

The Brothers  
of Turoc

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For Levi and Adam; my brothers and truest friends.

And for James and Theo, who helped inspire this book.

'The Brothers of Turoc' is written from the points of view of both Aari and Theo, in alternating chapters.

# Chapter One

## The Punishment

~Aari~

The doors are enormous. They tower over our heads, great brass slabs that stretch to the ceiling. They frown down at us.

I do not want to walk through these doors.

I look at my brother, Theo. He is trembling. Theo is smaller than me, but maybe not younger. I do not know, because I don't know how old he is. I do not know how old *I* am. Maybe twelve. Maybe more.

There is a loud boom. A thin strip of light appears at the top of the doors, running along the gap like melted gold. The strip gets wider; the golden light is blinding. I swallow hard.

"Aari," croaks Theo next to me. "What are they going to do to us?"

I shake my head. I want to say sorry. It is not Theo's fault; it is *never* his fault. I'm the troublemaker. But I say nothing.

We can see through the doors now. At the end of the room the Prime Master sits on a stone chair. The room is so long I cannot even tell if he's looking at us.

There is a sharp pain in my back; I am being told to move forward. The chains around our ankles rattle as we shuffle into the room. We don't always wear chains, but today is different.

Theo falters. I nudge him forward. Theo is not as brave as I am.

The Masters pull us to a stop. Theo stares at his feet. I stare at the Prime Master. He is an old, fat man. His beard is long and dirty, and he has yellow, bulging eyes. One word from him and you could be dead in the flash of a sword.

“Sirrah Zak’ul,” says one of the Masters behind me. “Master Ion has sent these slaves to you for sentencing. Offences against the Kingdom.”

Theo bows, low and clumsy. I stare at the Prime Master, frowning at his dirty beard. Why should I bow to him? A blinding pain explodes across the back of my head. I bow. On purpose I do it slowly. Only a glance at Theo makes me feel bad. I am making things worse.

The Prime Master looks at me. It is the same look he might give a dead dog, or a bug in his rice. “Filthy scum,” he rasps to himself. Then, to the Masters, “What are the offences?”

“Blasphemy, sirrah. Treachery, sirrah,” says the Master behind me.

“Blasphemy...” hisses the Prime Master. His yellow eyes narrow.

“These slaves made claim that King Allure is a false god, sirrah. These slaves declared they are not loyal to the King, sirrah.”

Now the Prime Master’s eyes are bulging right out of his head. “A false god...” He turns to Theo, his mouth sour. “What have you to say, slave? Are you a heathen?”

But Theo cannot answer; he is trembling too much.

So I answer for him. “He said nothing, sirrah,” I say. My voice is small. I am a rat squeaking against a bull. “It was just me.”

The Prime Master whips around. “You dare speak out of turn, slave?” he bellows, and strikes me across the cheek. There is a ringing crack, and I see stars. Beside me, Theo shrinks.

“Sorry, sirrah,” I mumble.

“Disobedient dog,” the Prime Master spits. He turns back to Theo.

“Tell me, slave, do you know blasphemy is punishable by *death*?” Theo utters the slightest noise, like a moan cut short. “The Great God King Allure gives you shelter, and food, and honest work to keep your idle mind busy – and yet you say you have no loyalty to him?” He speaks calmly – it is worse than yelling. Theo whimpers. I cannot stand it.

“He didn’t say anything, sirrah,” I say again, “it was only me –”

“SILENCE!” the Prime Master roars, rising from his chair.

My legs shake. My heart beats like a *buju* drum. But I do not look away. I look the Prime Master in the eye. I am not lying.

The Master sits down slowly. A smile spreads across his face like a pool of oil. “I see you are most loyal to your slave-mate,” he says to me. “More loyal to him, even, than to your god. And if that is your disposition...” He sits back in his chair, and waves a meaty hand over us. “The Pits. For them both.”

Theo is the first to move. His head snaps up, his eyes wide with terror. He looks at the Prime Master, then at me. I look away. It feels as if something heavy is pressing down on my chest.

The Pits.

I cannot breathe.

It is a death sentence.

# Chapter Two

## The Ladder

~Theo~

I don't blame Aari. Who could blame the sun for rising?

I wish I could be strong, like he is, but my legs shake as we are led back to Asp Wing. Outside the great brass doors we pass other slaves waiting to be sentenced by the Prime Master. Some of them are men, but most are boys; few live long enough in the mines to become men. Some are here for stealing food, some for fighting. Some for killing. Once, Aari was punished for stealing rice. They made him work in Scorpio Wing, hundreds of feet below the surface where the diamonds are still being mined by the cartload. Two weeks he was there, and when he returned he was covered in boils from the soot, and his back was hunched over. It did not take long to straighten out. Nothing can keep Aari's back bent for long.

When he came back, Aari said we were lucky to work in Asp Wing. In Scorpio, he said, the dirt is so hot it burns your hands, and the air is thick and makes you cough.

But even Scorpio Wing is heaven compared to the Pits.

\* \* \*

I wake up. It is the morning after the sentencing. I am in a tiny space.

A dirt ceiling is just two fingers' width above my nose. I know this because I tested it once. The space is a long rectangle, like a coffin, dug into the wall. Only the side to my left is open. There are no pillows, just rocks sticking into my back. Sometimes I wake up feeling numb. One morning I woke up with a numb face. Aari laughed and laughed. He said I looked like a melting candle.

Every slave in our Wing has a hole like this for sleeping. They are dug by hand, hundreds and hundreds of them all through the mines, filled every night with exhausted slaves. They are the closest thing we have to a home.

I think of this as the Masters come and take us away, and lead us down to the Pits.

There is a ladder. It takes you down a hole, just wide enough for one person. The entrance to the Pits.

Aari goes first. Two Masters watch, unsmiling, as he disappears into the dark. His face is calm, his eyes blank. He won't show the Masters that he is afraid.

Now it is my turn. The hole stares up at me like a wide-open mouth. At a prod from one of the Masters I grip the ladder, and place my foot on the first rung. I try to keep my face calm and my eyes blank, but my legs are shaking. I barely manage the first step. There are thousands more to go.

At the fifth step my head slips below the surface, and the walls close in around me. It is hot and feels as if there is no air. I can hear Aari's hands and feet slap against the metal bars below me. He told me he would go down first in case I fell, so he might be able to catch me. Aari is too strong to fall.

As we climb lower and lower down the hole it feels like the earth is swallowing me up. I know I will never be able to get out again, or see the sun.

I think maybe it is a good thing I will be dead soon.

It is half a day before we reach the bottom. My arms are numb, and my legs feel like they are going to break at the knees.

It is so hot down here, worse than midday on the surface. It is a thick, heavy heat that sticks to your skin. Sweat runs down our bald heads and into our eyes, bringing dirt with it. Aari, whose skin has always been darker than mine, is now as black as a stick of charcoal, and when he looks at me at the bottom of the ladder the whites of his eyes glow against his skin.

A foul-faced Master is striding towards us. I want to curl into a ball and sleep, but suddenly he is right in front of us, yelling and throwing us picks. We are to follow him and start work right away, even though we have just been climbing for hours. I am hot, and dizzy, and feel sick.

I stumble, and Aari catches me. “Work slowly,” he says, close to my ear so the Master can’t hear. “I’ll tell you if anyone is watching; save your strength for then. Be invisible, Theo.”

Be invisible. I am good at this. Sometimes I think if I press myself into the rock and stay very still, the Masters won’t see me at all. I could be invisible for hours, days. Maybe even forever.

We turn out of a low tunnel, and are struck by a wave of noises and smells. Beneath us is a ginormous quarry, circled by a path that spirals down into the guts of the earth. Dark-skinned slaves work like ants on the rock, scratching through its surface with their blunt picks and chisels. Diamond mining by hand is slow. The slaves here are so thin their skin is like a piece of dirty cloth stuck to their skeleton. None of them look much older than us.

A boy walks past me. He is maybe seven or eight, and pushing a cart loaded with clods of dirt and dull white pebbles. Raw diamonds. He glances at me, and I shudder. His eyes are giant, like twin moons

in his sunken face. I wonder if he has worked in the Pits for long.

I wonder if my eyes will look like that soon.

The smell gets worse as the foul-faced Master leads us deeper into the pit. Bodies, waste, kamuls, ancient dirt and gas are all cooking in the heat like a *benti*, a casserole. Even Aari wrinkles his nose.

We are given a section of dirt some way down into the pit, where a side tunnel is being dug. The Master gives us two bowls each; one for diamonds, and one for our waste.

The dirt feels like hot coals to touch, and my fingers blister before I have even one clod loose. The ground here is harder than up in Asp Wing, baked by the heat, and so we must use grown men's tools. Within minutes my shoulder blades are on fire. Sweat pours into my eyes. I do what Aari has told me, and work slowly until he tells me a Master is watching. Soon I am breathing faster, finding my rhythm, but the air is thick and makes me cough. I have to stop, even though it has been only a few minutes.

"Theo, what are you doing?" Aari hisses at me, swinging his own pick. "The Masters will see you!"

I try again, and falter. The climb was too much. "I can't do it, Aari," I say. "It's too hot."

Aari's eyes widen; he is looking over my shoulder. I hear the whistling sound and flinch before it hits. The whip slices my back like a hot knife. I clench my teeth and breathe in fast. It is a trick Aari taught me to stay silent. Crying out will earn you more. I lift up my pick and get back to work.

Soon I start to retch. The heat, the smell, the pain in my shoulders weigh down on me. I stop. Another whipping. The dirt in front of me spins. Blackness creeps along the edges of my vision. I am going to pass out.

"Theo, Theo, get up, the Master is yelling..."

Another whipping.

“Please, sirrah, he is exhausted, just let him rest -”

Another whistle, but no pain. It is Aari they are whipping now.

Then the blackness is right in my eyes, and I hear nothing more.

# Chapter Three

## The Treasure Hunt

~Aari~

We must escape.

It has been three days. Theo will not survive here. He can barely work an hour before he passes out. Everything is making him sick; the water, the heat, the work. He will not eat. He is like a chicken bone already.

My brother is dying.

But I have a plan.

Today we have a bad job. Kamuls and slaves die like bugs down in the Pits, and must be cleared out. Slaves are piled into mine carts and hauled to a shaft where they are lifted to the surface for burial. Kamul carcasses are just thrown into a deep chasm to rot. Some nights the Masters set the pit alight, and it smells like a wonderful meal cooking.

Today we are clearing away kamuls. It is worse than clearing slaves, because kamuls - great four-legged animals with humps that draw the mining carts - are heavier. But today I am happy. Today I *want* to clear kamuls.

The Master leads a group of us through the Pits, pointing out dead kamuls. There are a lot. It takes three slaves to drag a kamul to the

grave. When the Master points one out I grab Theo's hand. Another slave follows us; he is missing an arm. I roll my eyes. Why did the Masters pick him? But when we start pulling, I see he is strong. We grunt as we pull. Theo is barely doing anything; he is too weak, and looks like he is going to be sick. The other boy scowls at Theo, knowing he is not working as hard as we are. I take up the slack and glare at the boy. I can work hard enough for us both.

The kamul grave looms up ahead, a great yawning hole in the earth. I breathe only through my mouth. The smell of one dead kamul is like perfumed oil compared to a whole pit of them.

Finally we get the kamul to the grave and get ready to push it over the side.

I am quick. I take a fistful of the beast's thick, greasy hair and pull hard.

I am almost smiling as I watch the kamul fall into the pit. Before the other boy can see, I shove my prize under my wrap. For a moment I think Theo has seen me. His eyes are wide, and he is staring at me. I shrug and walk away, back to find the Master and another kamul.

It is time to continue my treasure hunt.

In the Pits we do not sleep at night like the slaves in the Wings. Here we sleep in shifts. Work for eight hours, sleep for four, over and over again. There are no holes in the walls. When the Masters say you have worked eight hours you go to a wide space off to the side and sleep where you fall. Because I have no hole, I must find a hiding spot for my treasures. I choose a place by the kamul pits, where the smell keeps the Masters away. It is a clever hiding spot. There are lots of big rocks. I lift one up and dig a hole beneath it, hide my treasures, and put back the rock. Even if someone moved it they would not think much of my treasures; some kamul hair and wraps from dead slaves. No one will ask where their clothes have gone. Living slaves always

steal wraps off the dead, if they are cleaner than their own.

There is only one more treasure I need for my plan to work. I wonder how I will get it. It is the hardest treasure of all.

Knowledge.

# Chapter Four

## The Witch-boy

### ~Theo~

Aari is up to something.

I know it. His black eyes burn with purpose. It scares me. The last time they burned like that, we ended up here.

It had happened quickly. In Asp Wing the slaves eat breakfast on the surface, up on the desert where all you can see for miles is sand and rock, and great looming cliffs behind us. It is easier to make a mess up there and then come back down to work, leaving the leftovers behind in the sand. Here there is no mess. Here the water is black and hot and tastes of metal. Here the only food is rice soaked with the same black water, which turns it grey. Here there are never any leftovers.

It happened when I reached out to take my bowl one morning. A Master, a new one, grabbed my chin with his filthy hand and made me look at him.

“Blue eyes...” he muttered, and spat in my face. “Your mother was a witch!” The other Masters joined in. They pushed me around, laughing and taking turns to spit in my face. “Your mother was a harlot, a Gypsy!” I clutched my bowl and tried to walk away, wishing they would leave me alone.

“Where are you going, witch-boy?” snarled the new Master, and

pulled back his fist, ready to strike me. The Master was huge. Such a blow would crack my skull. Suddenly something black and fierce flew past me, knocking the Master off his feet. It was Aari.

The Master looked up, his face furious. He stood up. Then he picked up Aari's bowl of rice and tipped it on the ground, stamping it into the sand.

Aari shrugged. "I don't want your disgusting food," he said. "Slops barely fit for dogs – even the kamuls won't touch it!"

The Master stared down at him. "Your food is given to you by the Great God King Allure himself – you dare deny your own *God*?"

Aari's black eyes burned. The words came from his mouth before I could stop him. It started with a snort. "Allure is *your* god, not mine. And he is not my King."

The desert fell silent. No one spoke; not the Masters, not the slaves. Aari kept his eyes on the Master, but they no longer burned. He had gone too far.

But the Master's own eyes shone like sharpened blades. "*Blasphemy*," he hissed. "*Treachery*. You will hang for such words." He turned to the crowd now forming around us. "You all heard him!" he bellowed. "You heard the filth uttered by this slave!" He looked at Aari, then at me. "It is off to the Prime Master with you both. And may the Great God King have mercy on your souls."

# Chapter Five

## Knowledge

~Aari~

It is the last hour of our sleeping shift. I have not slept at all. My stomach is squirming. Punishment for trying to escape Asp Wing once is a hundred lashes. For your second attempt, fifty days in Scorpio Wing. Third, death by hanging.

Down here there is only one punishment; being thrown into the kamul grave. Alive. If you survive, good for you. But it is a big 'if'.

One chance.

I glance at the kamul grave. My pile of treasures has been growing.

Then I look at Theo. We have been down here for eight days. I doubt he will last nine. But it does not matter. I finally have everything we need. Including the last treasure; knowledge.

Yesterday the Masters needed someone to clear a blockage in the shaft used for dead slaves. I had looked around, my eyes narrowed, before I raised my hand. I did not want to look too eager.

The Master grunted and led me to the shaft. There was an ancient ladder inside. My job was to climb up and see what was blocking the lift. A pile of dead bodies lay at the bottom, waiting to be pulled up. The ones with open eyes stared at me. Only the Masters are important enough to be covered when they are dead.

As I climbed up the ladder I took notice of everything. The walls rose up steadily. Every now and then a little pocket of dirt had been gouged out. I stared into each one, feeling a little crumble of disappointment when I saw the solid wall at the back. A strong smell burned my nose, something I had never smelled before.

Small living things scuttled about the walls; cockroaches and centipedes, beetles and scorpions, all waiting for their daily feed of flesh. They crawled over me, but lost interest when they realised I was alive. They were only interested in flesh already starting to rot.

Something brushed against the top of my head. I looked up. I had found the blockage. I ignored it, and kept going.

I climbed higher and higher. The Master was growing impatient with me. "Hurry up, dog! Is there something up there or not?"

"I think I can see something, sirrah!" I called back to him. "Just a bit further!"

The Master muttered something I couldn't hear. I kept going, higher and higher. The shaft went on forever. I had to be quick, and climbed faster. Soon I was sweating, but there was something else. The air was getting cooler.

I began to worry I would reach the top, and a group of Masters would suddenly catch me. What if they threw me back down the shaft before I could tell them a Master had sent me?

Finally I found what I was looking for. One of the gouges in the wall, barely big enough for a person, did not have a solid back. My heart almost burst with relief. A tunnel!

There was no time to see where it led. It wasn't very *good* knowledge, but it was something.

I started back down, stopping only when I got to the blockage. A skeleton, too large to be a child's, had gotten wedged between two gouges on opposite sides of the wall. I wrestled with until it came free and went tumbling down through the dark shaft below.

“Sirrah! I got it!” I yelled, a little too late. I heard the Master as he jumped out of the way, cursing – he must have poked his head up to see what I was doing. I snorted with laughter the whole way down.

At the bottom I pretended to be interested in the shaft.

“Where does it go, sirrah?” I asked.

“To the burial chamber,” he growled, heading back to the main dig. “Everyone knows that.”

“What was that smell in there?”

“Ammonia. Masters tip it down the shaft as the bodies are hauled up; it cleanses them, makes them fit for burial.”

“Ammonia... is it dangerous?”

The Master glared at me. I stared back at him, my features plain and only a little eager. I wanted him to think I was warming him up, so that he might be a little nicer to me. Every slave does it, especially to the weaker Masters.

He shrugged. “It is if you are still alive. It burns like liquid fire.”

“And what happens, sirrah, when the lift gets to the burial chamber?”

It was too much. The Master whipped around, shoved me hard in the chest. “Enough badgering, slave! Or you will be joining the dead on their next lift up the shaft!”

I pretended to be winded, and stood still, panting, until he was gone.

Then I muttered to myself, “I hope so.”

# Chapter Six

## Aari's Plan

### ~Theo~

Someone is shaking me. If I weren't so weak I would hit them. I just want to sleep, and sleep, and sleep... maybe forever.

It cannot be a Master. A Master would kick me. I open my eye, just a crack, and see Aari's dirt-caked face staring down at me.

"Theo, Theo," he whispers, "will you do exactly as I say?"

I frown. "What do you want, Aari?"

"Will you do exactly as I say?" he repeats, shaking me again.

My eyes widen. I am awake now. "Of course."

"The Masters will come to wake us soon. We must try to work near the kamul grave."

My face falls. "Oh, Aari, not there... the smell makes me sick..."

"Will you do as I say or not?" he says, his eyes flashing.

"Yes, yes. I will work near the kamul grave."

He sighs, relieved. I am worried. "What is it, Aari?"

He shakes his head. A Master is walking towards the sleeping area. "Pretend to sleep, Theo," he says, and I do.

When the Masters come we are given chisels. I give Aari a worried look. There is very little digging to do around the kamul grave. He shakes his head, and pulls me to the back of the line.

“Maybe there will be enough slaves for digging,” he whispers, “and they will put us somewhere else.”

I nod. They take us deep down the spiralling path, to another side tunnel. Aari’s face falls. It is as far away from the grave as possible, and there is plenty of work for all of us.

We get to work. They have given us chisels because we are tunnelling through stone here instead of dirt. It is hard, slow work, but there are many of us, so it is easy to be invisible and not work very hard. Even so, it does not take long before my head is foggy. I think the other slaves are avoiding me. I wonder why.

We are squatting, working down low. In minutes my thighs are burning. The heat wraps itself around me like a python, squeezing the air out of me.

My hands are raw and bleeding, blistered and calloused. The fogginess in my head is growing worse and worse. I am tired, and weak, and sick of everything.

I put down my chisel.

“Aari,” I say softly. “I think I will stop now.”

Aari looks at me. First it is horror in his eyes. Then sorrow. He looks around, looks back at me. “I’m sorry, Theo,” he says, then does something I do not expect. With the chisel still in his hand, he pulls back his arm, and strikes me in the face.

I roll back on my ankles, my eyes wide with shock. My ears ring, and tears sting my eyes. My brother has never hit me before.

He does it again, harder.

“Aari, don’t -”

“Thief!” he yells in my face. “This is *my* chisel, you dog!”

A Master rushes over, his whip already raised. “You! What are you squabbling about?”

Aari points a finger at me. “He tried to take my chisel, sirrah.”

I stare at him, open-mouthed. Stealing a tool is like stealing food.

I will be punished for certain. I shake my head. “Aari, what are you -”

He launches himself at me and throws me to the ground, screaming, “Thief! Thief!”

The Master goes wild with his whip, not caring which one of us he strikes. I start to fight back. I am angry. I only want to rest, and now I have to fight. It is not fair!

When the whipping does nothing the Master reaches down and pulls us both to our feet. “Enough!” he cries. He looks at me. “Slave! Where is your chisel?”

I look around. It has disappeared.

Then Aari says, “He threw it away. I saw him, he threw it in the kamul grave when he went for a drink.”

The Master gives me a hard shove in the back of the head. “Go and get it!” he cries.

Aari snorts. He looks at me as though I am a cockroach. “A weakling like him? He will fall into the pit and break his skinny legs.”

The Master turns on him. “Good,” he sneers. “Then *you* can go with him. And if you come back without him, I will strap carts on you and *you* can do the kamul’s work.”

Aari looks furious and storms off towards the kamul grave. I stumble after him. My head is throbbing. I think maybe my nose is broken. But it is not these things that make my eyes sting with tears. It is because it was *Aari* who hit me.

We are halfway up the path when a sob escapes me. Aari stops. Behind us, a Master is watching. I think maybe Aari is going to say sorry to me, but he just shrugs and keeps walking.

We reach the top of the quarry, and still Aari does not look at me. He strides towards the kamul grave, and with my head bowed low, I follow him.

Only when we are at the grave, behind a pile of rocks and out of the eyes of the Masters, does he stop and stare into my face. He looks

miserable.

“Forgive me, Theo. I had to. It was the only way we could get up here together.”

“You hit me on purpose?” I shake my head. “But why didn’t you tell me? I would have pretended.”

Aari looks down. “You’re not good at pretending,” he says. He is honest, even when it might offend me. “But you’re going to have to try, now.”

He picks up a rock and moves it aside. There is a pile of rubbish underneath it – kamul hair, and scraps of cloth. He hides them in his wrap. “We’re leaving this place, Theo.”

I want to ask him questions. What does he mean, leaving? How will we get out? Why is he hiding that rubbish in his wrap? What if the Masters catch us? But I am too tired. I wish Aari had let me rest.

There is a dead kamul by the edge of the grave. A lazy slave has not finished his job. Aari spears it with his chisel and coats his hands with its blood. It must not have been dead long – blood still flows freely from the wound.

My stomach turns as he paints the back of his head with the mess.

He calls me over.

I shake my head.

“You said you would do as I say, Theo.”

Reluctantly, I shuffle over to the kamul. I shudder as Aari paints me with the blood. He puts most of it on my chest, rubbing it into the dirt and mud already caked onto my skin. Soon there is so much it looks like a real wound.

While he paints me he says, “A Master will send a slave to find us soon. We have to make them think we are dead. We are going to pretend.”

“But you said I’m no good at pretending.” My voice sounds far away.

“Just stay very still,” Aari tells me, “and make sure your mouth is open so you can breathe without making any noise.”

I sigh. I want to tell him not to bother. I want to jump into the kamul grave and be left alone. But all I say is, “Yes, Aari.”

“Lie on your stomach.” I do it. He paints a rock with blood, and puts it in my hand. I am so weak I can’t even hold it, so he closes my fingers around it for me.

Aari heaves and heaves, and finally pushes the butchered kamul into the grave by himself. Then he gets down on the ground next to me, face down as I am. “Now stay still and do what I say. Keep your mouth open as I said, and don’t move. If they pick you up, be heavy, and let your head flop around. And Theo,” he warns, then pauses. Someone is coming; a slave, and a Master, yelling at him. Aari looks at me with worried eyes. “Don’t fall asleep. They will see you breathing.”

I nod, and close my eyes, rest my head on the hot dirt. The smell of dead kamuls washes over us. I barely notice it now.

It is easy being still. It almost feels close to resting.

“Be still, Theo. Be still...”

# Chapter Seven

## Escape

~Aari~

The voices get nearer. And suddenly –

“Sirrah! Dead slaves! They have been fighting...”

A Master grunts. “Get rid of them.”

“Into the kamul grave, sirrah?”

I stiffen. The Master pauses. It would be easier, he knows. But then he shouts, “Do they look like kamuls to you, dog? Stop being so lazy and take them to the shaft!”

I feel the Master prod me with his toe as the slave runs for a cart. “A burial is the only decent thing this scum gets.”

He walks away.

When the slave comes back I make sure my mouth is open so I can breathe without making any noise. He has brought another slave with him. They pick us up and throw us onto the cart. My head hits the wood, hard. I want to leap up and smack the slave who threw me, but I don’t. How can I? I am dead.

They wheel us to the shaft. My legs itch. I have rubbed extra dirt on my wrap so no slave will want to steal it. If they take my wrap, they will find my treasures.

They fumble with us and throw us onto the pile of bodies. It takes

a few moments for them to walk away. I only relax when I know they are not going to steal my wrap. I count six breaths, then open one eye just a crack. Theo's wrap is gone. His bare bottom sticks up in the air, and I almost give us away and laugh, but at least he is not moving. I am proud of him.

We lie in the pile of bodies for hours. The smell is bad, but no worse than the kamul pits or the raw earth or the gas. The bodies are soft beneath us.

I fall asleep for a little while, but a noise wakes me. Another dead body is being thrown onto the pile. It lands near my face. I hope they are going to send us up soon. I am getting stiff from not moving.

But the slave who brought the body walks away, and we stay at the bottom of the shaft.

I hear another shift being sent to the sleeping area before a Master finally comes towards us with two slaves. I quickly close my eyes. The rest of my body aches from staying still so long. I wonder if I will be able to move again, when I have to.

The Master tells the slaves to stand by the cranks. Something starts rummaging around us; I think it might be a rat, and a thrill of fear shoots up my spine. I do not like rats. They bite, and make you sick.

But then I feel a hand around my waist, and realise it is a slave. He is scavenging through the bodies. He is going to take my wrap. If I move, the slave will know I am alive. But if I stay still, he will take my treasures.

I hold my breath, and do not move.

But then the Master shouts, "You rotten filth, get out of the shaft! You had your chance for pilfering, now do some work!" There is a whip whistle, and the slave slinks away.

I hear wood turning, and metal straining, and then we are moving upwards. The lift groans and shudders beneath us.

I open my eyes. No one can see us now. If a Master looks up into the shaft all he will see is the bottom of the lift.

I shake Theo's shoulder. He is dazed, but awake. His eyes are still dull, like they were when he put down his chisel and told me he had decided to stop. It is a scary look, as if he is already halfway into the next world. The other slaves had noticed it, too. I could tell because they didn't want to get too close to him in the tunnel. If he fell near them, a Master might have made them carry him to the shaft.

"Theo," I say. I am about to tell him we need to hide in one of the gouges in the wall when there is a sound above us; a sloshing, roaring sound. The ammonia. I force my numb body to move, groaning as I sit up too quickly. The shaft spins around me. I bite back the dizziness, then grab Theo's shoulders and shove him into a passing hole. There is only enough room for him. He stares up at me, his eyes widening as the lift climbs past him, taking me with it. I see the look on his face; he thinks I am abandoning him. I barely have time to hiss, "Don't move!" before the lift passes the hole and he slips from my view.

The sound grows louder. I look up. A wave of white is rushing down the shaft towards me. I search the walls; the nearest hole is far above. I don't think I will make it in time.

Maybe I can hide under the bodies... I claw at them, but they are heavy, and stiff, and I can't seem to grab them properly.

I look up.

The next hole is on the wall opposite the ladder.

I will have to jump.

I kneel up on the bodies, then climb onto my feet. The white wave is just metres above my head now. My skin starts to sting, and my vision blurs. The hole looms closer. I steady myself on the back of a dead slave, hoping his ribs will not break, bend my knees -

focus on the hole -

and jump, straight up towards the deadly ammonia.