTC
imminent at the time, I finally got the idea to write a spiritual successor to Afterlife of the Colossus. In order to ensure that the new story would not just be an extended rip off of Afterlife of the Colossus, I came to the conclusion that I would need to alter the premise in some way, while acknowledging my inspiration. So, after consulting with a couple of real life friends, you know who you are, I came up with how I would alter the basic ideas of Afterlife of the Colossus. Hopefully making this story my own, while keeping some particular elements of Afterlife of the Colossus that simply seemed to work well. I would also like to acknowledge that the SOTC fanfic known as The Wanderer and its short spinoff A Colossal Attempt at Humor inspired some of my ideas for the characterization of the colossi, including their gender identifications. Most of the ideas in this story are still original to me. I came up with my own “head canon” backstory elements for example.

The story is currently finished in rough draft form and edited. I always planned that if this story were to be posted at all, it would not befall the same fate as Afterlife of the Colossus. With the acknowledgements and history of this project out of the way, please enjoy the story.

Thank you for reading.

See the end of the work for more notes.

- Inspired by Afterlife of the Colossus by Ornitho Kalyko
There was a beautiful garden atop the mysterious and ancient shrine. It was a peaceful place, where animals played and birds chirped. The young woman Mono, having awoken on an altar in a strange land to find her fiancé’s horse Argo and sixteen shattered idols, had walked up to the garden. Before doing so, taking Argo with her, she had found what looked like a horned baby crying in the pool of water close to the spiral ramp leading upwards shrine. Mono had taken the baby along with her, not knowing what else to do with the strange infant.

As Mono sat in the garden, she was trying to piece together what had happened to her. She remembered being stabbed through the heart by her city’s head Shaman, Lord Emon. He had told her that by accepting her death, she was doing her people a great service. Lord Emon had told her, just before her death, that the Shamans’ visions had foretold that she would somehow bring about the return to power of the malevolent grand spirit Dormin. Dormin was said to be the incarnation of death and their people’s ancient foe. Emon believed that he was taking one life to head off an immense catastrophe.

From what Mono could gather, since her fiancé’s horse was with her. Wander, her beloved and betrothed, must have taken her to this land on the horse. However, that did not explain why she was alive again, why the bridge leading north had collapsed, or who the infant was. Mono most of all wanted to know where Wander was and if he was alright?

As the lonely young woman continued to ponder the many questions on her mind, she heard the baby’s crying stop. She looked down and then saw, to her horror, that the baby had started, very slowly, to fade away. He still seemed mostly real. However, a black light had gathered around him. Mono dropped the infant, which did not seem to harm him or even restart his crying. The baby continued to fade away, albeit extremely slowly, as Argo reared up and Mono backed away. The young woman’s confusion had just increased exponentially.

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Wander was lying on the ground, coughing intensely. Something in his stomach felt intensely wrong. He was not sure where he was. He could barely see his immediate surroundings. The last thing the young man remembered was returning to the Shrine of Worship after slaying the sixteenth and final colossus. However, the Shaman Lord Emon and some of his soldiers had arrived and tried to kill him. He had been shot by a crossbow and then stabbed through the chest. After the blade had pierced his heart, everything was a blur. His last fragment of a memory was running towards his lifeless love Mono, who had still been on the altar of the Shrine of Worship. However, he had been unable to reach her lifeless body before he blacked out again.

Wander’s eyes finally began to clear up. The young man slowly stood up, finding it easier than he thought it would be. He looked around and realized that he was alone, unarmed and no longer in the forbidden land.

Wander saw a purplish sky above him, it looked permanently cloudy. However, he could see all around him with perfect clarity. After focusing on his immediate surroundings, he realized that he was atop a cliff. All around him was a vast network of other rock formations, all made of some kind of purple-brown stone. He realized that he was only a few steps from falling into a crevice a couple hundred feet down to the maze of tunnels winding through the rock formations. Wander saw that there was a vast plain not far away. It was bordered by a sandy beach and a large river on one side. On the other side was another series of rock faces.
As Wander was marveling at the alien landscape, he realized that he had no idea where he was and saw no other living creatures. There seemed to be no animals, foliage, or people in this place. Wander then recoiled in terror as he saw a colossal snakelike figure silently pass over him. He gasped as he recognized the gargantuan serpent immediately, it was the thirteenth colossus that he had slain in his quest to revive his fiancé, Mono. Wander did not have the slightest clue about how a creature he had seen die was alive again.

The draconic snake, was now a good distance away. However, the colossus soon turned back around and began to fly lower. Wander realized that it must have detected him. As he was about to try and climb down into the tunnels below to avoid pursuit, he remembered that this beast had never tried to directly attack him during their battle.

Wander then realized that the colossal sky snake now had him in its sight. The young man was knocked to the ground in surprise when a surprisingly calm female voice echoed in his mind, “So, our murderer shares in our fate?”

Wander could only respond, “You…cannot be talking to me? You are a mindless automaton. You are a creature of stone and earth. More importantly, I killed you!”

The snake-dragon somehow began to float in place, looking at Wander with two blue eyes on one side of her head. She then replied, “Yes, you did kill me. You also killed all fifteen of my kin. I would, and maybe should, be enraged. However, it is my way to not take revenge. Unlike the others, peace and mercy is my creed. However, I would still like to know why you took all of our lives…”

Wander, still stunned, shouted back, “That does not explain how you are talking to me! Wait… I must be dead. If I am sharing in your fate… that stab must have killed me.”

Wander fell to his knees, realizing that he had failed to see Mono alive again. Then, he wondered if Dormin had resurrected her? Maybe she was at least alive? Hopefully, his quest had not been in vain.

Wander’s thoughts were interrupted, by the colossus saying, “I see that you are having some trouble in adapting to being dead. That is understandable. Yet, I can sense that something else is giving you grief.”

Wander then asked in return, “Why do you care if I grieve? I still do not know how you can even communicate with me! Even then, I slew you in cold blood. Why do you show sympathy when I suffer?”

The Colossus replied, “It is just the way I have always been. I will not seek revenge on you, even though what you did was cruel and despicable. …However, the others will not be so kind to you, young man. I am afraid that I cannot do much to stop them.”

Wander then heard a series of noises from behind him. He whirled around and saw the lion colossus he had fought after the dragon-snake hopping from cliff to cliff toward him. Just behind him was the other small four-legged colossus, the one who had been his eleventh foe.

The lion colossus telepathically shouted, in a gruff male voice, “There is our murderer! You led us right to him, Phalanx!”

The other light colossus then added, “Knowing Phalanx, she probably did not want to lead us here.”

Wander heard footsteps coming from the side of the plateau he was standing on and then saw the gecko colossus, who he had been the eight he had slain, cresting the top. The stone gecko, sounding
like a man with a light, sharp voice, shouted, “We will make or killer suffer for his crimes!”

As the two small colossi closed in on Wander, the stone gecko began to charge up his “mouth” with energy. Wander knew what that meant and reflexively threw himself off of the cliff. As the bolts impacted, filling the area with toxic gas, Wander found himself hurtling toward the ground.

Wander hit the ground, landing on his feet. He felt immense pain, but it was over in an instant. He also saw some white light shed off of his body when he hit the ground.

Wander then saw the first colossus he had battled, a towering minotaur equipped with a club, emerge from a wide rocky tunnel. Wander ran away from the towering brute toward the open plains. He wanted to see his pursuers coming from a distance.

The young hunter, not wanting the colossi to catch him, ran through the maze of tunnels, trying to find the open plain. He looked up and saw that the two small colossi were following him on the cliff tops. Phalanx, the massive dragon colossus was flying up high now. She watched the chase unfold from the safety of the skies.

Still being chased, Wander kept running until he burst out into the open expanse. He did not know if he could die again. However, he was sure that the colossi intended to visit terrible tortures on him if they caught him. Wander realized that he was not getting as tired as he normally would from running for an extended period of time. That could only be an advantage now, seeing as though he was trying to avoid capture by a mob of angry giants. On that subject, Wander saw the bull and horse shaped colossi farther away from the river and now chasing him as well. He also saw the warrior colossus and the one with a long beard coming in from another direction.

Wander’s situation became even more nightmarish, as he began to duck and weave around a crossfire of projectiles made from energy. He saw that in the river the twelfth colossus was standing up and firing at him. Directly ahead of him, but still far away was the ninth colossus, a massive tortoise. He could hear all sorts of angry echoes in his mind. Except of Phalanx, all of these beasts hated him, or at least wanted to punish him. Wander saw that the electric eel colossus was patrolling the river, making sure that he could not consider that route of escape. To make things even worse, the hideous eyes of the tenth colossus, a massive snake that burrowed with alarming speed were watching him from the beach.

Wander then realized that the first four colossi to have detected him before he burst out onto the plains were in pursuit as well. The two small ones were now gaining on him. He then saw a small opening in the distance. It was probably a cave of some kind. He would have to skirt the ninth colossus. However, it was his only hope of escape from his monstrous attackers. There was no way that he could fight them. He had no weapons to fight even one of them with. The smallest two colossi seemed to have somehow regenerated their back armor, to make things worse.

Wander began to veer towards the cave, dodging the occasional swarm of energy bolts as he went. As wander closed in on his goal, the colossi coalesced more into one unit. However, just when he thought he could get away, he heard a new female voice call out, “Not so fast!”

The fifth colossus he had destroyed, a massive bird, swooped down past Phalanx, her talons bared. Wander tried to evade the massive bird’s attack. However, he was too tired to do so. The great avian grabbed Wander in one of her talons.

Wander cried out, “Let me go! You colossal buzzard!”

The voice of the bird replied, “No possible way.”
The massive bird then hovered over the crowd of colossi. Wander heard the tortoise colossus call out in a voice that sounded like a stern old man’s, “Avion, you are not seizing our killer for yourself? You would not do that to us, your kin, right?”

Avion replied, “Of course I am not taking him for myself, Basaran. I would never deny any of you justice. However, Lord Malus has sent me here to apprehend the human and bring him in for sentencing. Argus waits with him. We are all to gather where Malus’s soul has arrived in this realm for the human’s sentencing. He will guide you to him, if you need any help.”

The colossi all seemed to reluctantly agree to what Avion had said. The massive bird then flew up and away, with Wander in her talon and Phalanx following her closely. The various colossi then set out to follow the two fliers by land or by water.

Phalanx said to Avion, “You and Malus both know that I will advocate for mercy. Our slayer has already been killed, he has suffered the same fate that we have. I would also like to know his motive for our murders while he is in our custody.”

Avion replied, “I know, I would rather have our captive come to understand that he has done wrong, than to have us torture him for a century. However, I have faith that Lord Malus will know the best course of action for us to take.”

Wander then asked, fearing that he already knew the answers, “Who are Lord Malus and Argus?”

Avion replied, “Lord Malus is the final colossus that you killed. Argus is his most loyal servant and the penultimate of our kind that you slew.”

Wander feared for what his sentence was to be. He knew that if he tried to wrest himself free of Avion’s talon he would either be gripped even more tightly, or be allowed to fall and then get picked up again when he landed. The young man’s biggest question was how the colossi were able to communicate like people? How could the monsters have gained intelligence upon death and then still remember that Wander had taken their lives?

Avion and Phalanx did not take long to reach a spot further down the river. There, near the shore, the sixteenth colossus stood tall. Patrolling nearby the towering colossus, was the penultimate foe Wander had faced. Somehow, the towering beast had his cleaver in hand again, as the first colossus had regained his club.

As Wander could see the other colossi beginning to slowly converge on the sight, moving faster than he had seen them move before. Avion flew up to the living tower and said, “Lord Malus, I have brought you our killer. He is yours to pass judgement on.”

Malus reached out his right hand, seizing Wander just as Avion let him go. The titanic colossus then looked up at Avion and responded, his voice like that of a charismatic and self-assured man, “Excellent work, Avion. Once all of our kin arrive, I will sentence this young man to his punishment.”

Wander knew that Malus could probably roast him in seconds if he made the lead colossus too angry. However, he had one question that demanded an answer. Wander raised his courage and asked, “I demand to know how all of you are able to communicate with me and with each other? When we fought, none of you ever said a word to me!”

Malus looked down at Wander, his blue eyes flashing orange for a brief moment. When his eyes turned back to blue, Malus responded, “The essence of Dormin that was sealed within us when the humans fled the ‘Forbidden Land’ clouded our minds and rendered us beastlike and easily fooled.
You may have freed us from that existence. However, your crimes still stand and you will have to answer for them.”

Wander gulped. Then Argus, shouted up at Wander, “Next time, do not speak until you are spoken to. You are the one charged with sixteen counts of murder and trying to release death itself, not us.”

Malus simply nodded at his vassal’s suggestion and then ordered, “Argus, alert me the moment all of our kin are here. Time is of the essence.”

Argus saluted Malus with his free hand and then responded, his male voice sounding absolutely willing, “Yes, my Lord.”

Wander was forced to rest in Malus’s hand for a bit longer, as the other colossi assembled around their leader. Argus seemed to be counting the colossi as they arrived. He then saluted Malus and informed him, “Everyone is here, Lord Malus.”

Avion, who had been hovering nearby confirmed, “Argus is right, my Lord. Shall we begin?”

Malus looked over the assembled colossi and then began, “We are all gathered here to pronounce judgement on this young man, our killer. As the acknowledged leader of our kind, I pronounce the human I hold in my hand guilty of murdering all sixteen of us. Also, he is guilty of having endangered the mortal world by releasing Dormin, the grand spirit of death. Therefore, I have no choice but to sentence the criminal to…”

Phalanx then interrupted, “Lord Malus, please. Before you sentence this young man. We should allow him to speak in his own defense. I think we would all like to know the truth as to why our lives were taken.”

The various colossi all began to telepathically murmur. The sea serpent colossus suggested to the group, in a female voice “Maybe he was a sadistic psychopath? Maybe he had an innate desire to kill that he did not want to risk engaging in when he was among his fellow humans?”

The sand snake then offered up, in a gravely male voice, “Maybe he was a demented thrill seeker. Maybe he sought the greatest challenges in the world and slew us to prove his skills, if only to himself?”

The warrior colossus then queried, in a voice that sounded like a well-spoken upper-class man, “Maybe he was a surviving worshipper of Dormin’s who had come just to free his master from being sealed? He probably assumed that he would gain great power from Dormin in exchange.”

At that point Malus declared, “I will allow the prisoner to explain his motive. Then I will sentence him. I am very sure that he made some kind of a deal with Dormin. They are known to make deals with mortals and almost never break them. …Young man, you are ordered to explain why you slew all of us. I doubt it will affect your sentence, however.”

Wander then nodded and responded, “For one thing, my name is Wander. As for why I made a deal with Dormin, I did it to recover the life of my slain fiancé, Mono. She was the love of my life and she was killed by my city’s head Shaman for having a “cursed fate.” Sacrifices like that are very infrequent, but the woman I loved was the victim of one. I could not live without her, so I stole the ancient sword from Lord Emon’s temple and stole Mono’s body as well. I then rode my horse, Argo, all the way to the Forbidden Land. There, I made my bargain with Dormin. I killed all of you in the hopes that she would live again. All that mattered to me was having a chance to be with Mono again. If what you say about Dormin and deals is true, then maybe she lives again now?”
Malus did not take much time to ponder what Wander had told him. The first colossus then chuckled, in a low male voice, “His name is Wander?”

Malus then looked down at Wander and announced, “Regardless of how noble your motivations were. Your crimes were still committed. Therefore, I sentence you to undo the damage you caused! You, Wander, are to help us to escape from the afterlife as your atonement for your actions in life!”

The colossi seemed shocked by their leader’s pronouncement. Then, Malus, noticing the confusion among his followers, continued, “I have determined, as my magic has been returning to me, that Dormin was, thankfully for the material realm, banished back to their home world. Their home world being where we are now. Dormin is slowly, but steadily reforming in this world, the Chthonic Realm. When they fully regain their power here, they will surely hunt us down and absorb out souls into their being. We need to escape from the Chthonic Realm before Dormin fully reforms, or we will face a fate worse than death.”

The colossi all recoiled in horror. Wander had never seen the massive beings all so obviously terrified. Malus then continued, “As many of you know, Dormin is one of sixteen grand spirits. There are fifteen others in this realm. We are going to have each one of us gain the spiritual energy needed to revive from of those spirits before Dormin becomes able to act against us. Celosia and Cenobia should be able to be revived by the same grand spirit.”

At that point, the skeletal horse interjected, in the voice of a mature woman, “Lord Malus, how could we even reach the realms of the grand spirits? They all have the power to prevent unwanted entry into their realms. Only other grand spirits have the power to enter their kin’s realms uninvited.”

Malus responded, “The key is in the last part of what you said, Phaedra. You see, Wander here was borderline possessed by Dormin. He still has some of the spiritual energy of the grand spirit in him. I have surmised that he can grant himself and any colossus he is in contact with egress into the realms of any grand spirits who do not grant passage willingly. You all are to each go to the realm of a grand spirit and await Wander’s arrival. I will do my best to guide all of you telepathically. However, I fear that many of you will seek out the grand spirits you most want to see weakened. Upon reaching you, Wander will grant you passage and assist you with any challenge that the grand spirit demands you complete in order to use some of their power. The challenges will probably vary from brutal battles to completely non-violent affairs. Regardless of the details, if this works, we will all be brought back to life before Dormin is able to begin hunting us down.”

Wander then asked, “So, you want me to help all of you, in order to ‘redeem’ myself. What about me? Do I get revived by a grand spirit if I help you all to return to life?”

Malus shook his head and said, “Unless you could somehow make a deal with Dormin once they reform, I doubt it. You are going to assist us in order to redeem yourself and atone for your crimes.”

Wander looked quite angry. However, he quickly composed himself. He looked Malus in the eyes and told the head colossus, “Fine, I will help you all. However, if any of you colossi encounter Mono alive when you are revived, you are NOT to harm her. She is not guilty of harming any single one of you. In fact, in exchange for my help, you all are to make sure that no harm comes to her and that her needs are provided for in whatever ways you all can. Do we have a deal?”

Malus nodded and then informed the gathered Colossi, “Yes, we do have a deal. You all heard him. If we find the maiden Mono, we are NOT to harm her and we are to make sure that she is safe and provided for.” Malus then looked down at the small colossus with horns and a face with gritted teeth. He said, “It pains me greatly to do this…. Celosia. However, I need you to be Wander’s escort during his atonement. You are to make sure that he goes to every colossus and helps them to
revive. We will have Wander assist us in the order that he slew us. However, Celosia, you will have to be the last.”

As Celosia was about to reply to Malus, the lion colossus spoke up, “Lord Malus, please permit me to go with my sister. I can help her to make sure our killer does not escape from his penance. Besides we are supposed to be revived by the same grand spirit. Frankly, I also don’t want to be returned to life without her being with me.”

Malus nodded one more time, as the other colossi were departing to find the realms of the grand spirits. He then said, “Cenobia, your request is granted. However, do not take this as an opportunity to torment Wander. We need him in order to escape a terrible fate. You will help Celosia to escort Wander from colossus to colossus. Therefore, you will go with her as the final ones to be revived. That actually does work well, seeing as though there are only fifteen grand spirits other than Dormin.”

Cenobia responded, “Thank you, my Lord. I’ll admit that I would love to spend hours batting our killer around like a cat plays with a toy. However, this is not the time for such silliness.”

Malus lowered Wander to Argus. Argus then placed Wander atop Celosia’s back. Malus then ordered, “I have mentally directed Valus to go to the nearest grand spirit, Multian. The three of you will find their lair in the city-like structures nearby, away from the river. Now, be on your way and make haste!”

Celosia, in a female voice, told Wander, “You should hold on tight!” She then told Malus, “We will not let you down, Lord Malus. We will get out of this place and see the sun again!”

Celosia then took off with Wander on her back and Cenobia close behind. As Wander held onto the back of the armored colossus, he thought, “It does not matter to me if Dormin ‘absorbs their souls.’ Somehow, these monsters believe that I am willing to help ‘redeem’ myself. However, as soon as I get the opportunity, I will take the power of one of these grand spirits for myself. Then, I will return to life and hopefully Mono!”
The One Who was Ever Dutiful

Chapter Notes

Sorry for any tabbing issues that show up. They have appeared in at least one previous story that I have posted and I have tried to get rid of them to no avail. Thank you all for reading.

Wander was awkwardly riding on the back of the eleventh colossus he had slain in life, Celosia as “she” was apparently called. As Wander kept a tight grip on Celosia’s back, he saw that he was occasionally getting a nasty look from Cenobia, the other small colossus, who was alongside his “sister.” Celosia and Cenobia were following the first colossus Wander had defeated at a distance. The lumbering minotaur had been the easiest foe for Wander to fell, but he knew that that was not something he was going to mention at the moment.

As the small procession made its way into what looked like a city. Wander came to an important realization. The young man then asked, “Excuse me, if we are in the realm of the dead, why haven’t I seen any other mortal souls?”

Cenobia gave Wander an angry look, his eyes turning orange. Before the lion colossus was able to say anything, Celosia answered, “Since you will be left in the Chthonic Realm, you may as well know the answer. According to Phaedra, this layer of the realm is where powerful souls end up. A few powerful shamans and some other souls come here after death. However, this realm is mostly occupied by the grand spirits and most other souls that arrive here become their vassals. Most mortal souls end up in other layers of the Chthonic Realm.”

Cenobia then gruffly added to Wander, “You are only here because some of Dormin is stuck in your soul. Otherwise, you would have ended up somewhere with other mortal souls.”

Celosia then pointed out, “His possible loss is our gain. Remember, brother, we need his help in order to escape Dormin’s wrath. None of us want to be reabsorbed into Dormin.”

Cenobia seemed to nod, he then said, his voice filled with more emotion than Wander could have expected, “You know very well that I would rather allow Dormin to absorb my soul than see you suffer that fate, Celosia.” Cenobia then glared at Wander again and continued, “I was not there for you once. I will not make the same mistake again.”

Celosia simply nodded in response. Wander did not respond in any way. He refused to accept the idea that the colossi could have humanlike feelings. Still, he wondered at how they had come into being. Clearly Dormin had been a major part of their creation, since they had the power to “reabsorb” their souls. However, many of them had armor and other body parts that have to had been built by mortal craftspeople. Wander decided not to ask any more questions for the time being. He did not want to risk the wrath of Cenobia. He also knew that if all went according to his plan, he would be able to escape the afterlife, leaving the colossi behind to literally meet their maker.

As Celosia and Cenobia followed the immense minotaur through the “city.” Wander was still confused as to how empty it was. It was not too long until the procession reached a point where a dome of white light seemed to wall off the city center.
Wander was told to dismount Celosia, which he did. Cenobia then barked up to the minotaur, “Valus, we have made it to the realm of the grand spirit. It’s time to see if this plan will work.”

Valus nodded and then Wander nervously walked forward to the immense humanoid. As Wander was standing alongside Valus, he heard Malus’s voice in his head, saying, “Wander, make physical contact with Valus and then move into the realm of Multian. They are the first grand spirit you are to challenge.”

Wander noticed that Valus seemed to have received the same message. He then put one of his hands on the minotaur’s closer hoof and kept it on as best as he could.

As Celosia and Cenobia watched, Valus and Wander crossed into the realm of Multian.

After making it through the barrier, Wander breathed a sigh of relief. If Malus’s plan was not going to work, he would have no chance of returning home. Valus then kept walking forward, looking around for the grand spirit that he was to challenge.

When Wander saw Valus’s back, he remembered the immense platforms that he had used to rest as he scaled his first colossus. He then thought about who could have put them there. They looked so man-made. Wander then could not help himself as he asked the giant, running to catch up with him, “Valus, was it? I have to ask, how did you come into being?”

The colossus did not stop walking and looking around. However, he informed Wander, in his slow, dull, ponderous voice, “We were all built by Dormin’s mortal worshippers in centuries long gone. We were then animated by Dormin’s power. I do not remember how we acquired souls and personalities. What I do know is that almost all of us were made for a purpose. I was built to patrol and guard the temple outpost in the mountain valley. And I did so, both before and after Dormin fell. I never stopped as long as I lived. Until you snuck up on me from behind and slew me with ease, I did my duty.”

Wander quickly fought off a pang of guilt, he then decided to ask, seeing as though Valus had been willing to answer his question. “Were you ever paid or otherwise rewarded for your work?”

Valus responded, “Not really. We colossi were respected and admired by the people. That is part of why we decided to help them when we realized that Dormin’s rule was no longer good for them. When we made our great sacrifice… Still, I always wanted a hat to wear. I saw humans wearing all kinds of headgear and I wanted to wear a hat big enough to fit my head. Maybe it was for the best that I never got one made. The birds of the valley might have had more trouble resting on me if I was wearing a hat.”

Wander realized that this colossus seemed to be a simple creature. That made him feel slightly less guilty about his plan to leave him in the afterlife. However, he had more questions now than he had had before. He wondered how many workers it took to build a colossus? What material made up their fur? Did they have any internal organs of importance? Most importantly why had they decided to turn their collective backs on Dormin, if Dormin was their creator? Was their great sacrifice being left alone in the forbidden land? Was it allowing Dormin’s essence to be sealed within them?

At that point, Valus stopped. Wander soon saw that there were now a large number of humanoid figures just a bit taller than him and seemingly made of shimmering white light moving about the city streets. Various voices seemed to come from the spirits.

Valus prepared to telepathically ask the mass of spirits a question. They then seemed to notice the two intruders. Suddenly, a large number of the spirits rushed together in front of Wander and Valus and gathered into one seething mass of white light. Many of the other spirits seemed to tense
up, as if acting in anticipation of something, as the writhing being of white light spoke in a number of voices at once, “If it isn’t one of Dormin’s rebellious creations? One of the colossi who gave up so much to trap their creator and free their subjects. Regardless of how you arrived in our realm, what have you come seeking?”

Valus looked down at the writhing orb of spiritual energy and then seemed to think for a moment, the minotaur colossus then responded, reciting what Malus had telepathically told him to say, “Grand spirit Multian, incarnation of the common people’s will and redeemer of their struggles. I have come here to seek some of your power, so that I can escape this realm and Dormin’s wrath.”

As Multian mulled over Valus’s request, Wander remembered stories of the grand spirit Multian from his home city. The priests of Multian were the servants of the populace. They distrusted the political, religious and military elite and gave substantial aid to the poor and homeless whenever they could. Wander realized that he had now come close to two of the sixteen grand spirits. It was in some ways a great honor to make contact with such an entity, even if they were mostly ignoring him.

Multian then said to Valus, “Your kind brought great aid to the people who suffered under the arrogance and careless leadership of Dormin. You all then willingly paid a terrible price for your righteousness. …However, we do not want to be weakened, even if reviving you will upset Dormin…. We will drag you to the ground!”

Wander was confused as to what Multian meant. He then saw the mass of souls slowly begin to pull apart. Wander also noticed that the other humanoid figures made of light were beginning to advance on Valus.

The souls began to speed up as Valus shouted, “They intend to force me to the ground!” As more and more of the beings of white light rushed into the square, Valus brought down his club, which Wander now noticed was flickering with white light. The club smashed into the ground, sending a number of souls flying and crushing others. The defeated souls seemed to dissipate into nothingness.

As more and more of the souls composing Multian started to climb up Valus’s body, the colossus began trying to shake them off. He stomped a number of them out of existence with a mighty crash of one of his hooved feet. The colossus looked at the bewildered Wander and shouted, “Help me! Don’t just stand there!”

Wander had no weapons, so he was unsure of what to do. As he spun around helplessly, Malus’s voice echoed in his head, “With some of Dormin’s power inside of you, your thoughts can have power here. Imagine yourself doing something and you can possibly do it. Imagine a weapon and it will form. Just be careful not to overexert yourself.”

Wander tried to focus himself, as the souls ran past him. He knew that he was a better archer than a swordsman. As he imagined having a bow, the end of his right arm took on a shape akin to a longbow like the one he had used in life. The bow shimmered like the Valus’s club, helping Wander understand how the colossus had generated his weapon in the Chthonic Realm. Wander was shocked at first. He then imagined a short sword, to see if it would work. Indeed, the end of his left arm transformed into a wickedly sharp blade of white light.

Wander then ran to Valus, as the colossus was being covered by hostile souls, all trying to drag him down. Wander used his blade arm to slice a few of the souls away, as he advanced on the desperate colossus. Wander then imagined himself being able to jump and climb far better than his clumsy mortal body ever could. As he had hoped, he easily rushed up the colossus’s leg that was not trying to stomp down on some Multian souls. Wander then leapt onto the lower platform on Valus’s back and used his blade arm to clear away the souls who had made it up that far.
Valus then began to shake off the souls who had made it onto his upper back. As Wander marveled at the power he was able to wield in the afterlife, he wondered how much of it came from Dormin’s essence still trapped in him and how much of it came from his being freed from the confines of his physical body.

Wander shouted, “I will try and keep the ones who get around your attacks from getting too far!”

Valus responded, “I will smash as many still on the ground as I can, then!” Valus raised up his club and then brought it down with a crash, dispelling another group of Multian souls in one strike.

Wander then tried to imagine himself firing off arrows as fast as he could. His bow arm pulsed and he started shooting bolts of white light at his foes. His shots picked off the advancing Multian souls with impressive precision and speed. Wander had always been a prodigy at archery. However, his soul form had the power to fire off energy pulses at a much higher rate than his mortal self could fire off arrows.

Together, Valus and Wander were able to route dozens of the soul forms. Whenever the Multian souls would get close to Wander, he would slash or impale them on his blade arm. Multian was not one of the grand spirits dedicated to anything resembling war. Therefore, the souls composing the entity did not use any sort of weapon. They simply did their best to swarm up Valus and pull him to the ground. They acted as one, not caring much for their individual survival.

Wander felt himself beginning to tire as he continued to fire bolts into the advancing souls. He realized what Malus had meant when he said that Wander should not overexert himself. Wander had tried a couple of trick shots, like shooting charged bolts through multiple souls, or firing a spread of bolts to hit multiple targets. Those attacks had quickly dispelled multiple foes. However, they had drained Wander more quickly than a normal bolt of energy. The central mass had fully deformed into the soul swarm a while ago. However, the souls kept on coming.

Wander allowed a few of the souls to get up to his level and then slashed a few of them out of existence. He kicked one off of the platform and impaled another through the “gut.”

Wander then heard Valus call out, “They are thinning out. Hold on!”

Wander grabbed onto Valus’s fur, as he had done when he had first snuck up on the colossus. Valus then stomped down on the ground hard, eliminating a good number of the “fragile” Multian souls. He then turned around and brought down his club on a cluster of them as they tried to scatter.

Wander fired off a few bolts and then noticed that the remaining Multian souls were running together to form one mass again.

Valus advanced on the new central mass, as it began to form. It seemed that Multian took more time to deform than to form. As Valus raised his club to strike, Multian’s called out, “We yield! You have dispelled most of our current components! They will return in time. However, you have weakened us severely.”

Valus called back, “Grant me your power! Then, the human will leave you in peace. He has fifteen of my kind to help after me.”

Multian then seemed to collectively sigh. The grand spirit then shot back, “Fine! Takes some of our power, colossus, and return to the mortal world.”

Wander dismounted Valus. He wanted to try and intercept the power transfer. However, he was too
tired from the fight. He hoped that the next challenge would not be combat based, seeing as though his plan would not come to fruition this time.

Multian’s mass glowed brightly and then Valus glowed with a piercing white light. Wander had to cover his eyes as the light grew to an unbearable level. When Wander could see again, Valus was gone.

Multian told Wander, “It has been done, the colossus lives again!” Multian then paused and continued, “…I sense some of Dormin in you, human. You must be the way the colossus came to our realm. Be gone from here, and be warned that the other grand spirits will have mixed feelings toward your quest.”

Wander bowed to Multian and then walked out of the city center. As he was leaving, he thought, “I will have to see if I can intercept that transfer, or make the grand spirit give me some power instead. Still, Valus will probably keep patrolling his valley when he revives. I should be able to avoid dealing with him. I wonder if the colossi will still be weak in the same places without Dormin’s essence trapped there? …It does not matter, I don’t want to fight them again, I just need to flee them, hopefully with Mono. I still have plenty of chances to escape this place. My love, if you live again, I will be with you soon enough.”

Wander walked out of the spiritual barrier and saw Celosia and Cenobia waiting for him.
The One Who Aspired to Be More

Wander had just left the realm of the grand spirit Multian after failing to revive himself using the entity’s power. As he walked over to his “escorts” Celosia and Cenobia, Celosia asked him, “So, how did it go?”

Cenobia then gruffly asked Wander, “Was Valus revived or not?”

Wander responded, “Yes, we had to battle a swarm of souls that were trying to pull Valus down. However, we outlasted them and were victorious. Multian yielded and allowed Valus to take some of their power.”

Immensely relieved, Celosia then exclaimed, “Wonderful! It looks like you have started on your road to atonement. We can only hope that the remaining colossi are able to complete their challenges as well as Valus did.”

As Wander mounted Celosia, Cenobia added, “You will be helping each and every one of our kind. Valus was only the beginning. Now, Lord Malus has informed us where Quadratus is waiting. We are to go to him immediately!”

Wander nodded, not wanting to give away his plot. Then, the two small colossi set off along with Wander.

As the trio made their way through the Chthonic Realm, Wander could not help but notice a lack of plants. There seemed to be no greenery in the afterlife, at least in this layer of it. Wander then remembered what Valus had said about the creation of the colossi, their connection with Dormin and the “great sacrifice” that had been mentioned. Wander decided to risk asking Celosia, “When I was with Valus, he mentioned that each Colossus had been made by human workers and then animated by Dormin. He also mentioned that almost all of you were built for a purpose. Then, you all made some kind of personal sacrifice. What is all that about?”

Celosia replied, “Yes, we were all built by human worshippers of Dormin. Dormin then provided the spark of life for us. As for the two of us, we were made for both defense of specific areas and for scouting enemy positions. With regard to the sacrifice we made….”

Cenobia then interjected, “Which you almost ruined by you releasing Dormin! Even if it is terrible for us, as of now, we should be thanking whatever powerful shaman was able to banish Dormin back to their home world. It is for the best that the grand spirit of death is no longer able to work their will on living mortals.”

Wander realized that it had to have been Lord Emon who banished Dormin from the material realm. He hated that man because he had slain Mono, or at least had overseen her sacrifice. He still hoped that Dormin had been able to resurrect Mono, regardless of Dormin’s morality. He then asked, “So, about your sacrifice? What did you do that was so noble according to Multian?”

Cenobia continued, “When Dormin’s rule became worse as they became more and more arrogant, Malus decided to support an up and coming new religious sect that opposed the worship of Dormin. By that point the shaman colossus had become our de-facto leader. However, we had all come to see the people of Dormin’s lands as those we were to defend, rather than Dormin themselves. When the rebellion began in earnest, we joined with it rather than support Dormin.”

Cenobia, sounding more sorrowful than Wander had ever heard him, then added, “The real
sacrifice was made after Dormin was defeated. The new shamans knew they could not kill Dormin. Also, they had not yet concocted a spell powerful enough to banish the grand spirit from the material realm. So, they needed to conduct a ritual of sealing. They needed to trap Dormin in what would become the Forbidden Land. The colossi allowed one piece of Dormin’s essence to become trapped in each of us. We assumed that our sacrifice would be separation from our people. However, it turned out to be far worse.”

Picking up the thread of the story, Celosia continued, “The essence of Dormin was enraged at our ‘betrayal.’ Over the years, it worked its way into our minds and solely destroyed our ability to reason and to think. We stopped visiting each other as often. We eventually became like beasts. Only small vestiges of our personalities remained. To make it even worse, the essence of Dormin seeped so deeply into us that it intermingled with the magic that had animated us in the first place. We became vulnerable, more so than ever before.”

Cenobia then finished, “When YOU attacked us, most of us defended ourselves out of instinct. Also, many of us sensed that you had come to kill us for Dormin. I attacked you fiercely because I knew somehow that you had murdered my sister. The Dormin essence partially took over our minds in some battles, making us think that actions that left us vulnerable would work, even multiple times in a row. When you stabbed the areas where the Dormin essence had been sealed, it escaped. Your attacks de-animated us when the essence was fully released. Each time one of us fell, our Dormin essence entered you. A piece of Dormin became free of its prison.”

Wander considered asking his escorts about the colossi idols in the Shrine of Worship, but he decided to save that for later. The history of the colossi was clearer to him now. He also had an explanation for how he had been able to destroy all of them. He also now knew that the colossi had betrayed their own creator for the religion that would later kill Mono. He felt like leaving them to their fate was justified. Even if Dormin had become a lousy ruler of their lands, a betrayal was a betrayal.

Wander remained silent as he rode Celosia north past the “city” where Multian laired. It was not too long until the trio noticed that they were approaching a wide canyon covered in beautiful plants and stunningly colorful flowers. The realm looked like something out of a painting. Wander was admittedly pleased to have found a portion of the Chthonic Realm that was aesthetically beautiful.

Waiting for Wander and his two escorts was the enormous bull colossus whom Wander had fought second. The young man remembered getting behind the massive creature and shooting an arrow, after many failed tries, into one of his rear feet. From there all that he had had to do was scale the bull and stab his tailbone and later his head until he fell. As the trio closed in, Wander noticed that the bull colossus was in better condition than he had looked during their battle. His fractured horn had regrown, for one thing.

Cenobia announced to the colossal bull, “Quadratus, Valus has been revived. We have delivered our slayer to you so that he may continue his atonement.”

Quadratus nodded slowly, he responded, with a voice sounding sharper and less ponderous than Wander had expected, “Very good. It seems as though Lord Malus’s plan has merit, as his plans usually do. Follow me, young human.”

Quadratus did not seem to harbor much resentment towards Wander. The bull colossus turned around and then lumbered down the canyon path leading towards a wall of white light in the distance.

As Wander followed Quadratus, he could not help but ask, “Valus told me about the creation
of the colossi and I was later told of your turning on Dormin. So, I am wondering what were you built to do?”

The great bull kept walking. As he did, he responded with some degree of sadness, “I was built to be a ‘beast of burden.’ All I was built to do was haul massive sledges around behind me, or carry cargo on my back. I agreed to help the rebellion because I felt angry at Dormin for making me something so …simple. I was sealed away in that seaside cave to sleep, in the hopes that it would be harder for any interlopers siding with Dormin to find me. When I burst out…driven to fight by Dormin’s essence, what was left of my mind did not have much to live for. I embraced death when it came, cruel as it was. Many of the others did not feel the same way.”

Wander was not expecting such a sad story from a colossus. Quadratus clearly seemed to be harboring some sorrow. He then asked, “If you did not enjoy your job, what did you want to be?”

Quadratus answered, “I enjoyed being a part of the act of creation. Whether it was of other colossi or of great structures. I always wished that I could create things of my own, things like art.”

Wander was about as surprised as he could be by the colossus’s admission. He had to try and repress a twinge of sympathy for the brute.

Quadratus then continued, “Now is MY chance to see if I can direct a creation for once! We are going to the domain on the grand spirit Adar Flam. He is the patron of the arts and aesthetics. If I can impress him with my creation, then maybe he will give me the power I need to escape the Chthonic Realm, but I will need your help.”

Wander nodded as they reached the barrier of white light. He then held a hand out to one of Quadratus’s hooves. The two of them then passed through the barrier into the realm of Adar Flam.

As man and colossus made their way through the realm of Adar Flam, Wander was happy to see what appeared to be a number of animals and plants, all beautiful specimens of their kind, dotting the area. The small foliage that covered the realm was all of a brilliant green color. Wander then noticed a small number of glowing white souls. These souls, unlike the Multian souls, all looked somewhat different from each other. They actually had discernable features, like Wander’s soul did. Presumably, these souls were separate entities under the protection of the realm’s lord, Adar Flam.

Wander walked alongside Quadratus through the realm of Adar Flam. He remembered some stories about how Adar Flam was said to be one of the grand spirits most interested in mortal affairs. Many great works of art were said to have been created by artists divinely inspired by Adar Flam. Adar Flam was devoted to the ideal of aesthetic beauty. Therefore, it made sense that his domain would be one of the more beautiful places in the Chthonic Realm.

Soon, Wander and Quadratus came to a large clearing. There an immense phoenix was overseeing a number of mortal souls working on a massive mosaic being created on a rock wall. The red plumed creature turned to the interlopers and sighed, “A creation of Dormin’s and a soul polluted by the same come into my domain. What do you want? I am a very busy grand spirit. I will assure you that I have no interest in fighting you. Regardless, you better have a good reason to be here.”

Quadratus awkwardly attempted to bow, saying, “Oh great and brilliant Adar Flam. Patron of artistic creation and material beauty, I have come seeking to gain some of your power in order to escape this realm. I am willing to undertake whatever challenge you put forth for me in order to earn your favor.”

Adar Flam scoffed, “If you insist, since you asked so politely. I will give you a challenge. I will even make it something simple…. You must create an aesthetically beautiful work of art for me. Right
here in this clearing.”

The clearing expanded significantly as Quadratus asked, “Lord Adar Flam, would be so kind as to provide the materials I ask you for? Also, this human is to help me in completing your challenge. I would like to be able to direct him for the creation of the piece. He will have more precision with his arms than my hooves ever could have.”

Adar Flam responded, “Agreed on both conditions. I must say, I was always impressed by the worshippers of Dormin in the days long past who built massive statues so that their ruler could give them life. Of course, your master sees you all as traitors now. I can see why you would want to escape Dormin’s rage. Now, what materials do you want?”

Quadratus responded, “Please summon a large number of bright blue boulders at the edges of the area we are to use. My assistant will use them under my direction to create the work.”

Wander wondered if Quadratus was indirectly trying to exact his own punishment on his killer. Was he trying to use Wander as his “beast of burden?”

Then Adar Flam laughed, “Boulders you say? They must be painted light blue? Well… I already agreed to your challenge. So, let’s see what you can come up with stone beast.”

Quadratus seemed hurt by being called a stone beast, mainly the beast part. Adar Flam glowed brightly. The grand spirit summoned up a multitude of light blue boulders at the edges of the clearing.

Quadratus told Wander, “I am going to direct you on where to place the boulders. With my higher vantage point, I am in a unique position to see the sculpture coming together. Don’t worry, you will not have to stack any boulders.”

Wander looked frustrated, but did not complain as he got to work pushing and, when possible, carrying, the small boulders in to the formation specified by Quadratus. After finishing a rough circle of boulders with some sort of design in the center, Wander was getting bored and Adar Flam looked to have had his interest piqued.

As Quadratus directed Wander to start positioning the next wave of boulders at the starts of arm-like extensions of the core, Wander decided to try and use the power of his soul form to make the task easier. Soon, the young man was using mild, but broad, pulses of energy to move boulders into position. Pushing the boulders around with energy pulses fatigued Wander, just as physically moving them had. However, using energy pulses was at least more fun than manually pushing and carrying the boulders around.

Wander finished four long arms of boulders and two short ones. Quadratus then directed him to make minor adjustments. According to Quadratus, the work was coming together nicely. Adar Flam had not complained yet.

After Wander had been forced to make a number of boulder position adjustments and was now exhausted, Quadratus announced, “It is done, Lord Adar Flam. Please, tell us what you think.”

The phoenix flew over the stone “sculpture” and then looked it over carefully. He then returned to his perch and responded, “You directed the human to construct a giant stone Sigil of Supren. That was the very symbol that marked where Dormin’s essence had been sealed within you and your kin.”

Quadratus then added, “Yes, that was my plan all along, Lord Adar Flam.”
Adar Flam nodded and declared, “Colossus, you have shown me that even those who appear as simple beasts can have a sense for beauty and precision. You have actually impressed me, which is no easy feat. Your work shall adorn my realm for the time being and you will be given your reward. I would not want Dormin to claim your soul, after witnessing your talents.”

The stone sigil floated up, keeping its exact shape. It then embedded itself on a rocky backboard that rose to meet it. Wander could now see that it was indeed the symbol that had indicated where he was to stab the colossi. That was also the symbol on his cloak. The symbol of the grand spirit Supren.

Quadratus began to glow brightly, along with Adar Flam. Wander could not help but ask, “I did all of the physical work. Where is my reward?”

Adar Flam responded, “Those who help an artist realize their vision are indeed important. However, the colossus is the one who had the vision and made sure that it could be carried out with his directions. He will be given what he came here for.”

Quadratus said, “Thank you for your help Wander. I wish you could help me make other works of art back in the mortal realm. Good luck with the other colossi.” Then Quadratus glowed so brightly that Wander had to look away. Quadratus disappeared.

Wander, with no prompting from Adar Flam, then began to leave the grand spirit’s realm. It hurt him to have to leave the beautiful place and return to the drab majority of the Chthonic Realm. However, Wander still had a job to do: find a way to return to life. His job was not to help the colossi. Still, Wander felt oddly happy about helping Quadratus to fulfill his dream and escape from the afterlife.

Wander did his best to suppress his positive emotions about Quadratus. He could not let himself get attached to the colossi. If he did, he could actually find himself stranded without a way to return to life. That would mean that if Mono had actually been resurrected, he would never see her again.

Wander left the realm of Adar Flam. As he expected, Celosia and Cenobia were waiting for him beyond the barrier.
Wander had just returned to Celosia and Cenobia after helping Quadratus to return to life. As she lowered herself to the ground to allow him onto her back, Celosia asked Wander, “How did it go?”

Trying to hide his annoyance, Wander responded, “Quadratus has been revived. We created a work of art that impressed Adar Flam and the grand spirit returned him to life.”

Cenobia said, “Good, you have returned one eighth of us to life in that case. Now, get on. We need to reach Gaius. He will be awaiting us next.”

Wander mounted Celosia, and the trio set off for their next destination. As they traveled through the Chthonic Realm, now a good distance from the area where Avion had first caught him, Wander noticed that they were entering an area where the landscape looked ravaged. Burnt and smashed chunks of rock littered the ground, making maneuvering trickier for the two light colossi. As the group caught sight of the towering warrior Gaius waiting for them in the distance, Cenobia asked Wander, “I have been wondering if you would answer one question for me?”

Wander thought it over for a moment and responded, “Sure, what is the question? However, I will get to ask a question of you two in return without you grumbling about it after I answer.”

Cenobia nodded his agreement, asking, “I was thinking about what you told all of us when you were being sentenced to your atonement. It seems to me that you cared for your woman Mono in a way kind of akin to my feelings for my sister. By that I mean that it seems like you loved her intensely. What was your relationship with her like?”

Wander was surprised by Cenobia’s question. He thought that the brute would ask about something related to their fight. He then answered, “We were, thankfully, not related in any way. She was an acquaintance of mine when we were children. We grew closer over the years to the point where I felt like I could not live without her. As one of my city’s best up and coming archers and hunters, I thought that I could provide a good living for her and our future children. With that in mind, I proposed to her. She accepted and we were formally engaged. I remember how she warning me against entering that regional archery contest. But, the prize, a well-trained and loyal warhorse, was simply too appealing to me. I entered the contest and won the horse. I named her Argo.”

Wander paused and then continued, “I later lost Argo on the way to my fight with Malus when she fell off of a cliff after throwing me to safety. Anyway, I loved Mono with all of my heart. However, love could not save her when the local shamans declared her as having a ‘cursed fate.’ They murdered her only a week before our wedding. Without her, I saw no future for myself in that city. I stole her body and the ancient sword and headed straight for the Forbidden Land on Argo. We all know what happened after that.”

Cenobia responded, “I see… you must have really cared about that girl. So, what is your question for us?”

Wander asked, “When I made my deal with Dormin, I was told to destroy the sixteen idols that represent the colossi. What was the original purpose of those idols?”

Celosia replied, “The idols were created along with each colossus. The shamans of Dormin established a magical link so that the corresponding idol would self-destruct if one of us were ever to be destroyed. The idol would stand as long as the corresponding colossus lived. The idea was to let mortal priests in the Shrine of Worship know that a colossus had been destroyed so that they could”
act accordingly. Dormin did not want their populace worshipping us instead of them. The idols were not intended to be worshipped.”

Wander thought, “Of course Dormin did not want the colossi to be worshipped. They might be powerful, but they are not grand spirits themselves.”

As Wander finished up his thoughts on the nature of the colossi idols, he saw that they were approaching Gaius, the third colossus he had destroyed. The massive colossus’s chipped armor had somehow been repaired and his stone “hand” now had functioning digits.

As Cenobia and Celosia slowed down in front of the warrior colossus, Cenobia announced, “Gaius, Valus and Quadratus have been revived. We now bring you our killer, Wander. He is to help you with whatever you need in order to escape this realm.”

The vaguely doll-like warrior colossus nodded and responded, “Very well. Wander, come with me. We are going to the realm of Desat, the grand spirit of destruction.”

Wander dismounted Celosia, who said, “Good luck. You will need it since I have heard that Desat has a more violent temper than even Barba.”

Gaius lowered his arm-mounted pillar sword and allowed Wander to climb on. Wander, wondering who Barba was, then jumped off onto Gaius’s restored waist platform, per the instructions of the colossus.

Wander and Gaius set off for an enormous shield of gray light protecting what looked like a gargantuan crater in the ground. Wander was about to ask Gaius more about Desat. Desat was a grand spirit Wander had heard some bandits and raiders worshipped. Otherwise, Wander was unaware of him. However, Gaius asked Wander first, “So, young man, how did you come into possession of the Sword of Sealing?”

Wander realized that Gaius had to mean the ancient sword that he had stolen from Lord Emon’s quarters while the vile old shaman was away. Wander explained, “The man who probably murdered my fiancé, Mono, had been granted custody of the weapon. I snuck into his quarters and stole it before fleeing to the Forbidden Land because I had heard that it was linked to Dormin in some way. Honestly, I am not really a swordsman. I was trained in archery extensively, though.”

Gaius responded, “What remained of my mind was surprised that the blade had survived. However, it is a powerful magical weapon. Powerful enough to literally cut Dormin into seventeen parts and seal sixteen of them into my kind, one part per colossus. The sword had the power to find us and locate where the essence of Dormin was, since it had been the instrument that placed parts of Dormin within us.”

Wander asked “Could you all have been slain without the use of that unique weapon?”

Gaius thought it over and answered, “Someone could have found us by luck or by spending enough time searching. They would have had more trouble than you did fighting any of us because our weak points would not be revealed to them by another weapon.”

It dawned on Wander that Gaius did not seems angry with him for his actions in life. Quadratus had not valued his past life much, and Valus had been more focused on his revival. Did Gaius accept the premise that Wander was trying to redeem himself wholeheartedly? Wander took a risk and asked, “Why do you seem so calm around me, even though I killed you?”

Gaius’s blue eyes turned orange for a brief moment. He explained, “You are a murderer,
Wander. You killed Phalanx in cold blood. She did not resist your attacks with the intention of killing you. Despite that, I do not hold my own death, or the deaths of most of my comrades, against you.”

As Wander and Gaius approached the shield of gray light, Wander asked, “Why?” He was curious as to why Gaius did not hate Wander for his own death.

Gaius’s eyes were calmly blue now. The colossus informed his rider, “I was designed to be not only a soldier, but a symbol to bolster the morale of our warriors. I learned much about the proper way to fight and the best ways to die during my time at war. We fought in an honorable duel. You won that duel, and I died. I do not believe that dying in battle is a bad way to die. So, I do not mourn my own death or those of most of my kind. Besides, you are trying to fix your lethal mistake by helping us return to life. You will undo the damage you have done and Dormin will be thwarted again if all goes well.”

Wander nodded, not wanting to give away the fact that he still planned to betray the colossi at the first opportunity he got.

Gaius told Wander, “We have made it. Let us see if we can cross this barrier and confront Desat.”

Wander readied himself, holding on to Gaius. The duo was able to cross over through the barrier into the realm of Desat.

This realm was a horrific wasteland. Small blasted craters and piles of rubble dotted the land. Wander looked out at the horrible sight, thinking that any living creature trapped in this place would undoubtedly suffer a painful death were it on the mortal plane.

Gaius told Wander, “I intend to take some of Desat’s power away by force because I doubt he will willingly give any of it up. It should be a hard fight. However, I am willing to take the brunt of his attacks. Your archery skills will likely be tested as we try to take down the patron of those who ravage and plunder.”

Wander got the feeling that Gaius actively wanted to fight and weaken Desat. Valus and Quadratus had both not wanted to fight the grand spirits they challenged. Valus had had to fight Multian regardless, while Quadratus had been able to easily avoid combat with Adar Flam.

As Wander and Gaius neared the center of the crater, they saw a number of spiked reddish boulders start to fly towards a human-sized core of energy. The rocks assembled into a humanoid form taller than Gaius. The form was well armored because of the rocks and had two eye slits on its “head.” There was a brightly glowing spot of black light at the end of each of the giant’s arms where his hands should have been.

Desat looked upon Gaius and Wander, smirking, “It seems like I have guests. Lucky me. A golem of Dormin’s, eh? I envied Dormin so much. They really figured it out, traveling to the mortal realm and becoming a god. Of course, they got bit in the ass by their ‘worshippers’ eventually. I would just rampage across the land until I got bored if I was able to incarnate up there.”

Gaius pointed his blade at Desat and shouted, “Desat, you talk too much! Also, I am here to challenge you to a duel. I will seize some of your power and use it to revive myself.”

Desat chuckled and then shot back, “It will please old Dormin when I pummel you and your human buddy into the ground! I could use a good fight. Ok, colossus, accept your challenge. I don’t think you would have given me a choice.”
Desat extended a wickedly sharp sword of black and white light from one of his arms. He also generated a pole of energy with a hammer-shaped bludgeon on the end from his other arm. The grand spirit then rushed forward and swung his blade at Gaius. The colossus blocked the strike with his pillar sword. Then Desat struck with his war hammer, hitting Gaius square in the stomach as Wander avoided being crushed by the blow.

Gaius staggered back and then swung his sword at Desat. The grand spirit used both of his arms to block the massive weapon.

As colossus and grand spirit began to duel, Wander generated a bow at the end of one of his arms. He did his best to hang on to Gaius’s stomach fur with his other hand. Wander then began to strategically fire off bolts of energy, targeting the chinks in Desat’s rock armor.

Desat seemed to be taking a few hits from Wander’s sniping. Gaius, on the other hand, was getting badly worn down by Desat’s almost constant attacks. Clearly, Gaius was not as powerful as Desat was. Even when Gaius would land a blow against Desat, it would only chip off some of the rock armor, leaving small patches of Desat vulnerable. But Gaius had trouble hitting the same spot twice. Wander was focusing on pouring energy bolts into Desat’s, newly exposed, weak points.

The grand spirit staggered back from the stream of attacks launched by Wander. He then turned his hammer into a battleaxe. Desat swung his sword at Gaius, who easily blocked the attack. Then, Desat used his axe to swipe at Wander. Wander jumped off of Gaius reflexively to avoid the strike.

Wander used his soul power to briefly burst through the air over to one of Desat’s legs. Wander found a series of rocky spikes to cling to when he landed. He had just had an idea.

Thankfully, Desat was still focused on defeating the weakened Gaius. He must have thought that Wander had been dealt with. Wander used the spikes and cracks in Desat’s rocky defenses to maneuver to the grand spirit’s back. Wander did not want Desat to see him and easily shake or brush him off.

Wander looked up and smiled. He saw an area on Desat’s back where there was a significant gap in the rock plates. Energy pulsed wildly from that area. Wander knew that that had to be a weak spot. It was time for him to climb a different sort of colossus.

Wander used his soul power to rush up from handhold to handhold. He saw that Gaius was clearly doing his best, but was now facing an almost constant barrage of Desat’s attacks. The colossus did not seem to know what had happened to Wander either.

Wander finally reached the pulsating weak point. Holding on to the edge of a rocky plate, Wander formed his other hand into a sword and began to stab Desat’s core.

Desat rumbled and roared with pain. The grand spirit stopped attacking Gaius. He tried to shake Wander off, but failed. As Desat was shaking, Gaius knocked away a large portion of the grand spirit’s chest armor with his pillar sword. He knew that now was his chance.

Wander waited for Desat to stop shaking for a brief few seconds. He stabbed his spiritual sword into the grand spirit’s core and twisted the blade after Desat stopped shaking. Desat fell to his knees, his stone armor falling off in massive quantities as his weapons dissipated.

Gaius said to Desat, “I am sorry to strike down a foe as weakened as you. However, I need your power to escape this place. Besides, given the opportunity, you would only cause great suffering with your full power.” Gaius drove his weapon right through Desat, rendering the grand spirit as close to dead as such an entity could be.
Wander jumped down from Desat and then saw Gaius stick his hand into Desat’s core and say, “Wander, I might not approve of your deceptive method of fighting. Still, you did save me from defeat there. Thank you for your help. I could not have won without you.”

Gaius began to glow with intense and brilliant light. Wander realized that another colossus was going to escape the Cthonic Realm and that he had failed to steal the energy once again. After Gaius vanished, Wander saw that Desat was now effectively unconscious. Wander sighed, trying to suppress his feelings of triumph over a powerful enemy, and left the realm of Desat. Once again, he found his two escort colossi where he had left them.
Wander was not pleased with how things had been going, he had failed to revive himself three times. Now, he was three colossi down. Despite his failures, he knew that there were still over ten colossi left to go. He only had to take the energy from one grand spirit, leaving the remaining colossi behind. Wander mentally renewed his determination, he would not allow himself to be stuck in the Chthonic Realm without any hope of seeing Mono again. At some point, he would have to successfully betray the colossi. Even though Wander knew that he needed to escape the chthonic realm, he had felt the need to suppress feelings of sympathy for the colossi he had met so far. He had learned about their personalities and their hopes. Two of the three colossi he had helped to revive had even been actively grateful for his help, even though he had put them in the Chthonic Realm in the first place.

Wander snapped back to reality as he walked over to Celosia and Cenobia, the small colossi who had been assigned to make sure his “atonement” was completed. Celosia seemed to be in a good mood. She exclaimed, “We are almost a quarter of the way done!”

More serious than his sister as usual, Cenobia added, as Wander climbed aboard Celosia, “We have received Phaedra’s location from Lord Malus. She was the fourth of our kind whom you slew, so she is next on our list.”

Wander nodded, wanting to seem eager to continued his atonement. Celosia then began following her brother away from the realm of Desat at a quick pace.

The two colossi and their human charge made their way across a wide open plain. Wander could see a series of rocky pillars as tall as mountains not far off. To the other side of him, he was surprised to see a verdant jungle. The new jungle was similar to the realm of Adar Flam, which Wander has visited earlier.

When the trio could see the outline of an enormous horse waiting for them nearby the edge of a cliff at the edge of the plains, Celosia asked Wander, “We have talked about our pasts quite a bit. However, I don’t think that I have asked you how you think your atonement is going yet?”

Wander was caught off guard as the two small colossi closed in on Phaedra. He then responded, doing his best to half-lie convincingly, “It has been interesting to learn more about you all. More importantly, I know that since I killed all of you, it is only fitting that I help return you all to revive. My redemption is the main purpose of this exercise on my end.”

Cenobia responded, “You seem to see the point now. Avion would have you try to learn more about us and understand us. However, that is not why you are here. You are here to redeem yourself. You killed us for Dormin. Now, you have to save us from Dormin.”

Celosia pointed out, “Cenobia, if Wander learns more about us, then hopefully he will see why killing us was wrong. He should both realize that he did the wrong thing and try and fix his mistake. They are both important components of his atonement.”

Cenobia did not respond, as the trio had now nearly reached the skeletal warhorse colossus whom Wander had slew in an isolated green field lined with bunker tunnels. Cenobia then caught the gaze of the great horse and told her, “Phaedra, we have brought you Wander. …Where is the lair of
Phaedra replied, in the voice of a mature woman, “The lair of Varsa, the grand spirit who represents truth, deceit, secrets and perspectives, is built into the cliff face far below us. Accessing it will be a challenge in of itself. One that Dormin’s pawn here is going to have to help me face, along with the trial Varsa herself presents us with.”

Wander dismounted Celosia, realizing that this colossus might be angrier with him than the other three had been.

Cenobia then told Wander, “You heard her, go and continue your atonement. We will be waiting right here.”

Wander nodded somewhat nervously and then walked over to Phaedra. Trying to sound dutiful, he asked her, “How am I to assist you in reaching this Varsa’s realm?” Varsa was the one grand spirit that Wander had so far encountered that he had never heard of previously.

Phaedra looked down at Wander, and replied, traces of anger in her voice, “The path down to Varsa’s lair is purposefully hard to discern. There are spots where the rocks jutting from the cliff can hold part of my weight. However, there seem to be hidden footholds as well, according to Lord Malus. The footholds are platforms made of spiritual energy. I need you to use whatever means you can come up with to test the area and find out where they are. That way, I can follow you down the cliffside passage.”

Wander nodded and then proceeded to the side of the cliff. He began to make his way over and down. He was moving towards a large opening in the cliffside he saw in the distance. As he made his way down, he started to notice a series of shimmering runes in the air. He soon realized that Phaedra could not see the runes. Wander concluded that the essence of Dormin still trapped in his soul could be the reason he could see the runes while Phaedra could not.

As Wander was trying to figure out a way to reveal the runes to Phaedra, he heard the horse colossus calling down, “Human, I have a question for you.”

Wander called back, “Yes?” He was still trying to figure out how to properly guide the skeletal warhorse onto the runes safely.

Phaedra then asked, “When you made your deal with Dormin, did you realize at all who you were dealing with? What Dormin is?”

Wander generated his bow of soul energy, having one possible idea for showing Phaedra the way. He then responded, “I had heard that the mortals of the past left Dormin alone in the Forbidden Land. I heard that the shamans in my city and the surrounding area all fear and hate them. However, I was willing to break that greatest of taboos in order to bring back the woman I love.”

Phaedra nodded as Wander took aim at one of the runes. The great horse then replied, “I see…. I have ruminated on the concept of love quite a lot. Celosia and Cenobia seem to love each other in a way akin to mortals’ familial love. Regardless, you should be made aware that Dormin is both the grand spirit of death and a being that thinks in a way vastly different from both mortals and colossi. They could not have been an effective ruler because of that. They could only see mortals in terms of contracts. They could not feel love, or care for anyone but themselves. Even us colossi, their own creations, were borderline worthless to them!”

Wander tried to act like he cared about what Phaedra had just said more than he did. He then asked, “Well, how do you know all of that?” Wander then fired a series of energy bolts into the
nearby runes. These bolts were intended to not weaken the runes, but overcharge them with energy.

A series of glowing white and blue platforms were now visible to Phaedra, with the runes glowing brightly at their centers. The colossus, began to carefully make her way down to Wander. She then replied, “Smart thinking, human. I can always appreciate cleverness, even from my own murderer. As for how I know so much about Dormin, I was built to guard what was once the great cemetery of Dormin’s domain. I was supposed to be a constantly vigilant guard over the graves of the dead who had passed on for good. I had a whole lot of time to think things over. I became a philosopher of sorts over the decades. I also ruminated quite a bit on the nature of Dormin and the other grand spirits.”

Wander was now trying to find his way down to where he could accurately take aim at a new series of runes that could support Phaedra. He asked, still wondering if the colossi were truly intelligent, “If you spent so much time thinking, did you determine the nature of your own sentience? Why would Dormin not have made you mere automatons if they did not care for you?”

Phaedra did not seem angry at Wander for his last question. She then answered, “I had a theory that Dormin stole our souls from humans who had died in their domain with no family or close friends. Wiped of all memories, they were placed in our stone and earthen bodies. However, I have no proof of that. Either way, we were animated with souls so that we would more effectively and adaptively perform our duties and receive orders from Dormin and their mortal agents.”

Phaedra’s eyes then turned orange as she added, “As for why Dormin did not care about us, they sentenced us to die by your hand. They only saw us as tools at first and then later as traitors. In the end, we were obstacles to be destroyed by a willing pawn.”

Wander did not immediately respond; he then fired another series of bolts to allow Phaedra to continue her careful advance.

Wander continued to move ahead down the rocky path leading to Varsa’s lair. As he advanced, he would shoot the runes to delineate the path for Phaedra to follow. As the two of them closed in on their destination, the rocky outcroppings became slimmer and slimmer. Wander could now only stand on them with his back to the cliff face. One positive thing about the Chthonic Realm was that there was no wind to speak of, presumably unless it was conjured by a grand spirit. That made the descent slightly easier.

Wander saw a number of runes, spaced decently distant from each other, leading to the cliffside entrance. There was a barrier of white light just inside of the gaping egress. He then told Phaedra, “This will get a bit trickier now. However, just move to the runic platforms after I get them glowing. I will follow you, shooting the ones just in front of you.”

Phaedra replied, “I will do as you say.”

As Wander and Phaedra closed in on their destination, moving dexterously to avoid falling to the ground far below, Phaedra mentioned, “As much as I despise what you did, irresponsibly almost unleashing a vengeful Dormin on the mortal realm, you clearly were not an active worshipper of Dormin’s. To add, you did inadvertently restore my mind when you killed me. I must say that I wish I could learn to love someone in the way you must have loved the woman you were to marry. It must have destroyed you emotionally to lose her.”

Wander looked a bit surprised, as the duo made it to the opening. He realized that he might have been able to get through to Phaedra unintentionally. He then looked to the white barrier that protected Varsa’s realm. There was just enough room for Phaedra inside of the cliffside lair without passing through the barrier. Wander then touched one of Phaedra’s legs and the two of them passed through the white wall of energy to the inner sanctum of Varsa.
When Wander and Phaedra successfully passed through the barrier leading into Varsa’s sanctum, they found themselves in what appeared to be a throne room of sorts. Worked stone bricks covered the walls. A number of torches emitting pure white light lined the walls. Floating above a pitch-black throne was an entity composed of shimmering light. Varsa took the form of what Wander first thought was a shield, but then realized was actually a mask. The patterns on Varsa’s mask changed every few seconds. There did not seem to be any rhyme or reason to the changes. Stretching out from the mask were four vaguely human-like arms.

Varsa turned to the two intruders and then said, in a calm female voice, “I see that I have company. I do not like to be disturbed in my meditations. However, if you were able to put in the effort to come all this way, I will hear you out. What do you two want?”

Phaedra bowed her equine head and then replied, “Great Varsa, I have come here in order to seek your power so that I may escape the Chthonic Realm and return to life. What do you wish of me in return for some of your power?”

Varsa calmly laughed a bit. The mask she wore was now wearing a smile. She then declared, “So, you have coming here looking for a challenge. I will give you two a fitting challenge. …In order to escape the Chthonic Realm. You must answer my riddle. You will have only three guesses between the two of you.”

Phaedra nodded and then asked Varsa, “Very well, what is your riddle?”

Varsa replied, “Answer, in one word: What was I, what do I do, what will I be? … Although you’re always on my heels, I’m always one step ahead. … I have weathered many trials. And shall endure yet longer…. I can never be ambushed from behind. None ever chase after me.”

Phaedra sat herself down, looking similar to how she had looked when Wander first found her at the edge of the green field. The colossus seemed intensely focused on trying to decipher Varsa’s three-part question.

Wander was also trying to figure out what the answer to Varsa’s riddle was. He wanted to answer it first so that the grand spirit would have reason to revive him and not Phaedra. Wander knew that the answer to the riddle was a single word. However, he was not sure what the correct word was.

As Wander continued pondering the riddle, trying to discern what word would fit all three descriptors, Phaedra offered, “Is the answer Shadow?”

Varsa nodded her mask no and replied, “Shadows do not really weather trials. No, that is not the answer. You have two guesses remaining.”

Phaedra shot Wander a look, her eyes glowing orange. She told him, “Let me come up with our final guess! I need to be responsible for my own fate.”

Wander nodded. Even though he still wanted to beat Phaedra to the correct answer, she was clearly smarter than him. Even if Wander offered up the right answer, Phaedra could still be revived
instead of his since she had initiated the challenge with Varsa.

After what felt like a decent amount of time, Phaedra’s eyes lit up with blue light, she said, “Past… that gets me thinking, of course! Ok, Varsa, here is my final guess….”

Wander heard the fear in Phaedra’s voice. He knew that she did not want to be trapped, doomed to be absorbed into Dormin. He accepted that if she gave Varsa the right answer, she would be revived. He would only have eleven challenges left to escape the afterlife. Still, that was more than half at least.

Phaedra then offered, “My final guess is Last.”

Varsa’s mask then took on a frown. It then turned into an energetic smile. The grand spirit announced, “Well done, colossus. You have answered my riddle correctly. Last was indeed the proper answer. You have earned your revival.”

Phaedra bowed her head to Varsa and then her body began to glow with brilliant light. The horse colossus then turned to Wander and said, “You were actually quite helpful in both the riddle and the journey here. I hope that you fully realize the truth about Dormin in due time. Until then, best of luck with the others. …If I see your Mono, I will do my best to keep her safe.”

As Phaedra disappeared, Wander stood in stunned disbelief. The emotion in Phaedra’s voice had seemed so genuine. It sounded like she really intending to watch over Mono. For the first time, Wander wondered if saving as many of the colossi as possible was actually a good idea and his mind did not immediately banish the thought.

Varsa then turned to Wander, she said, as part of the stone wall behind her parted, creating a stairway leading upwards, “I know who you are. I also know that you want to betray the colossi. You would leave them to their fates to save yourself. Do what you will, Wander. However, know that Dormin will be enraged with however many of the colossi are left in the Chthonic Realm when they fully reform.”

Wander simply bowed to Varsa and took his leave of her domain.

After Wander had resurfaced and was nearing the waiting Celosia and Cenobia, he reasoned that he would still try and escape the Chthonic Realm when he could. However, maybe he would try and wait until a colossus was truly unpleasant in order to enact his plan. He knew that he had to put himself first. However, he was starting to feel the weight of his past actions and question if he could really leave the colossi trapped and facing the enraged Dormin?

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to my friend who helped me come up with the riddle used in this chapter. Riddles are not really my thing normally. However, I thought that one would be appropriate for this chapter's challenge.
The One Who Sought Understanding

Still feeling conflicted over helping the colossi, Wander had just returned to his escorts, Cenobia and Celosia. Celosia said, “I take it that Phaedra has been revived.”

Wander nodded, as he climbed aboard Celosia. He then said, “Next one up is the bird colossus, right?”

Celosia’s eyes flashed orange for a quick moment. He gruffly responded, “Her name is Avion, and yes. She will be the next of our kind to be revived.”

Wander nodded, as the two small colossi began to make their way towards the unnaturally tall and slender pillars of rock they had passed by before. Wander looked up and noticed that the tops of the pillars were shielded by another barrier of light. He realized that pretty much no non-flying creature could make its way into the domain of whatever grand spirit inhabited that realm.

As the trio made their way over to the pillar formation, Wander began to realize that there was quite an expanse of pillars nearby. They were almost like a forest of immense leafless trees when viewed from the ground.

When the trio had closed in on the rock pillar “forest,” Wander looked up and saw the bird colossus flying down to meet them. Avion landed atop a large boulder jutting out from the ground.

Avion surveyed the trio and then announced, “Lord Malus is pleased with the prisoner’s performance so far. One quarter of our kind have been revived without any failures! Have you two found transporting Wander around to be burdensome so far?”

Wander chafed mentally at being called a “prisoner” of the colossi. However, he knew that, for the moment, he was in the creatures’ custody. As Wander resisted giving Avion a glare, Celosia replied, “It has been fine so far. The human seems to be learning a lot about us. We have also been learning some things about him.”

Cenobia reluctantly mentioned, “Luckily for the prisoner, he has not made any escape attempts. So far, he has been very cooperative. I am frankly surprised at how willingly he has been carrying out his sentence.”

Wander just nodded, even though his feelings on the colossi had been getting more positive, he still put his own revival first. He did not want Avion, or any of the colossi for that matter, to know his real intentions.

Avion nodded her large head and then said, “Well then, as much as I worry for the safety of all of you and feel as though I need to be here for Lord Malus, it is now my turn to receive Wander’s assistance.” Avion then turned to Wander and told him, “Climb aboard and stay close to my head. Hang on as tight as you can. This time, I will not be trying to shake you off with all of my might.”

Wander nodded, nervously remembering his tense encounter with the avian colossus when he was alive. The battle that ended when he knocked her from the sky. He then did as he was told, climbing aboard Avion and hanging on close to her stone-covered head.

Avion then flapped her gigantic wings and took off. Celosia and Cenobia backed away from Avion as she soared up and away. As Wander adjusted to hanging on to Avion while they flew through the windless skies, he had a thought.
Wander asked Avion, “If I might ask, how does a creature as large as you fly?”

Avion did not seem offended, she replied, “I was built for airborne scouting and diving down to attack enemy soldiers. I needed to fly in order to fulfill those purposes. I was made with far lighter materials than most of the others. However, powerful magic helped to keep my material body airborne.” Avion then paused for a moment and then added, “I do miss the skies of the mortal realm now. This place is so drab and dreary. I think that I resisted the death you brought me so fervently because what remained of my mind never wanting to give up flying in those skies.”

Wander felt pangs of guilt once again as Avion continued while they spiraled up higher and higher, “So, here is my question for you. Do you yet understand that you did the wrong thing in life? Do you see that bringing us back to life is the right way to atone for your crimes?”

Avion was trying to get Wander to admit his misgivings about killing the colossi while he was alive. He realized that she was not just a mere “colossal buzzard.” Wander responded, “I simply did not know that your kind were once sentient. I just wanted Mono back so badly…. Honestly, I felt like I was undoing a terrible injustice by getting Dormin to bring her soul back. I was motivated by love, not hate. If bringing you all back will ensure her safety, if she lives, then it seems worth it.”

Wander was being mostly truthful, but not entirely so. Still, Avion seemed to believe him. The flying colossus replied, “I see…. It seems as though positive emotions can motivate somebody to commit terrible crimes just as negative emotions can.”

Wander had no immediate response as Avion changed the subject, saying, “As for where we are headed now, Lord Malus has seen it fitting that I challenge the grand spirit Avus. Avus is essentially the ‘older sister’ of Adar Flam, who you have already met. She is known as the ‘Roc Spirit.’ Avus is the grand spirit of the air and flight. She resides amongst these pillars, where only other flyers can reach her domain. Because I can fly, I was one of only two colossi who could easily reach the barrier protecting Avus’s realm.”

Wander asked, “What do you know about this Avus? What is her personality like?”

Avion replied, “Frankly, I do not know much about Avus, other than her being the patron of flying beings and the skies. I hope that she will see me as a kindred creature and have sympathy. However, I still expect that Avus will issue a challenge for us to complete. Grand spirits normally do not give up any of their power easily.”

Wander nodded again. He then held on to Avion tightly as they neared the barrier. Like the last four times, human and colossus passed through the barrier to the realm of Avus.

Within Avus’s realm, there was wind. There were also mists, fog and clouds in the sky above. Avion winded her way through the pillars of rock, many of which she could now see the tops of.

Wander noticed, after a bit of exploration with Avion, that there was a particularly large pillar that fanned out like a mushroom with a flat top nearby. Avion also saw the unique pillar. She flew over to it and landed for a rest. After Avion landed, the duo heard the noise of wings beating the air above them. A light grey-feathered bird around Avion’s size flew over the duo and then landed gracefully in front of them.

Avus looked Avion and Wander over. The grand spirit then shook her head and declared, “I see I have a new visitor. A fellow creature of the air has come to see me. If only I knew you were coming, Avion, I would have allowed you entrance to my home. My only question for you is why you came with your murderer?”
Avion replied, “He is here to assist me, oh great and wise Lady Avus. I have come to your home with this human in order to gain a portion of your power so that I can return to the world of the living. I will accept whatever challenge you give us to complete.”

Avus sighed and shook her head. The grand spirit then said, “I am always happy to help a creature like myself. I don’t really wish to anger Dormin. However, I do not wish to please the either. However, I am somewhat offended at the presence of the one who knocked yourself and Phalanx from the sky. It is him whom I would like to test. …I think I know how, come to think of it.”

As Wander grew nervous, seeing the contempt-filled gave of Avus upon him, Avion asked, “I take it you are going to issue a challenge for the two of us, Lady Avus?”

Avus nodded her head and then then declared, “Watch this!” the region of stone pillars directly behind Avus was suddenly filled with jagged crags of rock that grew out from the stone spires. Then, two walls, a floor and a ceiling of spiritual energy cordoned off the, now hazardous, area. A bright light shaped like the “Sigil of Supren” that had adorned the colossi’s vitals appeared at the opposite end of the massive corridor. Finally, Avus beat her wings furiously towards the hazardous corridor. That act summoned a thick fog that Wander could still see through.

Avion seemed concerned and confused. She then asked, “Is that the challenge, Lady Avus?”

Avus replied, “Why yes, it is. You cannot easily see the obstacles, but your killer can see them. You two should both be able to see the light at the other end of the course. The human must successfully guide you through the course until you hit the light. You cannot touch any of the four walls of energy at the borders of the course. Complete the corridor without hitting the walls and you will gain some of my power. Hitting any of the rocky crags will not immediately disqualify you. However, it will make it harder to avoid colliding with the walls of energy.”

Avion then told Wander, “It seems as though I have no choice but to rely on your guidance.”

Wander nodded and held on as Avion took off and headed into the maze. Wander knew that he would have to issue directions to Avion quickly and precisely in order to get her through the course. He knew that he was not going to get Avus’s power, she was too upset with him. However, a significant part of him was determined to help Avion see the skies of the material realm again.

Avion entered the maze of pillars. For a few tense moments Wander gave her precise commands, allowing the avian colossus to avoid crashing into any of the rock formations. Human and colossus started to close in on the end of the maze, with Wander growing more confident in his ability to direct Avion.

As they neared the end of the titanic maze, Wander instructed Avion to duck below a horizontal bar of stone with jagged blades jutting out of it. As Avion ducked below the pillar, Wander realized that the essentially blinded colossus had misaimed just a bit. Wander was smacked head on by one of the rocky spikes. He was flung from Avion’s back as she was slightly damaged, but continued on.

Wander fell backwards for a few seconds. He saw that Avion was closing in on a vertical pillar of rock that she would slam into head on. She was really close to the lit-up sigil to boot. Wander called out to Avion. “Pillar right ahead of you! Veer to one side!”

Avion started to veer as Wander kept falling. He then focused himself, imagining wings growing from his back. Wander suddenly launched himself forward through the air at lightning speed with the wings of spiritual energy on his back propelling him forward faster than he could have predicted.
Avion avoided the pillar successfully. Wander then landed on her tail and gripped on as tightly as he could. He was beyond exhausted from his brief flight. He heard Avion’s voice in his mind call out, “I think you were knocked off! Are you ok?”

Wander responded, “ Barely, sorry about that. Now, let’s finish this!”

Wander directed Avion past the last couple of obstacles with relative ease. The flying colossus then rushed through the air with Wander still clinging to her tail. She struck the sigil at full speed and the whole course was dispelled in a brief, but bright, flash of light.

Avion then flew back over to Avus who seemed to be in a good mood.

Avus happily proclaimed, “It seems that the murderer is trying to redeem himself after all. Good work both of you. I was both impressed and surprised by your comradery. Now, Avion, since you fulfilled my conditions, you will be returned to the mortal world. Farewell, my fellow flyer.”

Avion turned to Wander as her body began to glow with brilliant light. She then informed the young man, “You were quite the help, Wander. Now, you have taken part of in one-third of the grand spirits’ trials. Regardless, I am glad that we could get to know each other to some extent as well. You are not merely the cruel pawn of Dormin we once thought you to be. Best of luck with completing your atonement.” Avion then disappeared in a burst of brilliant light.

Wander was left with the same awkward feelings that Phaedra had left him with when she vanished. The, still exhausted, Wander then saw Avus looking down at him. The Roc Spirit summoned a stone platform that floated in midair with glowing white light supporting it from the bottom. Avus then said, “You have proven yourself to me, human. You aided Avion more than competently. Despite your past crimes, you can leave my domain in peace.”

Wander instinctively bowed to Avus and then stepped onto the rocky platform, as the grand spirit had motioned for him to do.

Wander then rode the descending platform down out of the realm of Avus and back to the ground. Upon reaching the ground, he discovered that he had been dropped off right next to Cenobia and Celosia.

As Wander walked over to his two escorts to repeat the process, he noticed that the two colossi had been quietly conversing. They almost seemed to be giving their charge nervous looks as he walked over to the two of them. Wander decided that he would have to ask them what exactly was going on.
Wander had returned to his escorts, Celosia and Cenobia, after helping Avion in her challenge. He regretted calling the great avian a “colossal buzzard” now. Avion had said that Wander was not who she previously thought he was while Avus was reviving her. Wander had been moved by Avion’s words.

Wander tried to push his rising feelings of sympathy for the colossi down and focused on the nervous behavior of the two light colossi who had been escorting him for his “atonement.” Wander asked Celosia and Cenobia, “Why are you two acting so nervous all of the sudden?”

Celosia replied, “Well, I assume that you helped Avion to revive. That is a good step forward for us. The thing we are worried about is the next of our kin you are to assist.”

As Wander moved forward to mount Celosia, Cenobia added, “Barba was always more ill-tempered than most of us. He proudly said that he pursued you pretty aggressively when you fought him. We are a bit worried about whether or not he will be willing to cooperate with you, even if his soul’s fate is on the line.”

As Wander mounted Celosia, she added, “Barba was always cranky, it is just how he is. However, that cranky behavior can turn into outright hostility without much provocation. Let’s just say that there was a reason he was trapped deep underground under an old temple when some of Dormin’s essence was sealed within him.”

Wander could not help but be a bit nervous; he knew how challenging his encounter with the bearded colossus had been. He had been the first humanoid colossus that had attacked in such a highly aggressive and surprisingly quick manner. Barba had been a dangerous foe, even though (or maybe because) he fought unarmed. Now it was clear to Wander that the bearded giant had not been aggressive just because he was fighting for his life, but because he was a naturally aggressive creature.

Cenobia said, “Well, we have to go to Barba next regardless of how he will react to Wander. Come on, sister, we have no time to waste with Dormin still reforming.”

As the trio moved away from the realm of Avus, Celosia added, “Lord Malus has informed me that Barba should be waiting for us near the jungle that conceals the realm of Orag. Apparently, Orag is the grand spirit of both trickery and education.”

Wander remembered some things about Orag, as he and the two colossi closed in on the verdant jungle that housed the grand spirit’s realm. Orag enjoyed playing tricks on others. Therefore, some believed him to be annoying and unworthy of worship. However, Orag had a few dedicated mortal shamans and other followers. The worshippers of Orag believed that tricks could be used to educate others and help them grow as people, even if they were frustrated in the process. Orag was a trickster, but he still enjoyed helping others in his own way.”

Wander and his pair of escorts made their way across the open plain towards the jungle’s borders. Wander noticed that the massive river he had seen earlier now wound its way through the jungle. Another branch of the river led to a nearby waterfall.

Celosia mentioned, “After you help Barba, assuming that works out, we will find Hydrus on the river and then head down to the lowlands that sit past those cliffs and that waterfall.”
Wander and the two light colossi soon found themselves at the entrance to the thick jungle. There they found the bearded colossus pacing slowly back and forth. When Barba saw the trio approach, he stopped pacing. The bearded giant folded his arms and declared, “Well, there you three are. I have been waiting here for far too long.”

Wander noticed the crankiness in Barba’s voice without much effort. He then dismounted Celosia as the giant snickered and asked Celosia and Cenobia, “Are you two sure that Malus would not mind me stepping on our prisoner a couple of times?”

Cenobia shot back, “Yes, Lord Malus would mind it if you wasted our precious time. Now, take the human with you and find the realm of Orag!”

Barba growled, “You two kids are no fun. Alright, come with me, human. You will help me escape this place. When I revive, I am getting out of that basement and seeing the damn light of day again!”

Wander and the three colossi all heard the voice of Malus saying, “Barba, you can revive where you wish. Just take Wander and get moving. We do not have any time to waste!”

Barba responded, “Very well, ‘Lord Malus.’ I will do as you say. We cannot allow Dormin to re-absorb the FIRST COLOSSUS, now can we?” Barba, performed a fake bow and then extended one of his hands down for Wander to climb onto.

As Wander nervously climbed onto Barba’s hand, Celosia and Cenobia said in unison, “We will be waiting here. Now get going!”

Barba grumbled under his breath and walked into the jungle, using his free hand to bat away foliage that has crossed onto the pathway and crushing other plants with his feet.

With Wander in one of his hands, Barba walked through the jungle towards a light in the distance. The bearded colossus complained, “Damn Malus, sends me to confront the cheekiest of the grand spirits. He should have known what a terrible match up that was. I could have taken Desat! I probably could do a good job handling Kyos for that matter.”

Wander recalled that Kyos was the griffon-like grand spirit who represented tradition, planning and stability. He wondered which colossus was to face Kyos’s challenge and if he would be around to find that out. Wander had an inkling that it would be worth it to steal Orag’s spiritual energy from Barba if he could. As Barba kept grumbling, Wander took a risk and asked the shaggy colossus, “So, what were you built to do? You said that you were the first colossus.”

Barba looked down at Wander, but his eyes did not turn orange. The bearded giant continued walking and responded, “How brave of you to ask.” He then continued proudly, “Yes, I was the first colossus. I was the one they built as a ‘proof of concept.’ They wanted to see if giant statues could be built for animation by Dormin. My lead designer had quite a love of facial hair, that was for sure. Once I proved that colossi could become a reality they went and built fifteen more.”

Barba’s voice turned sorrowful as he added, “As for me, I was deployed to the battlefield sometimes. However, they kept calling me ‘unstable,’ so I ended up being used to execute the worst criminals in Dormin’s realm. I helped the others overthrow Dormin because I did not want to be the ‘odd colossus out.’ The people were always afraid of me, so I felt little obligation to help them.”

Wander simply nodded. He did not take the risk of suggesting that if Barba had worked on his attitude and temper, he might have been more respected by the mortal population. Wander also realized that Barba was the type to want to talk about himself. That was probably why he had divulged so much information.
It was not long until Wander and Barba made their way to the shield dome of white light that protected a massive, circular stone wall that ringed the center of Orag’s jungle home.

Barba said to Wander, “Ok, we are to going to go right through both of these walls!”

Wander exclaimed, “The gate to the stone wall is creaking open. …So is the wall of light?”

The two barriers were indeed creaking open. The shield of white light parted to create an arched gap large enough for Barba to pass through easily. The colossal stone wall behind the energy shield had a front gate, which had opened to create a path inside for Barba and Wander.

Barba looked down at Wander and said, “I take it that does not normally happen. Well, you are still coming with me. This is YOUR atonement, kid.”

Wander noted that Barba enjoyed being rude. Wander wondered if Barba’s behavior had something to do with the underdeveloped process used when Barba was animated.

Barba boldly stepped inside the light barrier and stomped through the gate of the stone wall. The colossus found himself, along with Wander, inside an impressive, massive circular stone wall. The duo surveyed the walled enclosure. They then looked upwards. Wander and Barba both saw an expansive canopy of vines that seemed suspended from the barrier of light itself. Hanging from them was a colossal monkey-like being with dark brown fur and a long tail.

Orag looked down at his two visitors and smiled. Bowing while still hanging from his vines, he said, “Welcome to my humble realm. I have cleared it out in preparation for your arrival. Now, let me ask why you two are here?”

Wander had a feeling that Orag already knew why they were there.

Barba called out, “I assume you are Orag. I am here to complete your challenge in exchange for some of your power. What do I have to do?”

Orag laughed as a labyrinth of stone walls with corridors just large enough for Barba to fit through emerged from the ground. A Sigil of Supren hovered just outside of the opposite end of the maze. Orag declared, “Barba, the first of the colossi, you simply have to make it to the other end of my maze in order to take some of my power. However, you cannot break anything within the maze on the way to the other end. Let us see if you can suppress your destructive urges long enough to make it to the other side. You have as much time as you need to find your way out.”

Barba grumbled as he entered Orag’s maze. He then mumbled, “Of course Orag would give me a challenge that forbids me from destroying anything.”

Wander, who was still in Barba’s hand, realized that there was another catch to the maze; there were a number of small obstacles on the floor of the maze, shaped like smaller versions of the shrines scattered throughout the Forbidden Land. Wander leapt down to the floor, using his soul power to dart down and land safely.

Barba looked down at Wander and angrily asked, “What do you think you are doing?”

Wander ran towards the obstacles and responded, “Helping you pass this challenge!”

Barba’s eyes followed Wander to one of the small obstacles. He grunted angrily, realizing that they would make his job much harder.

Wander called out to Barba, “I am not risking destroying these obstacles, since I’m not sure if
I am allowed to. Either way, you are not allowed to break them. I will push them out of the way carefully. You just see if you can find your way to the other side.”

Wander and Barba had to take their time trying to find a way out of the maze. Wander always made sure to push the small obstacles aside so that Barba would not have to worry about them. Eventually, the duo found their way to the other side of the maze. However, on the way Wander had needed to warn Barba multiple times about losing his temper when he came across too many dead ends. Barba had done his best to remain patient. He had resisted slamming his fist into a couple of walls. Once, Barba had been about to ram his body through a wall, but he knew that if he did, he would lose the challenge, becoming the first colossus to give up his opportunity at revival in the process. So, he reined himself in reluctantly.

When Wander and Barba reached the opposite side of the maze, the duo discovered that the end of the maze, right in front of the Sigil of Supren, was a solid wall that had no exit. Barba shouted, “No, this can’t be!”

Wander was not sure what to do. It appeared that Orag had deceived them and created an unwinnable scenario for Barba to deal with.

Barba was doing everything in his power to not slam his fists into the wall in front of him. He looked up at Orag and saw the simian grand spirit filled with mirth. Orag giggled intensely and dropped down from the vines. He crashed into the wall, creating an opening. He then stepped back, allowing Barba to reach the Sigil of Supren.

Orag explained, “You two did very well. You have earned your victory. I just made the last wall without an exit to see how you would react. Frankly, I would not have blamed you for smashing that one down. A challenge has to be winnable. Otherwise, what is the point of issuing it?”

Barba actually seemed happy for once. He declared, “Sorry Dormin, you won’t be getting my soul!” Barba hastily grabbed the Sigil of Supren and began to glow with a brilliant light. Wander had been too tired to try and grab the sigil himself.

As the maze lowered into the ground and disappeared, Barba turned around and looked back at Wander. The colossus sighed and told Wander, “Well, kid, you did a good job. I honestly hope that I have not used up too much of the time that my younger kin will need to escape from this place. Keep doing what you are doing and maybe you will earn your redemption after all.”

Wander had to avert his eyes as Barba disappeared in a flash of blinding white light. He had failed again. Now, there were only ten colossi left. That still gave Wander quite a few chances. However, he was concerned that Celosia was warming up to him. Could he leave her to Dormin since she was to be one of the last colossi to be revived?

Orag looked down at Wander and asked him, “Well, what are you just standing around for? …Oh, I know!”

Orag held out his hands and opened a hole in reality that Wander could see Celosia and Cenobia through. Wander stepped through, and Orag clapped his hands to close the portal.

Wander found himself once again in front of Celosia and Cenobia. One more colossus had been revived. Wander was getting close to halfway done, for better or for worse.
The One Wracked by Guilt

After watching Barba’s revival, Wander had just been magically returned through Orag’s portal to Celosia and Cenobia. He stood in front of the two light colossi and began to mount Celosia. It was time for the revival cycle to repeat itself.

As Wander was climbing aboard Celosia, he found himself telling the two small colossi, “Barba apologized for costing you the rest of you any valuable time. He wants all of you to make it out of here.”

Cenobia did not respond directly to Wander’s statement. However, the lion colossus told Wander, “Now, we are going to head down to the plains below, following the river to the lair of Aberth where Hydrus is waiting for us.”

As Celosia and Cenobia set off, Wander asked, “Aberth? Isn’t she the grand spirit of pain and suffering? I have only heard of a few people worshipping her. Those few that do pay homage to Aberth are normally societal rejects who often seek to harm and even kill others.”

As Wander clung to her back, Celosia replied, “Yes, you are correct on all of those points. Her lair seems to be on the water and Hydrus wanted to challenge her. As for why, you will have to ask her yourself.”

Wander knew that Hydrus had to be the serpentine colossus he had faced right after Barba. The enormous electric eel had nearly killed him when they had fought. Wander had badly timed reaching her head where her final lightning spine rested. He had been badly electrocuted when Hydrus dived deep under the water. Still, after resting on a partially sunken platform, Wander had been able to resume his attack, disable the final spine and plunge the ancient sword into the colossus’s weak spot. That had put an end to her.

Wander could not help but smile at the thought of his hard-won victory. Thankfully for him, the two colossi he was with could not see his smile.

Wander rode Celosia down a rocky slope toward the lowlands where they were to find the lair of Aberth. Upon reaching the lowlands, Wander saw three areas protected by domes of white light. One of them was over a spot where the river became wider. The next one was over what looked to be a small village. The final one sat atop a hill just past a fortified grey-colored stone wall. Wander could also see that the river terminated at a barely visible area that looked filled with plant life. Not far from there was the entrance to an enormous cave.

A female voice echoed in Wander’s head, “You have done well so far, Wander. Most of our kind have already assumed their positions and are awaiting your arrival.”

Wander knew that the voice did not belong to Malus. He then looked up and saw the draconic serpent Phalanx patrolling the skies of the Chthonic Realm. Wander looked back down and noticed that, from what he could see, she seemed to be right. He could see the gecko colossus pacing near the small village, the tortoise colossus resting close to the hill and the pincer-mouthed snake colossus coiled up nearby the cave in a large patch of sand.

Phalanx continued, “Hydrus will be awaiting you near the lair of Aberth. You should not keep her waiting. Farewell for now. I should go keep some of the others company.”

Wander remembered what Gaius had said about how he had murdered the magnificent
It was not long until Wander and his two escorts reached the shore of the small lake. The trio saw the serpentine form of Hydrus emerge from the water and glare at Wander with orange eyes. The immense sea snake’s voice echoed in Wander’s mind, “You are here, Celosia and Cenobia. Good work keeping him in line, you two. We can’t have the murderer escaping, now can we?” Wander nervously dismounted Celosia and advanced towards the water after Hydrus emerged.

Celosia told Hydrus, “You can relax, Hydrus. He has not resisted performing his duties to us. He has already helped to revive Valus, Quadratus, Gaius, Phaedra, Avion and Barba.”

Hydrus allowed her immense tail to reach the shore, so that Wander could climb onto it. She said, “Very well then, I shall waste no more of our precious time. We shall go and confront Aberth.” With Wander now on Hydrus’s tail, the water colossus made her way towards the dome of light.

Wander was not sure what to say to Hydrus. He wondered if he could steal Aberth’s power and escape. However, Celosia had just defended him to Hydrus. Could he really leave behind the colossus who had begun to defend him from the others?

Wander was interrupted by Hydrus asking, “Did you know about Dormin’s history when you met them? Why did you think it was a good idea to make a deal which such a being?”

Wander stammered back, “You already heard my story. I did it for love because I had no other choice if I wanted to see my murdered fiancé again. You sound like Phaedra did. If Dormin gave you life, then why do you hate them so much and why did you betray them?”

Hydrus tensed as Wander kept carefully climbing closer to the colossus’s head. She replied, her voice quivering with anger, “I will tell you why I hate Dormin. It is because they created me to patrol their coastline and defend it from invaders. However, it is not as innocent as it sounds. These electric spines I have were meant to shock foreign sailors who tried to come ashore, or whose ships had been destroyed. I was meant not just to defend my people’s homeland. I was created to give other living creatures agonizing deaths. I inflicted agonizing pain on so many people, and they died horrible deaths. Dormin saw us all as tools; they never cared about who and what we would destroy. They only wanted to protect their own status as the ruler and god of their lands. That is why they had to fall. When the people started to rise up, I agreed to do whatever it took to bring Dormin down.”

Wander had no idea what to say. He had noticed that Hydrus had some control of her spines’ discharges in her soul form. They had been emanating electricity when she was angry and were dark otherwise. He also realized that Hydrus regretted her very existence even more than Quadratus had. Wander considered trying to point out how Hydrus must have saved some innocent lives by helping to protect the domain of Dormin from hostile foreigners. However, he quickly thought better of it. He did not want to further anger the colossus he was riding.

Hydrus asked Wander, her spines glowing brightly, “Do you have a better idea by now why Dormin is the villain in this story? Someone should have told you by now that they do not think like mortals do. Honestly, many of the other grand spirits have a better understanding of mortals than Dormin does.”

Wander felt forced to respond, “I was not doing what I did for Dormin’s sake. They were only a means to an end for me; all I needed was for them to bring Mono back. I felt no special allegiance to them beyond our deal. Now, can you tell me why are you going after Aberth? She is
surely a dangerous creature, even by the standards of the grand spirits.”

Hydrus replied, “One of us had to. Besides, Aberth is the antithesis of everything I now believe in. Unlike Phalanx, who I do respect quite a bit, I do not totally abhor violence. However, I still abhor needless violence. Even though many of their misdeeds were due to negligence, I wish I could directly harm Dormin. They really have it coming as far as I am concerned. Regardless, I intend to fight Aberth, and then seize some of their power for myself. I am not going to even bother with asking for a challenge.”

Wander was unsure of how effective Hydrus’s strategy would be. However, they were now at the barrier protecting Aberth’s lair. Wander grabbed tightly onto Hydrus, and the duo passed through to the realm of Aberth.

Wander and Hydrus both saw that they were now in an unnatural place. The plants sticking out of the water looked distorted and covered with sickles and barbs. Rock formations in the shapes of oversized spiders stuck out from the water in random places.

Hydrus and Wander soon found themselves face to face with a colossal long-legged spider that rose from the water, towering over the duo. All eight of the spider’s legs seemed to balance on the water. The creature had a tube sticking from her body near her head and eight jet black eyes. Her fur was a dark blue-gray color and her mandibles were curved and barbed in various hideous ways.

Aberth looked down at the two new arrivals and cackled. The grand spirit then called out, “So, one of Dormin’s monstrosities has come to my realm. You are admittedly very brave and must want some of my power. Fine, in order to take some of my energy you must….”

Hydrus interrupted, “Aberth, I am not here to bargain. I am here to fight! I will take some of your energy by force!” Hydrus then swam towards Aberth at maximum speed.

Aberth seemed to smile. It was hard to tell due to her distorted maw. The arachnid grand spirit declared, “So be it then! I will enjoy a pitched battle just fine. When I am victorious, I will rip out your marvelous spines and find a way to put them to my own use!”

As Hydrus rushed toward one of Aberth’s legs, her spines began to burst with lightning. Hydrus made a close pass at one of Aberth’s legs and shocked it with a blast of electricity.

Aberth lost some of her balance and then laughed, “Is that all you have for me?”

As Hydrus was below her, Aberth fired a sphere of black light from her tube and began to back away from her foe.

The orb connected with Hydrus, shedding much of her soul energy. Hydrus’s eyes dimmed as she shrieked with pain.

Wander could not help but be angry at Aberth as he heard Hydrus scream and felt her shake with pain. Now perched atop Hydrus’s head, Wander generated his bow of energy and unleashed a volley of soul bolts at Aberth’s main body.

Wander’s “arrows” bounced off of Aberth’s hide. The grand spirit laughed, “You cannot do much to harm me, human. This is a battle between two monsters!”

As Hydrus tried to reach some of Aberth’s other legs, the grand spirit fired off another sphere of energy. However, Wander fired a charged bolt of soul energy into the sphere, detonating it prematurely.
Aberth recoiled as she took the brunt of the force from her own orb exploding. The stunned Grand Spirit was unable to stop Hydrus from reaching another two of her legs and applying electric shocks to them. Aberth seemed weakened and glared down at Hydrus, who now seemed to have the upper hand.

Hydrus shouted, “Good shot! Keep it up and we will have a good chance at winning. We will bring her down in no time!”

Wander saw Aberth fire off three more orbs. He targeted them in succession and detonated one to injure Aberth again. The next two he destroyed before they could reach Hydrus. Those blasts did not harm their foe further.

With Aberth stunned for a few seconds, Hydrus swam as fast as she could towards two more of the grand spirit’s legs. Aberth tried to move back as she recovered, but she was left with only three legs intact.

Aberth fired off one more sphere, which Wander detonated with ease. Hydrus was able to target the remaining leg that stood opposite the two others, and Aberth came down onto the water with a crash.

One of Hydrus’s spines, the one closest to her tail, impaled Aberth when she hit the water. Hydrus called to Wander, “I will shock her so that she cannot attack you easily. Get over there and finish the job!”

Wander found himself saluting Hydrus, exhilarated by the battle. He ran towards the badly wounded grand spirit, hoping that she would not recover from the repeated shocks just yet.

Using his soul power to run faster than usual, Wander reached Aberth. Generating two swords of light, he began to hack into Aberth’s face.

Aberth managed to recover long enough to try to bite Wander. However, he easily jumped backwards and evaded her fangs. Aberth called out, “You will always be what you were made to be, Hydrus! You are a monster made to cause pain, just like me! Stop fooling yourself and accept it!”

Hydrus finished Aberth off after Wander got in a few more strikes. The final lighting pulse knocked the cruel grand spirit clean out. Hydrus shrieked mightily when she delivered her final blast of lightning.

Wander watched as Hydrus began to glow with a brilliant light. He could see the sadness in her deep blue eyes. What Aberth had said really affected her. Wander found himself saying, “Don’t believe what she said. A true monster would not regret anything.”

Wander realized what he had just said and its implications for his own life. Hydrus replied, “Thank you for that. You know, I was trapped in that lake for so long with only my guilt and Dormin’s power. Now, I can return to the ocean and maybe begin my life anew.”

Wander was left treading water nearby the unconscious Aberth when Hydrus disappeared in a massive flash of light. He then began the long swim to the shoreline. As he swam, he thought about whether he regretted killing the colossi. He could not decide for sure. Especially, since their deaths might have brought Mono a new life. He was starting to worry about his past actions more and more. Wander also knew that he was almost halfway done with the colossi. The chances of him being stuck in the Chthonic Realm were growing higher with every revived colossus.

Wander reached the shore and then returned to Celosia and Cenobia. He knew that the next colossus
he was to assist would be the gecko waiting nearby the village.
Wander had just returned to Celosia and Cenobia after quite a bit of swimming. The young hunter stood in front of the two small colossi once again.

Celosia seemed to be in quite a good mood. She exclaimed, “Well done! It seems like Hydrus has been revived, since she is not with you. We are almost halfway done!”

As Wander walked over to Celosia and began to climb on top of her, Cenobia gruffly added, “Yes, he has been doing an admirable job, contrary to my expectations. However, we are not ‘out of the woods’ yet. Lord Malus has informed me that Dormin is nearly halfway to reforming in this realm. We are making good time…for now.”

Celosia mentioned, “Kuromori is next. Once he gets revived, half of us will have escaped Dormin’s wrath.”

As Celosia, Cenobia and Wander made their way towards the village where the gecko colossus was waiting, Cenobia mentioned, “Knowing Kuromori, he will be getting really bored right now. He probably tried to hog Phalanx’s company when she passed over him.”

Celosia replied to her brother, “Well, Kuromori does not sit still as easily as Basaran, Dirge, Pelagia. …Or most of us for that matter. Remember that they had to seal him in that old colosseum in order to make sure he would not just up and leave the peninsula after Dormin was sealed.”

Cenobia responded, “Yeah, knowing Kuromori, he will also be the least afraid of encountering a grand spirit of any of us. He always did believe he could do just about anything.”

Wander listened to the conversation going on between the brother and sister colossi. He was beginning more and more to realize just how “human” their behavior was. The two of them were bantering about an old friend of theirs’ just like two human siblings would. Wander could not suppress his guilt at slaying the two of them, regardless of how hard it had been to do so. The young man also knew that the next colossus he would have to help, Kuromori, would be the wall-crawling gecko that spit poison gas. He could only wonder which grand spirit Kuromori was going to challenge.

Celosia, Cenobia and Wander made their way over towards the village. They saw that Kuromori was pacing back and forth incessantly in front of the entrance. When the trio arrived nearby the entrance, Wander could not see any souls in the village. However, most of the settlement was covered by an immense dome of white light. Therefore, a grand spirit laired within the town. Any inhabitants would likely be sheltered past the barrier.

The gecko colossus, whom Wander had had to flee soon after he arrived in the Chthonic Realm, walked over to the trio. As Wander dismounted Celosia, Kuromori looked down at Wander and his two escorts and said, “Looks like you finally bothered to show up and you brought the colossus-killer with you. As much as the kid was clearly a talented warrior, I am sure I can deal with Kyos myself once he gets me through that barrier.”

Wander remembered the name Kyos. He was the grand spirit of tradition and stability. Kyos represented caution, planning and respect for the past, among other things. From what Wander had
gathered about Kuromori’s personality, the lizard-like colossus was pretty much the opposite of Kyos.

Cenobia told Kuromori, “Dormin is almost halfway reformed! You need to take Wander and find Kyos in there.”

Kuromori responded, “Got it! I will most certainly not be the first of our kind to fail a challenge! Come, giant slayer, you have a barrier to get me through!”

As Wander walked into the village alongside Kuromori, he mentioned, “You know, I am supposed to help you however I can with your challenge.”

Kuromori quickly responded, “Sure, sure. You can help in whatever way you want to, but I don’t think this old fogy Kyos will be a match for me. You know, I fought in all kinds of battles back in the day. I would climb right over enemy walls, dodging catapult boulders as I went. Then, I would blast the defenders into submission. I was a hero to the people back then. Basaran might not like to reminisce about our fighting days, but I sure do.”

Wander realized that he had not needed to ask Kuromori what he was built for. The arrogant colossus had spelled it out for him without much provocation. He was pretty sure that Basaran was the immense turtle colossus he had faced after Kuromori. Clearly, both of the energy-shooting reptilian colossi had been built for military purposes.

Wander and Kuromori continued their walk down the main street of the village, which turned out to be larger than either of them had expected it to be. As they kept walking, nearing the barrier of white light, Kuromori explained, “Kyos is the grand spirit of tradition. Therefore, he should be set in his ways and predictable. I doubt that he will have any challenge I will not be able to overcome. In fact, I bet that I will be out of here faster than most of the others were. We will be halfway done thanks to me!”

Wander noted that Kuromori was far more energetic then most of the colossi that he had encountered. The colossus had unshakable confidence. As the duo neared the barrier of light, Wander placed his hand on one of Kuromori’s legs and prepared to pass through.

Wander smirked and asked Kuromori, “Are you ready?”

Kuromori shot Wander a quick look and then laughed, “Of course I am! Get me through the barrier and I will take it from there.”

Wander and Kuromori advanced through the barrier and then found themselves in the round central plaza of the village. A number of soul forms were going about their business in this area. Most of them seemed to be shamans of some kind. Many of them looked aged, despite already being dead. Wander could not but feel nervous around the figures. After all that had happened to him in life, he was not a fan of shamans.

At the center of the plaza stood a colossal statue of what looked like a griffon. It appeared to be made from wood and was painted with a number of exquisitely detailed patterns and symbols.

As human and colossus made their way into the square, Kuromori asked, “Where’s Kyos? Do you think he’s one of these Shamans? We will need to find out which one is him.”

Wander sighed and pointed to the statue of the griffon. He then said, “I think that that’s…”

The immense statue then began to slowly turn itself towards Wander and Kuromori. The various Shamans all began to bow to the immense being. Kyos looked down at Wander and Kuromori and
the patterns on his body began to glow with a bright greenish light. Kyos slowly rumbled, “So, the
caler of walls has come to challenge me? Many of us have become aware of what your kind are
doing….”

Kuromori then called up to Kyos, “Alright, Kyos. Give me your challenge! I am ready for whatever
you have to throw at me! Let us not waste time with pleasantries.”

Kyos seemed to sigh deeply. The grand spirit then shook his head in a frustrated fashion and told
Kuromori, “I know of your history, Kuromori. You always want to get to the end of something. You
always want to add another victory to your list of accomplishments. However, you never slow down
to think of what you have done or why you were doing it. You think you can do anything, can’t
you?”

Kuromori seemed to be getting annoyed with Kyos. His eyes had lit up orange. The gecko colossus
shouted back up at Kyos, “You are just wasting time! Now, give me your challenge so that I can
gain some of your power already!”

Kyos’s patterns glowed red. The grand spirit shouted, “Very well. You think that thinking things
over is a waste of time, don’t you? While your comrades’ situation is dire, your own stubborn
behavior will be your undoing!”

Kyos then began to expand as the shamans backed up. The square itself seemed to become
exponentially larger as Kyos grew to a size larger than any colossus. Wander, despite all of the giants
he had seen and fought, was amazed at how massive Kyos had simply willed himself to become.

A sigil of Supren appeared on top of Kyos’s back. Kyos then shouted down to Kuromori, now
bellowing, “See if you can scale me successfully, colossus! If you can reach the sigil atop my back, I
will revive you. However, I will be trying to shake you off. Fall and you will not receive any of my
power!”

A series of ledges and walls began to sprout out from Kyos’s massive body. It did not take Wander
long to realize that they were intended to create a maze. Kuromori could not simply crawl up to the
top of Kyos’s back. He would need to plan carefully if he was to navigate his way up to the top.

Kuromori charged ahead, telling Kyos, “Challenge accepted!” He then climbed onto one of Kyos’s
legs and began to scale the grand spirit.

Wander quickly realized that Kuromori was going to need help if he was going to navigate the maze
and get to the top of Kyos safely. It seemed that Kyos had hoped Kuromori would plan out his
ascent, but had not expected the colossus to do that. As for Kuromori, he was now on Kyos’s main
body and heading for a dead end.

After spending some time plotting out a path that Kuromori could take to reach Kyos’s back, Wander
shouted, “Hey, I think I can help you reach the top! You are headed for a….”

Kuromori shouted back, “No thanks, kid! I have this under control. I will show Kyos how you….”

Kuromori then saw the dead end covered with spiked walls he could not cross. He knew that his
blasts of energy would not do much to the solid walls. Then, Kuromori was forced to hang on as
Kyos tried to shake him off. When Kyos stopped shaking, Kuromori began to back up and shouted
down to Wander, “On second thought, why don’t you give me directions?”

Wander smiled at seeing Kuromori forced to reign in his overconfidence. He then told Kuromori
which way to go, after the colossus backed up a bit.
As Kuromori made his way up Kyos’s body, he would occasionally have to stop to avoid being shaken off. Wander would give Kuromori the best directions he could give in order to help the gecko colossus find his way to the top. With help from Wander, Kuromori soon found himself at the top of Kyos’s immense body.

As Kuromori was nearly to the Sigil of Supren that would mark him as victorious, Kyos shook vigorously one more time. Kuromori held on tight and shouted, “I have reached the top! This challenge is over!”

Kyos ceased his shaking and responded, “You did so with help. However, I did not forbid the young man from helping you. Therefore, it seems as though both of us did not think ahead as much as we should have.”

Kuromori then made a beeline for the Sigil of Supren as Kyos finished, “You would do well to remember this lesson. All the confidence in the world is not much good without a solid plan to back it up. You only passed your challenge due to the aid of your killer. However, many of your kind could say the same thing.”

Kuromori then reached the sigil of Supren and his body began to glow with a brilliant light. The wall-crawling colossus looked down at Wander and said, sighing a bit, “Thanks for the help, Wander. As much as I hate to admit it, my lack of planning would have cost me my revival if it was not for you. You know, maybe I should have learned my lesson about being too confident after you beat me in the first place?”

Kuromori then glowed even more brightly and vanished in a pulse of brilliant light. Kyos shrunk down to his normal size and told Wander, “Well done. You figured out the path to my back, doing what the colossus was supposed to do. Go in peace and make haste. The fate Dormin has in store for their creations is so vile that I cannot rightfully endorse anyone suffering it.”

Wander bowed to Kyos, as the grand spirit resumed his position atop the central pedestal of the plaza. The plaza itself returned to its standard size. Wander then walked out of the village. As he was leaving the village, he was more focused on his recent victory and the lesson he had hopefully taught Kuromori than the fact that he was halfway done with helping to revive the colossi and still in the Chthonic Realm.

Wander soon reached Celosia and Cenobia, who were waiting for him just outside of the village.

Chapter End Notes

Halfway done with the story! Only nine chapters left to post. Thank you all for reading and a special thanks to those who have left Kudos or subscribed!
The One Built for War

Wander had returned to Celosia and Cenobia for the eighth time. The young hunter had been pleased with himself for aiding Kuromori and hopefully teaching the overconfident colossus a valuable lesson. He had not thought as much as he could have about the fact that he had now missed half of his chances to revive himself.

As Wander approached Celosia, ready to mount her for the journey to the next colossus, she announced, “Wonderful! We have gotten eight of our kind out of the Chthonic Realm! Now, we are halfway done.”

As Wander climbed aboard Celosia, Cenobia nervously added, “Still, even if only one of us suffers Dormin’s wrath, that would be truly terrible. Also, sister, we will be the last ones in line. So, we are the ones who are most at risk.”

The voice of Malus echoed in the trio’s minds, “Yes, half of our kind have been reincarnated in the mortal world. However, Cenobia is right, we must ensure that every single one of us escapes. Dormin will visit terrible punishment on any of our souls that remain when they fully reform. You three should make your way to Basaran. He will be waiting for you on the nearby hill.”

Celosia replied, “Yes, Lord Malus. We will make haste to meet with Basaran!” The two scout colossi then took off, running in the direction of the hill where Basaran would be awaiting them.

The trio advanced around Kyos’s village and began to close in on the hill where Wander could see an armored tortoise-like colossus seeming to sleep nearby a heavily fortified stone wall. Wander once again noticed a massive cave entrance further away from the hill. The serpentine colossus was curled up in front of the entrance to the cave, which Wander now sensed a vague white glow coming from inside. Even farther away, Wander could now see at the end of the river the horned colossus he had battled twelfth waiting not far from a massive dome of white light. Up above the horned colossus was Phalanx. The massive sky-serpent was flying above the horned sea beast in circles. It would seem that she was trying to keep him company.

Wander and his escorts continued to close in on the hill. They noticed that the armored colossus, Basaran, was not moving much. This set him apart from Kuromori, who had been pacing energetically as he awaited Wander and his escorts’ arrival.

As the two colossi and Wander closed in on Basaran, Cenobia asked Wander, “So, did Kuromori talk about his war days at all?”

Wander responded, “Yeah, he did talk about them for a little bit. We did not have that much time together as we were on the way to Kyos. However, I noticed that he seemed very proud of his time on the battlefield.”

Celosia added, “Dormin used our kind both as defenders of their realm and as a means to expand it beyond the peninsula. Kuromori and Basaran were the siege colossi. The two of us were the scout colossi. Kuromori says he only joined the rebellion because he saw fighting Dormin as a new challenge worthy of his skills. However, I would like to think that he also wanted to help his kind and our people. Still, he was not happy about being trapped in the peninsula and had to be shut away in that old arena to make sure he could not leave.”

Wander then mentioned, “Kuromori said that Basaran was not proud of his war days. Why is
that? Is he like Hydrus, regretting what he did on the battlefield?"

Cenobia responded, “We are getting closer, you can ask the old soldier yourself.”

Wander realized that his escorts were now running up the hill leading to the stone wall and the resting tortoise colossus.

It was not long until the trio had reached the place where Basaran rested. The massive tortoise was a truly impressive creature. Unlike most larger colossi, nearly his entire body was armored with thick stone plates and ridges.

Basaran’s eyes were not lit when the trio arrived in front of him. Cenobia sighed a bit and then sent out a loud telepathic shout, “Basaran! We have brought you Wander! Wake up so that we don’t waste any more time!”

The tortoise colossus jolted awake and then began to rear up, his eyes orange. Basaran was about to raise up his legs to stomp the trio when he seemed to calm down, his eyes turning blue. The armored colossus looked around for a moment and then sighed, “Oh, you all have come. I would hope that the warrior who slew us all has been on his best behavior and not giving you two any trouble.”

Celosia, as Wander dismounted her, replied, “Wander has been doing his best. So far, eight of us have been revived. Now, take him with you and find the grand spirit you are to challenge.”

Basaran nodded his armored head and then told Wander, “Come with me. Lord Malus’s orders are orders.”

Wander nodded as Basaran turned to the stone wall and called out, “Imobus! I am here to challenge you! Allow me inside, don’t make me break down this wall!”

Wander remembered the name Imobus. He had heard that grand spirit invoked whenever his home city had been under any sort of threat. Imobus was the grand spirit of defense and the “cousin” of Kyos. Protection and safety were both in Imobus’s portfolio. He also represented the integrity of structures, even ones that were not built to withstand direct attacks. He was often invoked by builders, masons, architects along with soldiers on defensive assignments.

After Basaran had “thrown down the gauntlet,” a portion of the stone wall preventing access to the light barrier began to glow with blueish light. The portion of the wall seemed to swing open as it glowed. A path was made for Wander and Basaran to follow inside.

As Wander walked with Basaran towards the barrier of white light, he asked the colossus, “Kuromori said that you were not proud of your old war days…. I was just wondering why that was?”

The armored tortoise kept walking and then told Wander, “You mortals are sometimes born into families with certain expectations. However, you are never really born to do one thing and one thing specifically. I was made to besiege fortresses and break down their walls, snipe defenders and seize more land for Dormin. I only existed as a war machine. That is all I was made to be. I helped overthrow that incomprehensible bastard because they made me to fight and only fight and I wanted them to see the flaws in their planning. Of course, they got their revenge. Their essence drove me to sleep right next to a geyser field. That was not something I would have done while fully sentient.”

Wander admitted to himself that he could not entirely comprehend an existence where one was built for a specific purpose and was expected to only fulfill that purpose. He could not blame the
armored colossus for being upset at his lot in life, even if he lacked the painful guilt that Hydrus felt.

Wander placed a hand on one of Basaran’s legs and then the two of them advanced through the dome of white light. Once the two of them were inside the barrier, Wander saw that there was a castle protected by multiple layers of walls at the very top of the hill. They were standing a decent distance from it.

Basaran began to slowly advance forward with Wander in tow. The tortoise colossus grumbled, “Lord Malus said that it would make sense for me to challenge Imobus because I was designed to break through enemy fortifications. It seems to me like he was just rubbing my discomfort with my limited purpose in deeper.”

Wander could not help but respond, “Maybe he just wanted to have you challenge a grand spirit that you could probably overcome? Maybe he was trying to have you play to your strengths?”

Basaran seemed to nod slightly and then pointed out, “Maybe so. Still, I would rather not be reminded of my ‘singular purpose’ for living.”

A curious Wander then asked Basaran, as the two of them neared the castle, “Well, what would you like to do when you get revived? Quadratus was upset that he was a beast of burden. He told me that he wanted to create works of art.”

Basaran sighed, the deep sorrow in his voice obvious to Wander. The armored tortoise then said, “I have thought about that time and time again. However, I don’t know what else a creature like me is any good for. Mining? Starting fires? Honestly, I always wanted to protect people instead of subjugating others through force. Look at me, nearly my entire body is covered in armor. I could have been a great guardian, like some of the others. However, I was sent out to do what I was ‘meant to do.’ Destroy and conquer. …Why do you care?”

Wander was legitimately caught off guard at Basaran’s closing question. He was not sure what to say to the imposing armored colossus. The young man stuttered, “Well, I was just curious after hearing what Kuromori said when I was aiding him. Then you got to talking and I was wondering what you would rather do than besiege fortresses.”

As they were nearly to the first wall of the inner castle, Basaran said, “I see. I might ask you some things as well. However, right now we do not have the time....”

When Wander and Basaran reached the outer wall of the hilltop castle, they noticed a central tower rising from behind the layers of walls. From the tower, a deep male voice echoed out, “Basaran, the living siege engine of Dormin. I take it you have come for some of my power?”

Basaran grumbled a bit and then shouted back, somewhat sarcastically, “Yes, that would be nice. What must I do for you in order to obtain that power?”

Imobus responded, “You are a weapon made to penetrate enemy fortifications. So, I will ask you to do what you were built to do. Reach my inner keep where my tower stands and I will give you the energy you need to revive yourself.”

Wander realized that the castle was actually Imobus’s incarnated form as Basaran shouted, “Fine! If that is what you want, then I will take one last castle!”

The tortoise colossus charged forward and then rammed the outer most wall with his head. When that did little damage, he kicked at it with each of his feet and then delivered a mighty double stomp to the wall section’s foundations.
Wander, as the clearly angered Basaran fired volley after volley of energy pulses into the wall, noticed a series of small cracks emanating bluish light coming from another part of the wall. Wander called out, “Basaran, try hitting the spot on the wall that I am pointing at.” Wander then moved out of the way for the armored colossus to change his position.

Basaran said, “I am not sure what good this will do.” He then struck the wall and crashed right into the section Wander had pointed out with both feet.

The wall section crumbled from Basaran’s strike. Wander smiled triumphantly as Basaran seemed a bit surprised. The armored colossus wasted no time in advancing through to the next wall, telling Wander, “Good eye, kid. You will spot the weaker wall sections and I will get us through them.”

As Wander pointed out the next weak spot that he saw, Imobus called out, “Well, I see that your killer is granting you an advantage. …A castle needs defenders, after all. Let us add some to make this more interesting.”

A number of human-shaped figures equipped with energy bows, akin to the one Wander could generate, appeared on the wall and began to fire bolts of spiritual energy at Wander. Those of their bolts that hit Basaran seemed to have little to no effect on his carapace.

Wander had to dodge a series of bolts before he returned fire with his own energy bow. One of the spiritual archers was dispelled. However, most of them seemed too evasive for Wander to easily hit.

Wander hid behind one of Basaran’s front legs. Basaran shouted down at Wander, “I need you to concentrate on locating the weak points. …Let me see if I can cover you as you work on that?”

Basaran waited until four spiritual archers were clumped together and then blasted them with a series of high-speed energy pulses. The archers were all dispelled in one volley.

With Basaran sniping the archers and covering Wander, the young warrior was able to keep his focus on the next weak point. Basaran advanced while still firing at the archers and then head-butted the wall section into hundreds of pieces.

Wander followed Basaran through to the third and final wall. There, the spiritual archers appeared in force and began to bombard Wander with projectiles. Wander rushed forward to the wall, using his soul power to move faster and swat away bolts with clubs generated from his hands. Once right next to the wall, Wander found the final series of cracks and pointed Basaran towards them.

The spiritual archers began to extend themselves over the wall and fire directly down at Wander. However, Basaran fired on the defenders and began to wipe out entire groups of them. Basaran then rushed the final series of cracks and tackled the wall.

Wander followed Basaran through to the innermost courtyard as the remaining spiritual archers all began to vanish. When the duo neared the central courtyard, they saw a number of soul figures without bows or other weapons saluting them. From the central tower, Imobus echoed, “Well done. Your teamwork has allowed you to reach my inner courtyard. As much as I hate to admit it, you are an impressive siege weapon, Basaran.”

Basaran grumbled again and then said, “It is not like I had a choice in the matter. Now, please fulfill your end of the bargain.”
Imobus responded, “Interesting. It does seem that you are frustrated with the purpose for existing. Regardless, you have completed my challenge. I will bestow my power upon you as I promised before. I would hope that you make peace with yourself in the future, colossus.”

Basaran began to glow with a brilliant light. As he lit up, he looked down at Wander and told him, “Thank you for finding those weak spots. When I get back, I am going to have a long and hard think about what else I could do that would give my life meaning. Maybe I will enlist the help of the others for that? Regardless, good luck with the rest of your atonement, kid. Dirge is next and I don’t think that he will be thrilled to work with you…”

Basaran glowed with an intense light and then vanished. Once Basaran had disappeared, Imobus told Wander, “You are quite a skilled archer to have dispelled even one of my defenders. You must have been an asset to your people during your life. Now, go in peace.”

A large catapult materialized nearby Wander in a rapid flash of light. The young warrior bowed to Imobus and his subjects and then nervously got into the catapult’s sling, realizing how Imobus intended for him to leave the domain. Wander was launched through the air all the way past the barrier of white light. He landed right next to Celosia and Cenobia somehow without injury.

As Basaran had been being revived, Wander had been less focused on having lost another opportunity to escape the afterlife and more focused on his success once again. However, he was worried about what Basaran had said about the next colossus. Dirge had to be the sand snake waiting next to the cave. Wander remembered the wrathful temperament of that burrowing colossus and wondered how he would behave with his mind restored?
The One Who Sought to Avenge

Wander had just landed, uninjured, in front of Celosia and Cenobia after having been catapulted out of the realm of Imobus. The young warrior picked himself up and then walked over to mount Celosia once again.

Celosia proclaimed, as Wander was getting onto her, “Now, we are more than halfway done!”

Cenobia chuckled a bit at his sister’s enthusiasm and then said, “Yes, we are. Now, we should not waste any time reaching Dirge. He will be the next colossus Wander is to aid.”

Celosia nodded as they set off. She told Wander, “You have been doing well so far. We are more than halfway there and none of our kind have failed their challenges.”

Wander could not but feel somewhat smug about his successes. He was beginning to forget about his earlier plan to abandon the colossi. He knew that he did not want to leave Celosia to Dormin. Wander then remembered what Basaran had said as he was being revived and asked his escorts, “Basaran said that Dirge would not be happy about working with me. What is that about?”

Cenobia responded, “Dirge told us, after his death, that what remained of his mind had been trying to avenge those of us who had fallen by killing you. He did not know how many had died, but he was certain he was to the first colossus you had fought. He certainly wanted you dead before you could finish the job of releasing Dormin. He had chased you down with intense determination, even as the essence of Dormin trapped inside of him forced him to make a repeated tactical blunder.”

Celosia added, “He did not really need his eyes to track you when he could sense you through the sand. The essence of Dormin forced him to surface, making his eyes vulnerable to your arrows.”

Wander wondered how the immense pincer-snake would react upon seeing him again. He was not looking forward to his “reunion” with Dirge, that was for sure.

Cenobia grumbled, “Since we are last, sister, we will be going to find Pelagia after Dirge. I wish you could be revived faster. However, I know that you willingly accepted this task from Lord Malus. I will stay with you until the end.”

Wander was once again struck by the obvious emotional connection between the two light colossi. As he thought over their bond, he began to wonder how it had been forged in the first place. Wander wondered why the two of them treated each other as beloved siblings, despite not being conventionally alive. However, he soon saw that they were now coming up on the cave where Dirge awaited them.

Celosia told Wander, snapping him out of his thoughts, “When we reach Dirge, try not to upset him further. His temper can be as bad or worse than Barba’s. Thankfully, he should not want to jeopardize our mission. He will want to see your grizzly work undone.”

Wander nodded, he had faced hostility from some of his colossal victims before. However, he was still worried about the sand-serpent. Barba had developed a better opinion of Wander in the end. He wondered if Dirge would do the same?

Wander and his escorts reached the entrance to the grand cave. When they arrived, they saw that Dirge was looking into the cave’s entrance, where a faint white glow emanated out. It became
obvious to Wander that a grand spirit lived underground and that the cave was the entrance to their realm.

Cenobia called out to Dirge, “We are here! It is your turn to be revived, Dirge.”

The giant serpent slithered around to look at the trio. He then fixed his nightmarish orange gaze on Wander, sternly saying, “The murderer has returned. What I would not give for a rematch. Celosia, Cenobia, please tell me that you did not buy that excuse about his fiancé that he gave us.”

Wander dismounted Celosia, filled with anger after Dirge had questioned his motives. He then shouted up at the immense snake, “It was not an excuse! I did kill all of you in the hopes of bringing my love back!” He then calmed down and added, “More importantly, I have already helped nine of your comrades and am now here to help you.”

Cenobia pointed out, “We don’t have time to debate why this human slew us. What matters is that his atonement is progressing on schedule. Now, Dirge, take him with you, find the grand spirit and get out of here before Lord Malus gets angry with you!”

Dirge’s eyes returned to blue and he responded, “Very well. I will not get in the way of my kind’s salvation. Get on my back, murderer. You will continue to help undo the suffering you caused.”

Wander somewhat reluctantly climbed onto Dirge’s back and made his way towards the snake colossus’s head. As he did so, Dirge slithered into the cave, heading for the white light.

As Dirge departed with Wander, Celosia shouted after them, “Don’t be rough on him, Dirge! He has been doing his best to redeem himself!”

Wander was relieved at Celosia’s vote of confidence, as Dirge slithered deeper into the tunnels.

As Wander neared Dirge’s head, with the snake colossus keeping his back above the sand, the pincer-serpent said, “It must kill you inside, seeing all of your ‘work’ undone. The fact that you are undoing it yourself must make it hurt even more.”

Wander sighed and told Dirge, “It was never about killing any of you for its own sake. None of you were ravaging the lands outside of the forbidden peninsula. I just wanted my love back and I was willing to do what many would find impossible in order to get what I wanted.”

Dirge shot back, “I know that our minds were crippled by Dormin. Still, what did you see us as? Mad beasts that needed to be put down?”

Wander awkwardly responded, “Well… I thought all of you were automatons animated by magic and without souls or intelligence. I turned out to be wrong. I assumed that killing mindless beings was justified in order to bring my love back to life. Maybe I should have questioned Dormin’s motives more? Regardless, I did not do that and your kind all paid the ultimate price for my mistake.”

Dirge was silent for a moment as they closed in on the light barrier. He sighed a deep and rumbly sigh and said, “Well, you should not have listened to the grand spirit of death. We made our sacrifice and it was our choice. Still, it seems like you were not lying about your love…”

Wander then, seeing that he had gotten Dirge to back down, asked his traditional question, “Now that you seem calmer, might I ask why Dormin’s followers built you in the first place? What purpose were you meant to serve?”
Dirge responded, “I was made for tunneling and mining. I can move through sand and earth at high speeds, as you have seen. However, I take longer to burrow through solid rock. If I hit rock unprepared, I get bit stunned. However, I can get through it if I am given enough time.”

Wander to note of Dirge’s response as he began to notice some clumps of earth and stone on the walls that were glowing with spiritual energy. The clumps looked somewhat unstable as energy slowly seemed to be coursing in and out of them. Wander asked Dirge, “Who are we here to challenge, anyway?”

Dirge responded, “Dionin is who we are here to challenge. He is the grand spirit of earth, stone and the lord of what lies and lives beneath the surface of the world. He is thankfully not known to be hostile, despite his rumored hideous appearance.”

Wander nodded, he had heard of shamans praying to Dionin when comforting and healing miners. Dionin had few dedicated shamans, but he was invoked whenever someone needed help with anything regarding earth or stone.

Dirge snapped Wander back to reality by pointing out, “We have reached the light barrier. Do whatever it is that you do to it.”

Wander sighed and told Dirge, “As long as I am making contact with you, we will be fine to advance through it.”

Dirge seemed to nod and then responded, “You better be right about that.” The sand snake then slithered through the barrier.

Wander and Dirge found themselves in a massive cavern that was lit by the rocky clumps’ emanated energy. A number of subterranean animals seemed to be going about their business in the massive cavern. A series of smaller channels in the rocky walls looked to lead to other caverns. Dirge seemed too large to travel through them, even if Wander could do so on foot.

As Dirge made his way towards the center of the cavern, the sandy ground around him began to shake. Dirge stopped moving forward as all of the creatures in the cavern all assumed what looked to be reverent poses.

An enormous worm-snake burst from the sand. His mouth seemed to be contained in an enormous bulb on his head. The being seemed to stay still for a moment, its body vaguely swaying and rippling. Dionin then, in a slow and deep voice, said, “Ah, a grand golem of Dormin’s has come to visit me. I am curious about how you ended up dead and how you penetrated my light shield? However, I also wonder what brings you here, other than the environment being well suited for you?”

Wander realized that Dionin looked to be more isolated than the other grand spirits. He was probably not fully aware of all that had recently transpired.

Dirge tried to bow his head. He said, “Oh great and mighty Dionin, incarnation of earth and stone. I have come here seeking some of your power so that I might revive myself and escape Dormin’s wrath.”

Dionin responded, “Hmmm… Very well. I sense that you are not alone. That could explain your ability to reach my inner lair. However, I will dawdle no longer and bestow you with a chance at revival. Here is my challenge….”

A series of massive arrow-shaped symbols made of white light appeared on the floor of the cavern.
They led off into the distance as Dionin explained, “We are to race each other, colossus. If you can reach the Sigil of Supren that I have placed at the end of this series of arrows before I do, then I will grant you the power that you need to revive yourself.”

Dionin then began to turn around and laid the front of his body down into the sand. Dirge readied himself by taking up a position next to Dionin.

One the two contestants were ready, Dionin shouted, “Ready…Begin!”

The two immense snakes surged forward through the sand, Dionin was actually not as fast as Dirge and the serpent colossus began to quickly take the lead. However, Wander and Dirge sensed a problem as soon as they realized that the arrows led right into a stone wall.

Dirge slowed down as Dionin took the lead and crashed right into the stone wall. The grand spirit seemed to ooze acid from his head-bulb. The acid dissolved the stone rapidly, allowing Dionin to burrow through it at a reasonably fast speed.

Dirge shouted, “I cannot even fit into the tunnel he is creating! My rock burrowing speed is much slower than his. I don’t think I can….”

Wander had noticed a pulsating clump of earth on the nearby stone wall. He fired a bolt of soul energy into it and it exploded mightily. The blast created a hole large enough for Dirge to move through. Wander then shouted, “There’s your answer! Now get moving. I see another cavern on the other side.”

Dirge wasted no time in listening to Wander and speeding through the hole that the young hunter had made. They did not see any evidence of Dionin in the new cavern. However, they saw three more clumps of energized earth.

Wander fired on each of the clumps, setting each of them off in turn. Dirge picked the path that seemed to lead to another cavern and followed it as Wander hung on to his back tightly.

Now, Dirge and Wander were in the same cavern as Dionin. This cavern had a number of rocky spires jutting out of the ground throughout it. Dirge sped ahead to get in front of Dionin.

Dionin seemed confused and asked, “Where were you? Why did you not just burrow through the walls?”

Dirge shouted back, “Sand and earth are more my thing than solid rock. Thankfully, the human riding on my back made a lucky guess about the nature of part of your lair.”

With Dirge’s lead getting greater, Dionin responded, “I see, the unstable areas made you a path when triggered. I will still put in my best effort to win, however.”

Wander held on as Dirge swerved between massive rock spires at high speed. He was almost knocked off a couple of times. Wander looked around and saw Dionin coming at them from a different angle, trying to regain the lead. The stone spires had slowed Dirge down enough to give Dionin a chance. Wander noticed another pair of clumps of unstable stone and fired soul bolts at them.

One of the clumps exploded, slowing Dionin down slightly with shrapnel bouncing off of his hide. The second brought a rain of boulders that landed in front of the grand spirit. The time it took for Dionin to adjust his course was long enough for Dirge to surge ahead and cement his lead in the race.
Dirge sped towards the Sigil of Supren at the other end of the cavern. He leapt out of the sand and shot through the huge symbol head first. The sigil was dispelled as Dionin came to a stop close by the victorious Dirge.

Dirge seemed exhausted as he said, “Well, it looks like I won the race!”

Dionin agreed, “Yes, you have finished first. For your information, I was not intending to trap you earlier. I simply did not understand your capabilities. Regardless, you and your mysterious comrade have beaten me. You will receive some of my power, as per our deal.”

Dirge began to glow with a brilliant light. As Wander dismounted the snake colossus, Dirge said, “I guess I have to hand it to you. …You are pretty damn good with a bow. There was no rematch mentioned in the deal and I would have lost for sure without you. Good luck finishing your atonement. You still have six colossi to go.”

As Dirge began to glow more brightly, Wander mentioned, “Basaran might have an interest in mining. You should speak with him about that.”

Dirge seemed to nod as his body glowed with an intense light and then vanished from the Chthonic Realm.

Dionin turned to Wander and said, “I sense Dormin’s power in you. Whoever you are, you are a clever soul, I will say that. What will you do now?”

Wander responded, “Great Dionin, I have more work yet to be done. I need to be returned to the entrance to your realm where my escorts await me.”

Dionin lowered his body to the ground. He said, “Climb on, in that case. Since you showed me the proper respect, I will get you to the surface myself. I would like to know who you are and why you have some of Dormin’s power trapped within you?”

Wander climbed onto Dionin and then the grand spirit carried Wander to the entrance of his cave. Wander told Dionin his personal history and why he had killed all of the colossi on the way up.

Strangely, Dionin seemed to sympathize with Wander. The wormlike grand spirit said, as they neared the surface, “You were being used by Dormin. However, they did probably resurrect your love. They are known to honor any deal that they make. Most of us grand spirits are that way. I am sorry about your horse as well. Regardless of your past, you are right to be doing what you can to atone for releasing the incarnation of death. What worries me is that whoever remains when Dormin reforms will not be safe. No grand spirit will be able to protect the colossi against their wrath, especially in a weakened state.”

Wander nodded, he had already helped to revive ten colossi, only six remained. He then remembered that he wanted to see Mono again. However, he was starting to prioritize his mission of atonement higher than ever. Dormin had arguably tricked Wander. Did he really want the grand spirit of death to have their way in the end?

Dionin dropped Wander off at the entrance to his giant cave. He then rapidly retreated into the depths.

Wander bowed to Dionin as he left. He then returned to Celosia and Cenobia. The two scout colossi were waiting for him as they always were.
Wander had just returned to Celosia and Cenobia. He stood before the two light colossi in front of the entrance to Dionin’s cave. Wander began to walk over to his escorts as Celosia lowered herself to the ground. Wander informed them, “Dirge has been revived. We are off to see the horned lake colossus next, I take it.”

Celosia replied, “Yes, we are off to meet with Pelagia. He should be waiting for us nearby at the banks of the river close to the lair of this area’s final grand spirit.”

As he mounted Celosia, Wander asked, “I thought that there would be at least four more grand spirits to meet.”

Wander saw the magnificent Phalanx floating overhead. Despite the danger she was still in, she seemed peaceful and calm. He wondered how anyone could be so composed and non-violent, especially while being so imposing.

Wander heard Phalanx’s voice in his head informing him, “She literally meant this area. After Pelagia is revived, I am to take you to Noria, the grand spirit who I am to challenge. After that, you will help Argus revive. After Argus, Lord Malus and your escorts will be the last colossi left for you to aid.” He then held on again as Celosia and Cenobia began to make their way towards the river.

As the two escort colossi made their way towards the river, Wander saw a mammoth barrier of white and green light protecting most of the area where the river terminated. Near the shield dome, he saw an abundance of beautiful plant and animal life. Similar to the domain of Adar Flam, it seemed like an oasis in the lifeless Chthonic Realm.

Wander recalled that Dirge had not mentioned anything about Pelagia, unlike how Kuromori had talked about Basaran and Basaran had referred to Dirge. Wander asked his escorts, “What do you two know about Pelagia? He did not really make any noise when I battled him.”

Cenobia chuckled, “Dormin’s corruption really wrecked poor Pelagia’s mind. He was quite the chatterbox when he was sentient. He was also one of the first colossi to decide Dormin had to be stopped. He was always putting the people first. He was one of the first colossi to agree to the great sacrifice. He did it for the sake of those living in what were once Dormin’s lands. Sadly, the lack of mortal presence drove him a bit mad. It made it easier for Dormin’s energies to seep into his mind and corrupt him.”

Wander knew that many of the colossi had been angry at him for being Dormin’s pawn at first. He wondered how angry with him Pelagia would be. He was also somewhat surprised to hear of a colossus, especially one as alien looking as Pelagia, loving the company of mortals.

Celosia added, “Pelagia learned to hate Dormin for their arrogance and lack of concern for the mortals under their control. He would do anything for his people back in the day.”

As they approached the riverbank, Wander noticed the immense masked creature they had been discussing waiting for their arrival. Phalanx continued to circle in the sky above. She was to be revived after Pelagia. Wander knew that Phalanx was a peaceful creature, even with her mind destroyed. He wanted to see her live, even if some part of him still wanted to prioritize his own
Wander and his escorts reached the bank of the river where they found the horned colossus Pelagia waiting. Pelagia’s horns glowed blue and the immense creature appeared to be deep in thought.

Cenobia “cleared his throat,” preparing to deliver his usual greeting. Before Cenobia could say anything, Pelagia spoke up, “I know that you are here. I was just reminiscing about a past long gone. Having my mind back is a great gift. Yet it is also emotionally painful to be able to once again remember what I have lost.”

Celosia said, “Pelagia, we all agreed to make our sacrifice. You helped convince many of us that we had to help the mortals rebel against Dormin. We all did the right thing and paid dearly for it.”

Pelagia began to turn around, saying, “Still, there is hope now. We have our minds back and are being returned to life. I will see our home restored and this time it will be better than ever. Dormin will be here where they belong, and we will make our peninsula safe for mortals again. I will not give up on the future just because we lost the past.”

Wander dismounted Celosia, impressed to see such optimism from a colossus. Cenobia said, “As much as your positivity is nice to hear, you need to take our slayer with you and be on your way. You will never see your dream fulfilled if you fail to revive. We are losing time until Dormin reforms!”

Pelagia told Wander, “Climb onto my back, Human! I won’t mind this time. It is part of what I was built for anyway.”

Wander remembered that Dormin had called Pelagia a “moving bridge to cross to higher ground.” He then ran over to the horned colossus and climbed up onto his back. Once Wander had reached Pelagia’s head, he hung on as the colossus began to move towards the barrier of light.

As they advanced away from Celosia and Cenobia, Wander asked Pelagia, “Other than being a colossus-bridge, what were you designed to do?”

Unbothered by Wander’s question, Pelagia answered, “I was designed by some very creative artisans who wanted a guardian for the most luxurious and exclusive territory in the peninsula. I was created to ferry guests around and blast any hostile invaders. The ‘teeth’ on my head were meant to help steer me towards where my passengers wanted me to go. I was easily distracted, to be fair.” Pelagia continued, “Honestly, I did not need to blast that many people. My territory was such a delightful place. Some families would save up money for months to stay for a couple of days. Of course, after we tore Dormin’s rule down and were left in the ‘Forbidden Land,’ the structures turned to ruins and we were all alone.”

Wander sensed real sorrow in Pelagia’s telepathic voice as he finished. The colossus continued, “Can you imagine such loss? I heard you say that you lost the woman you loved. That must have been truly terrible, I will admit. However, to save them from Dormin’s control, I lost the people I loved. I did it all for them, though. My loss was their gain. And now, Dormin is going to be stuck here! We ARE going to find a way to restore the peninsula to its former glory without Dormin. Somehow, we WILL find a way for the mortals to come back!”

Wander could not help but be impressed with Pelagia’s determination. He responded, as the duo neared the shield dome, “Losing my fiancé devastated me. I also lost my other closest companion, my warhorse Argo. She was always loyal to me, no matter if we were being chased by a colossus or just riding somewhere together. When I was on my way to fight Malus, she fell to her revival.
death after throwing me to safety. I despaired when I saw her fall almost as much as when I learned of Mono’s murder. I did not even see where her body had landed after she fell."

Pelagia interrupted, “I think that if I could cry, I would be doing so now. Poor animal. She must have really cared for you, as much as a horse can possibly care for her master.”

As Wander was thinking that Pelagia was quite emotive for a colossus, they came quite close to the barrier. Wander instructed Pelagia, “Just march right on through it. As long as I am in contact with you, you will get through!”

Pelagia advanced through the barrier into a beautiful lake filled with an amazing diversity of animal and plant life. No sentient mortal souls inhabited the lake. Wander gazed at the scene in complete awe of its beauty. It was natural perfection untouched by civilization.

Pelagia cautiously advanced, saying, “We are here to find Aquarius, the grand spirit of water. A distant cousin to Avus and Dionin, he is said to be the self-proclaimed protector of nature.”

Wander had heard of Aquarius. However, very few sentient mortals worshipped him. Only a few isolated shamans living far away from civilization were truly devoted to Aquarius. Wander had never bothered to learn the reasons why Aquarius, despite presiding over water, a critical part of the world, was not often worshipped or widely invoked.

Despite his size, Pelagia seemed careful not to disturb the tranquil environment. He advanced slowly but surely through the beautiful realm. As Pelagia and Wander reached the center of the lake, the water in front of them began to bubble.

A blue-scaled fish that was enormous, albeit much smaller than Pelagia, emerged from the depths and declared, “My domain has intruders… Oh, I see who has come forth to challenge me, the lover of desecration, Pelagia. You will not find sympathy from me, the one who guarded a place where the sentient mortals turned a beautiful locale into their pleasure palace.”

Pelagia’s horns turned orange for a few seconds. They then turned blue as he informed Aquarius, “With all due respect, that is why very few mortals chose to worship you. You want sentient mortals to avoid the natural world and think that all they can do is damage and destroy it. Now, Aquarius, I have come here to claim some of your power so that I can be revived.”

Aquarius snorted, “I have no love for Dormin because they represent death. However, I do not wish to help you either. We are at cross purposes, colossus. You believe that civilization and nature can coexist. I do not agree with that view. Still, I would rather not sully this place by fighting you. I know what your challenge will be.”

Aquarius glowed with a baleful red light and a field of flickering energy surrounded himself, Wander and Pelagia. Aquarius transported the three of them to a blasted hellscape with a red sky and a polluted lake. The animal souls in this place all looked vicious and distorted. Aquarius shielded himself with energy and then told Pelagia and Wander, “You think that they are capable of respecting nature? Let us see how much you care about these.”

At that moment, six illusory humans in various states of distress appeared around the area. Three of them were being threatened by the animals. Two of them looked to be drowning, and one of them was dangling off of a cliff far above the polluted lake.

Aquarius shouted, “Save them all, Pelagia. Show me how much you care about your cause. Do so, and I will grant you your revival, if only to get you away from my domain!”
Pelagia blasted one of the spiritual animals, a cougar, that was threatening an illusory human with energy pulses from his horns. He shouted up at Wander, “Save the one up on the cliff! I will let the drowning ones climb up onto me!”

Wander was confused by the whole debate/challenge. However, he used his soul power to launch himself off of Pelagia’s head and start to scale the cliffs. Wander saw a series of hawks diving down to attack another illusory human not far from him. He generated a soul bow from one hand, while hanging on with the other, and fired at the hawks, dispelling them one by one.

As Wander advanced up the cliffs, Pelagia allowed one drowning “human” onto his back. He then let another grab onto his mask and climb up onto his head. Pelagia then saw one more “human” in the water, who could at least tread water efficiently, being circled by a series of sharks. He advanced towards the human, trying to pound the sharks with his limbs because he could not fire his energy pulses into the water.

Wander rushed up the cliffs using well-timed bursts of soul power. He reached the illusory person, who was about to fall, just in time. Wander could not help but find the whole affair to be silly, seeing as though these “humans” were not real, as he pulled the figure up to safety.

Pelagia had three “humans” riding on his back now. He carried them over to a safe patch of high ground and let them get off of him. He checked to make sure none of the other illusory figures were in danger of being dispelled. After checking, he blasted a new pair of spiritual cougars as they lunged at the figure that he had protected before.

Wander looked around and saw that all six figures were now safe. He folded his arms, still finding the whole challenge a bit weird.

Aquarius sighed and glowed with blue light. A field of energy surrounded the grand spirit, Wander and Pelagia and warped them all back to Aquarius’s domain.

Once they were all back, the massive fish asked Pelagia, “You know that those were all figments I created and animated, right?”

Pelagia responded, “I guess I did. However, you gave me a challenge and I had to complete it. I also saw what looked to be people in danger and I wanted to save them. I know that you do not care for people, Aquarius. However, I still maintain that they can coexist with nature, especially with those like me there to guide them. We colossi are in some ways a mixture of the natural and the man-made, you know. I can tell you that I am personally proud that my back became a home for colonies of moss to grow on.”

Wander, who was now on top of Pelagia again, stifled a giggle at the end of the colossus’s statement.

Aquarius smiled vaguely and announced, “I see your general point, colossus. Very well, so that the sentient mortals might have an immortal to guide them in respecting and caring for nature, I will revive you.”

Pelagia began to glow with a brilliant light. The colossus allowed Wander to jump off of his head into the water. He told Wander, “Thanks for your help. You know, when you first showed up in my territory, what remained of my mind did not want to attack you because you were the first person to visit in so long. I only fought you to try and stop Dormin from becoming whole again. I could not stand the idea of them terrorizing my people once more. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a revitalization to begin planning!”

Wander was left treading water nearby Aquarius after Pelagia vanished.
The grand spirit of water told Wander, “You have yet more of his kind to save from Dormin. Be on your way, and yes I know that the challenge was a bit odd.”

Wander saw a large log appear right next to him. He climbed aboard it and it remained stable. Wander was able to ride the log as it moved out of Aquarius’s realm and through the barrier of white light.

The log beached right next to Celosia and Cenobia. When Wander had fully dismounted the log, it vanished in a burst of green light. Wander walked over to his pair of escorts as he saw Phalanx flying down towards the trio.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a bit goofy, wasn't it? Anyway, two-thirds done posting now!
After Wander had returned to Celosia and Cenobia having just helped Pelagia to revive, Celosia looked up at the approaching Phalanx and informed Wander, “Lord Malus has decreed that Phalanx is to take you to the realm of Noria. We will travel there on foot and meet you after you are finished. From there, we are to escort you to Argus and then back to Lord Malus.”

Cenobia added, “After Lord Malus is revived, the two of us will be the last to go. Once we are revived, you will have redeemed yourself. Your sentence will have been carried out. You will be stuck here, but at least you will be free.” Cenobia actually seemed a bit uneasy as he finished his statement.

Wander looked up and saw that Phalanx was getting ever closer. As she had done when he had attacked her, Phalanx lowered her four “wings” towards the ground.

Phalanx called out, “Get on, Wander. We will head off to the realm of Noria as soon as you are aboard. Celosia, Cenobia, Lord Malus will telepathically guide you to the realm of Noria.”

As Wander walked over to one of Phalanx’s wings, he heard Celosia call out to him, “Best of luck, Wander. We will see you outside of Noria’s realm. If you can get Phalanx revived, there will only be one-fourth of our kind left to go!”

Wander saluted Celosia. As he did, he remembered how he had planned to revive himself in place of one of the colossi. He had started to forget about that plan. However, he knew that he still had five colossi, four challenges, left to go. He only wished that Celosia and Cenobia could be revived right after Phalanx, he had grown more attached to them then he had ever expected to.

Cenobia called out, “Make sure Phalanx returns to life! You owe that to her even more then you owe the rest of us!”

Wander once again remembered how he had slain the great sand-dragon without being directly attacked. As pangs of intense guilt welled up within him, the young man used his soul power to dash up Phalanx’s wing and get onto her back. He grabbed on to the fur close to her stone head.

The sky-serpent colossus took off in the general direction of where Malus stood. She flew as fast as she could over the vast terrain. Phalanx then began to fly up higher and higher so as to get over the nearby cliffs with ease.

As Wander hung on to Phalanx, he asked, “I have asked pretty much every colossus I have encountered what they were built for. I guess I should ask you the same question. Honestly, I am quite intrigued as to why you were created. What purpose did your designers have in mind for you?”

Phalanx replied, “I was not meant to perform a task in the same way as most of my kin. I was designed as a ‘Great Work’ instead. I was meant to be a propaganda tool for Dormin and their loyal followers. My very existence as a colossus of truly great size with the capacity for both magical flight and burrowing through sand and earth was meant to show those under Dormin’s rule, as well as foreigners, their great power.”

Wander then asked, “So, you were not meant for either defense or assault. You were not even meant to carry cargo? You were designed to show off what Dormin and their loyalists were capable of creating?”

Phalanx replied, “Exactly. I developed my pacifistic personality both from witnessing the
horrors of war that some of my kind were engaging in and because I was never meant to act aggressively like they were. In the end, I agreed to help seal Dormin in the peninsula because I wanted them to no longer be able to wage war on other mortal lands. Also, like many of the others, I thought that our people would be better off without them in charge.”

Wander then changed the subject, asking, “I have heard that we are off to see Noria. I remember that she is supposed to be the grand spirit representing justice. The magistrates who pronounce sentences for outlaws and guards who take their duties seriously are known to invoke her. I know that we must be running out of grand spirits. Still, I am curious as to why you are challenging her.”

Phalanx replied, “Noria is a strong believer in retribution as the primary means of ensuring peace and security. Conversely, I believe that compassion is better than retribution. Lord Malus allowed some of us to choose who we were to challenge. Some colossi either chose, or were sent, to challenge their ‘foils.’ That meaning grand spirits who held very different beliefs from the colossus challenging them. However, a few colossi were sent, or chose, to challenge grand spirits that would be likely to see them as kindred spirits. Noria is a foil for me because we have very different ideas about how to treat others. She is not evil. However, her philosophy does not put much stock in treating perceived evildoers with kindness or showing them mercy.”

Wander nodded as he wondered how Noria would look upon those who had murdered Mono. As far as Wander knew, the shamans had slain her in cold blood. How could murder be just regardless of why it was done? That line of thought lead Wander to think of his slaying of Phalanx and the other colossi. He winced as he began to think once again about the moral question of killing others to save the life of a loved one.

Wander rode atop Phalanx for what felt like a considerable amount of time. The draconic colossus floated calmly through the skies of the Chthonic Realm. Eventually, they passed over Malus, who seemed to be performing some kind of spell, or possibly talking with an unseen figure. They then flew over the river, which was bridged by a few land-bridges too small for most colossi to pass over. However, a large colossus could possibly ford the river with much of their body above the water. As they headed toward a massive dome of light guarded by a series of fortifications, Wander saw two other light domes. One of them was far away on an open grassland plain. The other dome, which Malus’s lieutenant Argus was waiting nearby, was placed in the middle of an area that contained a strange mixture of pleasantly pastoral and horrifically warped terrain and plant life.

Wander held onto Phalanx tightly as the colossus began to dive towards the upper reaches of the nearest light shield.

Phalanx asked Wander, “If I am correct, you just need to be in contact with me and I will be able to pass through the barrier, right?”

Wander responded, “Yes.” Phalanx then dived right into the shield of light. After penetrating the barrier, Wander saw that Phalanx was now starting to circle a massive stone tower surrounded by lesser fortifications. A number of humanoid soul forms could be vaguely made out below, moving about the area. This realm looked somewhat akin to the realm of Imobus. At the top of the central tower, a being composed of a gargantuan floating sword crossed with a metal shield floated, observing the area. A knight’s armored metal helmet, topped with a red feather plume, levitated just above the sword and shield.

The voice of a mature woman echoed out from the helmet, saying, “You have kept me waiting for quite some time. I was wondering which one of the colossi would come to my home. It turns out that the coward among the colossi was the one sent here to challenge me.”
Phalanx asked Noria, “Why do you call me a coward? I do not merely run away from danger. I do what I can to help ease and prevent suffering without intentionally harming others.”

Noria angrily replied, “You have never fought for what you believe in! You have never tried to personally bring justice to the guilty! You are a coward because you refused to fight, even when you had little to fear.”

Phalanx called back, “I made my choice to abhor violence and to pursue peace. I have been tempted many times and never given in to my urges to hurt others. You are too wrapped up in punishing the guilty to think about how to prevent them from causing harm again while helping them see that what they did was wrong!”

Noria then shouted up, “Enough of this idle chit-chat! I have waited for this moment since the one who released Dormin fell into this world!” A long length of chain with a harpoon at the end formed above Noria’s “head.” She then fired the spike with unerring accuracy at Wander.

Wander screeched in pain as the harpoon impaled him through the chest and pulled him off of Phalanx’s back. Wander was yanked down to the tower while suffering through extreme pain.

Noria ripped the harpoon from Wander’s body, causing him to lose quite a bit of energy. Then, as Phalanx looked on in horror, Noria bashed Wander to the floor with her shield and impaled her sword into his stomach. She then fired red lightning into his body, wracking him with nightmarish pain. Noria shouted at Phalanx, “This man lost his fiancé to an unjust and misguided act of murder. However, in response he took sixteen unrelated lives! Wander is undeniably guilty of sixteen counts of murder! Not to mention unleashing the grand spirit of death on the mortal world! Thankfully, the shaman Lord Emon redeemed himself by banishing Dormin back to this realm. However, the crimes committed by this murderer still stand. He will suffer here in my custody until I see fit to release him!”

Phalanx’s eyes turned orange as she shouted down to Noria, “You cannot do this! He has been trying to redeem himself! He has been carrying out his sentence as issued by Lord Malus. Lord Malus being the agreed upon leader of the aggrieved parties!”

Noria shot back, “He needs to suffer for his actions, undoing them is not good enough! Of course, if you would attack me and force me to release the criminal….”

Wander, despite the terrible pain he was in, saw exactly what Noria was now trying to do. She wanted Phalanx to attack her and therefore compromise her pacifist ideals. Wander did his best to tell Phalanx, “Don’t…do…it! She just wants you to betray your beliefs!”

Phalanx called back down, as she frantically circled the tower, “I have to save you, Wander! I got you into this!”

Noria then continued to torture Wander as she shouted up, “Yes, you have to save this pitiful wretch. The one who took your own life in cold blood. My main weapon is unusable for now, I am vulnerable. You can just come down here and….”

Phalanx seemed to have an epiphany and shouted down, “Noria, trying to obviously goad me into an attack does not suit you. Allow me to say this… if you keep Wander here, he will be unable to help the other four colossi and myself revive. We will all be absorbed into Dormin and likely doomed to endless torment. Is punishing Wander further really worth dooming the remaining colossi to suffer an unjust fate at the hands of the incarnation of death?”

Noria’s sword ceased glowing. She suddenly began to withdraw her blade from Wander. The grand
spirit stuttered, “How could I not have thought of that? By punishing him in my realm, I would be
dooming five sentient beings to a fate nobody deserves.”

As Noria allowed Wander to stand up, Phalanx added, “You would also be denying him his chance
at finishing his redemption. You have forgotten the ability of wrongdoers to change and grow,
Noria.”

Noria sighed deeply and said, “Maybe I did get too focused on punishment as a means to prevent
crime and reform criminals? I was using only fear rather than hope as a means of correcting
wrongdoers. Phalanx, it is ironic that your name is the same as a military formation, you know that?
You are quite committed to peace.”

Phalanx nodded her massive stone head and said, “I stand by my belief that violence only begets
more violence, even though I have learned that pacifism may not be for everyone.”

Noria told Phalanx, “I know that you do. Your ideals suit you well, even if I find them misguided.
Now, I am aware that you came here with the intention of being revived. I was not planning on
offering you a challenge. I just wanted you to deliver your killer to me and then possibly be forced to
rethink your hatred of violence. Now, it seems like you have reminded me of something important
that I forgot a long time ago. Because you taught me a valuable lesson, I will return you to life.”

Phalanx began to glow with a magnificent light. The draconic colossus told Wander, “Thank you for
not wanting me to abandon my ideals. I am sorry that I brought you into that trap, even if it was
completely by accident. I would like to think that you have become a better person via your contact
with us, just as we have come to understand you better. Now, all that remains is for you to help the
final four colossi revive. I have faith that you will complete your task.” Phalanx then disappeared in a
beautiful burst of brilliant light.

Noria seemed exhausted from the effort of reviving such a large colossus. She then looked down at
Wander and pointed over the plains towards a gargantuan cloud of roiling shadow with her sword.
Noria told Wander, “That dark cloud in the distance is Dormin reforming. You MUST make haste to
help the final few colossi escape. Only then, will you have atoned for your terrible crimes.”

Wander looked out across the plains and briefly studied the shadow cloud Noria spoke of. A slide
constructed from stone leading all the way down and out of Noria’s domain appeared
instantaneously. Wander nervously bowed to Noria and, wanting to leave her presence as quickly as
possible, jumped onto the slide.

As Wander slid out of Noria’s domain, he was admittedly worried about Dormin returning. He knew
that it would be truly terrible if any colossi were trapped in the Chthonic Realm with them. He had
been told so repeatedly. However, the question of what Dormin would do with him reared its head as
he neared the end of the slide.

When Wander found himself just outside of the shield dome protecting Noria’s domain, he saw
Celosia and Cenobia not far away. The two escort colossi spotted Wander having exited Noria’s
Domain and then made their way over to him.
Wander walked over to Celosia and Cenobia after having left the realm of Noria. As he approached his escorts, he heard Celosia call out, “How did it go with Phalanx?”

As Wander approached the two scout colossi, he sighed, “Better than it could have. The whole thing was a trap set by Noria to try and capture me. She wanted to punish me for my actions in life and tortured me with her power. Noria tried to goad Phalanx into attacking her to save me. However, Phalanx was able to convince her to release me without the use of violence.”

Celosia’s voice sounded legitimately concerned as she asked, “Are you alright now? It sounds like without Phalanx’s diplomatic skills, you would not have gotten out of there.”

Cenobia added, “Without you, the colossi still in this realm would be doomed to face Dormin. It seems like Phalanx might have saved that rest of us with her quick thinking.”

Wander told Celosia, as he walked over to mount her, “I am alright now. However, I cannot say that I enjoyed Noria’s torture. And yes, Phalanx both saved herself and gave the rest of you a chance to revive by convincing Noria to let me go. Her words ended up having quite a rapid and profound impact on Noria.”

As Wander mounted Celosia, Cenobia said, “Phalanx was never quite like the rest of us. She was always kinder and more forgiving. I am honestly quite relieved that she is now safe from Dormin. None of us deserve their wrath, but she was always the most innocent among our kind.”

Celosia happily exclaimed, “Now, we are three-fourths done! We are now off to meet with Argus!”

Argus was Malus’s lieutenant and the penultimate colossus whom he had slain. He also wondered how Malus was to be revived, since the titanic shaman was unable to move from where he stood.

Celosia and Cenobia made a beeline for the region where the terrain had become strange and distorted. Above the plains farther to the south, they could all see crackling lightning made of spiritual energy as a series of black clouds seemed to be coalescing. Wander could not help but point out, “That is where Noria said that Dormin is reforming.”

Celosia replied, “We know, Dormin is getting stronger as their power coalesces in this realm, their home world. We need to escape before they become strong enough to seek us out. Lord Malus will be the last colossus left here, other than the two of us, once Argus is revived.”

Cenobia added, “That is why we must make haste and finish what we started. It could end up being close, but we need to make sure nobody is left behind with Dormin. To say they will be angry with us is to say the least.”

Having neared his location, the trio saw the massive humanoid sentry Argus walking towards them and away from the nearest light shield.

Argus reached Celosia, Cenobia and Wander. He then looked down and said, “I am ready. Lord Malus is nearing the completion of his summoning ritual and has ordered me to be revived before him.”

Cenobia asked, as Wander dismounted Celosia, “I assume that you did not like the idea of leaving your lord here without you?”
Argus responded, “You are right, Cenobia. I despised that idea and asked to stay here while he got revived multiple times. However, Lord Malus insisted the I leave before him. He intends to be the last colossus out before you two are to meet with the grand spirit Sirius farther down these plains.”

Celosia nodded as Wander walked over to Argus. She then said, “We will be waiting for Wander here, as usual. So far, Lord Malus’s plan has been working brilliantly. Only four of us remain in this realm and Dormin is not yet fully active.”

Argus simply responded, “Of course our Lord’s plan is working. I never doubted it for a moment.” Argus then kneeled down and allowed Wander to jump up into his hand that was not holding a weapon.

Argus turned and then began to trudge towards the light shield in the distance. As he did so, he told Wander, “You should know that I still do not trust you. You still served Dormin, even if you are working towards atonement now. They commanded our loyalty for far too long and should have stayed sealed so that they could harm no one else. We paid our price for following them, you had no right to go around undoing our sacrifice.”

Wander shrugged off Argus’s criticism. He had heard that kind of talk from the colossi before.

Argus continued, “Despite your misdeeds, I will give you one thing, young hunter. By killing me you did free my mind and all of our minds from Dormin’s influence. I was reduced to a mere beast, a violent animal, when Dormin corrupted my mind.”

Wander tried to change the subject by asking, “You sure are loyal to Malus. Were you built to be his servant?”

Argus chuckled a bit and responded, “No, I was built to be the guardian of the city that you found me in. I became as loyal to Lord Malus as I am over a great length of time. Loyalty has to be earned. Malus earned the loyalty of our kind through great wisdom, compassion and strength of character. He was never meant to be our leader and ‘spokesman.’ However, he assumed that position through proving himself time and time again. It was Malus who proved his worthiness to lead and Dormin who proved their unworthiness to rule.”

It was very clear to Wander at that point that the colossi all had no love left for their original creator. As the duo approached the light shield, Argus continued, “We are going to challenge the grand spirit Pholux. Lord Malus says that he is the grand spirit of temptation. He is said to be a malevolent cousin to Orag, who Barba challenged. Be on your guard, Pholux is said to conniving, sadistic and loves to undo his victims’ beliefs.”

Wander nodded, wondering if this confrontation would take the form of a challenge designed by Pholux, or a direct fight akin to the battles with Desat and Aberth.

Argus advanced forward as fast as he could toward the shield of light and then went right through the barrier. Inside of the light shield, they found a beautiful and pristine environment that looked like the place where Wander had battled Argus in life. There seemed to be soul forms walking around the city on various business.

Wander suggested, as Argus was looking around, “You did say that Pholux is the grand spirit of temptation. Maybe this is his way of trying to mess with you?”

Argus seemed to nod, offering, “This could all be an illusion that Pholux has conjured in order to distract us. We need to find him and challenge him as soon as possible.” As they began to
hunt around for the source of the illusory city, Argus mentioned to Wander, “Before I knew of your motivation for slaying us, I thought that you were possibly some sort of mercenary, loyal to no one but yourself. However, your defense during the sentencing intrigued me. It seems as though you were loyal to your slain fiancé and that drove you to aid Dormin. Am I correct in saying that?”

Wander nodded, telling Argus as the duo kept looking for Pholux, “I was loyal to Mono to a fault. When she was taken from me and the living world, I was caught up in a whirlwind of grief because I had not been able to save her life. I would have easily given up my life so that she could live if I had been given the opportunity to do so.”

Argus admitted, “That is real loyalty. You must have loved her so. For us, it was love of our people that drove us to sacrifice our freedom, and eventually our minds, to seal Dormin away. Lord Malus did not force any of us to make the choice. However, in the end, we all did, even if it was hard for many of us. Your home was probably populated by the descendants of those who had once lived under Dormin’s rule. You benefited from our sacrifice, even without knowing it.”

Wander had not fully realized how his own life had been affected by Dormin’s sealing before he had traveled to meet with the grand spirit and then made a pact with them. As he was thinking his connection with Dormin and the colossi over, Argus stopped walking.

A black and red figure a little over twice Wander’s height had flown out from behind some columns. The figure had bat-like wings and sharp claws. His head was adorned with two horns. The being said, his voice high-pitched and sharp, “One of the lives created by death and then snuffed out to benefit the same has entered my realm.” The being bowed to Argus while still flying.

Argus plainly asked the creature, “Are you Pholux?”

The imp responded, “At your service, colossus. If I am correct, you call yourself Argus?”

Argus responded, “I do not have much time for pleasantries, Pholux. I have come here to face your challenge and gain some of your power to escape this realm and Dormin’s wrath. What would you have me do?”

Pholux giggled a bit and then told Argus, “I think that a simple challenge can be arranged. All I want for you to do is defeat my champion.…”

A tower sprouted up in the middle of the city’s massive main street. The soul forms all dissipated as the tower transformed into the spitting image of Malus. The illusory Malus made no signs of its nature as a figment, it looked exactly like the lord of the colossi.

Wander realized that Pholux seemed to be toying with Argus. However, he soon realized that Argus was simply standing in front of the image, unable to attack it.

Malus’s voice called out from within the illusion, “Strike me down, Argus and you will gain the power of Pholux!”

Argus seemed quite anxious. He got onto to one knee and said, “My Lord, I could never attack you…I…”

“Malus” chuckled as Wander was about to tell Argus to snap out of it and attack the illusion. The titanic illusion reached out a hand and blasted Wander from Argus’s free hand using an energy fireball like the ones Malus had slung when Wander had battled him.

Wander was knocked to the ground and then bombarded with fireballs, as “Malus” laughed.
The illusion declared, “I will blast our slayer into near nothingness as his punishment. You have learned well not to attack your master, Argus.”

Wander used a burst of soul power to dash towards a nearby wall and then tried to take cover. He was about to call out to Argus, when the sentry colossus stood up, his eyes now orange.

Argus pointed his generated blade at “Malus” and called out, “Lord Malus does not own me and he is well aware of that fact! You are starting to sound like Dormin, thinking that us colossi are mere tools to be used or discarded by their ‘master!’”

Argus advanced on the Malus illusion and raised his cleaver, taking a number of hits from fireballs on the way. He then continued, “I follow my Lord because of the values he represents, not because he simply is who he is!”

Argus then drove his cleaver knife into the illusory Malus. A blast of bright light erupted from where the massive figment had been impaled. The Malus illusion quickly and harmlessly exploded in a shower of radiant light.

Floating, exhausted, in place of “Malus” was Pholux. The grand spirit said, “On second thought, I am already drained enough from that illusion as it is. I think I will not grant you any of my power.” Pholux immediately started to fly towards the nearest wall, trying to flee from Wander and Argus.

Wander called out, “Oh no you don’t!” He then charged up a large bolt of soul energy using his arm-bow. His shot nailed Pholux and shot him out of the sky and onto one of the stone platforms above.

Argus then told Wander, “You need to go after him! I will try and catch up as best as I can!”

Wander nodded and then began to rapidly climb the walls. He used bursts of soul power to run up the walls and jet through the air. Wander admitted to himself that the best thing about being in the Chthonic Realm was that he could do things that would have been impossible in life. He was not clumsy, at least by the standards of elite archers, in the afterlife, like he had been as a mortal. Wander quickly made it up to the stone platform where Pholux was recovering from the charged shot.

Pholux turned around and then fired a series of small fireballs at Wander. The young hunter burst out of the way and shot a series of rapid-fire bolts from his soul bow into Pholux. As Pholux prepared to move back and continue firing, Wander tackled the imp off of the building and to the ground. Wander landed on top of Pholux and then rolled out of the way to allow Argus to stomp on him with one of his hoof-shaped feet.

Pholux was now partially crushed under Argus’s foot. The grand spirit shouted, “Alright, you win!”

Argus began to glow with a brilliant light as Wander kept his soul bow trained on Pholux. The sentry colossus looked down at Wander and said, “Thank you for catching him for me. I think he was the first grand spirit to offer a challenge and then refuse to honor the result. You may have heard this before, but I will watch over Mono if I happen to see her in the mortal world. Just get Lord Malus and the two scouts out….” Argus disappeared in a flash of blinding light before he could finish his statement.

Pholux looked over at Wander and sneered, “Time is ticking down before Dormin gets here. I am too weak to fight or aid you, just leave this place and see if you can complete your ‘atonement.’”
Wander simply nodded at Pholux and left the grand spirit’s domain. As he was leaving, he remembered that only two challenges remained. However, he had failed to steal the transferred energy in every challenge so far. Maybe he was doomed to be trapped in the Chthonic Realm. However, if that was so, he was at least going to finish what he started and get the last three colossi safely out. Besides, he hated the idea of Celosia being doomed to face Dormin, even if she had Cenobia beside her.

Wander soon returned to his escorts, who had been waiting just outside of Pholux’s domain. They seemed to be in a hurry to retrieve him and reach Malus.
Wander had just returned to Celosia and Cenobia after helping to revive Argus. Celosia walked over to him and lowered herself a bit, letting Wander mount her.

Cenobia announced, “We are going to set off for Lord Malus immediately. We are the last three colossi remaining and Dormin is nearly ready to act against us. I have no doubt that they know what has been going on and will want to seize the souls of any of us who remain in this world.”

Wander looked back as he got on top of Celosia. He saw the dark clouds in the distance were actually getting smaller and taking on a, hunched-over, vaguely humanoid form. Wander hung on tightly as the two escort colossi set off for the place where Malus stood at top speed.

As the trio set off to reach Malus, they could hear the shaman colossus’s voice in their minds, saying, “I have nearly finished my ritual. Make your way to my position and then our plan will be nearly finished. So far, it has been a stunning success.”

Wander held on as tightly as he could to Celosia’s upper body armor as she carried him across the plain and towards a land bridge leading over the river.

As Wander held onto Celosia, he asked her something he should have asked a while ago, “Celosia, why was it that we I fought you in life you were so afraid of fire?”

Celosia’s yes turned orange briefly and she sighed deeply. The scout colossus replied, “I knew intellectually that the fire could not really harm me. However, I had seen fire harm so many mortals in centuries past that I began to fear its destructive power. Also, the essence of Dormin within me exacerbated me fear of fire. Dormin’s essence allowed you to force me off of that cliff by exploiting my existing fear.”

Cenobia looked over at Wander and sternly asked, “Why would you bring up how you slew my sister again? We have been starting to warm up to you, honestly.”

Wander looked and felt somewhat guilty. He responded, “I am sorry, I just wanted to know the answer. I guess that Dormin really did corrupt your minds. Do not worry, I will finish my atonement and see you all out of this world.” For the most part, Wander meant what he said that time.

As the trio approached the land bridge, Cenobia mentioned to Celosia, “You know that if we are too late, if Dormin reforms before we can challenge Sirius and get revived, I will try to hold them off to save you, even if they catch you eventually. I let you get killed in the first place, so I feel that I have a responsibility to grant you freedom from Dormin, even if it only lasts for a short while.”

Celosia shook her head and asked Cenobia, “Do you really think I will run? No, we will face down Dormin together if it comes to it. We will at least be happy in the knowledge that we helped our kin to escape the Chthonic realm. Dormin, might catch us. However, they have still failed to absorb the souls of most of the colossi, thanks to Wander and the two of us.”

As Wander overheard the exchange between the two scout colossi, he could not help but feel concerned for them. He honestly hoped that the two of them would not be forced to face Dormin. If they were unable to revive in time, then he might have to stand with them against the incarnation of death. The loyalty that the two creatures felt towards each other had been astonishing at first. However, he had learned to accept it over time. These two colossi always wanted to be there for
Celosia and Cenobia were thundering across the landscape of the Chthonic Realm. They quickly reached a land bridge leading across the river and ran across it, determined to reach Malus as soon as possible.

As Wander hung onto to Celosia’s back while she sped toward Malus along with her brother, he saw what appeared to be a massive sphere of light descending slowly from the sky towards Malus. Wander realized that Malus was somehow bringing the realm of the next grand spirit to him. That had to be the purpose of the ritual that the Lord of the colossi had spoken of earlier.

Malus’s voice echoed in Wander’s head, saying, “You have now interacted with each and every one of my kind. Do you see now why we did what we did? Why Dormin had to be stopped and how we suffered?”

Wander did not have much trouble responding, “Yes, I have come to understand you all in a way that I never expected to. I am actually glad that I could help so many of your kind to escape this realm. I just hope that if Mono is up there in the mortal realm that you all fulfill your end of the bargain and ensure that she is kept safe.”

Malus responded, “I am sure that none of us will harm her. And, since you were wondering this about all of my kind, I was built as a coastal defense colossus. I was intended to smash invading ships to pieces with blasts of energy like the ones I slung at you. I was never meant to lead my kind, I ended up assuming that position over time through earning the respect of most of the others. However, I will say that among my kind, only Barba is older than I am.”

Wander realized that Malus had been telepathically overhearing many of his conversations with the other colossi. He was just glad that Malus seemed unaware of his earlier intent to betray the colossi.

The orb of light came down from the sky and reached the ground. Malus and Wander were now surrounded by a massive orb of light. Celosia and Cenobia were both standing just outside of the sphere. The only other being present inside of the sphere of pure white light was a floating figure that looked like a wise old male shaman. The shaman was wearing a cloak akin to the one Lord Emon had worn.
Malus called out to the hovering shaman, “Great and mighty Supren, most ancient of the grand spirits and patron of leaders, shamans and respected elders. I have called you here to gain some of your power so that I may escape this realm.”

The old shaman nodded, responding, “It is about time we finally met, Malus. Dormin’s reign on the material world had gone unchecked for too long when your kind aided my rebellion.”

Malus seemed surprised and asked Supren, “What do you mean by your rebellion?”

Supren smiled and then declared, “It was I who placed rebellious thoughts in the heads of those who first wished to oppose Dormin. I also empowered those who led the rebellion with some of my magic. Why else would the symbol of those rebels and their successors be my sigil? Of course, I want to hinder Dormin again now, since they are no friend of mine. However, I do have a question for you, Malus.”

Malus asked Supren, “Very well, what is your question?”

Supren asked, “What would your kind have done if I had not decided to inspire a mortal rebellion against Dormin? Would you have eventually taken the lead on stopping the grand spirit of death? Conversely, would they have continued to reign over their material domain without opposition from the colossi without my incitement?”

Malus seemed to think Supren’s question over for a moment. He then answered, “The truth is, great Supren, that it does not really matter now whether or not we would have aided our people without your actions. However, I would like to think that we would have aided them and helped to overthrow Dormin without your prodding eventually.”

Supren seemed to nod and mentioned to Malus, “That answer is satisfactory for the time being. However, seeing as though you need a challenge, there is a theory I have wanted to test for a long time. That being spiritual energy transference to bolster a soul’s powers. Malus, I believe that you are powerful enough, even here, to help see if my theory can work in practice.”

Supren began to chant and an enormous sigil, around half Malus’s height, appeared in front of him. Supren told Malus, “I think you know what I am talking about, since you have studied magic for centuries. Now, let us make this more interesting….”

The massive sigil began to fire pulses of energy at Malus from its six ends. Malus began to intercept a portion of the bombardment with his own fireballs. He shouted to Wander, “Jump down into one of my hands!”

Wander asked, as he tried to destroy some of the incoming pulses with soul arrows, “Why? What was Supren talking about?”

Malus shouted, “Just trust me! I only hope that I can make this work.”

Wander jumped off of Malus’s head and was caught by one of the shaman colossus’s hands. Malus used his other hand to blast away at the pulses coming towards his head and upper chest.

Malus suddenly threw Wander right towards the sigil, shouting, “Aim for the very center! I will help you destroy this construct!”

Wander used quick bursts of soul power to evade the sigil’s pulses and take aim at the very center of the colossal symbol. Wander ended up conjuring a long blade of spiritual energy from one hand, ready to strike his target. As Wander neared the sigil, Malus called out, “Here I go! Hit the center with one strike and it should dispel it!”
Wander felt a massive surge of golden energy surround his body, the young warrior felt overcharged with spiritual power as he held out his blade and rocketed towards the center of the sigil. Wander quickly reached his target and stabbed the center of the sigil with his soul blade.

The massive construct blew apart in a shower of energy. Wander fell towards the ground, but was able to use his temporarily increased soul power to fly down and land gracefully close to Malus. Wander then looked back over to Malus and saw that the leader of the colossi was slumped over, exhausted from whatever he had just done. Wander began to walk over to where Malus stood, seeing how tired the colossus was.

The voice of Supren suddenly echoed out, “Well done Malus! It seems that even though that drained quite a bit of your power, the transfer allowed you to impart enough power to this human’s soul that he was able to destroy my construct in one blow. Yes, he attacked the weakest point on it. However, my theory is still proven in practice. I hope that the results prove useful to both of us in the future.”

Malus slowly stood up straight and told Supren, “That was exhausting. However, the concept of an experienced shaman granting power to another is fascinating. I wonder if one of us could even act as a conduit to transfer a huge amount of soul power from one group of creatures to another group or individual?”

Supren nodded again, saying, “It might require further study. Still, we will have to undertake that separately. You have completed my challenge and therefore I will revive you now.”

Malus’s towering body began to glow with a brilliant light. He looked down at Wander, saying, “Thank you for your help in that impromptu experiment. All that is left for you do is help Celosia and Cenobia to revive. Then, your redemption will be complete. Meet with them and go to the realm of Sirius, the grand spirit of travel.”

Wander looked up at Malus and saluted him. The leader of the colossi added, “One last thing, when I was telepathically speaking with Celosia earlier, she said that…. Malus vanished in a brilliant blast of pure light before he could finish. Wander was left wondering what Malus had been trying to tell him about Celosia.

The realm of Supren began to lift up into the sky once again. Supren turned to Wander and told him, “I know that you wanted to betray them at first. However, you now seem to have learned quite a bit from them. …I sense that Dormin is almost completely reformed. They will soon be able to act to try and stop you from completing your atonement. Go to your escorts and see if you can finish what you started. …Sirius awaits you.”

Wander bowed to Supren as the grand spirit’s realm lifted up into the sky and away from where Malus had stood. Wander soon saw Celosia and Cenobia running towards him. Wander ran to his two escorts, he now had a question to ask Celosia.
Wander had returned to Celosia and Cenobia for what was sure to be the final time. The two scout colossi who had served as Wander’s escorts charged up to him. Celosia kneeled down to allow Wander to mount her. They were about to make a journey across the plains to meet with Sirius, the grand spirit that the three of them would challenge.

As Wander quickly got on to Celosia’s back, he asked, “As Malus was reviving, he started to tell me that you had told him something. It seemed to be important. Do you have any idea what it was?”

Cenobia looked inquisitively over at Celosia as the two scout colossi began to make their way to the land bridge that would take them to the plains across the river.

Celosia was deep in thought as she carried Wander forward. She slowly said, “Once we had gotten to know you better and you had already helped many of us to revive, I might have told Lord Malus that I would miss you once I was out of this realm.”

Cenobia would have been gaping if he had a traditional mouth. He asked his sister, “You told our leader that you would miss our killer once he had finished his atonement?”

Celosia admitted, “He has been doing his best to fulfill his sentence. He has helped fourteen out of sixteen of us to escape this place so far. Because of his aid, the vast majority of our kind are no longer in danger from Dormin!”

Cenobia sighed gruffly and added, “I must admit that I have been getting attached to our former enemy myself. He seems to have matured over the time that he has spent with us colossi.”

Wander chimed in, “Honestly, I am sincerely flattered by the kind words from both of you. I never expected to feel mutual respect with any of your kind when you first caught me.”

Cenobia said, “I am glad that we could all learn to get along. However, we are not finished with carrying out Lord Malus’s plan just yet. As we approach the realm of Sirius, we will be coming very close to where Dormin is reforming. We have to be quick, as they will want to snatch our souls.”

Celosia added, “I am sure that you have heard this already quite a few times, Wander. But keep in mind that Dormin has been getting more and more enraged every time one of us that escapes their grasp. They believe we deserve severe punishment, but even Dormin cannot comprehend how horrible that fate would be.”

Wander had come to realize how alien Dormin’s mind was. He said, “I made a deal with you all to see you freed from death itself. I will do my best to carry out that deal until you two are safe from Dormin.”

Celosia and Cenobia were both pleased with Wander’s proclaimed desire to see them escape the Chthonic Realm. With that, they crossed the land bridge and sprinted at full speed across the plains toward the final dome of light, the one that marked the realm of Sirius.

Wander was somewhat aware of Sirius. He knew that travelers and nomads were known to honor and worship the grand spirit. Sirius was said to be a cousin of Kyos, oddly enough, and was known to represent travel and speed. Sirius was similar to Kyos because he was a planner and did not make trips, or do anything, in haste. What concerned Wander was that Dormin was reforming
not far from where Sirius laired. In the distance, Wander and his escorts could see tendrils of black, shadowy energy leading into a hulking humanoid figure that at first had seemed lethargic, but was now starting to move around with great impatience.

Cenobia said, “That has to be Dormin. They will be at almost full power when those tendrils disappear, absorbed into their whole. Once they are ready, they will advance on us, even if we are in the realm of Sirius.”

Celosia added, “We have no time to waste! We have cut this close enough as it is. We just need to reach Sirius and get him to revive the two of us before Dormin storms that realm.”

Wander beheld the distant shape raising up its arms and sending them crashing down to the ground. The seemingly misaimed attack appeared to have weakened Dormin. The slam summoned a number of shadowy humanoid figures, which began to emerge from the ground around Celosia and Cenobia.

Cenobia called out, “They are trying to stop us from reaching Sirius!”

Celosia quickly replied, “We do not have time to fight them all! We need to outrun them, only destroying the ones that we need to!”

The two scout colossi rushed into an area where there were fewer shadow souls. The colossi bashed right through their enemies as the other dark figures started to shamble forward towards them.

Wander generated a pair of soul bows, holding on to Celosia as best as he could with his legs. He rapidly turned around and began to unleash a bombardment of spiritual arrows at the advancing shadow souls. Many of the figures dissipated from Wander’s attacks. Still more of them kept shambling towards the two scout colossi.

Thankfully, Celosia and Cenobia were both much faster than their pursuers. The shadow souls soon faded back into the ground because they could not catch up to the two scout colossi.

Cenobia said, “Stay on your guard, Dormin might try to send out more of those things to engage us and slow us down.”

As they continued to advance on the light dome that contained Sirius’s inner sanctum, Celosia suggested, “What if they don’t send out more? Since that tactic did not work the first time and cost Dormin some energy, they might just wait to finish reforming, rather than taking the risk of sending out more attackers.”

Wander realized that Dormin probably wanted to maximize their chances of catching Celosia and Cenobia in the Chthonic Realm. So, Celosia’s suggestion was valid.

The trio continued to make their way towards the light shield. In the distance, they could see Dormin growing larger as more and more shadowy energy coalesced into their main body. Thankfully, Celosia and Cenobia reached the light shield before Dormin seemed ready to move on them. But it was still obvious that their time was running out because Dormin was nearly ready to advance.

Once the three of them reached the light barrier, Wander dismounted Celosia. Then, he put one hand firmly on each of the armored scout colossi. The three of them walked together through the barrier and into the realm of Sirius.

The trio found themselves in a massive open plain with lush green tall grass as far as they could see. Standing before them was a being about twice the size of Celosia and Cenobia. The
The creature looked like an oversized armored boar and had a faint white glow surrounding his entire body.

The boar looked over at the new arrivals and said in a voice like that of an adult male human, “Welcome. I have been expecting you for quite some time. Ever since Kyos informed me of what has been happening, I have been preparing myself and my realm for your arrival.”

Cenobia stepped forward and asked the boar, “Are you Sirius? If you are, we are here to challenge you for some of your power and have no time to waste.”

Sirius nodded and declared, “Yes, I am he. Now, as for my challenge… any one of you three must make physical contact with me, dispelling the energy around my body, in order for you to gain some of my power.”

Cenobia readied himself to lunge at Sirius as the ground began to shake and a series of platforms of earth and grass flew up from the ground, creating a vast obstacle course. A series of spiritual nomads carrying blades appeared on some of the platforms.

Wander quickly mounted Celosia and then the two scout colossi surged forward. Sirius leapt onto a lower platform and began to sprint and leap away from Wander and the two colossi.

Wander soon realized that Sirius had planned an optimal route through the flying maze he had prepared. Even as Celosia and Cenobia made their way onto the lower platforms and began to chase Sirius, he was getting far ahead of them, despite being slower due to his larger size.

Cenobia called out, “I will go after Sirius! Celosia, carry Wander behind me and have him shoot the spiritual guardians to clear a path for me!”

Celosia shouted back, “On it! Wander, take careful aim. We cannot afford to have you miss.”

Cenobia began to take a route, jumping from one platform to another, that led right through where the bulk of the guardians stood. Celosia followed him with Wander on her back. Wander timed his shots carefully to dispel the spiritual guardians that stood in Cenobia’s way. They all knew that Cenobia could probably deal with the humanoid beings. However, none of them wanted to be slowed down at all. Both the rapidly reforming Dormin and the challenge that they had been given mandated the best possible timing.

As the two scout colossi chased Sirius, trying to follow the path that he had taken, they began to see that the platform course was about to end. They all were running out of platforms; no new ones had appeared past the current end point.

Cenobia was closing in on Sirius as the grand spirit approached the last platform. Wander kept eliminating the spiritual guardians in Cenobia’s way as the lion colossus tried to catch up to Sirius.

Sirius called back, “You all are doing much better than I thought! We are nearly to the end.”

Celosia shouted to Cenobia, “Be careful, he might double back and make us chase him the other way!”

Cenobia nodded as Sirius landed on the final platform. He made a leap for Sirius. In mid-jump, he noticed that there was a closer platform that he should have jumped from instead. Cenobia fell to the ground and lay there, severely dazed and unable to get up.

Celosia had been following Cenobia, so she ended up at the wrong platform as well. She saw
that Sirius was about to double back and continue the chase. Now, Celosia was without her brother and unlikely to catch up. She shouted, “Wander, let go of me!”

Celosia rapidly flung Wander forward as far as she could and then collapsed, exhausted. Wander used his soul power to burst ahead and fly right towards Sirius. The grand spirit tried to get out of the way. Wander adjusted his trajectory and managed to brush Sirius with one of his hands as he landed on the platform where the grand spirit stood.

Wander’s touch dispelled the field of energy around Sirius, and the platforms all slowly lowered to the ground. Sirius turned to Wander as both scout colossi were trying to get up and enthusiastically declared, “Congratulations champion! You have completed my challenge and earned your revival!”

Wander was surprised to see that his body had begun to glow with a brilliant light. He looked over at Celosia and Cenobia who were still both trying to drag themselves up. Wander knew what he had to do, despite wanting to escape death and see Mono again. He had to complete his atonement. Wander shouted, “Wait! Sirius, I slew these two creatures in life! They deserve their lives back more than I do! They were the ones who came here to be revived. If they are not returned to life, Dormin will consume their souls. Please, revive them, not me.”

Sirius looked at Wander and assented, “As you wish. They will be returned to life.”

Wander ceased to glow and then Celosia and Cenobia began to glow with a brilliant light. Wander told the two scout colossi, “When we first made our deal, I was actually planning to betray you. Now, I am glad that I didn’t. Go back to the material realm, live your lives and tell Mono the truth about what I did if she is alive up there.”

Cenobia responded, “I should have known that you were planning to betray us at first. I just want you to know that I think you made the right choice. You have honestly grown as a person since arriving in this realm. I am truly sorry that you will be left here. Your atonement is now finished.”

Celosia ran towards Wander and looked him in the eyes. As she began to fade away, she shouted, “No, Cenobia, we cannot just leave him here! Dormin will come for him as soon as they are reformed! Wander, we WILL find a way to come back for you! Lord Malus will have to do something for you after all you have done for us!”

Wander reassured Celosia, “It will be okay. I will face Dormin if I must. It is what I deserve. Just go and don’t worry about me.”

Celosia and Cenobia faded away. As Celosia disappeared, she uttered, “Wander, you should know that I cannot do that…."

After the two scout colossi vanished, Sirius turned back to Wander and informed him, “You did something extremely noble. Unfortunately, I cannot protect you from Dormin, especially when I am as weak as I am now. Best of luck to you.”

Wander bowed to Sirius and walked out of the grand spirit’s realm. The young hunter passed through the light shield and immediately saw the hulking black humanoid with piercing blue eyes surging towards him. Dormin had reformed.
The One Who was Honest

Mono’s  POV:

Mono dashed down the spiral ramps along with Argo. She was terrified after what she had seen on the upper level. She was completely and utterly bewildered about what the horned baby actually was. All that she knew was that it had begun to fade slightly, startling her and driving her to run away from it.

Remembering that there was a sword left in the pool of water where she had found the baby, Mono rushed to the pool. She had never been trained to fight, but she wanted to have something to protect herself with in the strange land in which she found herself. Mono found the sword and picked it up, examining it carefully. It had a number of runes carved into it, but no energy emanated from its blade. She continued on towards the front of the Shrine. Mono once again noticed sixteen crumbled statues, eight on each side, positioned along the walls. One of the statues suddenly began to glow brilliantly. However, it did not rebuild itself.

Puzzled, Mono was looking at the glowing statue when she heard a strange noise outside the shrine. She walked up to the front of the structure where she had woken up and then looked out across the terrain surrounding the shrine.

Mono was taken aback as a flash of brilliant light erupted behind the cliff walls in the distance. Moments after the initial flash, Mono’s blood ran cold as a titanic humanoid carefully climbed down from the high canyon and started to make its way over to the shrine. This being looked to be made of stone, but was covered with some kind of fur. The creature was holding a massive club with one hand; its other hand was empty.

Argo whinnied, but she did not run. The horse seemed determined to stay with Mono. Mono ducked behind the altar, worried that if the monster spotted her, the walls of the shrine would be inadequate protection against its massive weapon.

The next few moments were a nightmare for Mono as she cowered behind the shrine with the mysterious sword in hand. The colossal minotaur’s thumping footsteps got closer and closer. She was utterly confused and terrified. She only wished that Wander was with her, wherever she was.

Mono peered over the altar to see that the creature was now right in front of the shrine. It seemed to be looking around. Mono heard Argo neigh again. Unfortunately, she could not quiet the horse, especially without making more noise.

The titanic beast carefully bent down onto one knee and then looked directly into Mono’s eyes. The young woman almost fainted when she saw the bright blue eyes of the giant. Mono said nothing, paralyzed with fear when a man’s voice echoed in her mind, “Someone is here. She must be the…. Oh, hello there.”
Clearly panicked, Mono pointed the sword at the colossus and asked, “What are you? Are you going to hurt me? Can you tell me what is going on and where we are?”

The minotaur responded, “Three questions, huh? Well, I am a…guardian of this place and my name is Valus. I am not going to hurt you….because as a guardian I am supposed to protect people unless provoked. As for what is going on, I was just returned to life and am now waiting for my fellow guardians to revive and join me. As for where we are, we are in the mortal world, on a southern peninsula that was once long abandoned.”

Mono had a feeling that this “Valus” was withholding information from her. However, she was still too afraid to ask the guardian for more answers. She was just relieved that the immense creature did not seem to wish her harm. Wanting to learn more, she decided to tell the minotaur, “There was a baby with horns in the pool of water at the other side of the shrine. I carried it to the top of this place after I woke up here. However, its body started to fade recently. I was so confused and scared that I ran down here. Do you have any idea what that baby is?”

Valus appeared to be thinking. His eyes rapidly flashed orange, soon returning to blue. The guardian beast told Mono, “I think I might know what that baby really is. I need you to be brave and go retrieve it for me. It is not a mortal being and likely cannot be destroyed. However, it should not be able to hurt you.”

Mono was afraid, but she did not want to anger the colossal guardian. She ran up the stairs to retrieve the “baby.” Mono reached the top of the shrine with Argo and found the “baby.” The horned infant was lying exactly where Mono had dropped him. She picked up the entity and rapidly carried it downstairs to Valus.

After coming down the spiral ramps and walking through the shrine, Mono laid the “baby” down on the altar where she had woken up. Valus saw the “infant” and seemed to be inspecting it.

Valus said, “We can do nothing but wait. When this entity fades completely, time will be up for the rest of my kind.”

Mono was confused and then asked Valus, “It sounds like you were dead before, who or what slew you? How could anyone slay a creature like yourself?”

Valus responded, “I am not so sure I should tell you about that. Suffice to say that I hope that the rest of my kind return to this world soon. A terrible fate awaits them if they fail to do so. By the way, do you happen to have any knowledge of hat-making?”

Mono was unsure why Valus had mentioned hats. Her situation was only getting stranger. She shook her head no. That had never been something she had learned how to do.

Mono had no idea how much time had passed before a second statue began to glow with energy. Valus stood up and turned around as a massive cloud of energized material flew through the air and started to form into the shape of what Mono thought was a bull. Mono’s jaw dropped as the materials transformed into a massive stone bovine with two giant horns. The bull’s eyes lit up in his head as Valus turned to him.

The great bull declared, “Well, that worked! I am back to life and no longer trapped in that beachside cave to boot!”

Valus seemed pleased, saying, “Quadratus, it is good to see you again. Take a look at the being on the altar. Do you think it is what I think it is?”
A number of birds had begun to circle the heads of the colossal guardians, some of them landing atop the mammoth creatures. Quadratus then looked over at the infant and exclaimed, “Yes, I believe that this entity represents how much of Dormin is still tied to this world. Once it disappears, our foe will have fully returned to the Chthonic Realm.”

Upon hearing Quadratus’s statement, Mono exclaimed, “Wait, I remember being sacrificed to stop Dormin from returning!”

Valus telepathically sighed loudly as Quadratus exclaimed, “Those idiots called themselves Shamans! Lord Malus will be so embarrassed when we tell him what…. Oh, hello there.”

Mono asked, “Did Dormin return even though I was sacrificed? Clearly you two are not on their side.”

Valus and Quadratus had a private telepathic conversation as the horse was quite skittish around the two giants. Quadratus turned to Mono and told her, “Sorry miss, this is official guardian business. Just know that you will be safe here. We will protect you if anything comes along. By chance, are you interested in art? I will need an assistant for some of the things I have planned. You don’t have to answer immediately; we have plenty of time.”

Mono was utterly dumbfounded. She was not sure if she was even alive at that point. However, her stab wound had at least healed and her fiancé’s horse was with her.

As Mono was contemplating how to get more information from the giants and why one of them wanted to be an artist, a third statue began to glow and another cloud of materials flew over to a nearby spot and formed into a giant warrior with a pillar-like sword replacing one of his hands. Valus and Quadratus were quite pleased as the warrior looked down at Mono and then at the infant. The three beings were holding a private conversation in their minds.

Mono asked the three colossi, “This horse belongs to my fiancé, a young man named Wander. Do any of you know what happened to him?”

The warrior responded, “Other than the animals, we should be the only beings here. I am sorry if you lost your love. Still, we will make sure that you are safe.”

Mono was sure that she could not return home after what had happened. They might sacrifice her all over again. Also, there did not seem to be a way out of the strange land that she was now in. At least by land there was no way out because of the massive cliffs far away and the crumbled bridge.

Quadratus told Mono, “This is Gaius. He is another guardian of this land. We will attend to you once all of us have returned to life. Until then, we will not be able to focus on you. We are greatly concerned for the rest of our kind.”

Mono frowned, unwilling to forcefully question the giant guardians, but sure that they were not being entirely truthful with her.

Soon a fourth guardian shaped like a massive skeletal horse appeared and sat herself down. This one looked down at Argo and told her, “You have nothing to fear from us now. We will not try and harm you.”

A series of small brushes of telepathic force “petted” the warhorse. The colossal horse told Mono, “We might be imposing, but we are honor bound to ensure your safety.” Mono felt that she was safe with these immense beings. But the fact that at least one of them recognized Wander’s horse
all but confirmed that the colossi had something to do with Wander.

Later a massive bird flew over the landscape and perched atop the shrine. The skeletal horse, who had introduced herself as Phaedra, told the winged giant, “Avion, it is wonderful to see you again! You will probably want to scout the area to make sure all of our kind are present when they revive. Not all of us will have the wisdom to reincarnate here at the Shrine of Worship.”

Avion replied, “Understood. It looks like the young woman is indeed alive. That is good to see.” She then took off on an aerial patrol.

Mono looked up, impressed with the great bird. She realized that the colossi probably knew that she had been dead. They were not always clever enough to conceal their telepathic conversations from her.

Over what felt like the next few hours, Avion reported that a being known as “Barba” had revived outside of his temple. Quadratus led Mono to look down at the beach where he had been trapped. Once they reached the cliffside, a series of materials flew into the nearby ocean and formed into a colossal sea serpent with three spines on her back. The sea serpent telepathically called out, “Quadratus! There you are…. I see there is someone with you as well.” As the two colossi held a telepathic private conversation, Mono realized that these creatures were all acting like old friends.

Avion soon reported that “Kuromori” and “Basaran” had been revived. She said that Kuromori was no longer stuck in the colosseum, whatever that meant. Mono soon found the group near the massive shrine joined by Kuromori, who turned out to be a huge gecko with energy crackling from inside of his body.

Kuromori proclaimed, “More than half of us are out! I knew that I would make it back to life…. even if I had help.”

Avion added, “Lord Malus’s plan is working out perfectly so far.”

Mono nervously asked, “Who is this Lord Malus?”

Avion replied, “He is our leader. He is also the one of us who came up with the plan that has allowed us to be here with you right now.”

Mono simply nodded back up at Avion, hoping that the colossal guardians would be more willing to tell her the truth when they were all returned to life.

Avion later reported in that “Dirge” had been revived and was now talking with Basaran. Every time that a colossus was revived, the present ones cheered telepathically. They seemed genuinely happy and relieved every time one of their comrades returned to life.

Mono saw another massive creature forming soon after Avion returned from another patrol. This one had no eyes and two mammoth tusks. It almost looked like a mutant lobster. The creature moved awkwardly on land, stumbling around. From where she was sitting, Phaedra happily called out, “Pelagia has been revived, everyone!”

Pelagia looked down at Mono and then at Argo and telepathically exclaimed, “Dormin actually brought the horse back to life! The horse lives, guys!”

Mono knew that something had to have happened between Wander and the colossi. She was very close to demanding an explanation from the assembled guardians.

Pelagia was strangely happy to see Mono as well, despite having never met her. He started to
ask her all sorts of questions about the civilization where she had come from and was genuinely interested in hearing her answers. Mono hoped that the lobster-like creature was not just trying to distract her from finding out the truth as she tried to answer the questions as best as she could.

As Mono was busy chatting with Pelagia in front of the shrine, a titanic serpent-dragon flew over the area. The colossi all breathed telepathic sighs of relief as they saw the mighty creature fly over them. A woman’s voice called out telepathically from the flying snake, “I have returned. Our plan has nearly succeeded!”

The colossi all cheered and Avion declared, “I will head to Lord Malus’s cliffside and wait for him to reform. Argus will surely want to wait for him there once he revives.”

Avion set off south and would only return after some time had elapsed. Mono had not been keeping track of the idols. However, she knew that twelve beings had either appeared before her or been mentioned. There were only sixteen idols. Therefore, four colossi remained to be revived.

As Avion appeared once again in the distant sky, a booming voice echoed in the minds of the assembled colossi and Mono, “Argus and I have both revived. Our plan is almost complete! Now, only Celosia and Cenobia remain.”

At first the colossi rejoiced. Then Phaedra asked Mono, “Please check on the ‘baby’ you placed on the altar, I fear that our final two comrades are running out of time.”

Mono, still wanting to hear a full explanation of what had really happened, found that the “baby” had nearly completely faded out of existence. She shouted to the colossi, “It is nearly gone! It is about to fade away completely!”

The same booming voice soon said, “We can only hope that Celosia and Cenobia will escape the Chthonic Realm before Dormin gets to them.”

The “baby” soon vanished entirely. The colossi who were present were all mentally and physically silent. After a few moments of extreme tension, two four-legged beings much smaller than the other colossi began to form on the steps of the shrine of worship.

The colossi all telepathically cheered as the voice of Lord Malus boomed, “The plan has been successful…yet….”

One of the two small colossi bearing two tusks saw Mono and turned to her fellows, shouting up to them, “Everyone, we have to do something, anything, to help Wander! He is trapped with Dormin. We all know what they will do to him unless we find a way to help him!”

Finally having heard something concrete about Wander, Mono rushed over to Celosia and implored her, “Wander was my fiancé! You have to tell me what happened to him! His warhorse, Argo, is here, but he is gone. Where is he?”

The other small colossus, who looked like a lion, looked up at his fellows and shouted, “For the love of…. None of you had the guts to tell her the truth?”

Cenobia turned to Mono and telepathically sighed, clearly exasperated. He began, “Ok, I will have to be the bearer of bad news, as usual.”

As Celosia continued to pace about, panicked, the lion looked Mono in the eyes and began, “Your fiancé, Wander, came here on his warhorse and made a deal with the sealed Dormin to return you to life. In exchange, he was asked to kill all of us. However, Wander had no clue that slaying all of us would free Dormin and unleash them upon this world again. We could not tell him what he
was really doing because Dormin’s power had corrupted our minds and made us act like mindless
animals. Wander used that sword you are carrying to slay us one by one by draining Dormin’s
essence from our bodies. When Wander had finished his grizzly task, some shaman showed up and
was able to use an advanced spell to banish Dormin back to the Chthonic Realm. The sword must
have lost its power after being used in that spell.”

Mono was completely stunned. She had known how loyal Wander was to her. However, fighting and besting sixteen colossi must have required complete devotion to see him through. He
must have gone through quite the nightmare for her life. She also realized how her sacrifice had led
to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Wander had unsealed Dormin when he had tried to bring her back to
life.

Cenobia continued, “Dormin revived you and Wander’s warhorse because they at least honor
pacts that they make. However, Wander was killed somehow when Dormin fought the shaman and
his followers. We captured Wander’s soul in the Chthonic Realm, where powerful souls go. Lord
Malus sentenced him to undo the damage he had caused by helping to revive all of us. He agreed on
the condition that we would protect and provide for you if you had been restored to life. However, it
turned out that he had been planning to betray us at his first chance and revive himself. Ultimately, he
ever was able, or willing, to enact his betrayal. He helped me and my sister to revive at the expense
of his own last chance. He is now stuck in the Chthonic Realm. Dormin is there with him….and
certainly very angry.”

Celosia called out, “Is there anything we can do for him? We cannot allow Dormin to absorb
Wander’s soul!”

Mono was frozen with terror at the thought of her fiancé’s soul being absorbed into the
incarnation of death. That fear remained despite the fact that she was somewhat angry with him for
what he had done for the sake of being with her again.

Soon after Celosia had last “spoken” the voice of Malus echoed in every single colossus’s
head and in Mono’s. “Wander is now facing Dormin. There is actually one thing I can think of that
we colossi can do to help him. I have a new spell in my repertoire that should allow us to aid Wander
from here. All colossi, focus yourselves on me! That is an order!”

Mono had no idea what was going on now. She could only hope that Malus’s plan to save
Wander would prove successful.

Chapter End Notes

This is the penultimate chapter of this story. The final chapter should be posted next
Tuesday. Thank you all for reading this far once again!
The One Who Felt Betrayed

Chapter Notes

Hey readers, first off, I wanted to mention that this story has helped boost my total hit count across all of my stories on this website to over 2,000! Also, starting as soon as this Friday, I will begin posting a semi-original fantasy story in the original fiction section of this website. I mention that just in case any of you are interested in reading more of my work. There will be more notes at the end of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wander stood on the open plains just outside the realm of Sirius. Not far away there was a hulking black, vaguely humanoid shape with massive horns sprouting from their head. Dormin’s deep blue eyes glared down at Wander. The grand spirit of death thundered, “Thou hast betrayed us, mortal….”

Wander glared up at Dormin and interjected, “My name is Wander! Also, have I ever told you that your manner of speech is really outdated? The other grand spirits do not sound as ancient as you, you know.”

Dormin advanced menacingly towards Wander and bellowed, “That is all irrelevant! Thou hast allowed the traitorous colossi to escape after we fulfilled our part of the deal! We hoped to take our just revenge on those traitors after being banished from the material realm. However, your actions have left us here with no colossi to punish.”

Wander glared up at his former benefactor and responded, trying to be brave while literally facing down death. He countered, “I helped them to escape because I realized why they had turned their backs on you and why you could not be allowed to take your revenge on them. What matters now is that I have saved them all from the horrible fate you would have condemned them to.”

Dormin laughed at Wander and closed in on him, looming over their former vessel. They threatened, “Thou hast forgotten that you are still trapped in this realm. We shall take our revenge on you by absorbing your soul, which still contains some of our energy.”

Dormin reached down towards Wander. As the young hunter dodged Dormin’s shadowy arm, he shouted, “Dormin! I challenge you for some of your power! If I win, you will have to revive me! If I lose, I guess that my soul will be yours for the taking.”

Dormin responded, “Challenge accepted. Defeat us in single combat and we will grant you your revival.”

Dormin brought both of their fists towards the ground and created a wave of dark blue energy that sent Wander flying backwards. Wander got up just fast enough to evade a flaming blast of blue breath sent out by Dormin.

Wander retaliated with a volley of soul bolts from his generated bow, but the bombardment barely injured Dormin. The grand spirit cackled and rapidly struck Wander with a fist. The young hunter was sent flying back again. Dormin lunged forward as Wander fired another series of bolts at them while still on his back. Wander tried to get up, but took a point blank blast of Dormin’s breath.
He had bled of most of his soul energy from Dormin’s attacks.

Dormin grabbed Wander in one of their hands, pinning the young man’s arms to his sides. The grand spirit of death declared, “We appear to have won the challenge. Now, your soul belongs to us.”

Wander struggled as best as he could, but he could not free himself. He began to a feel horrific pain. Dormin had begun to absorb his soul. Wander could only think, “Mono, I will never be with you again. At least I did the right thing. At least I atoned for my sins.…”

Dormin laughed as Wander began to fade away, the grand spirit enjoying their long-awaited vengeance on the only soul they could justly exact revenge on. Suddenly, Wander’s body began to glow with a golden light. Dormin looked deeply confused as Wander felt some of his energy returning.

Pelagia’s voice echoed in Wander’s head, “Wander, your horse is alive!”

Wander had no idea what was going on as horns akin to Pelagia’s appeared on his head. He instinctually focused into them and blasted Dormin with a barrage of energy pulses, stopping the soul transfer.

Shock, Dormin released Wander who asked, “Pelagia? I don’t understand. Why are you helping me? I killed you. I was going to betray you.”

Malus’s voice echoed in Wander’s head, “What matters is that you never did betray us. You learned your lesson and now we are here for you.”

Cenobia’s voice exclaimed, “Alright colossi, let’s kick Dormin’s ass and get Wander home!” A series of telepathic cheers called out as Dormin was utterly stunned by what they were hearing.

Dormin bellowed, “Spiritual energy transferal? This must be the work of Supren…. Still, this cannot be. We did not create you colossi to do this! You are interceding to help your slayer! You were never meant to…."

Wander retorted, “You really only saw them as tools, didn’t you? They are so much more than that, and I see that now!”

Wander stretched out his hands and an image of Kuromori’s head appeared on one of them and an image of Basaran’s head appeared on the other. Dormin was blasted by two more streams of energy and caught in a cloud of toxic gas.

Dormin swept the cloud aside and rushed at Wander. But a barrier shaped like two of Phalanx’s wings crossed in an X pattern blocked their incoming fist before it could strike Wander. Dormin swept their other arm at Wander. Yet the young man sprouted wings shaped like Avion’s and was launched up into the air and over Dormin.

Wander was now behind his enemy. One of his hands sprouted a pillar sword and the other a stone club. Wander bashed into Dormin’s legs with both weapons, weakening the grand spirit. As Dormin tried to turn around to face Wander, they were flanked by a smaller apparition of Phaedra and a smaller apparition of Quadratus. Wander clapped his hands and the two spiritual colossi charged at Dormin and rammed into them.

Dormin was finally able to Whirl around, only to see Wander riding into the air on an apparition of Dirge. Wander turned one of his hands into a massive fist like Barba’s. He used the colossus fist to punch Dormin in the face, hard. As Dormin tried to recover, Wander generated a cleaver like
Argus’s and stabbed Dormin in the throat.

Wander leaped off the Dirge apparition and landed on Dormin’s head. Wander’s stomach grew a large electric barb akin to Hydrus’s which impaled Dormin’s head.

Dormin shook Wander off, but was charged by an apparition of Cenobia. Wander’s fall was broken by an apparition of Celosia who told him, “I told you we would find a way to come back for you! We will see this through!”

Wander stretched his hands out, aiming at Dormin. He said, “You all came through for me. I do not know what to say, but thank you.” Wander sent two Malus-style fireballs right at Dormin.

Dormin took the two heavy hits and was now badly wounded. They staggered about, screaming, “All of you are traitors! We gave you colossi life and brought the mortal’s love and horse back from the dead!”

Malus’s voice retorted, “Regardless of our past connection, you did not earn our loyalty. We helped our people to escape from you. You can never understand, but Wander listened to and learned from us. Now, everyone, one last heavy blow should finish them! We are all with you, Wander!”

Wander’s body was surrounded by mini-apparitions of all the colossi. The miniature Phalanx covered Wander from behind. All of the others were right up front with him. Wander rocketed towards Dormin, who held out their arms, attempting to defend against the incoming attack.

Wander struck Dormin like a meteor. A mammoth burst of energy accompanied the blow. The grand spirit was knocked on to their back as Wander stood triumphantly on their stomach.

Phaedra’s voice called out to Wander, “Take their power and return to the Shrine of Worship. You have earned it. We will be waiting for you.”

Wander responded, “Yes ma’am! Sorry Dormin, but it looks like I won. It might not have been single combat. But it showed that I am cared for more than you are….”

Cenobia’s voice interrupted, “Quit blabbing! Drain their power and don’t let them get back up!”

Wander reached one of his hands into Dormin’s body and began to glow with a brilliant light.

Dormin uttered, “You will always be tainted, mortal! You will never be fully forgiven….” The grand spirit of death fainted from exhaustion and injury as Wander yanked the power needed to revive himself from Dormin’s black, shadowy body.

Wander vanished in a blast of blinding light. As he felt himself shifting from one world to another, he imagined himself on the altar in the Shrine of Worship. He soon heard a familiar voice calling out to him, “Wander, you stupid, foolish, silly, wonderful man. Come back to me, to us. We are right here for you.” Wander smiled as his new body, adorned with two small horns, materialized atop the altar. He heard the telepathic cheering of the colossi and felt Mono taking his hand as he opened his eyes. Wander had not only redeemed himself, he had been revived.

_Soul of the Colossus: THE END_
First off, I want to thank anyone who has successfully finished reading this story. I greatly appreciate you all taking the time to read my work. I hope that you enjoyed reading Soul of the Colossus. I hope that you found my “headcanon” ideas appropriate for the setting. I also hope that you liked my characterizations of the sixteen colossi and the overall arc of the story. As of now, Soul of the Colossus is meant to be a standalone story. I have only had vague ideas for a possible prequel or sequel as of the time of writing. So, thank you all for reading this once again.

P.S. I do not know how many of you noticed this…. However, you should know that around half of the grand spirits had their appearances, and in many cases names, taken from unused beta colossi from the original Shadow of the Colossus. It was sort of a recurring “Easter egg” that I placed in the story. If you want to figure out which grand spirits were based off of unused beta colossi, you can probably look it up. The Team Ico Wiki has articles on the colossi that did not make it into the final game.

End Notes

With regard to the posting schedule, I am going to start with having a new chapter go up every Tuesday and Friday. This story will also probably be posted on Fanfiction.net in full. I might accelerate the posting process in the near future. If I do so, I will mention the new schedule in an author’s note.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!