



MAGIC
The Gathering

THEROS

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“Theros,” he said.

The girl winced like his answer hurt her physically.

“I need food,” she said.

“Yes,” he agreed. She hadn’t asked it like a question, and even if she had, he didn’t have an answer. He had no idea what to do next. She just wanted food. He envied her single-minded purpose.

The sun was setting, and Daxos stared at the sky as the gods came into sharp focus above him. Purphoros was locked in a death match against Heliod. A god couldn’t kill another god, but they would cause each other as much pain as possible. To the mortals, such a duel would be confined by a custom called *between the*

pillars. But to the gods, the entire sky was their proving ground.

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“Daxos,” he said.

“I’m Elspeth,” she told him, but the boy made no reply.

Planeswalkers

Gods

A Mixture That Could Prove Fatal to the World of

THEROS

MAGIC
The Stranding

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GODSEND BOOK 1

Jenna Helland



GODSEND
BOOK 1: THEROS

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PROLOGUE



Lidia's eyes flew open, and she was greeted by a darkened world. Instead of the gossamer curtains hanging around her bed, she saw the ancient trees of the Nessian Forest silhouetted against the brilliant colors of the night sky. She wasn't at her home in Meletis, not even close. She hugged her sleeping son closer to her. His skin felt cool from sleeping outside, but his breathing was even, contented.

A bird shrieked as it took flight from a branch above her. Through the gaps in the rustling canopy, she could see the god-forms shift in and out of focus. The night sky was known as Nyx, the realm of the gods. Every night the heavens displayed fleeting visions of gods and celestial creatures. Some just lingered for seconds. But sometimes the pantheon enacted entire scenes for mortal eyes to witness. Lidia rarely took time to step outside her home and watch the heavens, but now there was no place else to rest her eyes. Tonight the god-forms were vivid, and her heart beat faster as she watched their battle unfold.

Purphoros, God of the Forge, thundered across the sky. He lunged for his brother, Helioid, God of the Sun. Purphoros's intentions were murderous, that was clear even to Lidia, who felt like a grain of sand compared to the majesty of the heavens. Both gods had taken human form except with epic proportions. In every frieze or statue Lidia had seen of Purphoros, he always carried a bronze hammer. But tonight his weapon was a sword. Lidia didn't know what it meant when a god changed his weapon, but watching him assault Helioid, God of the Sun, filled her with fear.

Purphoros's bronze face gleamed in the crimson flames that engulfed his sword. He swung his blade low as if he were trying to slice Helioid in half. Helioid parried with his sun-spear and blasted searing light at Purphoros. But his strike was not a victory, and the God of the Forge emerged from the attack undaunted. Purphoros slashed again, but Helioid evaporated into golden mist.

Purphoros's body transformed into divine fire, and the mist and fire fused together and appeared like a great rip across Nyx. Lidia frowned at the night sky, which now looked bruised and torn. It made her feel squeamish, like the time she'd fallen and gashed her knee. She half expected the sky to bleed. She rolled on her side and turned away from the battle raging above. She needed sleep and didn't want to be troubled by the affairs of the gods. Tomorrow would be a long day. Tomorrow she was going to find her son's soul.



When they reached the Despair Lands, Lidia scanned the sky for locusts. She expected to see dark masses of them swarming above her. But when she and her son left the shade of the Nessian Forest and stepped into the rocky expanse, there was nothing overhead but an oppressive grayness that shrouded the midday sun. Not even the wind blew across the forlorn landscape. The stark line between the Nessian Forest and the Despair Lands seemed drawn by a god—and neither the trees nor the rocks dared argue with a god.

Lidia had heard stories about the Despair Lands, which teemed with deadly locusts that ate the gold masks dropped by the Returned who escaped the Underworld. But Lidia saw no masks discarded among the scattered stones. No locusts, no masks—what else had the stories been wrong about?

Her son, Daxos, whimpered and clutched her hand. Lidia, her unruly hair locked into a braid down her back, looked down and smiled brightly at him. With her oval face and large eyes, she looked barely old enough to be Daxos's mother. But she was twenty-four years old and was married to a wealthy merchant of Meletis, the city of philosophers at the edge of the Great Sea.

Before this journey, Lidia had never ventured farther than a day's walk beyond the great walls of Meletis. Once, when she was a child, her father had taken her for

a day trip out of the city. They'd ridden out of Hinter Gate between the giant statues and over the barren Four Winds Plateau. By late afternoon, they'd traveled all the way down Guardian Way and reached the edge of the Nessian Forest. Her father stopped their horse at the point where the interlocking cobblestones ended abruptly and gave way to a dirt road. A dense wall of towering trees stretched for miles in either direction, and Lidia shrunk closer to her father.

"This is the end of civilization, love," he said with a wink. And Lidia believed him. That was years ago, before she'd ever imagined herself as a mother with a child of her own. Her father had taken her only to the edge of the Nessian Forest. But Lidia had taken her son into the heart of it and then south to this land ruined by the breath of Erebos, God of the Dead, who ruled the Underworld. Lidia was shaken by a sense of disbelief. Had she really done it? Had she really made this journey by herself? Her husband made her feel as if she weren't competent to choose her own clothes. Yet here she was. Every citizen of Meletis would have been shocked to see her in the wilds near the entrance to the cave known as Athreos's Shrine.

Instead of appreciating the danger of the situation, Lidia's gentle mind was consumed with worry for Daxos, who was quite small to undertake such a journey. He'd just turned seven, but he was the size of a four year old, and he was frail. As they picked their way across the

foreboding landscape, with its sickly air that dampened the sunlight, she kept up a running conversation with her silent son. As they approached the entrance to Athreos's Shrine, the red dirt beneath their feet became black sand that had no give under their boots.

"What a strange place, Dax," Lidia said brightly. "A place with no grass. Or birds! I miss the birdsong in our garden. And your swing under the lemon tree! But we mustn't worry, love. This will pass, just like night passes into day. And we'll be home in the garden soon."

Lidia always tried to transform her mute, blind son's world into a place of joy through the power of her love. The truth was she didn't know if he was truly blind or mute. She had seen many healers and every one of them had insisted there was nothing wrong with his eyes nor was there any physical abnormality that prevented him from speaking. But Daxos never spoke a word, and his eyes didn't focus the way other children's did. Most of the time he just stared into the sky, transfixed by things no one else could see.

Throughout his early years, her son made no move to explore his world like children his age normally do. When inside the house, he would sit in a darkened corner. But he was happiest outside in the sunshine. Sometimes Lidia would leave Daxos alone on the grass in the garden, and she would stand in the shadows of the archway and watch him. When he thought he was alone, he would move his hands through the air, as though his

fingers were tracing patterns that only he could see. Lidia could let this go on only for a little while. Then she would hurry to him and wrap her arms around him. She would clasp his little hands in her own until they were still and calm. Lidia couldn't bear to leave him to a life of solitary mindlessness.

“Do you see that cave over there?” Lidia asked. She pointed at a brutal rip in the rock face. “It's where Athreos dwells. It leads to the rivers that ring the world. We'll find what we're looking for in there.”

Lidia said it with a mother's confidence, and her voice was as warm and comforting as sunshine flowing through an open window. But she had no idea what she was talking about. She had visited dozens of oracles, the men and women who served as conduits of the gods. She had waited for hours at temples on special holy days, like Stormcast Festival, when Keranos was said to grant desires in exchange for a piece of sea glass. She had written prayers, lodged them in vials, and cast them before Pharika, God of Affliction. She had tried every cure from everyone—magicians, charlatans, and liars—if they claimed they could help her son. But nothing had cured him. Nothing had made him like the other children.

Then Lidia had heard a story from the Old Women who served her husband. It was a god-story about children losing their souls at birth. These unfortunate children were not like the Returned, who were dead but

managed to escape the god of the Underworld. Instead, the Old Women described children severed from their souls *before* they ever had a chance to walk the mortal realm. It was Erebus's pleasure to cause others pain, and if he could steal all the souls he would, such was his selfishness and bitterness at his lot. The Despair Lands were his fault, after all. His malaise and self-pity leaked out of the shafts of his realm and withered the earth. All who breathed his air too long became as miserable and joyless as he.

After hearing the Old Women's stories, Lidia made up her mind. With no proof but her self-made conviction, Lidia decided that her son's soul—his eidolon—was wandering the world aimlessly searching for his body. She believed that only Athreos, God of Passage, could make her son whole. Athreos was the Boatman who guided the dead across the rivers to the Underworld. It was Athreos who remembered the names of the dead, the living, and the souls between. So Lidia filled a leather pack with gold and snuck out of her husband's house with Daxos in the middle of the night. It never once occurred to her that they might be slaughtered in any number of ways before they ever reached the Despair Lands.

Lidia did have one creeping fear about the journey, though she prayed to Heliod to help her forget it. The fear became lodged in her head just after they stole her husband's favorite horse and set off down Guardian Way

under the full color and glory of Nyx. The fear gnawed at her as they rode through the fields of yellow grain that bordered Meletis. When they entered the forest, her husband's horse became restless and bolted. They were forced to continue on foot, and the fear became like a knot of sickness in her throat. Lidia was afraid that even when they reached Athreos's Shrine, she wouldn't be able to make the god understand *what* she needed. Gods spoke in a language all their own, the language of Nyx, or so the scholars taught in school. Lidia imagined if god-language could be written down it would simply be constellations of stars glittering across the page. Among mortals, oracles were the only ones who could interpret the god-speak and translate it to the mortal tongue.

And that was Lidia's problem: Although she had asked everyone she could think of, no one could tell Lidia whether an oracle actually dwelled in Athreos's Shrine. In Meletis, there was an oracle in every temple. A towering woman with flowing black hair stood on a grand dais in the Temple of Purphoros and bellowed out his words of passion and fire. In Ephara's temple a young man tapped a bronze staff in time while speaking steady words of progress and stability. Even in Pharika's murky temple in the catacombs beneath the city, a snakelike woman hissed the secrets of life and death.

But try as she might, the only information Lidia could find about Athreos's Shrine was *where* it was located. No living person had ever been through the Despair Lands

to enter the sacred cave. No one could tell her if an oracle would be waiting to explain her request to Athreos. She was warned, however, of his love of gold. The dead must pay Athreos for passage, and his docks were littered with the coins of those who no longer needed them. His ever-growing caches rose like spindly mountains toward Nyx, or so said the Old Women. Lidia decided that if a soul was worth a single coin, then she would carry a hundred of them. She reckoned that the return of a severed soul might fetch a high price, but she was confident she had enough coins to convince Athreos to answer her question: Where is my son's soul? With the sack of gold slung across her back, they closed the gap between themselves and the cave.

But Daxos grew agitated as they approached the entrance to the shrine. His hands fluttered in the air, and his eyes were riveted on his mother's face. Lidia should have noticed his intense gaze on her because it was so unlike her son to fix his eyes on anything. But she was distracted by visions of a golden, happy future with a healthy son. In the shadow of the entrance, Lidia reached behind her neck and unfastened the amulet she had worn since she was a child. It was a delicate glass flower with six petals, almost star shaped, that glowed pink in the strange light of Erebos's despair. She secured the amulet around Daxos's neck and kissed him on his forehead and both his cheeks.

"My mother gave this to me, and it was passed down

from her great-grandmother,” Lidia said. “This is the flower that grows near my ancestral home, near the Great Sea.”

Daxos reached up and gently stroked the amulet, which pleased Lidia, because he had taken no notice in toys or other gifts that she had given him in the past. She took this as a good omen.

“It’s all going to be all right now,” she said, and ruffled his hair. She grasped his hand firmly and they marched into the darkness of Athreos’s Shrine.



Once inside the cavern, the rushing sound of a distant river reached their ears and the boy stopped abruptly, tipping his head to one side as if to hear a little better. The cave was sparse and clean, as if it had been swept of all rocks and debris. The gray light from the entrance ended after a few steps, and Lidia stopped and fumbled in her pack for a candle that she’d tucked among the gold coins.

“It must be a little farther down,” Lidia chirped, but her cheerfulness sounded artificial even to her ears. She knew a little fire spell, which was the only magic she could cast. When she had the candle burning, she led her son deeper into the darkness, and the sound of the river grew louder with every step. The fire danced along the wick but remained small, almost nonexistent, as if it

were afraid to be seen. Abruptly, the darkness felt like a fist closing around her, and she hesitated in the middle of the tunnel.

For the first time since she spirited Daxos away from Meletis, doubt consumed her. It hollowed her out and devoured her resilience. What was she doing here, alone and in the wilderness? If all the great minds of Meletis couldn't cure her son, what did she really expect to find in the savage wilds? Tears bloomed in her eyes as she was struck by the futility of this journey. Her abrupt change of heart was the work of Erebos, but Lidia didn't know enough about the nature of the divine to understand. Erebos whispered to all: *Resign yourself to misery*. Such were the teachings of the keeper of the dead.

"Oh, Dax," she said, sinking her heels and wrapping her free arm around her son. He leaned into her, the way he'd done as a small child seeking her warmth on cool nights. "I'm a fool, aren't I? A life with you in the garden is all I really want. However you are; whatever you see or don't see. I love you forever, you know that, right?"

"Asphodel," he said clearly. In his palm, he held out the glass flower that she'd hung on the chain around his neck. Lidia was so struck by her son's first word that it took her a moment to understand that he'd correctly identified the type of flower that grew in the fields of her ancestral house.

"That's right," she murmured, holding him closer. The

little light from her candle was like a fragile bubble, and she glimpsed movement in the inky darkness beyond.

Her son moved so he stood directly in front of her. He gazed at her with wisdom far beyond his youthful age. Daxos's expression seemed perceptive and mournful, like that of a sphinx she'd once seen in Meletis. The reflective sheen of his eyes that she once had taken for blindness now reflected the stars of Nyx. And suddenly she understood what her son was. Not deaf or mute but a seer of things beyond her comprehension.

Daxos was an oracle.

The realization took her breath away. He spoke again, but the voice that emerged from his mouth was layered and immense, like a thousand voices speaking in unison. It was like the voice of the oracles that she'd heard in Meletis—speaking the language she imagined like glittering stars.

“Your son is not safe here,” said the voice from her son's mouth. At the pinnacle of the multitude of voices was a woman's voice—the voice of Karametra, the god of mothers. “You must flee.”

As Lidia rose to her feet, she could see a pinpoint of light racing toward them. The light of Athreos's ethereal lantern emerged from the depths of the cave. Lidia stared at her beautiful son and asked herself, Where was my son's soul? Inside him all along.

“He sees the divine more clearly than any oracle before him,” the god-voice intoned. “Your mortal life is

just a shadow compared to the glory of the gods.”

A stale wind blasted against their faces as Athreos lurched up the tunnel toward them. Beyond the orb of firelight, Lidia heard cries carried on the wind—the keening of those waiting for passage over the river to the land of the dead.

“Athreos, Servant of the Dead, is coming for your son,” said the god-voice. “The Lord God of the Underworld desires this vessel. Erebos will try to claim your son.”

Daxos was a speaker of god-words, a seer of the veil, a star-touched. He was a gift that all gods desired. Sobbing, Lidia scooped him up in her arms and ran frantically for the entrance. By now Erebos had discerned what was happening from deep beyond the boundaries of the mortal realm. The tendrils of his tattered cape were like grasping fingers that tore at Lidia and slowed her escape, but he couldn't contain her. Daxos screamed his terror in the language of the gods.



Through his god-sight, Daxos knew that Erebos had heard his voice and would remember it for all time. He sensed Erebos rise from his throne. The God of the Underworld urged Athreos closer to the daylight. Athreos refused to go beyond his dismal cave, but his hooked staff could reach farther than Lidia could flee.

Because he could perceive all the gods, Daxos heard Athreos reaching for him through the winding passages. He sought to snare Daxos and deliver him to Erebos. Daxos tried to warn his mother, but the words that tumbled from his mouth made no sense to her mortal ears. Despite the dark intentions of the gods, Daxos heard a whisper of hope. Karametra recognized Lidia's overwhelming love for Daxos and took pity on the woman. Daxos heard the footfalls of a celestial creature racing to them. Karametra sent her own emissary, a giant sable, to encircle Daxos and prevent Athreos from pulling him away from his mother's embrace. But the fleet-footed sable was a heartbeat too late. Athreos had hooked his staff around the boy and dragged him deeper into the cave. Daxos could feel Erebos hungering for him as he outstretched his clawed fingers, so eager for a vessel that could touch the mortal world.

Despite the strong arms of his mother and Karametra's aid, Daxos was slipping.

Without hesitation or regret, Lidia traded herself for her son. The staff would not depart empty, so she squeezed her body into the crook and pushed her son to safety. Karametra's sable streaked into the cave, and Lidia begged it to bear Daxos into the sunshine. Then she let herself be dragged across the ragged waters to the unknown lands of the dead. And Daxos dug his small hands into the sable's fur, and he sobbed for his mother. With three bounding leaps, the sable had crossed the

Despair Lands to the relative safety of the Nessian Forest.

“There, in the sunshine.” Daxos heard Karametra talking to her sable. “Leave the boy and come back to me.”

The sable hesitated, but obeyed. As soon as the child was laid onto the emerald moss, the sable was running back to his mistress in Nyx. Daxos curled onto his side under the spreading oak and wept himself to sleep. The gods may be whimsical, but they respect the fates. And Daxos was not Karametra’s to claim, any more than he was Erebos’s. The grieving boy would be on his own until he stood up or died in the elements.

Daxos lay there for three days, clutching his mother’s amulet and sorting between the noise of the divine and the din of the mortal world. Most mortals could only see the god-forms in the night sky, and they were hazy and fleeting. But for Daxos, Nyx was a brilliant vision even in daylight. And for those three days, he watched the gods fight and listened to the pip and chatter of birds around him. He saw Purphoros, the God of the Forge, wield a gleaming sword that cut the divine fabric of Nyx with every blow. Daxos felt the mundane wind blow across his cheeks and rustle the leaves above his head. Finally he was ready. He understood what things belonged in what realm. He could think in the language of his mother and still breathe the language of the gods.

When he sat up, he found that he was not alone.

There was a girl watching him. She crouched at the

edge of the clearing wearing a black cloak that was too big for her. He didn't know if she'd been there for three minutes or all three days. Her hair was brown and her skin was pale, as if she'd been kept from the sun for a long time. And because he perceived the world in a multitude of complexity, he saw her grief like a prism, and it took his breath away. He'd lost his mother, and felt as if he might die of it. Whatever she had lost was so much more.

"I need food," she said in a scratchy voice from a throat that needed water.

They both needed food, Daxos knew. He was desperately hungry, and she looked as if she'd been starving for a while. There were strange markings on her arms, scars but not scars, and the skin around her eyes looked like ash. He worried that the ashes might spread down her face until she was half ash and half flesh and the winds of Theros would blow to her pieces.

"None," he said. His voice was his own again, a child's voice. But he could still hear Karametra's words ringing in his mind like temple bells. It made it hard to focus on the mortal realm.

"What's this world called?" the girl asked.

Daxos didn't find her question odd. He could see both the god-realm and the mortal realm. And probably the Underworld, too, if only he knew where to stand. Perhaps the girl was from Nyx, and she'd stumbled into the wrong place. But there were no stars shining in the

shadows of her body, and all creatures born in Nyx had that same starry essence.

“Theros,” he said.

The girl winced like his answer hurt her physically.

“I need food,” she said.

“Yes,” he agreed. She hadn’t asked it like a question, and even if she had, he didn’t have an answer. He had no idea what to do next. She just wanted food. He envied her single-minded purpose.

The sun was setting, and Daxos stared at the sky as the gods came into sharp focus above him. Purphoros was locked in a death match against Heliod. A god couldn’t kill another god, but they would cause each other as much pain as possible. To the mortals, such a duel would be confined by a custom called *between the pillars*. But to the gods, the entire sky was their proving ground.

“What’s your name?” the girl asked.

“Daxos,” he said.

“I’m Elspeth,” she told him, but the boy made no reply. He was distracted by the brilliance of Purphoros’s Sword, which the god had created in his divine forge. Heliod was weaponless. He’d flung his spear far to the north in a miscalculated strike. In the sky, the gods circled each other like wolves moving in for the kill. Daxos could perceive the history of their conflict etched into the foundations of the heavens. He knew that the God of Horizons had warned them not to let their hatred

spill from Nyx into the mortal realm. But their fury had consumed them.

“Where’s your mother?” Elspeth asked. It was strange that she didn’t know that the gods were fighting. Daxos wondered if she perceived Nyx at all. She moved closer to him, but like a frightened animal, she crossed the glade in short bursts. He waited, motionless, watching the sky. Soon she drew close enough to touch his hand, if she’d wanted to. She stared at the glass amulet around his neck. Now the asphodel glowed green, reflecting the life of the forest.

“Dead,” Daxos said. He hadn’t yet put two words together in a sentence, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“I’m sorry,” she said, but she made no move to comfort him. He perceived her silent plea, the one she made with the slant of her shoulders and the pits of ashes that were her eyes: *Please help me.*

Daxos didn’t know what to do, so he watched the sky where Phenax, the God of Deception, skulked across the horizon above the skeletal girl.

“I’ll try,” he promised.



Daxos and the girl moved slowly through the night and the forest. Elspeth walked like she was broken. Daxos kept tripping over roots because his eyes never left Helioid and Purphoros’s battle. Finally, Elspeth took

both his hands as if she were afraid he would fall and hurt himself. Elspeth's chin was bowed, and her eyes firmly on the ground. Shafts of divine light illuminated the forest around them as Purphoros's blade destroyed great swaths of Nyx. Daxos believed Elspeth moved with purpose up the mountainside. Years later he wondered how the girl knew to lead him to the summit. If she had not been there to take his hands, he never would have found his way. But at the time, he was too distracted to give it much thought. He could feel the reverberations of the god-war through the soles of his feet.

At daybreak, they'd reached the timberline. It was just a short distance to the summit. The sound of bubbling water made them pause. A few steps away there was a misty pond with unnaturally blue water surrounded by cattails. It was the domain of naiads, or water nymphs. Daxos could see the Nyxborn creatures shy away from the strangers.

Elspeth fell beside the pond and drank her fill. She curled on her side in the grass and closed her eyes. Daxos was torn—he needed to climb higher to see the gods more clearly, but he didn't want to leave the broken girl. After their initial shyness, the nymphs approached Elspeth in a kindly way. She was an innocent, and they took pity. They wouldn't let her perish in the haven next to their healing waters.

So Daxos continued his journey. Once he reached the summit, he had an unobstructed view of Heliod and

Purphoros. He could now see Purphoros's Sword clearly and marveled that such a thing existed. Purphoros had designed the blade to bring chaos to the god-realm. Heliod presumed to be the king of Nyx, and although Purphoros couldn't destroy him, he would punish his arrogance. Purphoros meant to lay Heliod low, to ruin his domain, and cast him shattered on the ground. He attacked with madness and cared nothing of the wounds he was inflicting on the world.

As they so often do, destruction and creation intermingled. As Purphoros cut into Nyx he rattled the celestial creatures that populated the night sky. He accidentally dislodged Polukranos, the World Eater, from its heavenly perch. The fifty-headed monster plunged toward the mortal realm, leaving a trail of Nyx blazing in the sky.

Daxos felt fear echo in the belly of the gods, who knew what a disaster Polukranos would be to civilization. Heliod demanded help from Kruphix, the eldest god. The God of Horizons had inscrutable powers, even to the rest of the pantheon, and he could stop Purphoros from destroying Nyx. Kruphix unfolded himself from the edge of the world and swept across the sky. Purphoros saw Kruphix coming for him and turned to face him. But when Purphoros turned, Heliod struck him with such force that the earth shook and water crashed over the sea wall of Meletis. The blow knocked the sword from Purphoros's hands. Before he could retrieve it, Kruphix

had encircled him with his four shadowy arms, each the length of the horizon. Purphoros's Sword slipped through one of the gashes it had created in Nyx.

Daxos watched Kruphix drag Purphoros away toward the edge of the world. But before he departed, Kruphix entered the mind of every god and warned them in the immeasurable language of creation: *Do not threaten the mortal realm again, or I will declare a great Silence. The gods will be threaded into the fabric of Nyx, unable to tread the land for as long as I will it.*

There was no time to protest the edict. The hydra was about to be unleashed on the unprepared mortals. Helioid joined with Nylea, God of the Hunt, who cast vines beneath the hydra's body to ease its harsh entrance into the world. Below Daxos, the hydra materialized in the valley and was momentarily stunned into stillness. Though much diminished in size, the hydra could still destroy every human city unless it was immediately contained. Helioid didn't see Purphoros's Sword fall because he had become a winged horse racing across the sky to help his sister Nylea. Together they trapped the hydra inside a cavern deep under the Nessian Forest.

Of all the mortals in the world, only Daxos saw Purphoros's Sword enter the mortal realm. He saw it leave Nyx and come to rest on the summit near where he stood. It burned hot through the sky, but when it landed, it was small enough to fit a human's hand. Just as it was with the hydra, the abrupt shift between realms had

robbed the blade of its divinity. It became fundamental—comprised more of iron than of Nyx. Daxos whipped his head around and stared at it in shock. The devastating weapon of the god lay just a few feet from him in the red dirt.

As Daxos struggled to make sense of what happened, a rejuvenated Elspeth climbed to the summit next to him. Jagged stellar light flashed in the heavens. Long strands of Nyx dangled from the dome of the sky from where Purphoros's Sword had damaged it. Below them in the valley, Nylea was still wrestling with Polukranos, who rebelled against the darkness of the cavern.

“Your world ...” Elspeth said. “It’s too immense.”

“Can you see his face?” Daxos whispered. “He’s everything.”

As if in response to Daxos’s question, Heliod revealed himself in blazing glory. He took human form and appeared as a man with black hair and flowing robes, but he loomed like a mountain on the horizon. It was as if he encompassed the sun. It shone out from inside his form, its fierce rays radiating across the sky in victory. As Heliod turned to Daxos, the boy threw himself to the ground in supplication.



Elspeth was awestruck by the immense visage dominating the skyline. But her home plane had been

overrun with unfathomable evil, and things she didn't understand meant death. In her mother tongue, there had been a word for "god," but it had become forbidden and dangerous. Helioid's divine light burned Elspeth's eyes, and she shielded herself from his blinding illumination.

Behind her, Daxos raised his arms to the heavens and spoke. "She died for me."

His words frightened Elspeth. She was afraid he was talking about her and the violence to come. She'd just escaped from a place of degradation and pain and had no intention of letting anyone touch her ever again. Her mind fought against itself. Part of her wanted to believe that this world was safe, that the god on the horizon wouldn't hurt her and might even protect her. The other part was like a rabbit, instinctively fleeing whatever she didn't understand.

At that moment, she spied Purphoros's diminished sword. Twin orbs glowed in the hilt like unblinking eyes. She didn't stop to question how it came to be on the mountain. She only thought of leaving. She didn't know where she was going, but somewhere *else* with a smoother sky and smaller gods. Anywhere would have a measure of violence, she'd learned that already. And she had nothing with which to protect herself but her own hands.

Elspeth's prey instincts triumphed. She ran forward, grasped the sword, and slid down the embankment. Hiding behind a boulder, she prepared herself to flee the

world. By the time she departed Theros, Daxos had given himself over to his god.

CHAPTER 1



Skola Valley was infamous for its endless revels. Miles away, in the back rooms of Meletis, people whispered tales of the debauchery of satyrs. The drums and cymbals crashed from morning to night. Cups overflowed, the dancing never ceased, and all desires could be fulfilled, or so they said. The tales of orgies and riotous celebrations spurred humans to make the arduous trek from their walled polis through the Nessian Forest to this isolated valley where they could experience the bacchanalia for themselves. Framed by verdant trees and bathed in the light of the bonfire, humans and satyrs mingled in the pursuit of everlasting euphoria. The reputation of the valley was well deserved, but not tonight.

Xenagos, the satyr-king of the Skola Valley, glowered disapprovingly at the revelers swaying on the grass below him. He perched on the edge of a chaise lounge on a wooden platform above the revel ground. To the revelers, euphoria was the end goal. A night of mindless release, and they were sated. Food was plentiful, work

was scarce, and the satyrs of the valley lived for the celebration—all the satyrs except their king, who had become jaded to the pursuit of pleasure. Revels were tiresome but acutely necessary.

Xenagos had seen more and endured more than his brethren could comprehend. Not one of them could appreciate the burden of his gift or the trials he had to go through to give these light-hearted revels lasting meaning. Seething with frustration, Xenagos slumped back with his double-pointed spear resting across his chest. It hadn't been so long ago that he'd been a foolish believer just like them. But once his spark ignited, he'd seen beyond the boundaries of Theros, and everything he thought he knew had been shattered. Even the haughty sphinx, prognosticating in his cave, had never alighted on other worlds like Xenagos had.

He'd always known there was something special about him, but his burden was truly unique. There must be some grand design because most mortals couldn't have handled seeing the infinite planes—they would have gone mad with the knowledge. Only a mind like his could truly profit from the experience. But still, he had never asked for this ability. It was thrust on him in a moment of great weakness. And now he shouldered the responsibility of leading these bleating sheep. For he alone among mortals—and gods—knew what was best for them, what was best for this tiny speck of existence known as Theros.

“Hail Helioid, Lord of Breakfast,” Xenagos shouted. “And Thassa, Queen of Puddles!”

At the sound of his voice, the revelers paused. With a practiced motion, the crowd turned to their king and laughed politely. But it wasn't loud enough to satisfy Xenagos. A fiery light flashed in his eyes, and the audience began to laugh uproariously at his jest.

Xenagos sighed. How he desired genuine emotion. He could make people do whatever he wanted, but such directives could never satisfy the depths of his cravings. Xenagos released his foolish flock back to their dancing and motioned for his attendant to fill his ceramic cup. With a heavy heart, he considered what he should do about the current atmosphere of the night's festivities, which was made up of mostly satyrs and a few humans, or *stubs*, thrown in for good measure. The revel was tepid. Unless it ramped up, the night would gain him nothing at all.

As the sun set below the horizon, Nyx materialized in the sky above the valley. With nightfall, the god-forms and celestial creatures would begin traipsing across the heavens. Xenagos didn't like eyes of the gods upon him and his domain. He wanted to avoid the attention of Nylea most of all. She believed that Xenagos and the satyrs occupied the valley at her pleasure. He began casting a protective spell because it was *his* pleasure that the air above his valley become as dense as a roof to block the vision of those unwelcome in his house. He

cast the spell with little effort, and a thicket of ethereal vines crawled over the valley and settled like a living dome above them all. Nyx's shifting light still found its way through the gaps, but the gods couldn't easily spy from their lofty realm.

The revelers burst into applause at the sight of the twining foliage and the dappled light playing across the emerald grass. They raised their cups to Xenagos, and he felt the energy of the revel increase. His heart beat faster. His veins crackled inside his body. But he needed more. Casually, he crossed one leg over the other and cast tendrils of capture-magic that snaked around the fire and looped around several dancers. It gave him momentary pleasure to snare revelers in the noose of his unseen control. But it was too easy to be interesting for long. Spellcasting was particularly easy here where the land was naturally infused with the essence of divine magic. In the Skola Valley, you could practically dig a hole and find the earth glittering with the stars of Nyx.

He'd ensnared three dancers: two female satyrs and a young man named Deiphon who arrived from Meletis only a few days before. The scion of a wealthy family, Deiphon was a handsome young man with curly dark hair and a sense of entitlement. He'd been drinking wine all night, which made him especially easy to control. Like all human *stubs*, he came to the valley with the idea that life would be one long party. Xenagos let the females slip from his mystical grasp. He could

manipulate satyrs all day long with little to be gained from it. But the young man was more interesting. Deiphon fancied himself a gifted speaker, a teller of god-stories. And Xenagos wanted to test those skills.

“Deiphon!” Xenagos called to the young man. “Come and join me at my table!”

The crowd twittered jealously. The revelers had been keeping an eye on the platform as the satyr-king sulked. Now his honored guest had been chosen. Quickly, a table was set up and attendants brought plates of fruit, figs, and barley bread. Dark red wine overflowed the edges of the two-handled cups, and the mood of the revel lifted considerably.

“You honor me,” Deiphon said as he settled against the blue pillows.

“What news of the world?” Xenagos asked politely.

“Callaphe the Mariner has returned,” Deiphon said triumphantly as if he’d accomplished the feat himself. The revelers murmured excitedly. Xenagos was disappointed. The legends of Callaphe—a sea-faring trickster who stole trinkets from the gods and cast them over the waterfall at the edge of the world—meant nothing to him.

“How interesting,” he lied.

“Yes, she was seen on the waves off the Siren’s Shipyard,” Deiphon said. “And on a stormy night in Meletis Harbor.”

“Perhaps she means to steal Heliod’s crown,” Xenagos

said drily.

Xenagos could see that Deiphon heard the edge in his voice. The young man closed his mouth and reached for his cup. Most people would have blundered on with the story, but Deiphon clearly sensed the satyr's disapproval. Perhaps he was more perceptive than Xenagos had originally thought. And *perception* was something that the satyr-king craved desperately.

"Enjoy your drink, boy," Xenagos said warmly. "And then tell me a god-story."

Telling god-stories was a highly prized skill with unspoken rules for both the storyteller and the listener. Deiphon smiled radiantly at Xenagos's request. He seemed unsurprised that he had caught the eye of the infamous satyr-king.

"My lord, I could not do a god-story justice," Deiphon demurred.

"You speak with a silver tongue," Xenagos protested. "Even the gods in Nyx will surely sit and listen."

"You're too kind," Deiphon said. "But if it pleases you, King, I'll tell you a new story I heard on my journey here. If you will pardon my inadequate oration ...?"

"I give you leave to mutilate it," Xenagos said magnanimously.

Deiphon adjusted the pillows around himself and rested his elbow on the high back of the chaise. Revelers crowded around the carved legs of the platform. Xenagos sat up and leaned slightly forward, as if he couldn't bear

to miss a single word.

“As we all know, Purphoros has been absent from the night sky for ages,” Deiphon began. “He toils in his mountain forge and neglects his duties to his brothers and sisters in Nyx.”

Xenagos nodded politely. A boy raised in Meletis was predisposed to see the conflict between Heliod and Purphoros in such a light. The Meletians adored their god of the sun while Purphoros was considered the fallen brother, the low dweller. A young man from Akros might have described it the other way around.

“Years ago, during a time of troubles with the minotaurs, Phenax began whispering in Heliod’s ear. He told Heliod that Mogis plotted to capture him and keep him prisoner in his Temple of Malice. The God of Slaughter planned to carve the name of war upon Heliod’s face.”

Xenagos recognized these events, which had occurred barely a decade earlier. Deiphon spoke as if they were the distant past even though the boy would have been alive, though very young. On Theros, history had a way of transforming to myth much more quickly than on other worlds. There were nuggets of truth in what Deiphon said, but much of it had been warped by his limited perspective.

“Heliod wanted to remind Mogis that he was lord over all the pantheon,” Deiphon continued. “So he asked Purphoros to rebuild Nyx. Heliod desired Nyx to

become like a grand palace for all to witness his glory. But Purphoros refused to construct such an edifice because he had thrown his lot in with Mogis and placed his fingerprints on the dark god's altar.”

Xenagos made a little grunt of derision, but Deiphon didn't hear him. The boy's story had turned into Helioid propaganda, which was even more irritating than the arrogance of *stubs*. Of course, the boy couldn't appreciate Purphoros's creative side, how he would make something beautiful only to cast it into the fires to destroy it and begin again. Xenagos had no love for the God of the Forge, but he could relate to the passion of his spirit.

“After the two quarreled, Purphoros forged a sword in the fires of his mountain,” Deiphon continued. “He was jealous of Helioid and didn't want Nyx to reflect Helioid's glory. Purphoros wanted to humiliate the God of the Sun, but in his frenzy to destroy, he made an error. He lacked the precision of Thassa, God of the Sea. He did not have the finesse of Keranos, God of Storms. So in his destructive fury, he unleashed the mighty Polukranos from his home in the sky.”

Now Xenagos felt a spark of interest. *Everyone* knew the myth of Polukranos. Eons ago, Nylea had immortalized him in Nyx after he annihilated a massive polis the size of Akros and Meletis combined—or so the mythmakers claimed. Nylea transformed the hydra into a celestial creature because she could not bear to let him

die, but she knew that he was too destructive to exist among the mortals. And Polukranos stayed in Nyx until Purphoros's Sword set him free once again.

"Heliod found himself in a grave situation," Deiphon continued. "When the hydra touched the earth, it would lose its cloak of stars. Polukranos burned with a mindless hatred for civilization, and Meletis, the greatest city of all time, was in peril. But Purphoros had challenged Heliod *between the pillars* and was determined to destroy Nyx. Of course, he could not let that stand. So he called to his eldest brother, Kruphix, who rarely emerged from his Temple of Mystery at the edge of the world."

Xenagos grew impatient with the way Deiphon's lips curled at the end of each slow sentence. He'd heard this story a thousand times. Was there some new event that would soon be engulfed into the legend? If the mortals were already telling tales of the hydra, and the gods had yet to notice ... well, then Xenagos's plans had progressed more quickly than he predicted.

"And Heliod called to his beautiful sister Nylea ..." Deiphon was enjoying himself too much. He spoke in an exaggerated voice intended to imitate the forum storytellers who attracted huge audiences in Meletis.

"Yes, Nylea spread a net of vines, and caught the hydra as it plummeted," Xenagos interrupted. They all knew how the story ended: Heliod bound the hydra. With Heliod's help, they lodged the hydra into a vast cavern, and Nylea settled the great Nessian Forest above him.

And Keranos sent a mighty wind to carry Purphoros's Sword into Thassa's ocean where it was claimed by the ruins of Arixmethes.

"And blah, blah, blah, Kruphix slapped their hands and told them to never do it again or they'd be sealed into Nyx like bad children," Xenagos quipped.

There was a stunned silence. The telling of a god-story had certain rules, and Xenagos himself usually abided by those rules. It was he who'd asked for the story, after all. It was considered a great rudeness—indeed a comment on Deiphon's manhood—to be hurried in such a way. The satyrs who were gathered around Xenagos's platform quickly hid their surprise, but Deiphon looked wounded by the satyr-king's interruption. Xenagos's eyes narrowed. Deiphon would spoil the revel with his pouting.

"You said you'd heard something new on your journey here?" Xenagos prompted.

Several of the satyrs knew the dangerous tone of voice and began to inch away from the platform. Out of the corner of his eye, Xenagos watched them back away like dogs about to be whipped for bad behavior. Cowards. If he let them all slink away, the grassy circle would be empty except Deiphon. He wanted an audience. If Deiphon loved attention so much, he deserved to have it.

Deiphon sipped from his cup and shrugged dismissively. "I heard that the hydra has risen again."

The shocked satyrs began to whisper among

themselves, and Deiphon looked surprised. He'd spoken with no dramatic effort, yet that sentence had the largest reaction from the onlookers.

“King Xenagos, thank you for your hospitality, but I am feeling very tired now,” Deiphon said. He made a perfunctory bow while still seated. “With your permission, I'd like to retire.”

Xenagos barely disguised his fury. He sat down next to the young man and slipped his arm around his shoulders. Deiphon, all sense of merriment lost, tried to shy away from the satyr's touch.

“But you came all this way to enjoy the fruits of this valley, where pleasure knows no bounds,” Xenagos said.

“Yes, and it has been most entertaining ...” Deiphon trailed off when Xenagos placed a heavy, controlling hand on top of the young man's head.

“Why is there no dancing?” Xenagos called to the crowd in a fatherly voice.

A red mist rose up out of the enchanted ground and shimmered around the legs of the revelers. The mist was accompanied by the sweet smell of oranges, and the onlookers felt an immediate wave of contentment. With eyes glazed, their bodies began to sway gently to nonexistent music. Some locked hands and danced faster. Others knelt to gather piles of stones.

Xenagos's fingers threaded themselves among the strands of Deiphon's silky hair. Still seated on the raised platform, the mist had not yet risen above Deiphon's

feet. The young man gazed at the darkening horizon.

“You seem thoughtful, boy,” Xenagos said.

“I’m thinking of the white sands of Meletis Harbor,” Deiphon said. He wasn’t just speaking, he was pleading. The desperation in his voice made Xenagos’s heartbeat quicken.

“If I have offended you, King,” Deiphon said quietly. “I am very sorry.”

He had anticipated his fate, Xenagos noted. Most men wouldn’t have, but it changed nothing. He no longer cared about Deiphon’s perceptiveness. Slamming his fist against Deiphon’s skull, Xenagos knocked the young man off the edge and to the ground. He lay there stunned for a moment as the red mist clouded his eyes. Inhaling deep breaths of the citrus-scented air, Deiphon stood and began to spin in slow circles, a look of utter concentration on his angelic face. Xenagos incited the musicians to pick up their instruments and play, and the dazed revelers accelerated their movements with the rapid tempo of the pipe and drums. The pile of stones grew from the height of an anthill to the height of an altar.

The spectacle didn’t hold Xenagos’s attention for long—he’d seen it so many times before. He turned his attention to the platters of food so he didn’t see the glassy-eyed satyrs surrounding the wayward storyteller. As Deiphon danced, a satyr swiped a stone from the pile and hurled it at the young man. Another joined in and

then another, until the rocks rained down on him. Deiphon was oblivious, like a blade of grass taking no notice of a passing storm, even as the repeated blows knocked Deiphon backward. He made no attempt to dodge the impacts even as he fell, bleeding, to his knees. His lips were frozen in a happy smile. Xenagos allowed the satyr stone throwers to disperse. Now that the damage was done, he wanted to prolong Deiphon's last moments.

"Bring me an oracle, but not Kruphix's idiot," Xenagos ordered his attendant.

"That's the only oracle you have left," the attendant reminded him.

Xenagos snorted at the fragility of god-speakers and motioned for the attendant to retrieve whoever they had in the cells of the caverns below, even if it was a crazy woman who lived backward, or whatever nonsense the mythmakers claimed to be true.

There was a rumble of thunder, and Xenagos frowned at the sky. Why was the God of Storms knocking on his roof? No rain fell here unless it pleased Xenagos. The thunder rolled again, louder this time, just above his valley. Xenagos flinched as a lightning bolt blasted down from the sky and burned a vast hole in his vine-roof. Keranos's strike breached Xenagos's protections and actually touched the ground, not far from where Deiphon lay dying with a crushed skull on the blood-stained grass. The energy crackled along the ground. The

revelers hadn't reacted to the sound of the bolt, but they felt the energy as it hit the ground, and it sent them scattering. Xenagos was left standing alone before a deserted field. As the drops pelted down through a ragged hole in his leafy roof, he shouted a mild curse at Keranos.

"Did Deiphon leave you a pretty bit of sea glass?" Xenagos taunted Keranos. "Or are you just jealous of my *stubs*?"

Flanked by his attendants, the oracle approached through the misty downpour. She was a beautiful woman with eyes the color of almonds, and long black hair. She seemed relaxed and distant, not like someone who had been kept captive for weeks below the ground. When they'd first brought her to the valley, she revealed that her name was Kydele, but she'd said nothing remotely useful since, even when coerced. That was typical of the oracles of Kruphix, who was said to be the eldest and most inscrutable god. Kydele glanced from Xenagos to the dead boy.

"Keranos is right to be offended by such senseless killing," she said. It was the plainest thing he'd ever heard her say. Her hair was slipping out of its binding and hung in front of her face. She peered at him through the dripping strands, and her eyes reflected the star field of Nyx.

"Don't speak unless I tell you to," Xenagos said. It sounded petulant even to him, and she scoffed at his

presumption.

“What do you want, King Stranger?” she asked.

“Tell me what you know, and you can leave,” he said. He slumped down in the soggy pillows in a fit of self-pity. The revel was spoiled. His heart beat with a slow and irregular rhythm, and he was unnaturally tired. He had been hopeful that Deiphon’s story would be useful, but mortals were too blinded by their own self-interest. Now all his oracles had perished except this one. He needed a better way to see the entire world than snatching god-speakers from the streets as if he were some lowly priest of Erebos.

“You could never contain me if I did not choose to be,” she replied. It was not Kydele’s voice anymore, it was the multilayered voice of the divine. Kruphix must have been watching through her eyes, that passive, infuriating elder god.

“Is the hydra truly wandering among mortals?” Xenagos asked.

“The floor of the forest spits, and Polukranos tastes the mundane air,” the oracle told him.

“How do I get to Nyx?” he demanded.

Kydele, like all of Kruphix’s oracles, displayed two additional arms made of a shadowy star field that mimicked the form of their god. Kydele’s shadow arms flowed as though she were dancing, but she said nothing. Xenagos sneered at her through the rain.

“You look like a flailing insect,” Xenagos said. “A

beetle tipped upon its back.”

“So through the roots and into the watery cradle of Arixmethes,” the oracle murmured. “A lost city with no roots of its own.”

“What about Purphoros’s Sword?” Xenagos asked. “The mythmakers say the fates of the sword and the hydra are bound together.”

“Mythmakers cannot measure the bottom of the sea to the edges of the cosmos,” said the oracle.

“How do I get to the edge of the world?” Xenagos said. “I know there’s a way into Nyx beyond your waterfall.”

“Come leap off the side, and I will gladly dash you against the rocks of existence,” Kydele said.

“Did my revels awaken the hydra?” Xenagos demanded.

“From the eternal fires to the shards of sky to the peak of Mt. Velus,” Kydele told him. “And then the void. But void no longer.”

“Speak clearly,” Xenagos ordered, “or I will cut your tongue from your mouth.”

“You think you can hide what you’re doing?” the oracle asked. “The gods are well aware that something is amiss.”

“But do they know it is me?” Xenagos asked.

“Soon everyone will know your name,” she said. Xenagos was flattered though clearly she did not mean it well.

Kydele turned her back to him and went to the body of

Deiphon. Xenagos decided that he hated Kruphix's oracles most of all. She'd let herself be taken captive to spy on him. He should kill her now before Kruphix deciphered his plans. The strands of hair hanging in front of Kydele's face became like the veil of Athreos as she helped Deiphon's soul find passage to the Underworld. So much fuss over one arrogant human.

"Thank you for the lightning, Keranos," the oracle said to the sky.

Instead of killing Kydele, Xenagos thought maybe he would just control and humiliate her in his valley. Her strange god-sight was better than none at all. But he felt weak after the disappointment of the revel. Her mind was clear and unimpaired, while he felt shaken and spent. He didn't want to test his strength against a female, so he did nothing as Kydele transformed into mist and vanished through the gap in the vine-roof. She would journey back to Kruphix's Tree at the waterfall at the edge of the world where her god monitored the pulse and ebb of time and creation.

CHAPTER 2



Hey, wake up,” Xiro growled. “It’s our watch.”

The toe of a boot tapped Elspeth’s leg, and her fingers closed around her sword. She’d been asleep for such a short time. And despite the hard ground, the knobby roots under her thin blanket, and the stench of rotting apples, she really didn’t want to wake up.

Elspeth opened her eyes just as a shower of sparks erupted from the volcanic Mt. Velus, which dominated the horizon above the orchard where they were camped. Tonight the night sky was particularly vibrant. Astral clouds of violet and blue framed the mountain and transformed into wave-like patterns before her eyes. The inhabitants of Theros had a name for the night sky: Nyx, the realm of the gods. At first Elspeth thought people were being metaphorical about the word “realm.” But she’d been back on Theros for several months, and the more Elspeth learned from visiting the temples, the more it sounded like Nyx was an actual place. She’d come back to the plane because of the gods. Maybe the gods made Theros immune from atrocities like she

witnessed on Mirrodin or the chaos that afflicted Bant. If the gods were the key to the safety of the world, she needed to understand everything about them. But first she had to earn her keep by working for Xiro, and he was nudging her in the side and ordering her to wake up.

“Now!” Xiro crouched down and shook her shoulder. “Or I take that precious blade of yours and kick you in the river.”

“Don’t touch my sword,” Elspeth said, climbing out of her bedroll.

Xiro was the captain of a crew of sellswords based in the Foreigners’ Quarter in Akros. Xiro paid tribute to Iroas, God of Victory. He even called his crew Iroas’s Cutters after the patron god of Akros. Except Elspeth, all of the Cutters had served in the Akroan army at one time or another but had been cast out for reasons no one talked about—outcasts not by birth but by circumstances. Xiro took jobs out of necessity, but he and his men often talked of regaining the favor of the authorities. Elspeth knew he longed to be accepted back into the pristine city beyond the boundaries of the shabby quarter he now called home.

Xiro waited impatiently while she rolled up her bedroll and stashed it with the rest of the crew’s gear under a tarp strung between two apple trees. This was their third night sleeping in the orchard of a nobleman’s estate just outside the walls of Akros. The Takis Estate

was one of a few large agricultural holdings near the city. It thrived on the banks of a tributary of the Deyda River, which flowed from high in the mountains down to the sea. Arvid Takis, the patron of this estate, was angry with King Anax of Akros, which is why he turned to Xiro for protection rather than relying on the help of the army. The Cutters had been hired to watch for leonin raiders coming down from the highlands. Of the major estates around Akros, this was the only one that hadn't been attacked by marauders. Xiro's crew was watching around the clock, taking turns patrolling the grounds.

"Where are the other men?" Elspeth asked Xiro as they made their way from the orchard to the walls of sprawling Takis Manor.

"They're doing a pass around the hinter grounds," Xiro said. "Then they'll retire to the orchard for what's left of the night."

"Isn't it usually the minotaurs that are the main threat to Akros?" Elspeth asked. "Why does Master Takis think the leonins are at fault?"

"A leonin was spotted in the orchard a few days ago," Xiro said. "Minotaurs don't do scouting missions before they attack."

Elspeth had learned that hordes of minotaurs plagued the mountains around Akros. Caravans that traveled the Great River Road alongside the Deyda River to the sea were constantly attacked. Although minotaurs lacked the organization for a full-scale attack against the polis, even

the flatland around the walls weren't immune from the constant minotaur threat. The conflict originated with the gods themselves. Iroas and Mogis were twin brothers and both gods of war. But Iroas's domain was victory and honor while Mogis prized slaughter and pain. They were always at each other's throats, and Iroas's main focus seemed to be keeping his brother at bay.

"What temple did you see this week?" Xiro asked pointedly. He was both amused and alarmed by Elspeth's exploration of the holy sites of his city. He acted as if her interest in the pantheon was distasteful at best and perhaps a little immoral. There was only one god for him, Iroas, and he would never darken the door of a "lesser" god's temple.

"I visited a shrine to Keranos at the back of the Royal Observatory," Elspeth said. "They assured me that it was just a poor imitation of his divine observatory, his temple in the mountains."

"Keranos, the God of Insight—*pah*," Xiro said, making a dismissive motion with his hand. "He's never told me anything I didn't already know."

"Heliod also has a shrine outside of Akros in the mountains?" Elspeth asked tentatively. Thinking about Heliod made her feel strange. She remembered him from her first visit to Theros, years ago on the mountainside. Since then, whenever she heard the word "god," she always saw his face.

"It's just up the Ridge Trail less than a mile from the

King's Gate," Xiro said. "The location is out of respect to Iroas. Not because we Akroans disregard the God of the Sun."

When they'd reached the edge of the orchard, a strong scent of citrus hung in the air. Two ceremonial towers stood on either side of a bronze gate, which was open slightly. As they watched, dappled, prismatic light shone down from Nyx. The cosmic shadows cast from the heavens were constantly on the move across the land. It had been disorienting at first, but now Elspeth saw it was like a natural camouflage. If you could move with the night shadows, you could be nearly invisible.

Still in the darkness under the trees, Xiro crouched down and inspected the impressions in the dirt road leading up to the gate. There were so many foot- and hoofprints that it looked as though an army had ridden through the area recently. Elspeth waited for Xiro to act, but he was still at his post. He was an older man with a pleasant but timeworn face, and Elspeth thought highly of him because he didn't blink at hiring her, a foreign female who reported no military training. His intelligence was centered in his resourcefulness—he'd be the man you'd want around in a fight or to fix a broken wheel, but not the man with whom you would choose to spend a leisurely afternoon in conversation.

"Something's wrong," Xiro whispered. "The boys should have completed their pass. But there's been no signal. And why did they leave the gate open?"

As if in response to his words, the south watchtower exploded in a hail of fire, shards of stone, and red dust. Elspeth whirled around and covered her eyes as the rubble rained down on them. They were saved from the worst of it by the overhanging branches of the apple trees. When the dust cleared, they could see that the gate had been melted down the middle, leaving a wide gap into the grounds of the estate.

With their weapons drawn, they ran through the twisted metal of the gate, which glowed red hot from the explosion. Just beyond the gate was the area called the Garden Ring, a grassy circle where the stable boys exercised the family's horses. The Garden Ring was deserted, but firelight flickered beyond the wall of the inner courtyard.

"We've got to keep them from the manor house!" Xiro said.

She followed Xiro as he raced toward the inner courtyard. Elspeth had been inside the courtyard once before, and it had been like something out of a dream. Flowers bloomed in beds along the inner wall, hanging baskets overflowed with blossoms, and a pond teemed with golden fish. The Takis family used the inner courtyard for entertaining, and it boasted carved benches, a pavilion with a frieze of Mt. Velus, and statues of the gods made by Meletis's finest sculptors.

When Elspeth and Xiro reached the cherrywood gate, they found it splintered and hanging precariously under

the stone arch. Xiro battered his way through the remnants and into the inner courtyard. They stopped short beside a burning trellis, the pink roses now black husks. From the trellis, the flames traced the mortar between the flagstones, which glowed with unnatural heat. Xiro hurried to the ash-choked pond and looked frantically for a vase or bucket. But something in the shadows in the corner of the garden caught Elspeth's eye. It was obscured by bushes and a line of fruit trees, and it was so low to the ground that she thought it might be an animal terrified by the flames. She took several cautious steps toward the shadows. Eyes stared up at her, but they had strange, rectangular pupils that bisected the iris.

"Elspeth!" Xiro called. "Help me with the fire."

When Elspeth turned her head to Xiro in response, the creature lunged through the bushes and plowed into her. It knocked her off her feet and was on top of her, snarling and snapping as if it were trying to devour her face. Several more dark shapes bounded off the top of the wall over her. They made a strange hollow sound as they hit the flagstones. When they landed, all three charged at Xiro. Elspeth shouted a warning and braced herself against the attacker. With one arm jammed under the animal's throat to keep its teeth at bay, Elspeth's fingers found her sword. She couldn't swing the blade to slice, but she slammed the hilt into its head. It reared back in pain, and she shoved it away.

Elspeth scrambled to her feet as the creature drew back

into the shadows in temporary retreat. She peered into the darkness where she could see the outline of ... what kind of creature was it? Its form was blurry, as if the air around it shimmered with energy. It might be some kind of canid, but it was definitely not a leonin. Too small, she thought as it blasted out of the bushes and jumped at her again. She dodged it and swung a wide, low arc. The tip of her sword sliced it from belly to chin, and it fell to the ground.

Elsbeth raced for Xiro, who was pinned against the wall as the creatures encircled him and tore at him with their teeth and hands. In the light from the burning trellis, she could see they had furry legs with hooves, but their torsos were humanoid. Before she could reach her captain, several more creatures appeared along the top of the wall. They leaped down at her as if the fifteen-foot drop was nothing. At the edge of her vision, she saw that the one she had cut so badly now stumbled to its feet. Blood gushed from its wounds and stained the ground, but it took no notice of its injuries. She plunged her sword into the throat of the closest attacker and waded into the fray near Xiro. She wondered if her vision was distorted because she couldn't quite see what she was fighting. But everything else—the trees, the flowers, the flames—stood out in sharp detail.

“They don't stop,” she shouted as she sliced off the disturbingly human arm of another relentless attacker. Losing an arm only made the thing pause. When it

regained its footing, it charged at her, mouth first. Elspeth split its skull with her blade and it slumped to the glowing flagstones. They might be subject to harm, but they were insanely persistent.

Nearly a dozen of the creatures had leaped down from the wall and crowded inside the courtyard. Those who weren't attacking Elspeth or Xiro were smashing statues or setting fire to anything that would burn. They seemed to be in a mystical trance, making jerky motions while they casually destroyed the beautiful courtyard.

"Guard the door!" Xiro screamed as he sliced his blade through the air. Blood sprayed on the wall behind him.

Elspeth darted across the burning ground and positioned herself in front of the door that led into the manor house. She felt a strange wind swirl around her. Each of the creatures froze for an instant, twitched abnormally, and then resumed their activities with renewed vigor. Something magical was at work here, no doubt. She took a deep breath, preparing to cast a spell despite the chaos around her. Her friend Ajani had once told her that all magic came from the land, but the strongest mages found individual ways to channel it in battle. Some chanted words to focus their minds while others cried out the names of their enemies. For Elspeth, she learned how to channel it through the ritualized motions of her blade. She was still using the power of the land, but the patterns focused the magic, like sound blasting through a horn.

Three of the creatures charged her simultaneously, but Elspeth's spell was complete. Strength surged through her and empowered Xiro, too. She heard him shout a battle cry as the unexpected energy flooded his body. A creature clamped its jaws down on her forearm, but she barely felt it. Elspeth brought her sword down and practically severed its head from its body. She shook her arm violently to dislodge the lifeless head from her arm. Another tried to gore her with its horns, but she kicked it back and it stumbled into another one. After the impact, the two turned on each other. They tumbled to the ground. The one on top slammed its head into the other. Then it ripped out its throat with its teeth and began to eat the other's flesh. In horror, Elspeth watched the gruesome spectacle of cannibalism against the backdrop of flame.

"Set them against each other!" she shouted to Xiro, who hacked at a creature that wouldn't die.

She ran at one who was pounding the stone head of Iroas into dust with a hammer. She grabbed it by its horn and shoved it into one of its companions. The two collided and began tearing at each other with teeth and fingers. Xiro followed her lead, and they corralled the creatures in a corner. The creatures seemed to have no wits about them. They were overcome with frenetic madness. A high-pitched and discordant howl sounded from the direction of the orchard. As the sound grew louder, the remaining attackers screamed the same

garbled words over and over: “King Stranger. King Stranger. King Stranger.” Then, almost as if someone had pulled a lever, they burst into self-immolating fire.

The howling faded, and the only sound left was the crackling of the dying fire on the charred husks of the creatures. Xiro doubled over and caught himself from falling on the shattered base of one of the statues. His arms and face were a mass of scratches and oozing bite marks.

“What were those ... beasts?” Elspeth asked, staring at the bloody pulps of the corpses that had been devoured by their companions.

Xiro straightened himself. Elspeth knew this man had endured the harsh training of an Akroan soldier and weathered many battles. But now he looked ill and shaken.

“Not beasts. Satyrs.”

“Satyrs?” Elspeth said in surprise. She’d seen friezes of the frolicking goatmen with flasks of wine and pipes. “I thought they lived in eternal bliss. Ramblers and merrymakers, from the stories I’ve heard.”

“They’re drunks and fools,” Xiro said. “And sometimes vandals. I’ve never seen anything like this. No one has ever seen anything like this.”

“What were they screaming, just before they died?” Elspeth asked.

Xiro wiped his brow, smearing the blood and dirt. “ ‘King Stranger.’ ”

“What does that mean?”

Xiro shrugged. “Just madness. You can’t make sense of madness. Come on, let’s find what’s left of our crew.”

CHAPTER 3



Heliod took the form of an ordinary man and stood on the crown of rock overlooking the vast, rolling sea. The sky was cloudless, an endless blue above the dark depths of the ocean.

“Sister,” he called. The winds bowed low in his presence and let his voice ring unobstructed to the edges of the land.

A dark cloud eased across the horizon, and the gusts of bitter wind lashed his rock. It was a sure sign that Keranos, God of Storms, was watching even though he was not wanted. Heliod drew himself taller, still a man but towering to the sky. In this form, he was much like the colossal men of old now gone from the mortal realm.

“Sister, I must speak with you,” he commanded. Then he glowered at the sky, where Keranos sulked in a gray fury. “Go back to your mountaintop, Keranos. I am not interested in you.”

The sea raged in response to his reprimand, so he knew that Thassa, God of the Sea, was listening after all. An unnatural undulation of a female voice pulsed

beneath the depths and bubbled its way to the surface. Echoing across the choppy waves, the chanting sound grew louder until a powerful geyser of water burst up from the floor of the ocean and blasted into the sky. Thundering waves radiated out from the shaft of water, which reached for Nyx and then cascaded back to the sea. Thassa's arrival was accompanied by a wall of water that smashed against Helioid's rock. The force would have flattened an ordinary man, but Helioid was now a pillar of marble a hundred feet high and hollow. He was filled with the dark, starry sky of Nyx, the god's realm. The depths of his being was inhabited with constellations and the eternal void—as it was with all gods, as it was with all gods' creations. Unlike this mortal realm, which had edges, Helioid was endless and unfathomable. And now angry.

“Thassa!” he raged, so loudly he startled Keranos, and in response streaks of lightning blazed across the stormy sky.

The female voice ceased abruptly. A pool of water calmed itself in the midst of the tumultuous waves. Helioid became a beam of sunlight and shone down on this calm eye of the sea. Out of the waves rose his sister, Thassa, now a giant squid, her one great eye staring at him defiantly. She knew Helioid fancied himself the head of the pantheon, but the waters held more secrets than the blazing sky could comprehend. Thassa did not bow to the Sun God, but she deigned to emerge a little from

her watery domain.

“Where have you been?” Helioid asked. He had a fondness for Thassa, and it irked him when she disappeared for ages in the inky blackness of the oceans beyond the extent of his rays of light.

“You upset Keranos,” she said disapprovingly. She took her favored form, a sleek triton, and swam circles around the perimeter of her calm pool. Beyond the tranquil circle, sirens wheeled through the sky in agitation. Creatures like sirens who had little capacity for mortal language were still attracted by god-speak, the multifaceted language spoken by the gods. Helioid could communicate with many of his world’s lesser beings, often in their own language, but sirens were Thassa’s children. Their squalling merely hurt his ears.

“I wish to tell you something—you and no one else,” Helioid replied. “You see wider and farther than me. You see more than all our brothers and sisters combined.”

He meant to flatter her and keep her attention. He gathered seawater to him in great handfuls, but she showed her disinterest. The waves knotted themselves around him and fell away in unnatural patterns, more like woven cloth than the natural waves.

“Was my voice not clear beneath fathoms of the sea?” Helioid asked pointedly.

“There are civilizations beneath the waves,” Thassa bragged. “Erebos thinks of himself as a mighty king of the Underworld, but even his boundaries are narrower

than mine.”

“I have seen the edges of your sea,” Heliod said, although it was not precisely true. “I have seen the roof and the floor. I would not be so boastful, queen of dead-eyed fish.”

His insult incensed her, as he had intended. Around them, the waves became like mountains, crashing down and rising up as if to leap into Nyx itself, which was not possible, of course. The boundary between the realms was inviolable except by the gods who could move freely among them. That was the order of the world. It was decreed that neither grains of sand borne on the wind nor the mightiest of the Hundred-Handed Ones could break the dome of the sky and access the gods’ realm. Only the gods could transverse the invisible passageways. Only the gods could both inhabit and be completed by the constellations.

“The waves cannot access Nyx!” Heliod bellowed with such force that Thassa transformed into mist to avoid the crippling sound of his voice, which traveled for miles. Miles away, his power overturned a small sailing vessel, which crashed into the rocks and was claimed by the depths of Thassa’s kingdom.

“Purphoros’s Sword crossed the boundary,” Thassa reminded him. “All things are possible, if a god wills it to be so.”

“So it’s Purphoros again, trying to destroy me,” he said. He breathed the name of his enemy into the four

winds, and the sky trembled.

“What do you want?” Thassa said with irritation. “I am weary of your feud with our brother. He has suffered enough from your last battle.”

“How can you ask me what I want?” Heliod replied. “Look around you, Great Eye. Purphoros again threatens Nyx. He would cast all the Ancients in the Heavens down amongst the mortals. Fragments of the night sky are falling. Nyx crumbles while you paddle about unawares.”

“Who told you this?” Thassa asked. She now appeared as a fine mist that danced around him in strands of sunlight. It gave him comfort that she could turn the sea into one immense tidal wave that would inundate all the land, even the tallest mountain peak, yet she could still not hurt him.

“The horizon felt them fall, and Kruphix sent a dove,” Heliod replied. He took the form of a man again, standing on the crown of rock as his sister appeared as a woman beside him. Together they stood in the mortal realm, corporeal and hollow. The sun warmed them, and in the places where they should have cast shadows, the glittering stars of Nyx lay on the ground.

“And what if the horizon is a liar and the dove merely a dream?” Thassa laughed. She was not one to laugh easily, and Heliod was furious with her for taunting him. Nearby, the sirens had reconvened above the waves in a great flock. They screeched and mimicked their queen’s

laughter. Heliod could not be bothered with them, so annoyed was he at his sister.

“I do not dream,” he said stubbornly. He was lying. He *should* not dream, yet last night he fell asleep in the form of a man and saw holes in his consciousness. In this dream state, great spaces of void invaded his vision and prevented him from seeing the expanse of his domain.

“Perhaps Purphoros *is* feeling murderous, boiling his iron skin in his infernal forge,” Thassa spoke as slowly as a trickle of water, just to infuriate her brother. She knew something, but she wanted to torment Heliod before she told him. He had grown too arrogant, even before his battle with Purphoros, and he had fancied himself above the rest of the gods.

“Does he forge another sword of chaos?” Heliod asked. “Tell me! You cannot condone the destruction of Nyx. Your realm would suffer greatly.”

“You pretend as though you fear the destruction of Nyx,” Thassa said. “But it’s *him* who makes you tremble.”

Presently, Heliod tired of her attempts to taunt him. He became knots of white fire and bound her to him. He caught her by surprise, and as a winged horse he stormed across the sky with her leashed to him. The ocean rose higher and the waves plucked desperately at the air, but they could not save Thassa from his grasp. Keranos, who hated the sight of suffering, protested with lightning that branched across the sky. Always cautious,

Karametra covered her city with her hands. Even Phenax stepped around a shadow corner, so intent was he on watching.

Heliod dragged Thassa to the Despair Lands where the Nyx fragments had dislodged from the god realm and struck the mundane earth. He released his hold on Thassa and let her drift like a feather to the black sand beneath. He could sense a shaft to the Underworld nearby. Heliod could hear the rushing of the underground river and taste the despair leaking up from the shaft and into the mortal realm. He hated Erebus with his ceaseless vanity and self-loathing. The God of the Dead should have two faces—he was such a pathetic liar and coward with his bully whip.

“There,” Heliod said to Thassa. He pointed with his great spear of light. “And look above, Thassa. There are voids in places where Nyx should be.”

Thassa had landed at the feet of the Nyx fragments, which stood taller than the greatest cyclops, who was seven times as tall as an average man. There were ten broken shards that looked like the fingers of a titan grasping up from under the ground. The fragments were hollow like the gods, filled with the night sky and the sparkling stars and mists of color and patterns of all the knowledge of the world and the cosmos beyond.

“Nothing like this has ever fallen before,” Heliod said. He tried to say it gently. He needed her to understand the dire circumstances. “If this is done by Purphoros,

then it is by a weapon I cannot conceive.”

“No, you cannot because you think in straight lines, while his mind is as tumultuous as waves in a storm,” Thassa said. “You are even more blind than you know.”

“Tell me what you have seen!” Heliod roared. His last trace of patience was gone.

“I have *seen* nothing,” she said. “I have *heard* footfalls from a creature at the far edge of the Nessian.”

“What did you say?” Heliod said. “What forest creature is so vast that it could make its presence felt in your realm?”

In the next instant, Heliod realized what creature she meant, and he did not believe her. “You lie!” he shouted, and the gray stones around them cracked and turned to dust. “Polukranos does not stir.”

She became the giant eye that hated him, and he saw her stone-cold intentions reflected in every drop of water that fell dripping from her, the lidless pupil, onto the wasteland that had seen no water in anyone’s memory. In the distance, her waves pitched and roiled as she spat out her indignation at being dragged across the sky.

“A great shadow will swallow the sun,” she raved. “A war will rage across the land, and my children will feast on the drowned corpses of your favored ones.”

And Heliod was sad because Thassa had been his favorite among his sisters and brothers. She became feral—which was nothing he had seen from her before. She slashed at his face with razor-sharp pincers. He felt pain,

though he did not know how she accomplished harming him because they stood in the mortal lands and not in Nyx. A god shouldn't be able to hurt another outside of Nyx. It should *not* be possible except that something was very wrong with their world. That was what he had been trying to make her understand. He needed to know what damage Purphoros inflicted and how. It was not just for him but for the sake of every living thing. But Thassa had set logic aside for the sake of her pride.

He lost his temper and struck her with his spear-of-light, catching her in a vulnerable state between forms. The rules of the world had been broken, and the blow nearly split her in half. She fell pathetically amid the common slate stones and sand where she slowly reformed into a worthy vessel for the stars. But Heliad wasted no more time on her. He became white flames and burned his way across the horizon. He left Thassa cast down among the wayward shards of his realm.

CHAPTER 4



Elspeth unbuckled her armor and laid it on the floor. She wrapped her sword in rags and hid it under blankets on the cot in her rented room in the Foreigners' Quarter at the edge of Akros. There was an old mirror above the washbasin, and Elspeth caught a glimpse of her distorted reflection. With her hair gathered high on her head in the popular Akroan style and wearing a simple silk dress, she could have been mistaken for a carefree native of the city. She looked like a woman with no scars, no secrets. The reflection in the mirror didn't look like someone who lay awake at night counting the litany of mistakes she'd made.

Aran and the knights of Bant—they all thought she was honorable and pure. But she was riddled by doubt and far from blameless. She could put on the shining armor, but Elspeth knew what she was. She was like Akros, this city of gods and warriors. On the surface, Akros was glorious—all scrubbed stone and blood-red banners. But every place had an underbelly of madness and violence like what she'd just witnessed with the crazed satyrs. The

people who inhabited the shadowy corridors and poorest hovels, untainted by lies of glory, might be thieves and liars, but in some ways they were more honest than all the kings on their thrones. And if she only visited the beautiful temples with their open doors and careful words of praise she would never learn the truth.

When her friend Ajani looked at her, he saw her for what she *could* be, not what she really was. Ajani was a fellow planeswalker and a leonin from Alara, and it was his gift to look at someone and see past their failures to the pinnacle of their potential. He'd seen her fighting like a disreputable thug in a gladiator's pit in Urborg and still treated her as if she were a noble knight. She hadn't seen the leonin since Dominaria, when he returned her sword to her. She wondered what Ajani would have to say about the gods of Theros. She knew he wouldn't have good things to say about where she was going and what she was about to do.

Elsbeth crossed the small room to the open window that overlooked a dingy alley. A warm breeze blew over the tops of the buildings and the Stone Colossus, which towered over all the roofs of the city. The Stone Colossus faced the ring of red mountains on the horizon with his arms raised as if to taunt the world: This city has never been conquered by our enemies!

But Elsbeth had stood in the crowd on temple days as the bodies streamed past her on their way into Iroas's massive temple. She knew that in less time than it takes

to blow out a candle, it could all come crashing down. How could they not comprehend the fragility of their lives? It was true that they had never witnessed the sickly ground of Grixis emerge into the placid fields of Bant. They had never seen Elesh Norn's minions up to their elbows in blood and flesh from the slaughter. They didn't know the horrors that could befall their world. Though the Akroan legions made her feel safe, she could also sense arrogance among the well-trained, well-fed natives of the city. They believed they were indestructible. And after what happened at the Takis Estate, she wondered if their arrogance was blinding them to dangers already present in the world.

Or maybe Theros was different. Maybe gods made it different. Perhaps they wouldn't permit their people to be taken to slicing rooms and be subjected to the butchery she'd witnessed on Mirrodin, the metal world now overrun by Phyrexia. No matter what plane she went to, she found savagery. But she'd never been to a place with gods. Maybe Theros was incorruptible, but Elspeth couldn't take it on faith. She had to find the underbelly herself.



An elevated walkway known as Stone Pike ran along the perimeter of the Foreigners' Quarter, and it was the fastest way to get through the crowds and winding

streets. Non-natives said the route had been built so the Akroans didn't have to mingle with the outsiders. It might be true: You had to pay a toll at the gates on either end, which was too pricey for most foreigners, who often didn't have access to Akroan currency. Elspeth paid with some of the coin she'd earned from the Takis Estate job and climbed the steep marble steps up to the walkway. A crimson sun was setting behind the mountains, and the evening light stained the city with red light. To her left, she could see the uniformed soldiers training on one of the many public parade grounds. The men moved in perfect formations, stopping on precise commands, and slicing their swords simultaneously through the air. Their stances and angles of their blades were slightly different, but the forms were very similar to those of Bant. Men seemed to reach the same conclusions when they set their minds to war.

The soldiers trained near a public monument known as the Five Fountains—shallow rectangular pools with glistening water. A colorful mosaic dedicated to one of the major gods decorated the bottom of the pool. Elspeth stopped, as she often did, where she had a clear view of Heliod. His strong features and piercing eyes were as familiar as ever.

Heliod was the one she'd seen years ago on the summit with the little boy with the amulet. Over the years, she'd often thought of him and how, without him, she would have died alone in the forest. The other gods were just

images under rippling water. But Helioid was something more. The memory of him always carried a tinge of childhood fear.

The Stone Pike was crowded with soldiers heading home for the evening and young couples strolling together. She was blocking the flow of foot traffic, so Elspeth hurried on her way. Beyond the toll gate at the other end of the Stone Pike, Elspeth crossed the crowded boulevard and stopped in front of a large public bathhouse. It was Xiro who begrudgingly gave her directions and warned her that young women must avoid the main baths. Instead, she entered the shared courtyard behind the building. When she saw the untended garden and pool with stagnant water, Elspeth knew she was headed in the right direction. She followed a deserted colonnade with cracked columns, and her footsteps echoed in the silence. Strange, windswept piles of black sand were heaped along the inner wall. Xiro told her to look for a defaced statue of a soldier with a broken javelin. There was a hidden door behind that statue. That marked the entrance she was looking for.

She found the crumbling statue easily. The door behind it was harder to find. It was getting dark, and she had to search the surface of the dirty wall for a certain stone—the one with a symbol of a knife carved into it. It took so long she thought that her friend had sent her on a wild goose chase. By the time she found it low on the wall, she was angry—both with Xiro and with this task

she'd set for herself. She pushed at the stone with the toe of her soft slipper, and a door opened. Beyond was a dim, foul-smelling corridor littered with crates and sacks and lit only by strange orbs of light hovering near the ceiling. Her anger made her reckless. With her heart beating fast, she stepped inside.

The door clicked shut behind her, and as her eyes adjusted to the strange light, she recoiled in shock. What she had mistaken as sacks were actually inert bodies. Elspeth reached for her sword and remembered she left it back in her room. She peered more closely at the slumped figure just inside the doorway. He was a young man, sitting on a crate with his back against the dank wall. When she leaned closer, his eyes popped open and she stumbled back in surprise. His eyes were glassy and unfocused, and he mumbled incoherently. Elspeth picked her way down the corridor, past other humans in a similar condition. It reminded her of the poppy dens she'd seen on Kell Phir.

Someone had scrawled lewd pictures in graphic detail on the walls. Violent and depraved images of humans and satyrs repulsed her, and she better understood Xiro's reluctance to send her here. Among the graffiti there was a single phrase scrawled over and over: KING STRANGER. It was the same phrase that the satyrs had been screaming before they burst into flames.

Elspeth didn't have time to ponder it, because something moved behind her. She spun around and saw

a man watching her from an open doorway. The edges of the doorframe were blackened and pockmarked from the heat of a past fire. The man, who was wearing a dark blue cloak with gold trim, stared at her intensely. He wore a leather knife belt diagonally across his chest, and there were braids in his long black beard. He looked young and powerful. When their eyes locked, he seemed to dissolve backward into the room. Elspeth followed.

Inside, a lantern hung on the wall over a wooden table scarred with knife cuts. The stone wall had also been slashed by dozens of blades—though what blades could cut stone, Elspeth didn't know. On the floor below, knives had been stuck into the ground through small pieces of paper. Xiro had told her that visitors to the Temple of Deceit were usually looking to kill someone. Each page bore the name of someone who was hated. She'd found the altar of Phenax, God of Deception.

The man had retreated across the room and stood near the table as if waiting for her offering.

“Are you an oracle?” she asked.

“Who do you want dead?” he asked. He had a low voice that rumbled in his chest.

“I just want answers,” Elspeth said. “I want someone who will tell me the truth.”

“And why do you suppose Phenax, the God of Deception, would tell you the truth?” the man asked. There was no trace of mirth in his voice.

“I've been to many temples in Akros,” Elspeth said,

“and the oracles all tell me the same thing. Pray to the gods, honor the gods, and they will make your life the way you want it. Is that true? I need an answer unclouded by those who seek glory.”

The man stared at her for a moment. He pushed back his hood so she could see his face more clearly despite the dim light. He was a handsome man with a clean-shaven head, dark eyes, and chiseled muscles in his arms and chest.

“Who sent you to me?” he asked. “You knew the way. You must have had an insider’s introduction.”

Xiro had obliged her request, but he didn’t understand it. Nor did she understand Xiro, a mercenary in thrall to Iroas, a god who had cast him out. She didn’t want to reveal him to this priest of Phenax, in case he had broken some rule by telling her where to find the altar.

“I paid for the information, and I will pay you as well,” she said. She held out a handful of smooth gold coins that Xiro assured her would be accepted by anyone, anywhere.

“You work for the Cutters of Iroas,” he said. “Phenax is aware of the strangers in this city.”

“Yes, I have done some work for them,” she agreed.

“I heard they were slaughtered by pug-faced satyrs,” he said. He looked at the coins and back to her face. He made no move to take them.

“Not all of them,” she said.

“You don’t mourn for your friends?”

“They weren’t my friends,” she said.

“But what will you do now?”

“Maybe I’ll be an assassin, like you,” she said.

“You seem too gentle to be an assassin,” he said.

“So do you,” she replied.

“You seem unafraid, even if I were,” he said with a vague smile.

“Will you help me or not?” she asked. She rattled the coins in her hand. Xiro said that money was the only requirement for a Priest of Lies, but this man didn’t seem tempted at all.

“What is your name?” the man asked.

Elspeth hesitated and decided it didn’t matter. “I’m Elspeth.”

“My name is Sarpedon, and you are seeking something I’m not entitled to give you,” he said. “You should leave the city. Anax’s advisors are increasingly mistrustful of outsiders. You will be cast out soon enough. Better to leave of your own free will. I can tell you’re a child lost in an unknown land.”

“Are you an oracle?” she asked, despite the fact that he hadn’t accepted payment. There was a long silence, as if he were considering the merits of her question.

“Yes,” he said.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“Oracles can speak directly with the gods,” he told her. “We are the gods’ vessels. To all the world, we’re considered the greatest and most honored. But if you are

seeking the truth, I will tell you. Being an oracle means devastation. An oracle is consumed by the god who chose him.”

“What can an oracle do for gods that they can’t do themselves?” Elspeth asked.

“Gods cannot see all things at once—they need the eyes of the mortals to multiply their domain. A mortal sees on a smaller scale than a god.”

“You see things that the gods don’t?” Elspeth asked.

“We see things that the gods dismiss as unimportant,” Sarpedon corrected. “We are their hands and feet among the mortal realm. A god cannot harm another’s oracle. But an oracle can kill whomever he pleases.”

There was no threat in his words. He said them in a detached way, as if he was repeating words he’d read on a page long ago.

“Can the gods determine my fate?” Elspeth asked. “What is truly the extent of their power? Can they make what I want happen—if only I please them enough?”

“If you want a god to determine your fate, you must ask him for an ordeal,” Sarpedon said. “A god will only grant it if they think you are worthy—whatever ‘worthy’ means for them. If you accomplish it, you may request a hand in your own destiny.”

As he said the words, Sarpedon reached out and grasped Elspeth’s hand. The coins were cupped between their palms. She started to yank her arm away, then stopped. This Priest of Lies was her best hope of

understanding, and in that moment, she let go of logic. She didn't care what happened to her. That had happened to her before, and she should know better. Part of her mind was warning her to act. But the other part of her was intensely curious to see what would happen. In a few seconds, no matter what he did, she would know more than she did now. She let the priest pull her closer to him until there was no space left between them. He placed the other hand on the curve of her hip. He leaned forward so his lips were close to her ear.

“Why do you seek the divine?” he whispered.

Then Elspeth knew for certain: Sarpedon was a mind-mage, and he was casting his net into her memories. She knew she could still free herself from his spell and break his nose with the flat of her hand. Instead, she permitted his touch—for a fleeting instant she wanted someone to know what had happened to her. She wanted someone to know what she had endured. *Go ahead and look.* With her free hand, she slipped the dagger from the sheath under her arm. *I hope you drown.*

He became a light-footed spy, traveling along the pathways of her brain, seeing much but not all. It was a strange—and not unpleasant—feeling to have him steal through her mind.

With a shudder, the man dropped her hand and the coins clattered to the floor. He slumped back against the wall and then dropped to his knees in front of her.

“You are greater than the gods,” he said in awe. “You walk in worlds they can’t see. You’ve faced evil they can’t comprehend.”

“No, I’m not,” Elspeth said.

“I’m a conduit to Phenax,” Sarpedon said. There was a strange desperation in his voice. “Now he knows what you are. He knows what you carry.”

“Please,” Elspeth reached down and tried to pull him to his feet. “Please stand up.”

But the man remained on his knees as if in worship before her. “Have you heard this god-story, Elspeth? A woman wished to change her lot in life. So she prayed to Nylea to set her free. Nylea heard her prayers and transformed the woman into a butterfly. But now the world was so immense that the butterfly couldn’t find her way, so she prayed to Helioid to send the South Wind to guide her home. Helioid took pity on this speck of a life and sent the wind, but it battered her and tore her wings. Carried on currents she couldn’t control, she fluttered into the heart of a spider’s web. Which is what Phenax had intended all along.”

“They can’t control the whole world,” Elspeth said after a moment of reflection. She couldn’t bear to stand above him so she sank to her heels so their eyes were on the same level. “They can only control their portions of it.”

“Some gods’ domains are greater than the others,” he said. “But even the greatest of them all is going blind.”

“What do you mean?” Elspeth asked.

“The God of Deception will punish me for saying this,” Sarpedon told her. “So I say this as a man and not his servant: Step below the sun and seek your god there.”

“You mean Helioid?” Elspeth said.

“There is a great silence on the horizon,” Sarpedon said. “Already, I can feel your secrets leaking to Phenax. He will lock them in the chest of his mind until he knows how best to use them to his advantage.”

Sarpedon crawled to the altar and pressed his forehead against the handle of one of the knives. Elspeth didn't know what else to do. She dropped the coins on the floor and went in search of the one god she'd been avoiding.



Even as the Priest of Lies bowed in front of Elspeth, Phenax sought Thassa in the cold quiet of the sea. Thassa and Phenax shared an arrangement from the days when archons tyrannized the land—but sharing secrets had taken a toll on her, and Thassa regretted ever casting in her lot with the god of cheats and liars.

Even as Elspeth recoiled from Sarpedon, Thassa listened intently to Phenax's whispers about the stranger in Akros. Even as Elspeth despised the Priest of Lies, Thassa despised Phenax as he shared his secrets. Phenax

threatened to use the secrets to control her, planning for the day when she would serve him in exchange for his silence. Phenax whispered: “This mortal wields the sword of a god. She possesses Purphoros’s Sword that was claimed by your ocean. Keranos never sent the weapon into your waters. It was never claimed by the ruins of Arixmethes. How could you deceive us all this time?”

Thassa pushed Phenax away from her and sped for the surface. Whether she wanted it or not, a war between her brothers was coming.

CHAPTER 5



The satyr bowed before Purphoros, who was surprised to see the goatish creature in his inner chamber at the heart of Mt. Velus. Purphoros had no memory of granting him entrance to the divine forge where the god spent his days before the eternal flames. But that didn't mean he hadn't done so. Even before Kruphix's punishment, Purphoros could lose himself for days—years, even eons—in the act of creation. Then Kruphix had limited his memories and taken hard-earned knowledge from him as compensation for the damage that his sword had inflicted on Nyx. Furious that the pantheon had let him be mistreated, Purphoros dwelled in the fires of Mt. Velus and no longer ventured into the realm of the gods. He took the form of a man. He felt the afflictions of a man. He'd even embraced the self-pity of a mortal's mind.

“What did you say?” Purphoros asked the satyr. Purphoros's deep voice echoed in the chamber, and lesser creatures would have quailed in his presence. The satyr was small, corporeal, and self-assured. He did not

shiver or quake in the presence of a god. Purphoros's own priests kept their chins down in his presence for fear of angering him. But this satyr brazenly met his eyes and did not blink from the fire burning in them.

"What about your sword?" the satyr asked. "It's been called the sword of chaos. They say it's your greatest creation."

"What of it?" Purphoros asked.

"What became of it?" the satyr asked.

"Lost to the sea," Purphoros said.

Purphoros didn't correct the bleating satyr, but the sword was not his greatest work of art. His greatest creation was a Nyxborn man named Petros, who was in the chamber with them. Petros stood nearby in front of the divine forge, toiling in honor of his creator. When the world was young, Purphoros was jealous of Iroas and Mogis and wanted a twin of his own. He'd created Petros from the cosmos, divine bronze with a touch of mortal flesh. Petros, who had existed longer than any mortal human, was always present in the forge. As the eons passed, Petros aged. Not like a human, but he withered, and Purphoros was forced to patch the cracks with strips of bronze and refill the vessel of his Nyxborn twin.

"Are you certain?" the satyr asked. "What if a fortune hunter were to find such a treasure? How might the world respond?"

"The world can't wield my sword," Purphoros said with annoyance.

“Then how might Polukranos respond?” the satyr wondered.

“Who?” Purphoros said. The word sounded familiar, but he felt a black cloud cross his god-sight and couldn’t remember the question.

But Petros turned away from the fires and stared at the satyr. He understood the mortal’s language, but he could not speak as other humans did. He’d helped Purphoros forge the sword in the searing, explosive furnace. Because Kruphix hobbled Purphoros’s mind, it was Petros who remembered how to craft with the essence of the cosmos. Through his actions, Petros reminded Purphoros of everything that Kruphix had stolen from him.

The satyr was so unnerved at the sight of Petros’s face that he took a step backward. Petros had been made in Purphoros’s image, and his chiseled features were an exact replica of the god’s own face. Like Purphoros, Petros looked like a muscular man whose coal-hued skin was covered with mutable bronze. The satyr was one of the first mortals to ever see Petros and survive. At the height of Purphoros’s power, he killed mortals for gazing uninvited on him or his Nyxborn twin.

“Who is this?” the satyr asked, regaining his composure.

“This is my artisan, and who are you?” Purphoros inquired.

“Your artisan is a wonder,” the satyr said. “And I am

your oracle.”

The satyr stared greedily at Petros, who could not speak to call the satyr a liar.

A momentary panic washed over Purphoros, who couldn't remember claiming this vessel to be his oracle. But he was distracted from his fears by drops of rain, which were falling through the open shaft of Mt. Velus and cascading into the fiery forge. He opened his massive palm and let the drops fall onto his starry skin, so not a drop would be lost into the dry earth. Thassa had come to call. By the time she had arrived, both the satyr and Petros were gone. But Purphoros was distracted by the sound of his sister, like a pearly seashell whispering the sounds of the sea. He didn't comprehend the theft of Petros, whom he loved like a son.

Besides, Thassa's arrival reminded him of other things. Smoke clouded the god's eyes, and he felt a glimmer of the rage in his belly. The anger was a shadow of his former self. In eons past, the world trembled in fear of his fury. As the civilization of humans grew and they constructed temples and built shrines, Helioid insisted on the finest rams, the finest lands, and placed himself at the head of the mortals' table. Purphoros had his worshipers among the mortals, but Helioid was better loved. Purphoros's fury grew at the thought of how he'd been wronged, but then Thassa's musical voice spoke to him through the smoke, and the rage faded. It had been far

too long since he'd seen his sister of the sea.

"Your forge is as oppressive as always, brother," Thassa complained, looking around the steaming chamber. "Where are your smiths?" she asked.

Purphoros led her out of the heart of the mountain into his main cavern, where scores of smiths and masons toiled at endless rows of burning forges. She stood on the balcony above the work and admired the towering pillars filled with stars. There were statues of monsters with molten veins and tongues of fire. The ceiling of the cavern had been transformed into an airy dome. It pulsed with an artificial visage of stars created in the image of Nyx, but fashioned to his liking. In Purphoros's version of the night sky, Helioid was bound with chains to the rock of Mt. Velus while Kruphix had been reduced to a puddle of murky stars.

"You have no need to return to the god-realm," Thassa said. "Your creations are more exquisite now than when you dwelled in the coldness of Nyx."

"When Helioid is put in his place among the snails, then I will return to the sky," Purphoros said.

"Have you created something new?" Thassa asked.

"I am always creating," Purphoros answered. "Just seldom are they worth keeping."

Purphoros swept his arm in an arc before him, and a warm breeze blew through the interior of the mountain. Of course he had created something new—the mountain was bursting at the seams with all that he had done.

“Have you crafted a new weapon to take your revenge on our brother?” Thassa clarified. “Helioid’s a vain coward, and you can tell me. I would rejoice at the sight of him broken in the sand.”

He stared at her. Hadn’t someone else just been asking about the weapon? There were dark clouds in his memory. He wondered if Kruphix had his mossy fingers around his throat even now, even so far away from the edge of the world.

Purphoros did not answer, so Thassa spoke again: “I have heard the footfalls of the hydra echoing on the floor of the sea.”

“Polukranos,” Purphoros said, the name finally returned to his mind accompanied by a sense of barely controlled fury.

“Can the horizon lie, brother?” she asked. “The gods are so divided. Your sword brought discord that has never been resolved. The hydra—”

“Kruphix is mad. If the horizon lies, it does so carelessly and at his bidding,” Purphoros said. Already, his attention on her was waning, his desire to return to his ceaseless creation tugging him away from her. Purphoros hated their brother Kruphix, who held dominion over time and the horizon. Kruphix had power the rest of them didn’t understand, power that seemed to reside outside his domain in the ribs of their world. As punishment for harming Nyx, he’d made Purphoros’s mind unravel, unlearning many things he already knew.

But Kruphix couldn't touch Purphoros's drive to forge, to build, to destroy and re-create.

"Are you attacking Heliod again?" she asked bluntly. "Did you call the hydra from his resting place? Is the god-realm threatened again?"

"I am not?" Purphoros asked, though his curiosity was piqued. Wisps of fire caressed her skin.

"You created the divine sword that made Heliod tremble," Thassa reminded him. "You forged it with fire and ingenuity. Surely you must remember. And surely you want your revenge."

Purphoros raged his fury in an explosion of fire and molten stones that surged into the sky above Mt. Velus. Thassa drained herself into the ground to avoid his wrath. "Kruphix stole my mind! He strangles me still!"

"No, he doesn't, brother," Thassa assured him when he had quieted and the forge rang again with the sound of hammers. "Not anymore."

"Why do you seek the weapon?" Purphoros asked.

"Heliod claims the world is crumbling," Thassa said. "He both dreams and is blind. Things are happening that should not be."

"He blames my sword?" Purphoros asked. "He blames you," she said.

Purphoros became a tiny flame in Thassa's hand. His voice was nearly lost among the clang and clatter of the work. "I cannot remember."



His shame touched her, and she wanted to grab Kruphix by his bony shoulders and thrash him until all that Purphoros lost came flooding back. But she would never be able to touch the God of Time. So for a fleeting moment, the two of them fled the mountain as mist and flame. To Thassa, the currents of the air moved like the waves of the sea, and she showed Purphoros how to rejoice in it. The skies over Akros became red as blood, and the air rippled like the surface of the ocean, and comets of ice and fire rained from the sky.

Thassa and Purphoros didn't reveal themselves in a recognizable god-form, so the people of Akros only saw the heavens become like fire. The mighty Deyda River surged and boiled in the gorge below the city. Great billows of steam rose from the rushing waters and engulfed the temples and rolled over the houses in great waves. Only the head of the Stone Colossus stood above the hissing blast. And far away in the mountains, the leonins in their remote camps stood on the cliffs and wondered—even trembled—at the fearful sky. In Akros the oracles shouted words of chaos louder than they shouted visions of peace. But they were confused because when two gods merge, their language becomes something new entirely.

Thassa and Purphoros finally rested in the mouth of the forge. Their breathing was labored, both nearly

overcome with great grace and the passion of speed. They appeared as man and woman again, even though Thassa knew that Purphoros would never love her. But then and there, he made her a chimera-gift. With feathered wings, a long black beak, and bones as delicate as glass, the chimera contained aspects of both an ibis and a stag. He crafted it of stars and divine bronze with his own hands. It began as a handful of dust, and he shaped it into a glorious creation befitting the divine. When he presented it to Thassa, she clapped her hands with childish delight. But it had no eyes, just bare sockets, empty as the void beyond the edges of the world.

“It can run faster than an arrow shot from Nylea’s bow,” Purphoros promised. “It won’t rest until it discovers the sword that I have lost. If it was lost forever, we will know. If it has risen again, we will find it.”

“But your chimera is blind,” Thassa said. She hesitated to speak because she knew that sight was fickle at best, and she didn’t want to question his creation.

Purphoros smiled, and Thassa’s heart leaped. He was not one for mirth.

“Great Eye, fill it with your own,” and he laughed, and the ground roiled and trembled, and all the birds of Theros took wing at once because they were so startled to hear the Fire Bull laugh. And Thassa became a ribbon of water that flowed into the chimera. She gave it perfect eyes that could see through the skins, and makeshift

shells, and deceits of those she hated. And the chimera stamped its hooves and pranced, ready to be unleashed.

“Your favor has destroyed me,” Thassa said humbly, and she rejoiced in another rare smile from Purphoros. “I shall call her Galaia, for never has there been such a gift of splendor.”

Purphoros turned and trudged to the forge. His weary footfalls made the earth quake from the walls of Akros to the Cypress Gates at the edge of the Nessian Forest. Already the fleeting moments of joy were forgotten.

“And what if Galaia finds the thief who stole your sword?” Thassa called to him.

“Then I will crush the one who wields it, and scour the land around him,” Purphoros said. “I will lay waste to his family and all he holds dear.”

Thassa nodded but said nothing. Phenax had whispered to her, so she knew the person he sought. It was a woman, not a man. But it didn't matter. Galaia would find the sword, and Purphoros's creation would be returned to him. He would lose his shame and return to Nyx. Helioid would be humbled and his arrogant tyranny finally stopped. The pantheon would be restored to the natural order—no god laid low, no god pretending to be king.

Galaia departed, running so fast that a mortal would see nothing. They might only feel the wind flowing behind her. Thassa was no wiser than before, but she returned to the quiet darkness of the restless seas,

keeping Phenax's other secret to herself: *Wherever the mortal carries the stolen sword, the fallen hydra would follow.*

CHAPTER 6



Heliod's Shrine was high above Akros at the end of a rock bridge that spanned the Deyda River Gorge. As Elspeth climbed up the mountainside to the shrine, the skies began to burn with a great fire. Below her, in the streets of Akros, steam flooded the streets and rolled over the buildings in great waves. The earth hissed and growled as if the mortal realm itself were unnerved by the spectacle playing out above.

The people of Akros gaped in wonder at the sight. Some fell to their knees. Others scurried for the temples in hopes of pleasing or appeasing their patron gods. Despite the blazing vista, Elspeth continued up the rocky path toward the summit. The sky became like a ceiling of lava with wisps of flames reaching toward the earth as the blue-gray steam rose up to meet them. Most who witnessed the spectacle thought to themselves: What are the gods trying to say to me? But Elspeth knew how insignificant she was, and instead she thought: What does this say about you, God of the Sun?

The steep path narrowed until she stood at the edge of

the gorge. The only way forward was the unlikely rock bridge—just a narrow span of red rock no wider than her boots. A marble likeness of Heliod towered on the other side of the chasm. The statue was as tall as the pillars of Iroas's mighty temple, and the sculptor had carved him to look much as he did in her memory—a tall man with long hair, a strong jawline, and powerful arms. But mere stones could not convey the awe she had felt in his presence. No one in Akros called him the head of the pantheon, but that's how he seemed to her. After all, what could live without the sun?

As she stepped lightly across the span of rock, her footfalls dislodged pebbles that vanished from sight long before they splashed into the raging waters below. The sword belted at her waist made her feel off-balance. Dizzy and dwarfed by the sweeping landscape, she carefully placed one foot in front of the other as she crossed to the Sun God's Shrine. Above her, the skies cleared as Thassa and Purphoros, still unrevealed as gods, completed their parade across the sky. By the time Elspeth reached the far side of the gorge, the sky had returned to a deep, flawless blue that hid even the faintest trace of Nyx.

Elspeth stared up at Heliod. From her angle at the base of the statue, she could no longer see his carved face or eyes, which gazed over her at the mountains beyond. Now that she was here, what should she ask for? What did she want from Heliod? And did it matter how she

asked the question? She thought of Sarpedon and his story about the woman who became a butterfly. If she asked for the wrong thing, would she simply be battered on the wind, helpless to control her own fate? If Sarpedon had been truthful, then the God of Deception knew about her presence. *Now he knows what you are. He knows what you carry.* At the time, those words made no sense because she carried nothing but a knife and coins. But, in the presence of Heliad, his words felt urgent and sinister. She had to speak to Heliad before circumstances were swept out of her control. *Step below the sun and seek your god there.*

What was expected of her? A confession, an offering, or a sacrifice? A memory of a ritual she'd witnessed back in Bant flooded her mind. It was when the war had been raging and other darker planes seeped into the verdant fields and forests of her home. She and her soldiers crossed paths with a ragged and hungry tribe from Jund just after they'd slaughtered a lost lion-mount and offered it up to their gods. Though starving, they wouldn't touch the meat because it was intended for their gods. It had infuriated her—that these people would presume to take the life of a beautiful creature for their own selfish ends. She and her soldiers had scoffed at their ignorance, their self-delusion.

Will I never learn? she thought as she bowed her head. So often she had judged another person, only to find herself crushed beneath the same problem later down the

road. Just like that tribe, she was hoping a sacrifice would help her find answers beyond her own understanding.

Elsbeth fell to her knees in the shadow of the statue. At the base there was a long, glossy altar stone where Elspeth imagined that priests and pilgrims laid their offerings.

“I’ve come full circle,” she said. “I came to Theros after fleeing Phyrexia the first time. And I’ve come back after Phyrexia defeated me again.”

Elsbeth stopped. Her voice was carried away by the wind. She felt no godly presence. It just felt like she was whispering her words to the winds. So she imagined that she was talking to Ajani, the leonin planeswalker, who had returned her sword to her. Ajani always treated her as if she were greater than the sum of her mistakes.

With his face in her mind, the words spilled out of her: “We were on Mirrodin in one of the main fortresses of Phyrexians, and we’d made it to the chamber beneath the throne room. We had the incendiary device. It was Venser’s design from before he died. We found it in that notebook of his along with his plans for Phyrexian ships. The resistance was over. We had lost. There were just a handful of souls who escaped the surgeon’s blades. By the time we made it into the fortress, it was just Koth and me. Whatever would happen that night—it would be our final stand.”

When she spoke Koth’s name, it seemed to ring from

the mountaintops. She didn't know if Koth had lived or died. But she knew that his plane had fallen to the greatest evil. Phyrexia felt no mercy, no regret, no desire except to convert everything to their own horrid vision, their bastardization of life. All the memories Elspeth had held at bay since her arrival on Theros crashed down on her: the butchery, the surgery rooms, the horrific transformation of the contagion. There hadn't been anything left to fight for. Every single living thing on that plane had been lost. Grief consumed Elspeth, and she felt sick from remembering it.

Elspeth continued, "The Phyrexians targeted us. We barred the door. The clanging of the weapons against the metal was a cadence, counting the seconds until they were in, until they were upon us. I'll tell you the truth—I just wanted it over. I wanted it done. We talked of killing ourselves before they could rip us apart limb from limb while we were still alive. And this is what I thought was coming next. Just giving in to the rising tide. Koth was ready, but he turned to me. 'You're leaving,' he said."

Elspeth fell silent. It felt foolish to continue. What would Helioid care about her doomed friend Koth? So she started over:

"I've come full circle," she said, quieter this time. The wind whipped her hair around her face. "The first time I came to Theros, there was a boy. He wore an amulet of a glass flower. He looked so young, but he bowed before

you, unafraid. I was terrified. No, that's not right. I was overwhelmed. Since then I've seen towering beasts that block out the sun, murderous creations designed solely for killing, and horrors I can barely describe."

A shadow passed over the shrine, but she didn't notice. She reached out and touched the stone altar in front of her. The glassy surface felt cool to the touch, not like a stone that had been sitting in the sun.

"My memory of you has stayed with me through it all," Elspeth told Heliod. "At the worst moments, I would think of you. I've had dreams of you protecting me so nothing could harm me. After everything I've seen, I need there to be something greater than myself. I need to understand what it means to be a god. And if divinity can truly protect this world."

Elspeth unsheathed her sword and held it flat against the palms of her hands. "This is from your world. It has saved me again and again. I found it on the mountainside near the boy ..."

An avian creature alighted near the statue, and Elspeth gasped in surprise. It had the body of a deer with large feathered wings and the long black beak of an ibis. Shimmering masses of stars and astral clouds shone in the shadows of its body, and she knew instinctively that this was a divine creature of Nyx, somehow born of the gods. The sword warmed in her hand, and the orbs changed before her eyes. Instead of glowing with faint blue light, they glittered with stars.

Elspeth felt a surge of joy at the sight of the creature. She believed that Heliod was watching her, heeding her words, and considering her plea. Elspeth nearly cried with relief. The grief in her heart, as painful as a real wound, eased a little. But this was Galaia, the chimera-gift of Purphoros, who had been sent to find her creator's sword.

"Thank you," Elspeth whispered to Heliod.

She laid her beloved sword on the altar before Heliod. But when metal touched stone, the world exploded. The statue shattered into a multitude of fragments and dust. Elspeth reeled back, falling to the ground, shielding her face against the impact. Pain never came. Instead, time stopped and the landscape shifted to an empty expanse of stellar clouds and diffuse amber light. She could still feel the grit of Akros beneath her hands. But she could no longer perceive the landscape. She could only see what Heliod wanted her to see.

Shards of stone and the dust of ages dotted the air around her, frozen in the moment like suspended flakes of snow. Her sword hovered above her, just out of reach.

"Where did you get this sword?" Heliod's words drove like percussive strikes directly into her mind.

"On the mountainside," she told him truthfully.

"It was never claimed by the ocean nor reached the ruins of Arixmethes," he finished for her.

The sword began to transform. Cosmic dust clung to it and the starlight was like mortar. It extended to double

its size. Heliod reforged the sword into a spear in the image of his own sun-spear. At the sight of it, Galaia clattered her bill in distress. Shrieking, she took flight and vanished into the mist. She found the sword, now she must tell Purphoros of this transgression.

“It is no longer Purphoros’s Sword,” Heliod said. “It is my weapon. It’s a Godsend fit for a mortal’s hand. A mortal who will be my champion.”

Since she first took the sword that day with the boy on the summit, it had been more than a weapon. She used it to focus her mind so she could use her magic more efficiently in battle. It had been her salvation many times. Elspeth reached for it without thinking. But just before her fingers could grasp the glittering hilt, a great pain enveloped her.

“You presume that you are my champion?” the voice demanded. “Why did you steal this weapon? And how have you kept it hidden from me?”

Heliod touched her with heat from the sun, and Elspeth felt she was being burned from the inside out. She tried to speak but could only cry out in pain.

“I am the Sun,” the voice said, now heavy and angry. “Hide from me now, if you can.”

“Hide where?” Elspeth pleaded, desperate for relief from the pain.

“There is a vastness of the Underworld ruled by my brother. Would you like to join him?” Heliod asked.

The scorching heat was relentless. Elspeth stopped

trying to fight the pain and found a quiet corner of her mind. She imagined a field of golden wheat, the stalks bowed by a strong wind. Nearby, there was also a quaint farmhouse with a thatch roof that she remembered from her dreams. Like a child building a wall of blocks, Elspeth assembled a mystical blockade and made herself immune to the light. Her skin became impenetrable to the damage wrought by the god she had offended. Presently, she walked out of the corner of her mind and found that the pain was gone.

“I am Helioid, the greatest of these,” said the voice carried by the winds. “Who are you? How have you done such a thing?”

“I am Elspeth, nothing at all,” she replied.

“Why did you come to me?” he asked. “What do you want? And will you ask for an ordeal to receive it?”

“I want a world that is safe from destruction,” she said. “And I want to have a place it in.”

“A place as what? A ruler? A queen?”

“No,” Elspeth said, suddenly filled with despair. This god didn’t understand her at all.

There was a sound behind her. Elspeth turned expecting to see a man—perhaps a father, wise but not perfect. Instead she saw a flock of star-specked white doves, and they flew directly at her. She didn’t flinch, and at the last second, they arched into the sky.

“Your fate is bound together with the *Godsend*,” Helioid said, his voice inside her head. “Bring the blade

to my temple in Meletis, and you will find what you're looking for. If you try to hide the weapon from me again you will be branded a pariah, an outcast, a traitor to the gods."

"You don't know what I'm looking for!" Elspeth cried.

"If you reach Meletis with this blade, you will become my living vessel, a champion against darkness," he said. "You will be a divine protector of Theros."

The voice retreated from her mind. The horizon spun on its axis, and Elspeth found herself on her knees before the unbroken statue on the mountaintop. The wind whispered to her, *Come to Meletis, come now.*

Below, the bells of Akros pealed in warning, and the sun crawled toward its zenith, and Elspeth retrieved the *Godsend* from the altar and made her way back down the mountainside.

CHAPTER 7



Daxos slammed the training dummy to the ground. If it had been a person, its skull would have cracked open. He yanked the dummy upright and set it back on its wooden stand. Then he surveyed the damage he'd done to the courtyard. Practice swords and shields lay scattered in the dirt where he'd discarded them. He'd somehow broken the bars that they used for strengthening their arms—but he didn't remember how. The throwing discs were haphazardly strewn around and a few were lodged into the dirt.

The small courtyard was tucked behind the *stoa*, or covered walkway, at the very back of Helioid's sprawling temple grounds. Officially, the courtyard was known as the Sunburst Garden because of the elaborate sun mosaic at the exact center of the rectangular yard. But among the priests, it was called Daxos's Yard because he trained there every night, alone. Only in the quietest hour before the dawn would he stop. He would sit motionless on the edge of the fountain, staring into the bubbling water and listening to the rustle of lemon trees that marked the

western perimeter of the courtyard.

Despite the late hour, there was nothing peaceful about him now. He grabbed a handful of metal skewers off the stone bench and stabbed the training dummy again and again. The metal skewers had been forged in a blacksmith's shop in the high-end market near the harbor. They were intended to cook souvlaki over a brazier. It was one of Daxos's favorite foods—pieces of lamb and vegetables grilled over the open fire. The artisans had given the skewers a silver patina that glittered under the Nyx light. At the end of each skewer—the part you were meant to hold—there was a tiny silver pegasus crafted in honor of Helioid. The other end of the skewer was as sharp and deadly as a weapon. Daxos had bought the entire set of twelve only to learn that the artisan had sold dozens of sets exactly alike. A specialty of the shop, or so they told him, after his coin was spent.

He was still holding one skewer, but he hesitated before stabbing the dummy again. It had a vaguely humanoid shape with wooden poles for legs and arms and a large brown sack filled with sand for its abdomen. Now it looked like a body felled by the arrows of a dozen archers. Daxos heard a faint whispering and looked up at Nyx. Phenax skulked through the stars away from Thassa's portion of the sky. Although Phenax had never wronged him the way Athreos had, he didn't have much use for the God of Deception. As an oracle of

Heliod, Daxos was expected to be a paragon of honor and truth.

Well, the joke was on him. Daxos took the sharp end of the skewer and carved a weary smile into the sack where the dummy's face should be. The burlap split and puckered as Phenax disappeared into the astral clouds above him.

At night, Daxos could block out much of the god-speak that assailed him during the day. The noise of the god-realm became like a dull roar in the back of his mind. Given that the sun was Heliod's domain, Daxos was inundated with sensations of the divine from sunrise to sunset. His eyes would water, his mouth would burn, and his ears would ring—all with the glory of the gods.

Since he was a child, he'd been beholden to Heliod. Being claimed by a god meant certain things: knowledge, prestige, and honor. But Daxos felt as if he were leashed to the temple by an invisible chain. He couldn't leave because Heliod would only reel him back. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to run. What would he be without his god? He would never get the chance to find out. Daxos wanted to scream. He wanted to destroy something. With his free hand, he grabbed one of the wooden training swords from the dirt and lashed the dummy with rapid, practiced strokes.

When will it end? That was the question Daxos had asked the sphinx, Medomai, who was unimpressed with the gods. Never ask a sphinx a question you don't want

the answer to. He'd gotten the answer all right. The sphinx had told him he would not only die but be murdered: At the feet of an untouched city. By the hand of someone he loved. Daxos stabbed the last skewer into the burlap and gutted the training dummy. Sand spilled down onto the tiles. In his frenzy with the wooden sword, he'd broken several of the skewers. The tiny winged horses had broken off and now lay in the piles of sand. But when he kneeled down to pick up the metal figures, he heard a man's voice.

"Daxos?"

Someone was standing under the portico at the far end of the courtyard. Backlit by torches on the wall, Daxos couldn't tell who it was. But for a moment, he felt fear. Maybe Heliod had found a way to capture his time during the night as well. Daxos dropped the wooden sword and rose to his feet. He rattled the silver winged horses together in his palm. They reminded him of the bones that the cleromancers used to tell people's fortunes.

"Daxos, are you all right?"

Daxos realized that it was only Stelanos, one of the young priests who lived in the temple. Daxos raised his hand in greeting, but he didn't smile. Daxos didn't have many friends in the temple. The other priests treated him either with awe or jealousy. Daxos knew he came across as aloof. He didn't make the lighthearted banter that seemed to be the mortar between people's friendships.

He was happiest when he was alone. But Stelanos didn't seem to notice. From the day they met, Stelanos treated Daxos as if they were brothers. Both men were twenty-two years old and about six feet tall. Each had shoulder-length dark hair and a lean, athletic body. People remarked that they could have been from the same family.

"Just light training," Daxos said. Given the ruined state of the courtyard, his explanation sounded sarcastic.

"You should try sleeping," Stelanos said. "Less bruises."

Daxos shrugged. He'd given up sleeping at night. Sometimes during the day he would grab a few hours of rest. But the night was too precious. He squeezed tiny winged horses in his fist and felt the broken edges dig into his flesh. Under the pressure of his fist, the soft metal twisted and bent into shapeless lumps. He tucked the ruined bits into a pocket in the folds of cloth around his hips.

"Let's clean the yard before the elders see this," Stelanos said. "And then I need your help."

Together, they worked quickly to straighten out the chaos Daxos had created. There was not much time before sunrise, so as they hefted the last of the logs, Daxos said, "You seem troubled."

"Yes," Stelanos said. "I've told you about Althea?"

"I remember," Daxos said. Stelanos and Althea had grown up together. They were childhood playmates who

had grown up and fallen in love. But Stelanos felt the call to serve Heliod, and he'd left his rustic village to come live in Meletis and serve the God of the Sun. Althea believed that Stelanos was destined to be her husband, and she had been heartbroken at his departure.

"Her father came to see me," Stelanos said. "Althea is not doing well in my absence, and he is getting on in years. He's asked me to come home and take his place running the farm. Althea and I could marry. I am torn, Daxos. I don't know what to do."

Stelanos laid his hand on his friend's arm. As soon as Stelanos touched him, Daxos had a vision of what his friend's life would be if he left Meletis and went home. With his god-sight, Daxos saw a man he knew to be Althea's father walking toward a dark river in the distance. Daxos saw Althea tending to fat sheep in the pasture with a sheepdog panting near the gate. And then he saw a stone cottage. The door opened, and Stelanos himself walked out. He carried a long pair of shears and hummed to himself. Althea waved happily at the sight of him. This was his life. This was where Stelanos was meant to be.

"Daxos, did you hear me?" Stelanos asked.

His voice shattered the vision and flung Daxos back into his mortal self in the courtyard of the temple. Although Daxos often faded away in the middle of conversations with Stelanos, it never bothered his friend. He would just repeat his question or comment to Daxos,

and the conversation would continue. But this vision was relevant to Stelanos's life, and it left Daxos feeling shaky and upset.

"Would you read the signs?" Stelanos asked. "Would you commune with Helioid and ask what I should do? I don't want to desert my duties here. But I don't want to stay either, if that's not my fate. I miss Althea so badly, I fear I've made a mistake coming here."

The two young men sat on the edge of the fountain in the fading darkness. Stelanos sat expectantly, waiting for his friend to speak.

"What is fate?" Daxos asked after a long pause.

"It's what the gods want us to do," Stelanos replied. "It's written by the Triad of Fates on the day we are born. We can't change it. Whatever we are meant to do, we must do it with glory and in praise of the gods. 'What is, is, and ever shall be.' "

That was the correct answer. That was what Helioid taught his followers to say.

"But is your fate really like a path that you must follow blindly?" Daxos asked. "Or is life about the journey? Maybe fate is a destination with countless different roads that you choose among, but there is no a singular path to limit our exploration."

"But we don't have to follow blindly," Stelanos said. "Helioid will tell you the way."

Daxos felt anger rising in his chest. Why did everyone treat the gods as though they were perfect when it should

be obvious to all that they were not? Hadn't Purphoros and Heliod fought over petty disagreements, like toddlers squabbling over a toy? Hadn't Thassa and Heliod quarreled like an unhappy married couple finding every opportunity to dig at the other's weak spots? The gods were as fallible as those who worshiped them. Why was Daxos the only one who seemed to see that?

"I'll read the signs for you," Daxos said. "And we'll implore Heliod for answers."

Daxos retrieved the ruined bits of metal from the cloth at his waist. No longer shaped like winged horses, they were just unrecognizable lumps. He jangled them in his hands. When will it end? He shook the metal pieces one last time and cast them against the marble. Stelanos looked surprised as they clattered noisily against the stones. But in the second before they came to rest, Daxos cast a silent spell, and the silver bits reformed into the shape of tiny winged horses: a perfect homage to Heliod, God of the Sun.

Like a child, Stelanos gasped in delight at Daxos's parlor trick. Daxos envied him the potential freedom of his life with Althea. He would not be bound to the temple the way Daxos was. He would be his own man, able to live his life however he chose.

"What does it say?" Stelanos asked.

"You are destined to be a great priest in the house of Heliod," Daxos lied. "Your future is here, in Meletis."

Your fate is glory and renown.”

Stelanos’s forehead creased with concern, and Daxos watched him carefully.

“Is that not what you expected to hear?” Daxos asked.

“I always believed I was destined for something greater,” Stelanos said. “My heart breaks to leave Althea, but I will serve my god faithfully.”

Daxos felt a rush of guilt. He scooped up the tiny horses and cupped them tightly in his palm.

“I must go write a letter to her father,” Stelanos said, climbing to his feet. “Thank you, Daxos. You are a true friend.”

Stelanos’s footsteps faded away, the sun’s first rays spread over the top of the red tile roof, and Daxos crushed the tiny metal horses in his fist. In the last minutes before dawn, he let the silence wash over him. Such moments when he didn’t notice the passing of time, when his mind was uncluttered and unburdened, was exactly what he craved. He wanted the times when he could perceive the world through just two eyes, just like other men. Already, his skin was opening up to the unseen world, feeling the tide of Thassa’s ocean through the morning mist. He could taste the acrid wind, which was singed and furious at Keranos for another of his searing storms.

Daxos moved to the cistern at the side of the courtyard and washed his face and arms in the clear water. Ivy covered the wall above the cistern. He reached out and

touched one of the delicate leaves. Through the veins, he could feel a heartbeat and hear the rapid breathing of prey fleeing through the forest. Nylea had returned to the mortal realm after a sojourn in the unknown lands. And now she was hunting in the Nessian Forest, which was leagues away but close enough for Daxos to sense her. But he did not call to her for fear of disturbing her. The hunt was precious to Nylea, as precious as these few minutes before sunrise were to him.

Daxos crossed to the red-gold mosaic of the sun in the precise center of the courtyard. He fell to his knees and then lowered himself to his stomach on the ground. His guilt felt sick in his stomach, but he pushed it away. He'd done the right thing, he told himself. Heliod needed priests like Stelanos as much as he needed oracles like Daxos. Daxos pressed his cheek against the small pieces of colored tile, and the grit scratched his skin. Deep in the earth, he could feel the restless turning of the roots beneath the Nessian Forest. With her bow in her hands and her lynx padding a few paces behind, Nylea ran swiftly and silently over the leafy ground. She spied her prey, raised her bow, and readied an arrow. Nylea never missed, and it was said that each of her arrowheads was marked with the name of its eventual victim.

But before she made her shot, the God of the Hunt sensed Daxos. She stopped and laid her hand on the forest floor. Despite the distance between them, he could feel the heat of her hand against his chest. His mind's eye

was filled with an image of a gnarled tree with millions of golden butterflies instead of leaves. This was the only temple Nylea would ever permit to stand in her honor.

“Leave your bindings and come run with me,” she said. She did not speak in mortal language. Her voice was like the howl of a wolf in the far reaches of his mind, and he perceived her desire rather than comprehended her words.

“You know I can’t,” he said, his face cold against the ground. “How were the unknown lands?”

“Is that where you think I was?” she asked.

“If not, then where?” he asked.

“I was hunting snakes in the deepest pits, and fighting horrors you cannot imagine,” she said.

“But ... why?” he asked. “You’ve been gone so long. Why would you leave your forest?”

Daxos tried to close himself off to all other noise except the presence of Nylea. The sun was coming, and he wanted just her voice alone in his head. But his god-sight was afflicted by an unfamiliar image. In his mind’s eye, the forest became like a flat tapestry hanging on a wall. The trees and animals were fashioned from cloth and thread so fine it could only have been crafted by divine hands. In his vision there were large sections of the tapestry missing, as if someone had burned holes in the fabric and left gaping holes where life should have been.

“Something is wrong,” he said.

“What do you see?” Nylea asked.

“Before my mother was murdered, I couldn’t separate the mortal realm from the god realm,” Daxos told her. “Where the two overlapped, I was blind.”

“I don’t understand,” she said. “But I’m listening.”

“The blindness has returned, Great Hunter,” he said. “There are voids where I should be able to see your forest. Something strange is happening in the Nessian.”

Nylea heard the urgency in his voice and grew to immense size. He could hear the leaves of the trees bow to her as she passed through the canopy on the way to the sky. She notched her bow and pulled the string taut. Her hair flowed behind her, and all the animals of the forest prepared themselves for danger.

“Something crashes through my trees at the far edge of the forest,” she said.

Then she was gone as she passed into one of the voids in his god-vision where he couldn’t follow. Daxos checked the angle of the sun above the red tile roof. The light eased across the courtyard now like a spear cutting through the veil of night. As was his daily ritual, Daxos beat his fist on the stones and whispered his daily curse against Athreos and Erebos for how they’d wronged his mother: “I turn my back on you false gods. May your power wither, may Heliod crush you into dust, and Kruphix salt the Underworld with the dust that was you.”

Daxos saw his mother’s face in his mind, and his hatred boiled up and then slipped away with the last

shadows of evening. The sunshine warmed his bare shoulders, and he felt the presence of his god.

“I am here, Heliod.”

If Nylea’s voice had been like the howling of a wolf, Heliod’s voice was like the light reflecting off the water of the fountain. His god’s voice shimmered in his mind, just behind his eyes. If anyone else were in the courtyard with him, they would have heard nothing at all.

“There has never been an oracle like you in all the world,” Heliod said. “That is why it is fitting that you are mine.”

“I am nothing but a vessel,” Daxos said.

“You hear all the gods’ voices at once,” Heliod said. “Who else can make that claim?”

“They speak around me,” Daxos replied. “I listen only to you.”

“What is true power, Daxos?” Heliod asked. “If I cast the light of the sun down, you could not stop it.”

“I could not stop you,” Daxos agreed.

“If the light burned from within you, would you survive?” Heliod asked, and he gave Daxos a vision of all the burning power of the sun encapsulated inside his own chest. Through the vision, Daxos saw his own body ripped apart as beams of light burst through his skin.

“No, I would die,” Daxos said.

“You could not make your skin like glass stone? You could not reflect me?”

Daxos was silent. His lord already knew that he could

not.

“I have witnessed this power in a stranger,” Heliod told him. “She possesses Purphoros’s Sword. I cannot fathom where she found it, unless she’s had it all along.”

Daxos knew that Heliod was talking about the broken girl, Elspeth. Skeletal and grief stricken, she had led him through the night to the summit. He’d thought of her often. She’d vanished abruptly. And so had Purphoros’s Sword. Although he’d wondered if the two things were related, he had tried not to dwell on it often.

“You were there that day,” Heliod said. “What happened to the sword?”

“I saw it fall, and then I only saw you,” Daxos said. He kept his face pressed against the tile.

“Moments ago, she laid the sword on my altar, and I have claimed it. I transformed it into a spear-blade that honors me,” Heliod said. “The stranger believes her fate is bound with the weapon. She is bringing it to me—to us—in Meletis.”

“She asked for an ordeal?” Daxos asked.

“She did not ask,” Heliod said. “So I did not tell her.”

“What will she have to do?” Daxos said. He felt pity for the girl. Like him, she was no longer a child, but she couldn’t have completely discarded her grief any more than he had.

“Can you imagine all of Theros with causeways of light extending far and wide in every direction? My sight used to extend to every corner of my domain.”

“I can see it,” Daxos said, even before Helioid affixed the image in his mind. His god-sight was a fraction of a second behind Helioid’s. Helioid saw, and then Daxos followed.

“But the voids grow worse. The causeways are severed, some shattered, some simply don’t exist at all. I believe this travesty started with Purphoros’s attempt to destroy my realm. The stranger and the sword return to me. Now, the void grows.”

“You believe it’s all connected?” Daxos asked.

“It must be, but my domain is narrowing,” Helioid said. “Some force is trying to render me blind. I need you to make sense of the mortal realm, now more than ever. I believe that Purphoros has devised a new way to destroy me. And Thassa dances with him even now.”

“Can the stranger help you?”

“That is her destiny,” Helioid said. “I could ask her to slay every oracle in the land, except my own. And she would be powerful enough to do it.”

“You would blind the other gods?” Daxos asked. “You would test Kruphix’s warning?”

“Only if Purphoros forces me to,” Helioid said. “I don’t fear Kruphix.”

“What do you need me to do?” Daxos asked.

“Ride out and meet my champion,” Helioid asked. “But before you go, see if my brothers and sisters are aware of her and the blade she carries.”

Daxos crawled himself up to his hands and knees. Sand

covered his chest, and his legs burned from the night's work. He emptied the space around his heart and let Heliod place the cosmos around it. Using his god-sight, Daxos tripped along Heliod's invisible causeways of light, searching for the stranger that carried Heliod's blade. The broken girl who stole the sword of a god. He saw her reel back off the edge of a wooden platform. The spear-blade flew from her hand. A harpy bore down on her, eager to pluck her eyes from her face.

Daxos stumbled back into his body, his eyes watering, his bones wracked with pain. "Divine One, she is in the wilderness. And Erebos watches her."

"Go now," Heliod said. "Take a contingent, and defeat any obstacle they present to her. Make her path clear to me. The pantheon won't want me to have such a champion."

"What about Erebos?"

"I will handle my mewling brother," Heliod said. "The pathetic lord of self-pity. I promise you, Daxos. Someday I will let you avenge what he did to you."

Heliod had said those words before, and he'd say them again, and yet Daxos knew that nothing would come of it.

"If she is not worthy or if she tries to flee with the weapon, you know what you have to do," Heliod asked.

"Kill her, take the blade, and bring it to Meletis myself," Daxos said, but not with a will of his own. He was repeating the orders that Heliod placed in him.

Daxos fought against the words, and still they tumbled from his mouth. And when he was done speaking, Heliod was gone.

Daxos picked himself off the ground and went to meet the woman he prayed would take his place.

CHAPTER 8

When Elspeth reached the city walls of Akros after her encounter with Heliod, she found a city on the edge of war. King's Gate, the main gate of Akros, was shut and barred, and archers on the wall aimed their bows at her as she approached. They allowed her to enter through the side entrance called Lateman's Gate, a reinforced corridor that led through the thick wall and was fitted with sturdy iron doors on either end. Once inside the city, Elspeth had to dodge formations of soldiers drilling in the entrance square. She spotted a young woman in the shadow of the wall watching the men in their crested helmets and bronze chest plates practice the motions of warfare.

"What's going on?" Elspeth asked the young woman, whose hair was fashioned into ramlike horns on the sides of her head.

"Didn't you see the fire in the sky?" the woman asked. "It was an omen. King Anax is sealing all the gates. We're under attack."

"From what?" Elspeth asked.

“Minotaurs,” the woman said. She looked incredulous that Elspeth would even ask the question. “They’re amassing against us. They mean to slaughter us all.”

“I was just in the mountains,” Elspeth said. “I didn’t see minotaur hordes.”

“That’s not surprising,” the woman said. She looked at Elspeth as though she was the stupidest person alive. “They live in caves.”

The woman moved on, and Elspeth turned down an alleyway to avoid the crowded square. She didn’t want to spend another night inside a city that was about to go to war. Nor was she ready to leave Theros. But she wasn’t sure how to get to Meletis or what to think about the god who had tried to kill her—even if he did think she was a thief. She didn’t have anything she cared about back in her room in the Foreigners’ Quarter, but she headed there to retrieve her pack while trying to decide what to do.

If you’re so powerful, Heliad, show me the way to Meletis. The words formed in her mind almost despite herself, and she looked around guiltily, as if someone might have heard her thoughts. But everyone was hustling past her as if they had somewhere important to be. The roads were clogged with soldiers marching up the hill to the Kolophon, the monolithic fortress of King Anax and Queen Cymede.

Elspeth stayed to the minor streets, but there was no way to enter the Foreigners’ Quarter without passing the

Twins. There were many shrines to Iroas, God of Victory. But the Twins was one of the few shrines that honored both Iroas and Mogis. The two gods were opposite in appearance: Iroas had the head and chest of a man and body of a bull. Mogis was depicted as a brutish minotaur.

Akroan soldiers kept watch on the site around the clock. So many fights had broken out in the shadow of Mogis that people believed the site was cursed. Still, worshipers came, but they stayed on the cobblestones at the feet of Iroas. The God of Victory stood proudly, nearly twenty-five feet high, with a shining bronze sarissa raised in triumph. The marble statue of Mogis skulked behind him. No matter where the sun cast its rays, Mogis was always seething in the background. Yet people still prayed to Mogis. He received the most attention after a savage battle when many Akroans died. The relatives of those killed would come to this shrine and silently pray because Mogis was also the god of revenge.

Elsbeth was just a block away from her room when she thought she heard someone calling her name. Given how few people she knew in Akros, she thought she might have imagined it. But she scanned the faces on the packed street and saw Xiro waving frantically at her. When he finally traversed the crowds, she saw that he was dressed as an Akroan soldier.

“Why are you in uniform?” Elsbeth asked

“Iroas has forgiven me. I’ve been reinstated as a soldier. There’s a war coming.”

“How do you know?” Elspeth asked.

“Didn’t you see the sign of fire in the sky?” he asked.

“It was a sign that you’d been forgiven?” she asked, wondering how anyone could be sure they were reading the signs correctly.

“No, it was a sign of war,” he said. “I went to the temple, and the priest told me I was forgiven. I’m reporting for duty at the Kolophon now.”

“Oh,” Elspeth said. “Well, I’m happy for you.”

“They’re going to empty the Foreigners’ Quarter,” he said. “I was afraid you’d be cast out of the city. But I found something for you. Arvid Takis owns the estate that was attacked by satyrs. He’s sending his daughter to study at the academy in Meletis. She’s traveling with the last caravan out of Akros—it’s leaving in less than an hour from War Gate. They want a female escort, and I signed you up.”

He handed her a piece of parchment with an official seal. “This will get you in the gates of Meletis. Once you deliver the girl to the academy, you can do whatever you like. The city is yours for the taking.”

If you’re so powerful, show me the way to Meletis. Elspeth’s head reeled. She felt as though she might start laughing, but she didn’t want to offend Xiro, who was trying so hard to help her.

“The girl’s name is Nikka Takis. She’s sixteen, and a

bit of a handful, or so her father says,” Xiro continued. “You’ll have to watch her like a hawk. They’ll pay you on safe delivery at the academy.”

“Thank you,” Elspeth said. She took the letter and tried to find the right words to thank the grizzled soldier.

“Are you all right?” Xiro asked. “I thought this would be right for you. You can continue your search of the temples, though I hope your path leads you back to Iroas.”

“Yes, I am,” Elspeth said. “I’m truly grateful.”

They embraced briefly, and Xiro looked embarrassed. He smiled down at her. “When I think of you, I’ll imagine you walking the streets of that great city searching for the heartbeat of the gods.”

“Maybe we’ll see each other again sometime,” Elspeth said. He winked at her as if he didn’t believe it and turned to leave. At the last minute, he turned and pointed to the east.

“War Gate is that way,” he called. And then he disappeared into a throng of passing soldiers. A street crier rang his bell and warned all outsiders to leave the city. Elspeth was happy to oblige.



Elspeth left Akros with the last caravan out of War Gate. Behind her, the city disgorged the rest of its unwanted onto the rocky plateau. The stragglers

unattached to the caravan seemed to hesitate, confused at the situation they found themselves in, and then scattered with the wind. Unlike the lost souls who had been cast out of the Foreigners' Quarter with nothing, Elspeth had an anchor—she must deliver Nikka Takis safely to the city of philosophers. Unfortunately, the sixteen-year-old girl made it clear that she wasn't interested in having Elspeth as her watcher.

The caravan wagon that Master Takis had hired for his daughter was by far the most affluent in the line. Most were just wooden boxes on wheels pulled by a lone horse. Nikka's caravan was painted crimson with gold trim and had velvet curtains covering the windows. It was pulled by two horses, and Elspeth was glad that her only responsibility was caring for Nikka and not tending to the animals. The caravan master employed drivers and stable boys who would see to the rest.

The caravan would follow the Great River Road out of the flatland and along the Deyda River to the sea, where ships would be waiting to sail them to Meletis. Elspeth had wondered why they didn't take a boat down the Deyda—until she caught sight of the river at the edge of Akros Flats. She looked down into the gorge where the mighty flow of water rushed in white-water rapids hundreds of feet below. Despite the distance, the echoing roar of the water drowned out the squeak of the wagon wheels.

Nikka leaned out the window to look down at the river

and caught Elspeth's eye. She jerked the curtains closed as if Elspeth had been spying on her. When Elspeth was sixteen, she trained day and night to become recognized as a Knight of Bant. She never would have treated an elder so rudely. She never would have disregarded someone who had been sworn to protect her. She tried to imagine what the most difficult thing in Nikka Takis's life had been so far. And then she realized it was probably this journey—being sent away from her parents. Today may well be the toughest day she'd ever experienced.

It had been a mad rush in the last moments before the caravan departed. Nikka refused to say goodbye to her father, and she climbed into the wagon and slammed the door.

"She feels like we're punishing her," Master Takis told Elspeth. "But this is for her own good. After what happened at the estate ... well, you saw it yourself. The oracles say that evil is stirring in Akros, and I want my daughter well away from it. You will take care of her, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Elspeth said.

"Don't let her out of your sight unless she is inside the caravan and you are guarding it," he said. "Don't let her fraternize with men. She can be willful. And I should warn you, she's very clever."

Elspeth frowned. "Clever, how?"

But the horn blasted from the wall and the wooden

doors of War Gate swung wide, and so Master Takis didn't have a chance to tell her. As the caravan rolled out, Master Takis ran up to the gate. The soldiers held him back, but he shouted, "Don't let her kneel at shrines! Don't let her talk to people who say they are priests!"

Soon the line of wagons began the descent off the Akros Flats and into the rugged mountains. The caravan master rode the line checking on the wagons. He was an ebony-skinned man with a clean-shaven head and enviable muscles. He only came up to Elspeth's shoulder, but he was twice her width, and there was not an ounce of excess flesh on him. She could imagine him easily hoisting up the back of one of the wagons to swap out a wheel, if necessary. When he reached the end of the line, he dismounted and walked beside her.

"My name is Ginus," he said. "I've run this route for fifteen years, and know all the trouble spots. Master Takis explained your task. Come to me if you have any problems."

Elspeth assured him that she would.

"The next few hours are the trickiest to navigate," Ginus told her. "It's ambush territory in those narrow canyons and passes. And you might want to walk on the right side of the caravan. Stay on the left, and you might get knocked off the edge and into the Deyda."

Ginus mounted his horse and rode back up the line. Elspeth wondered if Nikka had heard his warning. But the velvet curtains were decidedly closed, and Elspeth

made no attempt to speak to her charge.

The iron wheels rattled slowly down the steep grade for an hour as the sun crested in the sky. Dark shapes circled high above them, but Elspeth had dismissed them as large birds. She forgot them entirely when she saw the next obstacle—the road seemed to narrow dramatically to just a few inches to spare on either side of the caravan. With no room to walk on either side, Elspeth was forced to move to the very end behind the caravan where she didn't feel as if she was going to fall off into the river gorge or be crushed against the mountainside.

The drivers shouted down the line, "Halt!" And the caravan stopped abruptly. The road was too narrow for Elspeth to see what was happening. As shouts of alarm rang from wagon to wagon, she realized they were under attack. With nowhere else to go, she climbed on top of the wooden roof of the caravan and saw that many of the stable boys had done the same. They were armed with bladed poles—apparently the defense of choice against the raiders from the skies. The dark shapes bore down on them. When the creatures flew closer, Elspeth saw that they had ugly humanoid faces and talons on their black-feathered wings. One swooped down near Elspeth, and it circled away. Part avian and part human, the foul creatures had emaciated torsos and yellow, splintered teeth.

GINUS bounded between the gaps between the wagons as he sprinted down the roofs toward her. Her driver was

with the horse, trying to keep it calm. If it spooked, their wagon would topple off the side and fall into the raging river.

“Harpies!” Ginus yelled. She realized that he was coming to help her, the only wagon with a single defender.

The harpies hit the front of the line first, and they flapped away with chests, amphorae, or other supplies hooked in their talons. They seemed to be more interested in stealing the supplies inside the merchants’ vans than killing. Elspeth readied her spear-blade as Ginus skidded to a halt beside her.

“Are they scavengers?” she asked.

“Yes, but this is strange,” he said. “They usually avoid caravans with this many defenders.”

Two harpies swooped at them at a high rate of speed. There was coordination to their attack, Elspeth realized, as she crouched low and braced herself for impact. She could hear the horse nicker in fear, and the van lurched forward under their feet.

“Steady!” Ginus shouted.

After Heliod transformed her sword into the longer blade, Elspeth was afraid she wouldn’t be able to wield it with the same competence. But with her first strike against the diving harpy, she knew her skills weren’t impaired. The elongated blade was no heavier than her original sword, but it seemed to strike even harder than before. Between the speed of its ascent and the swing of

her weapon, she cleaved the creature nearly in two. It thudded onto the top of the wagon with a wet smack. Below her, inside the caravan, Nikka shrieked at the sound.

“Stay inside,” Elspeth commanded her ward through the roof. She shoved the carcass off with her foot and it went spiraling off the side of the cliff and down to the river.

Genus grinned at her with approval. “You could reach all the way to Nyx with that blade!” he shouted as two more harpies wheeled toward them.

One of the harpies circled above her, staying just out of reach. Then it made a strange, jerky grab for Elspeth’s blade with the razor-sharp talons on its feet. The motion was so unexpected that Elspeth lost her balance and fell backward off the back edge of the wooden roof and onto the road. She managed to land on her feet, but she dropped the weapon. With terrifying speed, the harpy shot directly at her. Elspeth lunged for the blade, but the harpy was faster. No longer reaching for her blade, it aimed its talons at her eyes. Behind the harpy, Nikka threw open the door of the caravan and hurled a ceramic jug at the creature. The ceramic cracked against the harpy’s skull and lamp oil drenched its wings.

The harpy thudded to the ground, whirled around, and screamed at Nikka. The screams sounded like some guttural language, but not quite like any words that Elspeth had ever heard. The harpy lunged toward the

wagon, but Nikka grabbed another jar and threw it at the harpy's face. It hit its mark directly, and this time the harpy had enough. It went careening into the air, dripping oil and screaming its ugly words. As it flapped jerkily into the air and out of sight over the ridge, the rest of the harpies followed.

“Good aim,” Elspeth said, grabbing her blade. She scanned the sky for more airborne marauders. “Was it saying something? Can those things speak?”

“Oh, it's going to tattle to Erebos,” Nikka said. “It also said unkind things about my face and your blade.”

Elspeth gave Nikka a funny look, not sure if the girl was joking or not.

Ginus appeared above them on the top of the van. “All accounted for?” he asked. “We better get moving, if we're going to make the campsite before nightfall.”

“If you see Beta, tell him I'm all right!” Nikka called after the caravan master, but she received no answer.

“Whose Beta?” Elspeth asked.

“None of your business,” Nikka snapped. And she slammed the door of the caravan in Elspeth's face.



After the harpy attack, the caravan rolled on without stopping. The Great River Road widened, and Elspeth walked on the right side of the wagon, happy to have a better view of what was coming. The driver called back

that they were just a mile away from the campsite, and Elspeth was relieved. It had been a long time since she'd walked this far. She felt a strange sensation in her mind, almost like an itch she couldn't scratch. A mage was casting, but it was a weak spell, as if it originated from far away. Elspeth cast her own in response, both strengthening herself and metaphorically swatting away the intrusive magic, like someone swatting away an annoying insect.

But she felt uneasy, as if someone was watching her. The velvet curtains moved, and she caught a glimpse of Nikka moving back from the window.

The sun was setting when the caravan stopped in a sheltered valley between two high cliffs. Ginus directed the drivers to roll the wagons into a protective circle, and his men built a bonfire. Elspeth offered her help to Ginus, but he politely refused. When the fire was blazing, Nikka hopped out of the wagon. Her appearance had changed since they left Akros. When she entered the wagon under the protective eyes of her father, her black hair was loose on her shoulders, and she wore a long, hooded cloak. Now her hair was braided and held in loops by an expensive-looking gold clasp, and she'd discarded her cloak despite the chill in the evening air. Every man in the camp—which was everyone besides Elspeth—turned their eyes on the young woman. Nikka circled the line of wagons as if looking for someone. When she didn't find what she was

looking for, she climbed back into the wagon and slammed the door.

Elspeth shared soup with the others around the bonfire, keeping an eye on Master Takis's wagon, but there was no sign of the girl. When the sun disappeared behind the ridge, she took a bowl to the wagon, but when she opened the door, it was empty. Nikka must have climbed out of the window on the far side of the wagon. Elspeth's heart sank. The stroll around the campsite had been a show all along.

"Have you seen the Lady Takis?" Elspeth asked as she searched the campsite. But everywhere the answer was the same. People shook their heads and refused to meet her eye. Elspeth wasn't sure if they avoided her because they knew something or because she was a stranger. Elspeth had done her best to disguise her otherness. Her skin was deeply tanned and she maintained a small glamour to make her eyes appear darker. But people seemed to instinctively mistrust her, to know that she was different. She heard a man muttering about Setessans in her passing.

Finally, after Elspeth had made the rounds through the camp several times, she went to see Ginus. By now it was dark, and Elspeth had heard enough stories about the murderous bandits and savage minotaurs roaming these rocky highlands to begin to fear for Nikka's safety. Unlike the rest of the men, Ginus didn't seem to have any problem with Elspeth. When she approached him and

asked about Lady Takis, he simply stood up and walked with her to the edge of the camp. They took a small trail up the side of the ridge to the mouth of a small cave.

“Youth,” he said derisively. Then he picked up a medium-sized stone and threw it into the entrance. They heard a yelp and then frantic whispering.

“If he’s one of mine, he’ll be whipped,” Ginus assured her.

But when Nikka and the boy emerged, it was the son of one of the merchants from Akros. He wasn’t much older than Nikka and looked like he wanted to die there on the spot. Ginus led him back to the camp while Nikka stared defiantly at Elspeth.

“Do you even know him?” Elspeth asked.

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Nikka asked.

“You can do whatever you like when you get to Meletis,” Elspeth said. “But your father entrusted you to my care, and until then, you need to stay in the wagon.”

“Or what?” Nikka asked.

It was a very good question. Elspeth didn’t have many ways to coerce the girl into behaving. Elspeth decided to go with a threat. “Or I’ll leave you on your own and you can pray the minotaurs don’t get their hands on you,” Elspeth said. She wasn’t sure that it would have much impact, but the girl glanced around nervously.

“All right,” Nikka said, moving closer to Elspeth. “You made your point. I’ll stay in the wagon.”

At first Elspeth thought the abrupt change was a ruse,

but the girl seemed genuinely scared. She went inside the caravan without protest and unrolled her sleeping mat. Elspeth left the doors open and sat at the back, her feet dangling over the side, and watched the valley transform under the shifting light from Nyx. The heavenly images of gods and celestial creatures captivated her. She couldn't believe that such a spectacle played out night after night. No wonder the people of Theros had such a firm faith—they saw their gods in action every time the sun hid behind the horizon.

“Do you know the story of Callaphe?” Nikka asked, crawling out of her bedroll and sitting beside Elspeth. Elspeth shook her head. Nikka seemed friendly, like she was eager to talk. It was all extremes with this girl.

“They don't tell god-stories in Setessa?” Nikka asked.

Elspeth didn't know much about Setessa except that it was a polis located somewhere in the vast Nessian Forest. She wasn't sure why everyone thought she was from there.

“I'm not from Setessa,” she said. “Who is Callaphe?”

Nikka pointed at a section of the sky where a lithe figure seemed to swim through the stars.

“Callaphe was the greatest mariner who ever lived,” Nikka told her. “She sailed a ship she called the Monsoon, and was the first mortal to decipher the secret patterns of the winds. Thassa grew jealous that a mortal should navigate her realm so easily, so she challenged Callaphe to a race along the waterfall at the edge of the

world.”

“There’s a waterfall at the edge of the world?” Elspeth asked without thinking.

Nikka whipped her head around and stared at Elspeth in surprise. “You don’t know that? Where are you from?”

“I was raised by leonins,” Elspeth said. She’d meant it as a jest, but she’d never been very good at humor, and Nikka took her seriously.

“Oh, is it true they eat babies?” Nikka asked.

“Uh, I never saw that,” Elspeth said. She had no idea what leonins on this plane ate. Hopefully, it wasn’t human babies. “Go on about the mariner.”

“If Callaphe won the race, then she could have the run of the ocean and Thassa wouldn’t bother her. But if she lost, she could never set to sea again. The race began, and Callaphe was actually winning. Thassa sent sirens to slash her sails, but still she hung on to the edge of the world and kept sailing. So Thassa sent a wind to blow her over the waterfall. No ship can sail over the side and not be destroyed. But Callaphe was too clever for the God of the Sea. The mariner went sailing over the waterfall. But instead of being dashed into oblivion, she sailed into Nyx itself.”

Nikka pointed to a cluster of stars high above them. “Look, you can see her ship,” she told Elspeth. “Oh, and Nylea is worried.”

“How do you know?” Elspeth asked.

“That’s her lynx, and you can tell by how it moves. It’s

looking for something. Something bad is about to happen.”

“Can you tell what?” Elspeth asked.

“Beta says that Polukranos has broken his chains,” Nikka explained. “He says the hydra will smash Meletis and I will be crushed to death if I let you take me there.”

“Is Beta your friend?” Elspeth asked.

“He loves me,” Nikka retorted, the edge back in her voice.

“All right,” Elspeth said. She wasn’t going to argue with Nikka about the nature of love. “Who is Polukranos?”

“Well, Polukranos is the greatest hydra ever to roam the mortal realm,” she said. “Purphoros’s Sword cut him from Nyx, and he became mortal on the way down.”

“Well, if he’s mortal and he can be killed, then there’s nothing to worry about,” Elspeth said.

Nikka scrunched her face doubtfully. “You don’t know much about hydras, do you? You have to chop their heads off all at once, and Polukranos has fifty of them. Beta said it took three gods just to bind him to the earth.”

“Maybe Beta was misinformed,” Elspeth said as the starry lynx dashed out of view.

“He does love me,” Nikka said.

“I hope we’re talking about the boy and not the hydra,” Elspeth said, and Nikka laughed.

“Have you ever been in love?” Nikka asked.

“No,” Elspeth said.

“Why? You’re young and beautiful. Although I guess growing up in a leonin camp ...”

“It’s getting late,” Elspeth said. “Maybe you should go to sleep?”

“Yeah, I’m really tired,” she said.

Elspeth watched Nyx until she was sure the girl was sleeping. At the edges of the sky, it did look like the waterfall that Nikka had told her about. Stars cascaded down and flowed out in unseen currents along the horizon. To the east, the figure of a hooded man bent low as he searched the world. A long cord like a whip lashed at him from nowhere. But it didn’t harm him; instead he grabbed it and wrapped the end around his hand. On the other side of the sky, a celestial lion and cub frolicked together. Elspeth felt content as she watched the shifting colors and stellar light. Despite the earthly dangers, this world seemed safer, brighter. What could corrupt the heavens? At the edge of sleep, Elspeth realized she was praying to Heliod. She used to pray to the angels of Bant each night, and now she found herself thanking Heliod for another day without pain and grief. There’d been obstacles, but nothing that she couldn’t overcome. The prayer felt automatic, like breathing. She curled up tighter and imagined Nyx to be like a shield around the plane and the gods the guardians of all—including herself.

CHAPTER 9



The hydra had awakened, and Nylea hadn't sensed it. It had taken Daxos—a mortal—to warn her that Polukranos was crashing through her own forest. Something was desperately wrong with the world when mortals could see what gods could not. Taking the form of a massive, star-clad wolf, Nylea loped along the trail of destruction left by the hydra. His mighty footfalls had crushed trees with every step. His hissing fury sent shock waves of energy emanating through the lush undergrowth, which turned the vegetation to pulp. If left unchecked, the hydra could flatten the entire Nessian Forest.

Nylea loved her forest, every leaf and padded foot in her domain, but she had been restless. Ever since the giant elder trees of the forest had been saplings, she felt the pull of the unknown, the desire to explore, to hunt things that deserved to die. There were hidden spaces and dark corners of this world that her brothers and sisters denied existed. There were monsters whose shadows dwarfed mountains, and there were

interminable pits of darkness where Helioid's sun had never touched. It was there Nylea liked to go and test her skills against the ferocious night-clad beasts.

But she had stayed away too long and neglected her home. And now the hydra had risen, and it was headed toward the coast. With his instinctive hatred of humans and their artifice, Meletis would be pulverized under his wrath. And the pantheon itself was in turmoil with Helioid and Purphoros yet again preparing to fight a battle that couldn't be won. Kruphix had warned that all the gods would be drawn back into Nyx if they carried their feud too far.

Nylea sensed a strange new wound on the face of her forest. She arrived at a blackened circle singed into the earth itself. This damage was not caused by the hydra, but it was in a place where the hydra had passed. Nylea became like a vole to scurry upon the earth and decipher the clumps of dirt and bloodstained sand. She took the shape of a falcon and soared above the glade, noting each step and drag of a hoof or foot. A group of satyrs and humans had held a revel around a bonfire, but why so far from the Skola Valley, Nylea didn't know.

At first, when it was wine and joyous laughter, the celebrants had gathered around the fire and danced. But later, when it had become bloody and violent, the prints staggered in all directions. The bonfire had exploded in a great burst of energy. There were blackened footprints of revelers caught in its blast zone, but there were no

bodies. In the vicinity of the fire pit, the bare earth had become like black sand. There were no green leaves on the nearby trees. Instead the bare branches had transformed into jagged obsidian. Some unnatural casting was at work here. Nylea again took the shape of a wolf and continued following the path of the hydra's destructive journey to Meletis.

When Nylea reached the top of the ridge, she could see Polukranos at the far end of the valley, and she felt pity for the magnificent creature. He was acting in the only way he knew how. She had tried to keep him safe in Nyx, but Purphoros and his wretched sword had ruined his peaceful place among the stars. And now something had disturbed his rest again through no fault of his own. The suffering of animals incensed Nylea and made her feel murderous. She would find the culprit and make him see the pain suffered by the creatures she loved. But the hydra was nearing the Guardians of Meletis, the massive statues that guarded the roads leading into the polis. If he reached them, he would be beyond the boundaries of the Nessian Forest.

Nylea discarded her corporeity and infused her essence into the roots that twined under the forest floor. Through the roots, she reached across the expanse between herself and the hydra. She tried to gather a sense of Polukranos, to touch the pathways of his mind and call him home to the forest where he might be safe. But her domain had become so small, she couldn't find him—she couldn't

sense a creature that towered above the mortals' monuments to the gods. Something had cut him off from her. Something had cut him off from the forest itself.

Nylea left the roots and came back into herself. This time, she took her favored form as a dryad. There was grief in her heart for her damaged forest and for the plight of the majestic hydra. She could not contain this problem to her forest. As much as it grieved her to admit it, she needed Helioid's help.



The Shrine of the Gods was a nexus point between Nyx and the mortal world, but only the Nyxborn could use it to move between the two realms. The gods needed no portal and could shift freely between the realms as they liked. The mortals called this temple Nykthos, but the name was much older than any living human. When they used the name, the mortals didn't know they referred to a divine artisan. Nykthos was the first Nyxborn, created by Kruphix, who was tasked with building the altars to the gods. Nylea remembered him vaguely, like a child remembers a long-dead grandfather.

Built on a vast plain high in the mountains, the temple itself was a huge semicircle on a field of marble. There was an unobstructed view of the horizons in all directions. While mortals believed the site to be a natural feature of the world, it was Nykthos who fashioned the

landscape with his bare hands in honor of the gods. Statues of gods, champions, and oracles littered the shrine. There was even one of Nylea. She didn't like images of herself crafted in stone, but she'd had nothing to say in the construction of this marvel. Each god had a marble altar in a distinct alcove, and once the gods had gone to war over whose alcove was the largest. Nylea moved silently past Thassa's altar, which was a fountain that flowed with starry water. A statue of the triton hero Thrasios looked down into a pool that reflected the brilliance of Nyx.

The statues and alcoves were crumbling in places, touched by the ravages of time. Even Heliod's were damaged. Nylea took the form of a mortal woman and paused before the massive urn set on the altar. A pillar of light originated within the urn and towered into the sky. The mortals said it touched Nyx itself. What mortals didn't know was that Nykthos was a mirror image to another temple in the foyer to Nyx itself where it marked the entrance to the realm of the gods. There was another urn in Nyx, and the pillar of light connected the two, although there were no straight lines when traveling between realms or even to the ends of the world.

"Heliod," Nylea called through the aether, "you are needed."

She wanted Heliod to come and walk with her on the land, but he did not. He spoke with her but did not grace her with his presence. She wondered what was so

important that he could not spare her his precious time.

“You are truly my most beautiful sister,” he said. He said it even though he knew that flattery meant nothing to the God of the Hunt, who ignored his compliment.

“I have stood many times near where the hydra slumbered, feeling his heartbeat through the blades of grass,” she told her brother. “I can sense the caterpillars in their cocoons, the shiver of the fawn in the shadows, the thud of the rabbit’s feet on earth. How is it that I can’t commune with one of my own children?”

“My vision is narrowing as well,” Helioid said. “Purphoros not only threatens the god realm, he has figured out a way to limit our sight. He narrows each of our domains.”

“What weapon can accomplish this?” Nylea asked. “Another sword?”

“The riddle is not yet solved,” Helioid told her.

“Daxos spoke of voids in his god-sight,” Nylea said. “This troubles our mortals as well as ourselves.”

“No god may touch another’s vessel,” Helioid said. “If Purphoros has afflicted Daxos, then he has scorned the laws of existence!”

“Remember Kruphix’s warning,” Nylea said. “If your feud threatens mortal existence, then he will enforce a Silence and remove us all to Nyx.”

“Purphoros must be punished!” Helioid said.

“Before you blame Purphoros,” Nylea said. “Have you searched for another cause? I have seen something

strange in the Nessian Forest. A satyr staged a fiery ritual. He drives the hydra toward Meletis.”

“The satyrs are under your protection,” Heliod said.

“Skola Valley is under my protection,” Nylea said. “Not a singular satyr who taunts my creatures.”

“Send your spies through your own timbers, little one,” Heliod said. “The Nessian is as restless as Thassa’s pond.”

“What has awakened the hydra?” Nylea asked. “When last I was near his chamber, he slept soundly.”

“How many years ago was that?” Heliod asked. “You have been away in the unknown lands for longer than you might perceive.”

“Years?” Nylea laughed. “Have you become so like the humans that you measure time in their increments?”

“And are you so love stricken with Daxos that you are not watching your own children?”

“I have no interest in your petty squabbles with Purphoros, until my creatures become toys in your duels,” Nylea said.

“If Purphoros destroys Nyx, then your forest will not survive,” Heliod warned her. “Neither will Setessa or your beloved animals. Perhaps you should care a little more.”

“You don’t know that,” Nylea protested. But she felt fear that any threat might harm the forest dwellers.

Heliod scoffed. “You know the natural order better than anyone. Mortal and ideal cannot coexist peacefully.

And as I have said, the realms are becoming like shifting sand.”

“The hydra will stay in my forest,” Nylea said decidedly. “I will see to it.”

“What will you do?” Heliod asked.

“I will visit the satyr,” Nylea said. “I tracked his footprints. He went from the Skola to incite the hydra. And after he left the hydra, he called upon Purphoros.”

Heliod exploded in anger. “You tell me to search for another cause. And *then* you reveal that the satyr works for the God of the Forge. This time I won’t let Kruphix punish Purphoros so gently, I will imprison him myself in the boiling tar near Erebos’s throne!”

Nylea had enough of talking to Heliod. She became a falcon, soaring away from him.

“If the hydra reaches the Guardians, he is no longer under your protection,” Heliod called, his voice like the wind during a fierce storm. “My champion cannot allow him to demolish the city.”

“Don’t touch my hydra,” Nylea warned the wind, but Heliod did not care to listen.



Nylea approached the Skola Valley with fury in her heart. The upstart Xenagos, with his pretensions of greatness, was behind this. She knew it as soon as she saw the tracks of his revel. He was the only creature she

ever encountered who did not seem to appreciate the gulf in their existence. He acted as if he didn't care that he was merely a creature of the world and she was a divinity of the stars. But worse, she had protected him, like everything that lived in her realm. She tolerated the satyrs and their mischief. She let them have autonomy in their pristine little valley where they did nothing but drink themselves into oblivion.

Nylea wanted to strangle Xenagos with her bare—human—hands, but when she moved to walk under the gateway of trees into the Skola, a wall-like spell blocked her passage. The mystical protections were far more powerful than should be expected of a miniscule goatman. Nylea became monstrous, her skin like bark and her arms like trunks of massive trees. She grew to fifty feet tall with all the lifeblood of the forest seething through her veins. Her skin was emblazoned with Nyx as she lorded over the valley. Beneath her the satyrs ran in terror at the sight of her, tripping over their tiny hooves and shrieking like cowards. With a single strike, Nylea ripped the mystical shield off the valley, which now looked like a tiny furrow in the ground below her. The grassy earth trembled and tore open, revealing caverns and the black smoke of industry.

Through the rift in the earth, she could see caverns that Xenagos had transformed into forges in the image of Purphoros's own mountain. There were prisoners chained to the ground, and they, too, froze in terror.

Their hammers suspended, and they stared at the sky and the tremendous arrival of Nylea. The cry of a bird reached Nylea's ears. It was the pitiful wailing of a chimera, imprisoned and panicked. Nylea sent ribbons of vine to seek the source, shatter the bars, and set all the creatures free. It was done in seconds. While the prisoners fled, an injured chimera limped into the sky. Its wing was twisted, but still it managed to fly. It was fashioned from divine bronze, and Nylea recognized it as one of Purphoros's creatures. She abhorred the metal trappings of the creature but couldn't fault him for his beautiful inventiveness. Part ibis and part stag, the chimera sang praises to Nylea and flew toward Mt. Velus.

Nylea entered the valley and landed on the ground with a small rumble. She was human-sized again but still towered over the cowering satyrs. Unconscious bodies lay scattered around, the victims of her anger.

"I liked my chimera," Xenagos said. He stepped from behind a wooden platform that held a gilded throne.

As soon as the pointy-chinned satyr stepped into the open, Nylea whipped the bow from her back and pointed an arrow between his eyes.

"Xenagos!" Nylea shouted. "What madness is this?"

"Fix my floor, sister," he said, pointing at the hole in the ground that revealed his forge.

"You little pig," she said. "I am not your sister. And what have you done to my hydra?"

“And why do you presume that he is yours?” Xenagos said. “What gives you the right of ownership?”

Nylea made a miniscule adjustment and unleashed her arrow. Instead of piercing him between the eyes, she punctured his chest. By design, the arrow narrowly missed his heart. He was blasted backward by the force of the impact, but Nylea moved faster than he stumbled. Before the arrow finished traveling into his chest, she grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against the ground. With a knee pressed into his chest, she leaned over him. She grabbed the shaft of the arrow and twisted it. He screamed in pain as the arrowhead tore through his flesh and inched closer to his heart.

“I am your god, and you are nothing but a bleating kid,” she hissed. “Should I pull your eyes out and feed them to the rats?”

“Please, no!” he gasped. He tried to speak again, and Nylea leaned forward to hear his plea.

“Not ... the ... rats,” he said sarcastically, spitting blood between his clenched teeth.

She stood up and left him sprawled on the ground. She sent a ripple of energy through the ground that jolted him back against the stone wall behind the throne. His bones cracked, but Xenagos grinned venomously. The rectangular slits of his pupils grew larger as he reached up and grabbed the shaft of Nylea’s arrow that was still sticking out of his chest.

“Why do you mock me?” Nylea asked. “Would you

like to see my wrath rain down from Nyx?”

“What do you want, O honored visitor?” Xenagos asked.

“Why do you torment Polukranos?” she asked. “Did you awaken him?”

“No, something new entered the world,” Xenagos said. “And it draws him like a moth to a candle. I just helped him on his way.”

“By inciting him, you are risking the lives of all my creatures,” Nylea said. “You risk the safety of the mortal realm.”

Xenagos snapped the wooden shaft, leaving the arrowhead deep in his chest. He flung the useless wood ineffectually at the God of the Hunt. It landed in the grass near his hooves. Nylea sensed his sick pleasure, how he reveled both in the pain and at her presence in his valley.

“I care nothing for your creatures,” Xenagos said. “Soon, you and all your precious children will bow before me ...”

Nylea could not be bothered to strike him again. Instead, she revoked her protection of the Skola Valley. In that instant, the trees faded from existence, the grassy expanse turned brown, and the plants withered. The stone walls, the wooden platform, and the pretentious gilded throne all turned to dust. Nylea diverted the bubbling stream with a wall of vines. She called away all creatures that dwelt there and offered them new homes in

her forest. Even the earthworms of the soil fled from the sickly ground.

“... the king of all.” By the time Xenagos finished his sentence, he was standing in a wasteland.

Now she saw something else in his eyes. Not fear, exactly, and certainly hatred, but something more sinister.

“Now you are king of nothing,” she said softly. “If you don’t cease your mischief now, I will throw you across Erebos’s river myself.”

“Ah, that’s the thing, isn’t it?” he replied, defiant. Blood oozed from the arrow wound in his chest. “You can’t kill me.”

Nylea felt something strange flicker inside of her. “What did you say?”

“You can’t touch me,” Xenagos said.

“I just did, and your wounds should make you remember,” Nylea said.

“You didn’t touch me. You touched the world.”

“Your bones are broken just the same,” she replied.

“Gods can’t touch mortals,” Xenagos said. “You can’t kill us anymore than you can kill each other.”

“You’re a fool if you believe that.” Nylea found herself puzzled by his arrogance and his denial of the physical forces that had just battered him.

“Belief ... funny you should use that word, Queen,” Xenagos said.

“You are nothing anymore. You are lower than the

Returned.”

“I was going to invite you to stay with me, but now I won’t,” Xenagos said. “The revels are just beginning.”

Nylea departed, no longer interested in meaningless banter with this ostracized creature. She became the air born from a sunflower’s petals. As she eased into the air, the fear for her beloved hydra and the Kruphix’s threat consumed her. Because of the voids that his revels had created in her god-sight, she could not sense Xenagos begin to restore his valley, rebuild his throne, or repair the protective magic of his peculiar sky. Later, as she raced with her lynx across the fields of wheat toward the Guardians, she couldn’t feel the massive waves of mana rolling out of his forge, cloaked by powerful spells he had again woven around his ruined valley. But despite his secrecy, his frenetic rituals shaved more stars from the underpinnings of the world. The cracks in the realms grew wider, and the dust of the cosmos jumbled together and rained through the rifts like sand.

CHAPTER 10

By noon of the second day, the caravan was so close to the sea that Elspeth could smell the salt in the air. Despite the camaraderie of the night before, Nikka had returned to her sullen self. At daybreak, as the caravan was preparing to leave, Nikka had asked Elspeth if she could walk up the line of wagons to speak to Beta. But when she returned a few minutes later, her eyes were red from crying. As the caravan rolled out of the mountains and into the rolling meadowland, she'd stayed in the caravan with the doors and shutters closed.

But at midday she climbed out of the van and walked beside Elspeth. The mountains receded behind them. They traveled through lush fields and stands of old forest. At the crest of each hill, Elspeth could see the blue sea sparkling on the horizon.

"Ginus says we're close now," Elspeth said. "We'll be in Meletis before nightfall."

Nikka shrugged.

"Are you all right?" Elspeth asked.

"I hate him," Nikka said, gesturing vaguely in the

direction of the caravan where Beta traveled. Elspeth wasn't sure what to say. And before she had to decide, the drivers shouted down the line to halt the caravan near a stream in a dark grove of trees. Elspeth went into the wagon and emptied the sack for some dry provisions for the midday meal. But when she climbed out, Nikka had wandered across the road and a short distance into the trees. Elspeth laid down the food and crossed over to her. Elspeth was glad they were so close to the sea. Once they were safely on the ship, Nikka couldn't wander off anymore.

Nikka crouched in front of a small tower of moss-covered stones. She picked up a stick and scratched a mark in the dirt.

"What's that?" Elspeth asked.

"I think it's a shrine to Nylea," Nikka told her. "Have you ever seen the Great Hunter?"

"Just in mosaics," Elspeth said. "And remember, your father doesn't want you praying at shrines."

"Nylea is so strong," Nikka told her. "Back at home, all my friends wanted to give her offerings and get her favor, but she doesn't like cities and she doesn't like shrines."

"Then why does she have one here?" Elspeth asked.

Nikka stood up abruptly and stared up at the treetops. Elspeth looked up too, curious at what had caught the girl's attention. Across the road, three giant black crows were perched on a thin branch above, staring directly at

them. Nikka frowned at the birds, and she backed away with her hands up as if in surrender. Elspeth's brain felt muddled, like she couldn't quite remember something.

Her vision wavered—or was the forest slipping sideways? Elspeth felt very tired and confused. She must not have slept well on the hard floor of the wagon. It was surreal to watch Nikka walking backward while her gaze flitted between Elspeth and the crows. Puzzled, Elspeth realized that she was now sitting on the ground with her hands digging into the soft earth. Why was she there? And where was Nikka? The ground looked very appealing and she thought she might just lie down. Through the trees, she saw Ginus and his men had also dropped sleepily to the ground where they had been standing. Even the horses were bowing their heads, their noses just inches from the ground.

“Are you tired?” Nikka asked. She sounded far away.

“Yes,” Elspeth murmured. “I think I'll just rest a moment.”

When Elspeth's head hit the dirt, Nikka spun on her heel. Beta came out from behind a wagon and grabbed Nikka's hand, and the two of them plunged into the trees. Somewhere in Elspeth's mind she knew she had to fight the sleep spell. She was also struggling with the knowledge that Nikka was a mage, but her thoughts were being suffocated by the sleep magic. Master Takis had warned her that his daughter was clever, but to put an entire caravan to sleep? That took the skill of an

accomplished spellcaster. Had she been lying about the fight with Beta just to distract Elspeth?

As if in slow motion, Elspeth tried to remember a spell to ward off the unconsciousness ... but her last waking memory was of a group of men in black hoods and cloaks sweeping up the road toward the line of wagons. They each carried a coiled whip with bronze plating. The men searched briefly through the bodies on the road and hastened into the trees in the same direction that Nikka and Beta had gone. Elspeth was hidden from view by the under-brush, and they never glanced in her direction. Then she slept and didn't dream.

The next thing she knew, cold water sloshed against her face. A sobbing Nikka held an empty flask. Her white dress was now covered in blood.

"They killed Beta," Nikka cried, dropping the flask to the dirt. "Erebos's agents stabbed him."

Elspeth sat up. Her head felt as if it had been stuffed full of spider webs. Her fingers were stiff and cold, but she managed to pick up her blade, which was next to her on the forest floor.

"Did you make me sleep?" Elspeth tried to say, but her tongue was as heavy as a stone.

"Yes, I'm so sorry," Nikka sobbed.

"Who killed Beta?" Elspeth asked.

Nikka gave a little yelp of panic and dragged Elspeth to her feet. The girl was surprisingly strong.

"We have to go," she cried. "They're coming back."

The air felt cold and unpleasant and there was no sun shining down through the trees. Nikka supported Elspeth's weight as they made their way back to the caravan on the road. Nearby, Ginus had climbed to his feet and rubbed his face wearily. A few of his men were also coming to their senses.

"Erebos desires oracles," Nikka told Elspeth. "He wishes to possess them and kidnaps them down into the Underworld. And the harpies saw. They told him where we were going."

"Is there an oracle here?" Elspeth asked stupidly. Ginus was stumbling toward them.

"Are you dense?" Nikka cried out in frustration. A cold wind blew through the grove and rattled the canvas coverings on the wagons. The velvet curtains of the Takis caravan swayed back and forth.

"Is there?" Elspeth asked again.

"Why did you think I was going to the academy?" Nikka asked.

"You're an oracle?" Elspeth asked. Wearily, she leaned on her blade as if it was a staff.

Ginus shouted and pointed down the road where they had come. A dark shape moved toward them, cloaked in mist. Elspeth couldn't discern what it was, but it was accompanied by a harsh sound, like the chattering of teeth. An unnatural sense of dread swept over all who heard the sound. The fear rushed through Elspeth, and it snapped her awake.

“I need to get her to safety,” Elspeth said to Ginus. “Something is coming for her.”

“Run for the coast,” Ginus said, pointing down the road. “Ships are waiting there.”

“Will Erebos’s men be able to follow us onto the water?” Elspeth asked no one in particular.

“Not without Thassa’s blessing,” Ginus said. He motioned to two of the drivers who were awake and gaping at the approaching darkness. “Go with them and help them safely to Meletis.”

“What about you?” Elspeth asked.

“I’m not leaving my caravan,” Ginus said, drawing his weapon. “Now go!”

The four of them sprinted down the Great River Road for the ocean. By the time they’d left the grove, the sky was dark and roiling with silver clouds. As they ran, Elspeth kept glancing behind them. She expected to see an enemy bearing down on them, but the road was eerily silent. It was less than a mile to the coast, but Elspeth felt like her lungs were about to explode by the time they reached the edge of the sea. Two large ships waited in the harbor, and a small boat for boarding was beached on the sand. The larger vessels appeared deserted, like ghost ships bobbing on the waves.

“We’ll take the boarding boat!” the stable boy ordered. He had dark, curly hair and a round face and sounded more authoritative than he looked. “We don’t have enough bodies to sail the larger ships.”

They shoved the boat onto the sparkling water and clambered inside as the sun peeked out and disappeared again behind the fast-moving clouds. There were only two sets of oars, and the boys grabbed them and began rowing. They obviously knew their way around a boat, so Nikka and Elspeth sat out of the way in the bow. The boys took them out a few hundred feet away from the shore and then began to skirt the coastline. Dark shapes circled in the water below them and trailed behind the boat.

“What are those?” Elspeth asked, looking down.

“Thassa’s tritons,” the other young man said. He looked a little older and had blue-gray eyes. “They watch and tell her about all who desire passage over her realm.”

“We should be at the mouth of Meletis Harbor within the hour,” the curly-haired boy assured them. “I think we’re safe. There’s no one set sail behind us. Are you injured, Lady Takis?”

Nikka didn’t answer. She stared at the storm clouds on the horizon.

“Are you injured?” Elspeth asked. Nikka shook her head almost imperceptibly. Tears ran down her cheeks. The girl knew she had just gotten Beta killed, and maybe more people at the caravan, but Elspeth wasn’t going to press her for details. Not yet, anyway.

“She’s all right,” Elspeth assured the young man, even though that was far from the truth.

The tritons followed at a safe distance, the wind blew harder, and the seas grew choppier with every passing minute. Finally, on the horizon, two massive statues loomed from the coastline.

“Is that Meletis?” she called to the young men. “What are those statues?”

“Those are two of the Guardians,” said the gray-eyed boy. “They’re monuments of great heroes that protect Meletis from the east and from the west.”

“And Meletis is just beyond the statues?” Elspeth asked.

“Not quite, they’re at the mouth of the river,” the boy explained. “We have to pass the Four Winds Plateau. Then, it’s just a short sail to the sea gate of the city.”

“Why is there no wind?” Nikka interrupted.

The young man looked up to where the clouds had darkened the skies directly above them. The clouds were like a tower for roiling darkness that could hide multitudes within it. A god could be watching, plotting, from its depths. Elspeth realized how little she knew about the beings that held dominion over this world.

“Something’s wrong,” the young man muttered. He leaned over the side and dipped his fingers into the flat water and began speaking a prayer to Thassa.

“I think Thassa is listening,” Nikka whispered to Elspeth. “But not to him.”

“What do you mean?” Elspeth asked

“The wind was silenced so Thassa can hear the words

of Erebos,” Nikka said. “He’s told her where to find us.”

Elspeth felt a chill of dread. “Why would she care? Does she want oracles, too?”

“No,” Nikka said. “I can’t imagine that she would want me. This isn’t about me anymore.”

Nikka turned on her bench and pointed to the southwest out into the vastness of the ocean. A giant wall of water had risen on the horizon. The young men craned their necks and saw it, too. They sprang into action, yelling out commands to each other as they frantically rowed for shore.

“What is it about?” Elspeth cried.

Nikka reached out and took Elspeth’s hand in her clammy fingers. “It’s about you.”

Though still a great distance away, the wave swept across the flat sea. With the speed it traveled, the boat would soon be engulfed. There was no way they would make it to shore in time. Elspeth thought desperately of what spell might save them all from drowning.

“I can help us,” Nikka said, still clutching Elspeth’s hand.

The flat water rose up around the gunwales of the boat. The water churned into the shapes of horses’ heads, and white foam rose to their chests. The elemental horses lifted the vessel on their backs and carried the boat to shore faster than the wave approached them. They thundered onto shore and deposited the boat high above the sandy beach on a rocky ledge. The watery horses

quickly transformed back into mundane waves and flowed back into the sea, leaving the boat fifty feet above the ocean.

The young men jumped over the sides, shouting with joy. The curly-haired boy raised his arms to the sky and yelled, "Thank you, kind deliverer!"

Elsbeth helped Nikka out of the boat. The girl shook with exhaustion. "He should be thanking you," she said softly.

"No, don't say anything," Nikka said. "I don't want anyone to know."

Elsbeth nodded. There were few who understood that sentiment better than she. She looked out over the ocean. The titanic wave still raced for shore and seemed to be gathering height and speed. Thassa wasn't going to stop just because they were on dry ground.

"Does that make up for what I did before in the glade?" Nikka asked, but Elsbeth was too distracted by the sight of the accelerating wave to respond. It was as if the entire ocean had risen up to flood the world.

"Are we high enough?" Elsbeth asked.

"I've made an enemy of Thassa now," Nikka said sadly. "And of all the gods, it's always been her voice that I hear the loudest of all."

Elsbeth scanned the landscape behind them. The boat had come to rest on a wide ledge halfway up a rocky slope with small trees clinging to it. Over the top of the slope, she could see the two stone swords of the

Guardians. If the statues were on the other side of this slope, then they weren't that far from the safety of Meletis.

"Come on, let's get to higher ground," Elspeth urged the young men who stood at the cliff's edge transfixed by the spectacle.

"Thassa can't reach us up here," the curly-haired boy said.

Elspeth wasn't so sure. She grabbed Nikka's elbow, and the two of them scrambled up the rocky slope. They were nearly to the top when the wave hit the shore. It slammed into the cliff face under the boys, but it traveled upward unnaturally. It arced over the boys, devouring them and dragging them down. The water headed straight for Elspeth and Nikka. At the crest of the wave, the ocean had become like grasping hands, reaching out to claim them for the sea.

"Climb!" Elspeth screamed. They struggled over the sharp rocks as the waves roared in their ears and battered against their legs. Elspeth felt the watery hands tugging at her. She shoved Nikka up the slope ahead of her. The girl managed to break free of the water and pulled herself onto the trunk of a dead tree with its roots barely clinging to the slope. Nikka reached down and tried to grab Elspeth.

"Take my hand!" Nikka called. Unexpectedly, the girl's eyes rolled back in her head and she spoke in a god-voice that was not her own. "I am Thassa, and you

are a thief. I claim your blade in the name of the God of the Forge. I claim your life in the name of mine.”

“Fight her!” Elspeth cried to the girl. “You are Nikka. Claimed by no one! Beholden to none but yourself!”

Desperately, Elspeth drove her spear-blade between the roots of the tree and clung to it while the sea tore at her. It felt like she was being stretched on a torture rack. Pain addled her mind as she desperately cast a spell to free Nikka. But the girl wasn't afflicted by control magic. Thassa was using Nikka as a mouthpiece, not a puppet. Like a hand brushing away cobwebs, Elspeth skillfully swept the magic from the girl's mind. Nikka's eyes returned to normal, and she glared angrily at the sea. The water receded, and Elspeth climbed up beside Nikka and worked her blade free from the tangle of wet roots. A gray rain began to fall around them. Nikka held out her hand to catch the drops, and they saw it wasn't rain at all. It was gray ash, as fine as powder. The sound of a distant explosion jostled the slope beneath them.

“Are they gone?” Nikka cried. The placid sea lapped the shoreline below them, once again an uncomprehending force of nature. The boys from the caravan were nowhere to be seen.

“We're almost to the top,” Elspeth said. “Let's get to the city.”

CHAPTER 11



The Four Winds Plateau was no stranger to destruction. A bone-white tableland overlooking Meletis and the sea, it had been the scene of countless battles through the ages. The Archons of Trax met their end on this battlefield. The legions of the dead were destroyed, and the Titan Pillars once cried out for mercy. Nykthos the Divine Artisan was murdered here. So many people had bled and died on this very ground that the gods had consecrated it. They declared it to be a *temenos*, a sacred land set apart from the rest of the mortal realm. No one was allowed to ever build on it again, and only the four winds were allowed to call it their home. Even the Guardians, the stone soldiers who watched over the inland route to the city, had been constructed just beyond the edge of the plateau.

Daxos and his small contingent of Meletian soldiers left by Hinter Gate and spurred their horses toward the plateau. Theros was restless to its core. The seas churned and smoke leaked from the mountaintops. The air was choked with omens and with the fury of the gods. Daxos

wished for a clear sky and silence like a blind man wished for sight. None of his companions could see the frenetic energy welling up from the land, or the rain of stars from the cracks in the Nyx, or the brewing battle between the gods. Daxos tried to brush away the curtain of noise to get a sense of Nylea, but her presence was nowhere he could grasp. She made him feel safe even from afar, something that Helioid never did. Helioid relied on Daxos for any necessary compassion, not the other way around.

As they ascended the road onto the plateau, the Meletis River churned below them. The water flowed backward from its normal course. It was as if it was being sucked back into the sea. Stelanos spurred his horse and rode alongside Daxos. Daxos felt a twinge of guilt whenever he saw his friend, but he reminded himself that it was days like today that justified his actions. The world was at a tipping point, and Helioid needed men like Stelanos.

“What is happening?” Stelanos asked.

“Thassa is preparing a second wave to inundate the land,” Daxos said.

They had just crested the slope and ridden onto the Four Winds Plateau when the top of Mt. Velus exploded into a massive fireball. Clouds of gray smoke rippled across the land and ash billowed into the sky. Crackling threads of fire stretched across the horizon until the eastern sky became a massive inferno.

“O great Helioid, protect us,” Stelanos said in terror at

the sight. “That is not the work of Thassa.”

“No, Purphoros is attacking Heliod,” Daxos said. His men dismounted at the sight of the inferno. They readied themselves for battle, though how they intended to fight the forces of nature, Daxos wasn’t sure. The men formed into a defensive formation as a second epic wave appeared over the ocean.

“Where is Heliod?” Stelanos shouted. And all the men except Daxos fell to their knees and shouted for deliverance from their god. Daxos crouched down and placed his fingertips on the smooth rock of the plateau. He let the mortal realm fade away and focused on the intricacies of the god realm. His god-senses exploded inside his mind, and for an instant he perceived the totality of the pantheon.

Heliod had become like a fog bank over the sea. To punish Thassa for attacking his champion, he drove the heat of the sun deep into her waves. The surface heated until all the fish died, and the larger creatures swam deeper to escape the Sun God’s wrath. As Thassa screamed in fury, her wave rose even higher. Heliod burned brighter, and all the dolphins in the midsea perished. The tritons fled to the darkness of the deepest ocean where the primordial monsters felt the waters warm and began to stir.

Even the gods who had not taken sides in this escalating conflict between Heliod and Purphoros felt the danger of the situation. Thassa’s deluge threatened

Setessa, so Karametra retaliated with the fury of a mother lion protecting her cub. Keranos incited a vicious storm in support of his favorite sister, Thassa, and lightning struck Meletis again and again. Erebus sensed that soon there would be many dead walking toward the Underworld, and he sent his agents to witness carnage. Only Nylea was absent from this spectacle of destruction.

The weight of his vision nearly crushed Daxos, and he fled back to the mortal realm. The gods had lost all reason. The mortal realm had become just a stepping stone in the quest for domination. What stood between them and the untimely end of civilization? Daxos struggled to his feet as the apocalyptic winds raged around him. He felt a surge of hope. Maybe today he would be set free.



Just moments before the wave crashed against the coast and the firestorm reached Meletis, Elspeth and Nikka climbed onto the plateau. As Elspeth stepped onto the sacred ground, her transformed blade flashed with divine light. Elspeth saw a small group of soldiers kneeling on the far side of the open expanse. The sky was a terrifying tapestry of roiling clouds, banks of ash, and fire. She glimpsed Meletis in the distance as it was lashed by lightning and winds. Compared to the divine furor around it, the city looked like an ant about to be

crushed from existence.

Come to Meletis. Come now.

Why? Elspeth thought. *So I could witness its destruction?*

There was no spell, no salvation she could offer this world. All was lost. She turned in a slow circle, surrounded by the vista of destruction, and the spearblade slipped from her fingers and fell to the ground.



In his temple at the edge of the world, Kruphix heard the divine blade fall from Elspeth's fingers. As it fell, it heralded the death of thousands of souls, and Kruphix could not let that happen. He had cautioned Heliod and Purphoros not to threaten mortal existence. Now he must intervene.

Kruphix drew in his breath. Time seemed to slow, and the gods looked closely at utter destruction about to befall the mortal realm. In the space between the minutes passing, Kruphix spoke to his brothers and sisters.

"I warned you about such madness." His message filled the mind of each god, and it was like grains of sand falling in an hourglass. Measured. Inevitable. Undeniable.

"The world is too precious to destroy. I am enacting Silence. I am threading you back into the fabric of Nyx."

Only Nylea responded. She rattled her forest like an

earthquake as she tried to capture the attention of the elder god.

“No, Kruphix!” she warned. “The mortal realm is afflicted by a mortal enemy. He threatens the pantheon itself! If you remove us from the world, he will have free reign.”

But Kruphix did not heed her warning. The deluge, the inferno, and the searing wrath of Helioid were weapons of the gods who couldn't think on a small enough scale to comprehend the devastation. Kruphix appreciated each and every life now threatened by their battle—their pain and grief would be his burden for as long as time existed. As he had in ages past, Kruphix carved the names of the gods upon his tree. As was his power, he forced the gods to convene in Nyx. They were removed from the mortals, no longer free to meddle in the affairs of humans. It was their punishment to cease their battle and contemplate the fundamentals of creation. Only Nylea spoke, and she screamed for him to stop.

“No! The mortals will be lost without us. They will have to face the enemy alone!” She paced along the edge of the sea like a trapped animal.

But despite her warnings, each god-name was mystically emblazoned on the tree at the edge of the world. The destructive forces evaporated from the mortal realm before their carnage was realized. Purphoros's fire dwindled. Thassa's sea calmed, and the storms of Keranos ceased. The sun retreated to its place high in the sky.

Under Kruphix's bidding, Nylea unwillingly joined her brothers and sisters in Nyx. As the Silence engulfed the world, the mortals felt their gods retreat, and their absence was profound. And from the heart of his ruined valley, Xenagos smiled. He stood up and stretched like a lion, awake from its slumber and ready for a night of hunting. He made a gesture of mock deference to the Kruphix, who had just made the way clear for him, King Stranger, to finally complete his scheme.



On the Four Winds Plateau, the inferno dispersed and the storms dissolved into clear skies. Daxos heard the call of seagulls and felt the tranquil breeze of a summer day. It was as if a metal clamp had been removed from his brain and iron plates lifted from his shoulders. He felt as if he could leap off the edge and fly like a bird above the grateful earth. He threw his arms out wide, gazed up at the heavens, and smiled with pure joy.

Stelanos grabbed his arm. "What's happened?"

"The gods have gone to Nyx," he told his friend. "I can't hear them in my head anymore!"

The air felt lighter somehow, as if the world wasn't quite so infused with magic. Stelanos and the other soldiers cheered and cried at the miraculous deliverance of their city.

Two women approached them cautiously from the far

side of the plateau. The soldiers stopped their celebration and watched as the two strangers, who appeared from nowhere, closed the distance between them. One was dressed in Akroan fashions and the other in strangely nondescript traveling clothes, but both were bedraggled and muddy. Daxos greeted them with a wide smile. He stopped abruptly when he saw Heliod's divine spear-blade, and the smile faded from his face. In response to his change of demeanor, the woman lifted her weapon defensively. The Meletian soldiers raised their sarissas in return and readied their attack.

Daxos was dumbstruck by the sight of the woman who held Heliod's blade. Even without the weapon, he would have recognized her. He knew the color of her hair, the shape of her face, the ethereal otherness that was invisible to everyone else. This was the broken girl who had grown to be Heliod's Champion. This was the stranger that Heliod had ordered him to kill if things went awry. Well, Heliod could smite him from his new lodgings in Nyx if such a thing were possible. Daxos would never hurt this woman. He opened his arms wide as if to embrace her.

"I know you," he said. He touched the glass amulet hanging around his neck, and she seemed to remember him. "You led me up the mountain."

Before the woman could answer, a great rumbling shook the ground beneath their feet. An ear-splitting roar blasted across the plateau.

Polukranos had arrived.

CHAPTER 12



As the hydra thundered onto the plateau, the soldiers recoiled with terror. At least forty feet long and twenty feet tall at the shoulder, Polukranos rivaled anything Elspeth had seen before on any plane. She counted at least ten massive heads with brightly colored crests. The long necks and black eyes moved in precise coordination with its four gargantuan legs. His long, heavy tail swung back and forth in rapid rhythm, as if propelling him forward. With each step of his clawed feet, the ground liquefied and then rehardened, leaving permanent impressions on the stone base of the plateau.

Polukranos fixed his many black eyes on them, and all ten heads roared at once. The soldiers covered their ears in pain. A trail of blood ran from Daxos's ear down his neck, and Elspeth felt disoriented until the sound retreated. Several of the horses bolted for the city, and the soldiers looked as though they wanted to do the same.

“Hold your ground!” Daxos shouted. “You are the only thing standing between that and your loved ones!”

“How far away is the city?” Elspeth asked Daxos urgently.

“A short ride down Guardian Way,” Daxos said.

“Nikka, take a horse and warn the city guard,” Elspeth said. “Can you find your way?”

“I know the way,” Nikka said. “But I can help you fight!”

The girl was a powerful mage, no doubt, but Elspeth couldn't be distracted by protecting her and fighting this monster at the same time.

“Warn the city,” Elspeth said. “Let them know we need help.”

Nikka nodded in agreement, and one of the soldiers steadied the horse while Nikka climbed into the saddle.

“I'll see you soon,” Elspeth called as Nikka grabbed the reins and spun her horse around. She dug her heels into its flank, and the horse sprinted for Meletis.

“Form up!” Daxos shouted to his men.

The soldiers grouped themselves into a rectangular formation with shields raised in a line in front of them and spears pointed at the approaching hydra. Only Daxos and Elspeth stood unprotected to the side.

“At least he doesn't have fifty heads,” Elspeth muttered.

“In the sky, he did,” Daxos explained. “But nothing is as powerful in the mortal realm as it is in Nyx.”

“Do you really have to cut its heads off all at once or they'll grow back?” Elspeth asked.

“That’s how we kill hydras in the mortal realm,” Daxos said.

“What do you have to do to kill one in Nyx?” she asked.

“No one has ever tried,” Daxos said. “Nylea would have killed them first.”

As it neared the center of the plateau, the hydra lurched forward with an unexpected burst of speed. The men of the phalanx scattered when it rushed them. Daxos shouted at them to be steady, but they were unable to regroup. Instead, the men attacked wildly from each flank in an uncoordinated attack. Elspeth dodged a head as it snapped down at her. Black foam coated its fangs, and she could smell an acidic tang permeating the air. Near her, one of the men was snapped up by another head. His bones crunched loudly, and then the head tossed him aside. He went flying through the air and landed nearby with a wet smack.

The head above Elspeth lunged at her again, and she sliced her blade below its mouth and severed the head from the writhing neck. Instantly, lumps of flesh pushed out of the purplish stump and two fully formed heads emerged in the place of one. Elspeth was forced to draw back or be devoured by the twin heads she’d created.

She’d lost sight of Daxos, but another solider rushed at the hydra. She followed close behind him.

“Gut the body,” she yelled. She dashed around a writhing head and drove her spear-blade deep into the

hydra's flank. The skin healed before she could even pull her blade out. She injured the creature again as she yanked the blade out, but again, it healed immediately.

She turned to her companion, but the soldier screamed as the hydra raised its massive foot and crushed the man to a pulp against the ancient stones. Elspeth withdrew from the range of the hydra's heads and tried to regroup with the other soldiers. But only a few remained standing. Daxos was hacking at one of the hydra's necks near the bodies of his men, who lay crushed and bleeding. They desperately needed more soldiers.

Elspeth moved her blade in the ritualized form that she'd learned as a Knight of Bant. Focusing her spellcasting through her weapon, she summoned a dozen soldiers to join her in the fight. Daxos stumbled back in surprise at the appearance of these strangers. They carried long spears, for she had a specific task in mind. She imbued them with a superhuman strength. They were greater than any living human—they were the ideal both in battle and devotion.

“Skewer the heads!” she ordered her soldiers. “Pin them down!”

Without question, the soldiers rushed the creature en masse. Dodging and making defensive strikes, they aimed to stab the heads and control them. The change in tactics confused the monster, and the soldiers managed to pin each of the hydra's heads against the ground. The flesh closed around the spears, but the soldiers held their

spears fast against the raging hydra.

Elspeth charged forward and swung her blade in a low arc along the ground. For an instant, it seemed that she would cleave all the necks cleanly. But the hydra reared its final head out of reach with the spear still jutting through its skull. Polukranos bit off the head of the nearby soldier and knocked his headless corpse flying through the air and into Elspeth. The impact slammed her into the ground, and she felt her ribs crack. She watched in horror as all the stumps sprouted two more heads. The hydra's body vibrated with energy and rejuvenated strength. Daxos ran to Elspeth and dragged her away from the monster. With a succession of rapid bites, the hydra slaughtered the remainder of her soldiers. Daxos and Elspeth were the last standing against Polukranos.

"I can slow it down," Daxos said.

Daxos's hand became covered in frost, and he transferred the chilling spell onto the hydra. Its massive body shimmered with ice crystals and its pace slowed. Elspeth dragged herself to her feet.

"Where are the gods now?" Daxos muttered under his breath.

A strange image had flashed inside Elspeth's mind. It was one of her last minutes on Mirrodin as she was attacked by Phyrexian abominations. She'd been preparing to leave the plane as the murderous creatures broke open the door and tried to crowd their way inside

the chamber where she'd taken refuge. They were climbing over each other, vying to be the first through the narrow space to get inside and gut her. They'd been too many to fit through the narrow opening, and the confusion had bought her a few precious seconds.

"We're not finished!" Elspeth cried. "I have an idea."

She set off running after the hydra, with Daxos close at her heels. The hydra strained against the frost. The spell wouldn't hold much longer. They had to finish the creature before it regained its speed. She cleaved her blade down on the nearest neck. But she only severed the neck halfway, and before the skin could heal, she yanked out the blade. The head dangled uselessly off the stump. But the skin was split wide open, so it couldn't mend itself back together—or at least that's what she hoped. Stumbling back, she watched breathlessly for signs of the new heads to form. There was a faint glow on the raw flesh. But it died away, and the stump remained smooth.

"Sever them partway!" she yelled to Daxos. "The heads can't regrow if the old one is still attached to the body."

Daxos immediately grasped what she was doing. As Polukranos struggled against the binding spell, they dodged the flailing necks and cut each head halfway off. The frost evaporated just as Daxos rendered the last head useless. The hydra stumbled and fell on its side with a mighty crash. With its useless heads, it couldn't roar its deafening noise or see to continue the battle.

“Put it out of its misery,” Daxos said.

Elspeth had already leaped up on the shuddering body. She drove her blade deep into the monster’s heart. It was a fatal blow. The hydra’s blood flowed freely from its wounds, and the life within it faded.

“Heliod would call you worthy of that blade,” Daxos said. There was awe in his voice, but grimness, too. They had lost men, so this was no time for celebration. The city guard galloped onto the plateau and began to tend to the wounded and see to the dead. Elspeth looked, but Nikka wasn’t with them. She must have stayed in the polis. In a daze, Elspeth wandered to the edge of the plateau and looked down at Meletis, the city of philosophers, nestled like a jewel against the blue of the sea.

“Where did you go when you left the mountain?” Daxos asked. “I’ve thought of you many times.”

“Wandering in unknown lands,” Elspeth said. Her words caught in her throat.

“That is Meletis,” Daxos said. “Heliod’s temple is there.”

“It’s beautiful,” Elspeth said. “I feel like I’ve seen it before.”

“You are Heliod’s Champion,” Daxos said, although he didn’t have the authority to declare it. “There’s a place for you with us in the temple.”

“His champion?” Elspeth asked. “Is that because of me? Or because of the blade?”

Daxos didn't seem to understand her question. "Will you stay? Or will you wander again?"

"What about the gods?" she asked. "Are they gone?"

"No, they will be back, and they are watching us even now," Daxos said.

"I don't want to wander anymore," Elspeth said.

Griffins wheeled in playful circles above the city. As she watched them dive in the wind currents, she felt like she might fall, and she touched Daxos's arm to steady herself. He reached out and took her hand.

"Welcome home," he said.

Continued

JOURNEY INTO NYX

GODSEND

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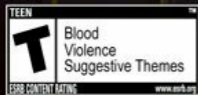
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