



**MAGIC**  
The Gathering  
**JOURNEY**  
INTO **NYX**

Rhordon perceived the mystical strike with his god-senses—it was like serrated claws raking across his body, followed by a burst of fire. The blast singed his fur and ripped his flesh, but Rhordon was not greatly harmed. Indeed, he relished the pain. Rhordon’s warriors felt a sickly wind and saw their leader’s chest split open. They glanced uneasily between the satyr and the wounded oracle. Rhordon pressed his hand into the wound and wiped his bloody fingers across his brow. He knew the satyr could have killed him and chose not to. He would treat the goat with a little more respect. With another tip of his chin, he ordered his warriors to fall back and not attack their visitor again.

“I did capture them myself,” the satyr said,

and Rhordon did not argue. “And I will tell you how to destroy Akros, and you will be Rhordon, Conqueror of Akros.”

**A New God Rises  
to Threaten the Fragile Peace of**

**THEROS**

**MAGIC**  
The Gathering

# JOURNEY INTO NYX

GODSEND BOOK 2

**Jenna Helland**



**GODSEND**  
**BOOK 2: JOURNEY INTO NYX**

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To Dan

# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15



# CHAPTER 1



“Why do they bleed?” King Anax shouted to his servants, who milled around him helplessly. His fury echoed down the stark corridors of the Kolophon, the royal fortress of the king and queen of Akros. Cymede rushed into the banquet hall and to her husband’s side. The king, with his powerful shoulders and muscular build, quivered with rage. Cymede followed his gaze upward to where the severed head of a stag was skewered on an iron chandelier. It was a Nyxborn stag, and it dripped rivulets of blood and star field into a glowing crimson pool on the cold stone floor of the empty banquet hall.

“Another day, another beheading,” Cymede said drily. This was the seventh day in a row that a mysterious severed head had been found in a different room of the fortress.

“This is no time for humor, woman!” Anax snapped.

Cymede shot him a dangerous look. When they had first married, Anax had a habit of demeaning her through careless words. His view that women were lesser than men was so ingrained that he never questioned his own beliefs. But Cymede did. In those early days, she fought

him on everything from his habit of executing prisoners by throwing them into the Deyda River to his refusal to make eye contact with a woman when she was speaking to him. Anax's father was the same way—both men assumed the woman wouldn't be saying anything interesting, after all. Cymede had waged an emotional war with her king to be treated with the respect that she deserved. To his credit, Anax had seen her perspective and adapted. Many men wouldn't have been capable of that.

“It's always time for humor, my love,” Cymede said. “I find it amusing. You now have a stag to add to your trophy room. Between the boar and the sable, perhaps?”

Actually, Cymede didn't find it amusing at all. But her husband was at the breaking point. If she showed her own distress, she was afraid he'd do something rash. It was best to downplay her concern in front of Anax and then do her own investigation into the situation. She still wasn't sure what they were dealing with. Anax believed it was a divine curse, and it might be. But it could also be a prank born of a twisted—but mortal—mind. Seven days and seven severed heads, and the security forces could do nothing to stop it. Despite having the best minds in the city working on the problem, only Cymede discerned the pattern. She was not about to share her discovery with her husband or any of the dim-witted oracles who had been no help whatsoever.

Each severed head was a Nyxborn—a creature born of

the gods. The first day, it had been the head of a brindle boar. On day two, it was a bull. The rest of the week, they were given the pleasure of a severed swordfish head, a lynx head, and a sable head. And today, the perpetrator had left them a mighty stag's head. After the lynx, Cymede expected everyone to see what was happening as clearly as she did. But Iroas's priests and oracles were so focused on *how* the perpetrator was doing it, they didn't stop to think about the meaning behind it. Cymede saw that someone was killing animals that represented the gods. In this twisted vision, the gods had become the sacrificial lambs. Cymede suspected that the perpetrator was making a statement about the nature of the gods—and it was an insulting one, too. Iroas had no animal, but his detractors often used a boar to insult the patron god of the city.

“Take the head to the oracles,” Cymede directed the servants. “And clean up this mess.”

“They have told us nothing!” Anax said. “Throw it in the trash heap!”

Cymede rested her hand on her husband's shoulder. He was on the short side for a man of Akros. His stature made him defensive despite his renowned exploits on the battlefield. No one questioned his prowess as a man, but it was always in the back of his mind.

“The trash heap,” she echoed. “You're quite right, Anax. This rubbish deserves no more of our attention.”

Then she led Anax out the door and up into the west

wing, where their chambers were. She flung open the doors to the balcony that overlooked Akros. When they stood on the balcony, they appeared to be at eye level with the Stone Colossus that loomed over the city. Cymede walked her king to the railing so he could survey his remarkable city. His extensive realm extended far into the mountains. Only the gods had greater domains. She waited while he stared at his horizon, and his breathing began to calm. It was only here on the balcony that her husband didn't feel small.

"You cannot let this ... child's prank get the better of you," Cymede said. A cool breeze blew in from the north. It was a hot and miserable day, and she thanked the wind for the small blessing.

"This is no prank!" he said.

"Then what do you think it is?" Cymede asked.

"Even the oracles of Iroas can't say. Why do you ask me?"

"Whoever is doing this knows you, Anax," she said.

"They're trying to erode your sense of security, which is fundamental to you. I think this is someone close to you."

"It's probably just madman," Anax replied.

"He is not so mad as to thwart our guards," Cymede said. "Think about your past. Maybe the answer is there."

"It's not my brother, if that's what you're implying," Anax said. "Timoteus is away with the Alamon."

Cymede considered her next words carefully. The Alamon were one of the wandering bands of warriors who made up the itinerant portion of the Akroan army. These warrior bands were entirely self-sufficient, relying on hunting to supply their numbers while in the field. The Alamon warriors were tasked with killing stray monsters that wandered too close to the city. They were also responsible for keeping the minotaurs at bay, which they were doing with less and less success. These warriors had been a vital part of the Akroan army for as long as anyone could remember. Whenever there was a threat to the city, the king would call them back, and they would flank and overwhelm the invaders.

Cymede believed there were benefits to this arrangement, but it also made governance difficult. The leaders of these wandering warriors did not think of themselves as under the rule of the king in the way they should. The younger brother of the king believed himself the rightful king of Akros, and although he kept his distance all these years, Cymede worried when he might make his claim.

She waited too long to speak, and Anax knew what she was thinking.

“If my brother wanted to challenge me, he would call me *between the pillars*,” Anax insisted. “There is no honor in leaving bloody tokens scattered around my home. There’s nothing to be gained for him in doing that.”

Except your increasing instability. Except your self-doubt, Cymede thought. Just a few months earlier, Anax let a self-proclaimed oracle convince him that a fiery sky meant that the minotaurs were marching to war on the city. With no evidence but the charlatan's word, the king had expelled the foreigners and made ready for war—and nothing happened. It had eroded the populace's confidence in their king.

“Yes, of course,” Cymede agreed. “Perhaps you should implore Iroas for answers. Better yet, beseech him for action. The Silence of the gods has gone on long enough.”

Anax nodded in agreement. “We'll hold a game this afternoon in the stadium. I will summon all the soldiers to exalt the glory of Iroas.”

“You should,” Cymede said. “Although there's a storm coming in.”

Sure enough, clouds darkened the horizon. Usually Cymede would have attributed them to the worried brow of Keranos. But without his presence in the world, the oncoming storm felt wilder and more ominous. Cymede felt like something very dangerous lay hidden beyond those clouds.

“Rain?” Anax asked. “What of it? Since when does rain stop the pankration?”

“Of course not,” Cymede said. So the spectacle would be half-naked men brawling in the mud for the glory of an absent god. Well, at least it would keep Anax from

brooding all afternoon.

“Will you come?” Anax asked.

“Perhaps I will be there for the finale,” Cymede said.

“I need to take care of some issues with the supplies.”

“Of course,” he said. He kissed her cheek. “I’ll see you soon.”

She waited until he left the chamber, and then she bolted the door. There was little chance she would be back in time for the finale. And she was tired of waiting for others to find answers. She needed to find them herself. Although she could hear god-speak, Cymede had never proclaimed herself an oracle or let any god claim her as their own. But if there were any god that she would devote herself to, it would be Keranos. She related to his impatient destructiveness. She had closely controlled these qualities in herself, but she could happily worship one who doled out death strikes and divine insight in equal measure.

She removed her purple gown and the decorative bronze accoutrements. She put on a simple black dress, leggings, and a cloak. With her hair hidden under a black scarf, she could pass through the shadowy corridors of the fortress without notice. Cymede hurried down the servants’ steps to the lower levels beneath the fortress. She ducked into one of the winter supply rooms and waited behind crates in the nearly complete darkness. When she was sure she hadn’t been followed, she pulled the hidden lever that led to the secret tunnels

below the catacombs. Following the tunnel would take her down through the earth to the Deyda River two hundred feet below. This exit was one of the best-kept secrets of the Kolophon. Only the king and his advisors were to ever know, and the knowledge was only to be passed down from man to man. But Cymede had a habit of listening at doors. She didn't agree with men having a monopoly on anything, and she used the tunnels more than any royal before her.

Cymede had secretly explored every inch of the tunnels and was surprised to find that, over the ages, people had left graffiti. Most were just names of people long dead. But some forgotten king had used the walls to write an enemy list with corresponding tally marks—although what he was counting was lost to the ages. Cymede had discovered that there were exits at two different heights above the raging river. The lowest door opened about ten feet above the water. A rope ladder could be lowered onto a narrow rocky beach during the dry season. During rainy season, the water rushed just below the doorway, and not even a triton could have navigated those treacherous currents.

The higher exit opened into midair a hundred feet above the water, and this was the one she liked to use. Perhaps there had been a rope bridge stretching across the gorge at one time, but there was nothing left of it now. No matter, she thought, as she flung open the heavy wooden door. The storm had moved directly over



the city, and the air felt like it was bruised and weeping. A furious wind howled up the gorge and battered against her. Below, the waters of the Deyda crested like ocean waves, and the air crackled with energy. This was no god-storm. It was the natural world reasserting itself in the absence of the god's control. Keranos's domain was storms, and they were running wild without him. Cymede liked it. The primal energy of the wind and rain made her feel more powerful than ever.

She stepped off the edge.

The water rushed up at her as she fell. Before impact, she manipulated a wave to crest beneath her, and she used the energy to propel her into the air again. Simultaneously, she magically tore shards of stone from the cliff and placed them like steps ascending the slope of the sweeping wave. Each stone hovered briefly before her then fell away and splashed into the water below. This was how she walked the river gorge. Commanding water and earth, she trod upon the peaks and valleys of the waves. Thunder and lightning was like music in her ears as Cymede shaped the world to her pleasure. No one—not even King Anax—knew she could make the elements bow before her.

After a short distance, she let the wave set her down on the opposite side of the gorge. The storm raged while she followed a little-known path up the mountainside to Keranos's divine observatory. Let the men at their games and shows of athletic prowess. She would pray to the

god of quiet insight and careless destruction, Keranos. It made her smile to think how furious he would be that a storm existed without his permission.

But if the gods had gone silent, then the world would fill the space.

When she reached the top of the cliff, the winds seemed to die down. She stood before the bronze observatory with its gleaming orb roof and perfect span of archways. Lightning played across its surface as it absorbed the energy of the storm. She'd been here many times before. Although she had never looked upon Keranos when he took the form of a man, she could feel his presence whenever he was near. With the Silence, she felt his absence like the cracked, dry earth cries out for rain.

The door of the observatory was slightly open, and the tiles of the foyer were slick from the storm. She pushed the heavy door open wider and walked inside. Torches lit the way, but they burned with a mystical fire that rain couldn't touch. The emptiness echoed around her. There were no priests who watched the observatory for the God of Storms. Keranos didn't have many oracles. He was particular and arrogant and believed few mortals were worthy of him. Cymede was one he wanted, but Cymede rebuffed his attempts to claim her. She had no interest in being owned by anyone.

Now she needed Keranos's guidance. He would know who—or what—was tormenting her husband. Their

oracles couldn't discern it. She needed the voice of a god. She knelt on the stone floor under the opening in the roof. The sky above was still gray, but the black clouds had blown away. It was twilight, and the first stars of Nyx dotted the heavens, but no god-forms revealed themselves amid the chaos.

"I need you, Keranos," she said. "I miss your presence."

There was no answer except the rushing sound of the wind through the opening in the roof. In the past, she might have thought it was an answer. But now, who controlled the winds? She let the quiet fill her up until she couldn't stand waiting anymore. She hurried out of the temple, slammed open the door, and stepped into the rain-washed night. Nyx was brilliant, but only with patterns and nebulae. No celestial creatures dashed across the heavens, and she found no answers in the jumble of stars. Furious at the lack of response, she lashed out with stones. She carved off the edges of the mountaintop and hurled them at Nyx. They just arched into the sky and cascaded lazily back into the gorge. So she battered the observatory with her fury, but the divine bronze of the building wouldn't bend to a mortal assault.

"Keranos!" she demanded. "Give me answers."

She heard a rustling noise as a gust transformed into a small whirlwind and slammed into her. She tumbled backward and cracked her head against a stone. She lost consciousness briefly, and when she came to, she was

lying flat on her back staring up into Nyx.

In the heavens, she saw a vision. Instead of god-forms, this vision was formed by the blackness between the stars. She perceived hulking creatures with the exaggerated horns of a minotaur. Then one became two, which in turn became four. The creatures multiplied exponentially until there were hundreds of their distorted forms. They lurched out of an open door from inside a burning room in an endless line, one behind another. The vision shifted, and the burning room became like a howling mouth. The face shifted incomprehensibly, until finally its features came to rest. And Cymede recognized that it was a satyr's face. A satyr was behind it all.

Cymede sat up. There was dried blood on the back of her head, but she felt strangely satisfied. Keranos had sent the vision to her eyes alone. To the rest of the mortals, the sky had only revealed incomprehensible splashes of color and pinpoints of light. She started back down the path for the gorge.

So some gods, like Keranos, were cheating the Silence. That surprised her not at all.

## CHAPTER 2



Xenagos had restored Skola Valley after Nylea's fury. Since the Silence, the emerald grass had grown over the bare dirt of the revel ground, and the stream was flowing through the heart of Xenagos's domain. He'd repaired the rift in the ground to hide the caverns where his forges burned constantly. These were no mundane forges built to make bronze swords or iron ploughshares. These were divine forges constructed by Petros, the kidnapped artisan of Purphoros. A Nyxborn man, Petros himself had been created in the image of the God of the Forge, and he knew all the secrets of divine creation.

And now Petros was owned by Xenagos.

Xenagos clucked his tongue in mock pity as he watched his stolen artisan. He didn't actually feel sorry for Petros. The satyr never felt pity for anyone, nor did he feel remorse or sympathy. Even before his spark ignited, Xenagos had little emotion when it came to the welfare of things other than himself. If someone was in pain, well, he just couldn't bring himself to care. He could pretend, though. He was very good at making people *think* he cared. He knew the value of a sympathetic arm around a troubled "friend." He excelled

at loud protestations about the injustice of the world. Xenagos skillfully created a shell of deceit around himself, and even without magic it worked ridiculously well. He was beloved by the satyrs in the Skola, which was crucial when you needed someone to do something for you.

“You don’t have friends, do you?” he asked Petros. “You don’t feel anything but the heat of that forge.”

In response, Petros hit the anvil in precise rhythm, again and again. An unfriendly creation, but Xenagos couldn’t argue with his work ethic.

“I’m going to bring the world to its knees,” Xenagos said. He wanted to impress someone. The satyrs of the valley wandered around guilt headed after the constant reveling. At this point, they were impressed by a shiny rock.

“The Great Revel is nearly upon us,” Xenagos told him. “It will make your master weep.”

*Clang. Clang. Clang.* Petros’s hammer never missed a beat.

“As an artist you know that things don’t turn out perfectly every time,” Xenagos said. “I’m sure you’ve seen Purphoros toss many beautiful works into the fires because they just weren’t exquisite enough. I consider my past endeavors useful ... but merely practice for what’s to come.”

There was a momentary silence as Petros adjusted the slab of bronze. Then the rhythmic clanging began again.

Xenagos wasn't going to win Petros over, but it didn't matter. Everyone else was going to be mesmerized by him. The satyr's mystically charged revels had amassed intense power—enough to alter the fundamental nature of Nyx. He'd created gaping voids in the god's domains and the sight of the oracles. Then, incredibly, the gods had shipped themselves off to Nyx with very little interference from him. It was all so ideal, except that business with the strange woman and Purphoros's Sword. He knew her name, but he just didn't like to use it. He thumped his chest on the raw skin that had healed over Nylea's arrowhead. Pain reverberated through his body. As it subsided, he felt as hyperaware as if he'd created the world and knew every inch of it intimately. He liked that he kept a piece of Nylea inside of him. It was proof that he was better than her. Better than all of the gods. They tried to kill him, and couldn't.

“Petros, I must say you are one of the most faultless things I've ever laid eyes on,” Xenagos said. He might as well try to flatter the hammer as the Nyxborn man, but sometimes he missed the days before he'd amassed so much power. These days, he could simply make someone do what he wanted with very little effort or expenditure of his ever-growing mystical resources. Constructing the web of lies, the false friendships, the well-placed rumors, made him feel superior in a way that blatant mind-altering magic didn't. He missed the old days of simple tongue-twisting manipulation.

“Petros, you’ve recreated Purphoros’s forge perfectly,” Xenagos said. “Having seen Purphoros’s forge, the two are exact in every way. I could easily forget myself and believe that I am standing in his mountain. You are a master of masters. But your star field fades before my eyes. Why are you so miserable here in my lovely valley?”

The artisan’s silence was irritating, and Xenagos was tired of being ignored. The satyr stretched his arms and tipped to his left and right to stretch his spine. He tried to remember life before his spark ignited. Had he been able to lose himself in the pleasure of the moment? From above the ground, he could hear the first strains of the pipes as a new revel began. But the celebrations had a raw, frantic quality to them. And there had been too many casualties. It was definitely time for a new strategy.

“Ah, Petros, no one understands what I endure,” Xenagos said. “I’ve given them all they desire. They came here seeking euphoria. They *worship* it. I am that, I am the essence of the revel. And yet, I cannot feel the joy myself.”

Petros stopped. He laid down his hammer and faced the satyr. Xenagos’s horns barely reached the man’s chin, and the satyr didn’t like to feel smaller than one of his slaves. Maybe he’d have the Nyxborn lopped off at the knees. Petros didn’t say anything, but Xenagos sensed defiance in him.



“You’re my grasshopper, collecting stores for winter,” Xenagos sneered. “Just a few thousand more, and I’ll send you back to your maker.”

Petros’s enigmatic eyes looked past the satyr into the depths of the cavern where the fruits of his labor were stored. Silent lines of Nyxborn minotaurs waited in the firelit cavern beneath the Skola Valley. He’d forged rows upon rows of the hulking creatures, and they didn’t so much as twitch a muscle. Staring ahead with vacant eyes, their essence was more star field than flesh, and they had no will of their own.

“Nyxborn isn’t the right name for my minotaurs,” Xenagos mused. “Let’s call them revel ’taurs. Or perhaps horned revelers. What do you think, Petros?”

He couldn’t honestly call them Nyxborn, after all. These minotaurs weren’t born of Nyx. They were born of his valley. They were born of him, King Stranger. They were as easy to control as drunken satyrs and waited mindlessly for the revel that would give them life. It was a pleasant irony. A minotaur would have nothing to do with a satyr’s revel. It would eat a satyr’s heart rather than participate in such festivities. But these were *parodies* of minotaurs ... yes, that was the truth of any Nyxborn creature. They were just shades of the ideal. And contrary to the god’s sense of self-importance, only mortals could truly be *ideal*. Just look how Xenagos had perverted the so-called divine order and created his very own Nyxborn—an army of the parodies—in his happy

little valley.

So much for the dominion of the gods.

“King?” a satyr attendant asked from the doorway of the forge. He carried a large rusty knife. “Does it need to be done today?”

“Of course,” Xenagos said. He stopped in front of a perfect specimen of a minotaur with stupid, unblinking cow eyes. “But I’m in the mood for escalation. I want the heads of a dozen of my revel ’taurs skewered on the gates of Akros. Let’s see what that does for the atmosphere.”

The attendant nodded. He was a competent mage, and his hands crackled with red energy. The celebration must be in full swing above. Everyone could feel the energy generated by the mass euphoria—but no one was able to harness it the way Xenagos could. Not everyone could turn mental oblivion into something useful.

“Petros, I hate to disturb your work,” Xenagos lied, “but how is my other project going?”

Petros laid his hammer down again. He limped across the forge to the far corner where a small object, concealed by a silk cloth, stood on a pedestal.

Xenagos ripped off the silk with a flourish, revealing the bronze head and shoulders of a young woman. Elspeth, the outsider, had slaughtered the hydra and lodged herself in Meletis as a chosen of Heliod. The hydra had served no real purpose to Xenagos. He’d been an amusing distraction and useful for stirring up old animosities between the gods. He didn’t really begrudge

Elsbeth for killing the creature. No, that's not why she captured his attention. He studied the curve of her jaw, her flawless eyes, her smooth forehead. There was a sense of dismay in her expression, almost as if the statue itself couldn't believe its current predicament.

"You really are the finest artisan who ever lived," Xenagos said. "This is an absolute marvel. A perfect representation of her. I can see why Purphoros misses you so."

Xenagos took a step backward and continued his scrutiny. The satyr's fist began to glow with molten heat. Elspeth was unique, and Heliod was clever to have claimed her. But Xenagos, having stepped outside the sphere of the world, had a perspective even the gods did not have. He knew another planeswalker when he saw one. With a casual motion, he grabbed the bronze face. His palm smothered her chiseled mouth, and his fingers jabbed into her eye sockets.

"She wields a sword that is too great for any mortal," Xenagos told Petros. "Do you know what that makes her?"

He watched with no delight as the exquisite bronze work features melted into oblivion.

"Too much like me," he told Petros. "Make another. Until I can ruin her myself."

# CHAPTER 3



**YOU ARE THE DIVINE PROTECTOR IN HELIOD'S ABSENCE. YOU ALONE CAN WIELD HIS WEAPON. YOU ARE DESTINED TO BE THE HERO OF THEROS.**

Daxos had written the words on a slip of paper and slid it under Elspeth's door at some point in the night. It was now early morning, hours after the ink had dried. She hadn't heard him in the corridor outside her room in the night or she would have opened her door for him. Elspeth crumbled the note in her fist. It had a sense of finality, as if she might never see him again and these were the last words he wanted to say.

Elspeth glanced at the rosy sky on the eastern horizon where the sun was rising. She'd been living in Heliod's vast temple complex in Meletis since the day they'd killed the hydra. Training with Daxos in the hours before dawn had become a daily ritual. They usually met in the courtyard of the grand *stoa*, but today he never showed up—he just left the cryptic note and vanished. He wasn't in his rooms—she'd checked. Elspeth continued waiting for him even after the appointed time passed. The dawn's rays warmed her skin, but both she and her blade

cast a long shadow across the immaculate flagstones.

Daxos's absence made her feel hollow. They'd argued the day before, and it felt as if something that had existed between them had been destroyed abruptly. Daxos was a hard man to get to know, but he was charismatic, too. People seemed drawn to his intensity even though he made little effort to encourage friendships. But despite his emotional distance, he made huge efforts to help her get settled in Meletis. It had been Daxos who had found her a room where she could live inside the walls of Heliod's temple complex. Although Ephara was technically the patron god of Meletis, Heliod's complex, which included his main temple, was the largest in the city. The main structure of Heliod's temple was impressive—a mighty rectangular structure with a perimeter of limestone columns that were each a hundred feet high. The sprawling grounds boasted dozens of limestone buildings connected by a maze of covered walkways.

Daxos showed her Heliod's grand library, which contained thousands of scroll boxes, and they spent hours reading Heliod's teachings, which had been transcribed by oracles and priests. They would walk down to the white sand beach where he would tell her Heliod's god-stories and tales of the mysterious archons who once ruled with an iron fist over the land. He had a flawless memory, almost as though the words were etched forever into his mind. But while he would recite

for her any story or teaching of the Sun God, he refused to discuss them. When she asked about the nature of destiny, he would recite Heliod's words and politely change the subject. It was probably what he was expected to do as an oracle, but Elspeth wanted to know what *he* thought, not just what he'd been taught.

In particular, she wanted to know what he thought about the Silence now that the gods were absent from the mortal realm and lodged in Nyx. Everyone else in Meletis acted shocked and overwhelmed by the novelty of it. Elspeth didn't have much personal contact with the other priests in Heliod's temple, but she overheard many conversations concerning the nature of the Silence and what it meant for the future. One morning when they were training, Elspeth pushed Daxos about the consequences of the Silence, and he was dismissive about its true effect.

"The priests' lives have changed very little," Daxos said. "For them, it was always rare to directly encounter a god."

"How is it different for you?" Elspeth said.

Daxos just shrugged and swung the training sword at her. She parried easily and let the conversation go.

Several weeks passed, the days grew shorter, and she kept expecting him to leave her on her own more and more. But he didn't. They began to visit the sick and elderly, a practice that was expected of all who lived in Heliod's temple. She loved the idea that good works

were an aspect of worship. Priests of both Helioid and Ephara made daily forays into the streets to help anyone in need. There was little poverty or violence in the city. These “healing” visits were a tradition before the Silence and continued unabated when the gods withdrew to Nyx. As she and Daxos worked together, Elspeth had a growing respect for the God of the Sun, even in his absence.

During training, Daxos taught her the distinct fighting style of the Meletian Army. He demanded more and more of her—as if time was so short, there wasn’t a second to spare. They were preparing for something, but he wouldn’t tell her what. Elspeth began to lay awake at night, just thinking about the enigmatic oracle and his intentions.

“What is all of this for?” she finally asked. “All the training and the hours in the library?”

“I thought that’s what you wanted,” he said.

“But to what end?” Elspeth asked. “What am I expected to do?”

“You’re Helioid’s Champion,” he said. “There are things you need to know before he returns.”

“But why?” she asked. “I don’t understand.”

He heard the confusion in her voice, and he frowned. “You’ll be his vessel in the mortal realm. You’ll protect his domain from those who would destroy it.”

“How can I be his vessel if I can’t hear the gods the way you can?”

“A champion doesn’t need to be an oracle,” he said. “You just have to have the heart of a hero.”

“I’m not a child,” she said angrily. “And I wasn’t raised on my knees in front of Heliod’s altar. Stop talking to me in platitudes. Just tell me the truth.”

“You wanted to be a hero,” Daxos retorted. “Why did you take up Heliod’s challenge to bring his spear-blade to Meletis? Why did you slay the hydra?”

“Because it was going to destroy the city!” Elspeth said. “What was I supposed to do? Nothing? And it’s my sword! Or spear-blade or whatever you call it. In my mind, it will always be my sword.”

“You shouldn’t say that,” Daxos said. “Heliod claimed that weapon. You’re wielding it for him.”

“And I’m trying to understand what that means!” Elspeth cried. “Does that mean that I can keep this world safe? Am I responsible for his people in his absence? Does that mean I’m not allowed to think for myself—like you?”

She hadn’t actually meant to say the last sentence, but it came tumbling out. Daxos looked pained.

“You don’t know what my life was like before the Silence,” he said.

“Then tell me!” Elspeth said. “I want to know. But don’t try to indoctrinate me with lies.”

“I’m not a liar,” Daxos said. He looked furious. She’d never seen him show any emotion at all except an occasional smile when she’d bested him on the training



ground. His fury was so intense it felt like a tangible thing, and Elspeth inadvertently took a step back.

“I didn’t say that ...” Elspeth said

“You expect Heliod to make your life perfect,” Daxos said. “You’re selfish. You want comfort and peace—but just for yourself.”

“That’s not true,” Elspeth said.

“You just want a home where nothing can touch you,” Daxos said. “As long as you’re happy, you don’t care about others. What makes you think you’re so important? Why do *you* deserve a life without suffering?”

“I want that for everyone, not just myself,” she said. His words hurt her physically. The one friend she’d made on this world, and he suddenly despised her. “I thought the gods made this world safe. But now they’re gone ...”

“They’re not gone!” he practically shouted. “This is like the eye of the storm. And I don’t have very long before the storm comes and ...”

He stopped. His body was trembling. Elspeth wanted to reach out and comfort him, but she stopped herself.

“And what?” she asked.

“And I’m dead,” he said. “A sphinx told me, Elspeth. He said: ‘At the feet of the untouched city. By the hand of someone I love.’ ”

“What sphinx? What are you talking about?” Elspeth asked. She hated this moment. She wished the floor

would open up so she could disappear. She wished she'd kept her mouth shut and that the two of them were sitting on the couches in the library reading yet another exploit of Heliad meddling in the mortal realm.

"You're destined to be a hero ..." Daxos began. Elspeth didn't want to hear any more of his half-truths, so she turned on her heel and walked away from him. As she stalked out of the complex and down to the beach alone, she wondered if she should leave Theros. But where would she go? She liked this placid, sun-kissed polis. It was the first place she felt safe since Bant.

She sat alone on the shore listening to the gentle rush of the tide. By the time the sun was setting she wasn't angry anymore. She just wanted to make things better with Daxos. They were supposed to meet in the morning to train, but instead she found the note under her door. She smoothed out the note and read it again: YOU ARE DESTINED TO BE THE HERO OF THEROS.

And now it was the morning after the argument, and there was no sign of Daxos anywhere. As she tried to fight off the unexpected sense of loneliness, two priests approached along the corridor behind her. She didn't feel like talking to anyone, so she moved behind a leafy trellis as they strolled by. Even without seeing their faces, she recognized the men's voices. The younger man was called Stelanos, and he considered Daxos to be one of his friends. The elder priest was called Hew, a nickname from his days as a stonemason, before he left

to serve Heliod.

“He’s neglecting his duties,” the elder priest said. “Something must be done.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Stelanos said. “I looked for him already, but there’s no sign he slept in his bed at all.”

“But he never does sleep, isn’t that true?” Hew asked. “Or has that changed?”

“Since the Silence, he’s been sleeping at night and rising early to train with Elspeth ...” Stelanos broke off. At first, Elspeth thought they stopped because they saw her through the trellis. But then she realized they still didn’t know she was there. They’d just paused on the other side of the pillar to continue their conversation, not knowing that she was listening.

“Why are you dismissive of her?” Stelanos asked. “You don’t believe she is a chosen of Heliod?”

“Why would Heliod choose an outsider?” Hew asked. “What is she, a Setessan? Then let her be the chosen of the Hunter. We don’t need her kind here.”

Elspeth’s cheeks flushed red. They had been talking about Daxos, and now they were talking about her.

“Her kind?” Stelanos asked. “You think the Sun God should only bless those born in Meletis? Or do you frown at all women nowadays?”

“I have no problem with women,” Hew protested. “I don’t see how Heliod chose her before he was called to Nyx by the Silence.”

“You presume to understand the mysteries of Heliod?”

Stelanos asked. “Or are you calling Daxos a liar? He is the one saying Heliod made her his champion.”

“No, no,” Hew said. “Some of the priests are questioning if she’s what she says she is.”

“She did strike the killing blow to the hydra,” Stelanos reminded him.

“Yes, but you can’t deny there’s been a change in Daxos ever since she’s arrived,” Hew said. “I don’t like it. He’s been absentminded. I don’t think he’s set foot inside the temple proper since ...”

“Since the Silence,” Stelanos finished for him. “Why do you think it’s the stranger and not the Silence that’s afflicting him?”

“I saw her early this morning walking near the fountain,” the older man said. “She’s not with him now, but she might know where he is.”

“I don’t want to trouble her,” Stelanos said. “I’ll speak to Daxos when I see him again.”

“Have you heard about the strange sightings of the Nyxborn?” Hew asked as the two men walked away. “They attacked Setessa. Can you imagine ...”

As their footsteps echoed down the corridor, Elspeth felt sick with embarrassment. It had never occurred to her that the priests like Hew didn’t want her here. Since she’d arrived, most of her time was spent with Daxos. But the priests had seemed to welcome her. The politeness of her interactions with them reminded her of the knightly protocol of Bant. Human interaction felt

cool and crisp. It was pleasant, but careful and formalized. Lifeless, perhaps, but it never occurred to her that it wasn't genuine.

Elspeth decided not to wait for Daxos any longer. She'd been meaning to visit Nikka, who was staying in Ephara's compound, where she was subject to strict rules. Temple life was an awkward fit for the rebellious teenager. Just as Elspeth made up her mind to leave, she heard a *tink* as a pebble landed on the bench behind her. She stared at the pebble, which glowed a soft amber.

*Why do you look at the pebble and not where it came from?*

The words seemed to flow into her mind, and she looked across the courtyard. Daxos was perched on the very edge of the sloped roof, watching her. When their eyes met, he grinned and tossed another pebble in her general direction. She plucked the amber pebble off the bench and slung it back at him. With feline reflexes, he plucked the pebble from midair and grinned again.

This time his lips moved, but no sound came out. *Meet me by Sleeper's Gate.*



The streets were crowded with people heading to morning worship as Elspeth slipped out Sleeper's Gate, the little-used wooden door tucked into the ivy along the southern entrance to the temple grounds. She didn't have

to scan the crowds long before she saw Daxos standing beside the public cistern at the end of the street. He held the reins of a large brown horse that stamped the cobblestones impatiently.

“Are you leaving?” she asked, after she’d threaded through the throngs. Helioid’s temple bells began to chime in the distance.

“Just a day’s ride,” he said.

“Oh,” Elspeth said, stroking the horse’s nose.

Daxos laid his hand on Elspeth’s shoulder and nodded at her weapon. “Why do you always have your blade at your side? The complex is safe.”

She shrugged. “Perhaps,” she agreed. She was going to repeat some aphorism about always being prepared but stopped herself. She wanted to *really* talk to Daxos. She wanted to repair what had been broken by their argument, but he spoke before she did.

“I rode out from the city before dawn,” he told her. “I passed through the Guardians and onto the plateau. Polukranos’s blood seeped into the stones. There’s a red stain upon the plateau that the gods can see from Nyx.”

“Maybe Nylea can use it for target practice,” Elspeth said.

“Nylea,” he repeated. “She won’t be happy about the hydra.”

“She’d rather that your city was demolished?” Elspeth asked in surprise.

“I was going to continue riding to the Nessian Forest,

but I changed my mind,” Daxos continued without answering her question.

“Why?” Elspeth asked.

“I’m sorry I called you selfish,” Daxos said. “Wanting a home—safety—is fundamental.”

“I wasn’t calling you a liar,” Elspeth said.

“Some people will believe anything for the sake of glory,” he said. “I should have known that wasn’t you.”

Elspeth shifted uncomfortably. She wasn’t sure what to do. Wish him a safe journey? Implore him to come back inside? Why was it easier to face an enemy in battle than speak her mind to a friend?

“Do you want to ride with me?” Daxos asked. “This is a strong horse. He can carry us both.”

“Where are we going?” Elspeth asked.

“To the Despair Lands—to look for my mother,” he told her. “Before Heliod would never let me go, and now, I don’t want to go alone.”



The sun rose higher and the mist burned off the fields as they rode down Guardian Way and onto the dirt road that led into the forest. Once inside the Nessian, Elspeth felt strangely ill at ease in the dim light of the forest under a canopy of the silver oaks. Near midday they stopped to rest by the ruins of a round tower beside a rushing stream. It was a particularly beautiful place with

lilacs growing along the river bank and golden butterflies flitting through the shafts of sunlight. The water was startlingly blue, and silver fish congregated near the stepping-stones.

“Where are we?” Elspeth asked. Her earlier discomfort evaporated once they reached the picturesque site.

“It’s called Hunter’s Crossing,” Daxos said. “That ruined tower used to be a Setessan outpost.”

They drank from the stream and then sat together at its edge while the horse grazed nearby. Daxos took off his shirt and used it as a pillow while he stretched out on the river bank. Elspeth watched the water for a while before turning her attention to Daxos. His eyes were closed so she stared at the tattoos on his shoulder, which she’d been curious about but had never seen up close. She recognized most of the symbols as being related to Heliod. She’d seen some of them emblazoned on friezes in Meletis, but a few were unfamiliar symbols. His eyelids fluttered. He was not asleep.

“Don’t you trust me, Elspeth?” he murmured. “Say what you need to say.”

It was an invitation, but not one that she was ready to take.

“What’s this symbol?” she asked. She pressed her finger gently against the ink near his throat.

“That is a terrible heresy,” he said.

“I thought you were all about orthodoxy,” she said.

“I think we have both misjudged the other,” Daxos



said.

“You don’t believe the teachings of Heliod? Or you do?”

Daxos’s eyes flicked to the sky then closed again. “I believe in them. I just don’t believe they’re written in stone.”

“Are you angry with Heliod?” she asked.

Daxos didn’t answer right away. He sat up, picked up a rock, and flung it in the water. It skipped across the surface three times before sinking.

“Are you angry with him for the Silence?” Elspeth prompted.

Daxos looked at her with a strange expression. Then he grinned and burst out laughing. It transformed his entire face, and she found herself smiling at his unexpected joy. He leaned toward her as if he were going to kiss her on the cheek. But instead he whispered, “I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life.”

Before Elspeth could answer, he grinned at her mischievously. “You know a funny thing about water?” he asked.

“About water?” she asked, confused at the change of topic.

He tipped his head to the left and then right. While she was trying to figure out what he was doing, she saw something out of the corner of her eye. A thin stream of water rose out of the stream. She turned to look more closely and heard Daxos snicker. By the time she realized

that Daxos was casting a spell, it had already drenched her completely.

“You splashed me!” Elspeth sputtered.

“That’s your response, Champion?” Daxos teased. “You can slaughter the great Polukranos and have no response to a simple dousing?”

Elspeth found she couldn’t think of a single spell, so she just tackled him instead. She surprised him and took the advantage. Kneeling over his chest, she almost pinned him down, but then he shifted his weight unexpectedly. She leaned left to compensate, and he flipped her to the right. She maintained control for about one second longer, and then he pinned her easily. They were about the same height, but he was stronger and had been trained in the art of wrestling.

“I give, I give,” she said. She shoved him off and sat up. They were both covered in dirt, leaves, and crushed violets.

“Nice,” he said, assessing her disheveled state. “You look ready for the pankration event in the Akroan games.”

“Is that like pit fighting?” she asked.

“No death matches, not since Anax became king,” Daxos said. “You didn’t learn hand-to-hand combat in your training?”

“No one usually gets past my sword,” she muttered. “But no, we didn’t spend much time with ground fighting. Being a knight was all about using the weapon

with honor.”

“Where was your home?” he asked. “When I first saw you, I thought you had been born of the gods.”

“My home was destroyed,” she said.

His brow creased with concern. “Where was that?” he asked.

“What is the farthest explored point on the known world?” Elspeth asked.

“In the east, beyond the leonin lands, there’s another forest,” Daxos told her. “Larger than even the Nessian Forest, no one knows how far it goes.”

“What’s to the west beyond the sea?” Elspeth asked.

“The world ends at the waterfall where Kruphix’s Tree grows,” he explained. “The sea falls off the edge and into the void below.”

“My home was beyond your infinite forest,” she said.

He smiled at her gently. “Beyond the infinite forest,” he repeated.

“You don’t believe me,” she said.

“I believe you,” he said. “And I marvel at your courage, traveling so far alone.”

There was a long silence broken only by the pip of the songbirds and the rushing of the water.

“What did you mean yesterday when you said, ‘At the feet of the untouched city. By the hands of someone I love?’ ” Elspeth asked. “Is that about your mother?”

Daxos stood up abruptly. He offered a hand to Elspeth and helped her up.

“We should get going,” he said.

“Daxos, I thought your mother died,” she said. “How could she be in the Despair Lands?”

“Come on,” he said. He stood up and held out his hand. “I’ll show you.”



They stopped on a ridge overlooking the Despair Lands where all the trees along the open edge of the forest had died. Daxos tethered the horse to a withered branch while Elspeth stared out at the lifeless expanse of black sand, scattered boulders, and desolation.

“Is this natural?” she asked. She thought of the sick ground of Grixis pushing up through the lush fields of Bant. Elspeth felt fear rising inside her, like a wellspring that could overcome her. Time seemed to slow. It was like an invisible weight had been placed on her shoulders.

“Natural?” he asked. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“What causes the land to die and the trees to wither?” she asked.

Daxos considered the perimeter of dead trees along the ridge.

“This is new damage,” he said.

“Damage?” Elspeth asked.

“There should be an ethereal boundary that keeps the forest safe,” Daxos said. “But with Nylea in Nyx, it’s

getting worse.”

“What’s getting worse?” Elspeth put her hand on her blade as if enemies hid just behind the trees.

“It’s the breath of Erebos,” he said. “He takes pleasure in others’ misery, so he fills the world with his own despair. It’s the only happiness he knows.”

“Is this just here?” Elspeth asked “Can he afflict the cities? How far can it spread?”

“The Underworld contains Erebos himself,” Daxos said. “I’ve never seen him cross the rivers into the mortal realm. Before the Silence, his voice was the hardest to hear. But he can afflict creatures and fill them with his toxic presence. Both humans and beasts, like the catoblepas, can be agents of his despair.”

“What is his purpose? Death and carnage?”

“No, that is what Mogis desires,” Daxos explained. “Erebos wants everyone to resign themselves to misery. We call it ‘drinking from the cup of resignation.’ At its most mild, it makes people sluggish and cruel. At its worst, it makes them reexperience the worst moment of their life. They can no longer separate reality from his affliction.”

Elspeth scanned the bleak horizon. Across the field, she saw the black entrance to a cave on the far side of the field of boulders and black sand. Panic rose up in her.

“This place feels oppressive,” she admitted. “Desperate.”

“And we are only on the edge of it,” Daxos said.

“Perhaps we should go back to Meletis. I don’t want you to ...”

A flash of golden light from below caught their attention. Elspeth pointed to a dark figure stepping around the boulders. Despite the distance, she could tell it was a centaur. They were more common in Meletis than in Akros, and they often sold their wares outside of Heliod’s temple. This centaur paced in circles around the rocks, repeating the same endless circuit.

“Who is that?” she asked.

“It’s a Returned,” Daxos said.

“Those are the people who wear gold masks?” Elspeth asked. She’d seen likenesses of them on a frieze in a catacomb below Heliod’s temple.

“A Returned can be anything that escapes the Underworld—anything that had enough consciousness to worship the gods in life.”

“Creatures really come back from the dead?” Elspeth asked in surprise. She’d seen plenty of zombies on other planes, but those mindless creatures hadn’t *really* come back from the dead. They had been ripped out of the grave by a necromancer. Because Daxos probably had no conception of a “zombie,” she didn’t speak her thoughts aloud.

“No one knows what death is really like in the Underworld,” Daxos said. “The gods tell stories of what it will be like, but only Erebos knows for sure. And he lies. That’s all he does. I’m not sure he knows how *not* to

lie.”

“Do you think your mother might escape?” Elspeth asked. “That she’ll come back to you?”

“I don’t know,” Daxos said. His voice caught in his throat. “I don’t know why some of the dead come back and some don’t. And even when they do come back, they’re not the same. It must be a horrible existence. They have a sense of all they’ve lost, but can’t begin to find it.”

Elspeth stared down at the Returned Centaur, who had stopped his mindless circling. He stamped his hoof on the ground over and over. It reminded her of an irate child, and she wished she could take away his frustration to ease his burden.

“They don’t remember their lives, so they follow some forgotten pattern seared on their brain,” he said. “Even if my mother did come back, she wouldn’t know me. She would have lost her soul and wouldn’t remember herself.”

“What happens to their souls?” Elspeth asked.

“The soul is severed and wanders on its own,” Daxos said. “They become idolons. It’s drawn to the magic of gods, like a cub clings to its mother.”

“Has something happened that makes you think you might find your mother now?”

“Heliod used to control my actions,” Daxos said. “With his absence, he can’t stop me searching. And this is where I lost her. If she did come back, she would be

wandering here.”

Now that she understood why this was so important to him, Elspeth tried to squelch her rising sense of panic. She put her hand on his arm. “Let’s do down and look,” she said.

“I didn’t know Erebos’s despair would touch you so strongly,” Daxos said. “Down there, it might feel even worse.”

“I can handle it,” Elspeth assured him. “And we’ve come all this way.”

“Are you sure that you’re all right?” he said. “We can go back to Meletis. I’ll throw you in the river on the way home.”

She squinted at him and tapped her blade playfully. “You could try.”

They picked their way down the ridge, slipping on loose rocks, and made their way toward the cave.

“The cave is a shrine to Athreos, the Boatman,” he said. “I don’t know what’s happened to him in the Silence. I don’t think Kruphix would have drawn him into Nyx. He has too important a role in the passage of the dead.”

“Do you want to go inside?” she asked when they reached the entrance.

“Yes, I need to,” he said. “Wait for me here?”

“No, I’ll come with you,” Elspeth said.

“I can’t speak inside the cave,” Daxos warned. “Erebos knows my voice. He wants to steal oracles for himself,



so I must be silent, or he will send his agents for us. Whatever happens, don't let go of my hand."

Just as they stepped inside the cave mouth, it was as if the darkness reached out and engulfed them. The light from the outside world evaporated, and it felt like she was being crushed by the blackness. With no point of reference, she began to feel off-balance, and she gripped Daxos's fingers like a lifeline. The air bristled against her skin, and suddenly there were a thousand voices screaming in her ears. Without thinking about the consequences, she cast a spell that flooded the chamber with golden light. Daxos shielded his eyes against the unexpected brilliance, but Elspeth saw what lurked beyond the circle of light. Ghostly, skittering forms encircled them—the lost souls of the dead trapped in the shrine with no one to carry them to the Underworld. The forms of the eidolons were made of light and aether, but under Erebos's influence, Elspeth perceived them in gruesome detail. She saw a woman, her body rotting like a zombie, stumbling toward her. An old man fell to his knees with his heart pierced with a javelin. Nearby, a young man with his skull crushed in lurched against the wall of the cavern.

Elspeth wanted to leave Theros. Immediately and forever. She couldn't planeswalk instantaneously, but she fell to her knees and focused everything she could on escaping this terrifying cave. Once, her friend Ajani told her that eventually planeswalking would get easier and

become less taxing. Her terror and despair seemed to accelerate the process. The edges of her being were like sand blown away in the wind. She was willing to hurl herself anywhere into the Blind Eternities to escape this horrific visage ...

Suddenly she felt Daxos beside her, the warmth of his body against her own. He wrapped his arms around her and became an anchor to reality. When she opened her eyes again, the eidolons were just blurry images. The vision of blood and carnage that had accompanied them moments before was gone.

“Please stay,” Daxos said. “Stay with me.”

Elsbeth severed her spell and let the magic disperse. She and Daxos ran for the entrance and crossed the threshold into the sickly light of the Despair Lands. They didn't stop running until they reached the withered boundary of the Nessian Forest and the unconcerned horse.

“I wondered what affect the Silence might have on the dead,” Daxos said. “I was afraid that the dead might be trapped without passage.”

Elsbeth threw her blade on the ground. She couldn't remain still. She kept turning in small circles, trying to find the breath that seemed to have gotten lost in her chest. She felt like an animal trapped inside a hunter's snare.

“I'm sorry, Elsbeth,” Daxos said. “Erebos's despair affects you profoundly. More than most people. My

hatred for Erebos keeps me safe from him.”

“I saw his agents when Nikka and I were traveling to Meletis,” Elspeth said.

Daxos nodded, but he stared at her with an expression she'd never seen before. It wasn't awe, nor was it fear or expectation.

“What spell were you about to cast?” Daxos asked. “I've never felt anything like that.”

Elspeth shook her head. Even if she wanted to talk to him about it, she wouldn't have the right words.

Below them, they saw a flicker of light moving across the Despair Lands. They stood on the edge and watched as it drew nearer. When she reached the base of the ridge, they could see it was an eidolon of a young woman with a long black braid. Daxos paled at the sight of her. Her form shifted with distorted light. It was as if the eidolon were blinking in and out of existence. She reached up to them with pleading arms. She beckoned to Daxos to follow her, but he shouted into the wind.

“You coward,” he raged, and his voice rang throughout the Despair Lands. “I will end you.”

Elspeth was frightened that, in his anger, he might lose his footing and slip off the side. She stood close by, in case he needed her.

“Is that your mother?” she asked, even though she knew the answer.

“It's a trick,” he shouted. And then he said more quietly, “Erebos heard my voice in the cave, and is

trying to taunt me.”

Daxos ripped off the amulet with the glass asphodel that his mother had given him on the last day of her life. He threw it down to where the ghostly woman had fallen to her knees. Still she beckoned to him. When the glass amulet hit the black sand, both it and the eidolon evaporated into smoke. Elspeth and Daxos turned away from the Despair Lands, and together they led the horse away and back into the forest. They leaned together as they walked, and just like the first night they met, each thought the other was leading the way.

# CHAPTER 4



Just as Rhordon the Rageblood raised his hammer to smash the skull of the injured leonin, he found himself wondering about the afterlife. Where would the leonin prisoner go after he died? Leonins didn't worship the gods. So would Athreos refuse to carry him across the river and to the Underworld? It was an odd thought at an inopportune moment. An exceptionally large and brutal minotaur, Rhordon was not accustomed to having his mind wander wherever it wanted. He was an oracle of Mogis, whose voice had been constant in his mind until the Silence. And it wasn't just Mogis's voice that had typically overwhelmed his own thoughts—Iroas's voice had been like a constant echo. Mogis would rant and Iroas's voice would counter him, and the ripples consumed Rhordon's mind and even his dreams.

Now his brain was asserting his independence. And he didn't like it.

Musing about the Underworld made him pause, and the circle of bloodthirsty minotaurs that had gathered around sensed it. No minotaur hesitated in battle and lived long afterward. The leonin rolled on its back on the scarred floor of the temple. Its blue eyes stared up at

Rhordon without fear. The leonin had been beaten, stomped and humiliated, but it didn't grovel or beg. It wasn't that it welcomed death; it just wasn't scared of it.

The minotaurs that crowded around Rhordon growled with displeasure. They didn't like delayed carnage. Their ear-splitting roars rattled the crumbling columns and sent a rain of dust falling from the remains of the ceiling. The Temple of Malice was a ruined fortress that had slipped into a rift between two mountains during one of Purphoros's battles with the giants. The stylized architecture belonged to a past civilization, a precursor to Akros, although traces of the grandeur could still be seen behind the foul exterior.

"Bring me his weapon!" Rhordon shouted as if that's why he'd been waiting to finish the prisoner all along. When the leonin had been captured in the hills above Akros, he'd carried a fine bronze sword with a glassy blue disc at the base of the blade. It was that sword that had kept him from being killed on the spot. One of the minotaur warriors insisted that Brimaz, King of Oreskos, carried such a sword. If this was the king of the leonins, he would make a handsome ransom. But the leonin had denied he was the king, even under extreme duress, so there was no use keeping him alive any longer.

One of his warriors handed him the leonin's shiny blade, and Rhordon hesitated no more. He struck the leonin's neck with such force that its head flew several feet from the body. Rhordon grunted with satisfaction

and moved out of the way as his fellow minotaurs descended on the body in a flesh-mad rage. But their feast was interrupted when one of his guards shouted that an intruder was about to enter the temple.

A diminutive satyr sauntered into the ruined hall, and the minotaurs stopped eating, their muzzles dripping blood, and watched him in surprise. Satyrs were considered small meals, not visitors. But stranger still, the satyr was flanked by two of the largest Nyxborn minotaurs anyone had ever seen. Rhordon was the biggest minotaur in the Temple of Malice, and he had to duck his horns when he crossed the threshold. These Nyxborn intruders stood at least a head taller than Rhordon. No self-respecting minotaur, not even a Nyxborn, should deign to serve a satyr. With his limited god-sight, Rhordon recognized that these Nyxborn were not quite what they seemed to be. While Rhordon's brain churned with curiosity, the satyr spoke first.

"I am Xenagos," the satyr bleated. Rhordon despised the squeaky voices of the lesser races. "The humans are joining together to slaughter all of you in Mogis's absence. Iroas cheats the Silence and aids them from Nyx."

Rhordon should have sent his warriors to rip the satyr into four pieces, but the satyr's words stopped him. The warriors left the raw flesh and grouped themselves behind their leader. Rhordon knew what they were thinking—why didn't Rhordon pound this impudent goat

into a puddle? He grunted at them to hold their ground. His minotaurs seethed with anger, but the satyr took Rhordon's signal as permission to continue.

"Akros is the beating heart of Iroas," Xenagos said. "It's time to rip it out."

Rhordon snarled with rage, and his warriors clashed their rusty weapons against the shattered tiles of the floor. Xenagos scanned the decrepit hall with its crumbling pillars and piles of bones. Despite the large number of threatening minotaurs inside the structure, he acted as if he was lord of them all.

"Mogis sent you an army of Nyxborn through the shrine of the gods, but the Akroans overwhelmed them," Xenagos said.

"How do you know this?" Rhordon demanded.

Xenagos gestured with both hands to the imposing Nyxborn looming beside him. Rhordon wasn't impressed. But he knew that the goatman didn't conjure them from nothing. Only Mogis could create Nyxborn minotaurs, so Rhordon decided to give the intruder a few more seconds of life. Besides, it was bleating at him again.

"The Akroan army destroyed my own valley, and you are next," Xenagos said. "I'm willing to return Mogis's army to you in exchange for your immediate conquest of Akros."

Rhordon didn't believe the lying satyr. Such a weakling couldn't have captured an entire army of



Nyxborn minotaurs. It was insulting for him to suggest that he had such prowess. Rhordon raised his grizzled chin. With that slight movement of his chin, he gave his warriors leave to kill the satyr.

The nearest warrior charged, but Xenagos anticipated his attack. The satyr did a strange sidestep, dragging his hoof through the bloody dirt, and one of his Nyxborn protectors lurched forward. Rhordon sensed an overwhelming power emanating through the unnatural creature. The Nyxborn stepped directly in front of Rhordon's warrior and lifted him up into the air like a sack of grain. Then he tossed him headfirst into the wall, snapping his neck against the stones. Before anyone could move, the satyr did another strange sidestep. Rhordon felt debilitating pain as Xenagos blasted searing energy against the Rageblood himself.

Rhordon perceived the mystical strike with his god-senses—it was like serrated claws raking across his body, followed by a burst of fire. The blast singed his fur and ripped his flesh, but Rhordon was not greatly harmed. Indeed, he relished the pain. Rhordon's warriors felt a sickly wind and saw their leader's chest split open. They glanced uneasily between the satyr and the wounded oracle. Rhordon pressed his hand into the wound and wiped his bloody fingers across his brow. He knew the satyr could have killed him and chose not to. He would treat the goat with a little more respect. With another tip of his chin, he ordered his warriors to fall back and not

attack their visitor again.

“I did capture them myself,” the satyr said, and Rhordon did not argue. “And I will tell you how to destroy Akros, and you will be Rhordon, Conqueror of Akros.”

“How can you know something that Mogis does not?” Rhordon asked.

“Mogis knows,” Xenagos assured him. “But Iroas will not let him break the Silence and leave Nyx to tell you himself. He sent you an army instead.”

Rhordon could believe this. Iroas existed solely to thwart Mogis and prevent his carnage.

“Tell us,” Rhordon growled. “And human blood will flood the streets of that accursed city.”

Xenagos took a long knife from his belt and drew a circle in the dirt with its tip.

“This is Akros,” the satyr said. “The city walls have never been breached because the wandering armies have always returned and flanked the invaders. Neither man nor minotaur can fight in two directions at once.”

Xenagos took his knife and drew another circle, a larger one, around the walls of Akros. Rhordon understood, even if his warriors did not. At the sight of it, he heard a rumble from above. He swore it was the sound of Mogis voicing his brutal approval from Nyx.

“A circle around a circle,” Xenagos smiled deviously. “And my Nyxborn will help you build it.”

Before Rhordon could respond, a warrior sprinted into

the hall. His filthy fur was matted and damp from racing across the countryside. His battle-axe was covered in gore, and he wore fresh human skins.

“They’ve mounted our brethren’s heads on the gates of Akros!” he shouted.

“See, I’ve told you nothing but the truth,” the satyr said. “The humans are preparing to slaughter you.”

Rhordon stared at Xenagos for a long moment. “Continue, goat,” he said.

The satyr did another funny step. And then he bowed in service to the god of war and slaughter.

# CHAPTER 5



**Y**ou're so dead, Daxos!" Nikka taunted.

With a flourish, Nikka slid the green tile six squares to the east and nudged a yellow tile that belonged to Daxos. Elspeth said nothing. Nikka was making a grave error, and the game would soon be over for her. Elspeth kept her eyes firmly on the game board so her face would betray nothing. The three of them were in Daxos's rooms in Heliod's complex. They often gathered in the evenings to sit by the fire and play a tile-and-board game known as Heliod's Domain. At least that's what the locals called it here in Meletis. Back in Akros, it was called Iroas's Domain, and Xiro and his friends played the game incessantly. Xiro believed it taught actual strategy on the battlefield and had insisted that Elspeth learn it. Much to Xiro's and his crew's surprise, it took Elspeth only a few sessions before she grasped the subtleties and routinely won the game.

Nikka made her disastrous move. Daxos shook his head in disbelief and removed his yellow tile. Elspeth tried hard not to stare at Daxos with his secret smile and the firelight flickering across his face. Nikka started humming a little song and moving her shoulders as

though she was dancing in her chair.

“You’d been setting that up for how long?” he asked. Elspeth coughed politely into her hand to keep Nikka from seeing her smile.

“For ages,” Nikka said happily.

It was nice to see Nikka smiling. She hadn’t adjusted well to life in Meletis. She refused to study or obey the rules expected of Ephara’s acolytes. While the news that Beta had survived the attack by Erebos’s agents had allayed her grief, her rebellious attitude had only gotten worse. Ephara’s priests had complained about Nikka to both Elspeth and her father. They called her defiant and uninterested in participating in Ephara’s civic works. There was talk of sending her home to her father in Akros.

“Well, you’ve been so busy trying to barge your way into my territory that you’ve completely ignored the threat right behind you,” Daxos said.

He gestured to Elspeth, who slid her red tile into Nikka’s home row. Nikka’s face fell in disappointment.

“Victory for Elspeth,” Daxos said.

Nikka yelled incoherently. She swept her arm across the enameled board and knocked the tiles onto the floor. Elspeth and Daxos exchanged knowing glances about the impulsiveness of youth.

“Manners, child,” Daxos said. “Don’t they teach you how to behave in Akros?”

Nikka opened her mouth to retort, but the door of

Daxos's rooms slammed open and a woman strode inside, sloughing off the priests who tried ineffectually to stop her. She had long dark hair, high cheekbones, and she wore the armor of a Setessian warrior. She carried a long white bundle while Stelanos dogged her heels.

"Daxos, we're sorry," Stelanos said. "She insisted on seeing you."

"It's all right," Daxos told Stelanos. "I know her."

"Do you need anything?" Stelanos asked. He was already backing out of the room while the woman stared aggressively at him. In the corridor outside the door, three more Setessian warriors waited impatiently. Each of the women was more than six feet tall and towered over the flustered priests. The two sides stared at each other distrustfully while Daxos reassured Stelanos.

"No, thank you," Daxos said, and Stelanos retreated to the corridor.

Elsbeth could only see the woman's profile, but she looked desperate and ferocious at the same time.

"Anthousa," Daxos said. "Why have you come to Meletis? What's wrong?"

Anthousa laid the bundle on the cushions of a nearby couch and brushed the cloth aside. They saw the face of a small child. The girl was as still as a statue.

"Can you help her?" Anthousa asked. "Her heart beats, but no air moves through her lungs."

"Is it a mage's injury?" Daxos asked.

"The Nyxborn invaded Setessa in the night," Anthousa

said. “Since the Silence, they’ve been swarming through the Nessian Forest. She was bit by a Nyxborn snake, and it afflicted her with this strange sickness.”

Daxos knelt beside the girl. His hands hovered on either side of her face. As Daxos attempted to heal her, there was a keening sound, like the wind sweeping over the ocean on a stormy day. Elspeth stood by the wall, feeling helpless.

Tense minutes passed, and Daxos sat back on his heels. The girl remained motionless. Daxos looked tired and sad.

“When did this happen?” Daxos asked. “And who is the little girl?”

“Her name is Pipa, and she’s been this way for several days,” Anthousa said. “Our healers in Setessa couldn’t help, so I brought her to you. I fear the Nyxborn threat isn’t isolated to Nylea’s domain. Your city needs to prepare itself.”

“Where are her parents?” Elspeth asked.

“Parents?” Anthousa asked.

“She is one of the *arkulli* of Setessa,” Daxos explained. “An orphan raised by the mothers of the city. I was one of the *arkulli*, as well. I lived in Setessa for several years when I was a small boy. Anthousa was one of my sisters.”

“She’s like his sister,” Nikka muttered under her breath.

Anthousa turned her attention to the two women

standing by the couches. She seemed to dismiss Nikka, but she stared at Elspeth with intense curiosity and mistrust.

“Who is this?” she asked, pointing at Elspeth.

“Elspeth and Nikka,” Daxos said. “I cannot heal this child, Anthousa. It’s as if her soul is missing. And there’s a void inside of her. It’s not a physical injury.”

Anthousa nodded in resignation. “That’s what the healers of Setessa said.”

“If we learn more about the nature of the attack, there might be a way,” Daxos said.

“My warriors will take her to the Healing Ward,” Anthousa said. “And I will tell you everything I know. And you must do the same.”

After the other warriors had taken Pipa away, Daxos motioned for Anthousa to join him on the couches. But she would only pace back and forth in agitation while the other three sat awkwardly on the edge of their seats and watched. Finally, she said, “Since the Silence, the Nyxborn are acting strangely. Are the gods sending them into the world as their eyes during the Silence?”

“I don’t know,” Daxos said. “I have not communed with Heliod.”

“Karametra is also absent,” Anthousa said.

“What do you mean by ‘sending them into the world?’ ” Elspeth asked.

“There is a singular nexus between the realms at the Nykthos, a shrine to the gods,” Daxos said. “That’s where



Nyxborn creatures enter the world—with some exceptions, like the hydra, but it's very rare.”

“We heard news of the killing of Polukranos,” Anthousa said. “There were other rumors, too, of a woman who wields the weapon of a god.”

“That's Elspeth,” Nikka said. “Savior of Meletis.”

“What?” Elspeth said. “No, that's not true.”

“That's what everyone says at Ephara's temple,” Nikka said. “They say you're the divine protector who will keep us safe during the Silence.”

“What gives you the right?” Anthousa asked Elspeth. She wasn't hostile, but she had a ferocious resolve, and Elspeth decided she never wanted to cross this woman in battle.

“Heliod claimed her as his champion,” Daxos said. “She acts with his blessing.”

“Since when do you answer for women?” Anthousa said. “Have you so forgotten the customs of Setessa?”

Daxos smiled faintly. “Forgive me, Elspeth,” he said.

Confused, Elspeth asked, “What am I forgiving you for?”

Nikka rolled her eyes. “In Setessa, men aren't supposed to answer a question for a woman. We need you back in Akros, Anthousa. My father *always* answers for me. He thinks that language is simply too complex for a girl to be able to master.”

“Who is your father?” Anthousa asked. “I'm happy to demonstrate to him what women are capable of

mastering.”

“Let’s talk about Pipa,” Elspeth interjected. “If this was done by the Nyxborn, and they are acting strangely, then where do we find out more about that?”

“The gods are not present anywhere in the world,” Anthousa said. “We can’t even glimpse them in the night sky.”

“Surely there is someone else?” Elspeth asked. “We can’t be helpless without the gods.”

Anthousa stopped pacing abruptly, and Elspeth wondered if she had offended her. Anthousa didn’t look like someone who would like to be called helpless.

“She’s right, Daxos,” Anthousa said. “We have implored the gods for aid, and they have not answered. Who knows the way besides the pantheon?”

Daxos rubbed his eyes wearily. “Medomai has recently returned and is in residence in Meletis.”

Anthousa said, “That is a grave omen.”

“Not necessarily,” Daxos said.

“Who is Medomai?” Elspeth asked.

“Medomai is an ageless sphinx and wandering prophet,” Daxos explained. “He usually comes to Meletis only at the onset of some event of great importance. But this time he arrived shortly *after* the Silence.”

“Which means something monumental is on the horizon?” Nikka asked.

“That may be so,” Anthousa said.

“Some consider him wiser than the gods because he is more grounded in the world,” Daxos added.

“There is none wiser than the gods,” Anthousa retorted.

“But they are not listening,” Daxos reminded her.

“I will not seek an audience with a godless sphinx,” Anthousa insisted. “But if you think it will enlighten you, do what you must.”

“We’ll seek an audience with Medomai, the Ageless One,” Daxos said to Elspeth. “And let’s hope he’s less cryptic than the last time.”



Medomai the Ageless was known as the bearer of ill omens. It was said that the sphinx dwelled in unknown lands and had an uncanny knowledge of the future. When his wings cast a shadow on Meletis, he carried with him a feeling of foreboding, though he was esteemed by the citizens of the city. Whenever he appeared, people expected that something terrible would happen. Hadn’t he arrived just hours before Heliod and Purphoros’s epic battle nearly a decade before? Hadn’t he alighted on the dome just before the giants attacked the city in the Age of Trax? Everyone had a story about a terrible thing that happened when the sphinx took up residence in Ephara’s Dome.

In the days that followed Medomai’s reappearance,

people expected some calamity to befall them in the absence of the gods. But life ticked on as usual, and people forgot that the ancient sphinx was still lodged in Ephara's temple. Medomai was fond of Ephara's Dome, but not because he had a particular allegiance to the God of the Polis. Inside the dome there was a replica of Nyx. When the sphinx was absent, the faux Nyx was dark and silent. But when Medomai returned to the polis, he took control of the stars twinkling on the constructed heavens under the roof. Medomai created clear constellations so visitors could see ethereal lines outlining god-forms and celestial creatures. It was less spectacular than the real Nyx, but far more orderly.

Medomai rarely allowed visitors into the dome and was notoriously hard to please. But he granted Daxos and Elspeth entrance without question. It was almost as if he'd been expecting them. Once inside, Elspeth tried hard not to gawk at Medomai in amazement. She'd seen sphinxes on Esper and was no stranger to their majesty. But Medomai, with his indigo feathered wings and leonine body, had a charisma that was completely different from the cold arrogance of the etherium-clad sphinxes of Alara. His human eyes had a piercing gaze that felt like the pull of a magnet drawing her closer to him.

"Daxos of Meletis," the sphinx spoke in a deep voice that vibrated the floor beneath them. "And Elspeth of Unknown. May I see Heliody's blade?"

Elspeth held out the *Godsend*, but he made no move to take it from her. In the dome above them, the constellations shifted and tumbled into new formations, but Elspeth couldn't tear her eyes away from the wise face of Medomai.

"It's more a spear than a sword," the sphinx rumbled. "It has been claimed by Heliod. Just like you?"

"The Silence came before Heliod could claim me," Elspeth said. She still wasn't completely sure what being "claimed" entailed, but this didn't seem to be the time to debate the meaning of the word.

"Yet you are his champion, are you not?" the sphinx asked. "You've completed an ordeal for your god. And what have you received in return?"

"What do you mean I've completed an ordeal?" Elspeth said. "I don't understand."

"You seek the divine. Did you find it?" the sphinx asked. "And you, Daxos, why do you live your life in parallel?"

Daxos and Elspeth looked at each other, unsure who should speak first. Daxos tipped his head at her, indicating that she should go first.

"I have questions about the gods," Elspeth said. "But even in their absence, I see the glory of the divine all around me."

"Yes, but did you find joy?" the sphinx asked. He looked at Daxos. "And did you find your mother?"

"Joy?" Elspeth asked. Apparently, talking to one

person at a time was too simplistic for the sphinx. Daxos sensed her confusion and spoke.

“We need your help,” Daxos said. “The Silence is a strange time, and we’re humbled by the absence of the gods. I don’t know why it is so, but the Nyxborn have become our enemies. We need someone greater than ourselves to help us understand.”

“Helioid’s greatest oracle seeks the mortal Medomai’s help,” the sphinx said. There was a shift in his tone, and he sounded unkind. “And not for the first time, either. Why not ask Helioid?”

“You know we cannot,” Daxos said. “He is in Nyx.”

“Without the gods, you are like lost children?”

“Yes,” Daxos answered.

The sphinx looked disappointed. His eyes were so black that Elspeth couldn’t see any pupils. But then the shifting light of the faux Nyx illuminated his face, and she could see the black orbs inside the blackness of his iris. The sphinx swung his head toward Elspeth. His eyes fixed on her, and she felt as though she’d been caught peering through a stranger’s window.

“Is that what you believe as well, Champion?” he asked. “Do you stand before me, lost?”

“Am I a divine protector because I wield this blade?” Elspeth said. “Am I responsible for keeping the world safe?”

“The gods have deserted you, and yet their divine children rampage across the world,” Medomai replied.

“You ask me why this is so?”

“The Nyxborn have taken the soul of a little girl,” Elspeth said. “And no one knows how to heal her.”

“Why does this surprise you?” the sphinx intoned. “Are you saying that the divine should not be a force of destruction?”

“Yes,” Elspeth said. Daxos glanced sideways at her in surprise. She realized she’d said something wrong. Of course, there were gods who were destructive. Phenax, Mogis ...

“You know very little about our gods,” Medomai said. “Why wield a blade for a god who is foreign to you? And you, Daxos of Meletis, have you ever pondered the origins of the gods? Ever question the inception of the divine?”

“‘What is, is, and ever shall be,’ ” Daxos said. Elspeth recognized the phrase as a one of the core tenants of Heliod’s teachings.

“The last time we spoke, Daxos, I gave you your future: ‘You will die at the feet of the untouched city. By the hand of someone you love.’ ” The sphinx’s tone was mocking. “If you believed me, then why are you even here?”

“What does that mean?” Elspeth interrupted. “You’re talking about Daxos’s death?”

“Elspeth is looking for incorruptibility,” the sphinx said. “She feels a responsibility. But to whom? Heliod? What has he done for you? Or is it Daxos you feel

responsible for?”

Elspeth opened her mouth to speak, but the sphinx was addressing Daxos again.

“There was nothing, once,” the sphinx said. “So which came first: the gods or people’s belief in them?”

“The gods, of course,” Daxos said. “And Kruphix was the first of all.”

“The people believed, the gods existed, and the trouble began when the gods started believing in each other,” Medomai smirked. He was laughing at them. Elspeth felt angry. A little girl needed help, and all Medomai could do was taunt them about metaphysics. She didn’t like this strange, two-headed conversation.

“Wait!” Elspeth began.

But the sphinx rose to his feet and stepped in a deliberate circle. As soon as Medomai moved, Daxos touched her hand. Elspeth understood his warning and closed her mouth. After he’d stretched like a cat, the sphinx reclined on his side as if he were going to sleep. As soon as his eyes closed, the constellations inside the dome disappeared. The ceiling became like a portal to another place and time. When they looked up, they saw a vision of a vast waterfall that seemed to stretch forever along the horizon. In this conjured vision, they were witnessing the actual edge of the world. The waves of Thassa’s sea cascaded off the edge and into Nyx below. On the horizon there was a gigantic tree growing right at the edge of the waterfall.



“Behold, Kruphix’s temple,” Medomai said with exaggerated grandiosity. “The God of Time guards the secret to getting into Nyx. But it’s not the time to seek an absent god.”

The image in the dome shifted, and now they gazed on thousands of minotaurs, both mortal and Nyxborn, charging down a mountainside onto a flat red plain. The ring shape of the mountains looked familiar to Elspeth. She recognized the flatlands and surrounding mountains near Akros.

“What’s happening in Nyx that its children are leaving in droves?” the sphinx asked. “The world has been tipped on its side and shaken. Flaied and abused so much that it’s scarred with voids.”

The vision showed a vicious-looking minotaur growing in size until he was hundreds of feet tall and towered over Akros’s walls. He slammed a divine hammer down on the city and obliterated it from existence.

“Is that Mogis?” Daxos asked. He looked shaken by the vision. “Has the God of Slaughter broken the Silence?”

“Whatever you wish for yourself, my lost children, the foundations of the world are in danger,” the sphinx warned. “Mortals must band together to stop this carnage. You can no longer be carried by the currents of your existence. The gods have deserted you, and the mortals must stand alone.”

“When will this happen?” Daxos asked. “How long do

we have to warn Akros?”

In answer to his question, a bell began to toll nearby. In the distance, they heard another bell, as if answering its warning. Soon, all the bells of Meletis began to peal in a desperate, discordant symphony.

“Your city fathers just received a messenger who told them that Akros is under siege,” the sphinx said. “The time is now.”

The vision above him focused on a black mountain looming against the sky. Suddenly the mountain exploded into a plume of fire. Both Daxos and Elspeth whirled away and shielded their eyes from the bright light. The dome went dark. Medomai opened his eyes.

“ ‘What is, is, and ever shall be,’ ” the sphinx reminded Daxos. “Are our destinies written in stone? Why don’t you tell her what she’s been asking you all along? Will the gods keep her safe?”

Daxos lifted his face to the blackness of the dome, and the sadness that Elspeth saw in his expression was overwhelming.

“Elspeth is a divine protector of Theros,” he said to the sky. “She is champion of our father, Heliod. She is destined to be the hero who saves us all.”

“What’s happening?” Elspeth cried. She felt as though Daxos and Medomai were speaking another language. Although she had understood every word, there was a layer of meaning that escaped her comprehension.

“A unified army of minotaurs has struck Akros,”

Medomai said. “If Akros falls, so will all of human civilization.”

“We’ve been called to battle,” Daxos said. He grabbed Elspeth’s hand and pulled her toward bronze doors.

“Called by whom?” Medomai called as they retreated. His voice followed them as they ran down the stone steps to the exit. “Poor two-faced boy, blind, mute, and lying. You’ll never learn.”

# CHAPTER 6

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**H**ordes of minotaurs surrounded Akros at nightfall. Heavy clouds obscured the night sky, and no light from Nyx illuminated the flatlands. In the darkness, Anax's advisors misjudged the number of enemies that surrounded their walls and recommended a counterattack. When Anax sent a contingent of soldiers out of King's Gate, they were fighting blind, overwhelmed and slaughtered in seconds. Anax ordered all the gates barred until they could better assess the situation in daylight. All night long the strange sounds of industry continued just beyond the walls. The ringing of hammers stopped just before the sun rose.

In the dim light of morning, the Akroans finally glimpsed what the invaders had been doing under the cover of darkness. They had turned Akros into prison by building a mirror image of Akros's intimidating walls. Akros was built on the edge of the Deyda River, and the minotaurs' wall was shaped like a massive U from one edge of the gorge, around the city walls, and ending at the gorge on the far side. The builders left open ground between Akros's wall and their new wall, and this is where the invaders sheltered. They finished the sturdy

fortification with terrifying speed, and by morning they were building protective shelters and catapults.

By midday the minotaurs began to taunt the city. First, they launched stones over the wall. Next, it was maggot-infested corpses. Akroan archers had to retreat from the open wall. They were easy targets for the hordes and their siege machines. The archers hid behind the slotted windows in the towers, but their arrows inflicted little damage on the teeming mass below them.

The people of Akros were stunned and trapped. Minotaurs didn't even build houses. How in the name of the gods could the simple-minded brutes be organized enough to create such a fortification? King Anax hurriedly called a war council and demanded answers. His oracles wrung their hands. His strategists babbled about the "circumvallation" and trembled in their chairs. Because anyone who knew the history of the world knew this was unprecedented.

"Why now?" Anax shouted to his strategists at the war council. "What does it have to do with the curse of the severed heads? There are Nyxborn besieging my city! Did Mogis break the Silence? Where is Iroas? Where is the Alamon? Why haven't my wandering warriors returned?"

Outside in the corridor, Cymede listened through the door to her husband's rant. She heard the quieter voice of the general in command of the warriors stationed in Akros.

“Sir, it was with great wisdom that you locked the city down after fire burned in the sky,” the general said. “We were expecting an attack against the city. Your quick action has prepared us for the worst.”

Flatterer, Cymede thought. There was no imminent attack, and after beating the war drum so loudly for naught, Anax’s leadership had been questioned.

“We believe that the omen pointed to an attack on the Alamon, not the city,” the general continued. “Under the command of a warlord named the Rageblood, the Alamon have been targeted and many of them killed. We had numerous reports of bodies in the wilderness.”

Cymede was distracted by the sound of pounding boots coming toward her. A guard rushed around the corner and skidded comically to a halt at the sight of her. He bowed low as she approached him.

“Let’s dispense with the scraping, at least while the siege is on,” Cymede said.

“I—I have a m-message for the king,” he stammered as he stood up. He towered over the queen, but then most men did.

“What is it?” Cymede asked. Everyone in the Kolophon knew that anything they could say to Anax, they could say to her as well.

“We caught the perpetrator!” the guard said. “He was leaving another head—in the king’s bed chamber!”

Cymede was not expecting that news. But she was a master of control, and her face betrayed no emotion.

“Well, then,” she said. “Take me to him.”



The full legion of the Meletian Army wasn't due to arrive at Akros for a week. Elspeth and her companions accompanied the fast-traveling Battlewise contingent and arrived in three days. Including Anthousa and her Setessan warriors, the vanguard army numbered only a hundred soldiers. When they reached the ridgeline above Akros, their first sight of the city was a shock. From their vantage point, the minotaur's fortification looked like a black noose around the city. Black smoke burned north of the wall where the tributary fed the large estates—that was where Nikka's home was located. Between the ridge and the fortification lay the flatlands, already a battlefield with burned caravans and unburied dead, killed by the approaching hordes. Nikka jumped off her horse and stared down at the flatlands in horror.

“You shouldn't have brought her here,” Daxos said.

“This is her home,” Elspeth said. “And she's not a child. She doesn't need to be shielded from the truth.”

The vanguard force set up camp on the ridge overlooking the polis. At night the black noose transformed into a ring of fire as the minotaurs lit pyres inside their fortification. The mood inside the Meletian camp was tense. The Meletian general had disagreed with Daxos's call for action and dismissed Anthousa's

opinions as irrelevant. With no contact with King Anax, the general decided the best thing to do was wait for reinforcements, either from Meletis or from the wandering Akroan army, which should have already returned in aid of their city.

Anthousa, Elspeth, Daxos, and Nikka were inside their tent. Anthousa and Daxos argued while Nikka brooded alone. Elspeth worried about Nikka while trying to keep Anthousa and Daxos from taking out their frustration on each other.

“The general is not interested in Setessa’s position—” Anthousa fumed when she was interrupted by a voice outside the tent. Someone requested entry. It was a female voice, and Anthousa opened the door flap to let her inside. A slender figure in a dark cloak stepped inside the tent. When she pushed back her hood, Nikka fell to her knees. The other three were surprised by Nikka’s reaction and stood awkwardly behind her.

“Queen Cymede!” Nikka said. “What are you doing here?”

“Please stand,” Cymede said. “I have spoken with your general, and he sent me here.”

Daxos and Elspeth exchanged a look. “Would you like to sit? Can we offer you something?” Daxos asked.

“There is no time,” Cymede said. “The minotaurs have blocked every way in or out of the city—except I know a secret way. There are tunnels above the Deyda River Gorge, but only an elementalist can make use of them.



The Deyda rejects all other attempts to tame her.”

Nikka’s eyes widened. “You came through the gorge?” she asked in disbelief.

“What can we do to help you?” Daxos asked.

“Even before the siege, my husband was struggling,” she said. “He’d believed he was under some kind of curse. Each day, we would find the severed head of a creature somewhere in the Kolophon. No matter the number of guards, the culprit placed it without being discovered. We consulted oracles and mercenaries alike.”

“What sort of creatures?” Anthousa asked.

“Nyxborn,” Cymede told her.

“Did you find out who was tormenting your husband?” Daxos asked.

“I believed it to be mystical,” she said, “but it was much more mundane. We caught a satyr sneaking into his chambers. He is some sort of mage who’s able to cloak himself and move unhindered, or at least I believe that’s how he operates. We have him locked up in a cell under the fortress.”

“With everything else that’s happening, why are you concerned with him?” Anthousa asked.

“There is some connection between the Nyxborn creatures and the siege,” Cymede said. “The minotaurs who built the wall—they are Nyxborn. When we captured the satyr, he claimed he was an oracle trying to warn us of the Nyxborn threat.”

“Could that be true?” Nikka asked.

“Perhaps, but now we can’t find out,” Cymede said. She peered first at Nikka, then Anthousa, and finally her dark eyes settled on Elspeth. “He refuses to talk to us anymore. In fact, he won’t talk to anyone except a single person.”

“Who is that?” Daxos asked.

“A woman named Elspeth,” Cymede said, and everyone at the table reared back as if she’d dropped a snake in front of them. “The general said I would find her here.”

“I am Elspeth, but I know no satyr,” she said. “What’s his name?”

“He calls himself the Stranger,” Cymede said. “Please, will you come inside and meet with him? In my heart, I feel he has the answers that will break this wretched siege.”



Once inside the Kolophon, Daxos didn’t want Elspeth to see the satyr alone. He warned her that it could all be a mage’s trick. Elspeth assured him she would be careful and left him fuming with Cymede. She heard the queen reassuring Daxos that someone would stay with her at all times while the guard led her down to the prison level.

When the guard opened the iron door to the tiny cell and Elspeth saw the satyr, she knew Daxos had worried for nothing. “Stranger” looked so small, even forlorn,

chained to the wall in the windowless cell beneath the Kolophon. He was shirtless and shivering, and red paint flaked off his skin. He had a raw and weeping scar on the left side of his chest. When the door opened and he saw Elspeth, his features brightened for a fleeting moment, and then he looked crestfallen once again. When her eyes met his, she remembered the Temple of Deceit where KING STRANGER had been written on the walls. With a sense of revulsion, Elspeth remembered the bodies in the dark corridor that led to Phenax's temple and the man who had intruded into her mind. The memory caused her throat to constrict, and she took a deep gulp of air.

"Do you want me to come inside with you?" the guard asked.

Elspeth shook her head, so the guard retreated to the hall but left the door cracked open.

"Unfortunately, I can't offer you a seat," the satyr said.

"What do you want?" Elspeth said. "And how did you know my name?"

"I have a friend who speaks highly of you," the satyr said. "His name is Sarpedon, but you may remember him as the Priest of Lies."

"I met Sarpedon once," Elspeth said. She felt disoriented. The satyr was talking about the very thing she'd been thinking about. "He barely knows me. What's your name?"

"In Akros I'm called Stranger," the satyr said.

“King Stranger?” Elspeth asked.

The satyr looked surprised. “My own people call me that. I’m surprised it’s traveled so far into the human world.”

“What do you rule over as a king?” she asked.

“It’s just a little joke among my people,” he said. “It’s a misinterpretation of my given name.”

“I saw your *people*,” Elspeth said, referring to the satyrs at the Takis Estate. “They were absurdly violent in your name.”

“I have no control over the satyrs,” King Stranger told her. “I am king of nothing.”

“So why did you ask to see me?” Elspeth asked. She felt irritable. Her skin felt like it was too tight. She wanted the satyr to hurry up and speak his piece.

“As I was trying to tell you, Sarpedon told me about you,” King Stranger said. “He fell out of favor with Phenax shortly after you spoke to him. But he’s taken up with another god, a god who would like to claim you for himself.”

“I’m not interested,” Elspeth said.

“Because you are Heliad’s Champion?” the satyr asked.

Elspeth took a deep breath, trying to calm her rapidly beating heart. “Why are you tormenting the king with the heads of the Nyxborn?”

“I am concerned with the fate of Akros,” the satyr said. “I was trying to warn Anax of the coming danger. And look, I was right.”

“Did you consider seeking an audience with the king and talking to him, rather than confusing him with cryptic nonsense?” Elspeth asked.

“I tried to seek an audience but was refused,” the satyr said. “I knew I needed to get the king’s attention. With all his oracles, they should have read the signs and given him the correct information.”

“Your timing is unfortunate,” Elspeth said. “The Nyxborn are outside the walls. It’s a little late to warn him.”

“I am no oracle,” the satyr admitted. “I thought we had more time. But it wouldn’t have done me any good to knock on his door. Anax thinks satyrs are barely smarter than barn animals. But I do love Akros. It’s a testament to the majesty of the gods and doesn’t deserve to be pillaged by minotaurs.”

“You love Akros?” Elspeth asked.

“The Iroan Games, my dear,” the satyr said. “If you’ve never witnessed the spectacle of the games, then you cannot understand the joy this city brings my people.”

During her time in Akros, people had talked about the Iroan Games constantly. Everyone was welcome in the stadium during the competitions. It didn’t matter where they were born or what god they worshiped. Satyrs especially flocked to the city to witness the events.

“But I still don’t understand what you want from me,” Elspeth said. Her head felt as if it were stuffed with straw. She sensed there would be gaps of logic in his

story, but she couldn't focus on them. And what had Sarpedon told him about her?

"I can tell you how to win this battle against the minotaurs with no loss of life—at least on your side," the satyr said.

"Why don't you tell King Anax yourself?" Elspeth asked.

"Really, Sarpedon seemed to think you were smarter than that," the satyr said with disappointment. "My previous attempts to communicate with Anax were misinterpreted. I am facing Akroan justice in a time of war. If I did try, no one would listen to me."

"Why do you suppose they will listen to me?" Elspeth asked.

"Because you're not going to tell them it was my idea," the satyr said. "Remember, you're a hero of renown. You killed Polukranos, single handedly."

"That's not true ..." Elspeth protested

"If you offer your wisdom in this situation, they will listen," the satyr said. "And Akros will be saved."

"How could you end the siege without anyone dying?" Elspeth asked, curious in spite of the strange circumstances.

"You've come in the castle by way of the Deyda River Gorge, correct?" the satyr said. "The river is the most powerful river in all of Theros. The minotaurs have built themselves a nice little wall, but it's open at both ends at the edge of the cliff above the water."

“But the water is still hundreds of feet below the city,” Elspeth said.

“Have you no imagination?” the satyr asked. “With the right mages, you could raise the river, sweep the wall clean, and send the invaders tumbling into the abyss.”

Elspeth visualized what he was saying. Cymede had just demonstrated her incredible skills bringing them up the river by manipulating the rocks and water. A single mage might not be able to do it. But ... she remembered Daxos’s playful splash on the banks of Hunter’s Crossing on the day they traveled to the Despair Lands. Daxos had divine skills that Elspeth didn’t understand. Together, two powerful mages might be able to accomplish such a feat.

“Raise the river and divert it through their fortification,” Elspeth said. The genius of his plan was dawning on her. “No one fights. No one inside the city ever has to raise a sword.”

“The minotaurs are merely swept away,” the satyr said. “They’re trapped by their own walls in a deluge from which there is no escape.”

“It’s quite clever,” Elspeth admitted. “Just tell the king. I can’t offer that idea as my own.”

“You must,” the satyr said. “If it comes from me, it’s automatically suspect. This is a horrible situation for me. I mishandled it from the beginning, and now I can do nothing but sit back and watch the city I love be destroyed.”

Elspeth felt overcome with sympathy for this small creature, who was simply trying to find a way to make up for what he had done. Something clanged in the hallway, and as she turned her head she missed the flash of red light in the satyr's eyes.

“Will you go to the war council and present the idea to the king?” the satyr asked.

Elspeth hesitated. Her mind was brimming with questions, but with one exception, she couldn't sort them into coherent sentences.

“Which god does Sarpedon pay allegiance to?” Elspeth asked. The words felt like pebbles on her tongue. “Whatever god it is, I hope he doesn't expect anything of me.”

“Oh, he doesn't,” the satyr assured her. “How about I arrange a meeting when this siege is over? I'm sure Sarpedon would like a chance to get reacquainted.”

“That's not a good idea,” Elspeth said, moving to the door. “But please, give him my regards if you see him again.”

The satyr smiled and jutted his pointy chin at her. “Good luck with the council, Elspeth,” he said. Then he said something else. It sounded like “I'll see you soon.” But the heavy door swung shut and blocked out his words.





When Elspeth joined the others at the Heroes' Podium, Anax was describing the countryside around Akros to Anthousa and Cymede. An ethereal representation of the ridges and mountains hovered above a stone table with carvings of two outward-facing bulls on its base. At the far end of the room, a marble statue of Iroas overlooked the proceedings. Daxos stood in the shadows apart from the others, leaning against a pillar. His face brightened at the sight of her.

Elspeth joined him at the edge of the room. She still felt strange and disoriented. But her heart pounded with excitement about the satyr's plan.

"Are you all right?" he asked. He brushed the hair away from her face. "You look feverish."

"I will challenge the Rageblood to a fight *between the pillars*," Anax said loudly from the center of the room.

"And what do you think that will accomplish?" Cymede asked. Her voice was deadly calm.

"The death of the Rageblood!" Anax shouted. "Are you questioning my ability to—"

"No!" Cymede retorted. "I'm questioning the minotaurs' honor. They won't respect the rules of the duel just because you do."

"You could kill the Rageblood, and the others would continue fighting without him," Anthousa agreed. "It wouldn't mean the end of the war."

"I have to act," Anax said. "I can't sit here like a mouse cowering in a hole."

“When is the full Meletis Legion due to arrive?” Cymede asked, turning to look at Daxos.

“In two days’ time, at best,” Daxos said.

“And what about Setessa?” Anax asked Anthousa. “Will your people come as well?”

“The Setessan warriors are at least a day away,” Anthousa said. “But I warn you, our numbers are small. We’ve never supported a standing army. I hear the leonins are watching from the mountains. Have you approached them for aid?”

“They might join the minotaurs,” Anax said. “Savages with savages.”

“The Alamon is decimated,” Cymede said. “I heard it from witnesses in the camp. We can’t count on help from our wandering soldiers.”

“So you expect me to sit and wait for Meletis?” Anax said angrily. “I won’t sit idly by and let them toss plague-infested carcasses into our city. If we wait for the Meletian Army, we will all be dead from the plague.”

“And I won’t sit by and let you throw your life away to prove you’re a man when no one has questioned it,” Cymede said.

Anax’s face turned purple, and Elspeth stepped forward. “There is another way ...” she began. As she explained the plan to raise the river and sweep the invaders into the gorge, she spoke quickly and without hesitation. It almost felt like the words tumbling out of her mouth weren’t her own. Shy by nature, Elspeth

didn't like speaking to large crowds. But she spoke with rehearsed perfection, and when she stopped, everyone in the room stared at her. She saw the respect in Daxos's eyes, and it made her feel worthless. But it was too late to go back and tell them that the idea had come from the satyr prisoner chained several floors beneath their feet.

"That's brilliant," Cymede said.

"It's madness," Anax said, but there was no fire in his voice. "You would have to have a mage of incredible power to manipulate the Deyda. Where could you possibly find one in time?"

"Well, you're in luck," the queen said brightly. "Daxos is revered by Heliad. His skills are unequaled in the all the world."

Daxos frowned at her for her exaggeration.

"Can you raise the river by yourself?" the king asked. He looked at the young man with new interest.

"I'll have help," Daxos said. He glared at Cymede, who said nothing. Apparently, she wasn't going to admit her own awe-inspiring ability to manipulate the elements.

"It's fine as our killing blow," Anthousa said. "But it's not enough. We need a distraction. The minotaurs must be focused on something else until the spell is completed. Or else they might be warned and escape their fortification before the river reaches them."

A war horn sounded from outside on the balcony. Anax rushed outside, and the rest followed. The

beleaguered inhabitants of Akros were spilling into the streets. All eyes were on the heavens, and many people were cheering under the blazing light of Nyx. In the sky there was a brilliant vision of Iroas, the God of Victory. The honorable god was challenging his twin brother, Mogis. The God of Slaughter charged headlong into battle. Just before they clashed, the astral light shifted into chaos again.

“Is the Silence over?” Anthousa asked.

Daxos shook his head. “No, Iroas had challenged Mogis *between the pillars*,” he said. “He’s furious that the minotaurs would dare to assault his city.”

Anax said. “It’s a sign that I must do the same.”

“Challenge Mogis *between the pillars*?” Cymede asked sarcastically.

“Challenge the Rageblood instead,” Anax said. “If I could challenge Mogis, I would. I would rather die at his hands than let these brutes hold my city hostage.”

Cymede opened her mouth to speak and then closed it. Anax turned to Daxos.

“You may pursue your course of action,” Anax said. “Raise the river. And I hope you succeed. But I have no choice. I must fight the Rageblood, man against monster.”



While Anax went to his armory to prepare for his

duel, Elspeth accompanied Cymede and Daxos down into the tunnels below the Kolophon.

“You’ll work together?” Elspeth said. “Together you can raise the river?”

“That’s the plan,” Daxos said as Cymede jerked open the wooden door onto the sheer drop-off above the river.

“Cymede could probably handle it all by herself.”

“Will you act as Anax’s second?” Cymede asked Elspeth. “If he falls in the duel, will you stand in for him?”

“Anthousa would gladly be his second,” Daxos interrupted.

“I’ll do it,” Elspeth assured Cymede. Anthousa had already departed for the camp to warn the Meletian general of their intentions. Anthousa had insisted on a backup plan, just in case the Deyda River failed to engulf the invaders.

“Manipulating the water is going to take some time,” Cymede warned. “We’ll be deep in the gorge, and it won’t happen immediately.”

“I understand,” Elspeth said. “I’ll do my best to help the king. Why did you not tell him of your abilities?”

“Anax is mistrustful of Keranos, and he would not like it if I had power beyond him,” Cymede said.

“Even if it was your own power and not a divine gift?” Daxos said.

“Especially then,” Cymede said.

Cymede turned away from them and walked a few

paces back up the tunnel. Elspeth knew the queen was giving her a chance to say good-bye. Daxos stood on the very edge of the cliff and peered down at the torrent of water raging below. Watching him, Elspeth was struck by fear. Fear that she might not see Daxos again.

She tried to say something and stopped. She tried again, but no coherent words would come out. Daxos grinned. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I understand.”

Cymede appeared beside them. “If you’re not going to kiss her, then we should get going.”

Elspeth felt herself blushing as Daxos gave her a quick hug and disappeared down the rope ladder.

“You’re going with the man I love,” Cymede said. “And I’m going with yours.”

Elspeth didn’t argue. “Hopefully you’ll finish it before they ever come to blows. And Cymede, I don’t even know the rules of the duel. If things go badly, I’m happy to break them.”

“And I’ll keep an eye on Daxos for you,” Cymede said. “Don’t wait too long to embrace how you feel for him, Elspeth. Life is short and it’s not worth living with regrets.”

# CHAPTER 7



King Anax and his men gathered in the courtyard as the last stars of Nyx flickered above them. Elspeth had volunteered to be the king's second, but he neither accepted nor refused her offer. The horses stamped impatiently. Behind them, Akros was as still and silent as a catacomb. But the roaring of the minotaur invaders could be heard beyond the majestic walls of the city. It sounded to Elspeth as if they were celebrating a victory that was not yet determined. She marveled again at the inscrutable nature of fate as an attendant adjusted the leather strap on the bridle of Anax's horse. In the next moments, did it matter what she did? Or was the ending already threaded into the loom of existence? Infinite worlds offer unfathomable possibilities. How could anyone—even gods—turn creation into clockwork?

"The rules of the duel are timeless and irrefutable," Anax told Elspeth. "Both parties must be allowed to approach the duel unmolested."

The king sat confidently atop a large black horse with a bronze champron engraved with the king's crest. His composure was immaculate. Elspeth's mind flashed to other worlds, other moments just before battle. In

particular, she remembered Koth on her last day on Phyrexia. She would never forget his words: “If there is no victory, then I will fight forever.” His composure had been immaculate, too.

There were no crowds to witness the king’s departure—just Elspeth and the handful of soldiers who would ride with him. The king’s guards opened the inner entrance to Lateman’s Gate, which consisted of two iron doors at the end of a reinforced corridor that ran through the thick wall itself. Once they entered, they would follow the torchlit corridor to the outer entrance. Under normal circumstances they would exit onto the open flatlands surrounding the city. Now the door would open onto the invaders between the two sets of walls where they could be easily torn apart by their enemies. Elspeth heard the door clang shut behind them. No matter their welcome from the minotaurs, the city was still sealed off to the enemy.

“The combat ground must be clear and unobstructed, with no chance of ambush or trap,” Anax continued as the horses plodded up the flagstones of the narrow corridor. It was so narrow that the king’s legs almost brushed the rough stone walls. Directly behind him, Elspeth rode uneasily on a borrowed horse. At the end of the corridor, a lone guard prepared to open the outermost entrance of Lateman’s Passage. Rhordon the Rageblood had agreed to fight Anax *between the pillars*. They were about to find out whether the Rageblood was



lying or if he meant to abide by the rules.

“Prior to the duel, priests must consecrate the area as a *temenos*, a plot of sacred ground. It’s bound by spells so the participants can’t use magic to harm each other,” Anax explained. Explaining the rules of the combat to Elspeth seemed to bring the king comfort. “The Rageblood and I must fight to the death with only physical strength.”

He glanced back at Elspeth. She didn’t respond. She’d made no promises nor was she bound by rules that would let her stand by and watch Anax die. She left herself open to the possibilities determined by the field of battle. Anax slowed his horse when they reached the outer door.

“Your bravery is commendable,” King Anax said to the young guard who had volunteered for the duty of opening the outer door.

“For the glory of Iroas!” the soldier said.

“For the glory of Iroas!” the king responded.

The soldier pulled the lever and the gate swung open. Elspeth braced herself for an onslaught of rage. But instead the roars and clanging of weapons fell silent. For a moment, rays of sunlight blinded her. Then she saw that the minotaurs had left a path of clear ground for them. Without hesitation, Anax spurred his horse through the sea of invaders, and Elspeth followed.

The air stank of rotten meat and fresh blood, and Elspeth almost choked. On their left side, there was a

mass of Nyxborn minotaurs. They seemed unreal and pristine, as if they were illusions created by a trickster mage. Elspeth wondered if pain would even register in their shadowy brains. On the right side, the mortal minotaurs with their scars and scabs leered at them as they rode by. Many were missing limbs and carried rusty makeshift weapons. They looked stupid and brutal. Which side would be easier to fight? Neither, Elspeth thought. I'd like to fight neither.

Two minotaurs yanked open the makeshift gate of their fortification, giving Elspeth a clear view of the flatland beyond. Even though it was daytime, Nyx was visible in the sky above the *temenos*, which had been consecrated for the duel. A shaft of light from Nyx illuminated the spot where the men would fight.

As they rode forward, Anax spoke to Elspeth again. "Once the duel begins, if either opponent steps out of the consecrated ground, he is forfeit and considered a coward. At no time may anyone accept aid from his patron god."

The Meletian soldiers were amassed along the far side of the combat ground. They were accompanied by dozens of centaur warriors, who had arrived to offer aid to Akros. Elspeth couldn't see Anthousa from this distance, but if she followed the plan, Anthousa should be on the left flank with the rest of the warriors from Setessa. Elspeth surveyed the combined armies. There were fewer soldiers than she expected. Maybe it was

because they were spread out across open ground compared to the fortification where the minotaurs were packed together. But if fighting broke out, their side didn't have advantage in numbers.

There was movement at the northern edge of the combat ground, and Elspeth saw Rhordon the Rageblood for the first time. The Rageblood was a huge minotaur with a broken horn and a blood-caked sword. He was bigger and heavier than the others—a giant among his kind. He wore primitive armor fashioned from bone plating and tattered hides.

Anax turned to look at Elspeth. “An opponent may choose to name a second to continue his fight if he falls. I have named you, Elspeth the Hydra Killer. Do you accept?”

“I will fight if you need me,” Elspeth said. She carefully avoided “accepting” anything, just in case that mystically bound her to the rules.

As the king dismounted, Rhordon bellowed a thunderous war cry that echoed across the valley. Elspeth thought of Daxos and Cymede in the gorge preparing their massive spell—the triumph over the elements that would end this all. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder at the invaders' fortification. Thankfully, they had closed the gate again. The minotaurs had constructed a few platforms along the top of their wall. These were packed with watchers, but the vast majority of their enemies remained on the ground

behind their wall—in the direct path of the diverted river, if all went well. Elspeth slid to the ground and let another soldier take the reins of her horse.

On the other side of the Nyx-enclosed ground, the Rageblood stamped and roared impatiently. His size was staggering. He must have stood eight feet tall, and that was hunched over. His horns could gut a man, and his bloody sword gleamed with infernal fire. Anax looked small—Anax *was* small—compared to the monster.

Elsbeth looked the king in the eye. “He’s nothing compared to you,” she said.

The king drew his *kopis*, a single-edged sword with a curved blade. He stood directly across from the Rageblood. The light from Nyx bathed them both in a strange blue glow. An eerie chime rang across the flatlands, and the enemies stepped onto the battlefield.



Near its surface, the rushing water of the Deyda River was deafening. Daxos had never been so close to the river, and as he stood just inches above its raging power, he was more intimidated than when they’d faced the hydra. Cymede had created rock ledges for them to stand across from each other. He was doing his best to aid her in raising the flow of water rushing below him. But his arms ached, his legs shook, and it felt as though all the energy had drained out of his body.

Spellcasting for Cymede was no passive thing. He watched her with amazement as she arched and turned and bent her arms. He could feel the energy cascading off her and mingling with the ferociousness of the water. His own magic was much quieter and more passive. Rather than match her style, he needed to do this his own way. Daxos crouched down on the ledge, soaked and shivering from the spray, and looked for a quiet place inside his mind so he could join with Cymede.

Finally, he could feel the origin of the river far away in the mountains. He achieved a sense of its wellspring, on the far side of the known world. He could see how it bubbled out of the ground, just a trickle of water, and gained strength with every passing mile. With his heightened senses, he could perceive the fierce jagged edges of Cymede's spell. He merged them with the smooth curves of his own magic. And where the two met, the river began to rise.

His concentration consumed him. But on the edges of his consciousness, he was aware that Cymede kept raising their makeshift ledges to keep pace with the rising water. The top of the gorge—and the ominous roiling sky—was getting closer. Soon, the effort became painful, and all he could do was endure it. He could feel tears opening in the pathways of his brain. Veins of blackness—not a void, but something more sinister—began to cloud his vision. He heard his mother's voice: *How could you leave me alone?*

The ledge tipped sideways, and Daxos tumbled over, nearly slipping into the churning water. Cymede moved for him as her slab of stone expanded to become a bridge across the expanse. He met her at the center, and she steadied him. The top of the gorge was only ten feet away.

“Hold steady,” she ordered him. “We’re taking too long.”

“I don’t know if I can,” he said.

“Then seek Heliod,” she said.

“He won’t break the Silence,” Daxos said. “Of all the gods, he won’t be the one who breaks it.”

“If your god won’t, then mine will,” she said. “You’ll have to bear the weight of the river and give me time. Can you do it, for Elspeth?”

Daxos wasn’t sure how much more he could withstand, but he motioned for her to do what she needed to do. Cymede lifted her face to the sky. When her attention left the river, he felt intense pressure, like the hand of a god pressing against him, trying to grind his bones to dust. He frantically cast stabilizing magic to maintain the spell. He was no longer trying to raise the river—just keep it in place while the queen implored Nyx for aid.

“Keranos!” Cymede screamed. “Help us! Help me save Akros, and I’ll give myself to you. I am yours to claim.”



Anax's blade sliced through the flesh on the Rageblood's arm. It was a superficial wound but still drew first blood. The minotaur slashed his stolen blade through the air wildly, but Anax dodged. Anax baited his enemy first left, then right. He was quicker than his opponent, but the Rageblood seemed to be getting angrier rather than tired from the sword play.

The minotaur brought his sword directly down, as if to split Anax's head in half. Again the king sidestepped, and Rhordon's blade hit the ground and lodged in the dirt. The minotaur left it there and went after the king with his meaty hands. Anax kept his strategy, but he aimed for the bull man's extremities. A master of sword play, the king struck at the muscular legs, dodged, and then circled around and struck low again.

Anax's blade hit flesh repeatedly, and the blood gushed from the gashes. It ran in rivulets down Rhordon's legs and onto the ground, and Elspeth could tell that Anax was beginning to feel invincible. He was trying to hit the perfect spot, maybe at the back of the ankle or below the knee, and sever the tendon. This might incapacitate the minotaur, but Elspeth didn't think it would ensure victory. Even dragging a leg, the Rageblood could still crush Anax's skull between his fingers.

Elspeth's eyes constantly shifted from the combat ground to the minotaur's fortification to Anthousa and her allies waiting on the flatlands. She could see the left flank of soldiers was—as planned—slowly moving closer

to them, like the top half of a crab's pincer. Anthousa herself led the slow-motion charge. There were minotaurs watching from their wall, but they faced away from Anthousa's soldiers and were focused on the combat. So far, not one of them had noticed the humans' gradual approach.

The Rageblood was getting frustrated with the quick-footed antics of the king of Akros. He barreled at him mindlessly and ran into the trap that Anax had planned. With a deft motion, Anax cut deep into the flesh of the minotaur's leg and severed the tendon below the knee. The Rageblood roared in pain and fell to one knee. The minotaurs watching from the walls clamored in anger and shouted a warning to the hordes waiting below. The gate of their fortification rattled. Elspeth feared that if they knew their leader was losing, they would leave their fortification and attack the humans outside their walls. Then Cymede and Daxos's work would be for nothing.

Desperately, she looked toward Deyda River, hoping for a miracle. But there was no sign of her friends or the torrent of water they hoped to raise from the gorge. With a sick feeling, Elspeth raised a hand in signal to Anthousa. But abruptly, the sky over Akros darkened from blue to deep purple. It was so dramatic that everyone could feel a change in the air as the temperature plummeted. Black clouds descended toward the Deyda River. Pockets of light shone through the thick layers of roiling clouds. The shifting sky revealed the



face of Keranos.

Except for the pillar of light shining down on Anax and the Rageblood, Keranos's storm clouds had transformed the day into night. Mogis materialized in Nyx, but he was visible only to oracles with god-sight. Sensing the presence of Keranos, Mogis gave a boon to the Rageblood. The God of Slaughter healed his oracle's severed leg and infused him with violence beyond what a mortal alone could conjure. Anax, who had raised his sword to finish the Rageblood, didn't have time to swing his weapon before the healed minotaur lunged forward and clamped his hands around the king's throat. Elspeth, who could not see Mogis directly, sensed his interference.

"Treachery!" she yelled and rushed onto the combat ground. But she was too late. The Rageblood lifted the king into the air with one hand. With his other hand, he drove his blade into the king's stomach. It pierced Anax's body completely, and the sword tip emerged through his back. The minotaur dropped the king, who tumbled to the ground in a heap. Infused with Mogis's boon, the minotaur swung his blade down at the motionless king. The power of the blow would cleave the man in two.

But Elspeth managed to lunge forward and redirect the killing strike with the point of her spear-blade. Her unexpected presence caught the Rageblood by surprise and he stumbled away from her. She positioned herself between the minotaur and the injured king. The

minotaur paused for an instant while he evaluated his diminutive female opponent. His red eyes assessed her blade, and then he charged her before she could cast any battle spells. With his bulk barreling at her, she immediately understood the merit of Anax's strategy. Outweighed by several hundred pounds, Elspeth would be barreled over if she tried to meet any frontal attack. Like her king, she sidestepped around the attack at the last second. But her target wasn't the extremities—it was his eyes. She spun to the left and jabbed her spear-blade while still in motion. The tip punctured the Rageblood's right eye and mutilated the flesh. The minotaur howled in surprise.

Elspeth spun left again and positioned herself directly behind her opponent. She aimed her spear-blade for the flesh just below his rib cage. With terrifying speed, the minotaur whirled around and swung his blade level at her neck to decapitate her. Her spear-blade was traveling in the wrong direction to parry. The best she could do was bring the spear-blade perpendicular to the ground and pray to Heliod for the strength to block the Rageblood's powerful strike.

The edge of his bloody sword slammed against the glowing orbs of her spear-blade. When the two weapons clashed, white energy spiraled from Elspeth's weapon. The shock wave from the impact threw both the opponents backward beyond the boundaries of the *temenos*. At the sight of the fallen Rageblood, the

minotaurs flung open the gate of their fortification and surged out onto the flatland. In response, the Meletian general shouted for his own army to charge ahead and meet their enemies in battle. In Nyx, Mogis felt the first volleys of war, and he roared with pleasure.

“Anthousa!” Elspeth screamed.

The Setessans were already at the gate. In one coordinated motion, they rushed forward and closed the gate, crushing several minotaurs between the boards. The king’s guards joined them as they struggled to hold the gate closed. The planks shook with the fury of the trapped minotaurs. A searing bolt of lightning streaked across the sky and blasted into the gorge.

Mogis launched his divine sarissa into the heart of the storm, but Keranos was like a mist and could not be damaged. Mogis’s weapon merely passed through him. The God of Storms funneled his power into the gorge. There was a wailing, explosive sound, and the river rose up into the sky. But Keranos wasn’t content to just raise the river. Under his power, it transformed into an elemental creature, slender like a serpent but with the head of a dragon. Its core was Nyxborn but its essence was the raging child of Keranos and Cymede. The elemental creature whipped through the heart of the minotaurs’ fortification. It scalded the skin from their bones even as it flung them into the watery abyss. Cymede stood at the top of the gorge and watched as the corpses were consumed by the flames and searing mists

below.

Seeing the destruction of his kin with his one eye, the Rageblood gaped as the river elemental made a second strike against the minotaurs. It swept the flatland clear of any trace of the fortification. As it passed, the Rageblood flung himself into the steaming deluge and was swept away. Elspeth knew that such a creature would rather die than be defeated and captured by humans.

When the storm had passed, Akros's walls were pristine and sparkling. The sky above the city was so clear that not even the oracles could see what had become of Mogis in Nyx.



As the final crest of water fell back into the gorge, Cymede came to rest on the opposite side. She fell to her knees as the river elemental vanished into the bubbling water. Daxos shouted joyfully, but Cymede stayed motionless with a defeated posture. Above Cymede, the storm clouds were blowing away. With his god-sight, Daxos glimpsed the face of Keranos in the clouds. His eyes were fixed on the queen. He had longed for her, and now she had offered herself to him. He was ready to claim the oracle that he had so long desired. Daxos saw the look of sorrowful recognition on the queen's face.

Helpless, Daxos watched as Cymede transformed into a pillar of fire and crimson light that trailed upward to

Nyx, then dispersed into nothing but the wind.

# CHAPTER 8



The red sunset bled across the horizon as the victory celebration began. In front of the gates of Akros, the minotaurs' fortifications had been washed away, and in their place there was a sea of colorful tents that housed the soldiers from Meletis and Setessa. The venerable walls of the city were draped with Akroan banners that rippled majestically in the wind. An enormous bonfire burned just outside of King's Gate. Near the fire there was a makeshift platform where musicians were tuning their instruments. The king's personal chefs from the fortress were hard at work on a feast for the revelers. Even though he was gravely wounded, Anax expected the celebration to continue without him.

Weary from her battle with the Rageblood, Elspeth didn't want to join the revelers. She was with Nikka and Anthousa inside their blue canvas tent near the edge of the encampment. It was a sturdy two-room arrangement with wooden doors and oak furniture that had been brought from inside the Kolophon. To Elspeth it felt as if she were staying in a well-furnished house, not a makeshift dwelling.

"The battle is over," Nikka snapped. "You can set your

weapon down.”

Nikka pried Elspeth's blade from her stiff fingers and set it aside on a wooden table. Elspeth winced as Anthousa helped her unstrap her armor and lift it over her head.

“Your injuries are not so bad,” Anthousa said as she inspected the bruises and cuts on Elspeth's back.

Nikka looked for herself. “Yeah, if you don't mind bones poking through your shoulder.”

Elspeth craned her neck around as if she could see her own back. She winced in pain.

“Sit still,” Anthousa said, giving Nikka an annoyed look. “The Rageblood never took your back. Where are these from?”

“One of the minotaurs who escaped the fortification,” Elspeth said. “I was watching Keranos and not my back.”

Anthousa made a disapproving sound. “I can fix it,” she said.

Elspeth was accustomed to healing magic that was quiet and passive. Anthousa's spell made her feel as though she was being shaken, the muscles stretched and tied in knots, and the bones jammed back together. And at the end, it felt as though Anthousa punched her to close the wound.

“All better,” Anthousa said.

“Uh, thank you,” Elspeth said. She still ached, but she could handle that level of pain. She reached for her armor plate, and Nikka smacked her hand.

“Good gods, woman, leave the metal for once,” she said. She tossed Elspeth a bundle of soft material. Inside was an Akroan-style dress with a long white skirt and crimson along the edges.

Elspeth stepped behind the changing screen. The canvas door of the tent opened, and she peered around the edge. Daxos balanced two platters of food, which he carried into the back room where there were couches arranged in a circle around a blazing brazier. Elspeth hurriedly finished dressing. The clothes seemed ridiculously tight to Elspeth and she had nothing to tie her hair back. But she was starving and wasn't about to put back on her filthy clothes from the battle.

“They're celebrating even with Anax injured?” Elspeth asked as she entered the pleasant warmth of the back room. Her friends had begun preparing souvlaki. Meat and vegetables on skewers sizzled over the brazier. Everyone in the room stopped and stared at Elspeth when she appeared.

“What?” Elspeth asked defensively.

Anthousa shrugged and turned back to the food. “You look different with your hair down,” she said.

Embarrassed, Elspeth plopped down beside Nikka on one of the couches. She fiddled with one of the silver metal skewers, which had a tiny winged horse on the end of it. Meletians put the symbol of Heliod on everything, even their cooking utensils. Daxos handed her a platter of food.



“Where did you put my armor?” Elspeth asked Nikka.

“Okay, first, I’m not your squire,” Nikka snapped. “Second, it’s on the table by your stupid spear. Third, if you put it back on, I will kill you myself.”

There was a stunned silence, and then the three adults burst out laughing. Even Elspeth, who had been thinking about doing precisely that.

“And since I’m not your squire, make your own souvlaki,” Nikka said with a faint smile.

“It looks pretty self-evident,” Elspeth said. “I think I can handle it.”

They ate and chatted, carefully avoiding talk of the battle. But as the music grew louder outside, Nikka became gloomier. She glared at the walls of the tent as if blaming them for not keeping the noise out. Daxos had whispered Cymede’s fate to Elspeth and Anthousa, but they had kept the news from Nikka. Even Elspeth agreed that more bad news right away might put her in a dangerous state of mind.

“This is stupid,” Nikka said, dropping her half-cooked food beside the platter. “Why are we celebrating?”

“Anax ordered his people to celebrate,” Daxos said.

“Celebrate his gutting?” Nikka snarled. “Celebrate the deaths of all the wandering soldiers?”

“Honor the gods for your success with a revel, or else they might not give you victory in the future,” Daxos said. “Celebrate the living and honor the dead.”

Elspeth recognized the phrase from her studies in

Meletis. It was a teaching of Heliod's, and apparently Iroas's as well. Elspeth knew Daxos meant well, but it sounded trite in the face of Nikka's turmoil.

"Will the king live?" Anthousa asked.

"I healed him as much as I could, and then his own people took over," Elspeth said. "I think he'll survive."

"People died!" Nikka practically shouted. "My father's estate was burned to the ground."

"Where is your father?" Anthousa asked.

"Meeting with advisors," Nikka said. "He's too *busy* for me tonight."

"He said he'd come for you first thing tomorrow," Elspeth assured her. "You don't have to go to the celebration. Just stay in here with us."

Nikka glared first at Elspeth and then at Daxos. "Yeah, right," she said. "Like I want to stay here."

There was an awkward silence, and then Anthousa changed the subject. "What is the state of the gods?" she asked.

"From what I can feel, the Silence isn't over," Daxos said. "Mogis broke it, as did Keranos. But I still can't hear the other gods. I hear something strange, but it isn't the gods."

"What does it sound like?" Elspeth asked.

"There's a noise like the crackle and rush of fire," Daxos said. "Maybe it's an echo from Keranos's power. I'm not sure. I've never heard anything like it."

There was a loud crash outside, and everyone jumped.

Uproarious laughter could be heard coming from the area near the bonfire.

“Something is wrong,” Nikka blurted. “Everything just feels wrong. Can you feel it in the air? I can’t hear that sound, Daxos. But the air feels like needles against my skin.”

Elspeth laid her hand on Nikka’s arm. “What do you mean?”

But Nikka was having none of her sympathy. She shook off Elspeth’s arm and stalked into the entry room.

“Where are you going?” Elspeth called to Nikka. She looked at Daxos and Anthousa. “Should we follow her?”

“I’m going for a walk!” Nikka screamed back.

Anthousa shook her head. “Let her be. In Setessa we would put a difficult adolescent to work or send her on a very arduous errand in the forest. Maybe you should consider that tomorrow.”

“Is it safe?” Elspeth asked Anthousa.

“I’ll take something to protect me,” shouted Nikka, who had been eavesdropping from the other room. “Leave me alone!”

“There’s not an enemy for miles,” Anthousa said.

“She’s all right,” Daxos whispered. “I think her father’s inattention hurt her most of all.”

There was a thud as Nikka fumbled with something heavy. She tried valiantly to slam the canvas door of the tent. And then she was gone.

“It’s the sense of letdown after a battle,” Anthousa said.

“Young people have a harder time with the pendulum of emotions.”

“She’ll probably stroll by the dancers and end up having fun,” Daxos said.

“Speaking of dancing,” Anthousa said. She was suddenly in a hurry to leave. “I have a deep fondness for Akroan pipes and lyres. If you’ll excuse me ...”

As soon as Anthousa left, Daxos came and sat beside Elspeth. They’d barely had any time to talk since he’d returned from the gorge with the sad news of Cymede. She leaned against him, and he put his arm around her shoulders.

“Did I tell you I’m glad you’re alive?” he said.

“I was going to say the same thing to you,” she replied.

“Do you want to go out there?” he asked. “Dance to the pipes?”

“Not really,” she said. “I can hear the music fine from here.”

“Do you want to talk?” he asked. His hand rested lightly on the back of her neck. She turned to him, and he grinned at her. It was an anything-is-okay-with-me grin. She took a deep breath and smiled back. Suddenly, it was like everything in the world made sense.

“I don’t want to talk,” Elspeth said. “Not even a little bit.”

She was the one who reached for him.



Outside the noise of the revel grew louder and louder. It sounded oddly systematic, almost as if it had a heartbeat of its own. The ebb and flow of raucous laughter sounded contrived, but Elspeth couldn't pinpoint how, or why. Through a cacophony of wails and twisted laughter, her surroundings came into gradual focus. Daxos was beside her, asleep. They lay tangled together on the couch. The hour seemed late. It had been early evening when Nikka had stormed out of the tent, but now it felt like the darkest hour before dawn.

She wondered if she should sit up, but she didn't have the will to do so. She tried to shake Daxos, but her touch was like a kitten's whiskers against his arm. The air was tinged with spellcasting. Someone had affected her and Daxos with powerful magic. Had Nikka done another sleep spell like that disastrous day on the caravan? The girl had been upset and angry, but why would she do something like this? Besides, a sleep spell wouldn't control the music or the escalating thud of dancers' feet. It was more powerful than Nikka, and whatever it was, it sounded frantic and unhinged. Beside her, Daxos stirred and mumbled something. Elspeth tried to inch closer to hear him.

"Will you stay with me?" he whispered. His lips barely moved.

She wanted to answer. She wanted to say: Forever. I'll

stay with you forever. But something was wrong. Elspeth felt as though she'd drunk a flask of wine, but she'd had nothing but water. Her face was pressed into the pillow, and it felt too heavy to lift. It was as if a second, invisible skin immobilized her in an ethereal cocoon. She heard the canvas door open, and someone entered the tent. The inability to move, or even to sit up and look around, made her panic. She wanted to flail, to thrash, to rip open the walls and flee into the night. But all she could manage was breathing. And those breaths were short, sharp, and desperate.

Outside a woman screamed. It was an unearthly cry of pain. There was a growling sound, as if a beast prowled around the perimeter of the tent. Frantic shouts rang out in the distance, but sounds of music and dancing continued. The revelers must be oblivious to the threat of violence lurking on the edges of the shifting firelight.

A shadow fell over Elspeth and Daxos.

Elspeth moved then, not of her own will but as if invisible strings were attached to her shoulders. Under someone else's control, she found herself sitting on the edge of the couch with Daxos still sprawled motionless behind her. Her hands were folded neatly in her lap with her chin lowered in enforced deference. Two people had entered the room, but she could see only their lower legs. One of them was a man, but the other had the hooves and crooked legs of a satyr. Whatever was controlling her forced her to raise her chin. And Elspeth

saw the face of King Stranger, the prisoner that she'd talked to inside the Kolophon of Akros. Behind him was a man in a dark hooded cloak with gold trim. His face was obscured by shadows.

"Elspeth," the satyr said. "It's time you know my real name ..."

"Xenagos," she replied as he placed the information in her addled brain. The effect of his spell intensified, and her senses became hyperaware. The blue of the canvas walls stung her eyes, the wails from outside pierced her ears, and the smell of burning flesh made her nauseous. Xenagos forced her to look into his yellow eyes, and the slits of his pupils widened and expanded under her forced scrutiny. She could see the fingerprints in the red paint smeared on his chest. She could hear his raspy breath. She could sense the shard of metal lodged near his rapidly beating heart. It was an arrowhead. He, too, had been someone's prey.

Xenagos grabbed Elspeth's wrist and yanked her nearly off the couch while she desperately tried to dispel his magic over her. Muddled by fear and disorientation, she couldn't shake it. Her own spells kept slipping away from her mind, as unattainable as leaves swirling in a storm.

"Where is Purphoros's Sword?" Xenagos demanded. His minions were trashing everything as they looked for the blade. Her eyes flicked toward the wooden table where she had left it. From her vantage point on the

couch, she could only see a corner of the table. But if her blade had been there, it would be clearly visible to everyone in the room.

“You thought it was in that room?” Xenagos shoved her back down on the couch. “Stupid girl. She didn’t even know it’s gone.”

The satyr motioned to the hooded figure, who stepped forward. The small fire burning in the brazier illuminated the man’s features. Elspeth would have screamed, if the satyr had permitted her the use of her mouth. The hooded figure was Sarpedon, the man she had met in the Temple of Phenax in Akros. He was the Priest of Lies who had read her mind and urged her to seek Heliad, but his handsome face had been ruined. His lips had been cut off and the skin sewn together with rough black stitches. His veiled eyes were stark and gray, like the sky before a storm.

“Phenax didn’t like the way Sarpedon handled his encounter with you, planeswalker,” Xenagos sneered. “But an oracle as powerful as he is never unclaimed for long. No vessel is too damaged for the God of the Underworld to covet for his own.”

Outside, blades clashed against each other. They sliced into flesh as desperate laughter turned to mad ravings. The discordant music was accompanied by what sounded like a pack of hounds tearing into their prey. Again, Elspeth tried to force the satyr out of her mind and recapture her free will. But the only memory she could



conjure was being with Daxos at Hunter's Crossing, and the memory of a forest gave her no power at all.

"Fortunately, Erebos was willing to share him with me," Xenagos said. "And for such a small price. He's wanted Daxos for such a long time."

Elspeth tried to cry out and warn her friend. But Daxos was still not moving, and her fear for him made her weak. The satyr forced Elspeth to stand with Sarpedon directly in front of her, looking down at her with his strange gray eyes. Since he'd been claimed by Erebos, his body was filled with the air of the Underworld. When he breathed, he filled the room with poisonous despair.

The choking air of the Underworld filled Elspeth's lungs. It reeked of dark earth, grief, and perverted desires. It was like the air in Athreos's Shrine where the souls begged for passage away from the misery between life and death.

"Kill her," the satyr told Sarpedon. "Kill them both. I'll find the sword without her."

The Priest of Lies kissed her with his mutilated mouth, and Elspeth could feel the life draining from her. Her strength and will to live leaked from her pores like water through a sieve.

"You know the futility of existence," Xenagos said as he turned to leave. "You know what it's like to feel lost in the infinite. You should have found a world and made the pathetic mortals bow before you. You should have crushed your enemies beneath your feet and made them

whimper at the sight of you. You should have done that ... anywhere but here.”

When Xenagos was gone, the Priest of Lies clamped his hand around her throat. But Elspeth found a ledge in her mind and braced herself against it. She envisioned the storied battlefield of the Four Winds Plateau where she and Daxos had faced the hydra. She felt the wind sweeping across the open expanse. She cast off the satyr’s magic and slammed her elbow into the priest’s face.

The unnatural skin on the priest’s face split open, and his jaw dangled off his skull. Searching desperately for a weapon, Elspeth kicked the priest away from her. He reeled back and crashed into one of the wooden couches on the far side the room.

“Daxos!” Elspeth screamed, trying to rouse her friend.

The Priest of Lies regained his balance, and Elspeth’s legs felt too shaky to fight him hand to hand. She darted across the room to give herself some distance. She wanted to cast a spell to make him vanish out of existence, but slowing him down was the best she could manage at the moment. The priest jerked to a halt, there was a flash of light, and he paused. Elspeth picked up an end table and bashed it against him. Under the influence of her spell, he couldn’t move to defend himself. He crumpled to the floor. As he fell, he cracked his head against the heavy wooden arm of the couch. The impact split his skull open, but Elspeth didn’t notice because

she'd bolted across the floor and flung herself beside Daxos. She shook him roughly and begged him to open his eyes. Behind her, the noxious fumes of the Underworld leaked out of Sarpedon's corpse as if a shaft to the Underworld had opened inside the tent itself. Daxos's eyes flew open.

"I forgive you," he said.

But the Breath of Erebus overcame her, and Elspeth was jarred into a very dark place. Gone were the blue walls of the tent and the sounds of madness outside. Elspeth believed that she was back inside the chamber on New Phyrexia, beneath the throne room where Koth had left her. He'd sealed her legs into the rock floor and told her to planeswalk away from the ruined plane. But the Phyrexians had broken down the door faster than she could cast her spell. The nightmarish Obliterator loomed above her. Where was her sword? She fumbled desperately. She must have dropped it. Her hand closed on something sharp and metal. It felt smaller than her sword, but she snatched it up, desperate for anything that would save her from the Obliterator.

The Obliterator was an abomination designed solely to kill. She saw the rows of teeth ripped from the mouths of living beings. Multiple bladelike arms shredded the air while noxious fumes leaked out of its chest cavities. It wore the skin of the dead and carried a legacy of crushed and broken lives. It took a single step, and it was on top of her. She swung the sharp metal wildly at the creature.

It was trying to grab her, throw her to the ground, and pin her arms. With all her strength, she plunged her small weapon into its heart.

The Obliterator reeled back and crashed to the ground. She'd killed it. She stared down at its grotesque corpse. She was reliving the moment of her deepest despair, but the circumstances were different. When she'd faced it before, she'd been gravely wounded. This time, she'd slaughtered it, this Phyrexian weapon of pain and chaos. Why didn't she feel triumph? The ground beneath her feet buckled, as if it were fighting its own demons. A rumbling noise filled her ears. And there was screaming. Thousands of people were screaming in pain. It sounded as if they were screaming her name.

*Elspeth! Elspeth!* It was just one person screaming her name. She felt hands on her back. They plucked at her dress ineffectually, like a child trying to move her. She whirled around and saw Nikka, sobbing, with a look of absolute horror on her face.

"It's dead, Nikka," Elspeth assured her. "The Obliterator is dead."

Like the covers of a book being slammed together, Elspeth experienced a strange collision of reality. Nikka and the Phyrexians belonged in different worlds. It was Nikka who was still screaming her name. *Elspeth! Elspeth!* She whirled back to the corpse of the Obliterator. Except it wasn't what she expected to see. It was a human lying on the ground. It was *Daxos*. He was

dead. He'd been stabbed through the throat with one of the metal skewers from the brazier. She looked down at her hands, which were bloody and shaking.

In one hand, Nikka clutched Elspeth's spear-blade. She shoved it at Elspeth.

"I'm sorry," Nikka babbled. "I'm sorry. I took your blade. Elspeth, I'm sorry."

"Who killed Daxos?" Elspeth asked stupidly. She took the spear-blade from Nikka. The girl's eyes grew wide and she backed away as if Elspeth might hurt her.

"You!" Nikka cried. Then she started screaming incoherently.

Something thrashed against the tent. Strange, clawlike hands reached under the tent, trying to tear it open. Daxos was dead, but had she done it? His eyes stared lifelessly. His chest, stained with blood, did not move. His heart was still. The ripping sound of the monsters tearing into the tent jolted Elspeth into action. She could see distorted, grotesque faces peering in from the outside.

She grabbed Nikka's hand and pulled her into the entry room. She grabbed her chest plate and threw it on over her head. She jammed her legs into the metal greaves. Nikka's mouth was still moving but no sound came out.

"We've got to get out of here," Elspeth said.

Elspeth was afraid Nikka would resist, but the girl allowed Elspeth to reach for her. Hand in hand they plunged into the chaos of the night. The encampment

had turned into a nightmare. Most of the tents had been ripped down, and the bonfire was raging out of control. Something—Xenagos the satyr?—had afflicted the minds of the revelers, who were overcome with madness. Some still danced amid the startling violence. Bleeding bodies lay scattered like driftwood on a beach as the crowds surged mindlessly around them. If this was Xenagos's final revel, his power had replaced reason with the twisted drive for pleasure. With Nikka in tow, Elspeth had just escaped the horrific scene when the girl stumbled, bleeding from a wound in her side.

“You're injured?” Elspeth said.

But a mob trailed behind them, and the sky was pulsing with a frantic, strobelike light. It looked as though Nyx itself was about to shatter and explode. Clutching Nikka's hand, they fled for the mountains.

The journey from the raging encampment, through the darkness, and up the rocky path to Heliod's Shrine seemed to exist outside of time. No one followed her into the darkness, and the sounds of the bacchanal grew more distant with every hurried step. When she looked back on that night, all she could remember was the weight of her grief. To Elspeth it felt as if her soul was crumbling into dust. It was like the edges of her being were folding in in a desperate attempt to protect the vital center from the world trying equally hard to crush it.

Daxos.

She felt mute terror at the realization that she'd done

something horrible. Her mistake could not be reversed. Elspeth's mind simultaneously tried to move forward—to Heliod, who she believed could help her—and reeled backward to the moment she saw the Obliterator. As inward as she was, she still saw the freakish changes in the sky. The stars and celestial creatures of Nyx drained from the heavens in rippling ribbons and left a void in their place. When Elspeth looked up, it was like looking up in the belly of a great cave, where no light had ever reached.

By the time she reached the statue of the Sun God, the lights of Nyx had vanished entirely. There was only a veil of unnatural darkness. Nikka collapsed near the base of Heliod's statue. The girl was barely breathing.

“Please, Heliod,” Elspeth whispered. “Come back to the world. Help her. Help us all.”

Below, it looked as though a fiery pit of lava threatened to swallow the city of Akros. Waves of mystical energy rippled across the open expanse of the flats. The Deyda River Gorge had become a snake of fire, and the ridge of mountains on the far horizon began to tremble. The tremendous mystical energy that Xenagos had harnessed through the perverted revel engulfed the satyr and transformed him from mortal flesh into something divine. The mountaintop burst into flames as Xenagos rose into the air. His essence pulsed with the stars of Nyx as his immeasurable form exploded into the sky.

A star field flowed from the edges of his divine body, and all of Nyx came rushing back to the sky. But a new god-form took his place among the pantheon. As Xenagos, the God of Revels, ascended to the realm of the gods, a destructive shock wave radiated to the edges of the world. As if the sickening jolt had awakened her, Nikka sat up. Her skin was ashen and her eyes burned with white fire.

“You are a traitor,” Nikka said.

Nikka spoke with a god-voice that was not her own. The girl had been claimed as a divine vessel, and her words originated from both Helioid and Nylea.

“You killed Daxos,” said the offended gods. “You helped the satyr break the barriers of Nyx and become a god. We’re coming back to the world. When we find you, we will destroy you.”



## CHAPTER 9

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Although no one was chasing her, Elspeth plunged deeper into the darkness of the Nessian Forest, which provided more cover than the open trails of the mountains. She ran blindly, harboring an irrational sense that if she just ran fast enough, she might catch Daxos before he disappeared into the Underworld. The forest was unnaturally still. There was no birdsong or rustle of branches. Even the wind had vanished. Under the mottled green canopy, the morning rays of sunrise were weak and ineffectual, as though they were hesitant to shine light on the changed world. Daxos was dead. Xenagos was a god. And Heliod wanted to kill her.

Where do you hide from the wrath of a god?

Elspeth saw a willow tree that towered above her, taller than the canopy. She pushed her way through the tangle of feathery leaves. Hidden from sight, she lay down at the base of the tree. Xenagos had used her to orchestrate his victory at Akros. He'd transformed the victory celebration into his ascension to godhood. He'd tried to steal her sword, and he'd taken control of her mind. He'd made her kill ...

She vowed not to leave Theros until she'd avenged

Daxos's death. And if she needed to force her way into Nyx and kill Xenagos herself, then she would do it. But first she needed to rest, to gather her strength, and to figure out where to go that Heliod wouldn't strike her down. Clutching the hilt of her blade, she fell asleep under the wispy branches of the willow and dreamed of Daxos. He was crouched on the roof at the edge of the courtyard in Heliod's temple. But instead of tossing pebbles at her feet, he was tossing tiny glass flowers that were similar to the amulet he had worn as a child. The six-petal asphodels crunched against the hard ground and then sprouted into shimmering white blossoms. Soon, the courtyard became a field of asphodels. The white flowers multiplied until they covered Meletis, and then they spread across the expanse of the world. You could walk to the ends of the world and see only the flowers of the dead.

Elspeth awoke with a start. In her confused state, she thought she was back in Urborg on Dominaria. That wretched place always had a distinctive light. It was as if the air itself was old and slightly charred. There was even the smell of charred wood in the air. But then she felt the cool earth of Theros beneath her, and the nightmarish memory of the revel came rushing back. Elspeth pushed aside the hanging branches and found that the forest had changed dramatically while she slept.

Where there had been an old-growth forest before, now the foliage had transformed into an unnatural corridor

going both directions. All the existing plants and trees had been condensed into two flat walls that extended as far as she could see. The canopy had become a nearly solid ceiling of leaves that permitted little light. She turned and saw that the willow, too, had been subsumed into the wall of the corridor, almost like a living mural. She touched the wall of the corridor, and it felt like glass. She struck it with her blade, but it didn't shatter. She could go left or right—those were her only choices—and they looked exactly the same.

Elsbeth turned left. After a few minutes the corridor reached a T. She turned left again. She repeated this choice several times and found herself back at the mural of the willow. There was a mist in the air, and Elspeth could sense the powerful magic that had transformed the trees into a labyrinth. This time Elspeth turned right, and then right again. As she stalked along the route, she scanned for any discrepancy that might show her a way out. But while the shape and color of the trees changed, they remained like a wall she could not cross. Elspeth turned a corner and ended up back at the willow.

Elsbeth attacked the willow mural with a spell of searing light. It remained unchanged.

Elsbeth went left again. Blinking yellow eyes stared at her from inside the walls of the forest maze, and they dogged her every step. Soon a breeze whistled down the corridor with her, and a young girl's voice was carried on the wind: *Murderer. Murderer. Mon-ster.*

Thinking maybe she could outpace the spell, Elspeth began to run. She enhanced her speed with spellcasting, and the shapes of the corridors changed. Instead of right angles there were curves and meanders. She could hear the footfalls of something coming up behind her fast. There was a howl of rage, and she saw a pack of Nyxborn wolves chasing her down. As she glanced over her shoulder, an arrow narrowly missed her head. A Nyxborn nymph rode on the lead wolf, and she was unleashing another arrow. Elspeth veered right down another corridor as the arrow whizzed past her.

A light shone up ahead, and she stumbled into a ruined temple at the dark heart of the labyrinth. There was a cracked fountain at the center of a circle of ivy-covered pillars. Gasping for air, Elspeth crouched beside its crumbling base. The inky black water inside the fountain began to ripple even though it hadn't been disturbed. She glanced over her shoulder, but the Nyxborn hadn't pursued her into the temple. She glanced at the water and saw Daxos's face staring back at her. She cried out in surprise. She could still hear the young girl's voice on the wind: *Murderer. Murderer. Mon-ster.*

"You forgave me—did you know all along?" she whispered, as the image of his face dissolved into the distinctive shape of Kruphix's Tree, which grew out of the waterfall at the edge of the world. Elspeth tore her eyes away from the vision as the wolves loped into view behind her. She readied her blade and turned to face her

attackers, who had encircled her at the edges of the ruins. The nymph slid off the wolf's back. She had a delicate build, hair that rippled like water, and her body was dappled with stars. When Elspeth came to Theros as a child, nymphs had helped her regain her strength. But this one glared at her with murderous intent.

“Heliod wants you to face his wrath,” the nymph said. “My master, Nylea, just wants you dead.”

The inky water in the fountain began burbling unnaturally. It sounded like a large object was rising from the depths. Whatever spell the nymph was casting, Elspeth didn't wait to find out. She dived out of the way as tendrils of dark water snaked out of the fountain and lashed at her. She channeled her own magic to stamp the water back into the fountain. But as soon as the nymph's spell failed, the Nyxborn wolves moved in and drove her closer to the fountain. Elspeth slashed her blade through the air, trying to keep them at bay, but they forced her toward the sickly water. She could hear the water again, rising behind her, reaching up to drag her down.

The piercing blare of a hunting horn rang from somewhere outside the temple. Immediately, the strange glassy walls that had transformed the forest began to melt away. With the nymph's spell broken, the forest returned to its natural state, although the ruined temple was unchanged. On a treeless rise just beyond the crumbling pillars, Elspeth saw a small band of hunters shadowed against the sun. As they charged into the ruin,

she realized they were not humans. They were powerfully built leonins, a feline race who attacked with the fierceness of enraged predators. The Nyxborn wolves scattered in confusion at their unexpected arrival. Furiously, the nymph yelled commands in an unfamiliar language. Her voice was deep and primal, and it echoed between the sacred trees.

The leonins were undaunted by the number of Nyxborn enemies amassed against them. The warriors attacked the wolves with bronze sarissas and flashing swords. Elspeth struck the nearest Nyxborn wolf. She sliced open its flank, but the wound didn't faze it. Hungrily, it circled around her, but before it could attack again, the hunting horn blew once more. There was a final flash of blinding light, and Elspeth closed her eyes against the mystical glare. When she looked up again, all that was left of the Nyxborn was dissipating smoke and shadows.

Elspeth lowered her weapon and bowed in gratitude to the leonin who had saved her life. These were the first leonin that she'd encountered on this plane. Like the leonins of Alara, they moved with grace, and she sensed a similar instinctual intelligence and empathetic nature. The battle was over, but the leonin warriors kept their distance. She stood silently and waited for them to make their judgment. Finally, a warrior with a golden mane and a crimson band of cloth across his chest approached her curiously.

“You’re Elspeth?” the warrior asked.

Shocked that he knew her name, Elspeth could only nod.

“She’s here,” the warrior called out. “You were right!”

He whistled and more leonins appeared on the crest of the hill beyond the edge of the ruins. They hurried down the slope toward Elspeth. With the sun at their back, she couldn’t see their faces until they reached her. The tallest one pushed back his hood. When she saw who it was, she wanted to cry with relief. Her old friend, Ajani, stood before her.

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” Ajani told her.

The leonin planeswalker had found her before, and he had never given up on her. No matter what she’d done, he wouldn’t turn his back on her. She stumbled forward into his waiting arms.

# CHAPTER 10



After Xenagos ascended to Nyx, a ring of darkness appeared in the heavens. It occupied the edges of the sky first, like a black crown around the head of the world. But as the hours passed it expanded and traveled inward. It became a wheel of darkness that transformed the horizon into a threatening vision, even in the daytime. None of the gods could stop Xenagos's creeping void, and many in the pantheon blamed the mortals for the satyr's intrusion. There were rumors of a Nyxborn army amassing in the west and of shocking god-led violence in the cities. While Keranos expressed his displeasure by sending banks of roiling storm clouds to lash a world at war, Purphoros directed his rage at the sky.

Elsbeth and Ajani traveled with the warriors to the leonin homeland, which they reached after a hard day's travel. Known as Oreskos, the remote region was beyond Akros, but it was still on the edges of the vast Nessian Forest. Ruins dotted the rocky scrubland, and the party trekked along a timeworn road built by a civilization that no one remembered. Tethmos, the main leonin fortification, was in sight in the windswept valley below



when they heard a rumbling in the distance. A pillar of fire blasted up from Mt. Velus, and the horizon shimmered with an ominous red haze. The firestorm intensified and the blasts of molten rock skimmed the bottom of the roiling clouds, then tumbled down into the Nessian Forest. Smoke rose from the trees in the distance, and flocks of birds fled to the stormy sky.

“Purphoros is a fool,” growled Seza, a leonin warrior with mottled gray fur who was in awe of Ajani. Wherever he walked, she was like his shadow. “He might be aiming for Nyx, but where does he think his fireballs are going to land?”

“Purphoros doesn’t care who he hurts,” said Pyxathor, a leonin with a golden mane who seemed to hold some authority among the warriors. “None of them do. Gods of arrogance and fools.”

“Nylea is going to be furious with Purphoros for burning her forest,” Seza said. “That means more trouble for the innocents standing in her way.”

“Innocents?” Pyxathor asked. “Now you’re calling the humans innocent?”

“They say Nylea is mad with grief,” Seza continued. “She loved a mortal, and he was murdered. She won’t rest until she has her vengeance and the pantheon is restored to its natural state.”

Elsbeth didn’t know who was saying such things, but she did know they were talking about Daxos. Weary from the journey and shaken at the mention of her

friend, the world tilted sideways. Ajani, who was right beside her, reached out to steady her. He gave her a searching glance, but she said nothing on their final descent to Tethmos. The stone walls of the fort were covered with plaster and painted in gold and sky blue, a startling contrast to the bleakness of the day. Seza had explained that during times of peace, Tethmos had a small population. Most leonins were nomadic and visited the fortification only on special days. When the gods turned on the mortals, outlying leonin groups had flocked to the relative safety inside the walls.

When they reached the humble wooden gates, Elspeth saw that tents and caravans lined the courtyard inside the inner bastion. There were so many packed inside the walls that it looked like the Endless Bazaar Elspeth had seen on the plane of Kodisha.

“Brimaz has encouraged his people to shelter here,” Seza said. “Some want to join the ranks of the humans. But others refuse.”

“Who is Brimaz?” Elspeth asked.

“Our king,” Seza said as the wooden gates of Tethmos closed behind them. “And I would address him as such. Only Ajani has first-name privileges.”

Ajani laughed. “Brimaz gets annoyed at such formality. He would rather you call him a brother than a king. Is there someplace we could impose on your hospitality, Seza? My friend needs rest.”

Within minutes, Elspeth was inside a cozy tent tucked

near the outer wall. Inside, everything seemed to be made of pillows. Outside, the wind picked up, and an unseasonal torrent of rain drenched the land. She knew Ajani was brimming with questions for her, but thankfully he left her in peace. Elspeth crawled under layers of blankets and slept for hours.



The war council sat in a circle around an open fire pit in the king's hall in the central bastion. They listened intently to Elspeth's account of the devastating events she'd witnessed at the victory celebration. But she chose her words carefully and didn't tell the assembly of leonins everything that had happened. She never mentioned Daxos or the circumstances of his death. There was no way to justify her crime. The right words didn't exist, even if she wanted to try. An "Obliterator" meant nothing to a leonin of Theros.

"So Xenagos learned of you from Phenax," the king said sadly. "May I see the weapon?"

Elspeth handed him her spear-blade. The king inspected it carefully before handing it back.

"A burden or a *Godsend*?" Brimaz asked. "I guess that's yet to be determined."

"Purphoros has ceased his firestorm temporarily," Seza said. "All of the forest would have burned down if he had not."

“Helioid strikes against Meletis, and part of Akros has been destroyed,” said an advisor on the other side of the circle. “Karametra shields Setessa from the gods’ wrath, but how long until Helioid convinces her to join them?”

“We must join the humans in their fight against the gods!” another leonin argued.

“Why should we help them, our former oppressors?” Pyxathor demanded.

Lanathos the Chronicler, an older man with cropped hair, sat near Elspeth. His neck and lower face were scarred with a webbed pattern that Elspeth recognized as mystical fire. Lanathos had been the victim of a powerful mage, and she wondered if the gruesome scars were the reason he lived outside human cities. King Brimaz seemed to hold the chronicler in great regard and often asked for his opinion or his recounting of historical events.

Lanathos leaned toward her and whispered, “The archon Agnomakhos and his human army cast the leonins out of Meletis. The leonins believe he did it with the blessing of the gods. It’s the subject of much debate.”

Around them, the leonins argued loudly until Brimaz raised his hands for quiet. He turned to Ajani.

“You’ve been quiet, old friend,” the king said. “You have both an outsider’s perspective and a friendship with Elspeth, who has inadvertently become the eye of this storm. I would welcome your counsel.”

“I have some sense of how Xenagos manipulated the

metaphysics of this world to occupy Nyx,” Ajani said. The leonins around the fire stirred. They wanted to ask for more details on how this powerful transformation took place, but their king was in the midst of a question, and so his advisors kept silent.

“Is it reversible?” Brimaz asked.

“Magic by its nature is mutable—it can be changed, dissipated, altered ...” Ajani said. “I don’t know how, exactly, to correct this situation, but I’m confident that it can be done.”

“What did you mean, the metaphysics of *this* world?” Lanathos interrupted.

“The gods derived from people’s belief in them,” Ajani said. “If I had to name it, I would call it theogenesis, and it’s a mechanism of the natural world.”

Only Elspeth could see how he was skirting the issue of their plane versus the myriad planes he’d visited. Each world exhibited a unique presentation of mystical energy, and to Ajani, each world’s magic was like a treasured fingerprint.

“Are you saying they—they aren’t real?” Lanathos stammered. He was the only one in the room who seemed shocked by what Ajani was implying.

“Of course they’re real,” Ajani said. “From the moment they sprang into existence, they were real. A flame is a flame whether it came from flint or if it was breathed by a dragon. The moment of conception is less important than the act of creation itself.”

“But ...” Lanathos seemed at a loss for words.

“Pyxathor, you have the floor,” Brimaz interrupted. He had little patience for metaphysical discussions even in time of peace, and he wasn’t going to entertain such a debate now.

“Why are the gods blaming the humans?” Pyxathor asked. “Why are they attacking the mortals’ settlements?”

“Because of Xenagos’s Revel?” Elspeth guessed. “Perhaps they believe the mortals contributed to his ascension.”

“Perhaps,” King Brimaz said. “I guess we’d have to ask a god to know for sure.”

“So do we join the humans in their fight or not?” Seza demanded.

“The gods are bringing their Nyxborn armies through the Nykthos, the nexus point between our realms.” Brimaz said. “Pyxathor will lead any warriors who do not wish to aid the humans. You will go there, intercept the Nyxborn as they arrive, and kill them before they can do more damage.”

Pyxathor stood and bowed to his king. “I’m honored that you trust me with this task,” he said.

“For those who wish to aid the humans, I’ll lead an army to the Nessian Forest where the humans are amassing for a strike against the gods’ army,” Brimaz continued. “I welcome all who are willing to join me, but I respect any who choose to follow Pyxathor.”

“Can you gain access to Nyx through the Nykthos?”

Elspeth asked.

“No, only the Nyxborn can use it as a conduit,” Lanathos answered. “And they can’t go back the way they came. Once they are in the mortal realm, they can never return to Nyx.”

“Is there no way into Nyx?” Elspeth asked.

No one spoke for a long moment, but all eyes were fixed on Elspeth. In the past, Elspeth might have squirmed uncomfortably at the attention. Tonight, she raised her chin defiantly. They couldn’t stop her, even if they didn’t want to help her; she would find a way.

Finally, Brimaz asked, “Why do you want to go to Nyx?”

“To kill Xenagos,” Elspeth said. She didn’t say the real reason out loud, but it echoed in her mind like cacophonous chimes: to avenge the death of Daxos.

“You cannot kill a god,” Lanathos said. “No mortal can do it.”

“*You* cannot kill a god,” Elspeth replied. “But you don’t have a sword forged by a god.”

Brimaz raised a hand of caution. “You don’t know what your weapon is capable of. Let’s pursue another path to victory.”

“You are pursuing two paths already,” Elspeth said. “I choose this one.”

Lanathos looked troubled. “There’s a tree on the waterfall at the edge of the world. Many myths describe an entrance to Nyx through Kruphix’s temple.”

“How?” Elspeth said.

“The god-stories aren’t clear,” Lanathos said. “Some speak of a ladder to Nyx, which must be figurative. And even if you find the way, you can’t get through the gates without passing an ordeal and receiving the blessing of a god.”

“I assume the gates are figurative as well?” Elspeth asked.

“No one knows,” Lanathos said. “Maybe the gates are as real as that fire. Or maybe everything is mist and light. I have no guidance on this.”

“I don’t care,” Elspeth said. “Unless you tell me there’s a way to kill Xenagos from here, then I’m going to Nyx.”

“I know of no way,” Lanathos said. “I might be able to discover one, but it would take time.”

“There is no time,” Elspeth said furiously.

“She’s right,” Ajani said. “The god’s wrath will scour the world if we don’t stop it.”

“How do I get to the edge of the world?” Elspeth asked. “Do I just take a ship and sail for the horizon?”

“It’s not that simple,” Lanathos said. “It’s not a linear course. It can be done with a ship, but you need a navigator who knows where he’s going.”

“Who has this information?” Ajani asked.

“The god-stories speak of two people who know the way,” Lanathos said. “Theophilia, who is Nylea’s naiad companion, has visited Kruphix often. But she would not help you. She loves Nylea, who is at war with the



mortals.”

“I think I met Theophilia already,” Elspeth said. “She tried to kill me in the forest.”

“Well, the other—and this is strange,” Lanathos mused. “Callaphe the Mariner knows the way. She is a figure of myth, and had not been seen for ages. But in recent months, there have been many sightings of her. Callaphe knows the edge of the world better than anyone else. She has a ship known as the *Monsoon* that she can sail along the precipice of the waterfall.”

“Where can I find this Callaphe?” Elspeth asked.

“She dwells near the Siren’s Shipyard,” Lanathos said. “The god-stories say you must throw a shell bearing the likeness of the kraken into the water to capture her attention.”

“You are resolved to this plan, Elspeth?” Brimaz asked. “You mean to make your way to Nyx and confront this satyr, Xenagos?”

“Yes,” Elspeth said.

“You can travel with us to the Nessian Forest and then follow the river to the sea,” Brimaz said. “The tyranny of the gods has gone on long enough, and the satyr doesn’t deserve to have dominion over a pile of dirt. If I could find a way to bring him to his knees, I will happily cut his head off myself.”

“I’m coming with you, Elspeth,” Ajani said.

“And I am grateful,” Elspeth assured him. “I need the help.”

She knew this wasn't something she could do alone.

## CHAPTER 11



King Brimaz led his band of warriors down the Oreskos Road, a dirt track that served as the main route between the leonin's homeland and the Nessian Forest. The leonins traveled at a high rate of speed, and Elspeth had little time to ponder anything but her rapid pace down the rutted road. Whenever they crested a rise, Elspeth could see Mt. Velus burning indignantly in the distance. Blasts of fire arched upward at irregular intervals. Purphoros was still taking wild shots at Nyx, and the mortals were bearing the burden of his anger.

By noon of the second day, they reached a wide valley between two separate mountain ranges. The swampy lowland was home to the Sperche River, which choked out life with its frequent flooding and left infertile dirt and gravel in its wake. A jagged ridge of limestone mountains loomed on the other side of the valley. Eventually, the Oreskos Road led to a gap between two of the limestone mountains. This natural formation was known as the Cypress Gates, and it marked the edge of the Nessian Forest. The mountains were heavily forested, although they were not considered part of the forest proper. Travelers hadn't entered into Nylea's domain

until they'd passed beyond the Cypress Gates.

But the valley was ten miles wide, and they had to ford the rushing Sperche River. Keen-eyed warriors had spied a traveling party in the distance at the crossroads at the heart of the valley. By the time the leonins reached the crossroads, the sun was low in the sky. As they approached, they saw that most of the people were already dead, just corpses sprawled along the road.

There had been some kind of rustic shrine marking the crossroads, but it had been destroyed and the rubble blasted in a cone-shaped pattern. The shredded flesh of the bodies had been partially eaten by some beast, and the ground was covered in paw prints. It didn't take an oracle to see that the indentations in the ground were infused with the stars of Nyx. The Nyxborn killers were leaving traces of themselves for all to see.

A single figure knelt in the middle of the road. He wore the tattered robes of a priest of Heliod.

Brimaz motioned to Ajani and Elspeth to follow him while most of his contingent kept their distance. Elspeth, with a dark hood pulled up to hide her face, trailed behind the two leonins. As they drew closer, Elspeth recognized the man kneeling in the center of the carnage. His name was Stelanos, and he had been one of Daxos's friends in Heliod's temple in Meletis. As they approached, he turned his head slightly and they saw that his eyes had been ruined by some mystical cause. He was blind, and where his eyes had been mist leaked out

and into the air, like smoke emerging from the cracks in an old forge. Stelanos clutched a ceramic flask with both hands as if it was the only thing that could keep him safe.

“Who’s there?” he cried.

“We are fellow travelers,” Brimaz replied. “We’re horrified by what’s happened here. Who did this?”

“Heliod has turned his back on us,” the man said. “He has forsaken us.”

Ajani came and knelt beside the man. “I am a healer,” he said. “May I help you?”

The man swiped at the air with his bloody hands as if to ward Ajani away. “No, leave me to my fate.”

“Why do you believe this is your fate?” Ajani asked. His voice was a low rumble of reassurance.

“Heliod and Nylea have joined together,” Stelanos said. “They intend to destroy everyone who once loved them. I was a priest at Heliod’s temple, and we were forced to flee with just our lives.”

“What is the state of Meletis?” Brimaz asked.

The man made a choking sound. “Ephara protected the polis from utter destruction, but she didn’t care about saving Heliod’s priests. To her, it was good riddance for the wayward children of the furious god.”

“Have you other news of the pantheon?” Ajani asked. Stelanos seemed to deteriorate in front of their eyes. His mouth was dry, and he was having a hard time formulating words.

“Mogis and Iroas are fighting in the deepest corner of Nyx, and they haven’t been seen since the satyr ascended,” Stelanos whispered. “Nothing is known of Pharika and Phenax.”

“May I get you water, brother?” Ajani said. “Is your flask empty?”

Stelanos cradled the ceramic flask against his chest. A picture of Heliod’s winged horse was painted on the long neck, and words of his teachings ran around the base. WHAT IS, IS, AND EVER SHALL BE.

“No, I have what I need right here,” Stelanos said.

“Who blinded you?” Ajani asked. “Was it Heliod?”

“When he purged his temple he accused us of working with the murderer Elspeth and her lover, the satyr,” Stelanos said. Elspeth covered her mouth with her hand to keep from protesting. “He blinded me as we fled the gates of the city. Once we neared the forest, Nylea’s minions trailed us. So we turned toward Oreskos, thinking we might beg the leonin for help. But her beasts overtook us and mauled my friends, but they let me live.”

“Why do you think they let you live?” Ajani asked gently.

Stelanos turned his head away so his blind eyes stared at the horizon. “Perhaps to tell you, whoever you are,” he said. “They will not stop until they recover the sword from Elspeth the Betrayer.”

“Please let us help you,” Ajani said. “You could travel

with us. We're seeking the army of humans and centaurs to aid them in this fight. Helioid is misinformed. Perhaps there is a way to set things right."

Stelanos shook his head. "No, I must accept my fate. Leave me here. Let me find my end in my own way."

"Let us at least bury your dead," Brimaz said.

"Leave us as a warning to others," Stelanos said. "The gods have forsaken us."

Ajani stood up, and Brimaz signaled his men to move around the crossroads and continue toward the gate. Even after they'd left him behind, Elspeth kept glancing back. Finally, Stelanos lifted the flask and drank. Then he crumpled to the ground and didn't move again.

"Nightshade," Ajani told Elspeth as the scene faded in the hazy air behind them.

Brimaz nodded gravely. "Erebos had offered him his cup of resignation, and he could see no option but to drink it. Humans cleave to *destiny* when they should embrace the unknown instead."



Brimaz's warriors crossed into the long shadow of the Cypress Gates. The sun was just about to sink behind the mountains, and the temperature was dropping quickly. As Nyx began to emerge above them, the ring of blackness still dominated the sky. For the first time since Xenagos had ascended, Elspeth could see the faint forms

of animals in the stars. They seemed to be in motion, scattering in all directions away from Xenagos's black ring. There were no god-forms, and mostly the heavens were just a mass of astral clouds and chaotic points of lights.

The Cypress Gates framed an opening in the sawlike ridge of mountains. The highest point of the ridge was almost seven thousand feet, but far to the north. The Gates themselves were each about five hundred feet high.

No one spoke in the gathering twilight. Ajani's ears twitched as he tried to decipher any sound that might reveal hidden enemies. They entered the throatlike passage between the mountains where the rocks on either side had erosion patterns that formed chasms—arched tunnels deep into the mountains themselves. They were well inside the pass when a small slide of pebbles trickled down the mountainside.

“Ambush,” Brimaz yelled.

Immediately, the leonins grouped into a defensive circle. A row of kneeling leonins held their shields edge to edge while a second line of leonins standing behind them readied their spears against any onslaught. Ajani and Elspeth stood in the middle of the formation. Their eyes scanned the towering cliffs above them. Black-clad figures emerged from the darkness of the warren of eroded rock at the base of the surrounding mountains. They surrounded the leonins but didn't attack them. There was a moment of silence, and it felt like everyone



was holding their breath.

“No stars,” Elspeth whispered to Ajani. “They’re not Nyxborn creatures.”

“Why do you wish to enter the Nessian?” a woman demanded from above them. She was perched on a ledge about ten feet above them. They couldn’t see her features in the darkness, but they could see her bow outlined against the starry sky. Light flashed in the heavens and revealed the woman’s face. But Elspeth had already recognized the voice: Anthousa.

“I know her,” Elspeth told Brimaz. “Should I call out to her?”

Brimaz seemed to consider this idea while Anthousa spoke again: “Answer me or I will cut you down.”

Brimaz nodded his approval to Elspeth, who shouted: “Anthousa! It’s Elspeth. We mean to join your cause.”

There was a moment of surprised silence, and then the woman disappeared from the ledge. The dark-clad figures didn’t alter their aggressive postures. If anything, they circled the leonins more tightly. There was the sound of hurried footsteps, and a torchbearer approached them from inside the mountain. Elspeth glimpsed Anthousa talking to several Setessan warriors just outside the entrance. Finally, she strode toward the wary leonins.

“Let me see the woman who calls herself Elspeth,” Anthousa demanded.

The leonins moved aside, and Elspeth crossed over to her. Anthousa took the torch and shone it directly on

Elspeth's face. When she saw it was really her friend from Meletis, she reached forward and embraced Elspeth. Her soldiers lowered their weapons, and the leonins followed their example.

"I thought you were dead," Anthousa said. "We found Daxos ... but no trace of you. I heard Nikka joined the Nyxborn, but I don't know what to believe anymore. Let's get inside where we can talk away from the eyes of Nyx."

Later, after Brimaz's warriors had been fed and given places to rest for the night, Anthousa led Ajani, Brimaz, and Elspeth up through the mountain, which was a maze of passages and chambers both natural and crafted by mages. Throughout the ages, the armies who had held the gates had transformed it into a natural fortress. But despite the thick rock and deep chambers, Elspeth doubted it would be enough to withstand the forces of the gods. She had already told Anthousa her plan to travel to Nyx and kill Xenagos, but Anthousa didn't respond. Instead, she led them toward the rocky pinnacle of the Cypress Gates.

Finally, they stopped at a ladder underneath a wooden trapdoor built into the roof of the passage. Anthousa muscled open the door, and they all climbed into the open night air on the bare rock of the mountaintop. Xenagos's wheel of darkness churned in the sky above them, and the few visible stars seemed to be at its mercy, like sparks thrown from a grindstone. Elspeth thought of

Stelanos's body lying at the crossroads, somewhere in the pitch black of the valley below them. If Erebos was the lord of the Underworld, it must be a wretched place, but maybe there was a tranquil corner. If so, she prayed that Stelanos would find it.

"Soldiers from Meletis, Akros, and Setessa are all sheltering here," Anthousa explained. "We're amassing supplies. We can make it a long time, if necessary. We just have to hold this line of mountains."

Anthousa pointed at the ridge on the other side of the valley. It looked like a vast field of stars glittered on the ground. Elspeth had the impression that the old Nyx had fallen like a blanket and come to rest in the mortal realm.

"What is that?" Brimaz asked.

"That's the shining essence of the Nyxborn army," Anthousa said. "They're preparing an all-out assault. We must defeat them here, or the gods will have triumphed in their misguided war. If they cross this line, then Setessa will fall. Meletis would be next."

"If Ephara and Karametra join the rest of the gods ..." Ajani began.

"Then the mortal world is finished, no matter what happens here," Anthousa said grimly.

"I offer you my warriors," Brimaz said. "We will force the Nyxborn to slink back to the silence of the sky."

"You are very welcome to fight beside us," Anthousa said. "But my hopes are with you, Elspeth. Killing the

satyr will restore the pantheon. I have faith that when he is gone, Nylea will come to her senses and stop this war.”

“We must get to the coast and Siren’s Shipyard,” Ajani said. “What is the fastest way?”

“It’s too dangerous for Elspeth to enter Nylea’s forest,” Anthousa said. “We will give you a boat, and the currents of the Sperche River will carry you to the sea by morning.”

## CHAPTER 12

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Elspeth and Ajani spent a restless night drifting down the river in a rustic fishing boat that was barely big enough for the both of them. The starry eyes of god-spies peered from the inky darkness, and Elspeth huddled low in the boat with her hood obscuring her face. With the craggy ridge of limestone mountains on their left, they traveled swiftly down the currents of the Sperche. Soaring seagulls marked the spot where the brownish river emptied into a sparkling blue bay. Flanked by bone-white cliffs, the bay would have been picturesque except for the dozens of ships that lay broken and humbled in the pounding surf.

“We found Siren’s Shipyard,” Ajani said.

Elspeth tried to stretch the stiffness out of her neck. “I think that’s a safe guess,” she agreed.

As they drifted into the bay, she counted no fewer than fifteen triremes breaching out of the water or shattered against the rocks. The mouth of the bay was a treacherous combination of strong currents and submerged rocks. Giant obsidian boulders blown from Mt. Velus littered the shallows, and the rocky cliffs formed a perimeter around the water. Caves pockmarked

the cliffs and housed a colony of sirens who considered this coastline to be their rightful domain. With its access to the Sperche River, the bay might have been an ideal trade route inland. But no sane-minded captain chose to navigate these waters. And those lured by the sirens were doomed to never leave.

Ajani and Elspeth managed to land the fishing boat on a narrow beach at the foot of a navigable path leading up to the top of the cliffs. As soon as her boots hit the shore, Elspeth had the sense of being watched. Ajani felt it, too, but he motioned for Elspeth to lower her blade as they trudged up the steep slope. A shrieking siren careened out of a hollow in the rock and soared to the top of a splintered mast where it could watch them ascend the rock. The siren had the form of a woman but with indigo wings and feathered legs. It bared its sharp teeth and shrieked with malice.

“The sirens mean to lure us to our death,” Elspeth reminded Ajani. “I don’t feel like dying today.”

“They only have power to lure things in Thassa’s domain—so a ship upon the water is in extreme danger,” Ajani said. “But since we may find ourselves sailing shortly, a little protection is in order.”

Ajani made no outward signs that he was casting a spell. But it was just seconds before Elspeth felt his magic sweeping over her like a beam of sunshine on a winter’s day. The siren perched on the mast screamed in annoyance. Sirens could sense the casting of magic,

though not the specific nature of a spell.

“That was as easy for you as snapping your fingers,” Elspeth said appreciatively. “Were little spells always so easy. So does that come with being an elder?”

“An elder?” Ajani asked with mock offense. “Among my people, I’m considered in the prime of life.”

More sirens had joined their sisters on the broken ships. They lined the edges of the ruined boats like vultures waiting impatiently for a feast. Ignoring their watchers, Elspeth and Ajani scrambled up a prowlike rock that jutted out over the ocean waves.

“I believe we’re standing on Weeping Rock,” Ajani said.

“What are the inscriptions?” Elspeth asked.

Near the edge, countless names were scratched into the rock. There were also symbols of the gods etched into the stone, and some of those glowed faintly against the dark gray rock. When she knelt down to get a better look at the inscriptions, she was startled to see dozens of figures below her on the narrow slip of land beneath the overhang of Weeping Rock. They wore golden masks, like the centaur she and Daxos had seen that day in the Despair Lands. They milled aimlessly in what little space they had along the ledge above the water. They took no notice of each other or the crashing surf.

“Of those who died here, some have returned,” Ajani said sadly, looking down at the strange congregation on the rocks below them.

“Can’t we help them?” Elspeth asked.

“They have no human needs,” Ajani said. “We can’t heal them or take away the pain. They don’t care about food or comfort.”

“Who are they? The sailors of these ships?”

“Many, yes. But Weeping Rock is where the heartbroken come to write the names of the lost,” Ajani said. “Their grief is so profound that many Returned are called to revisit. Although they have lost their memories, the Returned are drawn to places that had great importance in their lives.”

“How do you know this?” Elspeth asked.

“I’ve been here before,” Ajani said. “Even before you told me where you got your sword, I was familiar with Theros. The Returned are tragic. Although I have tried, I have found no way to help them.”

Above the crashing of the waves, they heard the sirens begin their song. It was hauntingly beautiful, and despite Ajani’s spell, Elspeth could feel a tug of desire to draw closer to them. But Ajani placed his hand on her back, and she was overcome with a sense of well-being. Unaffected by the alluring melody, they stood on the very tip of Weeping Rock and gazed out at the tumultuous sea and the endless horizon.

“We need to find a mariner,” Ajani mused.

“You don’t happen to have a seashell?” Elspeth asked. “Lanathos said you had to throw in a shell with the likeness of a kraken into the water.”



“No, I don’t,” Ajani muttered, lost in thought. Elspeth scanned the ground in case there was an obvious solution. Maybe certain shells naturally bore a likeness of the kraken on them. But there were no seashells this high up on Weeping Rock. Even down on the beach where they had landed their boat, the beach had been covered with pebbles but not shells.

“Why can’t we just sail a boat straight for the horizon and hit the edge of the world?” Elspeth asked.

“The world isn’t linear, and Kruphix doesn’t like strangers,” Ajani said cryptically.

Over the water, the sirens screamed with fury when their song failed to affect the interlopers. Dozens of them took to the skies, wheeling and screeching above them.

“What happened to your friend, Daxos?” Ajani asked unexpectedly. “The one who was killed at Akros?”

“You ask me that *now*?” Elspeth said, incredulous. “This doesn’t feel like the right time.”

“It feels like a good time to me,” Ajani said.

“Why?” Elspeth demanded. “Should I scrawl his name on Weeping Rock like some heartbroken widow?”

“People grieve in different ways,” Ajani said as the wind picked up. The waves crashed beneath them, drowning out the frantic cries of the sirens. “I just want to understand what happened.”

“I lost a friend,” Elspeth said quietly. Ajani tipped his head as if he couldn’t hear her. So she shouted the words again. And then she said more quietly, “And unless you

can make it hurt less, I don't want to talk about it.”

“That's your right,” he agreed. Beneath them, spray soaked the Returned, and Elspeth despised their pitifulness. In life, they had visited Weeping Rock, sick with grief, at one time or another in their abbreviated lives. What a useless fate.

“So are we just going to stand here?” Elspeth asked. “Or are we going to find a way into Nyx?”

The sirens soared in choppy little circles and made precarious dives stopping just short of the rough waves. Annoyed by Ajani's silence, Elspeth began to repeat her question. But when she glanced at Ajani, she realized he was deep in concentration. His eyes were glazed over with light, and his muscles were rigid with concentration. It occurred to her that he'd been casting this spell for a while, maybe since they stepped on Weeping Rock. His spine was curved by the effort of whatever he was trying to do.

An eerie light shone under the waves. Then a large dark object began rising under the gray-green water near the surface. When it first broke through the water, it was surrounded by a shimmering golden mist, and Elspeth couldn't tell what it was. But as the mist dissipated, she saw a ship. It looked ancient and more raptorial than the sleek ships she'd seen in the harbor in Meletis. It was a simple galley with a beaklike bow and a single row of oars along each side. The oars were narrow and starkly white against the dark wood of the hull. There was a

single mast with a dark green sail that was undamaged by its time under the water. The sail was stretched tight in a white frame, and threads of white branched through the membranous material.

By the time the ship had fully emerged, the sirens had spiraled away back to their caves, frightened by the magnitude of Ajani's abilities and the mystical emergence of the ship.

"What is that?" Elspeth asked in disbelief.

"I saw it beneath the waves," Ajani said. "Did you not —"

A female voice spoke behind them and startled them both: "How did you raise my ship?"

They spun around to see a triton grinning at them. She had light blue fins and finlike hair, and she was standing with one foot up on a rock, like the confident conqueror of the world.

"That's the *Monsoon*?" Elspeth asked. "You brought Callaphe's ship back ..."

"From the proverbial graveyard," Ajani said. "Apparently, it hadn't sailed off into Nyx."

"At least not the way they describe it in legends," Callaphe said. "Well, this is an unusual predicament. What happens now, leonin?"

Elspeth could hear the threat implied in her voice. She obviously didn't like people toying with her property. Elspeth started to speak but decided to wait. Ajani was the one who cast the spell that offended the mariner, and

Callaphe had addressed the question to him. Ajani took his time in answering.

“Have you noticed the void in the night sky?” he asked

“You mean the moat of oblivion?” Callaphe answered. “It’s hard to miss.”

“Where do you stand in the conflict between the gods and the mortals?” Ajani asked.

“It’s not *my* fight,” Callaphe answered. “There is no dust of Nyx on my fins or stars in my belly.”

“My companion has been falsely blamed for the state of the world,” Ajani said. “She must set things right.”

Callaphe looked at Elspeth with interest. “You do have a lovely spear.”

Elspeth put her hand on the hilt protectively, and Callaphe grinned. “I don’t want your mongrel blade, but I know what it’s like to be blamed for *everything*. So what do you want from me and my ship?”

“Can you take us to the edge of the world?” Elspeth said. “I need to get to Nyx.”

“Somehow, I knew you were going to say that,” Callaphe said. “Well, you’re in luck. I was just heading out that way myself. The winds are favorable, and there’s no time to lose.”

“Just like that?” Ajani asked.

“I’m a kind soul,” Callaphe said. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

“What do you want in return?” Ajani asked. “We won’t get on the water until we hear your demands.”

“Aw, the cat doesn’t trust me,” Callaphe pouted. “Well, how’s this? When I deposit you at Kruphix’s Tree, you leave my ship and never put your paws on it again?”

“Sounds fair,” Ajani said. Elspeth knew her friend well enough to hear the edge in his voice and know that he was holding something back.

“Then, let’s go,” Callaphe said. She ran to the edge of Weeping Rock and dived gracefully into the crashing waves. For a moment, they thought the triton had vanished, but then a walkway of a branching coral-like material rose out of the ocean and arched from the Weeping Rock onto the *Monsoon*. Callaphe breached out of the water like a dolphin, flipped into the air, and alighted gracefully on the boards of the boat.

“Step aboard,” she called. “It’s perfectly safe.”

“Be vigilant,” Ajani whispered to Elspeth as they crossed over to the ship.

Elspeth glanced back at her friend. “Why?”

“What sort of triton needs a ship?” he asked.

Elspeth gaped at him in surprise, and Ajani took her elbow to steady her. They stepped onto the rocking ship as Callaphe took her place by the steering oars.

“The winds are favorable,” she repeated as Ajani and Elspeth sat on the dark honeycombed thwarts that spanned the hull. “We’ll find the end of the world before night falls.”

“Hopefully before the gods see us coming,” Elspeth

said.

Callaphe steered the boat to face west, loosed the sail, and the *Monsoon* sprang forward like a beast in pursuit of its prey.

## CHAPTER 13



The *Monsoon* sailed with unnatural speed for the horizon, and soon the Siren's Shipyard vanished behind them. It was as if there was an invisible cord lashed to the prow and unseen hands dragged the ship toward an ultimate destination. There was a strong northerly wind, but it had no effect on their bearing as they barreled headlong into the blustery gales. At first Elspeth thought that Callaphe was mystically propelling the ship as it skimmed across the waves, but soon the triton left her station by the mast. She vaulted up onto the narrow gunwale and pranced lightly along it as easily as walking on a line drawn in the sand. The gusts ripped across the boat, but it didn't faze the agile triton.

Ajani shot Elspeth a knowing look. He addressed Callaphe. "You're truly a master of your ship," he said.

"And don't you forget it," Callaphe said. She leaped down into the hull where Ajani and Elspeth sat. "What's your name then, leonin?" she asked. "And how does a *cat* feel being on the water?"

"I've never appreciated a plank of wood more in my entire life," Ajani said. "I'm Ajani, and this is Elspeth."

"Elspeth, who has caused all the trouble with the

gods,” Callaphe said. “Is it true what they say about you?”

Elspeth scowled. “I guess that depends on who you’ve been talking to.”

“People use *my* name in all sorts of stories,” Callaphe lamented. “Did you ever hear about the time that I snuck into Mt. Velus and stole Purphoros’s tears? Ha! Or hid behind Phenax and wrote down his secrets for a year? In the name of Cosi, who do they think I am?”

Ajani’s ears twitched. “Cosi?”

Something on the horizon caught Callaphe’s attention. To Elspeth, it just looked like a small puff of steam in the distance. But Callaphe looked like a tiger salivating over its prey.

“Oooh,” she said. “We’ve arrived.”

“Arrived where?” Elspeth asked, squinting at the strange white cloud hovering above an otherwise featureless sea. She wouldn’t have to wait long. At the ship’s incredible pace, they would be upon it in mere moments.

“That is our crossroads,” Callaphe said. “I’d hold on to something if I were you.”

“Hold on?” Ajani asked. “The waves are mild, there’s not a cloud in the sky ...”

“Ajani!” Elspeth said. “It’s a whirlpool!”

As they closed in the spot became more visible, and it was no cloud at all. It was a geyser of water spraying into the air from a whirlpool swirling on the surface of



the sea. Callaphe tucked herself near the wall, braced her feet on the planks, and grabbed the edge of the ship. Elspeth and Ajani hurriedly did the same just as they hit the whirlpool. The ship skittered around its circumference and then skipped like a stone flung across the surface of a pond. The prow positioned itself nose first over the heart of the whirlpool and plunged down. Elspeth lost her grip and slammed to her knees on the hull. She slid forward, crashed into the mast, and held on desperately while Callaphe whooped with delight.

There was another precipitous drop, and Elspeth fell forward again as the ship righted itself. The ship leveled off and Elspeth pushed herself to her elbows. The boards of the hull, which had been normal seconds earlier, were now covered with a rough amber-colored skin. Elspeth felt disoriented by the shifting patterns of filtered light. She looked up, expecting the ship to be half submerged, with water pouring over the sides. But they raced down a translucent tunnel under the surface of the water. Shafts of diffuse sunlight dappled the ship, which was completely dry.

“You didn’t expect that the gods would make the edge of the world *easy* to find, did you?” Callaphe said. Her voice had taken on a reverent quality, and she gazed at the ocean around them. The seawater rippled just out of reach and was held back by some mystical force.

“What’s happened to the ship?” Elspeth asked. She was referring to the texture of the hull, but Callaphe

ignored her question. The triton gazed in awe at the dark depths of the ocean beneath them. The dark forms of enormous sea monsters glided just beyond the edges of their underwater passageway.

“Thassa’s oceans pulse with unfathomable life,” Callaphe said. “I’ve never seen such creatures—the size, the breadth of their lives—it humbles me.”

Callaphe ran her hand lovingly along the gunwale, which had transformed into a bony, scale-covered edge. The general shape of the boat was the same, but the planks were fused together and covered in a seamless skin. The curved planks on the walls of the boat had become bone white and resembled ribs. With a sudden shock of realization, Elspeth clutched Ajani’s arm and pointed. He nodded his understanding. This was no mere ship; this was a living creature. Elspeth could feel a heartbeat pulsing through her.

On the left, a snakelike serpent rose up unexpectedly to attack a sharklike beast. The serpent coiled around its prey like a python while the shark bit and tore at its attacker. The two monsters spiraled down into the darkness in a haze of red blood. On the right, a school of golden fish darted past, and Elspeth was mesmerized by the fluid coordination of their movement, as if they shared one mind among the thousands of tiny bodies.

“Callaphe, what is that ahead of us?” Ajani asked urgently.

A dark wall loomed at the end of their water-bound

tunnel, hard and impassable. If they hit it, they would be destroyed on impact. The triton leaped gracefully to the front of the ship.

“Finally,” she whispered.

The prow tilted upward abruptly, and the ship accelerated even more. They shot up through the surface like an arrow unleashed from a bow. As they vaulted into the open air, the ship transformed back to its normal state, but the planeswalkers were distracted by the unexpected sight on the horizon. Instead of the vast and empty ocean, the ship came to rest on a narrow strip of dark land at the edge of a vast and ruined city. Dripping husks of ornate buildings with elaborate facades and a complex of cobblestone streets stretched before them. The city’s horizon was unnatural, and the ruins arched upward as if the architecture were constructed on a convex surface that could not be shaped or altered to the builder’s whim.

“This isn’t Kruphix’s temple?” Elspeth asked. There was no tree or waterfall in sight.

“No, this is something else entirely,” Ajani said.

“Welcome to Arixmethes!” Callaphe cried with joy as she sprung out of the ship and onto the rim of dry land. “The sunken ruins! At last I’ve found him.”

“Him?” Elspeth asked as she started to climb out of the ship. But Ajani cautioned her to stay.

“Look at the ground,” Ajani warned her. Beneath Callaphe’s feet, the black ground was soft and pliable,

and it bowed slightly under her weight.

“You’re not Callaphe, are you?” Ajani asked the triton.

In the sea behind them, the waves had become turbulent. There was a rushing sound from deep beneath the waves.

“Not even close,” the triton answered cheerfully.

“Who are you?” Ajani asked.

“You can call me Kiora,” she said. “I needed the *Monsoon* to find Arixmethes. I couldn’t have done it without you. Good luck getting to Nyx.”

“But where is the edge of the world?” Elspeth asked.

“Ask the ship,” Kiora said impatiently. Patterns of teal light played across her skin as her arms elongated and grew sawfish teeth. She sprang high into the air, twisted her body around midair, and swan dived into the depths just as the Eye of Thassa emerged from the water. Thassa had taken the form of a giant eye that was composed of vapor more than corporeal substance. Elspeth sensed that even though the pupil was fixed on the bubbling waves where Kiora had disappeared, Thassa was watching her, too. When the God of the Sea swung her gaze toward the *Monsoon*, Elspeth and Ajani reacted simultaneously. Quickly, Ajani bolstered Elspeth’s strength while Elspeth made the air around them dense and heavy, like a metaphysical shield of light.

A flurry of razor-sharp translucent shards blasted out of the sea and rained down on them. Ribbons of water lashed the air around them like an unnatural typhoon.

The wind threatened to sweep Elspeth off her feet. But with Ajani aiding her, she maintained the focus of her spell. The watery assaults splashed harmlessly back into the ocean waves. For a moment, there was an unexpected silence. Then, a woman's voice whispered across the waves. The great eye blinked, the air around it folded in on itself, and Thassa was standing next to them in the ship before either planeswalker could think of reacting.

She had taken the form of a female triton no taller than Elspeth. Crimson fins branched from her forehead and tentacles coiled down her shoulders and back. Nyx shone brilliantly in her eyes and the shadows of her body. Even her bident glittered with divine substance. But without the traces of stars, she could have been mistaken for a creature of the mortal realm. Thassa took her time considering them.

“Why must you mortals aspire to godhood?” Thassa demanded. “You can never truly be like us.”

“We do not aspire to godhood,” Ajani said.

“Why do you travel with Elspeth the Betrayer?” Thassa asked him. “Are you a traitor as well?”

“Elspeth is not a betrayer,” Ajani said. “Of any god or mortal.”

“Helioid disagrees,” Thassa said. “With Nylea, they're determined to humble mortals into submission.”

“And yet you are here, in your realm, and have not joined them,” Ajani pointed out.

“I have spent most of the Silence hidden in the depths of my ocean,” Thassa said. “It was not me that Kruphix needed to punish. And now a humble satyr has cracked the foundations of Nyx.”

“I will stop him,” Elspeth said

Thassa scanned the horizon. She cared nothing for Elspeth’s promises. “That triton thief has been searching endlessly for the *Monsoon*. She’s pretended to be Callaphe. She’s pretended even to be me. She intends to steal Arixmethes.”

“How does someone steal a city?” Elspeth asked.

“It’s not just a city, isn’t that right?” Ajani said. “It’s what’s it’s built on.”

“I just felt her touch the sea floor,” Thassa said. “As she rises up, she gathers the strength of my currents. I must stop her before she plunders my realm. I have little time, but I will tell you this: I don’t believe you are to blame, Elspeth. Heliod is arrogant and intends to make himself lord of the pantheon. That is why he is so offended by the Satyr-God. He believes the usurper has taken his personal throne.”

Thassa touched the mast, and the ship began to roll beneath them. Once again, the boards became like skin, the planks like bones, and black-slanted eyes blinked open on the prow of the ship.

“Your blade is the only thing that can destroy Xenagos and restore the true nature of the world,” Thassa said. “I will remove the obstacles on the rest of your journey to

Nyx.”

“I will set things right,” Elspeth promised.

“Finding the way into Nyx isn’t the end of your journey,” Thassa said. “Once inside, you will find a shrine to the gods. You must choose one of us and ask for an ordeal. If you pass the ordeal, the god will open the gates of Nyx and grant you one request within his or her domain.”

“Can I request help in killing Xenagos?” Elspeth asked.

“A god cannot kill another god, but I can make it as easy for you as possible,” Thassa said. “Choose my altar, and your ordeal will be as kind as a summer breeze. Xenagos has protected himself by creating a void that lies just beyond the gates. Ask me for a bridge of aether so you can cross over to him.”

“What’s the void?” Ajani asked.

“It’s a gulf of nothingness around him,” Thassa said. “You’ve seen it in the night sky. Without my help, I fear you’ll never get close enough to kill him.”

Kiora emerged in the waves behind Thassa. She was perched on the back of a gargantuan sea serpent with a hornlike spire. The serpent undulated like a black snake but concealed its true size beneath the waves. The water churned with white froth as masses of writhing tentacles rose from the depths. Kiora had recruited monsters from the floor of Thassa’s ocean, and inky eyes that had never seen sunlight now gazed upon the surface world. Her legion included creatures native to this world but also

others that hailed from oceans under far-flung skies.

“She steals my children,” Thassa said. Her fathomless eyes gleamed with fury.

Beside the ship, a squidlike creature larger than a whale burst up through the surface. Rings of choppy waves rippled in all directions, and the *Monsoon* jostled against the shore. The creature’s leathery black skin was covered with mossy barnacles. Rows of yellow eyes blinked from the scalloped edges of its tentacles, which emerged one after another from the waves. It had a gaping maw with boulderlike teeth, and eyeballs lined the bumpy surface of its forked tongue. The monster was large enough to devour their ship with one bite.

“That is not my child,” Thassa said.

Elsbeth felt the ship pitch and roil beneath them, and the ruins of Arixmethes began to rumble back down into the sea. The ruins disappeared under an upwelling of water, leaving an unobstructed ocean in its wake. Elspeth marveled that an entire city could be swallowed by the ocean in mere seconds. No wonder Callaphe had such a hard time finding it. But there was no sign of the waterfall or Kruphix’s Tree. As if she’d read her mind, Thassa pointed to the horizon.

“My sea will carry you to Kruphix,” Thassa told Elspeth.

“Thank you,” Elspeth said.

“Choose my altar,” Thassa warned her again. “Or your journey will fail.”



Whispering to her waves, Thassa ordered the sea to reach for Nyx. In response to her command, the water hastened for the sky. A monstrous wave carried the *Monsoon* hundreds of feet in the air. From the summit of the wave, they saw Thassa transform back into the Great Eye, which transfixed its hostile gaze upon her enemy, Kiora. Just before their vessel cascaded down the other side, a titanic kraken breached out of the water in the distance, answering the call to battle. *He* was the one they called Arixmethes, and he carried the ruins of the lost city affixed to the length of his spine.

“You’ll never claim Arixmethes!” Thassa’s warned Kiora, who laughed at the God of the Sea. The last thing Elspeth saw was the two tritons locked in combat, surrounded by a legion of ancient sea monsters and furious, unbound waves.

As the massive wave descended back into the ocean, the ship accelerated dramatically until their surroundings were indistinct streaks of blue light. When they finally slowed to the tempo of the wind, Elspeth and Ajani were alone on the glassy blue ocean. A waterfall stretched endlessly along the horizon line. The water at the edge of the world was like a placid pond as if enjoying a last few seconds of existence before cascading over the edge in a raging torrent of white-capped water.

Directly in front of them was Kruphix’s Tree. Two enormous trunks were separate at the base, but they arched toward each other and joined at the top in a

single leafy crown. Stars glittered beyond the waterfall, but the background was milky violet with tinges of deep blue instead of the matte black of Nyx. The seawater that plummeted over the edge disappeared into the abyss of the stars.

They had reached the edge of the world.

The *Monsoon* paused, almost as if it were treading water. The rhythm of its breathing rocked them back and forth on the calm water. Then a melodious sound rose up around them. It was reminiscent of both the song of a whale and the howl of a wolf. It was both plaintive and predatory, and shivers ran down Elspeth's spine. But neither she nor Ajani spoke for fear of disturbing their vessel or interrupting its mesmerizing call. Their vessel raised itself higher out of the water, like a lion sitting back on its haunches. Finlike protrusions appeared along its flanks, and a crest of fins encircled the prow. Wisps of mist outlined the semitranslucent shoulders and powerful legs of this amphibious marvel.

"It's asking Kruphix to let it come home," Ajani said softly.

"Home to Nyx?" Elspeth wondered, and Ajani nodded.

The indigo sky beyond the tree began to shimmer like a desert mirage. The vessel sprang forward and loped across the surface of the placid water. When it leaped toward the tree, the colossal form of Kruphix materialized on the horizon. The God of Horizons blocked out the sky like a dark nebula, as featureless as a

shadow. The vessel bounded through the gap between the sacred trunks, and the God of Horizons opened like a window into Nyx, the realm of the gods. Beyond Kruphix, there was immeasurable depth and endless spirals and the sparkling cosmos.

As they vaulted over the edge of the waterfall, Elspeth looked down. Below them was a star-filled void, and instinctively Elspeth felt how it bled into the boundlessness of the Blind Eternities. The *Monsoon* surged forward, and Ajani grabbed her shoulders protectively as they were engulfed into the form of Kruphix. Unlike the pain of planeswalking, this transition felt like riding a raft down a lazy river. There was blackness and disorientation, but she felt Ajani's hands steadying her, and soon her feet were on solid ground though her eyes could see little in the dimness. She was captivated by glimmering lines that surrounded her as the *Monsoon* transformed fully into a celestial creature of Nyx. With a flash of violet light, it bounded off into a kaleidoscope of stellar formations and disappeared. When the light faded, there was nothing but darkness around them.

"Kruphix is a portal to Nyx," Ajani said. "Walk forward."

"I see nothing!" Elspeth didn't want to move in the darkness. She didn't know if Nyx was a flat plain, a field of razor-sharp shards, or as insubstantial as mist hovering above a pond.

“Trust me,” Ajani said, taking her hand.

Elsbeth inched forward. With each passing step, it was as if someone pulled a series of veils from her eyes. The light grew more and more distinct, until they found themselves inside an open-air shrine built on an expanse of glittering black marble. Monumental crystalline pillars stretched up and disappeared in the brilliant colors of ionic clouds. In every direction there was an unobstructed view of luminous stars and billowing interstellar dust. The shrine was divided into distinct alcoves that were framed by glittering black pillars. Five alcoves lay directly in front of her. More alcoves, spaced farther apart, lay in the distance. But she couldn't see how far the shrine extended or how many alcoves there were in all.

“I've seen the shrine of Nykthos in the mortal realm,” Ajani said. “It looks much like this but more ravaged by time.”

Elsbeth inspected the five alcoves closest to her. Nearly identical, each alcove had a heavy stone altar with a glowing kylix. A divine artisan had carved different symbols into the black marble altars. She saw a flying horse, the symbol of Heliody, in the central alcove. Heliody's kylix was lit with a circle of amber light—the termination point of the pillar of light from the mortal realm.

“Here's Thassa's altar,” Ajani called. Her kylix was sky blue, and the water rippled like ocean waves despite the

stillness of the air around them. A symbol of a bident emitted pulses of blue light.

“Look at this,” Elspeth said. She’d wandered to the alcove on the far right and knelt down for a closer look at the whip carved into the altar. In Erebos’s altar the kylix overflowed with black ichor. Unlike the other alcoves, there was a melted bronze statue next to one of the pillars. She recognized it as a likeness of Xenagos, the satyr, but a mystical fire had melted it into a grotesque shape.

“The satyr trying to take his place in the pantheon,” Ajani said, staring at the deformed bronze. “It’s not working out the way he would have liked.”

“Is there an alcove for all the gods?” Elspeth asked.

“All the real gods,” Ajani said. “We need to hurry. We aren’t in Nyx yet. If Heliod or Nylea discover you’re here, they will kill you before you can confront Xenagos.”

“Can gods kill mortals in Nyx?” Elspeth asked. “Gods can’t kill each other.”

“Assume the answer is yes,” Ajani said.

“I need to choose an altar to ask for an ordeal?” Elspeth said. “And that god must grant me a favor if I succeed?”

“Yes, Thassa’s alcove is over here,” Ajani reminded her. There were shapes appearing on the horizon around them—black shadows against the darkness of Nyx. Yellow eyes blinked and were gone. Ajani could sense

the gathering of magic, but Elspeth acted as if she were oblivious to the growing threat. A burst of red flashed in the distance, like a candle had been lit. Ajani knew they had been discovered, but by what, he wasn't sure.

"Elspeth, you must choose," Ajani said. "When the ordeal begins, you may be physically transported away. But if your body remains here, I will protect you until you've completed your task. But we must act now!"

He took her arm and steered her toward Thassa's altar, but Elspeth resisted. She broke away from Ajani and threw herself down before Erebos's altar. Ajani lunged at her, trying to pull her to her feet before she could speak. But he wasn't fast enough.

"Erebos, I request an ordeal!" she shouted.

The God of the Dead obliged her request.

## CHAPTER 14

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Elspeth tore Elspeth back from the shrine at the edge of Nyx. Her body remained, but her consciousness was snatched away. Elspeth found herself in what felt like a dream. She stood near the window of a stone cottage with a thatch roof. Outside there were grassy hills dotted with cherry trees. In the distance, the Angel's Palace hovered in the summer sky surrounded by sun-kissed clouds. Even before she saw the Angel's Palace, she knew that she was back on Bant. But this wasn't a vision of the plane that had been destroyed by the Conflux. Instead, her mind conjured a restored plane in a reality that could exist at some time in the near future.

A broad-shouldered man was just heading out the door to work the fields. She could still feel his kiss on her cheek. It was her husband, but his back was turned as he walked out the door. She never saw his face. Out the window, a young man—her son—was tending to the horses in the paddock near a sturdy barn. He grinned and waved when he saw her looking at him from the open window. She felt a tug on her dress, and a chestnut-haired child looked earnestly up at her.

“Yes, Mina?” Elspeth said. This was her daughter,

whose seventh birthday was just days away.

“Are you going to teach me more forms today?” the girl begged. In one hand, she clutched a blunt wooden sword that Elspeth remembered making for her. Erebos’s ordeal came with a series of pleasant memories that Elspeth knew weren’t real but she wanted them to be.

The smell of fresh bread mingled with the sweet scent of white flowers in a ceramic vase on the wooden table. A fragrant breeze wafted through the cottage. Her son had disappeared from view, but she could see the countryside in remarkable clarity. She could see the veins on the leaves of the oak trees on the other side of the field. That was the edge of their farm. No one could come onto her land if she didn’t want them to. No one would hurt her. No storms would ever appear on the horizon. This was her home, and she was surrounded by people who loved her.

The little girl smiled happily at her mother and set her play sword down on the table. As Elspeth stared into her daughter’s green eyes, she felt her true memories slipping away from her. Daxos, Ajani, Nikka—they were vanishing into the darkness and in mere moments she would forget them altogether. And she wasn’t entirely sure that she cared. Here was everything she ever wanted. And all she had to do was let go of the pain of her real memories.

The girl began to sing a jagged little song. It was obvious that she was making it up on the spot. “Across



the river ... oh, down the river.” As she sang, she plucked the white flowers out of the vase and laid them in a neat row on the table. While Elspeth struggled to remember the name of the flower, her daughter began pouring clear liquid from the vase into the gold cup on the table. The gold was very out of place in the rustic surroundings, and Elspeth felt confused that she hadn’t noticed it earlier. No, it wasn’t that she hadn’t noticed it. It just hadn’t been there before.

Her daughter poured the liquid until it reached the brim of the gold cup. The liquid had no smell, but Elspeth knew it wasn’t water. Once she drank it, she was done fighting. Once she drank it, she could finally rest. Asphodel. Elspeth remembered the name of the flower, but in doing so, a shudder of pain wracked her body. Remembering her old life was like reopening a wound. If she stayed here, emotions like grief and despair would become like strangers she had passed by long ago.

The little girl stared up at her expectantly. Every detail of her life with this child passed through her mind. From her birth to the joyful discoveries of her toddler years and even very recent days when they played together outside in the long summer evenings.

“You should drink it, Mama,” the girl said seriously. “That’s all you need to do.”

This was a vision of a home, safety, and comfort. She was so tired of the grief, of the destruction, and everything falling apart over and over again. Here was

Erebos's cup of resignation. Why should she be the one to fight Xenagos? Or the Phyrexians? Or any of the relentless evils that plagued the Multiverse? Didn't she deserve peace? She glanced out the window at the man who would be her husband. Whoever he was, he wasn't Daxos. Pain shot through her body as she reminded herself that none of this was real. She had not given birth to these beautiful children. There would be no finding rest here.

"Please, Mama?" the girl begged.

Elspeth snatched the gold cup and threw it against the wall. On impact, the gold shattered into a thousand worthless shards. Like everything else about the vision, Erebus's cup was a bitter lie. Tears ran down the little girl's cheeks, and Elspeth felt the regret as acutely as if it had been her real daughter she was abandoning.

"Why?" the girl asked pitifully. "Why did you do that?"

"Because no one ever promised me a life without suffering," Elspeth said.

And with those words, she was ripped back to Nyx.

# CHAPTER 15



**E**lspeth!” Ajani shouted, but he sounded far away. “Open your eyes!”

She blinked rapidly as her vision spun into focus. Above her, impossible formations of interstellar clouds seemed frozen against the infinite black of the starless cosmos. Burning white comets streaked across the sky. There were no echoes, no wind, and no scent of life. The pastoral scene from Erebos’s ordeal was gone, but so was the shrine on the periphery of Nyx.

They now stood on a precipice of black marble jutting into the blackness that had replaced the vibrant night sky. The black stone beneath their feet was partially transparent, and stars glittered and astral clouds swirled inside its depth. The “floor” of Nyx was stellar components made corporeal. Such features were unperceivable from the mortal realm where Nyx appeared boundless and unfathomable. But what appeared to be an ethereal creature to a human’s eye actually had form in the realm of the gods. A celestial creature could stand here, lift a weapon, and commit violence upon another.

Xenagos’s void lay directly in front of them. Elspeth

had imagined it as an impassible gulf that the Satyr-God had created to protect himself inside of Nyx. From the mortal realm, it had looked as wide as the ocean. But standing at its edge, the gap was much narrower than Elspeth expected. And it wasn't a moat of nothingness—it was still Nyx, just without the presence of god-forms, celestial creatures, or a multitude of stars. It was like someone had taken a cloth and scrubbed Nyx bare.

On the far side of the gulf, there was another plain of jagged black marble where a wall of fire burned across the glittering stone. At least fifty feet high, the flame wall was curved on both the east and west edges as if it continued in an unbroken circle, which could not be seen from their vantage point. A towering gray mound lay just beyond the flames. Obscured by the fire and smoke, Elspeth couldn't tell if it was natural or constructed. Protrusions of stone were embedded at even intervals up the center of the mound. The grayish surface looked sinewy and stretched.

“Where are we?” Elspeth asked.

“You must have completed your ordeal,” Ajani said. He shifted his axe from one shoulder to the other. “When Erebus opened the metaphysical gates of Nyx, we didn't move, but the horizon moved around us. We have come to this new place without taking a step.”

Elspeth believed him. She felt dizzy, as if she'd spun in circles again and again.

“Are you injured?” Ajani asked, looking at her with

concern. “Do you feel pain?”

For the first time since Daxos’s death, her guilt nearly overwhelmed her. But as soon as she conjured her friend’s face in her mind’s eye, it was replaced by an image of the little girl, Mina, her unborn child. Erebos had fused the memories in her mind and left her a mental legacy of all she could have had and lost. His deceit crowded against her true memories and left rage lingering in its wake. Was she injured? No, but she would never be whole again. She couldn’t answer Ajani’s question, so she ignored it instead.

“We made it inside Nyx?” Elspeth asked. “What happened to it? Why is it so empty?”

“I don’t know,” Ajani said. “What happened to you, Elspeth?”

Elsbeth shook her head. Someday maybe she could tell Ajani about the death of Daxos and the ordeal she’d just been through. But they had managed what everyone believed to be impossible. They had entered Nyx, the realm of the gods. Xenagos must be somewhere close. People had suffered and died so he could make himself a god. People like Daxos, and Stelanos, and Nikka, wherever she was. The satyr must not be allowed to keep his false kingdom.

“No time,” she said.

Ajani nodded in understanding. “Heliod is searching for you. His minions skirted the edges of the shrine, but they wouldn’t enter it. Now that we’re in Nyx, they can’t

be far behind us.”

“The last time I met Xenagos, he tyrannized my mind,” Elspeth said. Her voice was filled with hatred, and Ajani looked uneasy. “I must be free of his influence before I fight him.”

“I can protect you from his control,” Ajani promised. “I will never leave your side.”

“I passed the ordeal,” Elspeth said. “I can ask Erebos for something in return.”

“No!” Ajani said furiously. “He’s vain and cruel. Even Thassa was misinformed about the nature of the void. You don’t need a bridge.”

Ajani was partly correct. She didn’t need Thassa’s bridge to cross the void. Even as she spoke, she swung her blade in the ritualized form that focused her spellcasting. She was harnessing the mystical energy that would propel her and Ajani across the expanse.

“I do need something from him,” Elspeth said.

“Kill Xenagos, but forget Erebos,” Ajani insisted. “He was forced to open the gates to heaven for you. That’s victory enough.”

“It’s not enough,” Elspeth said.

With a graceful motion, she dashed to the edge and leaped toward the fire on the other side. Infused with her spell, Ajani followed her off the precipice, and for the fleeting second that crossed the gulf, they felt weightless and unbound by the laws of physics. To humans watching from the mortal realm, they appeared as two

constellations chasing after the firelight in an otherwise empty sky. When Elspeth and Ajani alighted on the other side, Ajani grabbed her hand. She felt his strength course through her. He was giving her most of what he had—a powerful bulwark against Xenagos’s manipulation. She would be the master of her fate, not some puppet dragged through the dirt of someone else’s theater.

Before they could move, tendrils of fire burst from the wall reaching out to capture them. With the gulf at their backs, there was no place to back away from the flames. Together, they bolted for an opening to their right, but the flames blasted up like a geyser from the stone. In a heartbeat, the fire crawled behind them along the very edge of the precipice. It arched over their heads and trapped them in a fiery prison. Once inside, Elspeth realized they weren’t the only prisoners. She saw twisted shadows writhing in the flames. The shapes were heartbreakingly familiar. They had the forms of mundane creatures from the mortal realm—except these captured animals glittered with stars.

“Ajani!” Elspeth cried in disbelief. “Xenagos trapped the celestial creatures!”

Inside the Satyr-God’s trap, they saw the fuel that fed his cosmic pyre. The starry creatures that had enjoyed the eternal freedom of the night skies now suffered in torment. The mystical flames scorched them but didn’t consume them. Instead, the flames fed off their bodies,

which had fused together in a wall of flesh and astral matter, and it intensified Xenagos's power. At the sight of the creatures' suffering, Ajani's hands began to glow with healing light.

"Why is he doing this?" Elspeth cried.

"He's lost the power from the revels and replaced it with this," Ajani said, moving to a celestial stag nearest them. It scraped its hooves pitifully against the marble as it tried to escape its bonds.

"We need to destroy the flames," Elspeth said. "We have to save them."

As Ajani wove a mystical shield to smother the flames, Elspeth used her blade to cut the stag from the gray sinews that tethered it inside the flames. She freed the stag, which bounded away beyond the fiery prison. But the flames closed the gap before she could attend to another creature. Hundreds of celestials were trapped in the burning landscape around them. They seemed to sense that the planeswalkers were trying to help them, and their haunting cries grew louder.

Through the shimmering flames, Elspeth saw the gray mound stir and shift. The mound wasn't part of the landscape as Elspeth first thought. As it rose higher, it became more defined. Red handprints were smeared on a sickly surface. Shoulders came into focus. Gargantuan arms stretched out with a grinding noise as joints snapped into place. Finally, the horned head of the God of Revels came into focus. Xenagos pulled himself to his



full height. He now had the horizon-dominating, monumental stature of a god. But by dousing the flames, the planeswalkers were diminishing his power, and he could feel it. He spun to face them, and the flames parted above them.

As he stared down from his lofty height, Xenagos's eyes met Elspeth's, and then they settled on her blade. His expression didn't change—there was neither glee nor distress. There was an absence of human emotion. She wanted him to be afraid. The blade had been crafted by Purphoros and claimed by Helioid. It was wielded by a mortal champion who had crossed through the gates of Nyx. The Satyr-God breathed deeply, and the mystical flames flickered. Nearby, a white Nyxborn lion roared in pain as Xenagos absorbed more energy from the suffering creatures. Elspeth wanted to carve the features off Xenagos's stolen face, but she couldn't leave Ajani. He couldn't disperse the flames on his own.

She needed to enlist help, but rank-and-file soldiers would just be absorbed into Xenagos's horrific mass. During their time in Meletis, Daxos had shared hundreds of god-stories, including the archon saga. She knew the power of the archons-of-old and their epic battle with the gods on the Four Winds Plateau. Daxos had described their nature to her in painstaking detail. An archon would not quail before a god. An archon could avoid the consuming fires. The spell felt as natural to cast as the wind lifting a banner high above a field of battle. She

imagined Daxos standing next to her as she summoned an archon to their aid.

With a deafening sonic explosion, a celestial archon materialized just above the flames. The faceless, hooded rider was mounted on a winged beast with eyes of fire and hooves of bronze. Elspeth shouted for her new ally to fly, and the archon spurred its mount along the length of the fire. The beating of its white wings sent a cold, ferocious wind sweeping across the jagged plain of Nyx. The oppressive wind flattened the flames to a mere flicker against the glittering stone. The archon circled around with astonishing speed and then doubled back. The wind nearly drove Elspeth to her knees, and Xenagos's cruel flames retreated into nothingness. Reeling with the loss of his fire, Xenagos roared in disbelief and stumbled back into the darkness of Nyx.

As the archon prowled the skies, golden light sparked from his body and rained down on the freed celestials. Ajani sent a wave of healing through the former captives. A Nyxborn wolf was one of the last creatures to escape the flames. The wounded wolf was four times the size of an ordinary wolf, and dozens of creatures shadowed it even after the flames disappeared. Its flank had been sliced open, and inside its body Elspeth glimpsed a vision of an infinite forest. Ajani raced to the creature's side, bowed his head, and placed his hands on the majestic wolf. As soon as he touched it, Elspeth knew that this was no celestial creature.

This was Nylea, who had come to fight Xenagos after his ascension. When she'd seen what he'd done to the celestials, she'd let herself be taken by the flames rather than permit her creatures to suffer alone. Under Ajani's care, the wound on her flank closed, and the vision of the forest was gone. Unsure of what world she had glimpsed, Elspeth marveled at the mysteries of the gods and the secrets of creation that Nylea protected within herself

Still in wolf form, Nylea loped to the edge, but the rescued creatures didn't follow her. Instead, they stayed their ground with Ajani and Elspeth. At the last second before Nylea bounded into the cosmos, she paused and looked at Elspeth. She didn't speak words, but Elspeth sensed her message. It was like a seed that Nylea had planted in her mind, and it was beginning to sprout: *The celestials are yours to command. I must find Heliod and warn him not to take vengeance upon you.*

When Nylea disappeared, a horde of Nyxborn satyrs hurtled out of the darkness where Xenagos had vanished. Much like Xenagos's ruined statue at the edge of Nyx, their features appeared melted and their bodies distorted. Grotesque parodies of the natural world, these satyrs were mindlessly determined to slaughter them. The celestial creatures sped forward to intercept this wave of enemies as Xenagos reemerged from the shadows. He stood like a pillar above the battleground, with his attention riveted on Elspeth. Fire still burned in his eyes,

but it was diminished. Elspeth glanced at Ajani, who took his place beside her.

Flying just above the fray, the archon sent gusts of wind through the hordes of satyrs, sweeping them over the edge of the battleground and clearing a path to Xenagos. The Satyr-God sent a barrage of fireballs as Elspeth and Ajani approached. He ripped huge slabs of marble from the ground, set them alight, and launched the fiery rocks into the midst of the celestial army. The archon dodged the flaming projectiles and made a frontal assault at Xenagos. He sliced his blade across Xenagos's neck. The blade cut through immaterial flesh, and Xenagos wasn't harmed. The archon prepared another assault, but a massive rock slammed into his winged mount. The archon vanished in a burst of light, but before it dissipated, it imparted Elspeth with its inhuman strength and speed.

As Ajani intercepted the haphazard attacks from crazed satyrs, Elspeth drew closer to Xenagos. It was like approaching a mountain. As in the battle with the Rageblood, she knew she couldn't go head to head with an opponent of greater size. Xenagos's immense hand reached out, swiping at her like a mosquito, but she dodged and sliced into him. Elspeth's speed was uncanny, and the god could barely track her. In constant motion, she circled around and slashed him over and over. And with every cut, she said Daxos's name inside her mind. *Daxos*. Hundreds of times, she paid homage to

the fallen oracle with the cutting motion of her blade. And she would say it a hundred more, because even though she wasn't killing Xenagos with her gashes, she knew her blade was damaging Nyx.

The *Godsend* was flaying the foundations of the god-realm, and the ground beneath them rumbled as if reacting in pain. The battle between the celestials and Xenagos's satyrs raged behind them, and as he promised, Ajani had abandoned his healing magic and protected her with his axe. No foe could approach her as she waged her personal war against the Satyr-God. Finally, the ground under Xenagos crumbled inward, and the god seemed to sink lower into the black marble of the battleground. His height was diminished, but he could track her more easily. Elspeth recognized the new danger, and she dashed back to Ajani to avoid Xenagos's oncoming blow. But she wasn't quick enough, and Xenagos slammed her into the ground.

Ribs broken and body bruised, Elspeth lay stunned on the roiling marble, gasping for air as Xenagos loomed directly above, lording his power and dominance over her. Here was her worst nightmare. She was trapped and overwhelmed. She could hear Ajani shouting as he rushed to her aid, but there was no time. Xenagos's eyes were wild as he raised his fist to crush her into oblivion. His gaze flicked to her blade. Instead of killing her, he hesitated. He would have the sword forged by Purphoros and claimed by Heliod. He would be the lord of the

pantheon, the greatest of all the gods.

As he leaned closer, Elspeth saw the raw skin of Nylea's wound visible on his chest. His body was still partially flesh, and Nylea's arrowhead pressed outward as if it was trying to escape the confines of his skin. The rapid thud of his beating heart rattled the damaged stone beneath Elspeth. Xenagos had ascended, but he was still mortal enough to have a pulse.

Just before he took the *Godsend* from her, Elspeth scrambled to her feet. With shaky hands, she aimed the spear-blade and prayed to Nylea for guidance. Elspeth threw the spear-blade at the divine arrowhead lodged in Xenagos's chest. When the *Godsend* collided with the arrowhead, it exploded into a million razor-sharp shards inside him, and his beating heart was shredded. His remaining flesh became like tattered ribbons. Rivers of star field streamed from the gaping wounds in what had been his body. As his remnants crashed to the ground, the star field flowed back into the gulf he had created, and Nyx shone down on the mortal world again.

"Erebus, I passed your ordeal," she said. "I make my request."

"No, Elspeth!" Ajani roared.

"I trade my life for Daxos's!" Elspeth shouted.

Ajani was shouting at her while Elspeth raced to retrieve her blade. With a wide arc, she made the final, deepest cut across the ground, and the glittering marble crumbled under the weight of the dying god. Elspeth

sprinted back as the black marble disintegrated behind her. Ajani darted forward, grabbed her, and dragged her to a safe distance. They tumbled to the cold stone, and Elspeth clutched her blade to her chest.

“Oh Elspeth, what have you done?” Ajani whispered.

The winds carried Elspeth’s request to the Underworld, where Erebos rose from his golden throne and wrung his hands with anticipation.

“What have you done?” Ajani repeated.

But Elspeth didn’t answer. After Xenagos’s consciousness faded from him, his body diminished until it was as small as it once had been. He slipped through the crevices between realms and his shattered body came to rest in the Despair Lands. Xenagos’s satyrs were exploding in self-immolating fire, like the last moments of a revel, when fireworks explode in the sky. The celestial creatures bounded back into the vibrant night sky and resumed their walk across the ageless heavens. But Elspeth’s eyes were fixed on a blue speck flitting toward her. Amid the noise and chaos, a Nyxborn butterfly alighted on her hand that gripped the spearblade.

Nylea’s god-voice blossomed in her mind: “You have returned the pantheon back to its natural order. I forgive you for your transgressions. But you must flee Nyx before Heliod finds you or Erebos can claim you. I will help you if I can.”

Elspeth’s body began to shimmer with celestial light.

An aura of star field surrounded her as Nylea wrapped her in a cloak of stars. Stellar light dappled Ajani's white fur when Nylea gave the same gift to the leonin. Bestowed with the essence of the stars, they had become like the Nyxborn.

"Flee to the Shrine of the Gods on the edge of Nyx," Nylea said. "You can escape into the mortal realm where Heliod must rely on his oracles to find you. The world is vast and deep, and you can hide from him there."

"Where are you going?" Elspeth called, but she already knew. Nylea would search for Daxos, who would soon be walking among the living. Elspeth grieved that she would never see Daxos again, but at least he could find happiness in his sparkling city on the edge of Thassa's sea. The butterfly disappeared, and the horizon began to tilt on its axis, and the shrine of the gods spun into view.

"Can you planeswalk?" Ajani asked. "I don't have the strength."

At that moment, Elspeth was too weak to conjure a grain of sand. Nor did Nyx feel like a place from which she could enter the Blind Eternities. It did not seem to exist in time and space the same way that a plane did. And if they couldn't planeswalk, they would have to run. With the little strength they had left, they hurried for the shrine, but a voice echoed around them as they ran. Raw and thunderous, it was ancient and devoid of compassion.



“Heliody,” Erebus said. “You must deliver her to me.”

They were nearly at the shrine where the pillar of light shone like a beacon of safety. Originating at Heliody’s altar, it was the nexus point between the two worlds and their only escape from the god’s realm. Only the Nyxborn could cross from Nyx into the mortal realm, but Nylea had given them that ability with her gift. They were seconds from safety when a rippling shock wave of energy swept over the shrine and knocked them off their feet. Heliody had arrived. He looked almost human, with his dark hair and piercing eyes, but he was encircled by an aura of brilliance that made it hard to gaze upon him.

“My champion,” he said. “Give me my blade.”

The *Godsend* flew from her hand even though she tried desperately to keep hold of it.

“Make yourself immune to my power,” Heliody taunted. “If you still possess the power to do it.”

Elsbeth had no strength left. He had taken her blade, and she was weary beyond all measure. In the insufferable light, she couldn’t see Ajani. She felt blindly for him, but she couldn’t find her friend.

“Even if you hadn’t given yourself to Erebus, I wouldn’t have permitted you to live,” Heliody said. “You are too much like the satyr. Your eyes have seen things I can’t fathom. And a champion cannot know more than her god. *I am lord of the pantheon. I am the greatest of these.*”

Heliody’s light blinded Elsbeth, so she never saw him

move to strike. She didn't know he was going to murder her until she felt the *Godsend* pierce her chest. As it tore into her flesh, it broke in half and lost its divinity. Helioid had no use for a sword that could rend Nyx and slaughter a god.

The pain was absolute. Her soul became like a physical extension of her body, a fragile thing mutilated by the spear-blade. The brilliant light faded, and Elspeth lay on her side on the black marble. So many battles she had fought, so many injuries she had endured. And now, she didn't possess the strength to lift her head. Her vision was hazy, but she could see Ajani kneeling beside her. His face was a mask of pain; his body seemed rigid with shock.

Helioid said to Ajani, "Carry her back to the mortal realm, leonin. Deliver her to Erebos. If she dies here, she will disperse to nothingness."

Elspeth cried out as Ajani lifted her and cradled her in his arms. Without a word, he carried her into the light of Helioid's altar. Together, they passed into the mortal realm. It was a warm night, and the god-forms and celestial creatures were fully restored and glorious above them. Elspeth's breath slowed as he took her beyond the boundary of Nykthos, Shrine to Nyx, and laid her upon the bare earth. He wouldn't let her die at the feet of the gods. Black-clad figures swept across the bleak plains toward them. Erebos's agents were coming. The God of the Underworld would claim his prize.

Enraged with grief, Ajani picked up his axe and rushed toward them, but Pyxathor and his leonin warriors hurried from their hiding places. King Brimaz would want them to keep Ajani safe. They encircled the injured leonin and spirited him to safety. Elspeth watched him disappear into the night. There was an instant before Erebos's agents reached her that Elspeth was alone. Her happiest memories with Daxos flashed through her fading mind. But as the world retreated into darkness, she thought of Heliod. *Give me quiet. Give me peace. Give me rest at last.*



Nylea scoured the mortal realm. The God of the Dead was required to release Daxos in exchange for Elspeth. Elspeth had completed her ordeal, made her request, and Erebos was bound by it. Yet there was no sign of Daxos. Nylea took the form of a human woman and walked upon the earth. Her bare feet in the soil, with her bow in her hand, she wandered the wilds in search of the mortal she loved. She had no conception of time passing, and her heart was heavy with grief.

Nylea's journey ended on a cloudy day deep in the heart of her own forest. She came upon the ruins of an old Setessan outpost near a stream. In the mortal language, this idyllic place was called Hunter's Crossing. The sound of the rushing water mingled with the sweet

song of the birds. Nylea paused under the shadow of a silver oak and suddenly saw why she hadn't felt Daxos's presence in the world.

Daxos paced endlessly along the riverbank. He paused at a certain spot near the rushing stream where the violets were in full bloom. A gold mask covered his face as he searched mindlessly for the thing he loved the most.



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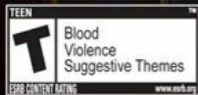


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