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1: Winter is Here

Winter was coming, and the monsters arrived early.

All civilizations north of the Sunsea feared the winter season, the most dangerous of them all. Navigation slowed down to a crawl during that period. Winter storms were as dangerous as their autumnal counterparts, and cloudy skies made it difficult to use the stars or sun for navigation. Mists and fogs obscured reefs and dangerous straits. Very few maritime routes remained relatively safe to travel, and only the bravest of sailors dared to sail during that period. With fewer ships to bring grain home, many northern towns faced food shortages.

Kairos of Travia, pirate king of Histria and captain of the *Foresight*, had lost family members to one such disaster.

However, his glittering [Golden Fleece] cloak had enhanced the autumn harvests, guaranteeing that his colony and the Travian towns it supported would remain well-fed. But unfortunately, civilized species weren't the only ones starving.

Monsters were no different than most animals. Some adapted their tactics to the new season, trading colored pelts for white fur. Some slept beneath the earth during winter, waking up hungry and ravenous in the spring.

And others migrated south to escape the chilling cold.

Riding on the back of his crimson griffin Rook and escorted by a small group of bronze-beaked Stymphalian birds, Kairos observed the Mint Woods from high above. Named as such due to the overwhelming amount of mint plants growing there, this forest cut his dominion in half. A magical barrier prevented one from moving north, to the island's mountain and hidden dungeon. In spite of their best efforts, Kairos' mages hadn't managed to break past it yet.

Some local monsters could cross the frontier just fine though.

Multiple herds of wild pegasi had crossed the forest by flight, some herds numbering more than twenty. Great white mares grazed the grass south of the forest, alongside colts and fillies. The stallions patrolled the skies above the group by running circles, some eyeing the griffin rider warily.

"They have never met humans," the Stymphalian flock's leader Horace warned. "And adult griffins love the taste of flying horse flesh."

"They do look delicious," Rook said, though he had been well-fed before the trip. "We could share, Kairos. I take the legs and you keep the wings?"

"I would be more interested in recruiting a herd or two than hunting them," his rider replied with an amused smile. Powerful nations like the city-state of Thessala and Lyce fielded brigades of pegasus cavaliers, and Kairos wished to have his own too.

His griffin looked up at him in outrage. "Kairos, you aren't dumping me for a dumb horse? They eat grass, like cows!"

"Don't worry, your place is secure," Kairos reassured his [Animal Companion] and most trusted friend while petting him behind the head. The griffin wagged his serpentine tail in happiness. "I put your head on our coins."

Explorers had found rich silver deposits on the island's eastern side, enough that the colony's council decided on the creation of a mining settlement to exploit them. [Crafters] had started minting coins using the ore, with one side representing Kairos' face, and the other Rook's.

Though the pirate king had originally named the whole colony Histria, the creation of a second town had complicated matters for mapmakers. In the end, he renamed the island 'Chronia' after his father Chron, and kept Histria as the main port's name in honor of his late sister. Following the theme, Kairos decided to call the mining settlement Taulas after his deceased brother.

The pirate king wondered if his people would name a third city after him, if he ever perished. "Cass would certainly look great on a pegasus' back though," Kairos mused.

"I hope her own hunt will go well," Rook said, as he made another circle in the skies.

So did Kairos. With the incoming winter, sea monsters like the dreaded Cetae migrated south to warmer waters and attacked ships or ports on the way. His second-in-command Cassandra had taken her new whaling galley, the *Rhadamanthe*, to hunt a monster approaching dangerously close to their colony.

Kairos didn't worry about it. Cass was a [Hero] like him now, with a magical weapon to match her rank. Two months had passed since their adventures on the amazon island of Achlys, and she used that time wisely. She would return victorious.

"Perhaps you could approach them for us, Horace?" Kairos asked his bird ally. The Travian's [Monster Lure] Legendary Skill should make it easier for him to befriend the

pegasi, but they clearly distrusted his group. "Tell them I wish to offer them food and shelter for the winter?"

"I could," the creature replied, before glancing at the forest. The trees shook one after another, insects and birds flying away. "But we've got a bigger problem on our wings, twoleg."

Something enormous moved through the woods from the north.

Refusing to take any chance, Kairos had Rook fly as high as possible. The [Hero] activated his [Invisibility] Skill, he and his mount vanishing from sight while the Stymphalian birds hid within the clouds. The Travian's silver [Anemoi Spear] vibrated with the cold wind, as if thirsting for battle.

The pegasus herds sensed the danger too, the stallions letting out a warning screech. The animals panicked, adults taking flight and mares desperately trying to get their young to follow. Some succeeded, but a few took too long to escape.

The Nemean Lion emerged from the forest with a rumbling sound.

The beast was so large that he tossed trees out of his path as he charged, snapping trunks in half. Kairos estimated his size as around ten meters in length, and four in height. His fur glittered in the sunlight, making him look like a statue of solid gold. Only the beast's crimson eyes revealed his true nature as a bloodthirsty predator.

The creature moved so swiftly that he became a shining blur, quickly closing the gap with the closest herd. A mare and a foal hadn't taken flight yet, and the lion fell on them like an executioner's axe. His silvery claws cut the adult mare in half, and his sharp fangs closed on her child with a sickening noise. The grass turned red with blood.

The other pegasi didn't even try to fight back. They dispersed by flight in a mad panic, while the lion swallowed the foal in one bite. The predator then let out a mighty roar that shook the woods like booming thunder.

[Terror] negated by [Leadership 3]!

Most would have fled in fear, but Kairos and his companions had faced worse foes. Still, they remained hidden in the clouds as other monsters emerged from the woods.

A winged sphinx followed in the lion's trail. The hybrid had black eagle wings and a lioness's body, except for the head and torso. The creature had a human woman's face of

incredible beauty, with long brown hair arranged in a ceremonial headdress including golden circlets and jewels. Her lined eyes looked like emeralds, while magical amulets covered her breasts. Kairos' [Magical Knack] Skill mostly identified them as protections against ailments such as [Charm] and [Berserk]. Though nowhere near the Nemean Lion in size, the sphinx's length reached three meters.

A dozen beasts escorted her. Wingless manticores, ferocious felines with scorpion stingers; and chimeras, large lionesses with rams heads sprouting from their back and a red serpent for a tail. All clearly females, and the Nemean Lion's pride.

The sphinx spoke words of power in ancient Greek while raising a paw at an escaping stallion. A fiery ray came out of her claw and cut off the pegasus' left wing, causing the animal to crash to the ground. A chimera grabbed the helpless beast and breathed searing flames from her goat head. By the time the herd managed to escape, the sphinx had slain four pegasi.

Kairos watched the slaughter from above, as the lesser beasts pulled their bounty towards the Nemean Lion. Much like a normal lion's pride, the giant beast ate first and the others waited their turn.

"If you didn't feed us, Kairos, we would be following them south," Horace said while trailing the fleeing pegasi with his gaze. "When the northern beasts become hungry enough, they will hunt *anything*."

"That's a big kitten," Rook said anxiously, as he watched the Nemean Lion devour a mare within a minute. "A very big kitten."

Kairos' friend Nessus had guessed that the island housed a Nemean Lion of colossal size alongside his sphinx mate, and this brutal display confirmed his worst fears.

The Travian used [Observer 3] on the pride. The chimeras and manticores were nothing to write home about, but the lion and the sphinx...

Thunderclaw, Murderous Lion

Legend: King of Lions (Hero).

Race: Nemean Lion (Mythic)

Class: Monster (Divine Beast, Dungeon Guardian, Behemoth, Maneater).

Level: 60.

Aglaonice, the Second Riddle

Legend: Moonbringer (Hero)

Race: Sphinx (Gynosphinx)

Class: Spellcaster (Astrologer, Priest, Oracle, Riddler)

Level: 60.

Kairos considered using his [Warg] Skill to try and possess one of them, but wisely decided against it. He would need to get close first with no guarantee of success, and considering their classes, the monsters probably had protections against mind-control magic.

The sphinx lounged on the ground, before raising her human head at the clouds. A chill went down Kairos' skin as he realized that the creature could see him and Rook perfectly fine. Aglaonice blew them a kiss with an amused look.

"Let's retreat," Kairos decided, Rook and the stymphalian birds hastily flying away. The sphinx watched them go with curiosity, but took no step to stop them. "Horace, I want your flock to shadow this pride's movements."

"We won't approach them closely," the bird replied. "Sorry twoleg, but food isn't worth throwing my life away over. I have chicks at home."

"I wouldn't expect you to take a risk," Kairos replied, knowing Horace's greedy heart. "All I ask is that you watch them from afar."

"Will we hunt them, Kairos?" Rook asked. "Or befriend them?"

"It's too early to say yet." Kairos had built his success on recruiting monsters, but he wanted to access the island's Necromanteion dungeon. The Nemean Lion clearly acted as its guardian, and the colonists would need to slay the beast to bypass the Mint Woods. Kairos wasn't sure how the monster's pride might react to his demise, and though he would rather recruit new allies, he had the duty to protect his subjects first.

More than fifteen thousand people now called his colony their home, and more kept coming, attracted by the promise of work, food, and wealth. Other cities and islands had joined Kairos' pirate federation, and the fanged crown on his head felt heavy to bear.

Monsters followed the winds of winter, but his war would begin with spring.

Thales the Promethean observed his device with great interest.

A metal needle was suspended over a bronze circle, always pointing in the same direction however the scientist held it. He had tested his theory a dozen times, using his four hands to make measures and double-check, and the device always indicated the north.

Lord Kairos had asked him to examine the island's soils, to find silver, gold, gemstones, copper, and other metals that their colony could exploit. Thales found traces of all of them, but it was this strange new metal that caught his interest. The automaton obsessed over the invisible forces that influenced the physical world, such as magic or souls. By measuring and studying them, he grew each day closer to his dream.

In time, the automaton would surpass his maker and create life in his image.

"Fascinating," Thales said, scribbling notes on a papyrus. Dreadful notes and cacophony shook his usually silent study, but the automaton's task occupied his full attention. "The metal always points north, probably towards the Eye of Typhon. The trapped titan likely exerts an invisible pressure on it. Must investigate possible connections with seastorms."

He would need to travel south, to check if his compass device always pointed in the same direction no matter the location. Besides the obvious benefits for navigation when combined with an astrolabe, the metal could help measure magical force—

A terrible screech drew Thales out of his thoughts.

Thales' sanctum was one of the largest houses in Histria, but mostly consisted of a single central facility with smaller rooms serving as specialized laboratories or store rooms. Thales had no need for bedrooms or a kitchen, for he was a creature of wood, glass, and metal. A magical stone in his heart gave him life, while a crystal eye allowed him to see, hear, and vocalize words through vibrations. Knowledge was his food, study his sleep.

The automaton alchemist hadn't yet transferred all his belongings from his old lab in Travia, so his current lab was in shambles. Shelves of papyrus scrolls lined the walls next to wax tablet repositories, while half-empty chests contained the measurement instruments

Thales didn't have the time to sort out. Four stone tables housed maps, notes, and the plans for the automaton son that the scientist hoped to raise one day.

Two 'guests' sat around one of the tables: a crimson bearded satyr with a glass left eye, and a black minotaur playing a silver lyre. His music sounded worse than a tortured cat's screams.

"I am sorry, but could you be a little less loud?" the animated machine asked his guests softly.

"Don't worry, we're almost there," Nessus the satyr mused, his ram hooves on the table and his hands behind his head. "Agron is close to making a good note!"

"Agron does not flee from battle!" The minotaur pinched one of the strings with his enormous fingers, to Thales' immense distress. "Any battle!"

Almost all the island's officers and major captains were level 40 [Elites], with the exception of young Tiberius, who had barely reached level 21. Agron needed a [Legend] and the [Hero] Rank to gain more levels, and he thought mastering the [Lyre of Orpheus] artifact would help him with it.

Unfortunately, no matter his efforts, the minotaur had a long way to go before becoming even a passable musician.

Thales had offered to help him practice, only for his latest discovery to distract him. The automaton had a hard time focusing on a given subject for long; his curiosity was a wild beast impossible to satisfy.

He needed to discipline his thoughts. Lady Julia had given him a highly important mission, and he was loath to disappoint her. Chronia's queen was not only his favorite *Board & Conquest* adversary, but also his main patron. Her coins had funded Thales' lab, and many of his books came from her own library. By now, Thales almost considered her a friend, though he remained mindful of his place.

"We could make your music a new interrogation method," Nessus japed. "Nobody will resist it."

Agron sent him a baleful glare, before clearing his throat. "Ah me, thou son of wise-hearted Tydeus, what a thing hast thou said!" He quoted the eighth book of the Iliad, his voice deep and strong. "For though Hector shall call thee coward and weakling, yet will not the Trojans or the Dardanians hearken to him, nor the wives of the great-souled Trojans, bearers of the shield, they whose lusty husbands thou hast hurled in the dust."

This made Nessus raise his right eyebrow. "You know the Iliad?"

"I can recite Homer's works by heart, alongside those of Sappho of Lesbos." The minotaur snorted at the gazes his fellow officers sent him. "A mind must be sharpened like an ax."

Truth be told, Thales had a hard time imagining the brutal, pyromaniacal minotaur as a poetry lover, but the automaton guessed one couldn't make war all the time. "In that case, you should practice war songs to receive the [Skald] Fighter Specialization," Thales suggested to the minotaur. "You should have the [Charisma] and the poetic knowledge needed to unlock it."

"The [Skald] Class Skills will help you play with that lyre," Nessus said, "though I think your music is already devastating as it is."

"There won't be a war until spring or summer," Agron pointed out. "Maybe no war at all, if Queen Teuta submits."

"Any fight will do, so long as you inspire warriors," Thales explained. [Skald] was a relatively common Class Specialization in his adopted country of Travia, owing to their violent culture. "A monster hunt can work too."

"We'll find you some beast to hunt, my bullheaded friend," Nessus said, before glancing at Thales' compass. "How are you faring, oh brave seeker of knowledge?"

"My Skills identified this metal as 'lodestone,'" Thales replied. Since he was no [Hero], the automaton couldn't sacrifice Skill Points to raise his stats. So he had instead invested in a vast array of abilities, such as [Metallurgy], [Ceramic Engineering], or [Geology]. They provided the automaton with a wealth of knowledge, though incomplete. If only he could gain a [Legend] and improve his Skills further... "It always points to the Eye of Typhon."

"Good, if we want to get eaten by a titan, we will always find the way."

"You won't need to go that far to face danger, I'm afraid." The group turned towards the facility's entrance, as Lord Kairos walked in. His [Golden Fleece] glittered to the light of wax candles, in stark contrast with his blackened hair and gaze. Drops of rainwater fell from his leather armor. With his crown of hydra fangs, he looked every inch the monster king.

"How was your scouting, sir?" Thales asked courteously. Though he was closer to the pirate king's wife, the alchemist admired him a great deal. He was a visionary, who supported Thales' unconventional ideas.

"Worrying," Lord Kairos replied, before glancing at Nessus. "You were correct, unfortunately. The Nemean Lion crossed the Mint Woods, followed by his sphinx mate and a pride of lesser monsters."

"Finally," Agron said with relief. Music was new to the minotaur, but he understood battles well enough. "Do they have [Legends] for us to claim?"

"The lion and the sphinx do, and they're both capped [Heroes]," Lord Kairos answered, making Thales anxious. While Agron relished the chance of rising through the ranks and Nessus remained calm, the automaton feared these creatures. The scientist was a [Crafter], unsuited for direct battle. "They are following a pegasus herd southwest, but their prey will soon flee the island. At which point the pride will probably wander near our settlements."

"Maybe they will turn away," Thales said with optimism. "Histria alone is home to thousands of warriors." The builders and stonemasons struggled to keep up with the influx of people.

"Monsters so powerful hunt men and women like any other animal," Nessus replied with a shrug. "They don't fear us."

"I asked Horace to shadow the pride's movements, but they could reach Histria within days or weeks," the pirate king of Histria said as he sat at the table. "Thales, how are our defenses?"

"Good, sir," he answered as he joined his allies around the table. As a [Trap Master], defensive fortifications were one of the automaton's areas of expertise. "The second row of walls is almost finished, alongside the mounted ballistae, ditches, and the harbor chain."

His superior didn't show much enthusiasm. "Nemean Lions have an invulnerable skin, and claws almost as sharp as adamantine. They are dangerous by nature, but that one is four times the normal size. He's a living siege engine. Neither walls nor ditches will stop him, and the sphinx *flies*."

"Then we strike first," Agron suggested. "We don't let them come to us. We hit them when they don't expect danger."

"Fighting that giant Nemean Lion in a direct confrontation will be suicide, oh my bull," Nessus said. "We need to trap the beast."

The three men glanced at Thales, whose fingers fidgeted in embarrassment. "I'm..." the automaton looked down at the map. "I do not believe I am the most qualified party."

Agron let out a snort. "Are you a [Trap Master] or not?"

Yes, but his [Trap-Making 2] Skill only allowed him to craft Rank 1 and 2 traps, including caltrops, foothold claw traps, grease traps, fire traps, or powders inducing light ailments like [Sleep], [Confusion], or [Paralysis]. They might prove effective against lesser beasts, but not against [Hero]-Ranked horrors.

"Lord Kairos—" Thales began, only for the Travian [Hero] to wince. "Sir?"

"You don't have to call me lord in a private meeting, Thales," the Travian [Hero] replied. "You come to play board games with my wife every two days. You are a friend, not a lackey."

"Besides, it should be *Your Grace* or *Your Majesty* now," Nessus mused.

"Sir, Captain Kairos," Thales said, trying to find the right courtesy, "you have a Skill allowing you to wound invulnerable opponents. You could defeat the beast in battle."

"If it was a normal Nemean Lion, I would be inclined to agree, but that beast is more than ten meters in length, blindingly fast and powerful." Thales flinched at these words. "I will need support to prevail. And while the Nemean Lion behaved no differently than any animal, the sphinx has [Spellcaster] subclasses and showed tactical intelligence."

"Brains and brawn," Nessus mused.

Lord Kairos smiled. "Something like that."

"Sphinxes are cunning but arrogant, oh my captain," the satyr continued. "They never got over their ancestor's defeat at the hands of Oedipus, and have a crippling need to prove their intellectual superiority. I'm sure you will find a way to exploit that, [Rogue] that you are."

The Foresight's captain crossed his arms. "What about Cass? Did she come back from her hunt?"

"Not yet," Agron replied curtly. "One of her whaler fleet's smaller vessels returned. Cassandra is hauling the Cetus' corpse to port for your ship to consume."

Lord Kairos' *Foresight* ship could grow by consuming monster parts. It could already walk on land, and Thales wondered what devouring another sea monster would do to it. The automaton hoped to gain insight into the creation of life through this process.

"In which case, Nessus, you will go to General Petra and increase patrols to protect the hinterlands' farmers," Kairos ordered, to the satyr's happiness. The lusty Nessus delighted in working with the amazons among them. "Agron, you will gather your men and join up

with Horace. Pride members hunt over a large radius, and with luck, you can ambush the lesser beasts following the Nemean Lion. Manticores and chimeras shouldn't prove troublesome."

"They won't," Agron replied confidently. "What about the lion and the sphinx?"

"Avoid them for now, until we are better prepared."

The minotaur didn't like this part, but he knew better than to disobey a direct order. "Fine."

"Thales, we will overview the city's defenses and prepare traps for the Nemean Lion. Considering its power, we must prepare the ambush's location with care."

Realizing they had been dismissed, Nessus and Agron left the laboratory, leaving Thales alone with his superior. If anything, it made him even more anxious.

Thales was a scientist first and foremost, and though he could operate ballistae in battle, he didn't have a warrior's heart. He would rather spend his days studying at home than supervising a city's defenses. "Sir, have you thought of simply talking it out?" the alchemist asked. "You made many enemies into friends, even monsters."

"Perhaps we can reach an agreement with the sphinx, but we will probably need to slay the Lion to access the Necromanteion dungeon since it has the [Dungeon Guardian] subclass," Lord Kairos replied. "Access to the dungeon will prove more profitable than a single monster."

Thales could read between the lines. Lord Kairos' lover Andromache had been cursed, and though the System provided a Quest to cure her, they would need to petition the god of magic Orgonos for help. The deity would only grant audience to visitors bringing magical artifacts worth his attention. Items likely waiting inside the Necromanteion.

Speaking of Orgonos... "Sir, if I may..."

"You can."

"Lady Julia asked me to map out new potential trade routes, and I believe I found one," Thales explained as he pulled out the map and traced a route. "The Vali-Alexandria-Argo triangle is relatively safe to travel in winter, and according to my investigations, a warm water current flows south of the island. We could take it, travel to Vali and Alexandria in search for rare magical items, and then bring it to Orgonos on Argo."

Lord Kairos examined the route with a frown. "The current goes through the open sea though."

"Under your command, the *Foresight* could easily sail even in winter. Your [Seamanship 3] Skill will warn you of storms and naval dangers early."

"Other ships will be at a risk," Kairos pointed out, "and the open sea is under the control of the mermaid kingdom of Orichalcos. They don't let ships pass without tributes, especially when Cetae activity increases."

"I..." Thales' four hands fidgeted in shame. "I didn't consider that, sir. I am sorry."

"No, no, you have done a great job so far, we will just refine your idea further." Lord Kairos smiled at his engineer. "Thales, I don't only want you to work on these traps because I believe in you, but because I want you to fulfill your dream."

"My... dream?"

"How far are you from creating life?"

The alchemist looked down in shame. "Far."

It was the dream of many automatons to create new members of their kind, but their maker Talos forbade it. Thales had fled his native country of Thessala for Travia to practice his craft in peace, but although his knowledge had grown, he hadn't succeeded yet. He could create a body, but not a soul.

"I believe you will not achieve your dream unless you progress to [Hero] and raise the necessary Skills," Lord Kairos said. "You need a [Legend] to achieve extraordinary feats."

Thales instantly caught on. "Sir, you wish me to slay the Lion and steal his [Legend] for my own?"

"I believe you can, if one of your traps does the deed." The Travian warlord shrugged. "We have many powerful warriors, Thales, but we need more than swords and axes. We need knowledge, buildings, infrastructure... a [Hero]-Ranked [Crafter] would help Histria far more than another [Fighter], and you could achieve your dream."

It... it could work. Thales had received his own Quest to gain a [Legend], but if he could gain one through another method... he would gain powerful Legendary Skills, and the Quest's reward would change to make him a [Hero]. It would make him closer to his goal.

But how could he defeat such a powerful monster in battle?

No, no, he had to think of it like a puzzle, a problem. Heracles had slain the first Nemean Lion by strangling it. Though Thales was not Heracles, he could learn from his example. Though few to no weapons could pierce a Nemean Lion's skin, they still needed to *breathe*.

"I may have an idea, sir," Thales said with renewed confidence. "If we can lure the lion to the right location."

2: Legacy

Cassandra came back with a catch.

Standing on the crescent-shaped harbor of Histria with a small group of bodyguards, Kairos watched on as ships crowded the wharves and piers, taking on grain shipments, off-loading fish cargo, or letting new colonists take their first step on the island. Others moved through the mouth of the local *Eosian* river's mouth, to transport merchandise to the new settlement of Taulas.

Once nothing more than a shore of sand and stone, the port had grown with its city. His wife Julia had invested in infrastructure for ships, storehouses, and boarding rooms for merchants. Scribes under her employ inspected ships' cargo, took the colony's taxes, and issued official documents marked with a hydra seal to law-abiding merchants. With sea conditions worsening, sailors were in a hurry to make a last-minute profit, filling Kairos' coffers.

His own ship, the *Foresight*, waited on the shore like a great sleeping beast. The living galley grew by absorbing monsters' remains, and had lost almost all its wooden parts over time. Its oars were fins, its sails translucent membranes, its deck lined with scales. Most importantly, crablike legs allowed it to move inland. The ship didn't even need a crew anymore to function.

Kairos didn't have the opportunity to sail lately, and he dearly missed the activity. Flying on Rook's back was a joy, but the Travian was all but born on a ship's deck.

Cass' flagship, the *Rhadamanthe*, was neither alive nor a merchant's vessel. It was a whaler, a galley specialized in fighting sea monsters. Its ballistae were equipped with harpoons, its ram had spikes. A dozen smaller boats and larger ships followed in its wake, carrying a dead monster in an enormous fishnet.

The Travians had developed a novel tactic to hunt sea monsters long ago. Small boats made a racket to lure them into shallow waters and strong nets wielded by allies. Whaler galleys then approached the trapped monsters to slay it with harpoons and spears. This tactic needed a small fleet to pull off, but proved its effectiveness time and time again.

"Kairos!" Cassandra waved her fiery fork of a weapon from her ship's bow as it docked. Her shield was bent, but she didn't look wounded. "I bring a gift!"

"We got the victory!" her first mate said, the green-haired amazon Chloris. Cassandra's crew was almost entirely made up of these warrior-women.

It didn't surprise Kairos. Cassandra had saved the amazon city of Moros from an undead horde, and many locals had pledged themselves to her service afterward. "Any losses?" Kairos asked, as Cassandra and her crew moved onto the pier.

"Two soldiers," his old friend replied. "All our ships made it back home."

"Great beast attacked us, but we refused to be losing," Chloris added. Though her Travian had improved, she was still hopeless with grammar. "We had a great result."

"The poisons you coated the harpoons with made the difference," Cassandra explained to Kairos. "By the time we caught the creature in the fishnet, it was already suffering from [Paralysis]."

This pleased Kairos greatly. Now that he had more resources to use as a would-be pirate king, his mastery of his [Poison Brewer 3] Skill had let him create new substances. He wasn't sure they could affect creatures as large and powerful as Cetae, but he was happy with the result. A pity he could only produce a limited amount of poison per day.

Kairos' eyes wandered to the fleet's catch, as a hundred sailors pulled it to the shore. The monster looked superficially like a whale, albeit with hind legs resembling those of a crustacean. Strong scales encased its body, although harpoons and spears had blown bloody holes everywhere in its natural armor. The creature's mouth ended in sharp fangs capable of snapping a ship in half.

This Cetus had been small by its vile species' standards, no more than fifteen meters in length, but dangerous all the same. These monsters attacked helpless ships for sport.

"We also brought smaller catches for you to practice [Skinchanger 3], including an octopus," Cassandra said, as she adjusted her black braid. "I know you're working on sharks for now, but..."

"Octopi are good," Kairos replied. His [Skinchanger] Skill allowed him to shapeshift into non-magical animals whose blood he tasted and physiology he studied, so long as they didn't exceed five times his weight. The Travian thought it would help him for battle, but the transformation didn't apply to clothes and weapons. Even if Kairos could turn into a bear now, claws would never beat his magical spear.

The Skill was, however, phenomenally useful for scouting. Kairos was currently studying ways to turn himself into an owl and a spider for the purpose of infiltration, and a naval animal would nicely complement these shapes.

"You're sure you don't want to keep any crafting material from that thing?" Kairos asked, as the *Foresight* rose to approach the Cetus' body. By now, most locals were accustomed to seeing the living ship in action, though new colonists looked at the scene in astonishment. "My ship will eat it whole."

"The flesh is full of poison, and the *Foresight* is by far our colony's most powerful weapon," Cassandra replied with a smile. "Besides, I'm curious to see how it will change."

"Hungry ship grows one step after the next," Chloris added. "One day it will reach completion."

Kairos wondered if the *Foresight* even had an upper limit as far as its evolution was concerned. The living ship approached the Cetus' remains and stabbed them with its crablike legs. Like a vampire bat, the *Foresight* devoured its victim's flesh and blood, its bones and scales.

Kairos took the opportunity to inform Cassandra about the Nemean Lion's presence in the south, causing her to cross her arms. "That pride is worrying, but not as much as what's happening outside our borders," she said. "A monster pack is dangerous, but not as much as an army of men. Orthia hasn't forgotten our raids against their shores, or the death of their former king, and Teuta..."

"Is it true that she is building a pirate confederation?" Kairos asked. Julia was developing a robust information network, but Cassandra had her own informants in Travia and Thessala.

"Yes," Cass confirmed with a nod. "She offers a different deal than ours. Travian captains and cities aren't asked to surrender part of their authority to an assembly, and this is strictly a military alliance. She doesn't offer economic benefits, nor unified taxation. And most importantly, she wants to keep raiding Lycean vessels rather than make peace with the Republic."

In short, Queen Teuta defended the usual status quo among the Travian people. A temporary alliance of equals under a powerful pirate lord to raid foreign shores. "She offers a dead end," Kairos stated. "We've seen where these arrangements lead, namely nowhere."

"Perhaps, but many captains would rather remain fiercely independent even if it costs them prosperity."

"We're waging a war for Travia's soul," Kairos said. "Either we unite our country, or we will remain a backwater den of pirates."

"You preach to the converted, but Teuta has powerful friends," Cassandra replied. "Mithridates sent her gifts, as did Orthia's new king Antipater. Worse, the Thessalans will hold the Olympic Games in the Spring, where they will elect their League's Strategos. Mithridates is the clear favorite. If he wins, he will gain control over the League's military alliance, at least nominally."

A war loomed on the horizon, one that would either make Travia or break it. And Kairos could see the hand of Mithridates everywhere he looked.

The Poison King of Pergamon had tried to kill Kairos on multiple occasions, even using him for his plans. Though Mithridates had said it was all politics, the Travian understood that they couldn't coexist. Kairos wanted to get new rich lands to feed his people, and aligned himself with the Lycean Republic to get them; while Mithridates wanted to unify the weakened city-states of the Thessalan League under his banner to throw off all foreign influences from the region.

Inevitably, one of these visions would give way to the other. "You said *nominally*," Kairos pointed out. "It won't give him effective power?"

"Mithridates has a lot of support among the city-states, but it's far from unanimous," Cass said. "Thessala, which gives its name to the League, doesn't want to surrender its fading influence. Many League members make their fortune from trade with Lyce or formed treaties with the Republic, and they don't see eye to eye with Mithridates' foreign policies. And some city-states, much like our captains, would rather defend their independence than unite under a single king. I would say two thirds of the Thessalan League will fall in line behind Mithridates, but the rest... the rest will resist."

"Can city-states secede from the League's alliance?"

"Nominally, yes," Cassandra replied. "But Mithridates will never let that happen. He can't let his alliance fracture."

A hydra's heads shouldn't fight each other. Kairos started to get a broader view of the situation, and he had the gut feeling a conflict would erupt when city-states refused to accept Mithridates' election. Some would call foreign powers like Lyce for help, and then the knives would come out.

"Then we have an opportunity to exploit," said the pirate-king, trying to find the right angle of attack. "How does Mithridates project his influence?"

"Pergamon is rich and fertile," Cassandra explained. "It is the agricultural center of the Thessalan League, and its silver mines fuel a vast economy and army. It commands the

fealty of more than a dozen lesser cities, and Mithridates spent years fostering alliances with other regional powers. Orthia's new king Antipater owes his throne to his scheming."

"No need to remind me," Kairos said grimly. The memory of Prince Critias' murder still haunted him. The Travian Pirate had no love for that Orthian royal, but he had been *eight*. If only Kairos could find proof of Mithridates' involvement in the assassination... "Orthia is a lost cause, but Thessala might be open to offers of alliances."

"They lost most of their fleet in a disastrous expedition, and have yet to recover from it," Cassandra said with a nod. "They will want to defend the current status quo until they can rebuild their strength, even if it means allying with outsiders. Mithridates is powerful, but he is a [Hero], and Thessala's defender Talos is a [Demigod]. They can't afford a direct conflict."

Kairos would have to interrogate Thales about his homeland. The automaton had come from Thessala before being exiled to Travia. His insight would be welcome.

"We need to weaken Pergamon's powerbase," Kairos decided. "A war is inevitable, but the more we weaken Mithridates before it, the better. He is already at work trying to divide us, it is time we repay him with his own coin."

"I couldn't agree more," Cassandra replied, still holding a grudge against the Poison King. "But if we are to meaningfully challenge him, we need the pirate lords of Travia behind us. All of them."

"Do you think we could reach an agreement with Teuta?" Kairos asked, unwilling to fight his own countrymen.

"We can always try, but she hates Lyce fiercely and you're in bed with them, in more ways than one. Your mother, wife, and aide-de-camp are all Lyceans."

Many Travians hadn't forgotten that their ancestors escaped slavery in Lyce to flee north, and the idea of making peace with their former oppressors remained... divisive. It was why Kairos had eventually decided to make Nessus his new first mate rather than Tiberius. The mysterious satyr had no particular tie to any nation of the Sunsea.

"Julia and Nessus say I should create my own [Hero] cult," Kairos said. "Purchase the [Cult (Hero)] Skill and develop a large following."

"They are right," Cass replied. "If you want to avoid a war of the swords, you have to win a war for the hearts. Did you learn what this Skill does?"

"Andromache found answers in Euryale's library." His concubine spent most of her time researching magic under the gorgon Euryale's tutelage, far away from Histria. Kairos suspected she spent as little time in the city as possible to avoid facing his wife. "It will allow me to grant benefits to my followers. Even empower [Priests] once I reach the [Demigod] Rank."

"Then the choice is easy."

"Truth be told, I considered hoarding SPs and raising my stats instead," Kairos replied. Additional [Charisma] had proved to be a wise investment, and more [Luck] and [Intelligence] could give him an edge. "I need to get stronger to fight the likes of Mithridates."

"But with all due respect, Kairos, your strength comes from the allies you made." His former first mate grinned at him, her fork shining brightly. "You have a follower right here. Strengthen me and I will slay your enemies for you."

Her answer warmed Kairos' heart. Though Cassandra had left his crew, he would never have a more loyal friend and ally.

Convinced, the Travian captain opened his System Screen.

Purchase the [Cult (Hero)] Skill for 3 Skill Points? This will become a Legendary Skill bound to your [Legend].

Kairos agreed. As he sacrificed the necessary Skill Points, a crimson aura briefly surrounded him, flaring with divine power.

You purchased the [Cult (Hero)] Three Stars Legendary Skill. Physical representations of yourself, such as statues, altars, or paintings will now gain the [Idol] property. Your [Idols] serve as relays for your divine power, which grants them unique magical properties. Additionally, your Idols gain unique abilities based on your [Legend].

Thanks to your [Monster Reaver] [Legend], your [Idols] gain the following properties: your [Idols] will passively attract a single [Elite] monster to serve as its keeper. The monster gains the ability to understand and be understood in all languages as long as it remains close to the [Idol], and will work to further your interests by advising or leading your followers.

You can now purchase the following *Legendary Skills* for 3 SPs each: [**Mystery Cult**], [**Healing Altar**], [**Animated Idol**], [**Enthralling Image**], [**Unsettling Presence**], and [**Empathic Link (Idol)**]. These [*Skills*] will grant additional powers to your [*Idols*]. Other *Legendary Cult Skills* will be unlocked as you climb Legend Ranks. The more idols spread and the more followers you accumulate, the more abilities you might unlock.

"Would it seem arrogant to commission a statue of myself?" Kairos asked with a grin.

"Yes, but we expect that of kings," Cassandra replied with a chuckle as the *Foresight* finished its meal. To Kairos' surprise, the ship hadn't changed much. The scales looked more streamlined, and a translucent membrane had grown to bind the oars together like fins, but most of the absorbed mass had vanished. Nothing remained of the Cetus. "I expected something more spectacular."

So did Kairos. The Travian captain and his fellow [Hero] moved along onto the *Foresight's* deck as the living ship slid into the waters, its legs retracting.

"Perhaps it increased its speed in the water?" the pirate king asked, his hand trailing on the mast. "What new ability did you gain, my old friend?"

The *Foresight* answered his question with a bellowing noise.

The deck shook below Kairos and Cass, both almost stumbling. The living ship fled from the shore and towards the open waters, blowing small waves that pushed boats aside.

And then the *Foresight* began to sink into the water, the distance between the surface and the deck narrowing.

"Kairos, what's happening?" Cassandra panicked, as a translucent, slimy substance started to grow from the deck's edge and the mast's tip. The strange mucus slowly formed walls on all sides of the ship. "Kairos, we have to escape!"

Cassandra grabbed her former captain with the intention of jumping overboard, but Kairos refused to move. Instead, he held firmly in place as the mucus formed a transparent dome over the *Foresight's* deck, using the mast as a supporting pillar. It reminded Kairos of a tent, except he could see the world beyond just fine.

The *Foresight* kept sinking into the bay, and the water rose above the deck's surface. Yet the sea couldn't pierce through the transparent dome, nor did it find any hole to enter the cargo hold. The space between the oars had long vanished, making the *Foresight* as impervious as a chest.

Cassandra finally understood what was happening and stopped struggling. The [Hero] instead held her breath as she looked through the translucent membrane separating her from the waters outside. When the *Foresight's* mast vanished below the surface, sunlight reflected in the liquid above them like a rain of light. "No way..."

Kairos glanced beyond the dome, at the luminous waters of the bay. Fish flew alongside the *Foresight*, swimming next to its oars' fins.

The Travian had hoped that his ship would one day fly.

Instead, the *Foresight* had learned to dive.

Julia Flavii Lucina read reports with a smile on her face. The candles dimly lit up the queen's solar, and cast a dark shadow on the woman sleeping quietly beside her. Her Caenis looked lovely when she dreamed, her skin glittering from the sweat, her black hair covering her mouth.

Julia had called her to her bed as soon as she heard the news, and she had no doubt her husband would share her excitement once he returned. Her Kairos would join her late, she knew that. He wouldn't rest until he had tested his new ship's abilities and figured out its limits.

The reports were less than encouraging though. Her family had a robust information network, and Julia used the colony's gold to create a separate one for her personal use. The merchants kept her informed of news abroad, messengers intercepted letters on her behalf, and she bought lords' servants with coins. Bards and entertainers in Mithridates' court worked for her, and she had started recruiting people among Travian smugglers operating in Queen Teuta's dominion. They reported what they knew to literate intermediaries, who kept Julia informed through coded letters. In other cases, she bought the debt of lesser Thessalan nobility, putting them in her clutches.

Julia's [Spycraft 2] Skill helped her manage her information network by intuitively providing her with knowledge about best policy practices, but the Lycean noblewoman had mostly developed this talent on her own. As the daughter of a rich Lycean politician and a foreign concubine, Julia's own position in Lyce had never been secure even before her werewolf curse manifested. Sabotaging rivals was almost second nature to her.

Unfortunately, while Queen Teuta was rather lax about security, one couldn't say the same for Mithridates. Julia had heard news that his naval engineers were working on a secret project, but all her attempts to uncover what had failed so far. Some of her informants had

disappeared trying to infiltrate the warehouses supplying the project with wood and magical reagents.

Mithridates was building *something*, and she needed to figure out what.

The King of Pergamon was also at work in Histria. Half the merchants coming from Thessala took his silver, and some of the Travians too. They spread lies, that her Kairos would sell the colony to foreigners, that his wife controlled him with magic—a rumor that Julia found rather amusing—and that Queen Teuta was a far better ruler than her grasping rival. Julia caught a few of these troublemakers, but some slipped through her grasp.

Unfortunately, she knew that spies were only the beginning. Inevitably, assassins would follow in their wake. And by then, Julia would be ready.

"Mmm..." Her Caenis stirred at her side, her blue eyes snapping open.

"Have you slept well?" Julia gently asked her mistress, as she put the reports aside on the bed table. Her hand moved to Caenis' cheek. "Or did the gods give you warnings?"

"It's always the same," Caenis replied as she massaged her temples. "A tide of poison swallowing a great city, casting down stone walls and letting sharks swim through the streets like canals."

"Our city?" Julia asked with a frown. Caenis had seen this dream two times already, but could never give details.

"No. A city so great that the sun cast a long shadow on it." Caenis shook her head. "I saw a skull drinking a silver cup surrounded by masked beasts, and a dragon's corpse devoured by its wingless brood. And your husband, milady. I saw him too."

Julia froze. "How?"

"I have glimpsed him dancing among the flames, fighting a titan of steel with an axe drenched in blood."

"An axe?" Mithridates rode a dragon, but he used swords and daggers, not axes. "Was it an automaton?"

Her lover shook her head. "I cannot say, milady."

Julia sighed, and wrote down the prophecy in her notes.

Her Caenis saw much in her dreams, for she was born a [Oracle] with a unique connection with the gods. They sent her omens in her dreams, and Julia had enough faith in her prophetic visions to make use of them for information gathering. It was Caenis who warned Julia that her husband had almost perished fighting the undead Argonauts in Achlys a season ago, which allowed the queen to quickly raise a fleet to his rescue.

Speaking of her husband, Julia smelled Kairos returning to their manor. Though her senses were less developed than when she took a bestial form, the werewolf still had far better senses than most humans. "He is back, and he smells of saltwater," Julia said with amusement.

"I will go prepare his bath then," Caenis said as she left the bed, her hand reaching for her gown on the floor.

"You can stay, Caenis," Julia said. Much like she had grown used to her husband's other woman, Kairos didn't send the oracle away all the time.

Her Caenis smiled as she put on her gown, though she didn't hide her concern. "I believe you should be alone to tell him the news."

Point taken. Still, as Caenis bade her good night and closed the door behind herself, Julia couldn't help but feel sadness. In a better world, they would have married, and their lives would have been simpler.

As expected, Kairos joined her a few minutes later, carrying maps under his arm. "Julia," he said before kissing her on the lips. Julia took less pleasure in his touch than Caenis', but she enjoyed it all the same. "How was your day?"

"Exhausting, but delightful," his wife replied as he removed his clothes and slipped into the marital bed naked. Julia's eyes wandered to his [Golden Fleece], whose fertility powers were now confirmed. "Caenis dreamed of you."

"Fighting a lion?"

"A lion with an axe," Julia mused as he joined her under the bedsheet, still carrying his maps. She shivered as his warm skin touched her own. "What is this?"

"A map of the old world, and the new." Kairos showed them both, before overlapping them. "Do you see it too?"

"Yes." Julia pointed a finger at an island on the old world's map, where only waters remained today. "This is the lost Atlantis, which Poseidon sank long before he flooded the

world. The mermaid kingdom of Orichalcos is said to be located near it, which means you can now reach it with your amphibious ship."

Kairos laughed. "You do know me well."

"Of course I do." Though the werewolf had been somewhat skeptical of their arranged marriage at first, she had grown fond of Kairos over time. How could she have not? Her husband remained at her side during the full moon, when her curse transformed her into a beast. Not even her brother had shown her that much dedication. "We have shared a roof for months now."

"A bit more than that." Kairos put his maps aside, and stroked Julia's red hair with his free hands. Her husband gently pushed her head against the griffon feathers pillow and positioned himself over her. "I could bring you pearls and nacre. I heard the merfolk make beautiful jewels from them."

"You could," she replied, her hand trailing against his chest, "but we have a greater need for diplomatic alliances and mercenaries."

"That was my plan," he replied with a frown. "Perhaps visit Vali and Alexandria too."

"My brother served as an ambassador in the court of Philip of Vali, and befriended him. That king is a haggler and a profligate, but I suspect he shall receive you well. My brother Sertorius left a good memory."

Perhaps too good of one.

Her husband frowned. "A profligate, you say?"

"If half the tales my brother told me are true, then you will find no place half as decadent as Vali's royal palace." Rumors that he participated in debauched orgies there still hounded Sertorius at home. A young and handsome Lycean spending a year at the court of a libertine foreign king was bound to spark rumors, though Julia knew they were nothing but slander.

For her brother Sertorius' only vice was ambition. Men, women, gold and pleasure didn't matter to him. Even his sister was only one of his pieces, as was her husband and all those he pulled into his web. That obsession with accumulating power was why Sertorius shipped Julia to Kairos in the first place; her brother wanted a Travian [Hero] as an ally in his plans for conquest, but he could only trust an in-law.

Of course, it wasn't all about politics. Julia's brother loved her in his own way, and she knew he had selected Kairos as her future husband after learning his mother Aurelia was a

werewolf. Though he put his family's ambitions above everything else, Sertorius would never have given his sister to a man who couldn't accept who she was.

Julia banished these thoughts, as her lips moved to Kairos' own. "We could catch up on that front, if we so wish."

The kiss was tender, but her husband broke it quickly. "I would rather avoid leaving Histria right now," Kairos admitted. "There's still so much to do here."

"I can manage things in your absence," Julia replied, her hand trailing against his chest. "You are the only one who can make that living ship of yours behave, while I can manage this household well enough. Your mother will be here, and Tiberius too. You can rely on him."

"It's Tiberius' father that I worry about." Ah, yes, Dispater. The richest man in the Lycean Republic, and her brother's father-in-law. "He's still hounding us about getting exclusive rights over our silver mines."

"You know my point of view," Julia said with a shrug. "Dispater is a powerful [Hero], and he has many qualities. He is intelligent, brave, and loyal to his friends. But he has one crippling flaw that overshadows everything."

"His hunger for gold," Kairos guessed.

"And his thirst for fame too." Dispater was a [Crafter], who earned his power through trade, wise investments, and cutthroat practices. Yet the highest honors in the Lycean Republic could only be earned through military service. No doubt he funded her brother's plan of conquering the Thessalan League in the hope of earning glory for himself. "You don't have to worry about betrayal from Dispater, husband, and he will prove useful as long as we can contain his greed. As for Tiberius, he is desperate to break out of his father's shadow. He will stay loyal, if only to prove his worth."

"I hope so. I've grown fond of him." Kairos lightly kissed his wife on the cheek. "Tiberius told me you wanted to create a free school for both men and women?"

"We are building a new nation," Julia reminded him. "People are hostile to reforms by nature, so important rules should be established now rather than later."

Julia had been denied a great many privileges in Lyce by virtue of her gender. She could neither vote nor hold office. Though they gave her more leeway than most Lycean household heads, her father and then her brother had held power of life and death over her, choosing who she would marry or what property she could buy.

And so, Julia was determined to make sure her female subjects would grow with more freedom than she did. This started by giving them equal rights and opportunities. Neither did she think education should be restricted to the rich, the powerful, or some born with special blood. Her Caenis had been as lowborn as they come, but wiser than half the nobles Julia ever met. As for Thales, Julia shuddered to imagine what that genius could create with the right patronage. She had grown fond of him, and found his intellect refreshing.

Birth should not be the standard by which people were judged. Her eyes moved to her stomach, almost on instinct.

Her husband frowned. "There's something you're not telling me."

"I have great news for you," his wife admitted. She had been meaning to broach the subject, but wasn't sure how to announce it. "For us."

Kairos frowned. "Go ahead?"

"Have you settled on a name?"

"A name for what? The new settlement?"

"We agreed I would name the daughters, and you the sons." Julia smiled brightly. "Maybe you shall win the coin toss."

For a moment, Kairos of Travia remained motionless and as still as a statue. He didn't blink, didn't say a word. Julia met his gaze, amused by his shocked reaction. Did he think this day would never come? They had been using the [Golden Fleece] as a bedsheet for months.

"Indeed, Kairos," Julia said softly, unable to restrain her happiness. "If the gods are good, you shall be a father next year. My [Physician] says as much."

Her Caenis had been afraid when Julia told her the news. The Beast Cult of Lycaon targeted the people capable of maintaining the seal keeping their god imprisoned, namely the male heirs of the Senex, Lyce's core families. If Julia gave birth to a daughter as she hoped, well, they were safe.

But if she gave birth to a boy...

Julia tried not to think of this. She already had too much on her plate.

After a while, Kairos wordlessly rolled over to her side. He stared at the stone ceiling as if he could see the sky beyond, his breath short and slow.

He was adorable when anxious.

"Does my mother know?" he asked.

Julia chuckled. "No, of course not. If she did, Aurelia would have screamed her joy for all to hear."

"She had been pestering me about getting grandchildren for years," Kairos said with a sigh. He put his hands on his eyes and cheeks, before taking a long deep breath. "You're pregnant."

"By at least a month. My [Physician] told me to expect the birth around next summer." Julia observed her husband's mouth. His jaws clenched so tightly that she worried he might break his teeth. "Are you afraid?"

"Yes, I am, of course I am." His arms moving to his sides. "Aren't you?"

"A little," Julia admitted. "You are a [Wolfblood] and I am a [Werewolf]. I would be surprised if our children didn't inherit my curse. But this is still good news. Our marriage contract—"

"I don't care about that contract," he interrupted her. "Julia, now is not the time. There's a war brewing."

"Which we will win." She leaned against him, her soft breasts brushing against his abs, her lips kissing his neck. She sensed him relaxing at her caress. "Husband, there will never be a good time. The struggle will only end when we are dead. We knew that when we decided to rule."

She still remembered their wedding night, where they first made love promising each other that everything in this world would be theirs. Why would children be any different?

"Fuck," Kairos said, though he saw the wisdom in her word. "You made me a king, and now you will make me a father."

"So long as you make me happy, I will consider it a fair trade," Julia replied, as her lips worked her way up to his ears. "Now husband, let us worry about the future another time, and celebrate the present while we can."

Eventually, her gentle caresses washed away his fears, and he started returning her affections. His hands moved to her back, his lips to her own neck.

They celebrated long after the candles died out.

3: The Lord of Riddles

Father.

The word rang heavy in Kairos' mind, as he rode Rook above the western plains. "I'm going to be a father," he whispered to himself, the thought making him feel both anxious and excited.

"I am so happy for you!" Rook congratulated his best friend, his snake-tail wagging like a dog's. "I am so proud, Kairos! You are finally an adult!"

"I am older than you," the [Griffin Rider] pointed out.

"I'm more mature!" The griffin peeked over his shoulder. "Could I spoil your hatchlings? Can I, can I? I will build a beautiful nest for your eggs, almost as shiny as mine!"

"Rook, humans do not lay eggs."

"You don't?" Rook tilted his head at his best friend. "Oh right, you don't. But then how can you make sure your young hatch safely?"

"We can't guarantee any of that." And an incoming war would make them less safe than ever. "It's a constant struggle to grow old in our world."

"Sheesh, you mammals are so confusing. No wonder you need us birds to get things done!"

Kairos ruffled his friend's feathers, before glancing at the ground with his spear in hand. The Nemean Pride had left a trail of devastation in its wake, the bones of pegasi and sheep left abandoned in the open. Nessus' scouts had tracked the monsters to a hill with a cavern, which they would probably use as a lair until they depopulated the local countryside.

Kairos doubted the Pride would get anywhere near the Stone Garden of Euryale though. The gorgon was a [Demigoddess], and had lived on the island for centuries without anyone bothering her. The Nemean Lion either avoided or tolerated her presence.

Kairos couldn't say the same for his beloved Andromache, who currently studied magic with the gorgon. He had come to pick her up and return with her to Histria, to prepare for the hunt. Though the Scylla was blessed with invulnerability, a Nemean Lion's claws could cut through almost anything and might bypass her protections.

"Don't tell Andromache, Rook," the [Hero] told his companion. "About the pregnancy. This stays between us."

"What? Why? You're a father, you should tell everyone!"

"The news will hurt Andromache." His mistress' curse made her sterile, and learning that her romantic rival was pregnant would only add salt to the wound. Kairos would rather tell Andromache after lifting her malediction, to soften the blow. "So shush."

To his surprise, Rook decided to argue against it. "Kairos, she is stronger than that! If you love her, you can't hold anything back. Friends don't keep secrets from each other, so why should it be different for mated pairs?"

"You keep a secret stash."

"Yes, but that's different! My secret stash won't hurt anyone but me if it is discovered. The truth will hurt less than the lie."

He... he had a point. Andromache would find out on her own at one point, and she might see Kairos keeping it secret as a breach of trust. Their relationship was strong, and survived even his marriage with Julia. It could survive the truth.

"Then how should I tell her?" Kairos asked Rook. "In a way that won't hurt her?"

"Tell her kindly, of course," the griffin said. "Kindness can cure any wound!"

Somehow, he managed to make his naive statement sound wise.

Kairos rehearsed a way to broach the news to Andromache as softly as he could, and he realized that he wasn't sure how to deal with it himself. He knew this day would come, but children... While they were growing closer, his marriage with Julia had been a business transaction first and foremost. Kairos knew they would make good parents, but they faced great dangers ahead. Mithridates hadn't hesitated to have a child assassinated, and any heir Julia gave birth to might become a target.

And there was also that small matter of the werewolf curse... Kairos had had a vision of a figure heralding the return of the wolf god Lycaon, calling the [Hero] to join their hunt. The same evil might come after his blood.

He needed to prepare. Perhaps he should invest in detection Skills, or set magical defenses around his ho—

"Boo!"

Rook abruptly let out a screech of surprise, as the sphinx popped into existence right next to the griffin.

Kairos was almost thrown off his friend's back, but managed to regain his balance. The [Hero] raised his spear to keep the sphinx at bay, the human-headed monster smiling in amusement at the gesture.

"Kairos, hang on!" Rook immediately dived down, the griffin and his rider zigzagging across the skies. The sphinx responded by vanishing from their sight.

[Invisibility]. She could use the [Invisibility] spell, or a similar Skill.

"I can't smell her!" Rook warned while retreating towards the clouds. Kairos summoned winds around the two of them, trying to detect the sphinx by seeing variations in air currents.

It was a lost cause. The flying lioness reappeared again a few meters away from the duo, a glittering glow surrounding her. Kairos' [Magical Knack] Skill identified the protection as a powerful [Wind Resistance] spell, shielding the creature from magical winds. It explained why she didn't make any sound while flapping her wings, turning her almost undetectable.

"Now, that is most rude!" The sphinx said in ancient Greek, before flapping her wings to hover right in front of the griffin and his rider. "Is that how you greet a kind stranger, Kairos of Travia?"

Kairos frowned in response, his fingers tightening around his spear's shaft. "How did you learn my name, *Aglaonice*?"

"Oh, you answer a sphinx's question with another?" the creature chuckled. "Your [Turncoat 2] Skill protects your information from the scrutiny of [Elite] Ranks and below, but I am a [Hero] and an [Oracle]. I learned all about you through my daily scrying. I even know of these traps you are laying for my lion."

Ugh, seers were just the *worst*. Still, Kairos lowered his spear. If the creature truly wanted to fight, she would have struck them while under the cover of invisibility. Either *Aglaonice* wanted someone to boast to, or she had come to negotiate. "Perhaps we could discuss that like civilized people?" the Travian [Hero] asked.

"Now, that's better," the sphinx laughed heartily while she flapped her wings, the jewels in her hair and on her skin glittering as she did. "Going somewhere, handsome? This area is *very* dangerous."

It took all his willpower for Kairos not to show his nervousness. "Indeed," he replied serenely. "I heard the woods are full of lions, so I fly above them."

"And I'm with him!" Rook added proudly, glaring at the female monster.

"Didn't you know, my little birds?" The sphinx licked her lips hungrily, the way a cat did before jumping on a helpless mouse. "Some lions fly."

"And turn invisible?" Kairos should have expected as much. If the sphinx could see him through the veil of [Invisibility] before, then she could probably cast the spell herself. "How did you find us?"

"I can smell you for miles," Aglaonice replied oh so sweetly. "That [Monster Lure] Legendary Skill does not make you stealthy to us monsters. It did arouse my curiosity though. Were it not for it, I might have eaten you and your pretty bird for dinner."

Rook gasped. "But we're both part lions and part birds! That would be cannibalism!"

"All meat tastes the same when cooked," the sphinx responded with a wicked grin.

"Perhaps I could invite you to a meal then?" Kairos asked mirthfully. "We were on our way to a nearby swamp, to visit a gorgon friend of ours."

"Oh, you know my dear Euryale? It seems we have the same destination then." Somehow, Kairos wasn't even surprised that the sphinx and the gorgon knew each other. "Perhaps we could travel together then? I do not bite. Not to the death..."

"But of course," Kairos replied with false civility. "Rook, if you would."

"Ah ah ah." Aglaonice moved in Rook's way. "It is customary among us sphinxes to trade riddles with strangers. Would you care for a little match?"

Nessus was right, sphinxes did have a deep need of asserting their intellectual superiority. "Only if we wager," Kairos replied playfully, sensing an opportunity.

"I was about to ask we spice up the game too." Aglaonice's smile turned downright deadly. "If you lose, I will strangle you."

"Charming," the Travian replied dryly.

"Me too?" Rook asked, horrified.

"Yes, you would be what some merchants call a freebie," the sphinx chuckled, though behind the laugh there were teeth. She might have a human face and charming demeanor, but this creature was a wild monster to the bone. A civilized beast, but a beast all the same.

"And if I win," Kairos said, "you will step aside while we slaughter your pride. I guarantee no harm shall come to you."

Aglaonice exploded in laughter. "Now, you are as bold a thief as I ever met," she said, her eyes fluttering. "Are you trying to slay my lion and claim me as your own? I know you manlings will breed with anything, but I am not that kind of lioness."

"Nothing of the sort," Kairos replied, who found one wife and a concubine more than enough. "But I would rather avoid slaying potential allies if I can."

"A wise policy, but I must deny your request... for now." The sphinx chuckled playfully. "How about this instead? If you win our bet, I will answer your questions. Share some wisdom."

"Deal," Kairos said, "though I wonder why you don't simply strangle me now and dispense with the games."

"It has been a long time since I last matched wits with a wily mortal, and I have the feeling you will prove an interesting challenge." The sphinx pointed at a small mound sticking out of the hinterlands. "Let us rest there. Our lovely gorgon can wait."

Kairos nodded sharply, realizing that the sphinx could have shot Rook down from the skies like she did with pegasi if she had so wished. The griffin and the sphinx landed on the cold grass, with Aglaonice slouching on the side, her amulets glittering on her breasts and fur. "Better," she said, raising an eyebrow when Kairos dismounted while still carrying his spear. "Put that weapon aside, manling. Unless you need it to compensate for something else?"

"Nobody has yet to complain about my length so far," Kairos replied with the same deadpan tone.

"Perhaps I should see for myself," Aglaonice replied playfully, her gaze turning serious. "Enough with the witticisms. We shall trade riddles until one of us cannot answer correctly, and ladies first."

Kairos stood still. "Go ahead."

"What occurs once in a minute, twice in a moment, and never in one thousand years?"

As she uttered her question, Kairos sensed an invisible weight falling on his shoulders. If he trusted Rook's expression, the griffin felt it too. "You used magic?" the [Hero] asked Aglaonice.

"I bound us by the terms of our wager," the sphinx said with a cunning grin. "If you fail, your limbs will lose strength, and that funny throat of yours shall close forever."

"What? That's cheating!" Rook protested. "Kairos, can't we strangle her ourselves if we win?"

"We promised to talk it out," Kairos replied, before pondering the sphinx's question.

"Something about time?" Rook asked, confused.

"No help, griffin," the sphinx chastised him. "Let your manling seal his own fate. And yours, by the same occasion."

"Kairos, can we eat her after we win? I can take the breasts, and you the wings."

It didn't take long for Kairos to figure out it was a trick question. The answer was in the words themselves. "The letter M," the Travian answered. "It comes up once in the word 'minute,' twice in 'moment,' and never in 'one thousand years.'"

Aglaonice scoffed. "It was an easy one," she said.

"I was about to say the same!" Rook declared proudly, though Kairos knew he was lying.

"Before I ask my riddle, could you clarify the rules?" the Travian [Hero] asked the haughty sphinx, who sharply nodded. "How do you define a riddle? Can it be a logic puzzle, a question of general culture... How confident do you feel?"

"Oh, you wish to spice up the contest?" As Kairos expected, the haughty beast took the bait, hook, line, and sinker. "I will answer any question you ask."

"Any question, truly?" Kairos pushed his luck. "No take backs?"

Aglaonice smiled arrogantly. "Kairos of Travia, I know what you are thinking," she said.

"You want to beguile me with a question whose knowledge you think I do not possess, or a test you believe cannot be solved. But there is no problem beyond my reach, no mystery I cannot solve. Do your worst."

Let's put that boast to the test, Kairos thought before asking his question. "What's hidden beneath my bed?"

The sphinx glared at him. "A good riddle is a test of intelligence."

"If you truly learned everything important about me, then you should have the answer."

The sphinx's eyes briefly shone with an angry golden glow, Kairos realizing that she just cast a divination spell of some kind. "A poisoned dagger, to slay intruders," Aglaonice answered.

"Cheater, you used magic!" Rook protested.

"I never forbade the use of our abilities," Aglaonice replied. Clearly, neither she nor Kairos would play fair.

However, if her divinations could provide her with information that specific, then she could probably unlock any secret she wished unless blocked by [Demigods] and above. He had to think outside the box. "That answer is correct," he conceded.

"Of course it is. I have been playing this game since long before you were born." Aglaonice licked her fur like a cat. "Next question. A ship with twenty-six manlings onboard sinks. Every single passenger perished, eaten by a Cetus, and yet there were four survivors. How is this possible?"

Kairos frowned, trying to find the paradox's source. Was it a play on the numbers? Was it about the Cetus' nature? Every single passenger perished, but there were survivors... perhaps the four belonged to the crew, and didn't count as passengers?

No, it was another trick question. That devious cat liked to play on the wording.

"The four survivors were married, not single," Kairos answered.

The displeased glitter in the sphinx's gaze told the [Hero] he had guessed right. "Correct," Aglaonice said. "Your turn, manling. You better think it over, because nobody has lived to tell the tale about my third question."

"You're sure I can ask any question?"

"Stop playing coy, manling, and try your luck."

"Alright," Kairos said, before making his gamble. "What happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?"

For a moment, the sphinx didn't say a word, as she registered the question. Her eyes flared with a golden glow, but no divination could help her solve that particular riddle. "That question is a paradox," Aglaonice said angrily. "It cannot be solved. You do not even know the answer yourself."

That was the entire point. "You said I could ask anything," Kairos replied while trying not to sound too pleased with himself. "No take backs."

"You are fiendish," she hissed.

"I'm a [Rogue]," Kairos replied. "Now, give me your answer."

The monster bit her lower lip in frustration, trying to find something, anything that could fit. "They give up," Aglaonice answered with hesitation.

"An unstoppable force does not stop," Kairos replied with a shrug, "I win."

The invisible weight vanished from his shoulders, Rook screeching in happiness. Aglaonice responded with a mix of frustration and amusement. "That was a new one," she said. "I shall remember to clarify the rules next time I challenge a manling. You are a devious, cunning race."

"Is this the moment when you say you didn't promise not to eat us?" Kairos asked, half-expecting treachery.

"Maybe, but I promised you answers." Aglaonice crossed her paws, like a lion on a rock. "Go ahead."

"What do you know about us?" Kairos asked immediately. "Who do you work for? Why didn't you kill us?"

"Are you not greedy for knowledge? One question at a time, manling. I know much about you, Kairos of Travia. I have been watching you since the moment you slew the Cetus who made this island's waters its territory and established that little colony of yours."

So she had been spying on them since the very beginning? "Why didn't you come down from the north to hunt us? Aren't you bound to destroy intruders?"

"We will talk about sworn oaths later," the sphinx replied. "As for killing you, I figured we would get around to it when time came to hunt for winter. Why waste good food? Imagine my surprise when a season passed and that little colony of yours had grown from hundreds to thousands... and you came back from your latest trip with the [Golden Fleece]."

Ah, here it was, the reason for this talk. "You aren't sure your Pride can win this time," Kairos guessed. "You don't want to be on the losing side."

"You would kill me?" The sphinx's eyes fluttered, and she blew him a kiss. "Look at me, poor helpless me. I am weak and in need of a kind protector..."

"I don't believe you," Kairos replied dryly, not taken by her act. That creature was dangerous and treacherous. "Nobody capable of reaching level 60 is defenseless."

"Maybe," Aglaonice replied with a predatory grin. "But I admit someone capable of slaying Jason of Iolcus might very well defeat my lion too. And what an army you gathered around you too. Other [Heroes], powerful [Elites], thousands of soldiers... My lion's pride is strong, but they are so few. A wise woman hedges her bets."

"Isn't he your mate?" Rook asked, confused. "Don't you love each other very much?"

Aglaonice snorted. "You think an animal like him is in charge, griffin? I let him mount me when I feel like it, but this is strictly a trade on my part. He offers me protection from adventurers and other dangerous denizens of the island, and as far as I am concerned, this is all he is good for. He is my pet, not the other way around."

Kairos wasn't certain if she spoke the truth, but if she did then there was an opportunity to exploit. "Are you bound to defend the dungeon?"

"Not quite," Aglaonice explained. "I was contracted to take care of the Necromanteion's observatory, record celestial movements of stars and planets, and warn the Master Below of intruders' presence on the island until a certain day comes. A day that will come very soon, after which my service shall end and I will receive my reward."

And she would rather live until that day. "Who is this Master Below? The dungeon's master?"

"I know the answer, and I want to tell you, but I cannot. Oaths bind me."

"And I suppose other oaths prevent you from taking harmful actions against other protectors of the dungeon?" Kairos asked, the sphinx answering with a smile. "When is this day due?"

"With a celestial alignment next year." She waved her tail. "If you swear not to cause me harm and protect me until that time, I shall, say, disappear when you go confront my lion. I cannot take action against him, but I can simply sit this bloody battle out. If you prevail, I'm sure we could form a... mutually beneficial relationship."

So she was looking to trade one protector for another, or failing that watch them kill each other while she remained safe? "That deal benefits you, whoever prevails," Kairos pointed out.

"Of course. That's the principle of a good agreement." At least she was honest in her treachery. "So, manling, interested?"

"I don't trust her, Kairos," Rook whispered to his partner. "She's ready to cast away her own allies to save herself!"

"I can hear you," Aglaonice pointed out. "My claws are sharp, and my ears sharper."

Kairos shared his griffin's belief, but if he refused... if he refused she would warn the Nemean Lion of the traps ahead, perhaps even fight at his side, which would make taking over the dungeon far more difficult than it already was. Should he form a deal with her, one backed by oaths and magic? Or should he simply play along until an opportunity to kill her arose?

"I must consider it," the Travian said, needing more time to think. "We can discuss an agreement in detail at Euryale's mansion."

"Yes, yes, of course," she said, before rising up. "After you answer one last riddle."

Kairos frowned. "I won the game."

"You said it yourself, I didn't promise not to eat you," she replied coyly. "I am a wise woman, but I cannot leave this place defeated. I have a reputation to keep."

"It will be difficult to make a deal if I die."

"Who said you would die?" she asked playfully. "You are refreshingly intelligent for a manling, and chimerae and manticores are not good enough to satisfy my mind. I think I will keep you as an intellectual sparring partner. A trophy, if you will."

Kairos smiled. "So if I win, I live free, and if I lose, I live as a slave?"

"I'm sure you will get around to it," she said, her tail wagging. "So? Will you try your luck, or do we skip to the ugly part?"

"We have defeated worse creatures than you!" Rook said with a screech. "Let's beat her, Kairos!"

"No," Kairos decided. The creature was a higher level than they were, and a battle could go either way. Besides, even if clearly untrustworthy, this creature might prove more useful alive than dead. "I accept the terms. Ask a question... but one that I can solve."

"Wise." The sphinx licked her lips. "Then, here is the last question you will never answer. If in the first proposition which you utter, you speak the truth, I will let you live and enslave you. But if you speak falsely, I will strangle you. What will you choose?"

They were done playing.

"Hey, that's cheating!" Rook complained. "There is no way it can go well for Kairos!"

"It is also cheating to use a question without an answer," the sphinx replied with a cruel, whimsical grin. "So, manling? Are you done cheating me?"

No, not at all.

Kairos answered her fiendish smile with one of his own.

"You will strangle me."

The sphinx blinked once, then twice.

Her face lost all color, as she opened her mouth, only to close it. She extended her claws, and then retracted them. She clenched her jaws, her eyes blazing with fury. She moved from denial, to anger... and eventually, to depressed acceptance.

Aglaonice wordlessly flew away towards Euryale's marsh, her beautiful face twisted into a frown of frustration.

You earned a level (total forty-eight) and 3 Skill Points.

"I don't get it," Rook said, confused.

"She promised she would enslave me if I spoke the truth," Kairos explained. "But if she tried to enslave me instead of strangling me, my statement would have become a lie. If she did try to strangle me, my words would have become the truth. She had no way out."

"Oh, devious!" Rook whistled, before following the sphinx. "Serves her right for challenging us!"

The griffin and his rider flew after the angry sphinx, both reaching a foul bog on the island's western hedge. Aglaonice landed near a witch house at its center, attended by undead servants. A red hydra slithered inside the marsh's toxic waters, alongside a host of serpents.

And Kairos glimpsed Andromache raising the dead in the grass.

While his concubine often adopted her true monstrous shape to practice magic, she wore her human guise more and more lately. She had traded her usual chiton for a green peplos, bound by a girdle of red gemstones. The bright colors only enhanced her unnatural beauty, and the darkness of her hair.

She looked up upon sensing Kairos approach, her blue eyes shining as their gazes locked. She still wore the shark-teeth necklace the Travian had given her so long ago.

"My other half," Andromache smiled upon seeing the griffin rider land. "Rook."

Instead of answering with words, Kairos dismounted from Rook, set his spear aside, and took his mistress in his arms. He felt her hands move to his back as their lips met tenderly, a shiver of desire going down his spine. If they had been alone, he would have taken her right here and then, on the grass.

"I missed you," Kairos whispered after breaking the kiss.

"Me too," she answered, her forehead against his. "I was away for too long."

Kairos ignored Aglaonice's gaze on them, and instead glanced at a skeleton standing behind his concubine. The creature looked like a reptilian humanoid's corpse, which the [Hero] recognized as a Spartoi. He had fought a few in Achlys.

"You are improving as a [Necromancer]?" Kairos asked, curious.

"I figured I might as well get my own servants," the witch replied as she adjusted her hair. "It will be a while before I can staff your ship with the dead, my love. Spartoi are the easiest undead to raise, but also the costliest. Dragon teeth do not come cheaply."

"I could buy a few for you, if you wish," he answered before lightly kissing her on the neck. "Your wishes are my commands."

The witch replied with an amused gaze. "I shall remember that."

"My, my, so you did bind yourself to a Scylla," Aglaonice said, her anger suddenly replaced with amusement. "How very bold of you, manling."

"Who is this?" Andromache asked with a raised eyebrow. "A new pet?"

"A sore loser," Kairos answered.

"Better than a bad winner," Aglaonice replied. "I am not done yet with you."

"Aglaonice will hound you forever now, Kairos," a new voice said, as a dark figure stepped out of the witch house. The hideous gorgon Euryale warmly welcomed the newcomers, her bronze claws joined, her snake hair hissing. "Few can match her wits, and now that you did, she will torment you until you lose."

"Euryale, I see you have gathered a new coven," Aglaonice said, resting on the grass. "Here I thought the ages had made you more solitary."

"I am selective, not solitary," the gorgon replied, before politely nodding at Kairos. "Will you break your bread with us, Kairos?"

"With pleasure," he answered.

By now, Kairos had grown used to dining with monsters.

4: Old World Secrets

Gorgons held the best banquets.

As a wonderful host, Euryale had pillowed couches set for her guests and herself inside her wooden house. Kairos himself shared one with Andromache, his concubine's back resting against his chest, while Aglaonice received a hill of cushions as her seat. Undead servants served them wine, honeyed figs, and roasted birds beneath the light of ghostly torches. Rook and the other animals enjoyed their own private meal outside the house's walls.

Though the food was delightful, Andromache had been in a foul mood for the entire evening. As Kairos had guessed, the Scylla hadn't taken the news of Julia's pregnancy well. Sometimes her lover noticed her hand brushing against her stomach with an angry scowl on her face. When Kairos tried to comfort her by kissing her on the neck, she ignored him.

The two had planned to have children together, but Circe's curse had made Andromache sterile. Kairos had hoped that his [Golden Fleece]'s magical fertility might have solved the problem, but he had been disappointed. In the end, the fleece was a [Demigod] Rank artifact, and it couldn't overcome a true goddess' power.

For Andromache, learning of her romantic rival's fortune only reminded her that Circe still ruled her from beyond the grave. Though the Scylla had taken the first steps towards moving on with her life, Kairos could tell old wounds had opened again.

"We will find a cure," Kairos whispered into his lover's ear to cheer her up. "Now that the Nemean Lion is within our reach, we can access the dungeon."

Andromache didn't answer, her gaze lost in a cup of wine. She hadn't touched a drink since the feast's beginning, nor even taken a bite of food. Realizing she didn't want to talk at all, Kairos gently caressed her arm with his fingers, hoping to comfort her.

In contrast, Aglaonice eagerly partook in the feast, seizing roasted duck legs with her huge paws. "My, the food has improved since my last visit," the sphinx observed.

"My apprentice brings me gifts from the human cities east," Euryale replied, playing with a wine cup. "Gluttony is not among my flaws, but I appreciate a little variety in my meals."

"So you have known each other since before the Anthropomachia?" Kairos asked the gorgon and the sphinx.

"We are old friends now," Euryale replied, her snake hairs hissing. "Ancient scholars like us keep in touch."

"Who are you thinking of?" Kairos smiled. "Prometheus?"

"That old [Rogue]?" Aglaonice chuckled. "I heard you visited him. Does he still have a statue of the celestial bodies in his courtyard?"

"He does," the Travian replied.

"He better. That model was one of my finest works." The sphinx slouched on her cushions in a way that reminded Kairos of a lazy cat. "If you look up at the night sky, you will find that I named a fifth of all stars and planets."

"None have yet to equal your feats in the field of astronomy," Euryale complimented her.

"None shall," Aglaonice replied arrogantly. "I have forgotten more about celestial movements than human savants will ever learn."

"And I am sure you will remind everyone of it, if given the opportunity," Kairos deadpanned.

The sphinx looked at him dangerously. "If it were not a waste of wine, I would throw my cup at your face."

Kairos wasn't impressed. "Now, if you truly named a fifth of all stars, why didn't I hear of your name before?"

"Because only cultured people would know its significance, and you are sorely lacking in that regard," Aglaonice replied, her tongue as sharp as ever. "It wasn't always like this though. In fact, I had a thriving cult of astrologers and diviners before the Anthropomachia. I predicted lunar eclipses so accurately that your backward ancestors thought that I would bring down the moon if they did not appease me."

This caught the Travian's attention. "A cult?"

"Yes, the Skill-powered kind," the sphinx said with a cruel smirk. "My, I still remember the days people sacrificed goats before my altars and [Idols]. I miss the attention."

"I have some temples here and there too," Euryale said. "Though I have better things to do than answer prayers, and few even ask for my guidance. Still, in your case Kairos, I would suggest developing a cult. It is not for nothing that sealed deities like Lycaon and Typhon can project influence in spite of being imprisoned deep inside Gaia."

"I'm considering creating a [Hero] cult," Kairos admitted. "But I don't know how to proceed. I have access to a few Legendary Skills, but I am not sure which one I should take."

"You have access to the starting ones, I suppose?" Euryale asked, the Travian confirming with a nod. "Most are useful. [Mystery Cult] will make your [Idols] undetectable by lesser divinations. [Healing Altar] will allow them to provide minor magical healing. [Animated Idol], as per the name, can cause your altars to move on their own to protect the faithful."

Kairos listened with rapturous attention, trying to see which one could serve him better. [Mystery Cult] only seemed useful for banned, hateful cults like that of Lycaon or Typhon. Healing his followers would help him with his image, but as a [Hero], the Travian doubted that the Skill could cure much. Animated [Idols] sounded situationally useful.

"And the others?" he asked, finding his options underwhelming.

"[Unsettling Presence] inspires the [Terror] ailment in nonbelievers, and I can assure you that this Skill is effective at fostering fear and obedience," Euryale mused.

"She owns it, obviously," Aglaonice said with a chuckle. Kairos remembered his first meeting with the gorgon, and how she blasted him with an aura of fear that almost brought him to his knees.

"[Enthralling Image] is the exact opposite," Euryale continued while grabbing a honeyed fig. "Individuals with weak [Charisma] will find your [Idols] soothing, which may inspire devotion. Both are two sides of the same coin."

"Would you rather be feared than loved?" Aglaonice asked playfully. "That is the true question."

Though she kept gazing at the wine, Andromache finally spoke a few words, "Love is fickle," she said with disdain. "Fear stays with you forever."

"I would rather have both," Kairos replied. "So long as I am not hated."

"Wise," Euryale said. "Either would be appropriate, but I believe you will find [Empathic Link (Idol)] more useful to your purposes, Kairos. This Skill will allow you to sense everything happening within a short radius of your [Idols], and to connect with your worshipers."

Now they were talking. "So I could talk to my worshippers across vast distances?" Kairos asked. If so, then that would greatly expand his influence.

"Not quite. You would need to become a [Demigod] before you can talk directly to your followers through [Idols], and as a [Hero], you will only be able to focus on one [Idol] at a time. But you can listen to prayers, and convey your emotions to them."

Aglaonice smiled. "Why do you think most deities have their worshipers pray at specific hours, handsome?"

Andromache's head suddenly snapped in the sphinx's direction, her eyes blazing with anger. "What did you say?" she hissed, revealing her sharp inhuman fangs.

The viciousness in her tone took Kairos aback, but if Aglaonice was intimidated, she didn't show it. "Why so angry, darling?" she asked. "If a cat is a cat, you call it a cat."

The witch glared at the sphinx without a word, her silence ten times more oppressive than any threat. "Don't listen to her," Kairos whispered softly into Andromache's ear. "I am yours, and you are mine."

The Scylla didn't answer, but he felt her lean her back more tightly to his body while glaring at the wily sphinx.

Something in her expression reminded Kairos of Medea, and it disturbed him.

The sphinx looked at Andromache with an amused look, before focusing back on Kairos. "My riddle has an easy answer. Gods schedule prayers so that they may listen to them directly and process information efficiently."

"They use temples as intelligence networks?" Kairos guessed, his eyes widening as a great many things suddenly started making sense.

"Exactly," the sphinx confirmed with a nod. "The larger your cult, the greater your knowledge and your reach."

"Rituals and worship bring power," Euryale said as an undead servant gave her a new cup. "Have you never wondered why the Furies allow anyone to make oaths in their name, and strongly punish all oathbreakers? The more they become famous as all-knowing goddesses of oaths, the more likely they are to actually become so. In time, mortal belief might strengthen their [Legend] and elevate them from vengeful [Demigods] to true deities of oaths and contracts."

Kairos chuckled, before glancing at the still furious Andromache. "Perhaps I should ask builders to raise a statue of you next to my [Idols]," he told his concubine. "We could start our own pantheon."

This drew a smile on the witch's face, although barely. "In which form would your sculptors represent me, my other half?" she asked sourly. "This disguise, or my true form?"

"Whichever you prefer," Kairos replied simply before kissing her on the cheek. "We could be represented riding Rook together. The full package."

Andromache chuckled, her mood improving. "I will give it thought, my love, but I lack the [Charisma] needed for that Skill."

As Kairos had guessed, his concubine had chosen to favor her [Magic] and physical abilities rather than her leadership. She had few friends, and her late harpy followers had obeyed her out of fear.

Still, the Travian warlord guessed he could afford having statues of Andromache and Julia built next to his own, if only for propagandist purposes. If they gained power from it, all the better.

"Cults take a myriad of forms, Kairos," Euryale said with wisdom. "From secret cabals gathering at night, to ancestor worship or public religions, each god organizes their faith differently. They are powerful tools, but I offer a warning. Choose wisely which path your cult will take, because your worshipers' beliefs will shape your [Legend] as much as your deeds. If everyone believes you are a monster... you might very well become one."

Kairos nodded silently. Indeed, he would have to consider how to run his faith carefully. There was one Skill he felt comfortable in purchasing though.

You spent 3 SPs to buy the [Empathic Link (Idol)] Legendary Skill. By focusing, you can see and hear everything within a ten-meter radius of your [Idols], and empathically communicate with creatures within that radius. You can only focus on one [Idol] at a time, and your body is reduced to a deep torpor while your mind possesses an idol.

Kairos immediately decided on the construction of idols in each of the island's settlements. Though limited in his ability to communicate, he could easily establish a system of signals to keep in touch with his allies.

"If you are open to sharing your temples, perhaps you could raise a statue of me next to yours instead?" Aglaonice said brazenly, causing Andromache to sneer at the sphinx. "My current activities didn't leave me much time to maintain my cults, but now that the term of my service has almost expired..."

Yes, right, as if Kairos would allow a treacherous sphinx a way to spy on his heart of power. Still, he decided to play coy. "If you want to receive, you have to give," the Travian said.

Aglaonice shifted her position to rest sideways, exposing her belly and chest like a cat wishing for attention.

"If you want something from me, you are welcome to take it. If my lion is gone, I will be in need of a strong, virile protector." The sphinx looked at the Travian with fluttering doe-eyes. "Will you take care of me, Kairos?"

While Kairos didn't take the bait and kept an impassable face, Andromache's gaze turned downright venomous. Her hand moved to hold Kairos' tightly, as if reaffirming that she owned him. "He will not protect you from me, if you keep treading on dangerous grounds."

"My, what are you imagining?" Aglaonice replied with mock outrage, delighting in infuriating the Scylla. "Do you take me for a wanton lioness without any virtue? I was going to ask him to ruffle my feathers, nothing more!"

"And at this rate, you will lose more than feathers," the witch warned. "Learn your place."

"One learns best through experience, no?" The sphinx teased the Scylla.

"I shall not have a fight beneath my roof," Euryale warned. Though her voice remained soft and she didn't raise her tone, the gorgon's warning was enough to calm down hostilities. "If you wish to settle your differences with force, you shall do so outside after the feast."

Andromache frowned, but submitted. "Yes, teacher."

"You should not be so quick to treat me as your enemy, darling," Aglaonice said. "If I dare say, we might even become friends."

"Nothing you can offer interests me," the Scylla replied.

"Is that so?" Aglaonice smirked. "I know you are looking for a divine bribe. Something that will convince the god Orgonos to lift your curse. Maybe I know where to find something like that."

Andromache bristled, her hand tightening around Kairos' own. Her nails sank into his flesh to the point that the Travian worried she might draw blood. "We can search the dungeon ourselves, when your pride is out of the way," she rasped.

"Ah, but that item is something well-hidden that you will hardly find it without my help. And there is the small matter of how I ended up working in the Necromanteion. It is a story that you will find most interesting, Andromache of Scheria."

While the Scylla frowned in skepticism, Kairos raised an eyebrow. "I thought you couldn't work against the dungeon denizens?"

"Nothing prevents me from talking about the dungeon itself, except parts I was explicitly forbidden to discuss," Aglaonice said. "This story starts when the world was dryer. Planetary alignments were my current fancy by then, and I was studying the magical interactions between planets when I was approached by a certain..."

The sphinx let the sentence hang before showing her teeth.

"Witch-queen."

Andromache's eyes instantly widened, her interest aroused. "Circe?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Aglaonice replied playfully. "All I can say is that she was very interested in my research, and paid me an obscene sum to narrow down the date of a major planetary alignment, which I obviously did."

"The same celestial alignment that will signal the end of your service?" Kairos guessed, trying to make sense of this information.

"Indeed," the sphinx confirmed. "That witch-queen then brokered a deal between the Necromanteion's master and myself. In exchange for monitoring the heavens in preparation for the alignment, I was offered an irresistible reward. True, my service would last for more than a thousand years, but I was being paid to do something I would have done for free."

"What kind of reward?" Kairos asked suspiciously, while Andromache frowned, lost in her thoughts.

"A trove of priceless knowledge," the sphinx said evasively, before blowing him a kiss. "Maybe I could share it with you, if you make it worth my time..."

To Kairos' surprise, Andromache ignored the sphinx's provocation. Circe's involvement bothered her more than the cat's attempts at getting a rise out of her. "A phoenix moved near your dungeon months ago," the witch said. "Did it make its lair inside the Necromanteion?"

Aglaonice chuckled. "Yes, though he descended far deeper than the first level, the only one I was allowed to move through. I suppose it must have made its nest at the bottom or close."

"And your lion let the bird in unmolested?" Andromache kept probing for information, while Kairos' frown deepened. Much like his mistress, he was starting to see the bigger picture.

"These were the Master Below's orders." Aglaonice shrugged. "My lion will not let *you* pass, though. He swore to the Underworld's deities to defend the Necromanteion from intruders, and it took me all my charm to convince him to let me explore the first floor beyond my allocated observatory. Even then the other guardians were not so taken with me."

"They must have smelled your falseness," Andromache replied with a snort.

"Mayhaps, but if nobody has anything bad to say about you, then it means you are boring. I would rather be interesting than forgettable." The sphinx's gaze turned from playful to sharp. "Besides my neutrality in your battles, I can offer much. A map of the first level, for example. I may have noticed a few treasure chests and magical items too, though as a good friend, I will expect a good share... among other sweet things."

The friendly talks had ended. Now was the time for business. "Get to the point," Kairos said.

The sphinx straightened up, but her smirk remained devious. "My offer is simple, manling. If you prevail against my lion, you shall take his place as my protector and make sure no harm comes to me until the end of my service next year. This includes protecting me from yourself, or your men."

"My, what are you imagining?" Kairos deadpanned.

"You are a [Rogue], and you would not be the first manling playing with oaths," the sphinx said mirthfully. "I find you somewhat entertaining, and you might prove useful, but I only trust you as far as I can throw you."

"How strange, I feel the same about you."

"Perhaps we will grow closer with time," the sphinx replied playfully, though Andromache's lack of reaction disappointed her. "But I require an oath now."

Kairos frowned, for something did not happen. "What is your stake in this?"

"My, how can you be so cunning with such a poor memory? Unless you want me to flatter you? Fine, I believe you might slay my lion where so many failed, and I will not end on the losing side."

"But if the dungeon's master learns of your double-dealing, they might grow angry with you," Kairos pointed out with skepticism. "You might live in the short-term, but make a powerful enemy long-term."

"Staying neutral does not violate the letter of my oath." Aglaonice rolled her shoulders. "Maybe it does violate the spirit, but I have only one year left and you are here to stay."

"It's not just that." Kairos figured it out. "Do you know the purpose of this alignment? Why was the phoenix allowed inside the temple?"

She did. It was written all over her smug face. "If I did, I could not tell you."

"You know," Kairos decided, "and you don't want it to happen."

The sphinx only answered with a smirk. "I told you, manling. A wise woman hedges her bets."

Andromache glanced at her lover with a firm gaze. "A word, my other half."

Kairos nodded. "If you will excuse us," he said as they rose from the couch.

"Come back soon," Aglaonice warned with a grin. "This offer comes with a limited time."

The couple ignored her as they walked out of the wood house and closed the door behind. Kairos noticed Rook sleeping on his back next to Euryale's hydra, both having a heavy stomach from all the food.

"What do you think?" The Travian asked his mistress, now that they were out of the sphinx's earshot.

"She is a snake, and she will bite your hand if you move too closely," Andromache replied. "But we should take her up on her offer. Something is brewing, and time is not a luxury we can afford. That whore Circe set a trap before her demise, and we have little less than a year to disarm it. If the sphinx moves out of the way, it will be one less obstacle for us to deal with."

"So we are in agreement," Kairos said. "You think this was all part of Circe's plan?"

"I would wager my life on it, my love." The Scylla growled, her bestial nature shining through. "She cursed me to keep that egg until it hatched, and the bird made its way to the Necromanteion only a few seasons before the celestial alignment. It cannot be a coincidence."

The Travian didn't think so either. "Prometheus warned me of three calamities," he said. "One was a second sun rising in the skies."

"And the phoenix holds the power of Helios, the sun titan," Andromache replied with a nod. "Cosmic magic reaches the apex of its power during celestial alignments. Some things are possible on these days that are impossible at other times."

"Why would Circe need all these pieces in place?" Kairos asked. The witch-queen was long gone, but this reeked of a backup plan of some kind. "What did she hope to achieve?"

"I cannot say yet," Andromache admitted. "I will need more time and study. This celestial alignment could fuel a great many rituals, my love. Some with far-reaching consequences."

"And if Aglaonice is willing to sabotage the dungeon's master, then this ritual threatens her life in some way."

"Whatever Circe's plan is, I want it ruined." Andromache's expression turned into a snarl of all-consuming hate. "I want her hopes dashed, and her spirit crushed even in the afterlife. Even if it means allying with that sphinx. No price is too high for my revenge."

Kairos moved his hand to her head, his fingers brushing against her cheek. "Is that truly what you want?"

"Yes, I want it," she said, her voice brimming with dark desire. "I want to see Circe's work destroyed. Now that she is dead, that whore is beyond my reach, but I will have satisfaction for the slavery she put me through."

"Revenge consumed Medea and Jason, binding them to a thousand years of torment," Kairos reminded his concubine. "The same fate may await you if you go down that path."

Andromache sneered. "Would you rather that I let it go?" she asked. "Would you let it go? Even if it was all about me, the Titan of Foresight warned you. Whatever calamity brews within this island, it will wreak havoc on the whole Sunsea."

"True," Kairos conceded. "I just want you to understand what revenge at all costs will mean. For us."

Andromache's soft hands moved to his chest. "Will you follow me to the Underworld itself, if my vengeance takes me there?"

"You know I will." Kairos put his hands around her waist and pulled her closer. "We are bound until death separates us. Maybe even beyond that."

She raised her lips to reveal her sharp fangs, and kissed him ferociously. "Then please, indulge me on this matter," she asked in between embraces. "I want it. I *need* it."

Kairos gently pushed her lips back with his finger. "I will follow you to the end," he said. "But I won't let you drag anyone else into this if this goes too far. I have a responsibility to my people too."

"These people almost threw you out after all the victories you won for them," the witch pointed out with disdain.

"You hated me too once." Kairos shook his head. "I want you to receive justice for the wrong done to you, Andromache, but not if it costs you your happiness or that of others. We are building something here. Don't waste your future to avenge past grievances."

Andromache listened to his words, but Kairos couldn't tell if they had any impact. He could only see the sea in her eyes, calm and yet hiding great cruelty underneath. He hoped she would make the right decision.

"I will listen." Andromache's fingers brushed against his chest. "And if that sphinx speaks the truth... then she may have the key to lifting my curse. For us to have a future together."

They kissed on the lips for what seemed like forever, before returning to the wood house. "Alright," Kairos said, as the couple returned to their couch. "Let us talk."

The sphinx's grin turned carnivorous. "Gladly."

Aglaonice haggled over the alliance like a wine-seller, and the negotiations lasted well into the night. In the end, though neither the sphinx nor Kairos got everything they wanted, they reached a compromise.

Kairos promised to serve as Aglaonice's protector the same way the Nemean Lion had been, which included safety from adventurers, dungeon denizens, outsiders, and Kairos' own soldiers. Aglaonice was allowed to move freely inside the dungeon and through Kairos' territories unmolested. She would get a share of any treasure she helped the Travians find inside the Necromanteion, and keep the prize promised to her by the Master Below. Kairos was forbidden from trying to take it for himself, whatever it was. This was the part that worried the [Hero] the most, but the sphinx wouldn't budge on it.

In return, Aglaonice promised to stay out of Kairos' way while he dealt with the Nemean Pride and the dungeon's denizens, and not to start unnecessary troubles that would require her to be protected in the first place. She would provide the location of Orgonos' bribe, and any information she could offer without violating her agreement with the Master Below.

This included a map of the dungeon's first level, which she had explored in-depth. She would also stick to the bare minimum of the duties she owed to the Master Below, namely maintaining the observatory and informing him of intruders' presence... which she already did.

Finally, to her displeasure, Kairos forced her to agree not to harm him or his followers, though she was still allowed to challenge people to non-lethal riddle contests. Clearly, she intended to avenge her loss to the Travian.

The alliance was sealed by an oath to the Furies, with Euryale agreeing to serve as the pact's enforcer if anyone tried to overstep its bounds or deceive the other. All obligations would end after the planetary alignment.

"Make the oath," Euryale said.

"I swear before the Furies to follow the letter and the spirit of this agreement," Kairos said, sensing the shadows lengthening as a divine power took notice of the promise.

"Odd choice of phrasing, manling, but fine," Aglaonice said. "I swear to respect the letter and spirit of our agreement."

An oppressive, invisible presence took over the room, winged shadows appearing near the fire. They were gone in an instant, but they would return to punish oathbreakers.

"It is done," Euryale declared, as the invisible pressure vanished. She rolled up the scroll which detailed the agreement, and handed a copy to Aglaonice and Kairos each.

"Such a light piece of paper, for such a heavy deal," the sphinx said as her scroll vanished in a puff of smoke. "But I look forward to working closely with you, manling. Keep your tongue sharp, though. I have many riddles for you."

"Eager to lose again?" Kairos taunted her.

"One day I will tame that unruly mind and tongue of yours," the sphinx said while licking her lips hungrily. "You can count on it."

"Be thankful that agreement prevents me from ripping out your tongue," Andromache said dangerously.

"I suggest you leave the island after the celestial convergence, Aglaonice," Euryale mused. "My apprentice is nothing if not determined."

"I would rather settle our issues over games of wits, like civilized people," Aglaonice said. "Hunts are a tiresome affair."

"Now, fulfill your end of the bargain," Andromache said with a snort. "Where is the bribe?"

"I could show you when you enter the dungeon," the sphinx said. "Are you always so impatient?."

"Tell me now," the witch ordered impatiently.

Aglaonice sighed. "Very well. As you may know, Orgonos is a descendant of the old god Poseidon, and he still collects mementos from his ancestor. Now, who was the most famous son of Poseidon?"

"Theseus," Kairos guessed. "King of Athens and slayer of the first minotaur."

"An easy answer for an easy question," Aglaonice replied. "Now, Theseus' best friend was Pirithous, King of the Lapiths. Together, they hunted great monsters and defeated the first centaurs in a war called the Centauromachia. Both being [Demigods], they swore to each get a daughter of Zeus as their bride."

"While Pirithous had great strength, he lacked wits and chose a dangerous prize," Euryale said with an amused grin, as if she had known him personally.

"He chose Queen Persephone," Andromache said with a frown. "I know this tale. They both entered the Underworld to abduct her, and were bound to a rock by Hades for their folly."

"Indeed, and though Heracles eventually freed Theseus, who was only an accomplice, Pirithous remained a prisoner of the Underworld for his crime. Now..." Aglaonice chuckled. "Which entrance do you think they used to enter Hades' realm?"

Kairos's eyes widened in understanding. "The Necromanteion?"

"The myth was slightly exaggerated, darling. Pirithous and Theseus didn't go as far as the Necromanteion's first level before the curse bound them. Pirithous was mercifully put out of his misery with Hades' death during the Anthropomachia, but his rock remains."

"That is your bribe for a god?" Andromache scoffed with scorn. "A piece of rock?"

"Ah, but this piece of rock is very special," Aglaonice said with a know-it-all smirk. "Theseus and Pirithous were bound to it for so long that the stone absorbed some of their divine power. The [Rock of Theseus] is now an artifact capable of producing precious salt and summoning horses, as Poseidon once did for Athens."

This... this could work. From what Kairos had heard of Orgonos, the god of magic would appreciate such a gift. "Show us," Andromache ordered. "You said you would make a map, do so."

One of Euryale's undead servants provided Aglaonice with a new scroll, and the sphinx's eyes glowed with a golden light. Inscriptions and lines appeared on the parchment, forming two distinct drawings. Kairos recognized them as maps of two floors of a massive temple, one larger than any mortal palace.

"The first map represents the ground level where I live, and the second drawing is the Necromanteion's first floor," Aglaonice pointed at a room on the second sketch. "Here is a salt fountain, at the bottom of which you will find the hidden [Rock of Theseus]. It is quite deep though, but there is no such thing as an easy prize."

"How many levels are there?" Kairos asked.

"I heard of four floors, with the bottom holding the entrance to the Underworld. I daresay you might find your phoenix there, if you can enter the dungeon at all." Aglaonice slouched on the ground, her tail wagging. "You know what to do, darling."

Indeed.

It was time to hunt the Nemean Lion.

5: Lion Hunt

The night had been long, but they were ready at last.

Thales should have felt happiness at a job well done, but fear ruled his heart as he oversaw the deep trench before him. Thousands of workers had labored day and night since he elaborated the plan weeks ago, pausing almost every other major construction project. Even then they had needed to commission Dispater's Builder Corp to finish the trap in time.

Lord Kairos observed the work with a careful eye, walking along the trench with Thales hot on his trail. The automaton's fingers kept twitching, as he expected his superior to complain or pick up errors he had overlooked.

Lord Kairos nodded to himself instead. "I think it should do," he said with enthusiasm. "Good job. How long will it take for your trap to activate?"

"As soon as I give the signal." Thales had set explosive fire traps at the choke points, to clean up the path when the lion was caught. *If* it was caught. "Lady Andromache helped me on that front."

"She has progressed a great deal." A smile appeared on Lord Kairos' face. Thales found it quite sharklike under the moonlight. "There are kilometers from the river to the kill site."

"About that, I would..." Thales looked down. "I would be reassured if she could join us."

"She won't intervene unless things go wrong, at which point it might be too late to make a difference," the Travian pirate king replied, arms crossed. "I asked her to watch Aglaonice. I still don't trust the sphinx, not entirely. No oath is entirely foolproof, and if she gave any hint of our plan to her mate..."

Then they would all die. Thales had researched the Nemean Lion's subclasses based on Lord Kairos' intel, and what he found worried him.

While bound to a restricted area, [Dungeon Guardians] received Skills granting them accelerated regeneration to the point of not aging, immunity to most status ailments, and even the ability to shrug off mental attacks. Even if some individuals like Lord Kairos could theoretically bypass the creature's magical defenses, the creature's sheer power made it unlikely anything short of an immediate killing blow could put it down. The lion would recover from poison, resist mental domination, and regenerate from the gravest of wounds.

Thales had considered half a hundred scenarios, and only one had a slim chance to work.

"Sir, may I speak?" the automaton asked.

"I pray that one day, you will understand that you are always free to speak your mind," the pirate king replied with a hint of reproach. "Yes, Thales?"

"Sir, is it truly necessary for you to act as our bait? If you perish..." If he perished, Thales wouldn't forgive himself. And it would upset Lady Julia.

"As an annoying sphinx said, my [Monster Lure] Legendary Skill makes me a near irresistible morsel to monsters. We need to lure the lion to the kill site, and I should have superior mobility on Rook's back. According to your own calculations, the Nemean Lion can run faster than most horses, and fighting that thing in close combat is suicide."

"It is true that our only hope is to stay at range, but... maybe someone else could ride your griffin?"

"We have no other [Griffin Rider]," Lord Kairos replied with a frown. "I appreciate your concern, Thales, but I have faith in myself... and most importantly, I have faith in you."

"But what if I miscalculated?" Thales insisted. "What if I'm wrong?"

"You aren't."

"But—"

"You said it yourself," the [Hero] interrupted him calmly. "I quote, '*Nemean Lions might have invulnerable skin, but they still need to breathe. Heracles proved it.*' For all we know our feline can resist poisons or substances that would cause him to choke, but unless he can transform into a Cetus, he shouldn't survive your trap."

"But Heracles had near-limitless strength!" Thales pointed out, panicking at the thought he had overlooked some detail. "The chroniclers might have misunderstood what happened. He might have snapped the first Nemean Lion's neck, instead of choking him."

"I don't think so," Lord Kairos replied, skeptical. "Andromache admitted that your trick could work on her in human form, and she is indestructible everywhere, even in the eyes."

"What if the chains break?"

"They worked well against Andromache when she agreed to test them, and she can smash through city walls when furious."

"What if the delaying traps fail?"

"They won't, since you made them."

"What if—"

"Damn it, Thales!" Lord Kairos snapped in frustration, causing the cowed automaton to take a step back. The Travian [Hero] seemed to immediately regret his outburst, and sighed. "I trusted your plan since the very first day. Nessus trusts it, Agron trusts it, and Petra and Chloris and everyone involved in this hunt also trust it. So why can't you feel the same?"

Why indeed?

"Because I..." Thales looked down at the dirty ground. "Because I was defective from the start."

Though he avoided facing him, the automaton could already imagine Lord Kairos' scowl. "Who told you that?"

"The Archons of Thessala." The words came out like a flood, having weighed on him for decades. "I, uh... Lord Talos, the maker of our race, crafted me to be a warrior-model. A defender of our city. But when the class choice came, I... I couldn't unlock [Fighter]. I didn't have the prerequisites."

"Why, because you had higher [Intelligence] than [Strength]?" Lord Kairos asked with a frown. "Is that why you tried to create automatons yourself?"

"I sought to surpass my maker," Thales confessed. "I... if I was created flawed, then the process could be improved. I... I needed to figure it out."

"To figure out why you were you?" Lord Kairos asked. "Does it even matter?"

"Of course it does!" Thales finally looked up, as something in his superior's tone bothered him. "If you were born club-footed or blind, wouldn't you want to understand why and correct it?"

"But that's the thing, Thales. I don't think there is anything to correct." Lord Kairos smiled. "Suppose you succeed, that you gain greater strength or learn to wield a spear as well as I do. Would you leave your laboratory to take up a life of fighting?"

"I..." Now that he put it this way... Thales tried to imagine himself leading a pirate crew like his superior, or watching Histria's city walls until the day he was scrapped. Somehow, such a life didn't appeal to him.

"Don't try to be someone you aren't, Thales," Lord Kairos said, though there was no scolding in his tone. "Maybe you would have become a different person under different circumstances, as I would have probably acted differently if I were born a noble rather than a dirt-poor raider. But I do not regret the path I took. This is my life, and I made it for myself. If you had limitless resources and no enemies, what would be your perfect life?"

The answer came quickly to Thales' mind, though it took a few minutes before the automaton found the strength to confess. "I would spend all my time in my lab, creating automatons and doing research," he admitted, finding himself ridiculous.

His captain chuckled. "See, you would do exactly what you're already doing," Lord Kairos said with a smile. "Thales, Histria has many [Fighters], and quite a few of them man its walls. The walls that you designed. They live in the city whose plan you created, they sail with compasses you imagined. Do you understand why I insisted that we follow your plan, rather than make my own?"

"I... because I was a [Trap Maker], sir?"

"Because I have thousands of brave warriors, but I have only one Thales the Promethean. And I want you to understand that."

Thales didn't know what to answer to that.

"Maybe you will never swing a sword, but you could equip a thousand swordsmen if you wished," Lord Kairos continued. "Both the warrior and the blacksmith are important. Both have their strengths. And I know your skills will defeat that lion, where mine might fail. I can feel it deep in my gut."

He... no, he was only trying to cheer Thales up. But as the automaton examined that strong-willed human's face, he found no hint of deception, not even a white lie. The pirate lord believed every word he said.

"Thales, this is your plan. Though I validated it, I have chosen to follow your instructions, your strategy. In this particular case, I will not be your commander but your piece on the board. It is no different from the strategy games you love so much."

"Sir, you would not die in a strategy game," Thales pointed out. "And pieces always follow orders rather than having a will of their own."

"No plan survives contact with the enemy, either in a game or in this cold world of ours." Lord Kairos' smile widened. "And like pieces on a board, we will only proceed if you give the go-ahead."

What? Was he serious? "Sir, you are the king."

"And you are the expert. We will proceed with the plan, only if you say we do."

He was serious. "But... what if I say no?"

"Then we go home, and figure out something else."

Only then did the truth dawned on Thales.

The responsibility was the [Crafter]'s own alone. Only he would decide if the plan went ahead or not.

And he was afraid. He was afraid of failure.

No, that wasn't right. Failure was part of a learning process in the realm of science. Thales was afraid of being held *responsible* if it failed. Of having blood on his hands. He didn't have Lord Kairos' bravery, or what it took to lead troops to battle.

And yet... and yet Thales was no stranger to conflict. The weapons he created took the lives of others. The automaton couldn't pretend he was innocent; it was his ballistae that Lord Kairos' crew used to lay siege to the port of Boeotia, seasons ago.

And if nothing was done about the Nemean Lion, more lives would be lost. The creature's pride had already exhausted the wildlife in the west, and would certainly turn to settlements on the eastern coast. Towns that Thales himself had helped raise, and home to thousands. The automaton felt a responsibility to the people living there, and the *Foresight's* crew.

He couldn't cower and hide.

The Nemean Lion was a monster with immense strength, greater than any [Fighter]. His claws were sharper than swords, his hide thicker than armor. He was the ideal that inspired Thales' creation, and of which the [Crafter] fell short.

A thought crossed the automaton's mind.

If Thales' plan prevailed... if he proved that a [Crafter] could defeat a powerful warrior through nothing but simple tools...

Then it would be the proof that he was no failure, and never had been.

"Sir, if..." Thales reached a decision at last. "If I say yes, could I ask for a favor?"

The pirate chuckled and raised an eyebrow. "What kind of favor?"

"I will do it, sir," the [Crafter] declared, hesitantly, then more firmly. "I will do it. Myself. I will kill that beast."

Thales would pull the trigger.

The hunt began at dawn.

Kairos had hunted big cats in his youth on the monster-infested island of Travia, though never a Nemean Lion. Somehow he had the feeling his first time might also be his last, if he wasn't careful.

The [Hero] rode Rook high in the skies under the cover of invisibility, observing his island's hinterlands. After chasing away most pegasi herds and forcing local animals into hiding, the pride had started to move towards the east's civilized settlements. A vanguard of female manticores and chimeras scouted ahead of the group, while the lazy Nemean Lion and his treacherous sphinx mate lagged behind.

From his vantage point, Kairos saw his allies moving into position. Nessus, Chloris, and amazon horse archers waited in an ambush on rugged hills, facing the wind to avoid being smelled. All of them carried Achlysian composite bows except for their satyr leader, who wielded the golden [Bow of Atalanta], a trophy from the previous expedition.

Another group of horsewomen remained in reserve, led by the mercenary general Petra. Unlike their comrades, these soldiers carried heavy lances. Petra herself led the group in armor made of blackened scales, her purple eyes and long green hair partly showing beneath her helmet. Flames swirled around her spear, ready to burn the enemy's flesh.

Finally, Thales and Agron's team waited at the designated kill site farther east.

Kairos' men outnumbered the pride five to one, but numbers didn't matter much against beasts capable of smashing through city walls. The manticores and chimerae at the front also advanced cautiously, as Agron's group had successfully ambushed two of them a few days ago when they wandered away from the main group. The beasts knew they were entering dangerous territory and needed to stay on high alert.

Perhaps Aglaonice said something similar to the Nemean Lion, as she exchanged words with him. Kairos couldn't hear from his location without risking discovery, but the sphinx ended up flying away from the pride towards the northeast. She discreetly blew a kiss in the invisible Travian's direction, before vanishing herself.

'That's the signal, Rook,' Kairos whispered to his mount through their [Animal Companion] telepathic link, before anchoring himself to his griffin as best as he could.

'On it, Kairos!' The griffon dived down towards the pride's vanguard, moving as close as he could without risking detection. Two chimerae and a manticore smelled the grass below them, trying to find prey.

Kairos activated his [Warg] Skill as soon as the [Griffin Rider] came into range.

Andromache advised against attempting to possess chimerae, as they had multiple minds in one body, so Kairos' mind slipped inside the manticore. His spirit escaped his human flesh, leaving it semi-comatose and in Rook's care. He sensed the female manticore's mind briefly struggling against the intrusion, but she lacked the [Charisma] and awareness to force Kairos out.

When the human awakened, he saw the world through another's eyes. It was quite a strange experience. Kairos had already practiced [Warg] on other animals, and the manticore's vision reminded him of a cat; the Travian struggled to see more than twenty meters away from himself, and the world looked blurry, its colors dimmer. His host body would probably see better at night.

The other senses were nothing to sneeze at. Kairos could smell the bones below the earth, the winter mud, the faint scent of horses. His ears picked up the rustling of the grass in the wind, the soft sound his paws made on the ground... and the short breaths behind the hills.

They had sensed the skirmishers.

"Enemies?" one of the two chimerae asked, her multiple heads all speaking at once. Kairos understood everything, as both the host and the vessel shared the [Beast Tongue] Skill. "They don't sound like pegasi."

"Could be a horse herd," the other chimera said, humming the air with both her lion and goat heads. "I hear something else too... the flap of a bird's wings, and I smell the beast too, but I don't se-"

Without warning, Kairos tore the lion's head's throat out.

His manticore body's sharp fangs gored through the chimera's rugged flesh, violently separating the vocal cords and cartilage from the neck. The warm blood flowed on the ground as the surprised beast collapsed.

"What the—" The other chimera didn't have time to finish her sentence, as Kairos the Manticore tackled her, claws first. He forced the rival beast to the ground before viciously

stabbing the flank with his stinger-tail. The goat head responded by unleashing a stream of flames at the possessed manticore, causing Kairos to wince in pain as fire consumed his fur.

"Stop this madness!" Shouted another manticore, as the rest of the pride quickly caught up to the vanguard... with one exception. The Nemean Lion watched the scene from afar, his eyes squinting in suspicion.

As the pride approached, Kairos escaped his host's body, leaving her to fend for herself. But as soon as he returned to his own flesh, the invisible Travian immediately possessed another manticore and struck a chimera from behind with his stinger.

"Quick, it's now or never!" Kairos said through the manticore's mouth, as confusion spread through the pride's ranks. "More food for us!"

"Traitor!" A chimera snarled back before leaping at him. "Pride traitor!"

Kairos quickly escaped back to his body, and he didn't have to [Warg] again. By now, the paranoid chimerae had started attacking the manticores on their own before they could do the same, pouncing their rivals with claws or burning them with fireballs.

The pride devolved into a brutal, chaotic melee as the two species fought each other. As Kairos had suspected, when danger knocked on the door, species loyalties asserted themselves. The manticores were slightly more numerous, but the chimerae had the benefit of long-range attacks. The grass turned red from the blood spilled, and the nauseous smell of death filled the air.

"Enough!"

The lion's voice sounded like thundering lightning, and instantly ended the fight.

Kairos watched from the safety of Rook's back as the pride's lesser beasts cowered before their alpha. The Nemean Lion's heavy steps caused the ground to shake as he approached the slaughter's site, his enormous body casting a long shadow upon his feline harem. One swipe of his paw could easily send an elephant flying, and his powerful fangs could break a horse in two. He dwarfed his followers in size and could single-handedly massacre them, if he so wished.

The lion's mere presence united the pride in their fear of him.

Five of the lesser beasts had perished, three manticores and two chimerae, and the rest were wounded; some so heavily that Kairos doubted they would survive the night. So far so good. The plan was to eliminate the Nemean Lion's supporters before luring him to the kill site, as the pride's interference might allow him to escape at the critical moment.

"The manticore started it," said a chimera. "They—"

"Quiet," the Nemean Lion replied, the chimera wisely remaining silent. The pride's alpha squinted at the slaughter, and started humming the air. "I smell something vile..."

After a short search, and although Kairos discreetly used his wind spear to cover his smell, the Nemean Lion glanced in his direction.

Realizing the danger, the Travian reflexively attempted to [Warg] into the feline behemoth, but his mind bounced back to his body. The Travian awoke to see the world with human eyes, and Rook quickly carried him away.

"I can smell your magic," the lion rasped softly, showing his fangs in a twisted parody of a smile. "Manling."

'Retreat!' Kairos ordered telepathically, but the griffin had already started fleeing. The Nemean Lion let out a massive roar, so powerful it made his entire pride cower in fear.

[Terror] negated by [Leadership 3]!

The Nemean Lion leaped a dozen meters in the air, far higher than any beast of his size should be capable of. He attempted to swipe at Rook with his colossal paws, but Kairos negated air resistance around his mount with his [Anemoi Spear]. The duo soared across the skies and narrowly escaped the lion's claws, the beast making the earth tremble when he landed.

"Now!" Kairos lifted the [Invisibility] and revealed himself, which gave his troops the signal to attack. Nessus' archers emerged from behind a hill with a thunderous war cry and raised bows.

[Mounted Archer] was among the most powerful [Fighter] subclasses, and one of the hardest to unlock. It needed high [Perception], Skills in archery, horsemanship, balance... but when Kairos saw Nessus' group in action, he couldn't argue with the results. The amazons rode their horses as if they were the same being, like centaurs. By the time the pride realized what was happening, they had already unleashed a rain of arrows and retreated.

The arrows turned the lesser beasts into pincushions, piercing through their thick hide and manes. One chimera managed to avoid death outright by breathing flames at the projectiles, while a manticore powered through them in a futile attempt to reach the

archers. Both chased after the cavaliers with murder on their mind, leaving the rest of the pride behind.

So far so good, but only one threat truly mattered.

Arrows bounced off or shattered upon the alpha's invulnerable skin. "This is your pride, manling?" The Nemean Lion scoffed at Kairos, as he slowly stepped on his own wounded. Clearly, the alpha male considered his harem expendable. "I have eaten ten thousand of them!"

"But we're better than all of them!" Rook boasted back, as he bravely ran away after the horse archers.

"Then why run away?" The Nemean Lion's eyes shone with a golden glow. "I have your scent, manling, and that of your bird too. I will hunt you. I will hunt you day and night, twilight to dawn! I will hunt you in your dreams, until your legs crumble before you! And then I will eat you all, feet first! [Thunder Reign]!"

Instead of pursuing the group, the Nemean Lion took a deep breath, and roared to the skies.

As his voice spread, so did an ancient and powerful magic. Kairos sensed electricity in the air, as a foreign power clashed against his own [Anemoi Spear]'s mastery over the winds. In an instant, thunderclouds gathered above their heads and turned the skies black.

"Weather magic?" Kairos wondered out loud, as he attempted to disperse the clouds with a strong gale. However, whatever magic the lion wielded equaled his own. A torrential rain started pouring down the skies, and the thunder echoed across the island.

Weather changed to [Heavy Thunderstorm]!

Kairos now understood why the lion was called Thunderclaw.

That part was completely unexpected. The plan was to have the cavaliers use the open terrain and horses' mobility to pick off the pride without suffering casualties, while Kairos lured the alpha away.

But worryingly, the Nemean Lion looked in no hurry to pursue anyone. Before Kairos lost sight of the beast due to the heavy rain, the Travian saw him casting buffing spells on himself. Though invincible, the lion had the cautiousness of age.

Praying the monster would still take the bait, Kairos caught up to the horse archers led by Nessus. The remaining chimera and manticore, the only members of the pack capable of fighting after the arrow barrage, chased them down relentlessly. Their bestial strength allowed them to close the gap with the horses.

Or so it seemed. When the two beasts threatened to catch up with the rearguard, Nessus ordered his troops to accelerate, and they quickly outpaced the surprised monsters. Before the chimera and manticore could understand what happened, general Petra and two dozen heavy lancers ambushed them from behind, trapping them in a pincer movement.

Though the beasts were more powerful than warhorses, the amazons were well-equipped and determined. Their mounts battered against the rain and trampled the grass, while their hooves echoed with the thunderstorm above. The chimera attempted to stop them with fireballs, but Petra's fearsome warhorse charged fearlessly through the flames. Her spear gored the creature's goat head, while the rest of her troop smashed against the monsters. The horses trampled them to death before moving.

"Hey, Kairos!" General Petra called the Travian from below, as Rook flew over them. He had trouble hearing her over the sound of the thunder and the rain. "Is the lion going after you or not?"

"I think so!" Kairos shouted as raindrops fell on his [Golden Fleece] and Rook's feathers. The Travian turned his head as the group passed by small hills, approaching the crags and quarries of the east. He noticed the large shadow of the beast stalking them through the heavy rain, though the lion seemed in no hurry to catch up. "He's taking his time!"

"He can afford to, the ground is harder for hooves than paws!" Petra pointed her spear at the ground, which the rain slowly turned into mud. The lancers lagged after the horse archers, and both slowed down. "Can't you disperse the weather?"

"I tried, but his magic is stronger! I can only affect the air in my close vicinity!" Wait, did the lion change the weather to alter the terrain? Was he waiting until the terrain became too difficult for horses to keep their mobility advantage, while avoiding exhausting himself?

A mighty roar answered his thoughts, followed by a pressure in the air. A pressure he had already felt before in a previous battle, right before—

Kairos' eyes widened in alarm as he looked up at the skies. "Disperse!" he shouted as loud as he could, as electricity built up in the clouds. "He controls the lightning!"

Both Nessus and Petra heard him, ordering their groups to disperse just as the lion's magic struck. Mighty thunderbolts fell down from the heavens to strike the earth below, some

briefly setting fire to the grass before the rain extinguished the flames. One amazon lancer wasn't lucky and a bolt incinerated horse and rider both. Their charred remains were left behind to burn.

Damn it! Kairos knew it would be implausible to win without casualties, but how could they know a giant *lion* could alter the weather? If only Aglaonice could rat out the dungeon's denizens...

"Kairos, buckle up!" Rook warned, as the electricity gathered above them. Kairos created a wind tunnel with his [Anemoi Spear], his vision turning into a tunnel. His griffin danced around the bolts with skill that made his rider proud.

Unfortunately, the Nemean Lion had chosen that moment to turn serious, and came rushing after the horsemen at full speed. His paws caused small quakes as they hit the ground, almost louder than the thunder above.

And he was *fast*. His skin's invulnerability seemed to also apply to the rain and wind, as neither slowed down his advance. The half kilometer that separated the Nemean Lion from the rearguard swiftly turned into two hundred meters, as the golden blur caught up.

Kairos had Rook move to the side, trying to lure the lion away from the cavaliers... but to his horror, the beast ignored the griffin to chase after the horses.

"I will turn your pelt into a carpet!" The Travian [Hero] taunted the Nemean Lion before he unleashed a burst of compressed wind at him, but neither words nor his magic had any effect.

By now, the predator and the prey had left the hinterlands for the eastern areas of the island, where Kairos' men mined silver and minerals. The grasslands were slowly replaced with stone crags, rocky mounds, and pits. There, a booby-trapped ditch had been dug, separating the ground with only wooden bridges to join both halves. This first layer of traps should provide the cavaliers with key seconds, allowing them to outpace the Nemean Lion and escape to relative safety before the final battle.

But no plan survives contact with the enemy.

Nessus' group crossed the wooden bridges without issues, while rainwater slowly started to fill the ditch below. But the muddy ground slowed Petra's lancers too much, and the lion caught up to them. He smashed into the rearguard with a vicious swipe of his paw, sending two amazon horsewomen flying with their mounts.

Realizing they wouldn't escape, the lancers had their horses turn around in a desperate last stand. Unfortunately, the mere sight of the enormous lion paralyzed the horses with fear, except Petra's. The amazon commander tried to strike the beast in the left eye, figuring out that only his skin was indestructible.

But while she managed to avoid a deadly swipe of the creature's paw, her spear missed and only grazed the mane. The Nemean Lion's tail whipped her horse with the power of a flail, causing the warhorse to collapse into the mud and toss Petra off its back.

The lancers attempted to rescue their leader by throwing their spears at the lion, but they shattered against the behemoth's skin. The Nemean Lion lost interest in Petra, and instead charged at the lancers.

"Run!" Kairos shouted, attempting to support his soldiers from above with blasts of wind. But while powerful enough to throw a man off his back, his attacks had no more impact than a breeze. Maybe the Travian [Hero] could inflict damage in direct combat, but that would open him up to a deadly counterattack.

The monster didn't even acknowledge his presence, tearing the lancers apart with his claws. The sharp natural weapons cleanly cut both flesh and armor, while spears broke like tree branches.

There was no technique, no skill. Only strength.

Seeing their allies in danger, Nessus' group turned around and sent arrows from the other side of the bridge. "Hey, ugly!" the satyr shouted before shooting a golden projectile. "I'm the tastiest meal in the world!"

It was a lost cause. Even the satyr's golden arrow did no damage, and the Nemean Lion wasn't stupid enough to abandon a winning fight. He quickly massacred the lancers in a savage frenzy, leaving only corpses and maimed riders behind.

Unable to bear this sight any longer, Kairos decided to make a desperate attempt at saving the survivors. He telepathically ordered Rook to divebomb the lion from behind as he was busy finishing off the wounded, and raised the [Anemoi Spear] for a lethal blow. Kairos prayed that his [Legend Slayer] Skill could bypass the invulnerability.

As expected, the lion ignored the duo, too confident in his invulnerability, and Kairos struck him between the shoulders.

The spear pierced through the invulnerable skin, spraying the lion's fur with thick red blood.

The behemoth let out a roar of rage and pain, rising up on his hind legs. Rook quickly attempted to fly away, but when Kairos attempted to wrench his spear free, he faced resistance.

His spear was stuck between two ribs!

Realizing he had made a terrible mistake, Kairos was forced to leave his weapon behind before the lion could strike Rook, the griffin, and his rider flying out of range. The beast roared in fury, the [Anemoi Spear] sticking out of his back.

"Get back here, coward!" The Nemean Lion roared at the Travian [Hero], before noticing general Petra rising back to her feet next to her wounded warhorse. When the dungeon guardian noticed her fiery spear, Kairos saw a hint of fear in his golden eyes. The lion thought the danger came from the weapons, not the wielders.

And so, he attempted to finish Petra off with a trampling charge.

"Rook!" Kairos ordered.

"On it!" The griffin dived down, claws extended, while his riders used the winds to increase his speed. For a moment, Rook moved as fast as the Nemean Lion, both reached out for the same target.

Petra herself, realizing the danger, raised her fiery spear and threw it at the lion like a javelin. She aimed for the left eye and this time struck true, her weapon piercing the beast's ocular organ. Though he didn't stop his charge, the dungeon guardian shrieked and slowed down.

This moment made all the difference.

"Grab my hand!" Kairos shouted, as Rook reached Petra first. The amazon took his arm and the [Hero] managed to lift her to his back. A few seconds later, the trio narrowly escaped as the Nemean Lion's fangs fell on the spot Petra previously occupied.

"You're alright?" Kairos asked as Rook flew over the ditch, Nessus' group taking this as a cue to run. Without his spear, he had no way to harm the Nemean Lion at range.

"I'm fine," the amazon replied as she grabbed Kairos' waist so as not to fall from Rook, clearly gritting her teeth through her helmet. It astonished the [Hero] that she didn't have a broken leg after a severe horse fall. "You should have left me behind, stuck to the plan. Your griffin—"

"Could carry someone twice fatter than you," Kairos mused, though inwardly he admitted the general had a point. Two riders slowed down Rook, and the Nemean Lion had recovered from the surprise attack. The feline quickly chased after them with a murderous expression, one of his eyes a fountain of blood with a fiery spear sticking out, the other a baleful golden star full of malice.

Abandoning the maimed lancers behind for later, the Nemean Lion leaped over the ditch to continue the chase. But by not taking the wooden bridge, the beast triggered the traps set by Thales. Smoke bombs exploded below the lion and clouds of colored dust swallowed him whole.

Kairos had helped Thales with designing some of the traps, using [Poison Brewer 3] to create powerful sleeping powders and venoms. While the Nemean Lion seemed immune to [Sleep] and [Poison], the smoke made him scoff and briefly stop. His eyes turned teary, his nose on the verge of sneezing. Still, his rage gave him the strength to continue.

Using their foe's brief delay, Kairos and his troops reached the final step of their journey, a limestone quarry specifically modified to trap the lion. The mine was a colossal open hole sixty meters long and more than twenty meters deep. The place's bottom had been emptied, its walls so steep no one could climb up if they fell down.

Thales waited near a reinforced fence of wood on the far away side of the rectangle, while Agron and ten brave men stood watch on the end nearest to Kairos' position. The minotaur captain grinned upon noticing the cavalry's approach, he and his team grabbing long barbed chains. The metal links had been bound to heavy stone boulders, placed near the quarry's edge.

"I should have taken a bow," Petra complained as Nessus' riders separated to get around the open-pit, while Kairos had Rook fly above it. Lightning still cackled above them, the rain filling the quarry with a thin layer of water.

"I should have too," Kairos thought. Though he had a short dagger-sword which Cassandra gave him, he mostly relied on his [Anemoi Spear] for long-range attacks. He would invest in additional side-weapons, if they survived the battle.

The Nemean Lion came roaring after them, but abruptly stopped when he noticed the steep void behind Agron's team. To his horror, Kairos saw that his eye was already regenerating around Petra's spear, threatening to toss it out.

"Is that your plan?!" the beast snarled as he faced Agron's group, thunder echoing his roar. "Trapping me in a ravine?"

Agron's team responded by fearlessly charging at the surprised lion, and throwing their chains at him. The beast responded by calling down the lightning, Kairos having Rook dodge a bolt while another struck one of Agron's human followers dead. But the rest of the group surrounded the lion and struck.

Though they couldn't pierce the lion's skin, Thales had designed these chains well: the barbs locked into the links after wrapping up around the lion's limbs. When the beast tried to move to swipe the men within his range, he undid the fragile equilibrium that kept boulders' from falling into the quarry. They rolled down into the pit, and though the lion was strong enough not to let them drag him down into the quarry, the chains held and the added weight slowed the beast down.

Agron wrapped his chain around the lion's neck and bound it tightly, attempting to choke the giant cat to death. The Nemean Lion responded by cutting the metal links with his claws as if they were butter, and tried to follow up with the binding attached to his limbs.

Thales, watching the scene from the other side of the quarry, responded by clapping his hands loudly.

A 'click' sound spread near Agron's edge of the pit, and his group quickly dispersed. Before the lion realized what was happening, the underground traps had already activated.

Explosions shook the quarry's edge, and stone crumbled beneath the lion's feet. While Agron's group managed to run away in time, the chained boulders restricted the Nemean Lion's movement and his hind legs fell into the chasm.

The beast let out a furious roar as it made one last futile attempt at clawing Agron before he could fall down entirely. The minotaur grabbed a throwing axe around his belt and threw it into the monster's right eye, fully blinding him.

The Nemean Lion fell down into the quarry, bound by all limbs, his eyes bleeding out. And yet not only did the thunderstorm rage on, but his eyes already started regenerating. Kairos noticed his own [Anemoi Spear] being pushed out of the monster's body by the regrowing flesh.

"You were wrong," Kairos taunted the trapped beast from above, as he struggled on the pit's muddy ground. "It's not a ravine."

Thales clapped his hands again.

"It's a cistern."

An explosion blew a large hole into the wooden fence, and gallons of water poured through. A raging river filled the pit like a waterfall, the sheer pressure casting stones down and burying the Nemean Lion alive.

It had taken thousands of workers and a few dams to reroute the river towards the quarry, but their efforts had paid off. The monster's stormy weather had only made the death trap more lethal, as the rainfall fueled the raging river. The waters rose meters by meters, burying the giant beast alive.

The Nemean Lion attempted to escape the trap and reach the surface of the rising artificial lake, but the water's pressure and the boulders' weight kept him near the bottom. Kairos saw him try to cut the chains binding his hindlegs, but the more the Nemean Lion struggled, the tighter the bindings restrained him.

Even the giant beast's enormous [Vitality] could only do so much without air. Surprise hadn't given the Nemean Lion time to hold his breath, and less and less bubbles rose to the surface as minutes passed. The cistern's water level kept rising for minutes, and the lion couldn't free himself.

By the time the quarry was filled, no more bubbles rose to the surface. The lion's shadow remained at the bottom beneath the stormy waters, unmoving.

Kairos didn't lower his guards though. Nessus, Chloris, Agron, and the other soldiers readied their bows and throwing axes, ready to strike the beast if it was playing dead. Thales' fingers clicked nervously, while Rook held his breath.

But the rain stopped falling as minutes passed, the magical clouds clearing up to let the sky shine through.

Thunderclaw the Nemean Lion, protector of the Necromanteion dungeon, had drowned.

"I..." Thales seemed at a loss of words, before emotion won out. "I did it! I did it!"

Congratulations, you earned a level (total 49) and 3 Skill Points.

A small gain, but not unexpected. Kairos hadn't contributed much except against the lesser beasts, and the lion's share of the experience went to someone else.

A golden glow surrounded Thales, much to no one's surprise but his own. Blinding mythical energies flared from his metal and wooden components, cackling with divine lightning. When the light receded, the automaton looked at his hands with surprise.

Kairos knew what had happened before he even used [Observer].

Thales the Promethean

Legend: Thundercatcher (Hero)

Race: Automaton (Talosborn)

Class: Crafter (Alchemist, Inventor, Engineer, Shipwright, Mathematician, Promethean, Trap Master, Physician, Architect, Astrologer, City-Builder)

Level: 46

Once, Kairos' crew had slain a powerful Cetus with a stone avalanche, but none earned a [Legend]. A dozen people with fire rods had triggered the stone fall, each with a claim to the killing blow; and so the System didn't reward any of them.

But it was Thales who had designed this trap, overseen its construction, built the trigger mechanism himself, and activated it when the time was right. As far as the System was concerned, the automaton had landed the killing blow, and thus wrestled the creature's [Legend] and power.

The troops erupted into cheers, Nessus and the amazons dismounting to grab Thales and lift him above the ground. "Wait, wait!" The surprised automaton protested as his comrades lifted him above the ground and tossed him in the air, over and over again. "Stop!"

"Thales!" They chanted his name while ignoring his protests. "Thales!"

"Thales best [Crafter]!" Rook joined.

Only one person seemed unhappy with the hunt's result. "You will get your [Legend] next time," Kairos told Agron, who glanced down at the artificial lake with a frown.

"The automaton can get the [Legend] this time," the minotaur snorted. "But I keep the lion's pelt."

"I would like to get back my spear," Petra mused. "But first, we should help the wounded left behind. Some might yet live."

Indeed. All in all, the hunt had gone almost without a hitch and minimal losses. Kairos had won costlier victories before, and this one left him satisfied.

And now that they had slain the dungeon keeper, the path to the Necromanteion was open.

6: The Doorway to Hades

It took hours to get the Nemean Lion's body out of the water, and until twilight to bring it back to Histria.

Julia, ever the crafty queen, had met with the hunting party halfway to the city with Andromache, Cassandra, Aglaonice, and a contingent of warriors. That relief force would have intervened if the battle had gone wrong, but though it took some casualties, the mission ended with a great victory.

The hunters had lost around fifteen soldiers, mostly among the lancers who couldn't escape the Nemean Lion's charge. The survivors of that battle had taken heavy wounds, some losing legs and arms. Julia, ever mindful of rewarding veterans, granted them a lifelong pension and promised that they would be taken care of.

And of course, she didn't miss an opportunity for propaganda. "A triumph?" Kairos asked with a frown.

"It is a custom in Lyce, to reward our [Heroes] and great generals," his wife explained. "A victorious commander parades before the population with their army and spoils of war, before throwing a feast. Our people will love it, especially with the arrival of winter."

"I suppose you already arranged everything?" her husband asked. Julia answered with a smile. "This seems a bit... arrogant."

"You wished to build a cult, husband," she reminded him. "Though Thales and all those who participated in this hunt will get the glory they deserve, you must never lose an opportunity to impress our subjects. Awe them."

"I agree," Cassandra said. "Impressed people tell tales, and tales have power. If you wish to overcome Teuta's and Mithridates' influence, then you must win the battle of reputations."

"Where will you put me, though?" Aglaonice asked, wagging her tail. If she felt sad about her late mate's demise, she didn't show it. "The spoils, or the victors?"

Andromache sneered at the sphinx, clearly disappointed she hadn't broken the agreement. It would have given the Scylla an excuse to kill her, if the Furies didn't do it first. "The spoils."

"I suppose I can always turn invisible then," Aglaonice replied dryly.

"You will parade at my husband's side, as an honored ally," Julia declared with a tone that allowed no contestation. "You have proven true to your oath so far, and our subjects will be less likely to attack you by mistake if you receive a place of honor. My husband will look more impressive with a tamed sphinx at his side."

"Tamed, me?" The sphinx scoffed. "You presume much, wolfling."

"What is someone in need of a protector," Julia replied with a vicious smile, "if not a subject?"

"A friend," Aglaonice insisted. "And a public appearance might reach the ears of my other employer."

"A true friend wouldn't be afraid to show her true allegiances," Julia said with an affectionate tone that sounded almost genuine. "You have nothing to fear. We will shield you from all harm, remember?"

Kairos could read between the lines. His wife wanted the sphinx to commit publicly to the alliance, so she wouldn't have the opportunity to turn her coat again. Refusing to appear would be an open admission that Aglaonice wouldn't mind turning on them, and Julia understood that the key to managing a treacherous ally was to isolate them.

Both the sphinx and the queen exchanged smiles that showed the teeth behind them. They looked so much alike in that moment that Kairos could have mistaken them for sisters exchanging a private joke.

In any case, Kairos ended up agreeing to the plan, and the hunters entered Histria triumphant at twilight. Thousands gathered in the streets to acclaim them, as they paraded the Nemean pride's remains for all to see. By then Kairos had recovered his spear, as did Petra. It took four chariots to drag the Nemean Lion's corpse, due to the beast's weight.

Kairos himself flew at the front on Rook's back, with Aglaonice at his side. The sphinx looked bemused as children pointing fingers at her, fascinated. "Look at me!" Rook shouted, basking in the attention. "I am a feathered god of war!"

Thales received the place of honor, riding a chariot in front of those dragging the lion, and Kairos thought that the automaton would die from anxiety. Facing all of Histria's population must have been a nerve-wracking experience to the scientist. But midway through the parade, Thales grew used to the cheers and started shyly waving back at Histria's population with his multiple hands.

Agron, Petra, and Nessus followed, and then their troops. Petra acted with quiet dignity, Nessus happily saluted the crowd, and Agron sang a war song in a last-ditch attempt to unlock the [Skald] subclass. He had psyched up his men with music before the fight, but forgot to do the same in the heat of battle.

Afterward, Julia threw a banquet for the city's population, with Kairos' retinue and the hunters receiving a more luxurious one in his fortress' hall. Tables were set for a hundred, the wine flowed, and a peculiar dish was served.

A Nemean Lion's hide could resist almost anything, with one exception: its own claws. Much like Heracles before him, Kairos' men turned the dead creature's own weapons against itself and skinned it.

The flesh was then cooked, and served.

"We could prepare you another meal," Kairos informed Aglaonice. The pirate king oversaw the festivities from a small dais, with his wife and the treacherous sphinx on one side, and Thales and Cassandra on the other. Kairos would have wished for Andromache and his mother Aurelia to join them, but the Scylla had politely refused to participate in the feast, and Aurelia was abroad in Travia, working to convert cities to her son's cause.

Kairos didn't need to guess why his concubine had opted out. The witch was solitary by nature, and the sight of Julia filled her with anguish.

Below them, the soldiers feasted while Caenis and servants brought them plates. The lion's pelt had been put in the middle of the room as a carpet, while Rook slouched on it as if he had slain the beast himself. Agron and Nessus were already drunk and singing ribald songs, while the amazons looked on with amusement. As for Thales, though he came to the banquet out of courtesy, he spent his time tinkering with a clay pot and other tools.

"How do you manlings say it? Till death do us part?" After this jape, Aglaonice took a bite out of her former mate. Though her face was human, the scene reminded Kairos of her true, monstrous nature.

The pirate king looked at his plate without enthusiasm. It was an arrangement of lion steak, honeyed manticore stingers, and stuffed chimera horns. Eventually, Kairos found the bravery to try the dish, and was pleasantly surprised. The meat's taste was so strong that the cooks had to sweeten it with heavy doses of spices.

It was a passable dish, but it tasted like victory all the same.

"What will you do with the lion's pelt, husband?" Julia asked, a cup of water in hand. She alone didn't drink wine at the table, besides Thales himself. "I heard your minotaur wanted to make a cloak out of it, as Heracles once did."

"This lion is four times the normal size," Kairos replied, having thought it over. "I thought we could set aside most of the skin to craft armors for our strongest warriors, and feed the bones and whatever remains to the *Foresight*."

"The lion also has thirty fangs, and eighteen claws," Cassandra said at Kairos' side. "Each as sharp as adamantine."

"Not as sharp," Aglaonice replied. "They *are* made of adamantine."

"Truly?" Cassandra blinked. "I thought adamantine was a metal?"

"It is," the sphinx replied with a smug smile, happy to showcase her knowledge. "But Nemean Lions with [Hero] Rank and above can improve their natural weapons through racial Skills."

Thales briefly paused from his work to offer his own insight. "Adamantine is nigh-indestructible, sir. I could rework the fangs and claws into spear tips and daggers, but not fragment them."

"Truth be told, I am more interested in that device of yours," Kairos said, as he examined it. Thales had filled a pot with a cylinder of rolled copper sheets holding an iron rod at its center. The pirate noticed traces of asphalt here and there, and smelled vinegar. "What is it?"

"I received the Legendary Skill [Electrical Intuition], sir," the [Crafter] explained. "From what I understand, it gives me a natural understanding of the [Lightning] element and everything associated with it. Thunderstorms, spells, electrical fish... and this. Touch the tip."

Kairos did so, and a faint electric shock raced through his fingers when he touched the rod's tip. It was barely noticeable, but a shock all the same. "See?" Thales asked with pride. "The vinegar and metal create a weak lightning that travels through the rod."

"What do you call this device?" Kairos asked his chief engineer.

"I am leaning on giving it the name of 'battery,' sir."

"And what will you use it for?" It wasn't powerful enough to be a weapon.

"I do not know yet," Thales admitted, his fingers fidgeting in excitement. "But I am sure I will figure something out."

Frankly, Kairos was dubious that this curious invention would see much use, but his wife thought otherwise. "Some healers in Lyce use electrical fish to soothe muscle pain in a patient," Julia said. "Perhaps your device could make for a good substitute?"

"I could try to explore this subject," Thales said. "If... if Your Grace wishes it."

"Of course," Julia replied with a charming smile. "I am certain you will create something groundbreaking."

Though energized by the queen's encouragement, the automaton appeared a bit divided. "If possible, Your Grace, I... I would like to have some free time to work on my personal Quest."

"I wouldn't advise waiting on that front either," Cassandra replied grimly. "Putting my Quest on the backburner had unforeseen consequences."

Kairos didn't need a reminder. "Did your Quest change?" he asked Thales.

"I am no longer promised a [Legend] on success, only additional Skill Points," the automaton admitted. "I thought I could be promised a Rank-up to [Demigod], but my Quest isn't hard enough to deserve such a high reward."

It didn't surprise Kairos. Thales' Quest was to create another, fully functional automaton, something that the [Demigod] Talos did routinely. The System wouldn't consider the feat as worthy of ascension to a higher Rank than [Hero].

That was partly why Kairos had insisted so much on engineering a scenario where the System would recognize Thales as the lion's slayer. In his experience, killing someone of higher Rank and stealing their [Legend] also came with a promotion. Kairos himself gained a [Legend] and ascended from [Common] to [Elite] after slaying a [Hero]. Meanwhile, Cassandra, who earned her [Legend] through non-violent means, had to complete a Quest to become a [Hero] herself.

Truthfully, Kairos thought the real benefit of Thales' new [Hero] Rank wasn't his dubious new understanding of electricity, but the fact he could improve his existing Skills. If the pirate king could trust his own experience with [Poison Brewer], the automaton would find his options multiplied exponentially.

In any case, Julia didn't see any reason to deny Thales' wish, so long as he finished the other projects that he had already started.

"Now that the lion is dealt with," Cassandra said, "the path to the Necromanteion should be open."

"I would like to march on it tomorrow," Kairos replied, before glancing at Aglaonice. "Will the woods be traversable with your former mate's death?"

"The Mint Woods are protected by powerful magic, independent from my lion," the sphinx said lazily. "Only a few people are granted entrance by the spell, and though my lion could extend his invitation to tributary monsters, I cannot do so myself. But there is a workaround for the wise, my manling. "

"My manling?" Kairos asked with a scoff, while Julia raised an eyebrow.

"Well, you have slain my lion and claimed me before your entire city," the sphinx replied coyly. "You are welcome to take your rights anytime... though I do not guarantee your manhood will survive."

"How would it even work?" Unlike Andromache, Julia responded to the provocation with a mix of amusement and curiosity rather than wrath. "Men and cats do not fit well together."

"Sphinxes have their ways," Aglaonice replied with the same tone, slightly surprised by the werewolf's response. Kairos guessed the sphinx thought her flirting would rile up the Lycean, but Julia showed more self-restraint than Andromache. "In any case, I shall offer you a hint. How many seconds are there in a year?"

Kairos opened his mouth to answer, but Julia beat him to it. "Twelve," she said. "A second day for each month."

Aglaonice squinted at Julia. "You've heard it before."

"Sphinxes tend to cycle through the same riddles. Did you ever ask the one about single people dying on a boat, while married couples survive? I love that one."

Aglaonice's expression turned from smug to vexed. Indeed, she had asked that question to Kairos a few days ago. "Where did you meet one of my kindred?"

"My brother has baby sphinxes in our menagerie, as do many Senex households in Lyce," Julia replied. "When they turn into adults, the obedient ones are kept as tutors for gifted children. One androsphinx was my favorite teacher. A true polymath that one, I'm sure you would love him."

"Certainly," Aglaonice replied with a tone that implied otherwise. "And what happens to the disobedient ones?"

"Oh, they have their tongues and wings cut, and we forcefully breed them with manticores to create hybrids," Julia said these terrible words with the same passion as someone discussing the weather. "But don't worry, you are a loyal friend, and we do not have manticore stock yet."

"About hybrids, sir, when will the basilisk-hydra eggs hatch?" Thales asked with innocent curiosity, the conversation's subtext flying over him.

"With next spring, from what I understood," Kairos replied. Warbeasts always hatched in times of conflicts, that was known.

"In any case," Aglaonice said, trying to regain the spotlight. "This is the fourth riddle I challenged you with, and you shall get no other hint."

Kairos frowned, but quickly realized that the sphinx challenged him with another riddle, one subtler than the previous ones. A hint in the fourth question? About seconds or twelve?

It clicked.

"Four riddles," Kairos guessed. "A lion had thirty fangs, and eighteen claws. Forty-eight. Four times twelve. We can bring forty-eight people in total, each carrying either a fang or a claw, but the skin will not help us cross the woods."

Aglaonice glared at him with a mix of respect, frustration, and hunger; though Kairos couldn't tell the kind. "One day you will fail to answer my questions, and you shall rue that time," she swore. "Even if it takes me decades."

"I also have a riddle for you, oh great and wise sphinx," Julia said with an innocent face. "One I doubt you can answer."

Aglaonice scoffed arrogantly. "Go ahead and disappoint me."

The queen's smirk grew wider. "What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet—"

"For the sake of our friendship," Aglaonice interrupted the werewolf with a false smile, her claws sinking into the table, "do not finish that sentence."

"As you wish. Then again, a *man* answered it before."

To Kairos' surprise, who had expected a bloodbath, Aglaonice responded to the provocation with genuine amusement. "You know, I am growing strangely fond of you,

wolfing," the sphinx told Julia. "We might end up killing each other, but I will feel sad about it."

"You are quite the entertaining guest yourself," Julia replied. "Must you truly return to that dreary dungeon?"

"I am afraid so," the sphinx replied, wagging her tail. "But I could visit, if you make it worth my time."

"I will have guest quarters set for you, next to mine. Do you play strategy games, perhaps?"

And Kairos watched on, as the two women started discussing popular foreign strategy games, such as the Alexandrian Senet, the popular Lycean Latrunculi, and the ever-popular *Board & Conquest* with the easy familiarity of lifelong friends. Thales even moved his seat closer to them to participate in the debate.

"What just happened?" Cassandra whispered to Kairos, dumbfounded by this turn of events.

"Sphinxes assert their social hierarchy through mind games and witty banter," Kairos replied with a low voice, having consulted Julia on how to deal with Aglaonice after the hunt. "Threats of physical force only make them more arrogant, as they see you as a barbarian, but they respect poisoned subtleties and intellectual jousts."

Unlike Andromache, whose threats of bodily harm only encouraged the sphinx to taunt her, Julia's more subtle response had earned Aglaonice's cautious respect. By now, Kairos knew his wife well, and he could tell that unlike her genuine kindness towards Thales, her friendly banter with the sphinx was only a shrewish power game. Even the offer of guest quarters was a way to tighten the treacherous creature's leash.

"Is that why she alternates between flirting and challenging you to riddles?" Cass replied with amusement. "It's her way to establish intellectual dominance?"

"Over me, and my entourage." In a way, the sphinx treated her new allies like her previous pride. She was trying to figure out where she fit, and opportunistically work her way up. The pirate king would never trust Aglaonice—he was in no hurry to end up like the Nemean Lion—but he could manage her until a better option presented itself.

Kairos would have to explain these subtleties to Andromache too, before she lost patience with the wily sphinx; though he doubted she would meet Julia's success. By now, the werewolf even went as far as scratching the sphinx's back, as if she were a kitten.

Somehow, Kairos found the innocent gesture *deeply* ominous.

"The limited number of locks to bypass the Mint Woods greatly complicates matters," he said to Cassandra, changing the subject. "Only forty-eight 'keys' will make it difficult to march on the dungeon with a vast force."

"We could always feed a few to the *Foresight*, and see what happens," Cassandra suggested. "One or two losses won't make much of a difference, and if the ship gains the ability to walk through the forest, then it would solve the issue."

"We will try, but I am not so sure it will work," Kairos replied. "The spell protecting the woods was cast by a [God]. It probably has protections against such loopholes."

"We cannot know until we try," his second-in-command replied. "And if it fails, the low number of keys still make it possible to establish a small garrison to at least survey the dungeon and supply exploration parties."

Kairos nodded, before considering his approach. "We will travel light and move fast, so we can seize the dungeon's entrance before other monsters learn of the Nemean Lion's demise and do the same," he said. "Bring your best warriors, Cass."

"With pleasure," his second-in-command replied with a smirk. "I've never raided a dungeon before."

Kairos chuckled. "First time for everything."

Kairos left at dawn with a force of thirty, including the mounts.

Only his highest-level soldiers were invited to join in, with the exception of his personal aide Tiberius. Cassandra, Agron, Nessus, Chloris... what the raiding party lacked in numbers, it more than made up for in experience.

Thales, Petra, and others were left behind in Histria with what remained of the 'Nemean Keys', as Kairos' men began to call the fangs and claws of the late lion. To the pirate king's immense disappointment, feeding one of each to the *Foresight* didn't change much. The ship couldn't walk through the Mint Woods, nor did it gain special abilities besides sharper fins.

Perhaps there were other hidden conditions to bypass the barrier, and the *Foresight* didn't fulfill them yet.

The Travian [Hero] hoped he would find more success after feeding the lion's fur and bones to the ship. Thales still wished to craft whatever cloaks and weapons he could beforehand, and his superior gave the automaton free rein on that front.

Each member of the raiding party wore a tooth or claw on themselves, even Rook and the horses. Any living beings who didn't wear these lucky charms were teleported back to the entrance. Kairos tried tricks such as giving fang necklaces to horses or to riders, but not both. Each time the magic protecting the woods targeted those without a key.

"Annoying," Kairos said, as he rode Rook above the Mint Woods, while his landed troops walked beneath. Andromache sat at his back, her arms around his waist, while Aglaonice scouted a few meters ahead. "Simply annoying."

"But at least we aren't turning back this time!" Rook said, always positive. "This forest is so weird!"

"Once, there was a fair nymph called Minthe, beloved of grim Hades," Andromache said. "When Hades spurned her after marrying Persephone, she started denigrating her new rival with biting words. Eventually, Persephone's mother Demeter turned her into the first mint plant. Unable to reverse the spell but still feeling sorry for his first love, grim Hades granted her a sweet smell."

"You think that is the origin of this forest?" Kairos asked with a frown.

"I believe so," the Scylla replied, observing the countryside. "We are clearly close to the Underworld, my love."

Indeed. The lands beyond the forest were less fertile than those in the south, made of vast expanses of wilderness and lakes fueled by the central river flowing across the entire island. Kairos thought winter was to blame for the harsh terrain, before getting a better look.

An ominous mountain of blackened stone overshadowed the northern half of the landmass, from which sprang three rivers. The central one, made of water, was certainly the river Acheron and flowed to the south; the other two, however, were clearly supernatural. A constant stream of lava descended from the mountain and towards the northeast, devastating the region before reaching cliffs and falling into the sea. No grass survived there, leaving only soot, ash, and sulfuric pits.

The third and northwestern river was the complete opposite, a frozen stream surrounded by snowy plains. Instead of falling into the sea, this 'waterway' finished its course in a gaping, icy pit wider than all of Histria.

"Phlegethon, and Cocytus," Andromache explained. "The rivers of the underworld. Two others remain below ground."

The Styx and the Lethe rivers. "I don't see any monsters," Kairos said. "I would have expected a welcome party."

"My hungry lion chased most of them into hiding," Aglaonice said while intruding in on the conversation, flying next to Rook. "They will trouble you in spring though."

Which made establishing a base all the more pressing. "Show us the way, sphinx," Andromache said with a snort, as the soldiers on the ground finally crossed the woods unharmed. "You stretch my patience."

"But certainly," Aglaonice replied with false submission, before pointing at the mountain. "If you would kindly follow me."

She flew straight towards the north, Rook and his riders giving chase while the men on the ground accelerated the pace.

The flyers reached the mountain first, and Kairos marveled at the sight. The rock reminded him of a smooth dagger pointing at the sky, too steep to climb. However, following the river led the flyers to its source.

The Acheron flowed out of the mountain through an artificial entrance carved into the stone itself. A cyclopean archway more than one hundred meters tall overshadowed the waterway, protected by two statues of obsidian; one represented a grim queen with a crown of flowers, the other a fearsome man wielding a bident. Hades and Persephone. Above the entrance, the pirate noticed windows and cavities dug into the stone, alongside an ancient Greek temple which he recognized as a primitive observatory.

Though two paved walkways allowed one to follow the river on foot and cross the archway, a barrier of purple mist prevented Kairos from seeing what waited beyond. Yet he glimpsed the images of grinning skulls and the faint lament of the wailing dead inside the miasma, leaving no doubt to this place's true nature.

Though both Rook and Kairos gave the monument the grim respect it deserved, Andromache smirked with anticipation.

They had finally reached the dungeon, and were one step closer to breaking her curse.

7: Dungeon Diving

It took until nightfall for Andromache to finish examining *Hades' Gate*, as the men nicknamed it.

During that time, Kairos' soldiers had established a rudimentary fortified camp, digging a ditch and raising a wooden palisade. Kairos and Rook had followed Aglaonice to the observatory above the dungeon's entrance, to check on her lair. It had been what the Travian had expected from a sphinx's abode, a set of chambers carved in stone and richly decorated in scrolls, gemstones, feathered pillows, and accumulated treasures.

The observatory, though nowhere near as grandiose as the titan Prometheus', included many devices, such as lenses, clay tablets recording the stars, and astrolabes.

"Happy with your visit?" the sphinx asked after Kairos had searched the area. "If you are looking for a secret passage, there is none."

She might even be telling the truth. "How do you communicate with the Master Below?" the [Hero] asked suspiciously.

"With this." The sphinx pointed at a large tablet embedded in the observatory's floor, made of a strange crimson metal. "Do not worry, my manling, I will stick to the bare minimum of my duties. Laziness shall be my armor, boredom my sword."

"I hope so, for your sake," Kairos replied, before climbing on Rook's back. "Is there anything else you can tell us about the dungeon?"

"I would, if I could," the treacherous feline replied. "If you seek conversation, I will happily discuss the movements of stars, or life's great mysteries. I have so many questions to ask you myself..."

"Maybe next time," Kairos replied, knowing he wouldn't get more assistance in clearing out the dungeon. "Would you accept a side-job, besides your current one?"

"Oh?" The sphinx rolled on her back like an amused cat, intrigued. "Do tell."

"I have made powerful enemies, and if you are truly as skilled a diviner as you pretend, I would pay you handsomely for quality intel."

"You speak of this [Poison King] and [Pirate Queen] you will soon wage war on?" Aglaonice smirked, though Kairos didn't show any emotion in response. "I could be tempted to delve into their secrets, but how would you reward me for that service?"

"Silver, gemstones..."

"Look around yourself," Aglaonice replied haughtily, showcasing the wealth of amulets around her neck. "I am already wealthier than your wolfling wife! No, manling. Quid pro quo. You will pay for questions with answers."

Kairos sighed. "Another riddle contest?"

"I cannot let you rest on your laurels," the sphinx replied, licking her belly like a cat. "Come back in a few days, alone, and I might enlighten you."

"I cannot fly," Kairos pointed out dryly, the observatory lacking anything like stairs.

"Alone with your bird," the sphinx replied with the same deadpan tone. "Though you could also grow wings like Icarus. Be wary, manling. The sun burns all those who wander too close to its shining radiance."

Such a subtle warning.

Afterward, the Travian rode Rook as they flew back to the camp. His men had raised tents for the night, and Nessus currently carved a peculiar statue next to Persephone's own. Tiberius and Kairos' officers oversaw his work, while Andromache examined *Hades' Gate* not so far nearby.

"Sir," Tiberius Plutus bowed deeply before his commander, as Kairos dismounted from his griffin.

"Is that supposed to represent me?" Kairos asked in displeasure. Nessus had taken a tree's trunk and shaped arms and a head from the branches, but the satyr couldn't carve a face for the life of him.

"In the absence of a sculptor, I thought we could cover the chest with armor and the face with a helmet," Tiberius said. "Then put your flag on the statue's shoulders. A spear should complete the illusion."

"Oh, could I have my own statue too?" Rook said, though few among the troops could understand him. "Mine should be taller, since I'm the big brother."

"We could take some feathers and strap them to a beast's skeleton," Nessus suggested. "It wouldn't represent a griffin's magnificence, but we left most of our [Crafters] at home."

"You said you were the best woodworker among us short of Thales," Cassandra mused, entertained by the satyr's struggle.

"A woodworker specialized in bows, my dear Cassandra. *Bows*."

"The feathers trick could work," Kairos said, trying to activate his [Empathetic Link (Idol)] Skill and failing. "I cannot see through this altar yet, so it needs more work to truly represent me."

The empathetic communication through his [Idol] was limited, since he could only share emotions rather than words; but Kairos could always establish a basic code. A wave of joy for a yes, a feeling of anger for a no. Setting an [Idol] right outside the dungeon would give the Travian awareness of what went in or out, and communicate with whatever force he left behind to secure the area.

Andromache joined them, right as Tiberius helped Nessus put on the armor over the wood sculpture. "The sphinx is gone?" she asked, sounding both happy and cautious.

"She says she cannot help us more than she already did, at least on the dungeon front," Kairos replied.

"Of course she won't do more," Andromache snickered. "I have identified the spells woven into the structure. Some will prove problematic."

Kairos crossed his arms. "Go on."

"Only those with keys or authorizations from the dungeon's master can cross the miasma barrier," his concubine explained. "Summoning spells do not work within these walls, except if cast by a [God]. No one can teleport in or out."

This part would be more of an asset than a hindrance. Kairos' army had no true summoner.

"Second, as you know, powerful magic prevents divination in this part of the island," the Scylla said. "This temple is the source, my other half. Once inside, no divination magic of any kind can take place. Reading thoughts, seeing the future, scrying... as far as these arts are concerned, nothing exists within these walls."

"Would it be possible for someone inside the temple to scry on what happens outside?" Kairos asked.

"It would be," Andromache replied, "but long-distance communication would not work, unless the casters are exempted from the dungeon's restrictions."

As Kairos had suspected, they could learn what happened outside the walls, but not send any message. It made setting a [Idol] next to the entrance all the more important.

"More worrying, the dungeon's master will learn of our coming the moment we enter," Andromache continued. "The magic repairs any structural damage to the temple, so I cannot bring the walls down with flames either."

"So we can expect resistance soon after we move in," Cassandra guessed, bringing out the map that Aglaonice had drawn for them. "If we trust this scroll, the [Rock of Theseus] should be in the fourth room. If we move quickly, we should be able to recover it before the local monsters can organize. However..."

"It's possible that the Master Below already learned of the Nemean Lion's demise," Kairos said. "In which case, they will expect visitors."

"So how do we proceed?" Agron asked, a fiery axe in hand and his silver lyre around his belt. "Subtle or loud?"

"We will do it quickly," Kairos decided. "Cass, Agron, Nessus, Andromache, you will follow me inside. Our priority is to take a first look and get that stone, so a smaller team will work better for a scouting operation."

"What about me, sir?" Tiberius asked, after setting the helmet on the [Idol]. The young man was eager to prove himself, but he was unfortunately too low-level for the area ahead.

"You will fortify the entrance, and make sure no other monster gets in," Kairos ordered, fearing a pincer attack. "You will lay the foundations for a more permanent settlement, but if you don't hear from us by next nightfall, you return to Histria and inform my wife."

"You want to leave a permanent force here?" Cassandra asked with a frown. "To make it grow, we will have to leave keyless people behind. If anything happens, they might end up getting stranded."

"I know, but we need to fortify the area before the local monsters return with the spring," Kairos replied. "And afterward we must ensure that raiding parties can still access the dungeon. Having a base where they can resupply will make exploration much easier."

The Travian bristled, as a strange sensation raced down his spine.

His eyes glanced at the source of his feeling, the statue which Nessus had raised. The satyr had just finished putting Kairos' hydra flag over the armor and helmet, and though it only looked vaguely like the Travian [Hero], it seemed to have done the trick.

Kairos had raised his first [Idol].

Now, it was time to enhance it.

You used 3 SP to purchase the [Healing Altar] Legendary Skill. Your [Idols] can now provide magical healing three times per day to those praying to them. The healing spell will cure minor wounds, remove fatigue, and purge minor illnesses; it cannot cure mental damage nor regrow limbs, nor will it work against powerful plagues or poisons.

"Alright, if anything happens, retreat to my [Idol] and it will provide healing duties," the Travian informed his men. Kairos would have preferred to buy the [Enthralling Idol] Skill, but the life of his existing men took priority over acquiring new ones. "It can only provide healing three times a day, so do not use it for frivolities."

"Must we offer prayers?" Nessus mused, before doing his best impersonation of a supplicant. "*Oh, mighty Kairos, please grant me another eye, so that I may hunt your enemies in the dark!*"

"The [Idol] cannot regenerate your eye, unfortunately," the Travian replied, genuinely saddened. "But you have a point, I should make commandments and ceremonies. I wonder how the others manage these elements."

"The monster-centric religions I know of are Typhon, Echidna, Lycaon, and Hybris," Cassandra replied. "None have a good reputation, all practice human sacrifice, and each advocate waging war on other religions."

"In short, oh my captain, you should do the opposite of your competition," Nessus mused. "You must use words where they use claws."

"So keep doing what I have been doing?" Kairos replied with a smirk. But his friends had a point. There was a space for him to occupy, as a deity of monsters that wasn't hostile to civilization on principle; a [Hero] who favored diplomacy and battle in equal measure.

Kairos had seen that many 'monsters' like Horace, Euryale, even Aglaonice could coexist with civilized species. But if all monstrous deities were violent, then peaceful or pragmatic monsters couldn't find any deity to represent their interests. Attracting inhuman followers alongside humans, minotaurs, and the other civilized species would be a major boon.

Kairos' thoughts turned to his mother Aurelia, who had been chased away from her home for the crime of being born a werewolf. Though she had found a husband and a home in Travia, she had suffered greatly by the virtue of her birth.

Everyone should have the right to live.

"Tiberius?" Kairos said.

"Yes, sir?" his aide-de-camp immediately straightened up.

"Grab a scroll, you will write down the early tenets of my cult." He would create a simple codex of laws, and refine it. "Here is my first commandment: there is no stronger weapon than the word, and it is by the word that my cult shall spread its message. War only has a place when trade and diplomacy have failed. All creatures are welcome to pay me homage and ask for my protection, no matter their origin. We are all children of Gaia, and thus share the world equally."

"I dread the day you will have a Cetus follower," Cass said with a smile, while Tiberius quickly grabbed a scroll and started dutifully writing down Kairos' words. "Races shouldn't be the only thing you should take into account. Gender, marriage, society... These are all important subjects you should offer guidance on."

Indeed. In which case, Kairos' faith would be an extension of his country's laws and ideals. "Since gods and goddesses both rule the heavens, both men and women will rule the Earth as equals," the Travian king declared. "Skills and virtues are more important than birth, and children born in and out of marriage will be entitled to a share of their parents' inheritance. Same with widows and widowers. Each will have a chance to rise on merit, no matter their origin."

"You should also forbid the excesses of the likes of Typhon or Echidna, my other half," Andromache suggested shrewdly. "Nobody likes being sacrificed on a god's altar."

"Griffin sacrifices should be forbidden too, until the end of times!" Rook protested.

"I think you could stick to cows and fruit," Nessus voiced his agreement.

"You should also encourage your followers to explore the world," Cass argued. "We wouldn't have found this island otherwise."

And so, Kairos spent a few minutes debating with his officers about the finer points of the cult. Free spirits, discoverers, and adventurers would be honored. Everyone would be encouraged to sail the Sunsea, to find new lands, and spread the word to all corners of the world. However, the horrors of the other monster religions, such as cannibalism, race wars, slavery, and human sacrifices, would not be tolerated.

Nessus interrupted the debate though, when he noticed something in the darkening skies with his [Darkvision 2]. "Look," he said, pointing his bow at the heavens above. "We've got company."

Kairos raised his eyes, and noticed a monster as large as a horse flying to their location.

As per his [Cult (Hero)] Skill, the [Idol] had called a local monster to serve as its guardian.

The creature was a floating horror, a gnawing maw with at least four rows of sharp teeth hungry for blood. A cyclopean evil eye dominated black horns and orange scales, while a vestigial fishtail wagged behind. The monster looked like an unholy cross between a lamprey and an oversized mouth.

A Cacodaemon. An evil spirit of madness, and a devourer of the dead.

Kairos' men drew their weapons as the creature approached, but the Travian raised a hand to calm them. Instead, the daemon landed next to the [Idol], its globulous eye moving from the representation to Kairos himself.

"You summoned Eurynomos?" the creature asked, with the ugliest voice the Travian had yet to hear. The [Idol] instantly translated his words into each listener's native language.

Eurynomos the Corpsetaker

Legend: None (Elite).

Race: Daemon (Cacodaemon)

Class: Monster

Level: 21

"I am Kairos of Travia, the [Monster Reaver]," Kairos introduced himself to the fiend, the rest of his group calming down. "I raised this altar."

"It called me, and I answered," the daemon replied, floating around the [Idol]. "Its power can sustain me. Soothe my hunger."

"Only if you serve," the Travian said.

"If Eurynomos serves, yes..." The creature licked its sharp teeth. "A new [Hero] of monsters. Are you a son of Typhon, or Echidna?"

"Neither."

"I thought so. You look too beautiful. Too human. A monster's soul in a man's skin." Liquid drooled from the daemon's fangs. "What is thy bidding, Master?"

"You shall protect this [Idol], grant healing and shelter to my allies if they ask, and offer advice to my worshippers." Kairos turned to Tiberius. "My aide will teach you the tenets of my cult."

"May I eat the dead?" The ravenous daemon asked. "Just a taste."

"No, except sacrificial offerings or the remains of trespassers."

"Mmm..." The fiend seemed displeased.

"This is more than you will receive from any other cult," Kairos reminded him. Daemons were evil spirits, usually either exorcised or bound to servitude by powerful Goetic mages. "I will have my followers sacrifice animals to the altar on a regular basis, so you may feed. Food offered to me is food offered to you, and you shall devour it on my behalf."

"Good," the daemon said, reassured.

"Tell worshipers to pray at twilight, so that I may listen to their prayers." Since Kairos needed to focus on a [Idol] to listen, he should already begin organizing the time for prayers. "Welcome anyone who will submit to me. Men, women, monsters..."

"Daemons?" Nessus chuckled.

"Them too," Kairos replied, arms crossed. "You won't see much traffic for now, Eurynomos, but more will follow."

"Silence suits me," the creature replied with a shrug. "This is the abode of the dead, of the lost and the broken. I will tell them to worship your image, and I will feed on the blood they bring."

And so, Kairos recruited a fiend as his first 'priest.'

With the [Idol] and the camp raised, Kairos prepared to lead his small troop into the dungeon. Rook followed on foot, before his best friend stopped him. "You stay here, Rook," Kairos ordered.

"What?" The griffin didn't hide his displeasure. "Why?!"

"You can hardly fly in an underground temple," Kairos stated the obvious.

"But look at my claws! Look at how sharp they are!" And to illustrate his point he raised his foretalons.

"Rook, I don't doubt your bravery, but we're at our best when we fight in the air," Kairos explained calmly. "Our troops here are in the open and will need a flying protector too."

This didn't convince the griffin. "Who is going to protect you if I'm not there, huh? Have you thought of that?"

"I will take care of him, little bird," Andromache said with a kind smile that warmed Kairos' heart. Once, she would have fallen back on fear to make the griffin behave, rather than using patience. "You trust me, do you not?"

"Yes, I do, but..." Rook frowned. "What if you don't come out?"

"I will return." Kairos ruffled his friend's feathers. "By standing watch, you will protect my rear. And if you promise to stay, I will bring you a treat on my return."

Where words failed, the promise of food succeeded. "Like horse meat?" Rook asked with excitement, Kairos responding with a nod. "Mmm... I will let you bribe me. But only this one time."

Eurynomos, who listened to the conversation, immediately tried to exploit the situation. "Can I get horse meat too?"

"Maybe," Kairos replied, before grabbing his spear. He had also attached a small fire wand to his belt, to serve as a back-up long-range weapon. "Ready?"

His troops nodded. Cassandra wore strong hoplite armor, a rounded shield in one hand and the [Fork of Nemesis] in the other; she and Agron moved at the front, the minotaur using a breastplate so thick that an elephant would struggle to pierce it. Nessus with his golden bow and Andromache with her scepter closed the march.

The group walked through the miasma gate, leaving their troops behind. Kairos took Andromache's hand as their turn came to pass through the mist; it smelled of both sweet mint and rotting corpses.

It took the Travian pirate ten steps before he reached the other side, a vast circular chamber shrouded in darkness. While it might have once been a pristine entrance hall, dust now covered the walls. The group had landed on a crescent-shaped walkway of wet stone.

Cassandra raised her fork. A ghostly flame appeared within the two points of the bident, casting a bright green light in the chamber and illuminating it. "I didn't know you could do that," Kairos said.

"I gained a Legendary Skill after becoming a [Hero], remember?" Cass replied with a smile. "My light will repel the undead too."

[Lady of Cinders] indeed.

Now that Kairos could see, he took a moment to observe the chamber. The ceiling rose as high as twenty meters, while iron doors three times smaller waited on the other side of the walkway. A colossal statue stood in the middle of the room, vomiting the river Acheron from its ghoulish mouth. The creature resembled a ghastly, hooded figure, with two great black wings and a noseless face. Its empty eyes seemed to shine when Cass pointed her fork at it. The statue's expression was hateful, snarling.

"Thanatos," Andromache recognized the entity, still holding Kairos' hand. Her fingers clenched around his own. "Son of Nyx, the starless night."

"Alias *Death*," Nessus said. "And not just the peaceful kind."

Thanatos, though a 'mere' [Demigod], held a special role in the universe. Much like the Fates, he was an extension of the System itself, a core function of the world. He couldn't be killed, his [Legend] couldn't be stolen, and his touch couldn't be evaded forever.

Only delayed.

The entity's statue seemed to stand watch over the entrance hall, like Cerberus before the underworld's gates. An [Idol]. "Could it be the Master Below?" Kairos wondered out loud.

"This would be terrible news, oh my captain," Nessus replied grimly, as he calmly observed the statue and the walkway. The sound of his footsteps echoed as he moved closer to the iron doors.

Andromache nodded. "Hateful Thanatos despises all living things, and even the deathless gods beyond his grasp."

"Only the promise of death on a massive scale can secure this old fiend's favor," Nessus added.

"The Master Below might be someone else," Cass replied, skeptical. "The Necromanteion is a temple dedicated to the underworld's deities. Hades and Persephone's statues stand watch outside too."

"Point taken," Kairos replied, before glancing at Nessus. "Is the path ahead clear?"

The satyr, the most experienced in trap-finding, nodded. "Our lovely Scylla will need to take a look at the doors though."

Andromache broke hand contact with her lover, casting spells on the doors. The group would advance slowly and cautiously, as monsters or traps could await them at every turn.

The Scylla's magic revealed ancient Greek words drawn with fiery glyphs on the doors. "What does it say?" Agron asked.

"*Abandon all hope, you who enter here,*" Andromache answered, before shaking her head. "This is a mere warning. No spell protects these gates."

"I don't have hope." The minotaur raised a hoof. "I have certainty."

He forced the doors open with a kick, and the party carefully advanced into the next room.

As Kairos had expected, the ceiling's height narrowed to a more modest seven meters, not enough to fly well. The next chamber was cubical in shape, each corner occupied by a statue. The one to the group's left represented a man chained to a burning wheel, whose ghostly flames were all too real; on the side, three women tried to fill a container with seemingly bottomless jugs of water, but the liquid flowed out of holes before evaporating.

The statues on the opposite side of the room represented a man pushing up a boulder on a small hill; and the other, a three-meter tall giant whose heart was devoured by two vultures. A new set of iron doors stood between these two representations, waiting.

Kairos recognized the statues as Tartarus' most infamous prisoners. Ixion, who tried to rape the goddess Hera while being Zeus' guest, and whose lust now burnt him forever; the Danaides, who murdered their husbands and were forced to fill a bath without end; Sisyphus the cunning, who tried to escape death only to roll a boulder for all eternity; and the giant Tityos, a violator of goddesses tormented by winged scavengers.

Nessus raised a hand to stop the group before they could investigate. "Trap?" Kairos asked.

"Traps, plural," the satyr clarified, grabbing a pouch around his belt. He released a colored powder from it, revealing a few key details. Irregular patterns in the dust, a slight depression in the stone floorboard... and a near-invisible string, almost impossible to see.

Nessus walked over these traps without triggering them, but when he moved into the middle of the room, the iron doors on the other side suddenly vanished.

"Nessus, damn it, what did you do?" Cass asked with a frown.

"Nothing," the satyr replied, before taking a step back. The door reappeared immediately.

Nessus frowned, but kept studying the traps. He identified two lines of them, a row of trapped slabs and a tripwire. "Stepping on the slabs will cause Ixion's firewheel to tour the room and return to its position," he explained "The string will cause Sisyphus' boulder to fall off and flatten whoever is in the way. If you are careful, you can advance without triggering them."

"And the other statues?" Cass asked.

"Decoys, or puzzles," the satyr replied with a shrug.

"Puzzles," Cass declared firmly, her eyes set on the door. She carefully stepped over the traps, but when she approached the opposite gates too closely, they vanished. "Definitely a puzzle."

Agron nodded. "I can already see the logic."

"The four elements," Kairos said. Ixion represented fire, the Danaides water, Sisyphus the earth, and Tityos air.

"Huh?" Agron raised an eyebrow and mulled it over. "I was about to say Tantalus, but that fits too."

"Why Tantalus?" Cass said with a frown. "I don't see him among the statues."

"For the crime of serving human flesh to the gods, Tantalus was starved and chained within reach of food and drink," Andromache explained. "But whenever he attempted to drink or eat—"

"The food and drink moved out of his reach," Kairos finished, pointing his spear at the gates. "The door will appear visible, but disappear as soon as we seem to reach it. Our heart's desire remains beyond our grasp."

Cassandra blinked, before regaining her composure and glancing at Nessus. "Can you disarm the traps?"

"Not without triggering them first, beautiful. I say we should try to approach that door first."

Everybody agreed, but none succeeded. Kairos tried to approach the door while under the cover of [Invisibility], Andromache attempted to dispel the magic, Nessus looked for a hidden passage, Agron dented the wall with his axe, and Cassandra prayed to Persephone.

Nothing worked.

"Definitively a puzzle," Cass said, trying to figure out a way out. "Perhaps we must make up for Tantalus' crime?"

Nessus chuckled darkly. "By eating human flesh and spitting it out?"

Kairos didn't pay attention, focusing on identifying a pattern. Andromache examined the statues with magic. "All the prisoners suffer from eternal, pointless torment like we do," he said.

Nessus caught on first. "So if their punishment ends, so will ours?"

Andromache immediately attempted to dispel the statues' magic. The burning wheel of Ixion dimmed for a moment, and water stopped flowing from the Danaides' jugs, but soon flames and liquid returned. "The dungeon's magic is stronger than mine," the witch declared with an angry hiss. "I cannot suppress it."

Agron attempted to shatter the vultures eating Tityos' liver, but the statues magically reformed whenever he even grazed them. However, he noticed something. "That statue can be moved," he said, as he faced Tityos' representation. "It is not anchored to the ground."

"Neither are the Danaides," Cass said, after checking.

The solution appeared obvious to Kairos. "Agron, Andromache, push Tityos' statue against the string," he said. "Nessus, Cass, help me move the Danaides onto the trapped slabs."

"You want to trigger the traps intentionally?" Cass asked, before blinking. "Oh, wait, I see what you have in mind... it could work."

The *Foresight's* captain grinned. "It will."

In the end, Andromache had to briefly adopt her true, monstrous shape to help with the task, but the two groups moved the statues in the position Kairos had envisioned. The Danaides triggered the Ixion's trap, and Tityos Sisyphus' string.

Immediately, Ixion's fire wheel let out a screeching sound and charged, its flames blinding; Sisyphus dropped his boulder at the same time, the enormous stone rolling into the room. Kairos and his allies barely had the time to step out of their way.

The burning wheel's course ended against the Danaides' container, the shock shattering its edge and causing Ixion's statue to fall into the water. Immediately, the bottomless jugs sprayed the ghostly flames with liquid, both turning to steam. On the other side of the room, Sisyphus' boulder flattened the vultures, but shattered against Tityos' chest.

Almost immediately, all four statues collapsed into dust as time caught up to them. The iron doors on the other side of the room reappeared, and this time didn't vanish when Cass reached out for the handle. "Nice work," she congratulated her former captain.

Kairos chuckled. "I figured that much like the four elements, some would counter the others."

"Do not be too proud of yourself, my other half," Andromache said with a smile. "This is but the first level, and the ordeals will only get harder as we go down."

Her lover sighed. "I know, but I will take joy where I can."

"But it was clever," the witch conceded, before lightly kissing him on the cheek.

Cass opened the next door with an amused grin, pointing her fork to reveal what awaited them beyond; a tunnel with a low, narrow ceiling, so vast that her flames could only illuminate the beginning. A red line drawn on the ground paved the path ahead.

And on both sides were statues of monsters.

Manticores, chimerae, spartoi, hydras, cerberi, and other horrors... two members of each species faced one another row after row, their numbers stretching as far as Cassandra's light could carry.

Nessus sighed, as if he had already faced a similar situation before. "Some of them are going to wake up and attack, aren't they?"

"Maybe," Kairos replied. "So we will take no risk, and smash them one row at a time."

Agron grinned ear to ear. "Now, we're talking."

8: Haunts of Hades

The party had to shatter twenty statues by the time they reached the hallway's end, and as Nessus predicted, four of them tried to kill the adventurers.

A hydra of stone had risen, alongside a chimera, a skeletal warrior, and a griffin. Kairos had felt quite guilty when he smashed that one. Thankfully, none of the animated representations had their inspirations' powers. Their rocky bodies had made them difficult to damage, and they kept fighting until shattered into rubble, but the pirates had survived battles against far stronger foes.

Agron had even found the time to sing during the battle. "About time," he muttered to himself as he pinched his lyre's strings. Unlike his previous attempts, the minotaur managed to play a decent tune this time. "I thought I would never unlock that subclass."

"Now, my bull, you have to figure out a way to play the lyre and wield that ax of yours," Nessus said. "May I suggest that you learn the art of juggling?"

"Or you could keep your ax in your mouth, and play the lyre with your hands," Cass said.

Kairos himself ignored them, as he worked on unlocking the next door. Unlike the previous ones, this room's metal gates were protected by a complex, booby-trapped mechanism of gears and chains. Worse, the doors' threshold was trapped as well; any individual stepping into it would have caused the walls to close in and squash the intruders.

Thankfully, Kairos possessed the [Lockpick 3] and [Sneak 3] Skills. The former made him a master lock picker, though he couldn't affect magical defenses, and the latter prevented him from triggering land-based traps.

Moments like this made the Travian glad that he had picked [Rogue] instead of [Fighter] as his Class.

"Are you done, my other half?" Andromache asked at her lover's side, her fingers clenching around her rod. If Aglaonice hadn't lied, the [Rock of Theseus] waited in the next room, and this made the witch eager to go on.

The keyword being *if*.

"Almost," Kairos replied, using a small dagger as an improvised lockpick. He just had to remove that gear and—

A clicking sound followed his gesture, and the lock finally fell. The doors opened, and Kairos could see ghostly, dancing lights beyond the threshold. "Alright, don't walk on that line of slabs," the Travian said as he hid the dagger beneath his clothes and pointed at a spot on the ground. "Take a large step."

His group walked into the next room in tight formation, Cassandra and Andromache both providing additional lighting with their fire magic. Kairos expected other monsters to wait in ambush, but his fears were misplaced.

Though eternal torches fueled by ghostly flames cast the room in a dim light, the air was damp, almost misty. A large circular fountain filled the northern end of the chamber, with a three-headed hematite statue rising from the waters. The faces belonged to the Underworld's judges of the dead: Minos, Rhadamanthus, and Aeacus.

A broken obsidian altar stood on the left area of the chamber, with a strain of red quartz giving it a gloomy feel. A fresco representing Persephone and her husband Hades oversaw the shrine, their faces splashed with red paint. The Underworld's queen seemed to hold something in her arms, though the painting was too damaged for Kairos to say what. The right side of the room led to a black funeral box sealed shut by a heavy stone lid, followed by a new set of locked doors.

Andromache's eyes lit up upon seeing the fountain, but she remained cautious. Nessus went first into the room, checking it out. "I don't see any traps," the satyr said, glancing at the funeral box. "Though I wouldn't suggest opening that creepy tomb. I deny all responsibility if an undead rises from it."

"So what?" Agron asked. "We can kill it again, and the tomb may contain treasure."

"We came for the [Rock of Theseus] and for scouting," Kairos reminded him as they entered the room. "No need to take unnecessary risks now."

Cassandra agreed with a nod, her face as pale as a ghost. "I can't explain why, but this place makes me feel ill. It reminds me of the *Argo*."

Kairos could smell it in the air too. The scent of blood.

Andromache walked towards the fountain, tasting its waters with the tip of her fingers. Kairos peeked into the pool, finding it so deep and dark that he couldn't see the bottom. "Saltwater," his mistress said with excitement. "This is the place."

According to Aglaonice, the [Rock of Theseus] should slumber at this pool's bottom.

"I could swim down," Kairos suggested, while Agron and Nessus examined the tomb, and Cassandra the altar. "I learned to turn into a shark with [Skinchanger]. We could explore the bottom together."

"That is sweet, my love, but no," the Scylla replied, before removing her clothes. Her robes fell to the wet stone beneath her feet, exposing her nakedness. "I do not trust the sphinx. I can survive a trap underwater, but you are vulnerable in fish form."

It made sense, though Kairos would have rather followed her. "Be careful," he said, "and return safely."

"I will," she said before they exchanged a kiss. With these words, Andromache shapeshifted back into her true, cursed form. Tentacles grew where the legs had been, and snarling dog-jaws opened around her waist. She leaped into the pool before her transformation finished, staff in hand.

Kairos watched her vanish into the abyssal darkness, and prayed that she would come back alive.

"I hear running water behind that door," Nessus said, as examined the chamber's exit. "I will need your help to open it, oh my captain."

"We won't try until Andromache returns," the *Foresight's* captain replied. According to the map, the next room would lead into the dungeon's next level, and Kairos wouldn't scout it out without his team's full strength. "Cass, what about the altar? Did you find anything?"

His former first mate didn't answer.

Kairos frowned upon approaching Cassandra, finding her looking at the fresco on the left wall with a frightening intensity. The pirate king put a hand on her shoulder. "Cass?" he tried to shake her, to no avail. Her eyes didn't blink when he moved his hand before them.

Something was wrong. "Nessus, Agron, I believe Cass is—"

He heard a cry.

Kairos' head instinctively snapped in its direction, facing the fresco behind the altar.

The faces of Hades and Persephone had turned into weeping fountains of blood, pouring out the red fluid on the ground below. The red stain in the queen's hands shifted and wept, letting out horrifying laments and a familiar sound.

A baby's cry.

You have been [*Haunted*].

Kairos didn't pay attention to the message, his attention fully focused on the fresco. He couldn't avert his eyes away from its shifting colors and pictures; an invisible force pulled him in like a hook with a fish.

The picture's blood drowned the world and painted it red. Faces appeared from red walls, a horde of twisted fiends. Men twisted by centuries of torture, forgotten monsters rejected by the gods, broken giants, and beasts hungry for blood. The wolf-sons of Arcadia howled at the vanguard, a pack hungry for human flesh. The damned howled and screamed, raising bloody swords to a breach in a sky of stone.

The gates of Tartarus were rattling in the wind, and its prisoners walked free.

Only one figure stood between the red tide and the breach, a grim guardian with a helm of solid darkness. His bident slammed on the ground, and the Underworld trembled. The guardian was tall and strong, but what could a lone shadow do against such an overwhelming tide of evil?

"This is as far as you go." The grim figure swung his bident. His voice betrayed neither fear nor nervousity; only the iron-determination of a dutiful man. "Return to your cells."

The damned host responded with fire and fury. They marched by the hundreds, trampling each other in a desperate dash to the outside. A pack of wolf-men and inhuman beasts led the charge, a true tide of fur and fangs. Any mortal would have recoiled before their death march.

But the figure was no man.

Spikes rose from the earth with a wave of his weapon, impaling the wicked. The shadows swallowed the damned. Others he crushed underfoot. The tide crashed against this rock only to abate, again and again. The vile dead came with ever-growing numbers, but none made it past the shadow sentry.

"You cannot stop us!" The ghost of a murderer warned the grim figure. "Typhon is free, the living are rebelling!"

"This is the twilight of Olympus," a wolfling added. "And the beginning of *our* dawn."

"The dead will live again!" The cruel dead chanted. "The world will remember our might!"

The grim figure showed no fear. "Words are wind," he said, firm and implacable. "So long as I draw breath, you shall not escape my domain."

A new voice made his presence known, foul and cruel. "Your breath, or his?"

The horde split in half, to let a single figure through. A man with a black wolf's head walked among them, dressed in the tattered rags of a dead king; the wolf-sons of Arcadia bowed as one before their sire. The werewolf king's eyes burnt with cruelty, and a naked child cried in his arms.

And the figure flinched.

"Such a fragile little thing," the cruel werewolf said, his claws sharp and cruel. "A paltry whelp of a god."

"Zagreus," the grim shadow whispered, furious eyes simmering beneath the helmet. "How?"

"Does it matter? Here he is, and here I am."

The grim figure took a step forward in anger, but the black werewolf pushed a claw against the child's belly in response. The baby cried out in pain, a drop of blood shed, and the father froze in place. His fist clenched with rage, but his eyes were full of fear.

"Throw down your arms, Hades, and that helmet of yours," the werewolf king said with cold, cruel glee. "Or your son will die before you can take another step."

His wolf-sons howled, blood drooling from their fangs, and the damned laughed. The figure remained as still and thoughtful as a statue.

"I wondered how the barren Lord of the Dead could father a child." The werewolf chuckled to himself. "But then I remembered that your queen is the bringer of spring. It took eons of effort, but here is your heir, so full of life... like the child I served to your brother at my table."

"I can bring him back," the figure said, though his confidence had wavered.

"Can you?" The werewolf opened his mouth, revealing rows of bloody fangs. "Everything I devour is gone forevermore, Hades... his soul will languish inside my gullet until the sun dies out, and his death will make me a [God]. But what good is godhood without freedom? Let us pass, and I shall let the child go."

"Free him first," the figure ordered.

"I think not." And to illustrate his point, the wolf's fangs closed within an inch of the crying child's head. "We walk free, or your wife gets a delayed miscarriage. But then again... better late than never."

"You foul fiend, you will not free my son, even if I accept your bargain."

"But will you wager your son's life on it?"

"Your previous torment will look like the Elysium Fields, if you dare—"

"Oh Hades, even in the bowels of Tartarus, the damned can find comfort," the werewolf said. "Your pain will be my soul's meat, and your wife's tears will warm me for all eternity."

The grim figure hesitated, the earth trembling. The light of the outside wavered, as the Anthropomachia engulfed the world. Yet the guardian cared not for the outside. He only had eyes for the crying child.

"No..." a woman's voice echoed, full of horror and sadness.

"Swear," the figure ordered, clenching his fist so tightly that blood dripped from his fingers. "Swear upon the Styx, Gaia, and the Furies."

"All of them?" The werewolf laughed. "Very well. I swear to let your child go unharmed, so long as you throw down your weapon and let us escape."

"Do you take me for a fool?" The Lord of the Underworld thundered. "You will not only let my son go unharmed. You will swear never to harm him. All of you."

The werewolf's eyes burned with anger. "Fine," he said. "I swear that I shall never harm the child, and none of us here will lay a hand on him. May the Earth swallow me, the Styx drown me, and the Furies haunt my dreams if I prove false."

The grim figure let out a long, sad sigh.

"Forgive me, brother."

The Lord of the Underworld threw down his bident and his helmet, the shadows dissipating. Without his mantle of darkness, he looked no different than a man, gray and old and tired. The damned chuckled and jeered, but the grim figure stood with dignity.

The werewolf looked at the child, and then slowly put him on the ground. "Go, return to your father while you still can," he said, almost paternally. "I made no promise about your uncles, little one."

"Even with a new life, you will all end up here," the figure replied, implacable. "And when you return, you will find me waiting."

The grim guardian knelt, hand extended. His son calmed down at the sight of him, and crawled on all fours. The child moved back to his father, under the cold gaze of the hordes of Tartarus. All watched, but none made a move or a sound.

None but the werewolf. A dangerous light flared in his eyes, red and baleful.

"Sons, do not forget your table manners," he said with a vicious smile. "Don't eat with your hands."

And his vile brood rushed at the child, fangs out.

The figure's eyes flared with horror, his frozen heart breaking as he realized the loophole in the oath. He leapt forward in panic, not quick enough to grab his bident. "Zagreus!"

But he could not run fast enough.

His screams of anguish echoed across the Underworld, a deafening wail of pain and sorrow. The grim figure collapsed to his knees, struck not with anger, but with a deep, terrible despair.

The werewolf king moved faster than lightning, his fangs closing around the great lord's throat. Like sharks aroused by blood, the damned fell on the figure like one, tearing him apart.

None of them used their hands.

A woman's wail echoed, deafening, as a grim and twisted banquet began.

Kairos gasped, as his viewpoint changed and a terrible pain wracked his body. He felt his bones break beneath the jaws of wolves, his entrails spill into the Underworld's cold hard ground. He was the grim figure, sharing the pain, watching his own gruesome death...

"ZEUS!" The werewolf howled to the light of the outside, as he and his pack feasted on Kairos' flesh. "I will slay you, Zeus! I will slay you and your wife, your brothers, and sisters! I hunt your brood to the ends of the Earth, until none remains! I will feast on their hearts, and their children's souls! I will leave nothing but tears and bones!"

And then the werewolf turned at Kairos, the sharp fangs glistening with blood, his gullet as black as a starless night... he traveled down the throat, into a pitch darkness from which no one ever escaped...

[Instadeath] negated by Cassandra's [Cinderlight].

A warm hand grabbed him by the shoulder, and a ghostly light shattered the vision. The pain vanished, the blood replaced with saltwater filling his lungs.

[Haunted] ailment dispelled by Andromache.

When Kairos regained consciousness, Andromache was holding his head by the hair with a tentacle, and lifting it from the pool. Cassandra pointed her fork at the couple, bathing them in her light.

"Are you alright?" Andromache asked, as Kairos regained his breath.

"I..." The Travian spewed out some saltwater as his concubine released him, before sitting alongside the pool's edge. His head hurt, as if someone had hit him in the face with a hammer. "Give me a second..."

Kairos gathered his breath while Andromache shifted back into a human shape, his eyes examining the room. Cassandra looked terribly pale beneath her hoplite helmet, while Agron and Nessus were busy covering up the fresco using stones from the previous room. A wise choice, since the dungeon's magic repaired the walls whenever someone damaged them.

Most importantly, Kairos noticed a white, rounded stone one meter in diameter near the fountain. A single crack spread through its smooth surface, leaking saltwater.

"The picture was haunted," Cassandra explained, the fiery flames in her fork dimming. "But the effect was so powerful... even my undead-repelling light couldn't dispel it."

Andromache shook her head, as she put on clothes again and sat at Kairos' side. Her hands felt so warm when they brushed against his skin. "Were it not for you, Cassandra, the haunting would have slain both of you. Your fork's light weakened the memory enough to let my magic break the curse."

[Instadeath] effects immediately slew the victim without inflicting damage, separating the soul from the body. Even now, Kairos could tell he had barely avoided the kiss of death.

"I should have noticed that trap," he said, blaming himself. His Skills and Nessus hadn't noticed anything, and so the Travian had lowered his guard.

"You missed this haunting for the same reason that I did, my other half." Andromache scowled. "It was not a trap, but a memory that would not die. A pain so powerful, that it resonates even a thousand years later. You bore witness to a god's death throes."

"Two of them," Cassandra said gravely, her expression twisting into one of pure disgust. "A toddler..."

Kairos frowned. "That scene... Cass, was that—"

"The Crime of Lycaon."

An act so odious, that few ever dared to speak it. The twisted murder that allowed Lycaon to rise to godhood, and escape the Underworld. The sin that caused Queen Persephone to close the Underworld's gates, and emptied her of all joy.

Kairos shivered as he remembered Hades' pain and anguish, as Lycaon and his sons feasted on his flesh. Just the idea that he descended from these... from these heartless animals filled the Travian with shame and disgust.

"What I don't understand, is why it didn't affect you, Nessus," Cassandra said, as her teammates had finished covering the fresco, "You should have fallen into a trance when you looked at that picture."

"Well, it's because they weren't *my* ghosts," the satyr replied evasively, before shrugging. "More seriously, I think you triggered that haunting, dear Cassandra. You were revived once, and death shadows you."

Cass frowned, but had to admit the theory sounded plausible. "Possibly," she admitted. "If so, perhaps I should sit out the dungeon's exploration. I might cause other accidents in the future."

"Anyway, it's neutralized and we have what we came for," Agron grumbled. "What do we do next? We go on?"

Kairos glanced at the rounded stone near the fountain, using his Skills to analyze it in detail.

Rock of Theseus.

Rank: Artifact 3.

Value: Priceless

The rock which once bound Theseus and Pirithous to the Underworld. The rock will continuously cry tears of saltwater, and if hit with a weapon, shall give birth to an adult male horse loyal to the striker. Additionally, anyone sitting on the rock shall be instantly [Petrified].

A cursed item, if Kairos had ever seen one. Yet the sight of it put a smile on Andromache's face. "This is it, my love," she said with confidence. "The key."

The key to her freedom.

Andromache had waited for centuries, and now... now, if the god Orgonos accepted this gift, then they could finally lift her curse.

"Are you feeling anxious?" Kairos whispered into Andromache's ear.

"Not at all," she replied, though her smile faltered. "The road to Orgonos is still long and treacherous though."

"Perhaps," Nessus said, having heard the answer, "but you reached a major *milestone*."

Kairos couldn't help but chuckle, and even Andromache seemed amused by the wordplay. "To answer your question, Agron, we will check on the second level's entrance, and then return back to camp," the *Foresight's* captain decided. Though the vision hadn't slain Kairos, it had left him tired.

After disabling the doors' lock, the group scouted the next room. However, their advance came to a swift end, as the new stone hall ended in an underground river. A ghastly stone face of Thanatos more than ten meters in height spewed the waters, which flowed down into a large cavern supported by obsidian pillars. A black skiff large enough for six or seven people was anchored to the hall's edge, prevented from following the current by a thick chain.

"The current goes down," Cassandra said with a frown. The cavern was too long for the group to see far, but it clearly descended into the dungeon's lower levels. "It will be much easier to go down than up."

"Too risky to explore further for now," Kairos decided. "We lack supplies, and we risk being trapped."

"Agreed," Cass responded with a nod. "Especially since we lack a map or any information about what awaits us."

"The planetary alignment won't take place until next year," Andromache pointed out. "We have time."

"Time to do your Quest, oh lovely Scylla?" Nessus asked mirthfully.

Instead of answering, Andromache glanced at Kairos and locked eyes with him. By now, he knew her well enough to read her mind. Though she desired to foil Circe's plan, she lusted for freedom first and foremost.

The witch had waited centuries for an escape, but no longer.

"We retreat," Kairos decided.

"And the tomb?" the minotaur asked. "The rock is a good spoil of battle, but we can't divide it."

"I noticed no magical defenses protecting it," Andromache replied. The rock's discovery had left her in a good enough mood to indulge in graverobbing. "It could contain something interesting."

"I didn't find any traps either," Nessus said with a shrug. "Can't be worse than that fresco."

Kairos glanced at Cassandra, who shrugged. "What good is a dungeon if you can't loot its content?" she asked. "At worst we can simply peek beneath the lid and close it afterward."

And so, the party opened the funeral box. Kairos half-expected a trap to activate, a curse to strike them, or a ghost to haunt them. Yet, to his surprise, none of this happened.

For the funeral box turned out to be a treasure chest, overflowing with old golden oboles and a black, horned helmet.

Horns of Hypnos

Rank: Armor 2.

Value: 8000 gold coins.

This helmet consecrated to Hypnos, the late god of dreams, automatically adapts to the wearer's face. The [Horns of Hypnos] grants the wearer [Sleep] Immunity, though they do not protect them from physical and mental fatigue. Additionally, the wearer can cast the [Sleep] spell thrice per day.

"Perfect," Agron said before swiftly putting on the helmet. Though it was shaped for a human wearer, the device's metal adapted to the shape of the minotaur's skull, covering his horns and forehead.

Since taking the helmet didn't trigger any reaction, Cassandra and Nessus quickly emptied the box of its gold and counted the coins. Kairos examined a few, and realized that few of them were identical. Some represented the ancient symbol of the city of Sparta, others were imprinted with the face of Theseus of Athens. All of them predated the Anthropomachia.

"Around three thousand gold coins," Cassandra declared after she and Nessus finished counting. "Six hundred for each of us."

"Just to be safe, none of these coins are [Cursed]?" Nessus asked Andromache.

"No," the Scylla mused. "I suppose they were offerings to the temple's priests, back when it still received visitors."

Once news of these spoils spread to the population, it would bring many adventurers to the dungeon's doorstep; and with them, merchants, healers, and camp followers. As Kairos had guessed when he learned of the Necromanteion's existence, the wealth within these walls would help develop the colony.

With three more levels to explore, the Necromanteion would prove a long-term challenge, and Kairos faced other problems. The war with Mithridates wouldn't wait a year.

For now, Kairos would focus on fortifying the entrance and let other parties clear out the way. He would use the respite to form alliances, gather better equipment, and help his teammates complete their Quests. He had the feeling he would need a party of [Heroes] to conquer the dungeon's depths.

It was time to sail the Sunsea once more.

9: Plots and Turns

Sitting on his throne of bones in his fortress' great hall, Kairos dreamed of statues.

Watching the world through the eyes of his [Idols] was a strange experience. The Travian pirate had to meditate for a few minutes before he could enter the right state of mind. His body felt numb, his mind surrounded by darkness. In this void he saw two stars, each of them a lens through which he could observe the world.

Through the first one, Kairos watched Histria's temple with multiple eyes, all of them looking in different directions. Instead of observing the world from a human's perspective, he could see anything around his new [Idol], a stone statue representing him wielding a spear while riding Rook. The twilight's luminosity colored the brick walls and pillars of the temple red.

Kairos' statue stood shoulder to shoulder with honored [Demigods] like Charon the Boatman, or [Gods] such as the lord of magic Orgonos. Horace, the [Idol]'s chosen guardian, addressed a crowd of birds from atop the altar. Few citizens paid homages to Kairos himself, as while they respected him as their king they didn't yet worship him. Those who left offerings were usually former slaves he had freed in his campaign against Orthia, or his own Gladiatorial Guard. However, the Travian warlord's cult had found an enthusiastic flock in the city's Stymphalian birds.

After all, he fed them well.

Kairos' attention turned away from this area, and towards his [Idol] next to Hades' Gate. The garrison had raised a roof of goatskin above the altar, and sacrificed a pig to the sculpture. The daemon Eurynomos devoured its bloody entrails and flesh, while Thales scribbled notes on a scroll under the protection of two guards.

"The master is listening," Eurynomos said after briefly interrupting his feast. This surprised Kairos slightly. They had agreed to do a test at twilight, but he didn't know [Idol] guardians could sense him watching them.

"Excellent," Thales declared, before showing his scroll to the [Idol]. His sketch represented a plan of the future fortress, the automaton pointing a finger at a defensive wall. "Sir, what am I pointing at?"

Kairos answered with a wave of positive emotions, the feelings radiating from the [Idol] like a flame's warmth. Then he switched to an angry blast, making the onlookers take a step back. The [Hero] followed up with a second, and then stopped.

"This was more intense than I thought," Thales muttered, though he quickly took notes.
"Joy, anger, anger. W."

The process continued, as Kairos alternated between projecting two emotions and marking short pauses. "Joy, anger, A," Thales said. "Joy, anger, joy, joy, L. Joy, anger, joy, joy, L. *Wall*."

Since Kairos was limited at empathic projections with his current [Hero] Rank Thales had developed a code to make communication possible. Though the process was long and tedious, the Travian could already see the benefits. If he set enough [Idols] across his dominions or foreign courts, he could coordinate multiple groups across vast distances.

"Perfect, sir, you can not only see but also hear us," Thales said with a happy nod. "I am happy to report that we have already managed to transport two hundred people to the new fort. I have high hopes to see the fortress functional before the month's end, though winter and the region's barrenness will make regular supply missions necessary."

It didn't surprise Kairos, who was happy they could transport a small force to Hades' Gate at all. He had found a simple workaround to bypass the protective barrier: travelers would move with a key each, give them back to runners, and then stay behind to establish a colony.

Kairos thought that only a few brave volunteers would make the trip, but in the end, the transport guides couldn't keep up with the demand. Many adventurers wanted to try their luck at conquering the dungeon's riches.

It took a few minutes to translate the order, but Kairos asked Thales to oversee the fort's construction before returning to Histria. "As you wish, sir," the automaton replied. "When will you set sail?"

"SOON," Kairos answered through the code system. Tiberius, who had trained to take over as the *Foresight's* navigator, had confirmed Thales' suggestions for the trip.

Exploiting the amphibious nature of Kairos' ship, the Travian captain had selected a bold course of action: travel underwater to the mermaid kingdom of Orichalcos to either establish an embassy or trade relationships, stop in the merchant realm Vali to resupply, and then follow the maritime routes towards Orgonos' lair in Argos. There the crew would lift Andromache's curse, and return home at the beginning of spring.

"I'm truly disappointed that I cannot join you," the automaton said with a heavy sigh. "The tales about Orichalcos have always fascinated me. What strange and wondrous technology did the merfolk develop without metalworking? Do they truly raise palaces from pearls?"

Kairos would rather have Thales with him too, but the automaton needed to fortify and prepare the colony for the incoming conflict with Mithridates. Still, if the *Foresight's* crew succeeded in establishing an embassy in the mermaid kingdom, the [Crafter] would have many occasions to visit Orichalcos.

"I WILL BRING BACK SOUVENIRS," Kairos promised, to Thales' delight.

A voice echoed in the background of his mind, through his body's ears. Kairos bade Thales goodbye, before hastily returning to his own flesh.

"Lord Kairos?" Tiberius' voice interrupted his captain's meditation. "Your mother has returned."

Kairos opened his eyes, returning to his hall and family. As promised, his aide Tiberius had brought him his mother Aurelia.

She looked as intimidating as ever, though her black hair had started greying with age. Her wrinkled eyes were as strong as steel, and yet warm when they glanced at Kairos. Aurelia must have just climbed down from her ship, for she still wore traveler clothes beneath the white wolf pelts she affected. Julia accompanied her mother-in-law, while gladiator guards escorted the royal family, equipped with tridents, swords, and cesti.

"Son," his mother greeted him with a smile. "It has been a while."

"Too long," Kairos replied, before rising up from his seat and hugging his mother tightly.

Julia watched on with a smile, while Tiberius cleared his throat, embarrassed. "Sir, do you want me to leave you alone?" the young man asked shyly.

"My brother is your sister's husband," Julia reminded Tiberius with an amused smile. "You are part of our clan too."

"Indeed," Aurelia said while breaking the hug. "I rest easy knowing a man of such pedigree assists my son."

"I hope to one day honor my father's reputation," Tiberius replied with a sheepish smile.

"You will have the opportunity," Kairos replied, as Tiberius would sail with him on the *Foresight*. "Did your travels go well, Mother?"

"We were attacked by well-armed bandits on a trip near Lissala," Aurelia admitted with a shrug. "Your Gladiatorial Guard proved adequate at repelling them."

"I will see that they are rewarded," Kairos said, giving a thankful nod to the gladiators. "But why would anyone attack you near our hometown, Mother? Didn't they recognize you?"

His mother laughed. "Oh my son, they attacked *because* they recognized me. They had been paid to slit my throat, and equipped with silver weapons to make the task easier. Though we questioned them sharply, they would not reveal their employer's identity."

Kairos could already imagine. He knew of one poisonous foreign king, fond of using catspaws to do his dirty work. "I will have your guard tripled."

"This future grandmother still has claws, Kairos," Aurelia said with a warm laugh. She had worked years to set up her son with someone to see the family name live on, and her wish had been granted. "You cannot imagine my joy when your wife informed me of this excellent news. I look forward to the day I may carry a grandson or granddaughter in my arms."

"The child is not born yet," Julia replied with prudence. "And they will carry Lycaon's blood from both sides of the family. This does not bode well."

Kairos felt a chill run down his spine as he remembered his vision in the Necromanteion, while Aurelia responded with a shrug. "No words will tarnish my hope," she said. "Wolves or men, I will love your children all the same. Have you settled on a name?"

"Aurelius, if it is a boy," Julia replied. "Rhea, if it is a girl."

To Kairos' amusement, his mother's cheeks turned pinkish. "Son, are you trying to flatter me?" she asked with a chuckle.

"A bit," Kairos admitted. "I wouldn't be here without you."

"No boy would exist without their mother," Aurelia replied with a grin. "But I thank you, son. Why Rhea though?"

"For my mother," Julia replied, her gaze turning distant. Kairos had heard rumors that her mother had been a captured concubine from Achlys, but he could tell that speaking about her bothered his wife.

Noticing Julia's sour mood, Aurelia wisely changed the subject. "As for my trip, it went as well as it could have," she said. "I broke bread with half the pirate lords of Travia. Even a few who openly declared for Teuta."

Kairos took it as good news. It meant that the Travians still hesitated. "Did any of them declare for us?" he asked.

Aurelia frowned, and her son could tell he wouldn't like her answer. "The poorest ones, who need our grain and resources. The richest of them will support Teuta, as they won't surrender their autonomy. By large though, most remain undecided."

"The craven and the cautious can smell the risk of a civil war," Kairos guessed, "and so wait to see which way the wind will turn."

"Perhaps you should show them your spear then, husband," Julia deadpanned.

"Maybe I should turn my ship north rather than south, and return to Travia," Kairos replied, less amused. "While we go to Argos, Teuta will remain in Travia to persuade the pirate lords to support her at home."

"You are mistaken on that front, husband." Julia joined her hands, her smile turning serious. "My spies tell me that Queen Teuta intends to sail south too."

Kairos blinked in surprise. "Where?" he asked. He didn't doubt that the fearless Teuta would be willing to travel south in spite of winter storms, but only for something important.

Instead of answering immediately, Julia turned to her guards. "Leave us," she ordered. The men immediately walked out of the room, and closed the doors behind them. Then, with nobody left to spy on them, Julia answered her husband's question. "To Vali."

"Our friends in Travia whispered that she intends to meet with General Zama, a powerful Valian [Demigod] of warfare and strategy," Aurelia added. "Your father crossed blades with him, back when the man was only a [Hero]."

Kairos remembered the story. His father Chron had the opportunity to challenge the general and steal his [Legend], but chose not to take the risk. He had a family at home, and favored them over a fleeting chance at glory.

Would Kairos have to carry on that feud? He didn't hope so. He had heard the tales about the famous general, and how he never lost a single battle. Zama had crushed the city-state of Thessala's armies when they tried to take over Valian colonies, and sunk their ships to the ocean's bottom. His foes hadn't recovered from the losses yet, paving the way for Mithridates' ascension.

"Coincidentally," Julia said, "my spies in Pergamon informed me that Mithridates intends to send an embassy to Vali, while he stays at home to prepare for the Olympic games."

"Mithridates is recruiting allies abroad," Kairos realized. "He is building a coalition opposing ours."

"I agree," Julia said. "He will also certainly make overtures to Alexandria, if he didn't already."

Kairos had expected as much, since the theocracy of Alexandria and the Lycean Republic were natural enemies. If Lyce intended to conquer the Thessalan city-states, then its rival would certainly assist their enemies.

"Achlys intends to stay neutral, though their mercenaries will fight on both sides of the conflict, and the cyclopes of Argos only rise up to defend their shores," Julia said. "Since my brother has friends there, Vali may go either way, but Alexandria will certainly support Mithridates."

Tiberius cleared his throat. "If I may, Milady, I would not be so certain."

Kairos glanced at his aide. "What do you mean?"

"My father has trading partners in Alexandria, and I traveled there before on his behalf," Tiberius explained. "That empire is not what it once was, sir. The queen has abandoned herself to opium and hedonism, while scheming eunuchs rule on her behalf. Her pyramids' greatness cannot hide the gathering dust."

"Alexandria can still field hundreds of thousands," Julia replied, skeptical. "And the queen that gave the nation its name is a [Goddess], a victor of the Anthropomachia. Alexandria's glory may be fading, but an old lioness still has sharp claws."

"What I mean to say, Lady Julia, is that the empire of Alexandria is powerful, but it can be bribed."

Julia remained doubtful. "Even if your father is the richest man in Lyce, his wealth pales before Alexandria's. A bribe capable of impressing its rulers would cost a fortune... and whatever sum your father offers, Mithridates will match him coin for coin."

"I wasn't speaking of silver or gold."

Kairos immediately caught on. "They would join us in carving out the Thessalan League?"

"I think they would be interested," Tiberius replied with a nod. "I can secure an audience with Alexandria's regents, maybe even the queen herself. We lose nothing by meeting with them."

Julia frowned. "Even though tensions died down, Lyce and Alexandria have been hereditary enemies since their creation."

"So were Travia and Lyce," Kairos replied slyly. "And here we are."

"Touché," his wife conceded, before giving the suggestion serious thought. "My brother would rather have Alexandria with us than against us, as long as the price they fetch isn't too high. If we could at least secure their neutrality..."

"Simply having an audience with Queen Alexandria would be a great boon to us, my son," Aurelia said. "If kings and gods recognize you as a ruler, then it will give you recognition at home."

"It cost us nothing to try, sir," Tiberius said.

Kairos nodded, a plan forming in his head. "We will go to Orichalcos, then visit Vali and Alexandria, and before finally meeting Orgonos in the Cyclopean Islands of Argos. If all goes well, we should return to Histria with the spring."

"Nothing ever goes well, husband," Julia replied with a sharp smile. "But I will pray to the New Gods for luck on your trip."

"Take Cassandra with you, my son," Aurelia added. "You will need her."

"This will leave Thales as the only [Hero] in Histria," Kairos pointed out. "Though the risk is low, someone can still attack Histria in my absence."

"We are not so defenseless," Julia replied with a smirk. "We have thousands of soldiers, while your ship can only carry a few hundred."

Kairos considered it for a moment, before seeing the wisdom in her words. The journey would be dangerous, and might put them in a collision course with Teuta and Mithridates' agents. He would need powerful warriors at his side.

"Alright," he said. "Tiberius, prepare your belongings. We will leave within three days."

He still had one difficult advisor to consult first.

In the middle of the night, Kairos and Rook landed on Aglaonice's observatory.

"Can you wait at the entrance?" Kairos asked after dismounting from his griffin. "This might take a while."

"You're sure?" Rook asked with a frown. "Kairos, she might eat you if I'm not here to protect you!"

"She made an oath to the Furies, and she fears them more than she finds me appetizing," the Travian replied. "Besides, I always beat her."

"Mmm, alright, but don't take long," the griffin replied, slouching on the ground. "I'm sleepy, and I might take a nap if I wait."

"You can rest," his friend replied while ruffling his feathers. "After such a long trip, you deserve sweet dreams."

"Oh, I will try to dream of fish then!"

Kairos left his friend at the observatory's entrance with a smile on his face, before calling out for Aglaonice. "Where are you?"

The sphinx's voice came out from a room deeper inside the complex. "Over here, manling!"

Kairos followed the sound to an ovoid stone chamber. Polished marble pillars held a ceiling covered in mosaics representing the major constellations and producing a faint magical light. The room smelled of sweet incense, while scrolls lay scattered on the ground.

The Travian [Hero] found Aglaonice playing with a colored cube on a pile of pillows, while she had set another group of cushions aside for her guest. A small table stood between the two 'beds', with an hourglass set on it.

"We should stop meeting like this, handsome, or people will talk," she said while purring like a cat. "Tell me, have you come for answers, or a midnight tryst? Perhaps both?"

"Is that your riddle?" Kairos asked, amused. "I came for the answers you promised."

"I said I would *look* for answers, and not for free," the sphinx replied. "Thankfully, I have designed the ultimate test of wits and skills to test your resolve. Now sit, and watch."

Kairos slouched on his pillow bed, while Aglaonice showed him a strange device: a cube with six faces, each covered by nine stickers. The faces were red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet.

Aglaonice's eyes shone with a magical light, and the cube's faces began to move independently. Kairos blamed an internal mechanism, as the colors began to mix into a chaotic, random mix.

"An internal mechanism will allow you to move the faces," Aglaonice explained. "Now, you must arrange the cube so that every face is of the same color before the hourglass runs out. At the same time, I will ask riddles, all of which you must answer within thirty seconds of

me uttering them. The hourglass will run out within five minutes. If you fail any riddle or do not complete the cube within the allocated time, you lose."

Kairos frowned, finding the challenge ridiculously complex. Even her previous riddles hadn't been half as difficult as this puzzle. "If I fail, will you strangle me?"

"Don't be silly manling, I made an oath not to harm you... and I've grown too fond of you to snap your pretty neck, even if I could." The sphinx slyly scratched her belly. "No, if you lose, you will submit to me. You will acknowledge that I am your intellectual superior, and you will make an oath that you belong to me body and soul. You will find me a good and caring mistress."

So basically, Kairos would become her slave in all but name. It *technically* didn't violate her vow of non-aggression. "And if I win?"

"If you win, I will reveal what I learned about your foes and answer your questions."

"The penalty is lopsided compared to the winnings," Kairos replied. She asked for slavery in all but name, in exchange for a few tidbits of information, albeit sensitive ones.

"I am not the one in need of my advice, and I have found something quite interesting about this Poison King that you fear so much. Something *earthshaking*." The sphinx grinned ear to ear. "So, want to bet?"

Kairos scowled, and considered his options.

Though somewhat entertaining, he was slowly getting tired of these games. Each contest he played against the sphinx increased his odds of losing, and considering her penalties, Aglaonice only had to snatch victory once. Kairos might still have need of the sphinx's knowledge and powers in the future, and he didn't want to wager his freedom each time he visited her.

Sphinxes fought battles of wits to establish their social hierarchy, and Kairos needed her to learn her place.

"Only if we spice up the game," Kairos decided, putting his spear on the ground within arm's reach. He would need both his hands to complete the puzzle. "After I complete your challenge, I will ask you a riddle. If you can figure out the solution, you will be under no compulsion to answer my questions, and we will settle on a tie."

Aglaonice squinted suspiciously. "And if by some miracle, I fail to answer?"

"Then my penalty will become yours," Kairos said. "I will not ask you to act against your oaths, but in all other matters, you will be in my exclusive service. You will become my loyal *minion*."

This made the arrogant sphinx balk. Though she was prideful enough to believe in her chances of victory, she had already lost against Kairos in a game of wits. Once burnt, twice shy.

"If you are too afraid to continue after I solve your test, we could stop then. You will be under no condition to continue with another round." But Kairos knew her pride wouldn't let her leave on a defeat. "I won't even ask an oath from you, even if you fail."

This made her blink. "You won't?"

"I do not enslave people, even treacherous sphinxes like you," the Travian replied, having learned the shortcomings of oaths of obedience. "I will trust your honor as an intellectual to follow through."

By now, Kairos had a good insight into Aglaonice's personality. Her overwhelming pride would bind her better than any oath.

The sphinx considered the bet, and her rival could almost see the gears turning in her head as she weighed the odds of victory.

"I agree on one condition, manling," Aglaonice decided at long last. "If you complete my test and if I accept your challenge, the riddle you ask me must have an answer. An answer that you *know*. No more unanswerable paradoxes."

"Agreed," Kairos said, having expected such a condition.

He felt the weight of Aglaonice's magic on his shoulders, and the sphinx turned the hourglass.

Kairos immediately seized the cube, and started playing with the faces, trying to figure out how it worked. Aglaonice immediately asked her first riddle. "I am the beginning of everything and the end of every place. Who am I?"

"The letter 'e,'" Kairos replied immediately, as he realized he could also move the middle layer.

"That one was an appetizer," the sphinx said. "I am not alive but I grow. I don't have lungs but I need air. What am I?"

"Fire." Somehow, the picture of Agron flashed in Kairos' mind as he answered. Only when he lost a few seconds, did he realize the danger.

"You can catch me, but never throw me away," Aglaonice asked immediately, leaving him no time to focus. "I come with one season and leave with the next. What am I?"

"A cold," Kairos answered, trying to remember in which way he had moved the faces a few seconds before.

"What speaks without a mouth, hears without ears, has no body, but comes alive with wind?"

Kairos had to think it through for precious, precious seconds before he figured out an answer. "An echo."

Damn it, the sphinx's riddles distracted him from an already hard task!

"What goes up for you, but never comes down?"

"Your—" Your fame? Your wealth? No, something else. Time. "Your age!"

"Now that was rude," Aglaonice replied with a snort. "I'm tall when I'm young, and I'm short when I'm old. What am I?"

Kairos figured out the answer, but instead of answering immediately, quickly glanced at the hourglass, watching the sand tickling down. Around half of his time was wasted, and he hadn't completed a single face!

There had to be a way to solve this cube quickly. "A candle," Kairos answered before the thirty second limit was up.

"What belongs to you, but everyone else uses it?"

Your time, Kairos almost answered, before realizing it didn't fit. "Your name," he answered, deciding to try completing a cube's face one by one. Which proved harder than it seemed.

"The more of this there is, the less you see. What is it?"

By the time she had asked her question, he tried multiple combinations to no avail. *Wait, the corners!* he thought, and everything became much easier. "Darkness!"

"What's going to run out in one minute?" she asked with a coy grin.

That smug *bitch*... "My time," Kairos replied, grinding his teeth as he completed the first layer.

"What will I do when it runs out?" she asked, as he completed the middle layer.

The answer came with the bottom layer.

"Lose," Kairos replied, slamming the completed cube on the table before the last drops of sand could fall. His motion made the glass hourglass tremble.

For a moment, Aglaonice's mind couldn't process what happened. She blinked a few times, then tipped the cube over to check the faces while Kairos recovered his breath. His fingers trembled from the stress.

"No!" Aglaonice snarled angrily, as she realized that her foe had successfully completed the cube puzzle. "No way!"

"I'm not going to lie, that was close," the [Rogue] admitted. "That was truly close. You almost got me."

"Almost is not enough!" The sore loser violently slammed the table with her paw, sending it flying against a wall. The cube bounced off the stone, while the hourglass shattered into shards and sprayed sand on the floor. "You have a puzzle-solving Skill! That is the only explanation!"

"You already saw my stats," Kairos replied, after recovering. "You know that I have no such advantage. Admit it, you lost!"

She responded by leaping at him, claws out.

Kairos instinctively reached for the spear, but Aglaonice was swift as a panther. She landed on him like a cat on a mouse, forcing him to his back and pinning him to the ground with one paw. Her eyes burnt with fury, her claws grazing the armor beneath his [Golden Fleece] cloak.

'Kairos?' Rook called through their [Animal Companion] telepathic link. 'Is everything alright? I heard noise.'

'I'm good,' Kairos thought back. If he had been in actual danger, the Furies' shadows would have shown up to enforce the oath. This was just for show. 'She's just a sore loser.'

'You won? Of course you won. Now, rub your victory in her silly face!'

"I haven't lost yet," Aglaonice said, as if she had read her opponent's mind. "You owe me a riddle."

"Are you sure?" Kairos asked calmly, unimpressed. "No take-backsies."

In response, the sphinx lowered her human face to the [Hero]'s hair, and *smelled* it.

It might have vaguely been erotic... *if* she weren't an animal from the chest down.

"Your wit excites me, manling," Aglaonice whispered into his ear. "I enjoy this game. But if there is an answer to your riddle, then I will figure it out. No loopholes."

Here goes nothing, Kairos thought. "Can an omnipotent being create a stone too heavy for them to lift?"

Aglaonice scowled, her head moving away from her foe's. "If by omnipotent, you mean '*can do anything according to their nature*'—"

"I mean omnipotent as '*can do anything*,' period," Kairos said, preventing her from using a loophole.

"Then this question is a logical fallacy!" Aglaonice said angrily, grinding her teeth together. "You ask a question that has no answer, therefore it is not valid!"

"And yet there is an answer." Now it was Kairos' time to act smug. "If you can figure it out."

"You *lie*."

"If I tell you the answer, you lose automatically. Are you willing to risk it?"

"You are trying to bluff," she said, her claws sinking into his armor. "You are playing on my nerves. Trying to make me say the wrong answer, so you can claim victory without showing your hand. There is no answer. None that will work."

"Are you *sure*?"

"Yes," she said, sealing her fate.

Very well.

"The being is omnipotent until they have created the stone, after which they aren't," Kairos replied. "If a being can do anything, then it should be able to create its own limits."

Aglaonice looked into his eyes, looked at the ceiling in puzzlement, and then frowned. "Highly debatable," she said while staring back at Kairos, half-convinced.

"But it is an acceptable answer."

The sphinx snorted, looking down on Kairos. "How long did you ponder that riddle, manling?"

Kairos sighed. "All of the trip from my home to this place."

She looked downright insulted.

"You know what, fine!" Aglaonice snarled at his face, before removing her paw from his chest. "You win! You win, is that what you want to hear, you treacherous, despicable manling?! I acted towards you with generosity, kindness, and loyalty, and you repay me with mockery! After I treated you as if you were my own mate!"

"That really doesn't say much," Kairos deadpanned, as he sat back on his pillows. "You owe me answers."

"Fine, fine." Aglaonice adjusted her hair. "Tell me... have you ever heard of the [Trident of Poseidon]?"

10: The Road to Atlantis

For a moment, Kairos thought he had misheard.

"Poseidon's trident?" he repeated, shocked. "Mithridates is looking for Poseidon's trident?"

"Not looking for it," Aglaonice replied with a chuckle. "He already has a shard of it."

"You lie," Kairos said with a frown. "If Mithridates had the trident, he would already have sunk Lyce and Histria beneath the waves. If you want to see this weapon's power, look out of the window."

"I said a *shard*, manling." The sphinx played with one of her pillows, sinking her claws into the soft silk and spilling feathers on the floor. "Unless... you do not know it was shattered?"

Kairos crossed his arms. The tales of the Anthropomachia were often vague and lacking in details. The Travian knew how Poseidon and Hades had perished, but the fate of their relics remained obscure. "I heard that the mermaid kingdom of Orichalcos kept some of Poseidon's regalia," he said. "And that they used it to sink an island that mistreated their merchants."

It must have been the wrong answer, because Aglaonice smirked.

"Oh, you do not know?!" She asked, rubbing his ignorance in his face. "My, why didn't you tell me sooner, you selfish manling? I should have asked that question during our riddle contest!"

"I was waiting for you to teach me, oh wise and mighty sphinx," Kairos replied with false servility. "My knowledge of the world pales before your mighty intellect."

"The words are music to my ears, but the tone is displeasing. Perhaps I should kiss you on the mouth and cut that vile tongue of yours while at it? My kiss will be the best you ever had."

"I will pass," the human replied. "I know from Euryale that Poseidon was slain by his own demigod children, when my ancestors climbed Mount Olympus to overthrow the old gods."

"Indeed he was," she said, disappointed that the [Rogue] knew that part of the tale. "But while the children had allied to slay the father, none wanted to share his throne. Poseidon's body wasn't even cold when his killers started fighting each other, but when the fratricidal melee ended, all were dead, and the trident had shattered. Perhaps the winners of the

Anthropomachia, such as Orgonos, could have reforged the weapon and caused the ocean to recede."

"And yet here the sea still covers the world. So what happened?"

"The nereids, Kairos," Aglaonice said with a smirk. "The nereids."

Kairos searched in his memory, and remembered his mother's history lessons. The nereids were sea nymphs that represented everything good about the sea. They had served as heroes' lovers, sailors' friends, and Poseidon's attendants.

"Though Poseidon and their queen Amphitrite perished in the Anthropomachia, some of the nereids survived the massacre," Aglaonice explained. "Mourning their beloved Olympians but powerless to defeat the New Gods that murdered them, the nereids vowed that Poseidon's flood would never be undone; that from now on, the sea would cover the earth forevermore. So the survivors each took a piece of his trident, and spread across the ocean."

Kairos immediately noticed something wrong with the tale. "Why didn't anybody like Orgonos try to locate the pieces and recreate the trident?"

"Even shattered, the trident's shards house a dead deity's power. The pieces cannot be detected through divination, not even by the likes of Orgonos... and this protection extends to those who carry them."

"Then how do you know Mithridates has it?"

"Excellent question, and in answer, I shall regale you with the most extraordinary of tales!" Aglaonice put a paw on her breast, eyes closed. What a drama queen... "After you begged me on your knees to find information on your nemesis—"

"That's not how I remember it."

"I attempted to spy on this Poison King in Pergamon," Aglaonice ignored Kairos, clearly in love with the sound of her own voice. "Imagine my frustration when my divinations came up with nothing? I looked into the entrails of goats, a water pond, the stars... nothing worked! A lesser oracle would have given up, but a genius like me easily figured out a workaround."

"You spied on Mithridates' allies, since you couldn't target him directly?" Kairos asked.

Aglaonice glared at him. "I didn't spy on his *allies*," she said. "I spied on his *aide-de-camp*, the nymphblooded mongrel Absyrtus."

"Completely different," Kairos deadpanned.

"See, I have toiled for you out of the goodness of my heart, and I am met with barbed criticism!" Aglaonice snorted. "Though powerful magical wards protected him, I managed to overhear Absyrtus discussing the trident's shard with the Orthian king Antipater, and how it would secure their victory against Lyce."

"It's not the complete trident though?" Kairos asked for confirmation. "Only one piece of it?"

"Yes, though even a shard still has more power than all your silly magical items put together."

Julia had informed her husband that Mithridates' engineers worked on a secret project, though she couldn't discover what. It didn't take a genius to understand that both of these pieces of information were connected.

A colossal beast with oaken scales, sailing a sea of poison...

The titan Prometheus had warned Kairos of three calamities that would strike the Sunsea in his lifetime. The Travian could already see the writing on the wall, and how it all fit.

Mithridates' assistant Absyrtus descended from a nymph, and probably a nereid. His ancestor must have left hints about her piece of the trident's location, allowing the Poison King to claim it for himself.

"So this means that Orichalcos' 'regalia' is another piece of the trident?" Kairos asked.

"Indeed, it is."

And their shard could destroy an island, according to the tales. "How much power does Mithridates' piece have? Could it cause another flood?"

Aglaonice shrugged. "Each shard's power should vary, but I suspect Mithridates' could easily destroy that little colony of yours... if your foe figures out how to use it."

This caught the Travian's attention. "Mithridates can't access its full power?"

"Of course not, silly manling. A [Hero] cannot properly wield a weapon meant for a [God]."

So much like Kairos couldn't unlock all of his [Anemoi Spear]'s abilities until he gained the rank of [Hero], the Poison King could only access a sliver of his secret weapon's might. Was

that why Mithridates sought to form an alliance with the [Demigod] Zama? Somehow Kairos doubted that his rival would let anyone but himself anywhere near his trump card.

Mithridates had no friends, only servants and foes.

"What else can you tell me?" Kairos asked.

"Oh, a minor thing, not truly interesting." Aglaonice played with her hair. "King Antipater of Orthia is raising an army to avenge his city's losses against your fleet, but is struggling against Queen Euthenia for control of the government. Families always squabble..."

Kairos remembered Queen Euthenia from his own wedding. There was no love lost between the Travian and the Orthian ruler, especially after his actions indirectly led to the death of her brother and nephew... but the enemy of an enemy could become a friend.

"I will inform my wife, and you will work with her in my absence," Kairos decided, knowing Julia would find a canny way to exploit the situation. With Mithridates rapidly building up his strength, the Travian warlord had no time left to lose.

"And what about my pay, you greedy manling?" Aglaonice asked while Kairos had risen back to his feet. "A 'loyal minion' should be paid for her services, don't you think?"

The Travian glanced at the sphinx, and realized that she was entirely serious. He couldn't believe her sheer nerve. "How much do you want?"

"We will start with that guest room your wife promised, alongside a staff of servants. I am like a fragile flower, you understand? I will die if nobody caters to my needs. As for my salary..." She slouched on her pillow bed, a paw on her hindlegs. "I have a purse you can fill anytime."

Kairos suppressed a wince of disgust. "I do not do bestiality."

"Your wife is a werewolf, and your concubine is a squid. All you are missing to complete the set are a bird and a reptile. Unless you draw the line at felines, you speciesist? If you stop only at appearances, I could easily shapeshift into something you find more pleasant..."

"I would rather bed a snake than a traitor," Kairos replied harshly. Even if an affair with the treacherous sphinx hadn't been a bad idea in itself, Andromache hated Aglaonice with a passion. Sharing him with Julia already angered her, and Kairos loved the Scylla too much to wound her heart further.

Besides, he could see Aglaonice's plan. She was treating Kairos' family like her former lion mate's pride, and if she couldn't control him directly, then she intended to sleep her way to the top. No good could come out of this.

"You are no fun at all," the sphinx pouted. "Fine. In which case, I want a statue as payment. Seeing your [Idols] filled me with nostalgia. I will settle for nothing less than colored marble, maybe with emeralds for the eyes—"

Kairos sighed, and wondered if he had just been short-changed.

After being stranded ashore, the *Foresight* finally set sail again at dawn.

It had been fed the Nemean Lion's bones before leaving the port, alongside a patch of the indestructible fur. The living ship's scales had turned golden like Thunderclaw's skin, and though they didn't become invulnerable, the change greatly strengthened their resistance to damage. Spears and iron swords had broken or bounced off the hull when Kairos' crew tested the new transformation.

Considering the critical nature of the trip, Kairos had temporarily reorganized the crew to include captains such as Cassandra and Agron. Chloris the amazon also joined them as an interpreter, as she could speak multiple languages... though not always well. Besides soldiers and raiders, the Travian also took with him a small group of savants, including interpreters, engineers, astronomers, naturalists, and other scholars. Since Thales couldn't join the expedition, Julia had insisted on having intellectuals record discoveries and bring knowledge back home.

Thales would stay behind in the colony with Julia and Aurelia, while General Petra took over the colony's defenses during winter. "Return home, husband," Julia had said to Kairos while bidding him goodbye on the docks.

"I will," he had replied before hugging her. Andromache had watched on from the *Foresight's* deck without a word. "We will stay in touch through my [Idol]."

"A piece of stone does not replace a man in my bed and a beating heart," she had replied, joining her hands. "Return at least before the birth. I want our child to see his or her father when they come into this world."

No force on Earth would prevent Kairos from witnessing *that*. Not even Mithridates. "Julia, about the trident—"

"I will get to the bottom of this," she had interrupted him with a smile. "Focus on your trip husband, and leave the matter to me."

And so, Kairos looked on from the *Foresight's* bow as the ship left Histria's shores behind. His family and Thales waved him goodbye on the shore, alongside the crew's loved ones. The sight filled Kairos with melancholy.

It would be months before they saw these shores again.

The Travian warlord glanced at his troops, watching on as Cassandra and Tiberius reviewed the ship's defenses. Though Nessus had taken over as Kairos' first mate, Cass had spent years sailing on the *Foresight*, and old habits die hard.

As for the satyr, he took some time to continue teaching Agron the art of music. The minotaur had integrated his part of the Nemean Lion's pelt to his helmet, the fur covering his back, chest, and shoulders. It made Agron appear even more fearsome than usual, though the silver lyre at his belt contrasted with his barbarian look.

"You have gathered fearsome followers, my love, and well-armed ones," Andromache said while joining her companion at the ship's bow in human form. "I remember the day when you raided my shore with barely a shirt on your back."

And now, his entire crew wore steel armor, and almost all his officers wielded magical items. "We worked hard for this," Kairos said as he moved behind his concubine and put his hands around her waist. Her back lined up against his chest, and she smiled. "You most of all."

"The crown was my proudest work," Andromache said as she trailed a hand against Kairos' face, and the fanged diadem he wore. "It looks good on you."

Kairos kissed her on the neck, before looking at the ocean. Clouds obscured the sun and moon, while Rook and a small group of Stymphalian birds surveyed the skies. The open sea looked peaceful so far, but his [Seamanship 3] Skill warned the Travian captain of an incoming storm. "Anxious?" he asked her.

"Excited," the witch replied. The [Rock of Theseus] waited in the cargo's hold, alongside gifts for the officials the crew would visit. "Though the journey will be long. Orichalcos alone might prove a difficult threshold."

"You have already been there?"

"No, but I exchanged stories with merfolk in the past."

"Did they truly sink an island?"

"King Triton the Fifth destroyed the island of Minoan two centuries ago over a trade dispute, and turned the sunken ruins into a leisure palace. Surface-dwellers have given the merfolk a wide berth ever since." Andromache locked eyes with him. "You want to interrogate them about the trident."

"We need to figure out its power's limits," Kairos confirmed with a nod. "While it is probably a state-secret for Orichalcos, it costs us nothing to ask."

"Or, we could find our own piece to counter that poisonous worm."

Kairos frowned. "And how?"

"You took the titan's map with you?"

"I did." Kairos had intended to use Prometheus' map of the old world to locate sunken cities and pillage them. They probably housed a wealth of items and riches, waiting beneath the sea.

"Orichalcos is said to be located near the ruins of Atlantis, which Poseidon destroyed," Andromache said. "If I were a nereid looking to honor my fallen lord, I would entomb a piece of the trident there as a memento."

"A plausible ploy, but in this case, it could be the piece already in Orichalcos' possession," her lover pointed out.

"No," Andromache replied firmly. "The royal family of Orichalcos descends from one of the nereids that survived the Anthropomachia. She gave her piece of the trident to her husband as a bride price, alongside other artifacts from her fallen master."

"I'm still doubtful the merfolk would leave a trident piece so close to their realm without claiming it for themselves."

Andromache shrugged. "Even if I am wrong, we should check on the ruins. If I study the magic that destroyed Atlantis, perhaps I could find a way to protect us from the same fate."

Kairos could only agree.

Rook and the Stymphalian birds returned from their scouting, making circles in the skies. "Black clouds coming from the south, Kairos!" the griffin shouted.

Kairos had expected as much. "Return to the ship," he ordered the flyers, "we will start the descent."

No sooner did Rook and the birds land back on the deck, that the *Foresight* began to sink into the sea. The deck and the mast produced a bubble of translucent slime enveloping the ship. The crew watched on in silence or surprise as a dome formed over them, shielding them from the rising waves. All holes between the oars closed, making the *Foresight* impervious to flooding.

Within minutes, the *Foresight* had dived beneath the sea's surface. A ceiling of water reflected the dim sunlight above the crew's head, while schools of fish floated next to the deck.

"So pretty," Rook said, while Nessus whistled.

"Sea is beautiful," Chloris noted in amazement. Cassandra and Tiberius observed the turbulent waves give way to calmer waters in respectful silence, while [Crafters] among the crew hurriedly took notes. Even Agron looked at the dimming light of the above with longing.

The descent left no one indifferent.

"The membrane produces air by separating it from the water," Andromache said after magically examining the process. She briefly touched the membrane, her hand phasing through the substance without breaking it. "Like a frog's skin."

"So we won't risk asphyxiating at least," Kairos noted as the *Foresight* approached an undersea reef. To the Travian's amazement, the area seemed volcanic in nature. Thermal vents propelled streams of brine and sulfur into the sea, to the point that the captain could feel the heat through the translucent membrane.

Yet even in this semi-hostile environment, the ocean teemed with life. Forests of colorful anemones had made their lair on the reefs, alongside bioluminescent algae and crimson coral. Banks of clownfishes fled to the safety of this strange forest when the *Foresight* approached, while curious hermit crabs looked at it with confusion. Banks of fish followed the living ship to feed on the sea parasites covering the hull, like camp followers attending to a wandering soldier.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Andromache said, moved by the sight. She removed her hand from the membrane without leaving a hole behind.

"I could transform into a shark," Kairos suggested, imagining himself holding hands with the Scylla in this underwater paradise. If only he could breathe underwater... "And we could swim through these waters together."

"We could," Andromache replied with a smile. "We will."

The *Foresight* continued to move deeper underwater according to the navigators' information, until the sunlight started to look like twilight. Kairos estimated they had reached around one hundred fifty meters below the sea.

"Oh my captain, I see movement to our left," Nessus declared, his [Darkvision 2] Skill allowing him to see in the dark.

Kairos glanced in that direction, but the lack of sunlight made it impossible for the Travian to distinguish things clearly. All he could see were a wall of anemones and colossal shells carried by seah—

There.

To Kairos' astonishment, a strange chariot emerged from the anemone forest. The device was a carved pink seashell as large as a cart, carried forward by three golden seahorses as large as warhorses. A woman with a human torso and a fishtail drove the vehicle thanks to a coral harness binding her to the shell, and kept the animals under control with an organic tendril. A male merfolk held onto the chariot by the rear with one hand, while wielding an obsidian spear with the other. Both humanoids wore armor and helmets of carved turtle shells.

And they came with reinforcements. Two other seashell chariots appeared after the first, each with a similar pair of female-male warriors riding them. A group of four white sharks as big as oxen followed the merfolk like a hunting pack. The charioteers observed the *Foresight* with suspicion and curiosity.

"Kairos, what are your orders?" Cassandra asked. "Do we repel them?"

"And how, lovely Cassandra?" Nessus asked. "Can you fight underwater?"

Unfortunately, though the *Foresight* could defend itself, only Andromache could credibly fight underwater among the crew. Even Kairos was limited to transforming into a seafaring animal or possessing one.

A merfolk chariot moved closer to the *Foresight's* deck, the male soldier at the back appraising the translucent dome protecting the crew from the waters outside. When he

realized the surface dwellers wouldn't attack, he gestured at the reef. Realizing that they wanted the ship to stop moving, Kairos had the *Foresight* freeze in the waters.

Once the vessel was immobilized, the chariots and sharks surrounded it. The merfolk soldier exchanged sounds with his female partner using strange, whale-like sounds that even Kairos' [Beast Tongue 3] couldn't translate.

He did understand what the sharks said though. "Are we eating them yet?" one of the carnivorous beasts asked one of its kindred.

"Doesn't seem like it," another said, inspecting the ship. "It's not a Cetus."

"No, it's not," Kairos replied, his words reverberating through the translucent membrane and water. The sharks immediately looked in his direction. "This is our ship, the *Foresight*. We are surface-dwellers coming in peace."

"Your ship looks pretty alive, surface-dweller," one of the sharks replied with skepticism, before glaring at Andromache. "And that one... she has two legs, but she reads as a Scylla to my Skills. These waters belong to the sea people, not to monsters."

The mermaid kingdom of Orichalcos was constantly at war with the monsters known as the Alysseans, which included the Cetae, for control of the ocean. No wonder they saw a living ship like the *Foresight* with suspicion.

"We understand," Kairos replied with diplomacy. "We hoped to establish a friendly embassy in your kingdom, and bring gifts to your rulers."

The sharks exchanged glances, before moving away from the deck and reporting the surface-dweller's words to their merfolk allies. One of the male soldiers visibly frowned, left his spear behind, and started making hand movements towards the *Foresight's* crew.

"Sign language," Cassandra recognized.

"Oh, I have awareness of that!" Chloris said, making hand movements to the merfolk soldier.

"Tell them we come in peace," Kairos ordered. "That we bring gifts and friendship, not war. This ship is my Legendary Item, not a Cetus."

Other soldiers joined the merfolk chariot-rider, the sea people exchanging with vocalized, dolphin-like sounds. Their leader exchanged more signs with Chloris, causing the amazon to nod. "They say, we must go after them to a great city, or they will hunt us," she explained to Kairos.

"They won't let us turn away?" Cass asked with a frown.

"They gained great worry of big ship. They have curiosi—" Chloris corrected herself, trying to find the right words in the Travian tongue. "They are curious."

The sharks approached the deck again with similar demands. "You're coming with us to the capital," one of them told Kairos. "You do anything funny, and we'll see how well you can breathe without that bubble of yours."

"We agree to your terms," Kairos said, telepathically ordering the *Foresight* to follow the merfolk scouts. The sea chariots surrounded the living ship from all sides, escorting it south.

The journey lasted for roughly an hour, leading them deeper into the sea. But although the sunlight above dimmed, light increased in this area of the Sunsea. The sun contended with phosphorescent fish and flowers. More merfolk patrols joined the *Foresight's* escort, until a full school of chariots surrounded it from all sides.

The descent ended when they reached a deep sea crater so wide that Kairos estimated it at around thirty kilometers in diameter, with thousands of lights coming from within it.

The *Foresight's* crew gasped in amazement as they got used to the lights, and witnessed the shape of buildings within the crater's edge.

A gargantuan, underwater metropolis slowly came into sight.

The city was unlike anything on earth. Towers of coral larger than any building Kairos had seen cluttered like spikes next to stadiums made of the bones of colossal sea monsters. Rows of gigantic crab shells and oysters formed colorful suburbs, while enormous whales and massive angelfishes carried anemone houses on their backs. Shining jellyfish as tall as trees provided the city's lights, each of a different color.

Kairos could only gasp at the place's splendor, and even Andromache held her lover's hand tightly; Rook looked almost hypnotized. They witnessed wondrous sights everywhere they looked: nacre streets and iridescent pearls as big as houses, magnificent kelp forests and seagrass meadows, even a large bubble dome near the city center.

And the population... an uncountable number of merfolk, fish, sharks, and other creatures floated around the metropolis' wide streets and structures. They moved as swiftly as birds in the sky in a marvelous ballet.

A single building dwarfed all other structures, a dorsal spine-shaped palace of coral, nacre, and salt. Its surface shone with all the colors of the rainbow, while its transparent windows thrummed with the song of whales.

Few surface-dwellers had visited the kingdom of Orichalcos... and Kairos' crew had now joined this select group.

11: Line, Hook, and Sinker

The fish kept them anchored for half a day.

Andromache looked on from the *Foresight's* deck with disdain, as the crowd of merfolk gathered to see the ship grew ever larger. The soldiers had led the crew to underwater docks built along a coral reef, divided between ten floors. Fortress whales and seashell chariots waited, bound to the coral by mucous chains, while merfolk merchants used tubes of pressurized water to quickly send cargo to the city.

However, news of the *Foresight's* arrival had spread like wildfire, bringing thousands of curious locals. So many had come to observe the living ship that they disrupted the port's activities. The guards had to bring in reinforcements to repel them.

Separated from them by the *Foresight's* dome, Andromache suppressed the urge to disperse the rabble with a spell. She hated the way they looked at her, as if she were an animal in some king's menagerie. The worst among them were the families, couples of merfolks with tadpole children pointing their fingers at the witch.

Andromache resisted the urge to put a hand on her belly. *The seed is fertile, but the soil is barren*, she thought with resentment. Even dead for centuries, Circe still held Andromache under her thumb. Denying her the right to dispose of her own body, constantly demeaning her.

Even her shapeshifting magic offered the witch little reprieve. She sensed her tentacles wriggling inside her human legs, the silent howl of her hound-heads chained beneath her skin; Andromache might have looked human, but the monstrous nature beneath struggled to reassert itself. She couldn't turn her fangs into teeth, no matter how hard she tried.

Even Kairos didn't understand. Couldn't understand. The instinct was always there, simmering beneath the surface. Whenever Andromache kissed her lover's neck, she felt the urge to tear out his throat and feed on his warm blood. Their couplings were as exhausting as they were rapturous.

And the nightmares... sometimes she dreamt of Kairos thrusting his manhood in her, only for a tentacled wolf to tear its way out of her belly. The witch usually woke up shaking afterward, the picture haunting her all day long.

Andromache's existence was one of constant torment, and she had had enough.

"It's pretty annoying, isn't it?" Andromache looked at the speaker, as Cassandra Bato joined her next to the deck's edge. "I thought we would get a kinder welcome."

Andromache had few friends, but she had come to consider Cassandra one of them. They had bled together on many adventures, and grown to respect each other. Only her mother-in-law Aurelia and her teacher Euryale occupied a higher place in the Scylla's heart.

"They look down on us," the witch replied with a snort. She could see it in the soldiers' harsh gaze. "These fish see us as backward savages."

"Can't blame them," Cassandra said, glancing at the coral docks. Carved pearl statues representing dead divinities such as Poseidon, Oceanus, or Nereus gave even this utilitarian place a quaint charm. "I haven't seen anything so beautiful on land, nor a city as populated. I wonder how many merfolk live here."

"Over a million," Andromache replied.

"How do you know that?"

"A fish told me, once." Though she had never visited Orichalcos, Andromache had often traded with merfolk while she remained bound to the island of Scheria, exchanging magical items for arcane tablets. She had a better understanding of these people than the entire crew combined, even Cassandra.

"So their capital is more populated than all of Travia," Cassandra said, looking up as a whale left the docks and passed just over the *Foresight*. The beast's shadow covered the deck, before moving on. "Were cities from before the Anthropomachia as beautiful?"

"Some were." Though Andromache was a creature of nature, of forests and springs, she had witnessed the walls of Troy and the glory that was Atlantis. "I have seen fortifications so tall that even giants could not peek over them. The kingdom of Colchis was so rich that they raised their houses from gold, and carved their canals with silver."

"I can barely imagine it."

"This city is but a glimpse of the previous age's glory," the witch replied with a snort.

"Do you still regret it?" Cassandra asked. "The Old World?"

Andromache gave the question some thought. She had spent centuries regretting the past, and once she would have answered yes without hesitation. She could only see the ruins, and lament the gods' past glory.

But time in Histria had shown her another vision of the world. One where the gods were few and left the mortals to their own device, free to build as they wished. Free to live, away from the pettiness of immortals.

"No," the witch said after a long reflection. "Once I did. The Old World was grander, more beautiful than this current age."

"But it was an era where gods could curse people for the crime of being born beautiful?"

Andromache smiled bitterly, showing the fangs beneath. The fact that she once praised the gods and thought her curse was a just punishment filled her with hateful loathing. "Indeed," she said. "I would not throw everything away though. Knowledge can die as easily as any mortal."

Although she would have followed her companion anyway, Andromache hoped to use the expedition for archeological purposes. The witch had developed a keen interest in studying ancient secrets, perhaps because she found herself more at home among ruins than modern cities. The Scylla had lived centuries almost alone on an island, and it would take her decades before she grew accustomed to the presence of others.

Though Andromache had found that human nature hadn't changed much even after the cataclysm, she didn't recognize herself in this era's customs.

"Andromache, Andromache!" Rook leaped at the duo, wagging his tail.

"What is it, brave bird?" the Scylla asked, while petting the griffin behind the ears. The animal was a kind and loyal friend, enough to make the witch wonder if she should adopt a pet of her own... if only to have company. "Did you receive a word from my other half?"

The royal magicians had cast spells on Kairos and other envoys, including [Water Resistance], [Water Breathing], and translation spells. Though Andromache had insisted on accompanying them, the soldiers rebuked her out of fear and distrust.

They would have bowed, if I had come to them a nymph rather than a monster, Andromache thought bitterly. Though born a Naiad rather than a Nereid, she was a daughter of the waters all the same.

"He contacted me through our link," the griffin said with a nod. Though Andromache and her companion had formed a [Blood Pact], it was but a pale shadow of the link between a [Beastmaster] and his [Animal Companion]. "He said that the kingfish agreed to meet with us."

"King of the fish, not kingfish," Andromache corrected the bird.

"The name tastes better that way!" The bird looked at the merfolk with hunger. "They all look so appetizing!"

"I would not recommend eating the king," the Scylla replied with amusement. "Inbred meat tastes poorly. I can tell from experience."

"Inbred?" Cassandra asked with a smile. Lacking [Beast Tongue 3], she couldn't understand Rook's side of the conversation. "Now that's a bit harsh."

"The blood of Orichalcos must remain pure," Andromache explained to the human while ruffling Rook's feathers. "The royal family descends from Gaia and Oceanos, revered ones among the immortals. To join the divine ichor with lesser blood would be to taint it."

Cassandra paled in disgust, as she put the two and two together. "Their royal family practices incest?"

"Parents with children, and brother to sister," Andromache replied with a cruel smile. Somehow, she found the mental image of inbred fish mating laughable. "Which causes them many problems, from what I heard. A fourth of them goes mad, and a third dies from illness."

Divine blood lessened the effects of consanguinity, but only so far.

"What about the other envoys?" Cassandra asked. "Any news?"

"You are worried for the child, Tiberius?" Andromache asked with a raised eyebrow.

"A bit," she admitted. "He has made... overtures."

Good for her. Cassandra had shown interest in Kairos for a while, before politely backing out when Andromache entered his life. This act of kindness had earned her the Scylla's sympathy. "My other half has only good things to say about him," the witch said with honesty. "He is young and naïve, but loyal and dutiful. He would make a passable mate."

"I thought I could at least give him a chance," Cassandra replied with a hand on her waist. "But I'm not sure if his father would give his consent, even if we hit it off. Dispater is the richest man in Lyce, and might want something else than a dirt poor pirate captain for his son."

"You are a [Hero]," Andromache pointed out with a snort. "Never forget that, Cassandra. Power absolves everything, even birth."

The merfolk crowd spread in half, as a guard escort brought the surface-dweller envoys back to the ship. Her Kairos was swimming alongside Tiberius and Chloris, a bubble of air around their head, and the rest of their body shielded by the blue hue of a [Water Resistance] spell. Andromache's hands tightened around her staff, as the trio crossed the *Foresight's* air dome and landed on the deck.

"They're back, they're back!" Rook rejoiced, as he leaped at his owner's feet. "Did you get any shinies? They're everywhere!"

"Maybe later, Rook," Kairos said with a charming smile. "I wouldn't recommend swimming out of this bubble though. The pressure feels uncomfortable, even with a protection spell."

"So?" Andromache asked her other half, slightly worried. She didn't trust these cold-blooded scions of Poseidon.

"So we came at a bad time," her lover said with a frown. "Their previous ruler, King Triton the VIIIth, died only a few weeks ago."

"How so?" Cassandra asked.

"Slain in battle by a Cetus war party, from what we understood," Tiberius explained. "The new king is eight, and married to a sister thrice his age."

"The fishfolk did not appreciate the gold, but they loved Thales' inventions," Chloris said with more enthusiasm. Andromache had noticed that the amazon remained cheerful and optimistic in all circumstances. "Especially the sparkler and the clock."

"The battery and the compass, Chloris," Cassandra corrected her. "That's what he called them."

"In any case, the royal couple agreed to receive us and offer us Xenia in return," Tiberius said. "However, only unarmed [Heroes] will be allowed in. The royal family will take the presence of anyone of lesser Rank as an insult."

This didn't please Andromache, nor Cassandra. "It could be a trap to slay us and steal our [Legends]," the human said. "I heard some cultures do that. You should at least stay behind, Kairos. The *Foresight* only listens to you, and if you perish, our crew will be stranded in this city."

"I doubt the royal family will look kindly on us, if I send a representative rather than meeting them myself," Kairos replied. "Besides, I have diplomatic Skills. I'm confident I can at least talk my way out."

"Then I will come," Andromache decided firmly. She was a [Hero] first and a Scylla second, so the merfolk could hardly turn her away. "I do not need a wand or staff to cast some of my spells, and none of these creatures can harm me."

"My thoughts exactly," her Kairos replied with a sly smile. "Though our odds of escaping alive will be slim in any case, if the royal family calls for our heads."

"Slim is not none, my other half. Slim is not none." And if the fish slew her love by some miracle, then her fury would know no bounds. Andromache would let the monster inside come out roaring, and make a grave out of the merfolk's shiny palace.

"I will come as well," Cassandra said. "Even if I can't wield a weapon, I can still help defend you."

"Could you bring me a pearl, Kairos?" Rook asked with innocence. "Doesn't matter the color, as long as I can see myself in it!"

"I will do what I can, my friend."

And so, the crew's three [Heroes] left the *Foresight* behind. Even though she could breathe underwater in her Scylla form, Andromache retained her human disguise and let the merfolk mages cast the [Water Breathing] spell on her. The waters felt warm to the skin, perhaps heated by volcanic activity... though they weren't as warm as Kairos' fingers, when he took her hand into his own. This helped soothe her suspicious mood. Cassandra followed after them, the magical bubble around her head pushing against an invisible current. The [Water Resistance] spells protected their clothes from the sea, but only partly.

The merfolk guards led them to a large chariot made from an oyster's shell, and carried by four seahorses. The animals grew agitated at Andromache's presence, sensing her true nature, but Kairos calmed them with kind words. Her lover had a way with animals.

"I never thought I would carry a Scylla to Her Grace," their mermaid chariot driver said in ancient Greek, the words carrying through the water like the air above. She must have been chosen as the driver because she knew a surface language. "Perhaps you should replace the seahorses."

This made the witch see red, and she felt her hound-heads wake up beneath her skin. But Andromache sensed Kairos' hand squeezing her own, and fought the urge to tear that mermaid's head off her shoulders. "Just drive," the witch said.

The oyster shell contained a bed of comfortable algae, allowing Kairos, Andromache, and Cassandra to sit on it. No sooner did they do so that the mermaid driver whistled to the

seahorses, making them swim upward. The chariot drove into a powerful current, escorted by two dozen guards with obsidian spears and half as many great white sharks.

Andromache noticed a transparent window into the oyster shell, allowing her to see the world outside. The *Foresight* became smaller and smaller as the chariot moved away from the docks and passed over seagrass gardens, before approaching the palace from the left.

The structure was even more impressive up close than from afar. Coral made up the foundations of the structure, supplemented with iridescent walls of nacre and pillars of fossilized salt. Its shadow stretched on as far as Andromache's eyes could see, and she lost count of the floors.

The chariot drove to the palace's left, before a circular, transparent door of mucus protected by two sea spiders the size of elephants, and four merfolk guards. The Scylla expected to climb down at this point, but the gate vanished before her eyes and their driver had their vehicle enter the palace. Only a token escort followed the chariot inside, while the transparent door reformed behind them.

The palace's interior was somehow even more impressive than the outside. The corridors, large enough to let an army through, were chiseled from pearl, ivory, and white substances Andromache couldn't recognize. She could see engraved pictures everywhere she looked, each more splendid than the last. Some represented the many lovers of Poseidon, or merfolk heroes fighting against colossal squids and sea serpents. Many others showed sea animals, from angelfish to hermit crabs.

Still, one scene made Andromache wince: a fresco representing Poseidon 'seducing' the priestess Medusa, her subsequent transformation into a gorgon, and her eventual demise at Perseus' hand. The Scylla, having heard the true, horrendous story from her teacher Euryale's mouth, couldn't help but sneer in disgust.

They glorified a rape and the unjust suffering of an innocent, Andromache thought with disdain, just as I considered Circe's curse the order of things, rather than a pointless cruelty. Even now, that story hit her too close to home.

Her Kairos noticed her anger, and his fingers brushed against her arm. Though she appreciated the contact, it did little to soothe the Scylla's bitterness. All the murals celebrated the Olympians, glossing over their crimes.

But though she was angry at the merfolk, Andromache was furious with herself most of all. She loathed to remember how she once praised the gods like these fish did, and the sight of these murals made her curse her naïvete.

The fact he could make her forget her hate even for a second was one of the reasons Andromache loved Kairos so much.

As the chariot made twists and turns, the witch started to notice something odd. Andromache's A-Ranked [Magic] stat allowed her to sense magic in the air, to smell the stench of warlocks. The entire palace reeked of sorcery, of ancient spells as old as the world itself.

A familiar sorcery.

"The trident is here, my other half," she whispered to Kairos in Travian. "This place is its sheath."

"What do you mean?" He whispered back, careful not to be overheard by the chariot's driver. Cassandra leaned on to listen.

"This is not a palace. Not only." Andromache recognized the spells woven in the walls, the subtle way the rooms formed a magical array. "This is an amplifier, especially of [Water] magic. The energy suffusing these walls belongs to Poseidon's weapon."

"So that's how they could sink an island with only a shard?" Cassandra asked. "By multiplying its power?"

"Yes," Andromache confirmed. "The Poison King must know it too. Some of Medea's apprentices still work for him, and they have knowledge of the Old World. They will have reached the same conclusion."

"So that's what Mithridates is secretly building?" Kairos asked with a scowl. "An amplifier?"

"Perhaps," Andromache replied. "This fortress is built atop a nexus of oceanic leylines. To achieve the same results, he must find a similar location."

"Let us observe and memorize this place carefully then," Kairos decided. "We might need that knowledge later."

Andromache and Cassandra nodded at once, only for the chariot to slow down. Transparent gates vanished before them, until their race ended in a shining hall of natural, multicolored crystal. Seven pillars of a stainless, blue-green metal supported the audience chamber's ceiling, and surrounded a colossal throne.

The seat reminded Andromache of an oak tree, but carved out of bright, shining coral rather than wood. Two lines of golden merfolk soldiers kept watch over the hall, wielding

magical spears carved from Cetae bones and shell-shields, while a herald wielding a conch shell welcomed the surfacers with a cold gaze.

A mermaid sat on the throne, a creature of splendid red scales, milky white skin, and ruby hair. Her exquisitely carved obsidian crown put Kairos' own to shame, its spikes ending in serpent heads with gemstone eyes. She wore a wealth of pearl rings, nacre bracelets, and crystal earrings that could bankrupt a lesser kingdom.

However, beneath the radiant surface, her jaw was abnormally long, one of her eyes was white and the other green, and her nose was as flat as a board. Andromache also noticed a missing finger on her left hand.

A merfolk child no older than seven sat on her lap, and no jewel could hide his deformities. His red hair turned pale at some point, and an elaborate headdress covered his jaw. His pale fishtail bifurcated at the end, and his left arm appeared shorter than the right; his tiny hands played with a Thales-made lodestone compass adapted for undersea environments, a gift to the royal family.

Andromache could almost taste the rot festering beneath the wealth.

Somehow, the water pressure and pushback had lessened in this room, enough that the group could walk on the floor without being repelled upward. Andromache suspected that the inbred child couldn't survive outside.

The three surfacers emerged from the chariot, their feet sinking on the floor's surface. They took a few steps in between the two lines of golden soldiers, while the herald sounded his conch shell. The booming sound reverberated across the hall, and the guards stopped the trio with their spears as they came within ten meters of the coral throne.

"Surface-dwellers," the herald addressed them in ancient Greek, after finishing his song. "You are in the presence of Their Royal Majesties, King Triton the IXth and Queen Pallas the VIIth, co-rulers of the Orichalcos Kingdom, heirs of Oceanus, sovereigns of the merfolk, lords of the seas, and protector of the deep."

Kairos knelt, followed by his companions.

Though the little king couldn't care less, the queen appraised the visitors silently, her gaze lingering on Andromache the longest. The Scylla kept a neutral face, focusing instead on the fish's coral throne. She could sense great and powerful magic coming from within it, the crux of the palace's system.

There you are, Andromache thought. The merfolk had embedded their trident shard into the very heart of their civilization.

After a long, tense silence, Queen Pallas addressed her visitors in Greek. "Kairos of Travia," she said, her voice as sweet as a bird's song. "Cassandra of Travia, Andromache of Scheria. It has been a very long time since a surface-dweller visited our kingdom, let alone a group of them. What brings you to our doors?"

"We come as friends, bearing gifts," Kairos replied. "All we ask is your permission to establish an embassy in your kingdom, to foster trade and friendship between our nations."

"Your gifts are appreciated," the mermaid queen said with a smile, before glancing at her 'co-ruler.' "As you can see, my brother has taken a fancy to this 'compass' of yours."

The child paid them no mind, completely focused on the device. Andromache wondered if he could even speak with his strange headdress.

Not that his words would matter. He might reign, but his sister-wife ruled.

"We shall examine your petition with great interest," the queen continued. "However, if you wish to win our friendship, we require more."

This caused Andromache to scowl, as she immediately noticed something unsaid. Namely, that the merfolk *wouldn't* return the surfacer-dwellers' gifts with some of their own, and demanded more. This could only mean one thing.

The mermaid queen didn't consider the gifts as a gesture of friendship, but as a tribute.

Most importantly, the exchange of gifts was a key part of Xenia. By refusing to return kindness with kindness, the merfolk royals flatly denied the surface-dwellers the protection of hospitality.

"What do you require?" Cassandra asked the queen, while Kairos listened with a calculating gaze. No doubt he had noticed the hidden message, and its alarming implications.

"The Aysseans have grown more aggressive in the past years. My previous husband's death in battle was only the culmination of a long, long conflict, one that bleeds our population and empties our coffers." Queen Pallas joined her hands together in a pose that reminded Andromache of a common merchant. "We have vast armies, many brave [Heroes], and even a handful of [Demigods], but nothing like your ship. If you fight on our behalf, you will be duly rewarded."

Kairos exchanged a brief glance with his allies, before denying the fish queen's wish as politely as he could. "Unfortunately, Your Majesty, this kingdom is but the first step on our journey," he explained. "Any help we can provide will be short-lived."

"The task I have in mind will not require much time, only strength and bravery," Queen Pallas said, as implacable as a glacier.

Realizing that they would have to either leave empty-handed or accept the deal, Kairos reluctantly decided to entertain it. "We are listening."

"The sunken realm of Atlantis has always been our dominion by divine right," Queen Pallas explained. "But the Aysseans have maintained an outpost there for centuries. A temple dedicated to one of their [Demigods], Hybris the Cunning. From it, they launch raids into the very heart of our territories."

"Why couldn't you dislodge them?" Cassandra asked with skepticism.

"The temple is protected by a dome of air, not unlike your ship's. Our soldiers are unmatched in the water, but the temple's guardians can fight as well on land as under the sea."

Just like us, Andromache thought. And since the temple belonged to a [Demigod], even the strongest of their spellcasters would struggle to lift the dome.

"Destroy this temple or disrupt the dome protecting it, and your nation will win our friendship," the fish queen said. "Three [Heroes] of your caliber should prove adequate for this task, don't you think? To each tool a task."

Her wording made Andromache clench her fists. Did she consider them mere lackeys who could be brought to heel with vague promises?

"We will need more information about this temple," Kairos asked with caution, "and see if your friendship is worth the risk."

The queen exploded into prideful laughter, her voice carrying across the hall. "Would not a shark's friendship benefit a mere remora on principle?" she asked with the arrogance of a mighty empress.

I hunted a shark yesterday, and the remora escaped me, Andromache thought. She still remembered the taste of its blood on her lips. Cassandra answered with a forced smile, while Kairos responded with a cold gaze. "A remora may accept a shark's leavings," he replied with a frosty voice. "But a true friend will demand respect."

His brazen response caused the merfolk herald to glance at him, while the queen only responded with amusement. "We will see if you deserve that much, manling," she said, with a hint of contempt.

"My ship fed on two Cetae," Kairos replied, unimpressed. "It may eat a third, but not for empty promises."

"I see why your kindred call you the Sellsword King." The fish queen said with a smile. "Yes, manlings. Though the surface has little to offer us, we keep an eye on what happens there. A single one of our armies would outnumber yours ten to one. Do not forget yourself."

Queen Pallas put a hand on her child co-ruler's hair, like an owner with a pet.

"We are not equal."

Andromache couldn't take it anymore. "If you are so well-informed, then you know who we are, and what we achieved."

"Andro—" Kairos started, but didn't have time to finish.

"I know who you are, Andromache the cursed," Queen Pallas replied with a voice as icy as the Underworld. "A slave of Circe."

Andromache let the monster out.

Her transformation tore her wet clothes to shred, the ripples tossed merfolk soldiers backward, and made the infant Triton drop his compass. Colossal tentacles grew where legs used to be, snarling hound-heads showed their fangs at the royal couple, and Andromache's head reached the ceiling.

The fish queen trembled in shock and surprise, while her cowardly child-husband hid his face between her breasts. Was she arrogant enough to think that Andromache would take the insult without flinching?

To their credit, the guards immediately raised their weapons to defend their liege, while Cassandra rose to her feet with her fists raised. Only her Kairos remained calm in the storm, ignoring the spears pointed at his throat.

"You will not leave this room alive," Queen Pallas hissed, as she regained a semblance of composure.

"I doubt so." Andromache snorted, glancing at the soldiers. None of them had dared to attack yet. "I am the disciple of Euryale of the gorgons. I was old when your ancestors were

sucking Poseidon's cock, and I outlived them all. You are correct, youngling. We are *not* equal."

"We rule an empire that spans the Sunsea," the queen replied with arrogance, her co-ruler shaking. "We have sunk islands and made them pleasure palaces. You could collect all your lands' wealth, and they wouldn't fill my chamber pot."

"Yet I could tear through all your soldiers with my bare hands right now, and none could even scratch me," Andromache replied, unimpressed. "I could devour you and that spawn on your lap, and walk out of this palace unharmed."

A tense, agonizing silence stretched on, as none dared to take the initiative. Andromache calmly looked down at Kairos, their eyes locking. She didn't need words to understand his thoughts.

By now, she could all but read his mind.

"But I will not," Andromache said calmly. "Because we come as friends. Make sure we leave as friends too, and not as foes."

The fish queen frowned. "Are you threatening me, Scylla?"

"A warning, not a threat," Kairos said softly, finally rising up to his feet. "Friend or foe. We will either leave this room as one or the other. Insult us again at your peril."

"All your subjects are at my mercy outside these walls, petty king."

"A king of monsters," Kairos replied calmly. "And one that could easily go over to the Abyeans, if friendship and the laws of hospitality do not get in the way."

The [Hero] let the threat hang in the room, while the mermaid queen held his gaze. Her eyes then turned to Andromache, who responded with a fanged, carnivorous smile.

After a long moment of thoughtfulness, Queen Pallas raised a hand, and the guards lowered their weapons.

"Very well," the mermaid said with a cold face, pushing her infant brother away from her chest. "We shall discuss terms... as friends and fellow rulers."

Kairos and Andromache locked eyes. After a short moment, the former nodded, and the latter smiled to herself.

Every velvet glove needed an iron hand sometimes.

12: Counteroffer

*Congratulations, you earned a level (total **fifty**) and 3 Skill Points.*

Aggressive negotiations paid well.

His eyes closed on a bed of seagrass, Kairos dreamed of home.

Watching through the eyes of his [Idol] in Histria, he informed his wife of the current developments through Thales' code. He told her about Andromache's suspicions that Mithridates was building an amplifier for his trident shard, and about negotiations with Orichalcos.

The treaty was still being drafted, but so far, the merfolk royal family offered the creation of an embassy and trading post both in their capital and Histria, alongside a renewable non-aggression pact and tax exemptions on spices, medical herbs, and other merchandise. In return, they expected Kairos to destroy the temple of Hybris, periodic help against the Cetea, and an annual exchange of gifts to renew the treaty.

His wife didn't hide her disappointment.

"It is better than nothing, but little gain compared to the risks," she said. "If that dome collapses while you are inside it, your crew will drown. And even if you make it out alive, you would have removed an existential threat to the merfolk's internal security for a few trading benefits. I believe you could ask for more, husband. Squeeze them dry."

Easier to say than do. The merfolk royals were as stingy as they were arrogant, and clearly had no experience dealing with other nations as equals. They demanded tribute or vassalization in exchange for stronger concessions, which Kairos was opposed to. They were willing to offer information on the temple and minimal assistance, but little more.

WHAT ABOUT MITHRIDATES? Kairos asked using their code.

"I am organizing a meeting with Queen Euthenia of Orthia," Julia explained, with a hint of anger. She still resented how Mithridates had murdered Prince Critias at their wedding. "Though our last encounter didn't go well, she knows the Poison King organized her nephew's death. She might help us find the location of his arsenal and sabotage it."

Hopefully. Kairos promised to try to obtain better terms from Orichalcos, and Julia replied that she would share with him any information she found.

His business done, Kairos opened his eyes to find his back against seagrass, and his head resting on a pillow of seal fur.

The merfolk had given special quarters to the crew in the city, adapted for their rare landwalking guests. The building, an architectural marvel made of undersea stone and crystal, was shielded from the water outside by spells. Multi-colored algae covered the walls, while organic, semi-transparent barriers functioned as doors. Crystal windows let the city's light in from the outside, with the *Foresight* anchored near the building's entrance. *My own Cerberus*, the Travian captain thought in amusement.

Kairos shared his room with Rook, who slept near the seashell-shaped bed with seagrass for a mattress, and Andromache. The Scylla stood in front of a mirror near the window, trying out a beautiful gown of translucent red fibers given to her by the merfolk as a 'gift.'

"Are you done talking to your wife?" the witch asked with reproach in her voice.

Kairos rose from the bed and approached his concubine, putting his hands around her waist. She didn't push him away, but didn't welcome him either. "Are you angry with me?"

"When you are with me, my other half, I want you *with me*." Her teeth necklace glittered from the faint light outside the window, while her gown left little to imagination. Kairos' eyes marveled at the perfection of her curves, at the fullness of her breasts. He felt his blood quickening in his veins. "I want you, body and soul. I don't want to share half of you with someone else halfway across the world."

"I am all yours right now."

Unable to resist anymore, Kairos' left hand trailed against her leg, before finding a way beneath the gown. Andromache let out a cry of surprise, as his fingers reached out to her thighs.

"It's going to sound dirty," Kairos admitted, as he started pleasuring her. While his left hand played with her lower parts, his right moved to her breasts. "Watching you put that mermaid queen in her place... it aroused me."

"I wanted to rip out that insolent tongue of her..." she said between moans. "To watch her choke on her blood..."

"I would have carried you over the corpse," Kairos whispered, for he knew her well. "And made love to you on that coral throne."

"Rip it," Andromache asked, her fingers touching the fine gown. "Rip it off."

"It costs a fortune—"

"Rip it off!" She ordered with a hiss. "I hate it."

He did, tearing off the gown while she moved to remove his pants. "I hate this city," Andromache complained when she wasn't kissing Kairos' shoulder. Her fangs drew a little blood, but the pleasure of feeling her skin against his made up for the pain. "I hate these fish, their palace, their arrogance..."

"Me too," he confessed while carrying her to the bed. They had all the resources in the world, so much wealth, and yet they still dreamed of a glorious past long gone. "But we'll be gone soon."

"Not soon enough."

They made love on the bed with the same passion as their first night, and Kairos slept soundly.

Or so he thought.

When Kairos opened his eyes, white skies spread as far as he could see, and his back slept against a much harder ground. It took him a moment to realize that he had awoken on the *Foresight's* deck.

Kairos rose to his feet, noticing the [Anemoi Spear] within arm's reach, and the surreal sight of Rook dangling a fishing rod over the deck with his beak. The *Foresight* sailed on a calm sea's surface, without waves nor a horizon. No crew piloted the living ship but Kairos' own will.

"Is this a dream?" the captain asked rhetorically. Nothing existed beyond this strange sea. The sun had vanished alongside the moon and the stars, leaving nothing but a white, lifeless expanse.

Nothing but air and endless water.

"Of choursh ish a dreamsh, shilly!" Rook replied, though Kairos struggled to understand him while he carried the fishing rod in his beak. "Ish our dreamsh!"

Had the [Animal Companion] bond strengthened to that point that they could share a dreamscape now? Spear in hand, Kairos joined his friend and sat at the deck's edge. "Does anything bite?"

"It shoulsh, ish a dreamsh!" As if to answer his words, an invisible force began to pull the string below the waters. Rook would have fallen overboard if Kairos hadn't caught him in time. "Ish a big one! Kairos, help! Help!"

Putting the [Anemoi Spear] aside with laughter, Kairos grabbed the fishing rod and tried to help him claim the fish for dinner. Both human and griffin pulled, and pulled, but whatever dream catch awaited at the bottom refused to rise up.

For a moment, Kairos was brought back to a memorable day of his childhood, when his father Chron and elder brother Taulas took him fishing near their hometown's waterfront. The family had been starving due to famine, and Taulas had caught a fish large enough to feed everyone for the night. Kairos fondly looked back to this moment, as one of bliss and relief in an ocean of desperation.

But the joy had left the family's house the next morning, when the hunger returned with no fish left to satisfy it.

Though the skies remained as white as snow, the waters beneath the *Foresight* darkened. *It's a big, big fish*, Kairos thought, as an unnatural cold chilled him to the bone; the moisty frost of the sea's depths.

The fishing rod snapped, and the creature emerged.

Its arrival sent waves across the dream sea, making the *Foresight* waver. The surprised Rook fell on his back, while Kairos instinctively grabbed his [Anemoi Spear] and pointed it at the creature.

He immediately realized it would be a foolish proposition, as the monster, a Cetus, dwarfed even the *Foresight* in size; its maw alone could snap the ship in half. The chimera had the body of a sea serpent, the head of a shark, and a lizard's forelegs. Eight crimson eyes blinked on each side of its throat, and four anglerfish's lures dangled from its forehead. Its azure scales were as strong as steel, its fangs long as spears.

That wasn't a dream.

That feeling of an unwarranted presence, that invisible pressure... the Travian could sense it instinctively, the way a predator sensed the presence of an intruder in their territory.

"What are you?" Kairos asked, his fingers tightening on his weapon's grip; his [Observer 3] Skill failed to activate, perhaps because of the dreamscape's nature. Rook immediately rose back to his feet and bravely glared at the monster, heedless of the danger.

The voice that answered sounded like the crashing of waves, the dreadful noise of a raging sea.

"I am the fin rising from the waters. I am the shadow that stalks the depths, and carries ships into the darkness."

The creature's eyes all focused on Kairos, red and bloody.

"I am Hybris, [Demigod] of pride and sea monsters."

A Cetus [Demigod], and one of the most dangerous.

Kairos had researched this creature when he wondered how to develop his own religion. Hybris had cults on the surface, mostly in coastal settlements, who gained pearls and undersea wealth in exchange for human sacrifices. The fact that it openly advocated increasing the sea's level had made it loathed by most surface deities.

Most people prayed *against* Hybris.

"You forget *deception* among your portfolio," Kairos said, having done his research.

"It would not inspire trust if I said it," the Cetus [Demigod] replied with a dry, all-too-human tone.

"How did you get inside our dream?!" Rook asked, incensed.

"This is not your dream, feathered one." Hybris glanced at the *Foresight*. "This is its dreamscape. We are all guests here."

Kairos glanced at his ship's bow, and noticed that it had opened midway to reveal a row of sharp fangs and a hungry jaw.

The Travian knew that his ship had gained a measure of intelligence as it consumed more and more monsters, but if it had grown alive enough to *dream*... "You called that Cetus?" Kairos asked his ship.

He didn't expect an answer, but to his surprise, the *Foresight's* mast briefly wavered like a spear.

A nod.

"By feeding on my kindred and so many others, your ship consumed part of their essence," Hybris rasped. "As [Demigod] of sea monsters, I share a kinship to all predators of the sea... your *Foresight* included."

You are what you eat, the Travian thought grimly. "I would rather have a warning next time," he said to the *Foresight*. "I hate unexpected guests."

"Do not make that face, manling," Hybris said, vaguely amused. "Your ship is as loyal to you as this bird of yours. It called me to defend your interests."

Kairos remained skeptical. "The merfolk hired me to destroy your temple in Atlantis."

"I have heard," the Cetus replied. "My ears carry far."

So he had informants among the merfolk. Somehow, it didn't surprise Kairos all that much. "Have you come to attack me in my sleep?"

"No, landwalker." The Cetus lowered itself in the water, until only its 'face' and eyes peeked over the surface. Its lures wriggled and flickered like torches. "I have come to make you... a counteroffer."

Kairos' frown deepened, and the Travian rose on his feet. His eyes locked with the alien horror. "I would be a fool to listen," he said. "I heard the tales that caused people to call you a deceiver of men."

Hybris said nothing, its cold dead eyes appraising the human.

"A century ago, the Thessalan city-state of Poseidopolis saw an old man walking on the sea's waves like one would on land," Kairos said. "The old man pretended to be a lost son of Poseidon. He provided miracles to the city, calmed the raging sea, and offered wise advice. For weeks more and more people traveled to the city to meet with this Old Man of the Sea, until thousands believed in him. Then one day, he said he would lead his faithful on a great trip to a golden, wealthy land beyond the horizon. Thousands answered the call, selling their possessions to fill ships with provisions, goats, and pigs to survive the long journey, promising that they would return home rich... but when their vessels took to the sea..."

Kairos glanced at Hybris' anglerfish lures. "The old man vanished, and they saw the lure."

Hybris opened its maw, revealing countless rows of fangs.

"You and a hundred Cetea fell on the ships and devoured the crews, their animals, and all those who attempted to rescue them," Kairos said. "By the end of the day, the sea had turned red, and not a single survivor made it to safety. When their families went to the

shore the next day to mourn, the sea had retreated to reveal a wealth of bloody pearls and gold-filled chests."

"I did not lie," Hybris replied, showing no guilt whatsoever. "I was a scion of Poseidon, and I rewarded their sacrifice handsomely. It was an honest trade."

"A trade whose ghastly cost you hid."

"Because mortals want everything for nothing," the Cetus replied. "But perhaps you are the exception to the rule."

Kairos scoffed. "Trying to flatter me?"

"I have observed you for a while, [Monster Reaver]. Though you hunted and slew two of my kindred, you are different from other manlings. You welcomed the creatures your species call 'monsters' into your army, even fathered children with one. You wish to become a god of beasts and words. I thought we might be..."

The entity pondered its next words carefully.

"Natural allies."

Kairos laughed. "You want to sink our islands beneath the waves, and I live there," the [Hero] said. "Your fellow monsters prey on our shores and ships, and your cults toss maidens into the water."

"All of this is true... and yet missing key context." The creature's eyes glanced at the skies. "Why do you think we Abyeans rise to the surface, to hunt your ships and devour your men, when the sea below is teeming with life?"

"For sport."

"Some of us do so, yes," the [Demigod] conceded. "The old gods of the sea created us for that purpose. To torment those who didn't worship them. We hunger for blood. The instinct is always there... just like with the one you love."

Kairos scowled. "Don't bring Andromache into this."

"She struggles against her nature," the Cetus continued. "You sensed it too. Yet, she is moving on from it. So why can't we do the same?"

"Your species showed no interest in peaceful coexistence with the surface," the [Hero] replied.

"They tried to eat us!" Rook complained. "So we ate them first!"

"Coexistence is currently impossible because we need more space and more food than we have," Hybris argued. "We Alysseans and Cetea must deal with the dark, lifeless abysses, or the harsh trenches where life struggles to thrive. This is not enough, so we look to the surface for food. That state of affairs was not inevitable, human."

The beast angrily swayed its tail below the water, sending small waves in all directions. "When the flood happened, the oceans became vast enough for all of us children of the depths. We could have had peace. But we were the outcast children of the sea gods, the monstrous. So the merfolk and the nereids chased us. They took the fertile regions and the best hunting grounds, before refusing us entrance to our forefathers' sunken cities."

Kairos winced, as the story began to sound rather familiar.

"We were pushed into the darkest and poorest corners of the ocean. We were born monsters, true, but it is the merfolk who kept us that way." Hybris calmed itself, though the fury simmered beneath its crimson eyes. "I had a vision for my people, Kairos the Landwalker. One where we would rule the depths and enjoy the sea's bounties we were denied by virtue of our birth."

Kairos looked away.

These words echoed a bit too much like his own.

"Once I sought to expand our territories by sinking the surface, that is true," the Cetus argued. "But only because the merfolk denies us space here, under the waves."

"So you pretend to be Travians of the sea?" Kairos asked, locking eyes with the creature again. "My apologies if I find that story dubious."

"Believe what you want, human. It is the truth."

"The truth, from a god of deception?"

"Without truth, there can be no lies."

Maybe... or maybe not. The story sounded halfway plausible, but Kairos knew better than to trust a Cetus [Demigod] at his word. For all he knew, it could be a sob story to exploit the Travian's sympathy, or Alyssean propaganda to justify their ravenous ways.

"Let's assume that I believe you for a moment," the Travian said. "What do you want us to do, swim away?"

"This war for the depths does not concern you," Hybris replied with a nod. "If you wish to avoid being caught in it, then we Alysseans will offer you gifts of our own and grant you safe passage through the depths."

So, it offered Kairos a bribe to stay neutral and walk away. Though the Travian enjoyed the idea of being paid to do nothing, it meant the loss of a trade agreement with the merfolk and long-term development for his colony.

"But there is..." Hybris' maw morphed into a twisted parody of a smile. "Another way. A glorious way. The merfolk believe we use this temple as a staging point to start raids, but their eyes are small. They do not see it for what it is: a dagger pointed at their empire's heart."

Kairos' eyes widened. "You want to invade and sack Orichalcos' capital."

"I want to conquer it," Hybris corrected.

"How?" Rook asked, sitting on his hindlegs. The griffin had grown more and more anxious as the discussion went on.

"I will not tell you, unless you join me." Its eyes glanced at the [Anemoi Spear]. "But your assistance will help a great deal, human."

Kairos kept his mouth shut, and Hybris began circling the ship. The gesture reminded the Travian of sharks circling a man in the water, trying to see if they were prey, a foe, or a kindred. Though the creature was articulate, it remained a dangerous predator at heart.

"Why do you want this one city so much?" the [Hero] asked.

"Over the centuries, I have steadily worked to unite our people into a single whole," the Cetus replied. "I have formed alliances with the other [Demigods] and solitary [Heroes] of my kind. We have colonies, but nothing like Orichalcos' capital. If we can conquer it, my people can finally settle and become a true civilization. We will have plenty of fish to feed on, more than enough to satisfy our hunger."

"What's in it for me?" Kairos asked carefully. It didn't cost him anything to listen, and he might gain useful information.

"The pearls, the ivory statues, the gold... little of this shiny wealth matters to my people. You can take it if you want once we loot the city. Only the territory, the food, and the strategic position interest us. The magical items we will split evenly."

"Including the trident's shard?" Kairos asked

The monster scoffed. "You are greedy, manling."

"I won't leave something capable of sinking islands in the hands of a [Demigod] preaching exactly that."

"Nor can I give landwalkers the means to undo the flood, and reduce our territories' space." The creature stopped its movement. "But we could always destroy it..."

This caught the human [Hero]'s attention. "It's possible?"

"Mayhaps..."

"Mayhaps is not a yes."

"Those who forged the artifact might be able to undo it."

The Cyclops of Argos? Like Orgonos?

If yes, it would prevent these shards from threatening the surface in the future... but also make it impossible to recreate the artifact and undo the flood. Though Kairos doubted it would happen in his lifetime, destroying that possibility, as remote as it was, made him feel uneasy.

"What about the merfolk?" the Travian asked, changing the subject.

"With the loss of their capital, Orichalcos will shatter into petty kingdoms, too occupied making wars on each other to oppose us..." The Cetus chuckled. "Or you."

"They don't bother us in the first place," Kairos pointed out. "The merfolks have no interest in the surface, unless their merchants are threatened."

"Yet they sank many islands in the past. They will sink yours too."

"I can force them to make an oath."

"Mayhaps, but the risk will remain so long as they possess their piece of the trident," Hybris argued. "Once you are no longer useful to them, they will drive you out like they did with us."

"Thousands of innocent merfolks will suffer," Kairos said, anxious. "You will shatter their civilization and hunt them back into the depths."

"They will, and they deserve it," Hybris replied bluntly with vengeful fury. "People will suffer, yes. But it won't be *your* people."

The more he heard, the less the Travian liked it. "An assault will make us a foe of the merfolk."

"Without their trident, they will be nothing but a nuisance. Do not worry, landwalker. They will be too occupied fighting us to bother with you." The Cetus lost patience with the negotiations, and went straight to the point. "So what shall it be, manling? Will you fight with us?"

Only one answer came to mind.

"No," Kairos declared.

Hybris responded by letting more of its body peek out of the dream water, until it cast the entire *Foresight* in its dreadful shadow. If it was meant to intimidate the human [Hero], it was a lost cause. The Travian remained as calm and serene as a pool of water.

"Why so?" Hybris asked, its voice dangerous.

"Besides all the dangers involved in your scheme, I have studied you, Hybris. You advocate your servants to make war on other religions, and why would my cult be any different? Why won't you wage war against my crew once we're no longer useful to you?"

The Cetus [Demigod] had a ready answer. "Because if you join me, I will sponsor your introduction into our [Pantheon]."

Kairos frowned in confusion. "A [Pantheon]?"

"Do you not know?" The ancient horror seemed amused, delighting at his ignorance.

"[Heroes], [Demigods], and [Gods] can form alliances called [Pantheons]. The Olympian *Dodekathemon* was one, the Titans another. Through this alliance, the System granted them favor and power. The throne of the Olympians is empty, and new groups must take their place. The wolf god's pack has formed one, some of your foes another."

"Which foes?" Kairos asked, instantly suspicious. He raised his spear's tip at the creature, though it didn't even flinch. "Why is it that the System never informed me of that possibility?"

"A [God] is needed to form a [Pantheon]. Lone [Heroes] and [Demigods] do not have that possibility. As for your foes, I could tell you... but not for free." Sensing Kairos' ignorance of the matter, the Cetus continued to pitch his offer. "By joining our [Pantheon], you will gain unique Legendary Skills, a telepathic connection to its members, and your [Idols] will be built in our temple. It will be easier for you to ascend through the [Legend] Ranks."

"Sounds good," Kairos replied, skeptical. "Where is the catch?"

"Once your fate is bound to a [Pantheon], only the System's will can break the bond," Hybris warned, "and conflicts inside the alliance will be punished. The offer stands for your Scylla paramour as well."

"Oh, could I join it too?" Rook asked, suddenly interested. "I'm the senior partner here!"

Kairos couldn't suppress a smile. "Our [Legends] are bound, Rook, it's part of the package."

Though if that creature spoke the truth, then it opened a new world of possibilities... Even in the case Kairos didn't join this [Pantheon], he could study the existence of others.

"Which [God] made this alliance possible?" the human asked with caution, but the Cetus remained silent. "A little trust would help."

"Trust is earned, manling, I already told you more than I should have."

Realizing he wouldn't get any more information, Kairos considered the proposal. There were too many unknowns to his liking, and while the rewards were great, it meant allying with dangerous creatures and destroying an ancient civilization for wealth. Though the Travian was a pirate king at heart, he didn't quite find how such an alliance would benefit his people in the long term.

A mad idea suddenly crossed his mind.

He would have called it a pipe dream years ago, but...

"How much influence do you have over sea monsters?" Kairos asked.

"A great deal." The creature's eyes widened with interest. "You want our help to attack your enemies..."

"No." The people of the surface would despise Kairos if he openly called the Aysseans for help. "But if I help you..."

The pirate threw the dice.

"If I help you, I want you to abandon the surface, *forever*," Kairos said. "You will stop raiding our ships, harassing coastal towns, asking human sacrifices from your cults, or sinking islands. Everything below the waves will belong to you, and everything above to us landwalkers. Our species make peace, and share the world."

The silence seemed to stretch on for hours, as Hybris considered the proposal. To this vile creature, the idea of abandoning the surface probably sounded foreign. It had a lot to lose with this proposal.

But if it was genuine in its crusade, and truly cared about its people's welfare, then it would consider it. Whether Hybris accepted the deal or not entirely depended on how much it needed Kairos' help for its invasion.

"Some of my kindred will cling to the old ways, no matter how hard I try to rein them in," the monster admitted. "But if I forbid attacks on the surface, most will listen. With the resources of Orichalcos under our control, there will be little incentive to move to the surface."

"Just like that?" Kairos asked, dubious. He didn't expect a yes.

"You landwalkers have grown better at fighting us. Your ships are faster, your harpoons break our scales. So why take a risk for so little gain?" The creature showed its ravenous teeth. "There will be more than enough prey beneath the waves, once Orichalcos is ours."

There was not a single good bone in this hideous [Demigod]'s body. That creature was ruthless to the core, a true monster of legends. But it was a cunning, pragmatic monster.

If it spoke the truth, which Kairos was too cautious to accept at face value.

"I need to think about this," the human declared. Even if the proposal was honest, it would cost the merfolk dearly. Even if their leadership treated the surface-dwellers like crap, Kairos wasn't certain its civilian population deserved to suffer through their capital's destruction.

He needed to discuss the situation with his officers, and choose the correct path.

"I will let you meditate on my generous proposition, but if you speak a word of our meeting to the merfolk, then we shall become enemies." The Cetus started sinking below the waves, and Kairos noticed the sea's immaculate horizon growing closer. "When you have reached a decision, go to my temple. Join us, leave this war behind... or die fighting. This is the choice I offer."

Kairos and Rook exchanged a glance, as the whiteness around them swallowed them whole.

The Travian captain woke up to the sensation of a sleeping Andromache's body against his, and the warmth of a [Golden Fleece] blanket. Rook had woken up, looking at his best friend with worry.

They didn't need telepathy to know what the other thought.

Kairos left the bed and a stirring Andromache to look through the window, alongside his griffin.

Outside, the anchored *Foresight* had turned to face the mermaid city with hunger.

13: Heart of the People

"Yes," Andromache said.

"No," Cassandra replied.

They answered as Kairos had expected.

The [Hero] had gathered his officers and key councilors in the *Foresight's* cargo hold, to discuss the situation away from the merfolk's prying gaze. All of them sat around a table, and had quickly split into two sides.

Andromache, obviously, had leapt on the chance to inflict a devastating blow on the merfolk, and Agron supported her. Cassandra voiced her support for the current trade agreement with Orichalcos, and to Kairos' surprise, Nessus had followed her lead. Only Tiberius remained undecided.

Kairos didn't dare invite more people for the sake of secrecy. If a word of Hybris' visit reached the merfolk, then they risked endangering the entire crew. "Lyce has the greatest number of [Demigods] and [Heroes] in the Sunsea," Kairos said while glancing at his aide Tiberius. "Have you ever heard of [Pantheons]?"

"The only [God] we produced is Lycaon, who we chained, and the artificial spirit of the Senex assembly, which doesn't behave like a true deity," Tiberius replied. "I haven't heard of [Pantheons], but... their existence would explain a few things."

"Such as?" Cassandra asked with a frown.

"The surviving New Gods didn't make war between themselves, outside of Lycaon and Alexandria," Tiberius explained. "If the Cetus is correct, then the wolf-god formed a separate [Pantheon] with his pack. It is possible that Alexandria, Orgonos, Asterius, and the other New Gods who prevailed during the *Anthropomachia* formed a similar alliance between themselves to avoid conflicts."

"I don't know about the New Gods, but [Pantheons] are a thing, yes," Nessus said, causing everyone to look at him. "Though saying that they prevent conflict is misleading. The Olympians bickered all the time, it's just that their disputes were codified."

"Like the patronage of Athens, or the Judgment of Paris?" Agron asked, crossing his arms. "Athena and Poseidon held a contest to determine who would become Athens' patron in the first case, and in the second, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite let a mortal decide who would get the Apple of Discord."

"Exactly," Nessus replied with a nod. "Trials by champions were also common. All of this to say, oh my captain, that a [Pantheon] does not prevent disputes. It only makes them indirect or forces parties to follow an established framework."

"Which is an argument for us," Agron shrewdly pointed out. "If the Cetus can't backstab our captain..."

Nessus remained skeptical. "It all depends on the framework set by the [Pantheon] in question. I mean, for a group of bloodthirsty monsters, human sacrifice contests could look halfway civilized. And a [God] willing to let a Cetus inside its [Pantheon] doesn't strike me as peaceful. For all we know, Typhon the God-Eater himself might be behind it."

"I could always ask to be allowed into the [Pantheon] and see its framework as a condition to join Hybris," Kairos said. "If we ever decide to ally with it."

"More seriously, oh my captain, look at the creature's name." Nessus raised his arms theatrically. "*Hybris*. Pride before a fall? Don't you see the problem?"

"Our ancestors thought they could overthrow the gods and take their thrones," Agron said with a shrug. "They succeeded. It's only pride if you fail."

"They also drowned the world they were trying to conquer." The satyr slouched on his chair and put his hooves on the table. "Just saying, this sounds like a lot of trouble for uncertain gain. I say we either take the merfolk on their offer, or better, get paid by both sides and go on our merry way."

Cassandra looked at her previous captain with a worried frown. "Kairos, do you remember the last time we sacked a city?"

"How could I forget?" The pirate king replied grimly. The deaths that resulted still weighed on his mind.

"We came back with plunder, but the city-state of Orthia sent a fleet back. Hundreds perished... myself included." Cassandra joined her hands with a grim expression.

"Orichalcos is not a city-state, and we do not have a phoenix's feather to use anymore. Even if destroying the capital will cripple their empire and Hybris pretends otherwise, we can't rule out the possibility that merfolk remnants will have the means to take revenge on us."

"With far more resources and far less to lose," Nessus added.

"I'm sorry Kairos," Cassandra finished while shaking her head. "This situation reminds me far too much of our failed alliance with Mithridates to my liking. I'll have to vote no."

When she put it that way...

"I would rather share a bed with a mermaid rather than a Cetus," Nessus said. "In both senses of the word."

"You will have more chances with the latter than the former," Andromache scoffed at the satyr. "The fish look down on us, and offer their table scraps."

Agron nodded. "We could trade with the mermaids for a thousand years, and we wouldn't get a hundredth of this city's wealth. Our leader is called the [Monster Reaver], and allying with monsters is what we do. It has worked well for us so far. The mermaids offer us almost nothing, I say we take it all. Maybe we'll get [Legends] out of it too."

"I don't trust anyone nostalgic of the Old Gods, my other half," Andromache said to Kairos with disdain. The more time she spent in Orichalcos, the more she hated the kingdom. "And if I could study their piece of the trident, I might find a way to disrupt the Poison King's."

"We might gain a lot of wealth in the short-term *if* we succeed," Cassandra said. "And even if we do, this means letting the Aysseans become the dominant power of the depths and making an enemy of the merfolk. They will never forget."

"Good," Andromache replied with a cruel smile. "Let them remember what happens when they don't treat us as equals."

Having heard their arguments, Kairos turned at the only officer who had yet to take a side. "Tiberius?"

"I am torn, sir," the Lycean admitted. As the youngest and more inexperienced member of the crew, he sounded unsure if he should participate in the debate at all.

"There is no right or wrong answer," his captain encouraged him.

Tiberius joined his hands together. "On one hand, if the Cetus is genuine, then we have the most to gain by allying with it," he said after a moment of thoughtful consideration. "No more attacks on the surface would save countless lives each year, and usher in a new era of trade. However, so long as the merfolk and their rivals are locked in an endless stalemate, neither can turn their eyes to the surface. If the Aysseans prevail, Orichalcos will no longer act as a buffer state between us and them. I am not certain the immediate benefits will outweigh future costs."

"So you suggest walking away?" Agron scoffed.

"No," Tiberius said while shaking his head. "I would leverage a current position without committing to either side."

"What do you mean by that?" Kairos asked, curious.

"The Aysseans and merfolk have been at war for centuries." Tiberius smiled at his superior. "You, sir, can currently serve as a middleman between them."

Cassandra's eyes lit up. "We could act as mediators."

"This may be idealistic of me, sir, but I have seen you reconcile former foes and form strong bonds with unlikely allies," Tiberius continued with a smile. "I know you can do it again."

He had that much faith in his commander? It warmed Kairos' heart, though the Travian captain didn't feel as confident.

"It will be a waste of time," Andromache said with a snort.

Kairos couldn't help but agree. "This war for the ocean has lasted since after the *Anthropomachia*. If peace is even possible, it could take us years of effort to draft a consensus."

"I understand the difficulties, but I believe we should at least try," Tiberius insisted, though his argument turned out to be more pragmatic than idealistic. "It costs us nothing, while a war is exhausting. The conflict will not be won in one battle, and if we join either side, then we will be associated with it for years. And if peace negotiations fail, then we should walk away."

"You would turn down our agreement with the merfolk?" Cassandra asked, very much surprised. "You helped negotiate the deal arduously."

"My father taught me that one's decision should be guided by reason and divorced from emotions, Lady Cassandra," Tiberius explained. "I have no problem altering my conclusions if facts change. That trade agreement is not worth fighting a whole [Pantheon], especially one aware of our coming. We came to Orichalcos as a brief stop on our path to Vali and then the den of Orgonos, not to get embroiled in a potentially lengthy foreign conflict. We already have our own campaign to prepare."

Though he was inexperienced, Tiberius had enough wisdom to temper his idealism with pragmatism. His advice was the soundest so far, though Kairos remained undecided.

He had to make a choice though. With such a split, the captain's vote would be the deciding one.

Allying with Hybris would pay better, but it would come with heavy risks and result in a city's entire destruction. Though Kairos was no stranger to battle, he still remembered that fateful season he raided Orthia's coasts and watched his men massacre civilians. In the end, it led to a disastrous battle where almost all humans perished, and only the monsters rejoiced.

Kairos had promised to change that day, and make sure such a scenario wouldn't happen again. If Tiberius was correct and peace was an option, the pirate wanted to give it a chance.

Somehow, Kairos began to think about what other rulers he had met would do.

Mithridates would probably find a way to sow discord and worsen the conflict. He would weaken both sides until one begged for his help, allowing him to extract larger concessions and spread his influence. He would stop at nothing to gain an advantage, and in the end, he would ruin both sides and come out on top.

Sertorius always conditioned his help to a marriage alliance, though the merfolk royal family's inbreeding made it impossible. As such, he would probably take the Cetus' deal, as joining a [Pantheon] was the next best thing. The Lycean didn't care about bloodshed or the means employed to secure victory; only whether or not he could trust the other party to serve his family's ambitions.

Medea would have walked away, and probably Queen Thalestris too. This wasn't their war.

"I need a moment to think this through," Kairos decided, an idea crossing his mind. "I need to check something first."

Life as a shark was strange.

Everything felt different. He could sense every tiny vibration in the water, see as well in the darkness as in the light, and hear with incredible acuity. He also noticed invisible forces he couldn't explain, strange electrical currents pointing north and south.

But the smell was the most spectacular. He could smell blood all over the city, from the tiniest gashes to the stench of slaughterhouses. It aroused him too. Though he kept his human mind even in animal form, his new body's instincts remained.

[Skinchanging] unseen from the merfolk had been difficult, especially since he had to leave his clothes and weapons behind at the *Foresight*. But once Kairos had fully transformed, nobody paid him attention. Sharks were common in the merfolk's capital city.

But just in case...

You upgraded [Turncoat 2] to [Turncoat 3]. [Hero] Ranks and below will be unable to read your class information either with spells or Skills. Additionally, you can choose to present false information of your choosing.

Perfect. Kairos used [Observer] on other sharks, trying to see how they were called. Perhaps there was a naming theme.

Tigershark, Mousson the Jaws, Seteeth Swims-the-River, Selachii of the Black Ocean, Sharky...

Weird names, huh? Kairos tried to find one that would fit. Sharkander, Sekolah...

"Sharknado," the disguised human muttered, suddenly inspired. "Sharknado it is."

It sounded just about right.

To outsiders, Kairos of Travia had become *Sharknado of the Tempest Sea*, a [Common] shark traveler. Unless he crossed paths with a [Demigod], nobody should identify his true nature.

The Travian didn't have a particular plan in mind. He simply wanted to get a feel of the merfolk's society. He had only interacted with the royal family and their guards so far, and he doubted that they represented the whole civilization's population.

Kairos ended up spending minutes swimming through the marvelous streets of Orichalcos without speaking to anyone, amazed by the city's beauty. Every building seemed made of nacre. Statues of Poseidon, Oceanus, and the old sea gods decorated canal-like streets, alongside colorful anemone trees and shining jellyfishes.

Kairos eventually made his way to a lovely park built inside a coral reef. Clusters of anemones, seagrass, and strange flowers formed an undersea forest, while merchants had set up an open bazaar, using large seashells as stands to present their wares. Some sold pearls and shell luxuries, others alien plants the Travian had never seen before. His [Poison Brewer 3] Skill identified many of them as high-quality toxin sources, and his [Barter 3] provided him with rough prices. The Travian was tempted to return to this place in human form and do some shopping.

The park also had a zoo of sorts, with strange net-cages of coral keeping large creatures kept in. The merfolk had quite the menagerie of exotic squids and fish in reserve, one of them so colorful Kairos mistook it for a peacock.

Then he noticed her. She occupied the largest cage of the menagerie.

The mermaid was more 'fish' than woman though. Though she was no larger than any other member of the merfolk, her lower half belonged to a sleek killer whale rather than a fish, while the upper body's skin white as snow with long dark hair floating in the waters. A choker covered in magical glyphs squeezed her throat, while four merfolk guards kept her cage.

Kairos didn't see any way to approach her without alerting the guards, and so could only watch from afar. The captive mermaid seemed lost in a deep meditation, but when the Travian used [Observer] on her she opened eyes as black as the darkest night.

Nausicaa Seastar

Legend: Silent Death (Elite)

Race: Mermaid (Cetacean)

Class: Rogue (Assassin, Raider, Duelist, Hunter)

Level: 40.

Cetacean?

Though a crowd of merfolk swam through the bazaar, some stopping to look at the menagerie, Kairos could tell that this Nausicaa was looking at him directly. She had sharp senses, and cold eyes.

Kairos could recognize a hardened killer when he saw one.

Unwilling to draw attention to himself, the Travian moved towards the nearest stand, where a merfolk merchant sold expensive sapphire and coral jewelry.

"Hello," Kairos declared in ancient Greek, having realized that most merfolk could speak it. Even now, the Travian still didn't understand how he could speak when transformed into a shark. His research had shown that these animals had no organ meant for vocalization, and yet he could still form words. He blamed the [Beast Tongue 3] Skill for this oddness. "I'm new here, could you give me some directions?"

"Certainly," the merchant replied with politeness. He was quite handsome, with long black hair, a beard, and an expensive shirt made of woven scale. "What are you looking for?"

"I've heard foreigners from the surface arrived in the city recently," Kairos said. "I've never seen any landwalker, so I wondered if you could show me where they are."

"The landwalkers?" The merchant's expression instantly deflated. "Yes, I've seen them near the docks. Trust me, they're nothing impressive."

Something in his tone immediately bothered Kairos. "You don't seem to like them."

"The landwalkers steal our fish in shallow waters, and now they're going to move into our cities?" The merchant snickered. "We are the heirs of the ocean. Their ships? They're *trespassing*. Truly, one day they're going to push us too far."

"What does this mean?" Kairos asked, trying to sound neutral.

"I don't say we should get violent, but... well, it's going to happen if they don't understand their place."

"I hope it won't come to that," the Travian [Hero] replied while hiding his disdain, before glancing at the captured merfolk. "And what did she do to end up in a cage?"

"Oh, her?" The merchant raised an eyebrow. "She's a slave."

Kairos froze. *Like above, like below*, he thought with disgust. "She is for sale?"

The merchant laughed. "If she were, I would have made her my pleasure slave long ago! No, shark, she is a slave of the state. She was the champion of some barbarian tribe that refused to civilize, and even *bred* with Cetae. Killed fifteen of our bravest soldiers. His late Majesty Triton the VIIIth decided to parade her until his son Triton the IXth grew old enough to claim her [Legend]."

Barbarian tribe? "I thought Orichalcos ruled all merfolk?"

Kairos must have been too pushy or obvious in his questions, because the merchant started looking at him suspiciously. "Where do you come from?" he asked, probably using an [Observer] Skill to analyze him. "Sharknado of the Tempest Sea?"

"I come from the harsh stormy seas of the north," Kairos replied evasively, doing his best to sound like some backward peasant ashamed of his own ignorance. "It's my first time moving to a big city."

Thankfully, his high [Charisma] and [Speech] Skill made his words sound believable. "Oh," the merchant said, before giving his visitor the most arrogant, haughtiest smirk Kairos had ever seen. "You come from the *provinces*?"

Kairos would have punched him in the face, if he had arms.

"Well, unfortunately, my naive friend, there are always primitive tribes refusing to civilize," the merchant said while glancing at the captive. "A shame I can't buy her though. Barbarians with a drop of Cetus blood are the best lay. My wife is all stiff and doesn't make a sound, but that one... she's still half-wild."

Kairos had heard enough. "Thank you for the directions."

"Be sure to come back," the merchant said with a smile. "This stand doesn't pay for itself."

"I'll come back," Kairos replied, before sending one last glance at Nausicaa. The captive mermaid kept staring at him in silence, her expression indecipherable. Eventually, she closed her eyes and returned to her meditation.

I will return, Kairos thought.

The Travian could have sworn he saw a thin smile forming on the mermaid's lip, right before he lost sight of her.

Kairos asked a few questions here and there, and learned a great deal.

Though he found it humiliating, presenting himself as a naive country shark yielded results. The common merfolk were actually quite friendly and willing to enlighten him.

"There are always barbarians who refuse to accept Their Majesties' divine right to rule the depths," a florist mermaid explained to him, while tending to an anemones bouquet. Kairos was frankly tempted to buy one for Andromache, though he unfortunately lacked the money to do so. "Some even ally with the Alysseans, or even reproduce with them. Our kingdom has been steadily pacifying these groups, or pushing them back into the Alyssean territories. Don't worry, they haven't been more than a nuisance in centuries."

"I couldn't imagine merfolk making alliances with Cetea," Kairos said. "I wonder if it means we could make peace with them."

"Make peace with the Alysseans?" The botanist smiled kindly. "They ate our last king, and the one before."

Yes, that did make things harder. "You think the war will never end?"

"We've had a hundred truces with the Cetae, but none that lasted more than a decade. Some fresh quarrel always breaks out and opens the old wounds." The florist shook her head. "Call me a cynic, but no, the war will continue until the sun dies out."

Kairos sighed in despair. He had asked the same question half a hundred times so far, and always received the same answer.

"Don't look so unhappy, kind shark," the florist said. "Even if war is an inherent part of the world, it is still a beautiful place."

"Have you ever been to the surface?" Kairos asked, changing the subject. "I heard the world above ground holds many wonders."

Her smile brightened, and she adjusted her crimson hair. "I visited the island of Vali in the past," she said, much to the infiltrated pirate's surprise. "I met someone there. A human sailor. I visit him every moon."

"That's great."

"It's hard though, and not just because of our anatomies," she said. "We live worlds apart. He is a very powerful human, while I am as lowborn as they come. He says he could provide me with accommodations if I come to live with him on the surface, but... I don't know."

"Go for it," Kairos encouraged her, thinking of Andromache. "Even if the barrier between different species is often hard to climb, love makes it worth it."

She chuckled. "What do you know of love, brave shark? But I thank you for the advice."

"The humans?" The merfolk trader asked with a frown. "I trade with them all the time on the surface. They aren't that different from us. Some are friendly, others best avoided. Like the Travians. They're more likely to hunt you than trade. I was the first person to be surprised when they sent a delegation to our capital."

"I heard things have improved since that griffin king took over," Kairos said.

"You mean the Sellsword King? I heard the same, but I'm not sure if he will last. He has made many enemies, some in this city too. Friends in the royal guard told me that he threatened the queen herself with that Scylla of his. He made a mistake, and he will pay dearly for it."

The fake shark stiffened. "What do you mean by that?"

"Some of my colleagues among the merchant guild take money from the King of Pergamon, a rival power, to scout his island and keep him informed of his movements," the trader admitted, causing Kairos to freeze in place. "I'm sure word of this delegation already reached that man's ears. He's a [Hero]-Rank [Spymaster] after all."

Kairos' gaze turned dangerous. "You think he will scout the royal family for an alliance too?"

"Maybe?" The trader shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not privy to Their Royal Majesties' council. If I were, I would advocate neutrality. The surface's wars do not concern us, and conflicts are bad for trade. Our feud with the Aysseans is already a constant drain on our finances, we don't need another."

"Would you rather make peace with them? The Aysseans?"

"I would, but the decision-makers and landowners will never agree to it. They have too much to lose, and the Aysseans ask for too much."

Kairos glanced at the royal palace overshadowing the city. "You think this surface embassy will lead to anything lasting?"

"Honestly?" The trader shook his head. "No."

As it turned out, even the merfolk had bars.

Kairos had never seen anything like this. Patrons gathered in an amphitheater of granite, 'breathing' colored bubbles full of alcoholic beverages, drugs, and the ultimate luxury, pure bottled air from the surface. The staff kept these strange 'drinks' in storage thanks to hermetic amphoras, and the undercover Travian counted at least twenty different kinds.

"Humans?" The barmaid asked, a pretty mermaid who reminded Kairos of his mother Aurelia. Same steely gaze, but very different words. "They're the worst. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not a speciesist or anything... but if they could rule themselves, why are they always at war? They're primitive."

"Maybe it's a question of wealth and culture," Kairos argued. "If they had the same riches as us—"

"No, they can't help it, it's in their blood. They can't manage their own lives. It's like asking slaves to run our households. Some people are born to lead, others to obey."

Kairos strongly resisted the urge to bite her throat off. "If so, then how do you explain the *Anthropomachia*?"

"Don't tell me about it. That's what happens when you let the landwalkers do as they wish. Disaster after disaster." The mermaid grinned. "But it's going to be alright."

Kairos squinted. "What does that mean?"

"The oracle predicted it. A second sun will rise above the sea, and herald the return of the old gods. They will bring back order to the surface, you will see." The smile that followed sent shivers down Kairos' fin. "You will *see*."

The undersea temple was full, when the white whale began her sermon. The seastone pillars were so high that Kairos might have called them towers on land, and yet so many fish, sharks, squids, and merfolks had gathered that he struggled to squeeze inside.

Safe inside a bubble more than thirty meters in diameter, a whale with porcelain skin and silver eyes faced the crowd. She wore a crown of gemstones, and colorful tattoos of waves and fish all over her body. The animal oozed ancient wisdom and serene grace.

Kairos was careful not to come into the creature's line of sight, though he quickly used [Observer] on it.

Pherusa, Oracle of the Waves

Legend: Voice of the Depths (Demigod)

Race: White Whale (Leviathan)

Class: ???

Level: ???

Unlike Nausicaa, the whale paid the Travian no mind. Kairos suspected that he didn't stand out much among the other thousand or so visitors looking at her.

"I bear word of our future, carried by the waves!" The great whale spoke in Travian, or so Kairos heard. She probably had a translation skill of some kind. "An old ember will give rise to a new sun, as foretold by the prophecy! A light that will clear the skies, and banish the darkness!"

Her voice sounded like a song, and a jolt of lightning filled Kairos' bones. Though the words should have unsettled him, he was almost carried by the passion in her words, the glorious future she predicted.

No, Kairos thought, trying to focus. *No, this is not me.*

[Charmed] negated by [Leadership 3].

"Those who came before will live again!" The whale continued her sermon. "Tartarus will be empty, and the usurpers will be cast down from their ill-gotten thrones! The world that was unmade will be reforged! As it was, so shall it be!"

The temple erupted in a joyful chorus, with only one shark remaining silent amidst the cheers and the shouts.

Kairos came back to the *Foresight* at nightfall.

The monstrous ship waited for him, anchored near the crew's breathable quarters. Though Kairos used [Invisibility] and [Sneak] to slip past the guards patrolling the perimeter, the living vessel seemed to stir at his presence. It had sensed its master, and welcomed him home.

"You knew it would come to this, didn't you?" Kairos whispered.

The ship's bow opened to reveal hungry jaws full of Cetean fangs. It reminded the Travian of a grotesque, monstrous smile.

The *Foresight* was a [Monster Reaver]'s ship, and had developed a personality to match.

Kairos approached the dome protecting the deck, and noticed Cassandra waiting for him with his [Anemoi Spear], [Golden Fleece], crown, and clean clothes near the ship's bow. The *Foresight*'s captain crossed the translucent substance separating the waters from the deck and shapeshifted back into a human halfway through.

"So?" Cassandra asked with a worried face when he dropped his [Invisibility] and landed on the deck.

She had already guessed his answer by the icy look of his face, and dreaded it.

"They think we're beasts," Kairos said while putting on the clothes. "Let's not disappoint them."

At the end of the day, he was a pirate king, and his people's well-being came first.

14: The Old Gods and the New

The *Foresight* swam through the lightless abyss.

Cassandra stood at the ship's bow, grimly lighting up the way with her fork. Yet even her ghostly flames could only illuminate the world a few meters away. Sometimes, the crewmates noticed glittering forms in the sand below the ship. Most were the remains of bronze naval rams, the only parts of sunken ships that survived centuries beneath the oceans. Others belonged to half-buried helmets.

A naval battle had taken place above, a long time ago.

Kairos looked over the deck, though he remained careful not to cross the dome separating him from the sea outside. Andromache had learned the [Water Resistance] and [Water Breathing] spells, but he was in no hurry to move outside his ship's confines. This was a dangerous region of the Sunsea.

Others sensed it too. Nessus had been eerily silent and tense since the journey's start, his hands firmly on the ballista. Cassandra's eyes snapped from the left to the right without warning, as if she saw forms shifting in the darkness. The archers and warriors kept their weapons drawn, and Rook anxiously followed after Kairos without a word.

They could sense *something* watching them.

Andromache joined Kairos, putting her arms around his left one and her head against his shoulder. "Something bothers you, my other half," she said, sensing his worry. "And it is not the sea monsters around us."

"You can see them?" Her lover asked.

"No, but I can tell they are here." She glanced at the dome above her head, and perhaps the sky beyond. "The prophecy haunts you."

She knew him all too well.

"The phoenix's feathers could bring back the dead," Kairos said with a frown. "If it is a vessel of Helios' power..."

"It could revive the titan, and with the power of the planetary alignment, open the doors to Tartarus," Andromache confirmed his darkest fears. "Free whatever crusty old gods your kindred did not purge and unleash them on the new world."

Kairos had expected as much. He wondered why the phoenix had flown to the Necromanteion of all places, but now it made sense. Aglaonice had mentioned a door to the Underworld at the dungeon's bottom, one that could open under the right circumstances.

"Do you think Circe foresaw her own demise?" Kairos asked. "Could she intend to return to life?"

"Whether she intends to return or inflict one last act of spite upon the world does not matter, my other half," Andromache replied with an angry scowl. "We need to stop this plan either way."

"I concur," Kairos said, though he couldn't hide the sadness in his tone. "No matter the cost."

Kairos had tried to contact his wife and tell her of his plans through his [Idol], to no avail. Julia was too busy dealing with Orthia and the Thessalan League. He had asked his mother to transfer the information to her daughter-in-law, as he wanted her opinion on how to proceed.

The treaty with the merfolk would only become binding if the *Foresight's* crew assisted in destroying Hybris' temple, so no oath prevented them from switching sides... but still, Kairos' decision left a sour taste in his mouth.

"The merfolk population are clearly pro-old gods, and their rulers have the power to sink entire islands," Kairos said. "I hope we can stop Circe's plan, but it is likely that the merfolk will take measures to support it. The fact that they already scouted Chronia and Histria on Mithridates' behalf means that they could launch an attack on us anytime."

There were pro-surface dwellers among the merfolk... but they were a precious few. Changing their culture would take years, and Kairos couldn't wait that long. The planetary alignment would take place next year, and he had a military campaign to manage.

In the end, the safety and prosperity of his people came first to Kairos. Even if it came at the cost of another civilization. Even if it meant allying with monsters and lesser evils.

"You do not have to convince me, my other half. I know that all too well." Andromache frowned. "You are trying to convince *yourself*."

"I am," the pirate king admitted. "When I became a [Hero], I swore to change Travia. To move us away from our raiding ways, and help us transition into a civilization that could coexist with its neighbors. And here I am, planning another sack. I feel like a hypocrite."

"You can't befriend the whole world, Kairos," Andromache replied with cynicism. "No more than you can make peace with Mithridates. Compromise is not always an option."

"I suppose not," Kairos admitted. "But I hope we can limit civilian casualties to a minimum."

Somehow, that sounded like a vain hope even to himself.

"I see movement, oh my captain," Nessus said, his fingers tightening on the ballista's trigger.

Kairos had sensed it too, through his [Seamanship 3] Skill. A naval hazard approached the *Foresight*, as Cassandra's light revealed sunken structures. The looming shadow of cyclopean walls of corroded brass reflected in the dark waters, along with the remains of colossal, collapsed domes.

They had reached the ruins of Atlantis.

The *Foresight* stopped swimming at this point, instead, it used its crab legs to walk on the seafloor. No sound echoed with its footsteps; the place was so dead, so devoid of life, that not even an echo could spread through its empty streets.

Kairos could distinguish very little of the city's landscape even with Cassandra's light, but he saw enough. Broken spires that once rose all the way to the heavens, now covered in sea parasites and rotting shells. Sunken statues representing bulls, horses, and dragons, defaced and dismembered. Collapsed stone arches overwhelmed by alien, underwater vines black as night.

The ship continued its journey past a second row of defensive walls, this time made of tin. Parts of the structure had collapsed, while the seafloor had long filled the moat. The *Foresight* entered through a breach and passed before a gigantic, humanoid statue partly buried in sand. Though the waters had long destroyed its stone visage, the fact it wielded a broken trident revealed its nature as a lost [Idol] of Poseidon.

This place was as great as Orichalcos once, Kairos thought grimly, as the ship walked below a bridge rising more than forty meters above the seafloor. The remnants of marble stairs and walls gave observers an idea of the monument's past glory. *Gravestones are all that remain.*

And corpses too.

"Here, Kairos!" Rook said, pointing at something on the seafloor. "I see a fish!"

Kairos looked down, noticing a scaled tail sticking out of the sand below them.

It wasn't a fish.

Kairos almost flinched, he recognized the bisected lower half of a merfolk guard. Blood flowed out of it, tainting the dark waters red.

The Travian noticed movement in the darkness, and the monsters surrounded the *Foresight*.

One came from the left, a cyclopean fish with an eye shining as brightly as a star in the darkness; four long tentacles writhed from its flanks, while its black body glistened like oil. Another monstrosity approached from the right, a chitinous hybrid of a lobster and a dragon with pincers strong enough to shatter walls. A ship-sized squid emerged from the sand near the *Foresight's* bow, the arcane symbols on its body unnerving to look upon, and Kairos noticed the movement of glittering spheres above the ship's dome.

A whole band of Cetae had ambushed the ship.

Kairos' men immediately raised their weapons, but their captain calmed them with a hand signal. The Travian warlord remained as silent as a tomb, showing no weakness while the Cetae observed the *Foresight*.

"You were followed."

The voice echoed across the dead waters, although the speaker made no sound as it moved. A serpentine shape slithered above the bridge, anglerfish lures glittering in the darkness as the beast moved right in front of Kairos. The remains of a humanoid arm stuck out from between two jaws.

"These were not escorts though.... but spies, stalking you from the shadows." Hybris coiled on the seafloor like a serpent, its tail sweeping sand away. "Did you notice them?"

"We suspected their presence, though we had no way to get rid of them without alerting Orichalcos," Kairos replied. "I thought they would turn away once we entered dangerous territory."

"They should have. None of them will escape this place alive." Hybris' lures flickered. "Have you made the right decision, Kairos of Travia?"

"We will not side with the merfolk," Kairos declared, while Andromache and Rook eyed the [Demigod] warily. "The laws of hospitality no longer bind us to them."

The Cetus licked its fangs in pleasure, swallowing the remaining arm of his victim. Kairos found the gesture grimly symbolic. "Good, I would loathe to eat you. But this begs another question... will you leave this abyss, or shall we hunt together?"

Cassandra approached Kairos to whisper in his ear. "Are you sure?" she asked, still worried about this turn of events.

"Almost," Kairos replied, before focusing on Hybris. "I will need more information on what joining your [Pantheon] will entail, before making a decision."

Thankfully, it seemed that Kairos' refusal to side with the merfolk had mollified Hybris' suspicions. "Understandable," it said. "What do you want to know?"

"You invited Andromache and me to join, but not Cassandra, who has been my loyal ally through thick and thin," Kairos declared. The flattery made his former first mate smile. "Why?"

Hybris glanced at Cassandra with its many eyes, and her smile instantly faltered. Though she was no stranger to fighting the Cetae, she had never faced one as powerful, nor with such a large escort.

"The name of our [Pantheon] is the *Térastheon*," Hybris explained. Kairos translated the term as *Monster gods* in ancient Greek. "Our purpose is to unite all monstrous [Heroes], [Demigods] and [Gods] into a single alliance, and make our voice heard. Your human companion is neither a monster, nor a monsterkin."

"So you would accept Typhon and Lycaon, but not dear Cassandra?" Nessus asked mirthfully, as the satyr left the ballista to back his captain up.

To Kairos' surprise, Hybris shook his head. "His long imprisonment has driven the God-Eater to madness. He now seeks to devour all things and rule a world of the dead, so that none may imprison him again. Neither his consort Echidna nor his many children would escape his hunger. As for the wolf-god, he formed his own [Pantheon] whose goals do not align with ours."

"So it's all a matter of practicality to you?" Cassandra asked.

"Yes," Hybris replied bluntly. "Do not misunderstand us, Cassandra. We don't accept pureblood humans among our [Pantheon] because we are the gods of the beasts and outcasts. You do not belong to either."

This didn't please Kairos. "Still, turning down valorous [Heroes] based on their race does not bode well with me."

"It's alright, Kairos," Cassandra said. She didn't take the rejection personally. "I follow you, no matter whether we belong to the same organization or not. Truth be told, I don't think I would have joined this group, even if I could."

"Who leads this [Pantheon]?" Andromache asked shrewdly.

"You will meet her soon," Hybris rasped. "She must give you her assent before you can even join." The Cetus' lures shone brighter than usual, causing Kairos to immediately receive a notification.

You have been invited to join the [Térastheon Pantheon]. Warning: once a [Pantheon] is joined, you cannot leave it until it is disbanded.

Information about the Pantheon appeared, revealing its leader's identity.

Térastheon

Purpose: Unite and protect all monster races.

Key virtue: Henosis.

Founder: Gaia, Mother of All.

Entrance benefits: Blessing of Gaia + access to the [Henosis] Legendary Skill.

Restrictions:

- *Members cannot go to war with each other. Disputes must be resolved through the duel of champions, or arbitration.*
- *Defensive alliance. Members must provide resources to defend the Pantheon if it is threatened.*
- *Recruitment is done through co-option. Any existing member can invite a potential recruit, but their admission must be validated by a [God] Rank. Only monsters or individuals with monstrous blood can join.*

Gaia.

"Gaia?" Kairos said out loud, causing Nessus to scowl. "Didn't she perish during the Anthropomachia?"

"The Earth Mother is the world itself, and only its destruction may kill her," Andromache said. "I suspected her involvement. She has a long history of supporting her monstrous children against whoever ruled the cosmos at the time."

"My father Poseidon buried her beneath the waves and few worship her nowadays, but Mother Earth's power remains," Hybris added. "I will summon her into my temple, and she will either enlighten or deny you."

"Can I come?" Rook asked, wings expanded. "I can't let my human wander too far!"

"You may follow your partner and his mate," Hybris replied. "But no one else."

Nessus suddenly opened his mouth, but Kairos didn't understand the words that came out. The tongue was deep and guttural, with some elements of ancient Greek.

To Kairos' shock, Hybris flinched as if he had been hit by a sledgehammer. The Cetus immediately answered in the same tongue, he and the satyr conversing. Nessus crossed his arms as he spoke, his face serious.

"What is this tongue?" Kairos whispered to Andromache and Cassandra.

"I don't know," Cass replied with a frown. "I've never heard something like this."

Andromache had more to say, recognizing the language. "They speak Atlantean, though I cannot understand half of what they say."

Atlantean? "And the other half?" Kairos asked.

Andromache only answered with a suspicious scowl.

After a short exchange, Hybris examined Nessus warily, and reached a decision. "You can come," the Cetus said in ancient Greek, though with clear reluctance. "But do not expect a warm welcome, ghost."

The satyr responded to the threat with a casual shrug. "Doesn't matter either way."

Hybris uncoiled and slithered on the seafloor. "Follow me," it asked before moving deeper into the sunken city.

While the *Foresight* walked after the Abyssan warlord, escorted by the other monsters, Kairos frowned at Nessus. "You owe us an explanation."

"I suppose I do," Nessus replied, his voice deep and serious. "I knew this day would come."

"I understood little of your conversation," Andromache said with a frown. "But I gleaned one thing at least. At one point, you called him *'cousin.'*"

The satyr chuckled joylessly. "We're a pretty large family. Or we were, back in the day."

Kairos' eyes widened, as an idea formed in his mind. *Hybris is a scion of Poseidon*, the Travian thought. *If they are cousins, then that means...*

Kairos thought back of all he had learned from Nessus, all the way back to this night when the phoenix hatched. He remembered the rituals which the satyr had organized, the few hints of his past he had given, and suddenly it all clicked. "Nessus, are you—"

"You figured it out, didn't you?" Nessus interrupted Kairos. "Took you long enough."

"How is it even possible?" Kairos asked. Andromache's eyes widened, as she probably guessed his true identity as well, while Cassandra remained in the dark. "You don't have a [Legend]."

"I swear I will tell you everything soon, oh my captain," Nessus promised. "And... I hope we can stay friends afterward."

"You traitor!" Andromache snarled with fury, raising her scepter at his head threateningly. A flame formed at the tip, the Scylla barely holding herself from incinerating him. "This is all your fault!"

"Hey, calm down!" Cassandra interposed herself between the Scylla and the satyr. "Explain yourself!"

"I'm guilty of many things, dear nymph, but treachery is not one of them," Nessus said with an eerie calm. Death didn't scare him, perhaps because he had already come back from the other side before.

"You helped the egg hatch on Travia," Andromache accused the satyr. "You knew what it contained!"

"Yes, but not what the witch intended to use it for." The satyr shrugged. "Now I do, and I don't like it. One apocalypse was enough, thank you very much."

Cassandra blinked, her expression twisting into a frown as she put the two and two together. "We found you in a slaver's cargo hold," she said. "But it wasn't an accident, was it?"

"I never had luck with pirates," Nessus said with a smile. "Fate takes me to odd places."

"Will you turn us into dolphins?" Kairos asked, causing the satyr to chuckle. He had understood the reference. "Why reveal yourself now?"

"Because I know Gaia, and I do not trust her. She does not think as we short-lived creatures do." Nessus glanced at the seafloor with his lone remaining eye. The *Foresight* crossed a hole into walls of red metal, untouched by the abyssal waters. "I don't want you to end up castrated like Ouranos. Your wife would never forgive it."

The *Foresight* reached its destination before Kairos could interrogate the satyr further.

The living ship had walked into the very core of lost Atlantis, the ruins of an ancient palace. Once, it must have been a structure of dizzying height, with walls and towers as high as mountains... but like the rest of the city, only buried ruins remained. Five spires of glittering red metal formed a circle around a large crater of sand, each of them bent, broken, or slumped. Kairos recognized the material as the rare and precious orichalcum, which gave the mermaid kingdom its name.

A dome of air similar to the *Foresight's* one protected the site, though more than thirty meters in height. Hybris crossed into the dome like one would through a veil, followed by the *Foresight*. The monstrous escort remained behind.

The ship landed on the sand, Kairos, Andromache, Nessus, and Rook climbing down from the deck and stepping onto the ground below. The air was thick and rancid, smelling of sulfur and rotten algae. Hybris slithered on land like a snake, and almost as fast as in the water.

The group walked after the [Demigod] without a word. Andromache kept her scepter pointed at Nessus all the way to the temple, while the satyr glanced at the ruins with what could pass for nostalgia. The sand covered most of them, but Kairos noticed the remains of a marble bathhouse, and the collapsed walls of a great hall larger than most castles. The royal family of Atlantis once lived within them, before Poseidon buried the island beneath the waves.

A part of Kairos knew Orichalcos might end up looking the same way by the time they were done, and it filled him with melancholy.

A statue of Hybris oversaw this desert of stone and memories from atop a marble altar, as tall as the original. Shells made up its scales, pearls its lures, and rubies its eyes. Kairos' [Magical Knack] Skill identified the statue as the dome's source, and an [Idol].

Hybris stopped right in front of the altar, and coiled around it like a snake around its prey. "Mother of All," the sea monster rasped. "I bring you the new gods, and the old."

For a moment, only silence answered his call.

Then the sand started to move on its own.

The dust swirled before the altar, before rising up in the air and reaching the dome's summit. The sand coalesced into stone, forming the shadows of arms and legs.

Andromache lowered her scepter in silent awe, while Rook nervously moved closer to Kairos. The Travian [Hero] petted his best friend on the head to reassure him, as a gigantic figure cast a long shadow on them.

When every last grain of sand had at long last coalesced, the earth mother looked down on mortals with gemstone eyes.

Gaia was a creature of soil and stone, with skin as unblemished as marble and hair made of woven flowers. Roots and ivy grew down from her shoulders and all the way down her legs, forming a dress. Her feet melded into the seafloor, algae sprouting around them.

This woman of stone was no arousing beauty, but she exuded power and wisdom. Her very presence weighed on Kairos like gravity, as if his entire body struggled not to sink into the earth below. This was an entity as ancient as the world, the mother of the old gods, and the one who helped mankind cast them down.

Before Kairos knew it, he was on his knees, as were Andromache and Rook. The Travian didn't remember bowing; his body and mind had done so on their own, unable to resist her mere aura. Even using [Observer] on her gave Kairos a headache, the screen so bright it almost blinded him.

Gaia, the Earth Mother

Legend: Mother of All (God)

Level: ???

The stone woman appraised the group with an unreadable face, her eyes focusing on Nessus most of all.

"Great-grandma," Nessus said casually. He alone among the group hadn't knelt. "How have you been?"

"Better than you, my poor Dionysus," the Earth Mother said, her words as thunderous as a rockfall. Even so, Kairos sensed the pity in them. "This life hasn't been kind to you."

"No more than death, great-grandma," the satyr said and shrugged. "No more than death."

15: The Many Deaths of Dionysus

Dionysus was dead before he was born.

He remembered dreaming in his mother's womb, the seed of Zeus Almighty bestowed upon mortal soil. As Dionysus grew month after month, so did the divine spark within him. The power of an emerging myth, recognized by Fate.

A [Legend].

So great was the power of the [Gods] back then, that their children always inherited a [Legend] of their own. Like a flower could produce buds, their sons and daughters were always born [Demigods], their myths an extension of their sire's.

Dionysus' divine fire could not be hidden, least of all from the jealous Hera. Each bastard of her husband was a slight on her honor, and for that they had to die.

Her intrigues bore fruit, and on Mount Meros, Dionysus' mother Semele asked her lover to reveal himself in his full glory. Divine lightning struck her, and burnt Dionysus within her womb.

Even now, millennia afterward, he still remembered the pain of his stillbirth. The searing flames burning his mother's flesh, and the cold, skeletal fingers of death tightening around his neck to squeeze his last breath out of his lungs.

But a power greater than even Zeus spared him.

As the Lord of the Olympians cradled his son's corpse, Dionysus breathed for the first time.

Such was the birth of Dionysus.

It would be the first, but far from the last.

His second death was even more painful than the first.

Dionysus had reached the age of seven by then, under the care of forest nymphs and his foster father, the satyr Silenus. The curious child had wandered off, and slept in a valley between three hills.

Except that when morning came, the hills woke up and one of them caught Dionysus within his palm.

"Free me, you ugly beast!" Dionysus complained. The creature that held him was a giant of stone almost eight meters tall, with moss for a beard and grass for hair. "You'll regret this!"

"Who dares call Eurytus ugly?" the colossus roared, showing teeth made of old stone.

"The blood of Zeus!" Dionysus replied with pride. "King of kings!"

"And we giants are the blood of Gaia, the Earth," another giant said. This one was made of carved granite with gemstone eyes. "We were old before your father was but a spurt of seed on Rhea's cunt!"

"You do not belong here, brat, whoever your father is," said the third giant, with ashen skin and fire in his veins. "This land belongs to us."

"The world belongs to Olympus!" Dionysus shouted back, before nodding at the clear, open skies. "My father's writ extends everywhere the lightning strikes!"

The ashen giant snorted. "I doubt that. More likely you are some stupid human brat."

"A human brat?" Dionysus was outraged. "Don't you recognize a god when you see one? I am a prince of Olympus!"

"A prince?" The granite giant snorted. "Zeus' victory over Kronos has made him a bit too cocky. Perhaps we should send you back to him in pieces, to teach him a lesson in humility."

"And there isn't a thundercloud in the skies now," the ashen giant said, before squinting at their captive with shrewd eyes. "But you are indeed of [Demigod] Rank, so there may be truth to your words. What is your mother's name, child?"

"Semele!" Dionysus declared proudly. "The most beautiful woman in the world!"

Or so he thought. Though he never had seen his mother, he was certain she must have been a blinding sight to behold, to catch the eye of almighty Zeus! One day, when everyone recognized him as his father's son, Dionysus would journey to the Underworld and raise her from the dead. She would be so proud of him then!

"So you are not a child of Hera," the ashen giant said with a cruel, fiery smirk. "Good. She will shower us with favor if we bring you to her."

"No, no, Ophanion, I have a better idea!" Eurytus the stone giant chuckled. "The blood of kings of gods has power, it is known."

"Mmm..." Ophanion the ashen considered his fellow giant's words. "True. He is a prince of Olympus."

"Indeed, I am!" Dionysus raised his head with arrogance. "I am not without mercy. If you let me go, I will richly reward you when I take my rightful throne."

"Oh, we won't have to wait that long, young one," Ophanion the ashen said, before turning to his granite ally. "Clytius, fetch us the cooking pot."

The cooking pot? Did they intend to throw Dionysus a feast as an apology? But then Ophanion grinned cruelly, and the son of Zeus *understood*.

"Eurytus, you caught him first, so you pick the first choice." Ophanion glanced at the terrified Dionysus, savoring his fear. "The breast or the leg?"

A few minutes afterward, the giants tossed the horrified Dionysus into the boiling waters and ate him.

Dionysus screamed as the heat seared his flesh from his bones, and dissolved his eyes. But soon, the boiling waters muffled his screams and consumed his throat. By the time the giants pulled him out of the pot, the pain had made him pass out. The last thing Dionysus remembered was the sound of the cleaver rending through his leg's bones.

Darkness swallowed Dionysus, as the giants devoured him piece by piece in his sleep. Much later, he would learn that they had started fighting over who would get to eat the choicest part, the heart. Only this organ survived the grim feast.

When at long last, the last spark of divine fire within Dionysus faded, Death came for him. Icy fingers clutched the [Demigod]'s wayward soul.

I don't want to die. Dionysus would have let out tears, if he had eyes left to cry with.

"Do not be afraid," the shadow of death had whispered, almost soothing. "I cradled you in my own arms before your father did. It is better this way, believe me."

And yet, Fate was not done with Dionysus.

His heart started beating again, and the hand of death let his soul go in surprise. Dionysus felt his spirit imbuing a new vessel. He shook with new limbs, breathed with new lungs, listened with new ears.

And when he opened his new eyes, he saw a kind woman's gaze facing him, and sensed her warm arms holding him.

You have reincarnated!

"Mother?" Dionysus asked, his voice weak. He had never seen a face so beautiful, so warm...

"No," the woman replied, her gaze full of compassion. Her owl-like eyes shone like the sun, and a golden helmet covered her black hair. "I am your half-sister Athena. You are safe."

The memory of his death flashed in Dionysus' mind, and the child screamed.

The [Demigod] cried tears of fear and buried his face into his sister's bosom. His cheeks turned wet, and he soiled himself in dread as he remembered the cleaver, the teeth, and the boiling waters. Yet instead of pushing him aside, Athena only held him tighter.

"It's alright," she whispered kindly. "It's alright. You are safe. They cannot hurt you. No one can."

"Why?" Dionysus asked, refusing to let her go. "Why?"

"Because though you may not be one yet, you are destined to become a [God]. I have foreseen it." The goddess gently brushed his hair with her fingers. "[Gods] cannot die, Dionysus. They are beyond the rules that bind lesser creatures. Though mortals are bound to the earth that birthed them, cursed to live their short lives full of pain and misery, you belong in the eternal skies at our father's side."

Dionysus looked up at his sister, and she gently wiped his tears away with her finger. "Do you understand now, Dionysus?" she asked. "To take your place among us, you must become greater than the giants, stronger than any fiend, craftier than any sphinx. This is your destiny. One day will come when no one will threaten you again."

The young [Demigod] nodded.

He would never be weak again.

That night, his sister returned Dionysus to his guardians. He didn't speak a word, but somehow they knew. They all knew.

The nymphs showered him with gentle kisses and sweet pastries, but Dionysus cared for neither. Instead, he kept staring at the hills north of their camp. Which of them were slumbering giants, and the others harmless mounds?

"Young master, I am so sorry..." his foster father Silenus hugged his charge in sorrow and grief. The old, balding satyr wielded a drinking horn in his hand, and wept bitter tears of remorse. "I am so sorry... this is all my fault..."

"It is I who wandered away, Silenus," Dionysus said without emotion. "I should have listened."

It had taken his death to teach him this lesson: that though he might have been a prince of Olympus, others wouldn't acknowledge his title until he earned it. He had cried and perished like a helpless mortal, when he should have prevailed with a lightning bolt in hand like his father Zeus.

"I must become strong," Dionysus said, shaking. "But I... I can't forget. Everytime I look at these hills, I... I *remember*."

And the shadow always followed him, like a lion stalking an antelope. Dionysus could see it at the edge of his vision, always out of sight.

Seething. Hating. *Waiting*.

Silenus looked at his charge with sorrow, before offering him his drinking horn. "Take this, young master."

"What is this?" Dionysus asked.

"A cup of courage," his foster father said. "It will make you forget... and it will make you brave."

Dionysus carefully accepted the horn, and drank. The substance tasted sweet and sour both, filling him with joy. This night Dionysus danced until morning, before collapsing half drunk on a hill.

Afterward, he was never seen without a cup of wine in hand.

It was his third death that made him into a [God].

By this time, Dionysus was an adult, a man virile and strong. Some said that while wearing a cloak of lionskin and wielding his thyrsus staff, he looked every bit the spitting image of his father Zeus.

For years, he had fulfilled Quests and struggled to make mortals recognize his divinity. His travels had brought him to the ancient city Argos, whose people refused to acknowledge him. So he drove their women to madness, unable to even distinguish their own babies from wild beasts. If the men would not worship him, then their lines would die.

But the people of Argos had once done a favor to another son of Zeus, and called in the debt. A warrior clad in shadowy armor, with a shield representing a dreadful gorgon's head. One whose eyes held power.

Perseus had come to Argos' defense, and turned his [Aegis] against Dionysus.

A gorgon's power couldn't claim a true son of Zeus... but it could affect his retinue.

"Ariadne!" A horrified Dionysus watched on as his wife, his beautiful kind wife, turned to stone. Her golden hair turned grey, her warm hands cold as death. The divine winemaker attempted to lift her curse with spells and magic, to no avail.

"Now you feel an ounce of your victims' sorrow," Perseus said pitilessly.

"You turned my Ariadne to stone!" Dionysus angrily raised his staff as his rival [Demigod].
"Return her to me at once!"

His half-sibling remained unfazed. "Free the women of Argos from your curse, and I shall release your wife from mine."

Dionysus snorted. "I shall have my wife *and* my revenge. I am Dionysus, son of Zeus! I escaped the Lycurgus of Thrace, conquered India, slew the King of Thebes! Athens has bowed to my divinity, as did a hundred cities! All know me as a generous patron, who rewards faith with gifts!"

"And doubt with madness?" Perseus asked with scorn. "A true merciful god would have asked for patronage and offered gifts, as Poseidon and Athena did for Athens! Yet you rule through fear! The people of this city only *doubted* you!"

"They refused to raise [Idols] to honor me," Dionysus replied arrogantly. "I am a son of Zeus, born to rule. My greatness should have been obvious to mere mortals!"

"I am a son of Zeus from a mortal mother too, yet I do not pretend to rule mankind," Perseus replied. "Does your sinful arrogance know no bounds, Dionysus? Your mother was one of these mortal women once. Have you forgotten her?"

Dionysus' eyes burnt with anger. "I have not forgotten, no. I have not forgotten that my mother Semele was loved by Zeus himself, and chosen to bear a [God]! How dare you compare her to this common stock? Who could give birth to a god, but a goddess?"

"I see my words cannot reach you," Perseus said, before unsheathing his sword. "Perhaps defeat will bring you to your senses!"

Dionysus laughed and raised his thyrsus. "I have conquered Asia, and slain giants! I will master you too."

"We shall see," Perseus replied before raising his blade. The eyes of Medusa moved on his [Aegis] shield, glaring at Dionysus with hate and envy. "We shall *see*."

Dionysus charged with overconfidence. What could happen? A mortal could not slay a future Olympian. Perseus' weapon would shatter against Dionysus' skin, and the prideful city of Argos would learn humility.

And yet, he lost.

The furious Perseus battered the lord of drunkards, shattered his ribs, and pierced his skin with a cruel sword. His heroic will shielded him from [Madness] and [Terror], his [Aegis] shield from the thyrsus' blows. When the duel led the fighters to the city's lake and Dionysus fell into the waters, his blood tainted them red.

As his body floated down a river, Dionysus was brought back to his second death. The memories he had fought to suppress for decades and buried with wine flooded back to the surface. The cold waters suddenly felt searing hot; the sword wounds were like cleaver ones.

Am I... am I dying? Dionysus thought, as his vision blurred. But... a god cannot die... I... I cannot die...

His last thoughts were of his mother, waiting for him on the other side.

His mortal followers found his corpse near Delphi, where they had raised a temple. This city's people had shown him proper worship, and so he showered them with favors. Where the citizens of Argos had despised Dionysus, the people of Delphi had loved him.

They carried their fallen god to his own [Idol], praying for him, weeping for him, mourning him. Their voices reached Dionysus' spirit, making him linger on this earth. Though his body had perished, his soul refused to pass on. Instead, Dionysus latched on to his own [Idol], and watched his own funeral through eyes of stone. He watched on as his priests laid his body to rest in his own temple, and followers offered him prayers and offerings.

The dark figure that had followed Dionysus for years stalked the funeral procession all the way to the burial. When the mortals left the temple to let their dead god rest, only the hidden shadow remained.

"Who are you?" Dionysus' soul asked through his [Idol]'s lips, as the intruder stepped over his tomb.

The figure revealed itself, a cloaked, noseless man with black crow wings. His eyes were red like blood, his skin as pale as a corpse. His voice was low and soft, like a killer whispering one last word of comfort to his victim.

"Don't you know?" The shadow asked. "I am the last breath, the final whisper. I am the night of every sun, the darkness waiting beyond the twilight of years. I am the shadow of all living things. I am Thanatos."

The ancient deity smiled at the [Idol], but his mouth had neither teeth nor tongue. Only a gaping black pit of pure nothingness.

"I am *Death*."

If Dionysus' spirit still had a body of flesh, he would have shrugged. "You are not very good at your job, are you? I slipped through your grasp twice already."

"Third time's the charm," Thanatos rasped as he raised his hand, revealing fleshless fingers of calcified bones. He reached for Dionysus' tomb, to claim his soul for the Underworld.

But once again, his wish was denied.

Dionysus' [Idol] pulsed with divine light, and the dead [Demigod] heard voices.

They came from all around Greece, mourning him, praying for his safe return. His thousands of followers across the land prayed to his [Idols], the strength of their faith empowering his [Legend]. The divine fire of his myth grew warmer than the sun.

Dionysus' spirit howled in triumph, as his [Idol] turned from stone to flesh. The god's youth and vigor were returned to him, as a new body rose right above the tomb of the old. One with horns rising from his head, and the divine power of an Olympian.

You have reincarnated and strengthened your [Legend]! Your [Legend] evolved into [Inexplicable One]!

You upgraded your Personal Rank from [Demigod] to [God]. You can now progress up to level 100, and create your own [Pantheon]. You achieved [Immortality].

His followers' prayers and worship had turned him into a [God].

"Why won't Fate let me claim your arrogant soul?" Thanatos muttered to himself, as he stepped away from Dionysus' light. "You live, you die, you live again. Your immortality is the worst of them all, a false hope. I can feel your soul between my fingers, and yet it slips through my grasp."

"And I shall do more than escape your grasp!" Dionysus boasted with renewed confidence. He raised his hand, feeling the divine power course through his fingers. "What you have taken from me, I shall take back!"

And with the power of Olympus at his back, Dionysus called out for his mother.

The light in his temple grew blinding, tearing the very fabric of life and death apart. "No!" Thanatos panicked. "No, you fool!"

His feeble pleas fell on deaf ears, as a woman's soul manifested on the temple's ground. New flesh manifested from the aether to house her spirit. Her skin was as pure as porcelain, her hair, and her eyes were like gold. She was the loveliest creature Dionysus had ever seen, and when she looked at her son, tears of joy and pride rained down her cheeks.

And for the first time in many years, Dionysus felt happy while sober.

"Begone with you, crow," Dionysus mocked Thanatos. The shadow that had haunted the winemaker for so long no longer frightened him, for he had mastered life and death. "A mere [Demigod] like you cannot slay a [God]."

"No, I cannot." The shadow of death cursed Dionysus, before disappearing in a rain of black feathers. "I cannot."

The thrice-born Dionysus paid him no mind, and instead embraced his mother. He would free his wife from the stone, carry his mother to Olympus, and reunite with his father Zeus.

They would be a family at last, living forever in the skies.

His fourth death brought him down to earth.

Divine lightning shone in the skies, and rain poured down as he bled. His companion Silenus had turned to stone, alongside so many others. Warriors clad in steel cut his maenads apart with swords and spears, nailed his satyrs with arrows.

And his wife... his beloved Ariadne...

Her head had rolled on the grass a few meters away from Dionysus. Her killer slew her for the crime of shielding her husband.

And soon, his turn would come.

The curved weapon struck Dionysus again in the chest, tearing through his flesh and his very divinity. He recognized the blade as adamantine, the pommel as the Cyclops' handiwork. The divine fire within him weakened with each blow.

Warning, [Godslayer Khopesh] negated your [Immortality]!

Dionysus had tried to fight back and defend his flock, but the assassins had ambushed his retinue while they finished a feast in the valley of his childhood. The wine had driven the [God] mad with rage, but also made him sluggish and slow. The deity of drunkenness couldn't change his own nature.

Though Dionysus had killed dozens of these men, driving them to kill each other, collapsing the ground below them, or incinerating them with his thyrsus, more kept coming. Mages summoning mighty blasts of energy, archers raining acidic arrows, and warriors wielding fiery swords... an entire army had come to claim his head. They even brought the Gorgons with them.

In the end, this army's leader had overwhelmed Dionysus like Perseus before her. The [God]'s vision blurred as she raised her adamantine khopesh above her head, the blade whiter than even ivory.

She was some half-Greek warrior-queen of Egypt, a granddaughter of Zeus from her father's side. Her skin was dark, her hair darker, her eyes blue and cruel. Clad in golden, feathered armor, she was lovely, savage, and hateful.

"Kinslayer..." Dionysus managed to blurt out through his bloodied teeth.

"We were never kin, Olympian," she replied, her voice full of disdain. "It is time we humans take control of our own destiny."

"Father..." Dionysus pleaded to the skies, as lightning fell from the clouds. "Father... please..."

"That is not *his* lightning," the queen replied, as a dark mountain moved on the horizon. Only when the khopesh fell did Dionysus realize that it was a giant, serpentine leg taking a step.

Dread Typhon had escaped to challenge Zeus again.

And so Dionysus died, with a head cut and a heart full of fears.

As the blade tasted his immortal blood and severed his life's thread, a great cold filled his soul. His [Immortality] had been lifted, and the fire that burnt within him passed on to his slayer.

You have lost your [Legend].

When he perished for the fourth time, only the grim darkness awaited his soul.

That, and a grinning Thanatos. "I have been *waiting* for you."

"You..." Dionysos trailed off in rage and sorrow. "You are behind it all."

"Now, now, I only claim souls when the time has come. I bear no weapons, wage no war, raise no army. I can only whisper and advise." The ghoulish face of Thanatos turned into a ghastly, cruel grin. "When men asked me how to kill [Gods], how could I deny them?"

"You led them to us," Dionysus whispered, and death's envoy didn't deny it. "Why? You served Olympus too!"

"*Why?*" His voice changed from teasing to hateful. "You dare ask me why?"

Thanatos looked down on Dionysus with fiery eyes.

"Because I *hate* you."

His fingers grabbed the dead god's soul, holding it as tightly as if it were a body made of flesh.

"I am a shadow, a mirror, the reflection of life. I have existed since the moment Gaia gave birth, and I have hated you all ever since." His voice was deeper, fraught with fury. "I hear every breath, sense every heartbeat. I long for the peaceful silence from the time before Fate, when nothing existed. I long for the ending of all things, and freedom from my duty."

Dionysus looked into death's eyes, and saw the boundless rage within them. The hatred of a slave of Fate, envious of the living, but unable to lash out at them himself.

"I hate humans," the maddened primordial said. "I hate men and women. I hate the healthy and the sick, the faithful and the faithless. I hate all birds in the sky, and all fish in the sea. But of all the deathless [Gods], it is you that I hate the most, Dionysus. You, whom Fate granted the gift of endless reincarnation and the power to undo my great work on this Earth."

Thanatos opened his mouth, and Dionysus' gaze lost itself in the dark abyss between the primordial's lips.

"Now, the humans will bring death to the deathless. The Cyclops' weapons will pierce through the shield of immortality, and the arrogant [Gods] of Olympus will torment me no more. It will be a cosmic carnage. I will dance among the ashes and reap a harvest of immortals."

An eldritch power called Dionysus from within the dark abyss, inviting the lost god to close his eyes and fall, fall, fall...

"Starting with *you*."

And yet, his wish was denied once again.

An invisible force pulled Dionysus' soul back from the abyss of Thanatos' maw. None was more surprised than death itself. "The Fate System... will not let me take you?" His surprise turned to anger. "How? Your [Legend] is gone!"

Dionysus himself couldn't tell. Already he sensed his soul pulled back to the world of the living, away from the reaper's grasp.

"This power is not a Skill or a [Legend]," Thanatos realized, as his rage turned to hateful glee. "You are like me. An agent of Fate, a function of the world. Life to my death, light to my shadow... a shared torment."

Dionysus woke up again, right next to his own beheaded corpse.

His new body was weak and frail. The cold rain drenched his naked skin, making him shudder. The bed of grass below him offered no comfort, and the rancid smell of blood assaulted his nostrils.

You have reincarnated as a [Common] human!

Was this... was this how humans always felt? Dionysus thought. Even in his childhood, he had been born strong enough to break trees with his bare hands, and most weapons had bounced off his skin. *So weak and frail and fragile?*

Even standing up was a struggle, his legs almost collapsing when the ground shook below his feet. His knees trembled, and his ears hurt when the lightning struck above him. The rain had turned into a downpour, the skies so dark that he couldn't see. The air was choked with the taste of smoke and death.

His slayers had left, leaving only corpses and statues behind. Water and mud had started covering them, while the horizon looked bright red.

Fires.

Fires so great, even the downpour couldn't extinguish them. Gigantic shadows reflected in the distance among the flames, moving north towards their destiny.

Towards Mount Olympus.

"Mother, Father!" Dionysus took a step forward, but his foot slipped. The fallen god collapsed into the mud, face first. Powering through the pain and humiliation, the winemaker struggled to rise up again, to rescue his family and—

"Oh, I missed one?"

Dionysus froze, and quickly looked over his shoulder.

He immediately regretted it.

"Good," said the gorgon Stheno, the crimson snakes forming her hair spitting venom on the ground. Dionysus only caught a brief blur of her baleful visage, but it sealed his fate. "My collection was one statue short."

Her shining eyes met Dionysus' own.

It took centuries for his statue to break down.

He didn't know what freed him. Maybe the rain and wind finally destroyed the stone sealing his body. Maybe some adventurer party put him out of his misery when they attempted to take on Stheno. Maybe the gorgon released him on a whim.

Dionysus didn't feel anything while [petrified], but he wouldn't call it mercy. His mind had stopped functioning, neither registering the passage of time nor providing him input on the outside world. The fallen god had stopped thinking.

Oblivion terrified him more than death ever did.

His new life didn't begin as swiftly as the others. Instead of waking up as an adult, he awoke while his new mother struggled to push him out of her belly.

Without his [Legend], each new life would be lesser than the last.

When he emerged from her womb, Dionysus realized he couldn't feel his feet anymore. The lower part of his body felt deformed, and strangely warm.

*You have reincarnated as a **[Common]** satyr!*

Fate had a sense of humor it seemed.

"I cannot help you, brother."

The words echoed in Persephone's temple, spoken by her own [Idol]. It had taken Nessus years to find one, and make a successful attempt to contact his half-sister; the only close kin he had left from his previous life.

His second mother Echaria, a sweet human woman impregnated by some satyr rogue, had called him *Nessus*. Dionysus without the godhood. The irony, if only she knew.

Thankfully, Persephone's divine eyes had immediately recognized her half-brother... though the answers she provided him weren't to his liking.

"The power that returns you to life transcends my own," his half-sister explained. "It is Fate itself that brings you back, time and time again. For what purpose, I cannot tell. But so long as it remains unfulfilled, you shall walk this earth."

"If you can't free me from his curse, then can you bring back my Ariadne?" Nessus begged. "Silenus? My mother?"

The statue's expression turned into one of sorrow and sadness, crushing the satyr's hopes. "My [Legend] is a shadow of my late husband's. Though I inherited his duties, I cannot say the same for his powers. Reviving the dead, truly reviving them, is beyond my abilities. And truth be told... your loved ones' souls have long reincarnated. No one is waiting for you on this side."

Nessus was alone.

He felt as if a mountain had collapsed on top of him, or when his own followers buried him in Delphi. He tried to remember the faces of Ariadne, of his mother Semele. They looked like faceless shadows, as did his father, his half-siblings, and all the people Dionysus had taken into his care.

They only existed in his memories now. Even the [Dodekathēon] had perished.

Persephone looked at him with genuine compassion. "I am sorry, brother."

"Did they hate us that much?" he asked, his heart full of sorrow.

"Yes, they did."

"It's not fair," Nessus said, clenching his fists. "They took everything from us. *Everything.*"

"Was it?" Persephone asked with a frown. "Unfair? I would argue otherwise."

The satyr looked up at his sister's stone face. What he saw in her eyes shocked him. "You don't hate them?"

"Time has given me perspective, brother," Persephone said. "I have long asked myself why the mortals turned against us. I asked the same to the souls that ended in my domain, and learned from their answers. When gods threw fits, the mortals suffered. We expected—demanded—worship, when we should have worked to deserve it."

Your mother was one of these mortal women once, Perseus' words echoed in Nessus' mind. Have you forgotten her?

... yes, he had forgotten.

Dionysus had forgotten what it meant to be weak, that day the giants slew him. To live and die at the mercy of someone stronger than him. He had hated that feeling of powerlessness so much, this primal pain, that he buried it underneath cruelty, empty pride, and anger.

The gods had created men in their image, and humans had learned from them. The endless cycle of abuse had repeated itself.

If Dionysus had understood the truth of Perseus' words, could he have prevented this disaster?

Is this curse a duty I must fulfill? Nessus thought grimly. Or a punishment for my pride?

"What about Hades?" Nessus asked, changing the subject. "Zagreus?"

"Lycaon and his children devoured their souls," Persephone replied, her eyes blazing with rage. "So long as that vile wolf-god draws breath, they will remain trapped in his stomach."

"Can I help?" Though Nessus had never liked old grouchy Hades, his uncle had been fair with him. Dionysus owed him a debt for letting his mother Semele live again, and reincarnation didn't wipe it away.

"No. Not in your current state at least." Persephone marked a short pause. "But there may be a way to help yourself."

Nessus' head rose up in hope. "Which way?"

"Though you lost your [Legend], it does not mean you cannot gain another. You could become a [God] once more... a wiser one."

"I already asked the Moirae for a Quest," Nessus said, dejected. "They recognized me, and refused to help me. I did my time, they say."

"There are other ways to gain [Legends] than the Fates' Quests. The humans proved it, to our detriment. Fate is a powerful force, but not set in stone." Persephone's statue looked at her half-brother thoughtfully. "I may have an errand that could give you a new purpose."

"Oh?" The satyr couldn't suppress his curiosity. "Do tell, pale beauty."

"There is a soul missing from my domain. Though she perished at Orgonos' hands, Circe's spirit never arrived in my hall. I sense a larger scheme is at work, though I cannot divine

what." The [Idol]'s expression transformed into the pale shadow of a smile. "I do not believe Fate is done with you yet, brother."

Nessus had struggled to become a [God] before. He could do it again.

And this time, he would do it right too.

16: Among Monsters

"This is my story," Nessus finished his tale.

For a moment, neither Kairos nor Andromache knew what to say. The couple exchanged a glance, then turned to Gaia. Though it was still tremendously difficult to even look at her face, the ancient Earth Mother gazed down at Nessus with an immortal's compassion.

It was all true.

"This is a lot to take in," Kairos said while turning to Nessus. *And Persephone has been influencing our journey long before Achlys*, he thought. "But why didn't you tell us sooner?"

"Would you have believed me, oh my captain?" Nessus asked, and Kairos silently conceded his point. If Gaia and Hybris hadn't confirmed his tale, the Travian would have doubted still. "Besides... I don't want to be Dionysus anymore. I made a mess of that life, and I've been offered a fresh start. I intend to seize that chance and make things better."

Kairos could respect that. Though he was angry with Nessus for keeping important secrets to himself when his knowledge could have helped, he had proven himself a loyal friend and crewmate. The Travian captain couldn't blame him for trying to move on from his past and find penance.

Andromache reacted far less calmly, though for different reasons. In the end, she didn't care much whether Nessus was an old god reincarnated. A much more personal revelation bothered her.

"Circe's soul never reached the Underworld?" she asked with a cold, angry voice. "She is still alive?"

"No. Orgonos slew her and stole her godhood." Nessus put his hands behind his head. "But I'm the living proof the loss of a [Legend] isn't always the end. I do have a theory about what happened. The Necromantheion as it is now seems to honor Thanatos above the other Underworld deities, so we can presume his involvement. I told you the only way to earn the old fiend's support—"

"Is the promise of death and slaughter," Andromache finished, her eyes narrowing. "Circe's soul may be powerless, but her magical knowledge remains."

Kairos quickly put the two and two together. "Thanatos kept her soul to run the planetary alignment ritual?"

"If allowed to run its course, this plan will certainly cause a war between the surviving titans imprisoned in Tartarus and the new gods who rule in the current era." Nessus chuckled darkly. "Maybe we'll get around to having a *Theomachia*."

The old gods and the new would tear the cosmos asunder. And whoever won, Thanatos would reap a new harvest of immortal souls. "But if you work for Persephone, why isn't she taking more direct action?" Kairos asked with confusion.

"Hades and Persephone never joined my old man's [Dodekatheon] [Pantheon]," Nessus explained. It was strange to hear him refer to Zeus himself so casually. "The lords of the Underworld formed their own separate group."

And members of the same [Pantheon] couldn't interfere with each other's activities directly... Nessus was Persephone's representative in the matter, a champion she could act through.

"This changes nothing," Andromache hissed with fury. "If the gods will not act, we shall end this ritual ourselves."

"My thoughts exactly," Nessus said, before glancing up at Gaia. "Will you let us do it, great-grandma?"

Kairos suddenly realized that both Gaia and Hybris had listened to everything without a word. The former didn't seem like she cared all that much, while the latter looked as thoughtful as a giant sea monster could be. "We are sorry for making you wait," Kairos apologized to them.

"I am as old as time," Gaia replied softly. Though Kairos and Andromache had managed to stand on their feet, the ancient primordial's voice made the Travian struggle not to kneel before her again. Her [Charisma] had to be sky-high. "A few minutes are nothing to me."

"Not to me, however," Hybris said, slithering away from his altar to approach Kairos. "This discussion has little to do with the present matter."

"I disagree," Nessus said while looking up at Gaia. "You helped Zeus overthrow his old man to free your imprisoned children in Tartarus. And when Zeus sealed the titans away, you tried to do the same with him. And now, we're plotting to keep the surviving titans imprisoned."

So that was why Nessus didn't trust Gaia? Seeing it this way, a conflict of interests seemed inevitable.

"I want my children to live free and walk the world with all creatures of the Earth, that is true," Gaia explained. "When your ancestors asked for my help in overthrowing Zeus, I forced an oath upon them. That they would free my imprisoned children. When mankind rose up in rebellion, they freed my unruly son Typhon, the giants, and even some of my beautiful titans. For a moment, I rejoiced."

Her expression soured, her colossal head turning at the dark sea beyond the dome of air protecting the ruined temple. Could she see the sky beyond it?

"And then, I looked upon the world left after the Anthropomachia. My son Typhon had been imprisoned again, and so many of my children had perished..." Gaia shook her head sadly. "I have seen too many of my descendants perish in costly divine wars. If you can find a way for my titans to walk the world peacefully, take it. But otherwise, I would rather have them imprisoned than dead."

So she wouldn't interfere with their attempts to stop Circe's ritual. Good. "Why do you sponsor the [Térastheon]?" Kairos asked.

Gaia answered with a motherly smile that reminded Kairos of Aurelia. "My husband Ouranos imprisoned my first children into my womb, because he found them repulsive... but to my eyes, they were all equally beautiful. I've had a soft spot for the creatures you call 'monsters' ever since."

"I approached the great mother with my ambition of uniting all monstrous deities under a single banner, and she granted me her blessing," Hybris declared with pride.

"The times when a single [Pantheon] ruled the cosmos are over," Gaia said. "I would rather have many of them coexisting. Even Prometheus created his group, to welcome peaceful deities."

"Hey, why didn't they invite us?" Rook asked, finally finding the courage to speak. The question had bugged Kairos too.

"Prometheus' prophetic abilities dwarf even my own," Gaia mused. "No doubt he had predicted another destiny would fit the two of you better."

That crafty father of mankind... Kairos thought. Did he foresee this conversation? The more he heard, the more the Travian realized that invisible forces conflicted over mortals' fate in the background.

"You said some of our foes formed a [Pantheon]?" Kairos asked Hybris. "Can you give me more details?"

"Mother Gaia was not the first Protogenoi I approached with my plan for a pan-monster alliance," the sea monster admitted. "My first choice of a patron was Lord Pontus, the avatar of the seas. Unfortunately, he had recently formed a [Pantheon] of his own, one that wouldn't welcome monsters in its midst. The [Diadochi]."

Kairos recognized the word as an ancient Greek term for *successors*. "The successors of whom?"

"Of the Olympians," Hybris answered with a grunt. "Your foe, Mithridates, joined it."

"I can imagine what that poisonous [Rogue] promised sea-loving Pontus to gain his support," Nessus said grimly.

To expand the sea, and sink more land beneath the waves. No wonder Mithridates managed to get his hands on a trident piece. "Why didn't he let you in his [Pantheon]?" Kairos asked Hybris. "You wanted to sink the surface too."

"Though we respect him as our distant ancestor, Lord Pontus prefers the merfolk, the nymphs, and the beautiful creatures of the depths to us Alysseans," the Alyssean [Demigod] said with a grunt. "Lord Pontus also wants to restore his worship among the surfacers, who long ago turned to Poseidon and then the New Gods. He knows that your kind despises the Cetea, and does not want to be associated with us in their mind."

"Pontus supports this [Pantheon] in hope of gaining adoration," Gaia added. "I created the [Térastheon] to give my monstrous brood the power to carve their own place into this world. Even through violence, if needed."

"I understand," Kairos replied. "But I would rather defeat my enemies by making them my friends, rather than by killing or imprisoning them."

Gaia looked bemused. "Is that a jab I sense, mortal? There is a place for diplomacy, child, but if everyone was willing to compromise, wars wouldn't exist."

"I never said otherwise," the Travian pointed out. "But monsters have always used violence as their first resort, alienating potential allies and feeding a cycle of hate. I'm looking for *coexistence*, not *extermination*. Even if I join the attack on Orichalcos, my grief is with the merfolk's current culture, not the species as a whole. I will not participate in a war of extermination."

Hybris grunted. "Innocent blood will paint the sea red, even if we restrain ourselves."

"But it can be kept to a minimum." Kairos' hand tightened on his spear's grip. "I want to be a ruler, not a warlord. If that makes sense."

Gaia appraised him for a moment, her gaze as heavy as a mountain. It took Kairos a herculean force of will to face it, and even then he couldn't read the goddess' expression. This creature might have looked *humanoid*, but she had never been *human*.

"Is that your wish too, Andromache?" Gaia finally asked, turning her gaze at the Scylla. "You spent centuries slaying mortals who would bother you."

"I did, Mother Gaia," the witch replied while straightening up. "It is a struggle to restrain my hunger. To maintain balance between the monster Circe made of me, and the woman I was."

"But you would rather suffer than take the easy way."

"Yes," Andromache said with a firm nod, before exchanging a warm glance with her lover. "Though I will gladly devour these arrogant fish in Orichalcos, I have grown to enjoy the company of some mortals. Other creatures, like our birds and even that insufferable Sphinx have made similar choices. Though monsters are seen as the enemies of all, it does not have to be."

Though her expression remained mostly stoic, Kairos noticed a half-smile on Gaia's lips. "I see your condition gave you some insight... and this is why you and your human mate would make great additions to the [Térasthreon]. Voices of reasons to balance the hot-headed among my children."

Hybris looked up at the ancient deity. "So, Mother of All, will you accept them?"

"If they choose," the primordial deity replied.

"You could always try to stay independent, oh my captain," Nessus said. "Become a [God] on your own lonesome and create your own [Pantheon]."

"Are you trying to make us turn back, old ghost?" Andromache asked.

"No, I'm just pointing out other roads to take," the satyr replied. "Or it wouldn't be a choice."

Kairos considered Nessus' proposal, before quickly dismissing it. Though the Travian wished to ascend, like all of those who claimed a [Legend], he was not arrogant enough to believe he might live long enough to reach that status without support. Few became [Heroes], and fewer ascended to [Demigods].

By the time Kairos became a [God], he probably wouldn't need to create one in the first place. If he took Gaia and Pontus' example, [Pantheons] were mostly for the benefit of weaker creatures.

Finally, Kairos faced many enemies. Mithridates and his allies intended to conquer the Sunsea, while Thanatos and Circe plotted its destruction. And then there was the not-so-small matter of Lycaon...

They simply couldn't fight all these threats on their own.

"What will joining this [Pantheon] entail?" Kairos probed. "I understand that we will have to join a defensive alliance, and that conflicts between us will become indirect."

"A member of the [Térastheon] can ask others to help in their battles, though assistance is only mandatory if the [Pantheon] as a whole is challenged," Hybris explained. "In short, if you ask for help in attacking your foes, each member can decide whether to join you or not. But if one foe threatens multiple members of the [Térastheon], then this will be considered a challenge to the whole [Pantheon] and we will mobilize."

"I will not tolerate infighting either," Gaia said. "If you face a dispute, I will either arbitrate it, or you will settle things through champions. In exchange, you will receive a unique Legendary Skill associated with the [Pantheon]. As an aspect of the world, I can also petition the Fate System to grant you a boon upon joining. Skill Points. An increase in one of your stats. A unique Skill."

"Oh, will I get it too?" Rook asked, wagging his tail when the Earth mother nodded. "Yes!"

Andromache's eyes lit up with hope. "Could you lift my curse?"

Though the Scylla had probably expected it, Gaia shook her head. "At the beginning of time, the Fate System forced order upon the primordial Chaos and shaped our kind, the ancient Protogenoi. From my essence, Fate crafted my husband Ouranos, and from Nyx's the likes of Thanatos and Hypnos. Unlike the likes of you mortals, we Protogenoi and Personifications are fully beholden to the Fate System. While as aspects of creation we cannot truly perish, our ability to influence the world is... limited."

"Is that why you never attempted to take down the likes of Zeus or Kronos directly?" Kairos asked.

"Indeed. I can only affect the fate of the world indirectly, either through my children or agents." Gaia glanced down at Andromache. "I cannot circumvent Fate's decrees. If you

received a Quest promising you freedom from your curse, then I am forbidden to interfere with it. Nor can I free you from your immortality, Dionysus."

While Andromache clenched her jaw, Nessus crossed his arms. "Could you at least explain what's causing it?" the satyr asked.

"This universe of ours is torn between an age-old conflict between two cosmic forces: the formless Chaos, and the Fate System's order," Gaia explained. "It may be that your reincarnation is caused by one or the other. Perhaps even by their battle itself."

"So you don't know either," Nessus said with a sigh.

"I suspect that you are the counterpart to Thanatos, the eternal spirit of life. Your existence as Dionysus may not be the one where it all began, but only the first life you remember."

Andromache scowled at the setback, so Kairos put a hand around her waist and pulled her closer. The witch rested her head against his shoulder. "What do you want?" Kairos asked her softly.

"I want to cast the fish's city down," she replied angrily. "I want Circe's soul in the palm of my hand, so that I may torment it for all eternity. I want my curse lifted, so that I may find peace. And above all, I want allies to see this through."

So they were in agreement.

"We accept," Kairos said.

While Nessus remained silent and Hybris showed his teeth in a twisted parody of a smirk, Gaia appeared unsurprised. "What blessing do you wish for, mortal?" she asked.

"Can we know which Stat you will raise?" Kairos asked shrewdly. "Or how many Skill Points will we get? Or what the Legendary Skill will do?"

"No," Gaia replied. "I petition the Fate System, but I have no control over its choice. Your decision will also affect your [Animal Companion], Kairos."

"It's alright, Kairos!" Rook said. "I trust you. Whatever you choose will be for the best."

So this was a gamble all the same. A Legendary Skill was tempting, but its random nature worried Kairos. As for a Stat Rank-up, it could either increase a key ability like [Charisma], or one he didn't use much like [Strength].

Skill Points though were always useful. Kairos could shore them up to raise a Stat he had chosen, and most importantly, increase his [Idols]' power. Listening to Nessus' ascension tale had taught the Travian a valuable lesson: people's faith had power.

Enough to turn a dead [Demigod] into a true deity.

"I will take the extra Skill Points," Kairos decided. A boring choice, but a practical one.

"I wish for a Stat Rank-up," Andromache demanded. "I will take my chances."

"So shall it be," Gaia answered, her eyes shining.

A golden glow swallowed Andromache and Kairos whole, as the two moved closer to one another. Rook joined them too, standing proudly at their side like a ferocious guard hound. Monstrous shadows surrounded the group from all sides, turning their hungry maws in their direction. They were a carnival of dark beasts, some with wings, others with fins, and so few with legs.

Kairos recognized a few among them. The monstrous maw of Charybdis the devourer, the slithering form of a serpent woman, the eyes of abyssal monsters lurking at the ocean's bottom. A serpent eating its own tail, a three-headed giant, and dancing daemons. But it was Gaia's own shade that stood above them all, while Hybris' form slithered at her feet.

Kairos and Andromache each cast a shadow of their own. The Scylla's shade represented her true form, roaring hound-heads, and mighty tentacles; Kairos' was stranger, a chimera with wolf-legs, great griffin wings, and a hydra's countless serpentine heads. Rook's own shade didn't change much, but it grew to a colossal size, like a true king of griffins.

They fit right in among this assembly of nightmares, and the beasts welcomed them.

Kairos felt it long before the notification arrived. The sensation of joining something greater than himself, of forming an unbreakable contract similar to his marriage agreement to Julia.

You have joined the [Térastheon] [Pantheon]. Only death or the will of Fate can release you from your bonds.

You earned the [Henosis (Hero)] Legendary Skill. You can now access racial Class Specialization regardless of your species, so long as you meet the other requirements such as Stats, necessary Skills, achievements, or Character Rank. Additionally, you can identify an individual's [Pantheon] with [Observer] or similar Skills.

You have been blessed by [Gaia, Mother of All]. You gained 20 Skill Points.

And the [**Henosis (Hero)**] Skill immediately paid off.

You unlocked the [Moonblood] and [Telchine] Class Specialization.

Moonblood.

The beast within him had made its presence known.

When the light died down and Kairos returned to the temple, he found himself holding hands with Andromache. The Scylla wore a satisfied smirk; perhaps she saw joining a [Pantheon] as some sort of vindication for her suffering. Where Circe had cast her out, the new gods had accepted her in their midst.

There would be no turning back now.

You gained a level (total Fifty-One) and 3 Skill Points.

"So?" Kairos asked his consort. "Satisfied?"

"[Magic], my love," Andromache replied with a satisfied smirk. "From A to A+."

Really? Kairos thought it had been higher, but then again, he had to pay 30 SPs to move his [Charisma] from B+ to A.

"Ooh, 10 Skill Points!" Rook wagged his tail. "I can finally take that sweet [Magical Claw] Skill!"

"I hope you won't regret your choice, oh my captain," Nessus replied with a shrug.

"They will not," Hybris replied with triumph. "A feast awaits us."

"It is time you explain to us your plan for Orichalcos," Kairos said with a frown.

"Of course..." The monstrous Cetea coiled like a serpent. "Though it is my [Idol] that maintains the dome of air around us, the power it channels is not my own."

"When Kronos castrated my husband Ouranos, he did so on a physical and spiritual level," Gaia said. "His power over winds had grown aimless, undirected. This allowed the Anemoi gods, whose spear you bear, to assume control over the four winds."

"This place was once a temple dedicated to Ouranos' power, before I claimed it for myself," Hybris explained. "I have drained and stockpiled its power... and thanks to your spear, I can finally direct it."

Andromache immediately understood what the Cetus had in mind. "Once, the sky came down each night to unite with the earth..."

"As the merfolk sank islands beneath the waves," Hybris said with a burst of hideous laughter, "we will bring the sky to them."

17: Riding the Storm

The *Foresight's* crew prepared for war.

Once their business was settled, Gaia had sunk back into the earth from which she came, leaving the other [Térastheon]'s members to plan the assault as they wished. Though she probably had more than enough power to destroy Orichalcos on her lonesome, she couldn't interfere more than she already did.

"I will watch you from afar," she had said, before collapsing into dust. "We will meet again."

Afterward, the *Foresight* had walked to Hybris' altar, with the crew informed of Kairos' plans. Though some like Cass and Tiberius clearly would have rather walked away from the conflict, they started preparing all the same. Officers distributed fire rods, Andromache blessed the warriors with protective spells, Agron encouraged the men with songs, and Rook paraded before them like a mascot.

Hybris had gathered an army of his own, one that put Kairos' to shame. Monstrous toadmen with obsidian spears, Karkinos siege engines, amphibious Cetae, sea spiders the size of carts, twisted automatons made of seashells, colonies of eels coiling into the shape of a colossal humanoid... their battle lines stretched on as far as Kairos' eye could see. Each of these creatures could threaten a ship's crew or a coastal town, and Hybris brought thousands of them.

Even surface superpowers like Lyce or Alexandria would have struggled to repel such a force back into the depths. Their sight made Kairos' crew uneasy, some of the warriors observing the creatures as if expecting them to turn on the surface-dwellers without warning. Only their captain's promises had calmed them.

"I truly hope you won't regret this, Kairos," Nessus whispered to his captain as they oversaw the monstrous army. Hybris was singing ancient spells on his altar, laying the groundwork for the ritual. "We can't turn back now."

"I know," the Travian replied, a System Screen opened before him. He had reviewed his new subclasses and Skill for an hour, trying to make sense out of them. "I've always considered myself a bridge between humans and monsters. I can't deny half of who I am."

"I suppose not." The fallen god crossed his arms. "I'm surprised neither you nor Andromache told the others about my true nature though."

"You chose to share your tale with us," Kairos reminded the satyr with a genuine smile. "I would be a poor friend if I spread your secret life story without your consent."

"So we're still friends?" Nessus sounded relieved. Deep down, he had grown to care for the *Foresight's* crew. "Even knowing I'm one of the old gods you despise so much?"

"I don't despise the old gods, only some of them." Kairos had the utmost respect for the likes of Prometheus and Heracles in particular. "Whatever you were in the past doesn't matter. Who you are now does. You had my back for many battles, and I trust you."

"Thank you... my friend." Nessus chuckled. "Why do I have the feeling we will end up sharing a temple one day?"

"Because we will," Kairos replied. "Above that, how do you suggest I develop my cult?"

"Taking godhood seriously, now that you've got Gaia's ear?"

"Your tale changed my mind," the Travian confessed. "I thought cults were more of a vanity project, but yours allowed you to ascend from [Demigod] to [God]." Ascending through the Ranks meant greater power, and thus the ability to better protect his homeland and fledgling kingdom.

"My conversion method involved lavishly rewarding those who bent the knee, and inflicting calamities on those who didn't. This behavior got me killed twice over." Nessus let out a bellowing laugh, as if his death was something to joke about. "I doubt you would return from that, oh my captain."

So did Kairos. "So I should focus on earning people's adoration, rather than demanding it?"

"Exactly. Do it the heroic way. Save the kingdom to get the princess' hand rather than the other way around, if you catch my drift. Some people will be ungrateful whatever you do, but most will remember... so long as you proselytize. Or else you will end up like Perseus."

Kairos raised an eyebrow. "He must have found it unjust to see you ascend instead of him."

"Persy was pissed, yes, but he should have seen it coming. He considered cults an arrogant venture, and preferred to rule Mycenae as a just king instead. Though he had done more for Greece's safety than I ever did, he did not promote his deeds." Nessus put his hands behind his head. "If the snake is genuine and you make peace with sea monsters everywhere, you should spread the word. The only thing worse than death is oblivion."

Kairos would take that advice to heart. "Do you think [Animated Idols] would help with that?"

"Yes and no," the fallen god answered. "They will help when you become a [Demigod]. As a [Hero], they will only animate to protect themselves or worshipers, or under very specific circumstances. I would still take the Skill, as I'm sure you'll figure out a way to make it work."

Kairos considered how to use his SP wisely. He had twenty-five of them, so either enough to heavily invest in new abilities, or Rank-Up one of his lesser stats. The ones he wanted, [Intelligence] and [Luck], would each consume his entire point reserve to move from B to B+. With a battle on the way, Kairos considered it ill-advised.

Versatility is a strength in itself.

*You sacrificed 3 Skill Points to purchase the [**Animated Idol**] Legendary Skill. Your [Idols] can move and act on their own like mindless automatons. You can set the activation conditions at will, though the [Idol] will automatically animate to defend itself from attacks. You cannot directly control the animated [Idol], and they can only complete simple tasks.*

*You sacrificed 3 Skill Points to purchase the [**Enthralling Image**] Legendary Skill. Your [Idols] generate a pleasant feeling of joy in those who look at them. Additionally, your worshipers gain a morale boost around your [Idols], including resistance to mind-affecting effects such as [Terror]. Due to your [Legend], this will also affect monsters.*

Kairos examined the activation conditions, and found out that animated [Idols] were quite limited. They could be asked to follow a certain creature, attack specific people, or guard areas, but nothing more complex. "Nessus, you will set the non-combatants and [Crafters] among us to create [Idols] of me," he ordered his friend. "Nothing too complicated. Crude statuettes would work."

"These ruins have plenty of available material," Nessus said while glancing at the stone and metal walls that survived their time underwater, "but they won't help us much in battle. I suppose we can always make your [Idols] too cute to harm."

"They won't help as fighters," Kairos conceded. "Instead, they will serve as walking sources of healing and improve troop morale. My Skills might also attract additional monster reinforcements to protect them."

"I believe you are more likely to find defenders among the army here," the satyr said, "but I admit your strategy has merit. Since your [Healing Altar] Skill can cure people up to three times a day, this could decide the fate of multiple battles."

A few minutes afterward, Kairos' officers gathered to give their report.

"We are ready to march at your command," Cassandra said, though she clearly would rather leave the ocean's depths behind them. Her [Fork of Nemesis] seemed to have regained some of its luster. Perhaps it smelled blood in the water, and the Alysseans' grudge.

Andromache's staff glittered with power. "I have cast so many [Water Resistance] spells, I could recite the incantation in my sleep."

"Better safe than sorry," Agron shrugged. "We shall see if my flames can burn below the sea. Any new Skill that could help with it, Kairos?"

"Maybe that new [Telchine] subclass," the Travian answered. The three Skills it offered ran the gamut from sinister to tantalizing.

"I earned it as well, my love," Andromache said. "The Telchines were fiendish children of Tartarus and Nemesis. Sea daemon spawns of hell and vengeance."

"I never heard of them," Cassandra said with a frown.

"Among their exploits, they could summon the poisonous waters of Styx to turn lands barren and poisonous," Nessus added. "They did it so often that good ol' Zeus struck them all down with thunderbolts. None of them remain to this day."

"They also wielded maleficent sorcery, and crafted powerful weapons," Andromache said with a fiendish smirk that showed her fangs. "Including Poseidon's trident."

Kairos squinted in skepticism. "I thought the Cyclops crafted it?"

"They did, yes... but every great blacksmith has assistants, my other half."

Destructive and poisonous creatures with a link to Poseidon's trident... Kairos started to see why he had unlocked the subclass. It had probably been exclusive to the original Telchines, making it impossible to access without [Henosis (Hero)]. Since the [Hero] favored poison and trickery, this specialization appealed to him.

The *other* subclass though...

"I don't have any insight on [Moonblood] though," Nessus confessed.

"I have," Tiberius said with caution. "It is a [Werewolf] Class Specialization for pack leaders. Lycean Questors are trained to hunt them down, especially since..."

"Since?" Kairos asked, as his aide-de-camp hesitated.

"Since most [Moonbloods] are priests of Lycaon, sir."

A heavy silence followed, as the implications dawned on Kairos.

"Are the Skills interesting though?" Nessus asked, trying to stay positive.

"[Lunacy] will allow me to influence emotions depending on the moon's phase," Kairos said. "[Wild Hunt] should improve the power of my pack, and [Wolfstrength] my own. Including that of my werewolf transformation."

"But you don't have one," Cassandra pointed out the obvious. "So how would the Skill affect you?"

"Maybe you'll just gain a weakness to silver." Nessus mused, causing Kairos to raise an eyebrow at him. "What?"

"Silver doesn't affect werewolves anymore than any normal beast." His mother Aurelia could touch silver coins like any other woman. "I do not know where that folklore comes from, but the only supernatural weakness of werewolves is susceptibility to [Beastslayer] effects."

The only silver Kairos had to worry about was the one coming from Mithridates' mines.

"What about [Wild Hunt]?" Agron asked, interested in the possibility of gaining more power for himself. "How would you strengthen us?"

"By biting all of you," Kairos replied.

A heavy silence answered his declaration, and the Travian warlord realized that the way he worded the proposal made it sound... questionable.

"I knew it would happen," Nessus said, adopting a pose that Kairos found positively obscene. "Spending too much time around my beautiful body has made you lust for me. Can't wait to get a sweet taste of ol' Nessus, can you?"

"My, Kairos, how bold of you," Cass added with a coy smile, a hand on her waist. "I thought you would contain your greed from now on?"

Even Andromache couldn't resist making fun of him. "Where haven't you bitten me already, my other half?"

Kairos smiled joylessly. "That's not funny."

Only Agron gave the proposal serious thought. "Can a minotaur become a werewolf? I never say no to extra strength, but I can't picture it in my mind. Unless..." A shrewd smile formed on the minotaur's mouth. "Would wolf howls count as music to my [Skald] abilities?"

"Sir, I *strongly* advise you against purchasing any [Moonblood] Skills," Tiberius said with vehemence. "Besides the risk of contracting Lycaon's curse, public use of these abilities will not bode well with your alliances in Lyce. The mere fact you unlocked this Specialization at all will be seen with fear and loathing."

"Agreed, the potential power is not worth the risk," Cassandra said with wisdom. "Especially since Lycaon already tried to make you contract the curse before."

Kairos remembered that misadventure very well. When Jason of Iolcus almost killed him in Achlys, the Travian had received apocalyptic visions from his werewolf ancestor... or what he assumed to be Lycaon. The risk of [Moonblood] creating a direct connection to the loathsome, evil deity frightened Kairos.

"Sorry Agron, there will be no wolf transformation for you." Kairos could use [Turncoat 3] to hide his new subclass, since he couldn't get rid of it, and would put off buying [Moonblood] Skills unless absolutely necessary. "The [Telchine] abilities look more promising anyway."

"I taught you the basics of magic once, my love," Andromache reminded him. "The Telchines were masters of Goetic magic, the sorcery of Tartarus and daemons. But though lesser than Theurgic, natural magic, it is a tool like any other, neither good nor evil."

Kairos supposed he had gone too far to turn back now. Considering the conflict ahead, he needed to throw his all in the conflict.

*You sacrificed 3 Skill Points to purchase the [**Stygian Curse 3**] Skill. You can summon a cloud of toxic miasma produced by the river Styx from your mouth. This miasma is [Poisonous] to the living, though you are immune to its effects. Additionally, you are immune to the negative effects of the five Underworld Rivers.*

*You sacrificed 3 Skill Points to purchase the [**Telchine Metalsmithing 3**] Skill. You have mastered Telchine metal-working. You can craft magical weapons, armors, and shields by infusing them with blood and secret spell formulas during the creation process. You can create items up to Rank 3. The more powerful an item, the greater its fabrication cost and the longer its crafting time.*

You sacrificed 3 Skill Points to purchase the [Telchine Sorcery 3] Skill. You have adopted the Telchine's goetic magical traditions. You can empower your gaze with the Evil Eye to inflict the following ailments: [Charm], [Blind], and [Drain]. The target must have a lower Charisma than yours and see your eyes to be affected, but the ailment is permanent unless magically removed.

Kairos wondered if he could get a hydra-related subclass in the future.

Once the preparations were done, Hybris gathered his allies and monstrous generals near his altar, to explain to them his strategy.

"The dome will join with the skies above, creating a corridor of air joining the seafloor and the heavens," the sea serpent rasped. "From there, it will expand to cover all of old Atlantis."

Including the merfolk's royal city. "So we are creating a giant whirlpool?" Kairos asked, his fellow [Pantheon] member answering with a nod. "With the entire region as its 'eye'?"

"This phenomenon will devastate the capital before we even attack," Cassandra pointed out with a grim face. "Thousands will die from the storm, and even more from asphyxia."

Hybris scoffed. "Millions will perish today," he corrected the human. "Once the capital has dried, our amphibious armies will march into it. By the time the spell ends and water returns, we will have conquered the land."

"Taking the city afterward should be easy," Tiberius said with some optimism. "The city's giant fish will all perish, and if the merfolk were good at land battle, they wouldn't have sent us here."

"Some of their [Elite] warriors and spellcasters will offer resistance, led by [Heroes] and [Demigods]," Hybris countered. "And the palace possesses a separate aquasphere powered by my father's trident. The royal family will call upon its power as soon as they can."

"They could disrupt our ritual with the shard," Andromache said, "though not immediately."

"Then we will strike the palace while the rest of the armies occupy the city itself," Kairos decided. "Our crew is better at taking positions than holding them, and the *Foresight* is a living siege engine."

"I hope some of them have [Legends]," Agron said with enthusiasm. His fingers instinctively moved to the axe around his belt, as if he could barely resist the urge to swing it.

"We will start now." Hybris turned to his fellow [Pantheon] members. "Kairos, Andromache, I want a word with you before we begin."

The human captain exchanged a glance with his consort, before dismissing the crew.

"The entire royal family must perish," Hybris rasped when the trio was alone around his altar. "*All* of them. Do you understand?"

Kairos flinched. "The current king is a boy no older than nine," he argued. Though his sister had proved vain and scornful, King Triton was a harmless, cowardly child. "Without his throne, he will be no threat to anyone."

Hybris' red eyes narrowed at his ally. "Nine or ninety, a surviving king will serve as a rallying point for the merfolk's resistance. We must decapitate their kingdom to tame it."

"We could keep him as a hostage," Kairos pointed out.

"The danger of him escaping is too great." Hybris observed the Travian [Hero]. "This... delicateness surprises me. The merfolk spurned you."

"Children are a line in the sand for me."

"Yet many will perish today my other half, whether from asphyxia or battle," Andromache argued. "Though we might not be personally involved in their demise, we will be complicit all the same simply by assisting in the ritual."

Kairos clenched his jaw, having no answer to this. "What if they surrender?" the [Hero] asked. "Should I cut them down where they stand?"

The answer was swift and blunt.

"Yes." Hybris coiled like a snake. "Listen to my wisdom, Kairos. Empires are built on ashes, not principles. What value is the blood beneath the foundations, compared to the greatness that stands above it? These are not your people. They are not yours to protect."

"The peace you desire cannot be founded on half-measures, my other half," Andromache added, her fingers brushing against Kairos' arm. "If your mercy leads to greater suffering in the future, more wars, it is no different than cruelty."

Her argument made Kairos uneasy. "You sound like Mithridates."

"That does not make it untrue," the witch replied.

"If the merfolk regain momentum, my position over my fellow Cetae will suffer," Hybris said shrewdly. "They might turn to the surface again."

Kairos clenched his fists. "Are you blackmailing me?"

"No, I am telling you what is at stake." Hybris looked at the dome above their heads. "I believe the old people of Latinum had a saying: *Vae Victis*."

Kairos recognized the words as primitive Lycean. "Woe to the defeated," he translated.

"Mercy is not a moral obligation, but a privilege to be used strategically. Do you think the boy-king will be grateful for your kindness? Or that he will avenge the wounds done to him when he grows old enough to?" The sea monster's lures glittered with a fiendish glow. "How many of *your* children will perish then?"

Kairos' thoughts turned to Prince Critias of Orthia. The Travian had captured him, spared him when Mithridates not so subtly wanted him dead. And though Kairos tried to keep him alive, in the end, the [Poison King] eventually had him murdered.

Brave Prince Critias had never made a mystery of his intentions to fight Kairos, once he inherited his father's throne. But though Histrina could survive Orthia's fleet, Orichalcos' armies were another matter entirely.

Julia will give me a son or daughter soon, Kairos thought. Rhadamanthe left one too, and I swore to protect him.

But above all, the Travian was afraid of transforming into Mithridates. Pergamon's silver king had no fetters. He would do anything to protect his country and stand on top, whether it involved betraying allies, plotting murder... and slaying children. If he agreed to this course of action, Kairos would lower himself to his rival's level.

I'm not like him, Kairos tried to convince himself. I don't discard allies, and I don't divide the world between thralls or foes.

But the two kings were similar in one thing.

They both put their country's well-being above everything.

"Fine," Kairos said, though the word flayed his throat on its way out.

Though it horrified him, he would rather drench his hands in blood rather see his own children inherit his wars.

Hybris' fangs drooled with hunger. "Then let us begin."

Kairos climbed on the [Demigod]'s altar, and raised his lance towards the heavens above. He could already sense it in the artificial atmosphere all around him. Magic saturated the air, the very same power that coursed through his [Anemoi Spear]. His weapon reacted, like metal called lightning to itself.

The spear shuddered, the ancient power slumbering within its silvery shaft awakening. The tip flowered brightly with a moonlight glow.

And then the metal screamed.

The spear screeched, as its tip blasted the dome above Kairos with a twisting tornado. The magic's sheer power almost tossed the Travian off the altar, and it took all his strength to keep the weapon aimed straight at the dome. The winds twisted around him, some with the strength of a hurricane, others as gentle as a breeze.

The dome twisted as the tornado fed it, bending upward and pushing the waters back. The magical tempest pushed, and pushed, and pushed, until it defeated the sea itself. When Kairos looked up, he no longer saw the deep azure darkness of the Sunsea, but the pale blue hue of the sky.

The spear in his hands felt lighter, the winds it produced weakening. Yet the storm it had conjured only grew in intensity. Hybris' dome transformed into the eye of a gargantuan whirlpool, with walls of water swirling around the Atlantean ruins. Yet the air within its eye was no more than a gentle wind.

The dreadful typhoon began to expand, blasting away sand, dust, algae, and whatever had the bad luck of standing in its way. Even Atlantis' metal walls shuddered and snapped before the storm's divine power. The humans and monsters within the eye watched on, unperturbed, as the phenomenon expanded outward.

When at long last Kairos' spear calmed down and returned to normal, Hybris let out an inhuman roar that echoed across the ruins. Immediately, his monstrous army began to march in Orichalcos' direction, while the *Foresight* waited for its captain and master to do the same.

The storm had come to the merfolk, and monsters followed in its wake.

18: Death March

"Have a nice day!" Doris bade goodbye to her latest customer. The merfolk merchant thanked her with a nod, leaving the florist's shop with a bouquet of bright red anemones he meant to offer his aunt. Doris let out a tired sigh, exhausted by a day's hard work.

It was quite late in Orichalcos, though its oceanic markets never slept. While the florist would close her shop for the night, another would immediately open to take her place. Not that Doris complained, as night visitors were often an unsavory sort, drunks, knaves, or merchants of ill-repute.

She was in the process of putting her flowers aside when one last customer entered her shop. A familiar one.

"Hey, Doris!" Her friend Alexis was a handsome merfolk, with light brown hair and a comely face. In his city-watch obsidian armor, he looked halfway like a daring warrior from singers' ballads. "Are you still open?"

"Why is it that you always visit me when I'm about to close?" she asked with a bright smile, her crimson hair floating in the water. "Red algae with purple coral?"

"You do know me well," the guard replied. He always asked for the same bouquet. Though he had never told Doris to whom he offered them, she had her suspicions. One of her colleagues had noticed that Alexis often visited stonemaker Othon's wife, but only when her husband wasn't in town... "Is it true you're leaving for the surface?"

"It is," she replied, while arranging the bouquet. "I was on the fence, but a wise shark convinced me to take the risk."

"I wouldn't call this choice wise." Her friend crossed his arms, his obsidian spear strapped to his back. "A human [Demigod] is still a human. For all you know, your 'friend' won't let you leave when you move in. He'll throw you into a pond."

"You don't know him," she replied with a smile. "I do."

"I'm just worried. I heard Vali's king keeps a harem of three hundred, his star general probably has half as many."

"You would be wrong." Her love hadn't taken a wife since pirates widowed him. Doris still remembered the day she found him, half-drowned after the Travians sank his ship. He would have perished if she hadn't brought him to shore, and what started as an act of kindness evolved into something more...

"As for the pond part..." Doris blushed. "He ordered the creation of a lake near his palace."

Alexis choked. "A *lake*?"

"Men are all gallant fools," she replied, still a bit embarrassed by the attention. "You could come visit, if you like."

"Mmm, and why not? I doubt I will come often though, I'm expected to become the new captain—" He froze in place.

"What is it?" Doris asked, as the guard looked at the ceiling.

"Do you hear that?"

The florist frowned, but when she focused she noticed it too. A distant rumble, like an underwater landslide. Her hand moved to the walls of her shop, sensing the vibrations coursing through the stone.

A quake?

Impossible, the city hadn't seen one since its construction. Did the city's [Alchemists] cause an explosion again? Doris remembered they had destroyed part of the port five years ago after a magical mishap.

"It's getting stronger," Alexis replied before hastily swimming out of the shop. A worried Doris followed him.

The market was abuzz with activity, but not the good kind. The nacre shops were empty, both sellers and customers now gathering in the coral streets. A whale transporter had interrupted its circuit above the area, casting a long shadow above Doris' shop. Jellyfishes, merfolks, and other fishfolk muttered words to each other, all of them looking south with confusion and worry.

"What is this?" Alexis whispered, his eyes widening.

Doris couldn't even say a word.

A colossal current of smoke, dust, and steamy waters had risen to the south, coloring the whole horizon white. The sight reminded Doris of the clouds in the surface's skies, but she had never seen one so big before. The phenomenon covered hundreds of kilometers, and rose as high as her eyes could see. Maybe all the way to the surface. Even the royal palace looked like a child compared to this monument of nature.

Strange currents of air made the strange cloud swirl on itself like a whirlpool, blowing tons of sand and seastones where it touched the seafloor. It was... almost beautiful in its majesty. Even so far away, Doris could sense the vibrations in the waters, the rumbling spreading through the earth.

Was that a sea storm? She had never seen one so big, so powerful, so—

So quick.

The confusion turned to fear, and the screams became deafening. Merfolk swam away as fast as they could, while the market's shops started to collapse, their walls cracking. The cloud was moving closer to the city, swallowing the aquatic hinterlands and quickly reaching the outskirts.

The storm flattened buildings, uprooted anemone trees, and shattered all in its path. The wave of destruction moved more swiftly than a shark on the hunt, relentless and unstoppable.

Doris didn't have the time to flee, or suffer. Her mind didn't even register Alexis' hand grabbing her by the shoulder in a futile attempt to escape. She didn't have time to understand, as the wave hit the market with godly strength and debris tore her body apart. She didn't have the time to think of her love, or the bright future she had hoped for.

Death claimed thousands in an instant, and Orichalcos trembled.

"Rise, surface-dweller," said the mermaid queen.

Absyrtus, personal assistant to King Mithridates of Pergamon, moved back on his feet. At his side, three chests overflowed with his master's gifts to the rulers of Orichalcos: silver, gilded swords and armors, emerald statuettes from Alexandria, ivory horns, and a dazzling gemstone tiara for Queen Pallas. Absyrtus had done his research, and knew that the inbred child-king on his sister's lap was a figurehead at best.

"Your gifts are welcome," the queen said, though she didn't offer any to Absyrtus in return. The emissary was wise enough not to ask for any. He had spent enough time around royals to know that most were quick to swear revenge and slow to forgive. "Orichalcos values friends, especially those who show us proper respect."

"What else can we do but celebrate Poseidon's heirs and the masters of the sea?" Absyrtus said with honeyed words, though he didn't believe any of them. His voice felt sore from the

breathing spell cast on him. "We understand that we can only travel the Sunsea safely thanks to your merciful rule."

Thankfully, the queen was as venal and prone to flattery as his spies' reports implied. "All our subjects are entitled to our protection, whether they live above or beneath the seas," she said, her fish tail slapping her throne. "Though we made a treaty of friendship with the Travians too."

"Savage barbarians who respect nothing," Absyrtus said, though he carefully avoided mentioning the 'incident,' as his spies called it. "Your Majesty does not need to take up arms, or even concern herself with our trifle conflicts. You only need to tell us where this so-called Travian king will move after he leaves your fair city... and we will take care of the rest."

Queen Pallas smiled. "We will entertain your proposal with great interest. You may go for now."

"I will duly report this news to His Majesty," Absyrtus replied, though he knew he wouldn't need it.

His master was a [Hero] Ranked [Spymaster], with the Skills to match. King Mithridates could see through Absyrtus' eyes and listen through his ears, so long as he focused. His assistant always knew when his master was watching; he could see the [Poison King]'s long shadow at the periphery of his vision, a ghost haunting his senses.

Though Absyrtus was granted more autonomy than most, his superior always wanted to observe important meetings from afar whenever possible. The [Warp Necklace] around Absyrtus' neck, a powerful gift from Medea of Achlys, also allowed King Mithridates to teleport him back to Pergamon.

Though Mithridates had planned a diplomatic trip to Orichalcos for a while now, he had sent Absyrtus earlier than expected after learning of Kairos of Travia's visit. The [Poison King] had feared an alliance between the expansionist merfolk and the Travians, but thankfully the pirate had botched his diplomatic trip... leaving a gap for Pergamon to exploit.

However, these talks of prophecies he kept hearing from merfolk merchants concerned Absyrtus. He had informed his master as soon as he heard the rumors, but the [Poison King] had dismissed them. "*Ask the likes of Oedipus and Kronos about fighting prophecies,*" Lord Mithridates had answered. "*The more you try to avert them, the more you strengthen them. Prophecies are best left ignored.*"

Still, Pergamon's king worried about how anti-surface and old god sentiments spread among the merfolk population. King Mithridates hoped that redirecting their wrath against Travia would give him the time window he needed to fully unlock the trident shard's power, and complete the *Thalassocra*—

The throne room shook so violently that Absyrtus was almost thrown to his feet.

Three of the seven metal pillars supporting the ceiling snapped, while the shining coral throne of Orichalcos lost its glow for a moment. Queen Pallas instinctively grabbed her child-husband as he threatened to fall off her lap, while her golden guards immediately gathered around her.

The quake lasted only for a few seconds, but the entire palace felt it. Cracks spread through the audience room's crystal floor, while its transparent doors flickered for a brief instant, their magic disrupted.

"What's happening?!" Queen Pallas snarled, while King Triton started crying in fear. The royal throne shone with a blue glow, and a colorful bubble two meters in diameter formed in the middle of the room.

A picture of the city outside formed on the sphere, showing an apocalyptic vision that gave even Absyrtus pause.

The sea had split around the royal capital and kilometers beyond, a hurricane of magical wind opening a path to the red twilight skies above. Swirling walls of water kept the ocean out, leaving the seafloor to dry out.

As for the city itself...

Even the jaded Absyrtus had been left speechless when he first entered the royal capital, and marveled at its wealth. But where towers of coral once stood, only broken rubble remained. A mighty blast had tossed away shell houses as if they were made of straw, shattering them. With no water to support them, the countless fish and other aquatic lifeforms thriving in the city had fallen down to earth like wingless birds. Whales had crashed on pearl monuments or merfolk, and now agonized on the ground.

Powerful winds had uprooted the glorious, luxurious underwater forests, leaving nothing but sand and mud where algae trees once stood. Giant pearls had rolled away from their previous locations and ravaged the streets. No house remained standing.

Everywhere Absyrtus looked, he could see corpses half-buried in debris, or fish agonizing from the sudden lack of water to breathe. The survivor merfolk fared better in that they

didn't asphyxiate, but while they had looked gracious in the water, they could only hop on land.

"This..." the queen choked at the sight. The royal palace's divine magic had spared it the city's fate... but not for long.

Absyrtus squinted upon noticing forms appearing in the city's outskirts. As they came closer to the focal viewpoint of the monitoring magic, the ambassador noticed a tide of tentacles, pincers, and monstrous maws.

"Cetae!" a guard shouted in panic, upon recognizing the creatures. "The Cetae are attacking!"

A whole army of them had invaded the city from the south, stepping on the helpless merfolk and crushing them underfoot. A monstrous ship led the vanguard alongside a mighty sea serpent, carried by crablike legs.

The Foresight.

"Betrayal!" The mermaid queen's horror turned into fury, as she immediately barked out orders. "Guards, secure the palace and repel this rabble!"

The captain of her guard nodded, though reluctantly. "Your Majesty, the air outside—"

"Will soon bow to the sea's might!" The Queen answered, before putting her hands on her throne's armrest. Immediately, the coral seemed to thrum and sing, an ancient power awakening within its confines.

This does not bode well, Absyrtus thought, before smiling as magic coursed through the queenling's throne. The [Poison King]'s shadow loomed larger at the edge of his sight. *Or maybe not...*

Chaos and opportunity walked hand-in-hand, after all.

Nausicaa Seastar knew this moment would come.

She had waited a great many moons trapped in this coral cage, dreaming of release and freedom. Even after the feeble thralls of Orichalcos chased her tribe from its ancestral lands and captured her, Nausicaa had never lost hope. She had known she would escape, deep within her bones.

No house built on rot could survive long.

Imprisonment had been difficult. The magical choker around her neck felt heavy and burdensome, and the cage was too small for her to exercise as she wished. Without meditation, Nausicaa might have grown mad; and even then, the [Rogue] could hardly enjoy a few hours of quietness without onlookers disturbing her.

Four guards always kept her company, though they changed every moon or so. They hated their trapped foe, but desired her even more. They would have raped her, if they had been brave enough to. Nausicaa's choker prevented her from using most of her Skills, and the right password would [Paralyze] her if spoken out loud, but none of these cowards had even dared to open her cage.

Instead, they had mocked her, pissed on her cage's bars, or paraded their feeble cocks at her face. Merchants also jeered about bedding the trapped warrior, only to wet themselves when she glared at them.

Nausicaa wouldn't have answered their provocations, even if she could. The cetean mermaid was born mute, her throat as dry and dead as a grave. She never minded much. She preferred to speak through her actions, or with sharp blades. Silence was her armor, shielding her while she approached her prey undetected. The mermaid had been her tribe's knife, sent to slay those who would do them harm or invade their ancestral homes. Over time, Nausicaa had grown so good at it that even Abyssan warlords called upon her services.

Overconfidence had caused her capture, but she wouldn't make that mistake again.

And now, the opportunity for vengeance had come.

Nausicaa had sensed the storm approaching long before her guards did, and buried herself in her cage's sand floor. Debris snapped her cage's bars and wind pushed out the waters, but she endured.

When she emerged from her broken prison to breathe air instead of water, Nausicaa thought that it tasted like liberty.

Though she had weathered the storm, the mermaid [Rogue] couldn't say the same for the coral reef where she had been kept imprisoned and paraded. The wind had blown away the Orichalcosians' stupid shops, and the merchants alongside them.

Some of her guards were still alive. One laid on the ground near her, his fish tail crushed underneath a coral shard, his hand struggling to reach an obsidian spear. Two others

struggled to hop on the uprooted seagrass, and the fourth lay broken on a destroyed shop's remains, his gut impaled by his own spear.

Nausicaa wouldn't give these weaklings the time to activate the choker.

Though she couldn't use her best abilities, the necklace didn't deprive her of her strength and experience. While these weaklings struggled to crawl on the seagrass without water, Nausicaa used her hands to close the gap between them with frightening speed. She quickly reached the closest guard, right as he managed to grab his weapon.

He didn't hear his death coming.

Nausicaa swiftly grabbed his head with her hands, and twisted his neck on itself with all her strength. A sickening crack echoed as his vertebrae broke and his flesh bent to her might, separating the skull from the torso. The blood drops felt warm on her skin, and a delightful sensation filled Nausicaa's innards.

She had almost forgotten the thrill of the hunt.

Immediately tossing the head aside, she grabbed the dead guard's obsidian spear and attacked his two companions. They turned their heads in her direction after hearing the cracking sound of their compatriot's neck, but they didn't react swiftly enough. Nausicaa had disemboweled one before he even raised his own weapon, and impaled the other through the throat. The [Assassin] looked on with satisfaction as the light went out from his eyes.

Freedom tasted better when purchased with blood.

She heard a sound echo from the south, the rumble of monsters approaching her location. Nausicaa didn't try to escape. Instead, she patiently waited for their arrival, and the shark that led them.

A powerful Cetus climbed into the coral reef, its crablike legs stomping onto debris and corpses both. Its fin was a sail, its belly a hull. A winged beast flew above it, carrying a shadow with a spear, while a Scylla with a staff crawled after the ship. Nausicaa observed them in silence as they surrounded her.

"That's her?" The mighty Scylla asked in the old tongue. In response, the flying beast landed at her side, a strange bird that Nausicaa had never seen before.

Its rider was a human, one with a crown of hydra fangs, a golden cloak, and a spear of silver. It was a war chieftain of some sort, Nausicaa could tell it on sight.

A king.

"Do you understand us?" he asked in the old tongue. Nausicaa nodded. "Do you recognize me?"

Yes, she did. The human could change his form, but not his gaze. As a shark or a man, his eyes were always as cold as the sea. Eyes like Nausicaa's own. This human was cunning, ambitious, and battle-hardened...

And yet, there was a hint of something else in his gaze. Something she had rarely seen, even among her tribe.

Compassion.

Cold, but not heartless, Nausicaa thought.

"Good," the human answered when she nodded, a bright warm smile on his lips. The Scylla raised her staff, and the choker around Nausicaa's neck fell down on the ground. "Tell me... are you looking for a job?"

Nausicaa widened her lips, but behind the grin there were fangs.

19: Trident's Heart

This was a disaster.

Queen Pallas of Orichalcos could only seethe, as her palace trembled and her city burned. Her [Scrying Water Mirror] gave her a front view of the devastation, pictures reflecting on an aquatic sphere swirling before her.

She had only ever seen flames on paintings before, and yet fires had started all over her capital city. Her magnificent royal gardens were ablaze, as were some of the algae farms, but the destruction they caused was almost laughable compared to the beasts invading the streets.

The Cetae were unusually restrained, focusing on taking over major landmarks and slaughtering her helpless guards, but mostly ignoring civilians. Still, the sight of these beasts rampaging through *her* city filled the mermaid queen with disgust. These savages tossed down monuments built during Poseidon's rule, ravaged the streets her kingly father had renovated, and cast down houses of royal officials. Did they have no heart at all?

And the humans...

She should have known these visitors were spies the moment she laid her eyes on that monstrous ship of theirs! That monstrous abomination was climbing up her palace's walls, fighting the few members of her guard who could operate on dry land. It was only a matter of time before its crew broke inside.

And the cries and screams of the useless brother on her lap didn't help matters. *Shut up*, Queen Pallas thought, as 'King' Triton tried to bury herself in her bosom. *Your weakness disgusts me. Now is not the time for tears!*

Now was the time for war!

"Your Majesty, how far are we from salvation?" her herald asked meekly, while guards had barricaded the doors. The human ambassador Absyrtus watched the scene like a shadow, not even lifting a little finger to help. "The trident—"

"Will save us all," Queen Pallas answered angrily.

But when?

As the blood of Poseidon and lawful queen of Orichalcos, Queen Pallas could channel the shard's power coursing through her throne. She sensed its magic channeled by her palace,

a spear of the oceans. Once fully focused, this power could sink islands, raise horrors from the deep, and lay waste to the Cetae.

Yet the power maintaining the typhoon outside more than matched the trident's own. It was an ancient magic, she knew, a primordial power older than the Anthropomachia. Had the Cetae found a weapon capable of matching the legendary Poseidon's? She wouldn't believe it, *couldn't* believe it.

But her beliefs didn't change anything.

The trident's magic would tear down the air walls keeping the ocean at bay, but not quickly enough. By the time she did so, the humans and their monstrous allies would have invaded her palace, maybe even reached her throne room.

What could the queen do? Escape through the secret tunnels? No, the blood of Poseidon did not run. But she had no aptitude for fighting, and her guards couldn't hold back the tide on their own.

"Your Majesty." Queen Pallas glanced at the human Absyrtus, who obsequiously bowed at her. "May I offer a word?"

At least he had the sense to beg, the mermaid thought. "My patience with your kind is wearing thin, surface-dweller."

"Pergamon will always stand by your side, Your Majesty."

"Then grab a weapon and help my royal guard defend our home."

"I have no taste for weapons," the manling replied with an ugly look in his gaze, "though I can offer advice."

Queen Pallas laughed. "Can you slay the invaders outside with advice?"

"Mayhaps." The man put his hands behind his back. "However powerful, your shard's magic won't be enough to repel the army at your doors... at least not on its own. I have studied the lore of Poseidon, and I know why your royal family kept their blood pure. Because your blood has power."

"I know all of this." Only descendants of the mighty Poseidon could wield the artifact's full power. Others could only use a shadow of its potency. "What is your point, human?"

"A sacrifice might be necessary to hasten the process and strengthen the shard. And thankfully, you have a spare."

Queen Pallas' eyes looked down at the child cradling her bosom.

"You can't imply..." Her herald's eyes bulged out in horror. "Your Majesty, you can't possibly consider—"

"Quiet," the queen ordered, before squinting at the human ambassador. She couldn't remember any case of a blood sacrifice in her family's history, but then again, her ancestors never needed one... "He is my kin, my brother, and my husband."

"But young," the man replied bluntly. "It will take him years to father an heir on you, while it will take hours for the army at your gates to reach you and cut off your head. One heir of Poseidon is worth less than two, I will agree... but better than none. Your Majesty, I know the Travians, especially their leader. King Kairos may look charming, but underneath he is utterly ruthless. He has taken a *Scylla* into his bed, and made common cause with monsters. Once he gets his hands on you, Your Majesty..."

The human made a contrite face, as if afraid to go on. Queen Pallas found it particularly ugly. "Say it," she rasped.

"Well, I'm afraid your brother will die for a start, and you will probably follow. He understands he cannot hope to rule the sea as long as the royal line endures. At best you will spend the rest of your days in bondage in his harem, as he fathers a half-human whelp on you. Your people will live in shackles under an army of monsters. A dark age will dawn on Orichalcos... unless you stop it now."

Queen Pallas slouched on her throne, a hand on her brother's head.

She closed her eyes, and when she did so, she imagined that vile human king's hands closing around her neck. The mere idea of suffering his impure touch made her recoil in disgust.

This is why they will all die when the second sun rises, Pallas thought. She had looked forward to that day, when the surface-dwellers would finally learn their place and atone for murdering the old gods. The royal line descended from the Oceanids and the descendants of the great Poseidon, those who had not betrayed Olympus. Never once had they wavered in their loyalty, knowing that one day, the ancient order would be restored and peace returned to the universe.

She would live to see this moment. Queen Pallas was certain of it.

"I understand how painful and terrible this might seem, but you are a strong ruler, Your Majesty," Absyrtus continued, his words as sweet as honeyed milk. "It takes a great force of will to make a sacrifice for the greater good, and you have that strength."

Yes, she did. Pallas had been her father's true son, not the crying, useless whelp on her lap. If she had been born a man, she could have fully ruled in her own name rather than needing to share her power with this waste of skin. Now would be the perfect opportunity to get rid of her weakling brother and receive the people's acclaim.

But, when she opened her eyes and looked at the terrified child on her lap, Queen Pallas realized she didn't have the strength to do it. For all his weakness and idiocy, he was still the little brother she had nursed in the cradle.

Pictures shifted on the scrying pool, showing the humans' monstrous ship breaking down one of her palace's walls. Water flowed out of the hole, while that wretched Scylla and a Cetacean halfbreed swam up against the current. The vile Kairos circled above her fortress, riding on the back of some ugly, winged abomination.

"The enemy is inside the palace, Your Majesty!" one of the guards warned her.

I am not blind, she thought. "Fetch me a blade," she said.

"Your Majesty, no one is more accursed before the gods than a kinslayer," her herald protested.

"I know," Queen Pallas agreed, before glancing at the worm. "Which is why you will do it."

The herald paled in fear, his hands quivering on his sounding horn while a guard offered him an obsidian knife. "Y-Your Majesty," he stammered, "striking a person of royal blood—"

"Will cost you a hand. Not doing it will cost you your head." She grabbed poor King Triton in her arms, as if he were a baby. "Cut off his palm. With luck, a pint of blood will suffice."

The herald took the blade before glancing at the guards in fear. When some pointed their spears at him, the coward sobbed and didn't even dare to touch the king. "Do it!" Queen Pallas snarled with impatience.

The herald closed his eyes, gently grabbed King Triton's left hand, and slashed his palm with the knife.

His scream chilled his sister to the bone, and the pale red fluid rising from his wound all the more. *Shut up, Queen Pallas thought, as he wriggled in her arms. You are doing your kingly duty for the first time in your life.*

His screams and tears didn't help though. Queen Pallas swam above the throne of Orichalcos before applying her brother's bloody hand to it. The coral seat thrummed when his palm brushed against it, the trident shard embedded within reacting. The throne shifted like algae with the current, before releasing a sound as beautiful as it was haunting. It reminded Pallas of the song of dying whales.

"It's..." one of the guards rejoiced, his colleagues raising their spears. "It's working!"

"The blood has power," Absyrtus replied with a soft face that Pallas found eerily soothing.

Only Triton didn't rejoice, as the coral grew on his hands and arm, swallowing them. Queen Pallas had to release him when the growth continued to progress, and he tried to reach out to her with his weak, tiny right hand. The sight drew a brief moment of regret from the mermaid ruler.

Curse you, Kairos of Travia, Queen Pallas thought, trying to bury her guilt beneath the anger. You forced this crime on us. You might not have wielded the blade, but you guided our hand.

The coral throne consumed her brother whole, but didn't stop growing.

Queen Pallas blinked, as events unfolded beyond her control. The throne reached out to the ceiling and spread to the pillars supporting it, and the scrying water mirror turned into a bubble of sick, pale pink blood. The spot where her brother had been absorbed took a bright red shape, before spreading to the coral like an infectious growth.

"What's happening?" the herald asked, his voice breaking. His queen had no answer, the waters in the room gaining an eerie red afterglow.

"What I suspected." Queen Pallas turned to face Absyrtus, finding the human ambassador brushing the necklace around his neck with his finger. His eyes were full of a cold, dreadful curiosity. "I wanted to test my hypothesis before we used our own shard in the field, but I never dared. Well, this is good to know... for us. Thank you, Your Majesty, from the bottom of my heart. Your sacrifice shall be celebrated forevermore."

Queen Pallas' eyes widened, upon realizing she had been had. "You treacherous—"

"If you would kindly kill the Sellsword King on your way out, that would help my liege greatly." And after saying these words, Absyrtus of Pergamon vanished from her sight.

A loud crack echoed behind Pallas, and her panicked guards all raised their spears. The herald screamed and attempted to escape through the warded doors, his hands banging helplessly against a magical barrier. The queen of Orichalcos looked over her shoulder, noticing the cracks in the coral throne, and the pulsating redness below.

Flesh, she thought, putting a hand on her mouth to avoid vomiting, *this is flesh*.

And after the flesh, came the fangs.

I should never have trusted humans, Queen Pallas of Orichalcos lamented, as the jaws closed on her and all went dark.

The attack was going better than expected.

Flying on Rook's back, Kairos battered sea spiders and giant crabs with winds. These creatures were among the few capable of fighting without water to support them, and had immediately moved to intercept the *Foresight's* advance as the living ship climbed the palace's oblique walls. Kairos' vessel kicked away a few and devoured others with its fanged jaws, but more managed to climb on its hull.

The *Foresight's* crew had adapted the best they could to this strange battlefield, using ropes not to fall from the deck and hacking the attacking crustaceans when they reached them. Cassandra charbroiled a horse-sized sea spider with ghostly flames, while Nessus and his archers struck the eyes of a giant crab engaging Agron in a bloody melee. Thankfully for Kairos, Orichalcos lacked an air force, leaving the skies to Rook and him.

"Bird claws to the face!" Rook said, his talons turning into silvery blades. He dived down on a monstrous lobster pinching one of the *Foresight's* legs, his claws and Kairos' spear tearing through the monster's carapace like butter. The respite allowed the *Foresight* to kick away the creature.

There is no end to them, Kairos thought, as another swarm of crustaceans emerged from the palace's water gates.

Hybris wouldn't help much either. The Sea Serpent was engaged in a titanic clash of his own near the temple district, dueling the strange white whale [Demigod] oracle that Kairos saw preach of the second sun's return to the merfolk. The absence of water hadn't inconvenienced the creature all that much, the monstrous whale's tail tossing down buildings while Hybris coiled around it like a giant snake around a pig.

It didn't matter. The city would fall once Nausicaa and Andromache captured the royal family. The two had entered the palace through a hole the *Foresight* dug into its facade, water pouring out of it onto the street below like a waterfall. The mermaid [Assassin] had proved an eager recruit, though unfortunately mute. Thankfully, Chloris knew sign language enough to serve as the mermaid's interpreter. Between her [Rogue] skills and Andromache's invulnerability, they shouldn't have any trouble reaching the royal family.

Elsewhere, the Abyssean army had divided into smaller contingents, focusing on destroying the royal army's forts and massacring helpless soldiers before the waters inevitably returned. Thankfully, Kairos had extracted oaths to Hybris before signing on with the assault, including limiting civilian casualties whenever possible. The sea serpent [Demigod] had been true to his word, his armies focusing on securing the city rather than massacring the population. The Sellsword King knew from his own experience that some Cetae would disobey their commander's orders, but most stayed true to their discipline.

Thousands would still die, but at least Kairos could lessen the blow.

A part of him, the coldest part, tried to justify himself by saying it would serve Travia's and his colony's interests. The wealth of Orichalcos would fill their coffers, and the Cetae would make peace with the surface. The merfolk had plotted to support the old gods' return, and paid the price for their treachery.

But no matter what Kairos told himself, this assault left a bitter aftertaste.

War. War was always such a bloody affair, sparing neither the guilty nor the innocent.

What is done is done, Kairos thought, as he cast down a crab to the ground with a blast of air. The animal crashed on the solid ground beneath the palace, its body snapping in half from the impact. The [Anemoi Spear] within his hands still brimmed with power. The entire ritual had been a taste of its true power, which Kairos couldn't access without a higher Rank. With luck, this battle might help him ascend to [Demigod], and get closer to divini—

Andromache swam down from the palace's waterfall, followed by Nausicaa. "So soon?" Kairos shouted from above. "Do you have the trident's shard?"

The panic in his concubine's eyes told him otherwise... as did the bloody stump that wriggled where one of her tentacles should have been.

"Run!" Andromache commanded, while both she and Nausicaa leaped on the *Foresight's* deck. "Run—"

The monster burst out of the palace's roof, like a lizard from an egg.

His emergence sent chunks of the building erupting in all directions, and Rook hastily flew away to dodge the debris. The *Foresight* and its foes almost fell off the wall, but the living ship managed to stab the coral facade before it could descend more than a few meters, anchoring itself.

"What is *this thing*?" Kairos whispered, as a colossal monster emerged from the palace's top.

The beast was more than three times longer than the *Foresight*, and a true terror of the deep. The sea chimera had the head and front arms of a crocodile, the hind legs of a salamander, and the tail of a fish. Its scales were iridescent blue, its fins translucent red. Besides its gargantuan, toothy head, additional jaws snapped at each of the creature's joints, neck, and tail. Their sharp fangs cut through the air with a sinister 'clack' sound, while the monster's two black eyes reminded Kairos of a starless night. A strange, golden metal shard glowed between them, like a royal crown.

The creature was not without a certain bestial beauty, the cruel majesty of a lion on a hunt. This was a primeval predator nobler than the Cetae, a true dragon of the deep. The severed tail of Queen Pallas, caught between two of its main maw's teeth, showcased its indiscriminate hunger. To an almighty beast like this one, kings and commoners were nothing more than food.

And its song... when its main mouth opened to let out a bellowing cry, Kairos wondered if he had ever heard a sound more haunting and melodious. The Cetae stopped their rampage to look at this primeval entity, and the crustaceans that had harassed the *Foresight's* crew fled.

Even Rook, who loved fish above all other food, looked intimidated at the creature's sight. Its shadow loomed over the duo. "This is a very big fish..."

No. That wasn't a fish at all, and [Observer] quickly confirmed it.

Triton the Kin-Eater

Legend: Dragon of the Trident (Demigod)

Level: ???

"The merfolk king?" Kairos choked, before flying closer to the *Foresight* to check up on his crew. Impossible, he was no more than an upjumped [Elite] last time the Travian saw him!

"Those fools..." Kairos heard Nessus mutter to himself. Thankfully, the ropes had prevented the crewmates from falling off the deck, though some broke a leg or took wounds from the impact. Andromache herself had grabbed the mast with her tentacles, Nausicaa hanging on to her back.

"What's happening?" his captain asked his satyr ally, while the giant creature glanced at the devastated city with the curious innocence of a newborn animal.

"Unworthy mortals can't directly wield a godly weapon without a ghastly price to pay, captain!" Nessus shouted back. "If you can't master the weapon—"

"The weapon masters you," the pirate guessed.

The trident's power had taken over the boy-king's flesh, and used him as a vessel to take physical form.

Worse, it was naked, indiscriminate power. The monster leapt on a devastated street near the palace, creating a small crater upon landing. Its amphibian hands immediately grabbed a dying whale and a group of merfolk, feeding them to its various joint-jaws while they screamed. A cetus let out a roar, but the far larger Triton quickly swallowed it whole with its main toothy maw.

Cetus or merfolk, they all tasted the same.

It took the creature less than a minute to clean out the street, but it didn't satisfy its hunger; and maybe nothing would. The monster trampled houses beneath its hind legs as it moved on to search for more food, its tail shattering buildings.

I created this thing, Kairos realized with sorrow. I unleashed it, and now it will devour everyone inside this city.

"Kairos, what do we do?" Cassandra asked, as the *Foresight* climbed down from the palace's wall and landed on the ground. "Do we engage that monster?"

Nausicaa, who had watched the scene in silence, grabbed her obsidian spear. Water surrounded her like a shroud, before propelling her across the air like a liquid arrow. The [Assassin] formed an arc into the skies before landing on the giant sea dragon's back, stabbing it between its scales. The creature didn't seem to have noticed, but the mermaid fearlessly hung on to the colossus.

Kairos couldn't help but whistle at her brazen action. The path was clear.

"What else can we do, but become [Legends]?" the Travian captain replied, spear raised.
"Forward!"

The *Foresight's* crew shouted as one, and the living ship charged after the larger beast.

20: Blazing Ocean

The *Foresight* chased after the giant dragon, and Agron's fingers brushed against his fiery axe.

This was his moment.

He could feel it deep within his bones, like a searing flame burning inside him. After all these years of slaughtering his way across the world in search of a worthy [Legend] to steal, here was the creature that would kindle the furnace of his myth.

The *Foresight* leapt from destroyed house to house, while the monstrous Triton ravaged his previous capital's streets in search of food. The dragon's palmed feet trampled buildings like sandcastles, making the seafloor tremble with every step.

Both the Cetae and the surviving Orichalcian soldiers fled at the larger beast's approach, much to Agron's disdain. The minotaur could understand feigning retreat to launch an ambush, but he would rather die on his feet than live as a coward.

Only the brave could ever hope to become a [Hero].

The mermaid rogue which Kairos had freshly recruited climbed her way onto the dragon's back with an obsidian spear, though the beast didn't even notice her presence. She was no more than a tick on a hound's back - annoying, but beneath notice.

Kairos and his griffin flew above the dragon, preparing to strike from above, while Cassandra barked orders to the crew. "Archers and fire rods to the left! You too, Andromache! Tiberius, you take the ballista!"

It had been many years since Agron had served on a ship, rather than commanding his vessel. The minotaur had always been unruly ever since he was a calf, and his father usually beat him bloody to teach him obedience. His father never liked to hear his son talking back to him, especially after too many drinks. Agron had once heard other children whisper that his mother had perished during a drunken argument, and the minotaur had grown to believe it.

More than once Agron had dreamed of taking one of the tools in the family forge to hasten his inheritance. The taboo of patricide, and the sight of the forge's fire, had always made him reconsider.

Something in the flames soothed the minotaur's soul. He couldn't explain why, but they made him feel... *happy. Fulfilled.*

Eventually, Agron hadn't grown content with watching fires and learned how to start them. He had almost ended up burning the family house at twelve, and his father had beaten him hard enough to break a tooth as a birthday present.

Afterward, Agron couldn't take the abuse anymore and joined the first ship that would have him, the *Deathbringer*. Its crew had a well-deserved reputation for violence, but the minotaur couldn't care less. He just wanted to *escape*.

In the end, though he had been a human, old captain Periphetes had been more of a mentor to Agron than his minotaur father ever was. He taught him how to fight, how to kill for a living, and even how to read using old world poems.

Most importantly, old Periphetes had taught Agron that he needed to be more than *strong* to thrive, he needed to be *smart*. That the young minotaur should use violence not as an outlet for his frustration, but to spread a message, to build a reputation. That he needed to be selective in his rampages if he wanted to keep burning cities in his old age rather than perish young. That he should master his anger and his love of fire, rather than let them rule him.

Agron had been devastated when Periphetes died from an arrow to the gut during a Thessalan raid, and still relished the memory of hacking the murderer into mincemeat. To this day, the minotaur still kept the old man's poetry scrolls as a memento, and honored him with every verse he spoke. One day, Agron's works would join the same pantheon of poets honored by scholars across the world.

After his mentor's death, the minotaur had taken over his ship—though he had to kill two challengers first—and renamed it *Bridgeburner*. Agron had never come back home afterward, instead pillaging his way across the Sunset Sea.

Under his command, the *Bridgeburner* became synonymous with arson and terror. Agron had grown cannier with age, never picking a target he hadn't thoroughly studied first, cultivating a reputation as a powerful but implacable mercenary, and investing in equipment rather than wasting money on whores and booze. He even convinced a magician to forge his fiery axe as payment for mercenary work, and never parted ways with it since.

Agron had always aspired to become more than a mere pirate captain though. He wanted to do more than start fires. He wanted to *become* a flame, to transcend his weak flesh and ascend as a living inferno. Then, he would be happy forever, burning and singing in his own private furnace.

But to achieve that dream, he needed a [Legend]. To take power the same way the New Gods did when they cast down the Olympians.

Agron could have taken a Quest and followed the path set by Fate... but he refused to. Power, *real* power, was taken by force. That was how the minotaur god Asterius had become the lord of all forges, and Agron would follow in his footsteps.

That's just the way the world works, the warrior thought, as he checked the ropes keeping him attached to the Foresight. Either you eat and get stronger like this ship, or you get eaten yourself.

Or at least, that was what he had believed for years, until he met a certain would-be Travian king.

Agron had joined up with Kairos after learning of him hatching a phoenix, mostly because he hoped to see the creature himself. The minotaur imagined it as the most beautiful, radiant thing in the world, a vibrant flying flame. The incarnation of his dream.

If this fiery messenger had shown favor to Kairos, then the young man had a great and terrible destiny ahead of him. Those who followed Kairos would reap a harvest in blood and glory, and those who opposed him would perish.

So Agron had fallen in line, and following events only reinforced his conviction. Cassandra had gained a [Legend], then Thales followed shortly afterward. After so many years of wandering without ever finding a challenge worthy of his axe, the minotaur had finally found his path to success.

And yet... and yet instead of conquering his way across the Sunsea as Agron had expected, Kairos had chosen a different path. He had raided cities, but raised others from the dirt too. He had made friends out of people Agron would rather have killed. And somehow, it worked out for him.

It got Agron thinking, and he had wondered if there were other ways to live than through killing.

Though he didn't entirely believe in the man's dream of a peaceful and prosperous Travia, the *Bridgeburner's* captain couldn't help but respect Kairos. Maybe the would-be king would succeed in changing their nation, maybe not. But he was the only one brave enough to try, and Agron wanted to see what waited at the end of his dream.

Maybe that was why Fate had seen it wise to give him the [Lyre of Orpheus]. To show Agron that he could choose another path than the eternal flames.

At long last, the *Foresight* caught up to the sea dragon in the ruins of an underwater park. The creature was gorging itself on a whale transporting terrified merfolk merchants, the

animal's tail sticking out of the giant monster's toothy maw. The storm had uprooted the seagrass and algae trees, leaving nothing but a muddy wasteland behind.

The sheer size of the dragon made the crewmates flinch. The beast towered over the Foresight like an adult over a young child.

"If you have a song, oh my bull, now is the time," brave Nessus said, as he readied his bow for the kill.

Agron had one. The original musician wrote it as a hymn to the old gods, but the [Skald] had adapted the lyrics to the modern day. The minotaur kept his axe around his belt, grabbed the [Lyre of Orpheus], and sang. His bellowing voice carried over the deck, as deep as the ocean's abyss.

"Dwellers on the unconquered land, the time of victory is at hand," the minotaur sang, his eyes glancing at the hydra flag atop the Foresight's mast. "The royal flag forward goes, the silver spear glows!"

As his voice rose in pitch, so did the men's courage. The crew who had wavered before this colossal beast found its bravery again. The war machine that successfully fended off the Argonauts in Achlys finally returned to life, as the *Foresight* crawled to the dragon's left side.

Your song temporarily raised your allies' [Strength] and [Charisma] by one stage!

"Fire!" Cassandra ordered, her voice carrying over Agron's own war song.

The *Foresight* let out a fearsome roar, and its crew a volley of projectiles. Fireballs flew over Orichalcos' ruins, alongside golden arrows and ballista bolts. A rain of flames and steel hit the trident dragon from the side by surprise, blasting his scales and piercing one of his pitch-black eyes. The sight of all these fireballs filled Agron with a quiet, blissful sense of contentment.

The surprised beast stumbled to its right, its feet drawing a trench in the seafloor as they moved. The monster spit back the half-devoured whale in its main mouth, while the half a dozen other jaws on its joints and chest shrieked in fury. The beast's eye shed pale red blood, while Kairos and Rook fell down from above. Spears and claws cut through the forehead's scales, before retreating as the dragon raised its hand.

"On the holy altar, fire consumes flesh and tar!" Agron kept singing, as charbroiled scales and burnt blood fell down from the beast's side. "The smoke rises to the skies, where our glory lies!"

The dragon glared down at the *Foresight*. "Uh oh," Nessus said so eloquently.

The giant monster roared, and chased after the *Foresight*. The living ship, thrice smaller, immediately escaped through Orichalcos' devastated streets, stomping rubble, dead fish, and helpless merfolk as it did. Its crablike legs clinked as it raced faster than any horse, drawing upon its inhuman strength and endurance. The slower dragon chased after them, its mighty tail shattering seastone pyramids and casting broken spires to earth.

"The banner of conquest we raise!" Agron chanted, as the dragon's wounds began to heal as fast as a hydra's heads, while Kairos chased after it and Nausicaa climbed its back. The beast opened its mouth, blue light surging within it. *"The golden voice blends with songs of praise!"*

A torrent of cold water and ice poured out of the dragon's main maw, the pressure intense enough to crack stone and shatter bones. The *Foresight* leapt like a spider atop the ruins of a pearl house to dodge the bombardment, the movement so abrupt that the crew would have been tossed overboard if not for the ropes holding them to the deck.

Agron looked up at the dragon, his eyes locking with the giant beast's. The monster's eyeball had regenerated enough to spit out Nessus' arrow, so the minotaur attempted an unconventional approach. He looked up at the monster while singing, and activated his helmet's ability.

You couldn't overcome [Triton the Kin-Eater]'s [Sleep] Immunity.

Curses! Why were common status ailments always useless against powerful opponents?!

"Regeneration?" Cassandra said as the dragon's wounds closed. The flying Kairos breathed a cloud of purple miasma on the charbroiled scale, interrupting the beast's icy bombardment. Even the venom didn't stop the dragon's healing process, and only slowed it down. "Nessus, you said that the trident was controlling the creature?"

"Thankfully, dear Cass," the satyr replied, once again aiming for the creature's eyes with his magical bow and golden arrows. "That thing has tremendous power, but not the intellect to make good use of it."

Agron couldn't help but wonder how the satyr knew that piece of information. The minotaur couldn't put his finger on why, but Nessus always struck him as wearing lies and secrets like armor. Mayhaps he hid wounds of his own.

"That wasn't what I meant," Cassandra replied, focusing on the golden metal shard sticking out of the creature's forehead. Nausicaa had almost climbed her way to it, soaking herself in a shroud of water to propel herself upward. "Everyone, prepare for the next volley! Target the forehead!"

The trident dragon didn't give them the time to breathe. After running out of water to spew, the beast let out a moan of pain, its voice echoing with magic. Black clouds formed in the skies above the cyclone drying up Orichalcos' capital, and soon a downpour rained down onto the seafloor.

[Triton the Kin-Eater] changed the weather to [Heavy Rainfall]!

[Triton the Kin-Eater] activated [Rainskin] and [Rainscale] Skill! His [Agility] stat increased, and [Fire] attacks will be Resisted!

Cassandra immediately understood the danger. She had grown into her own since her days as Kairos' first mate, and Agron knew she would grow into a fearsome general one day. "Andromache, change the weather at once!"

"I will," the Scylla replied as she raised her staff and bent the skies to her will. She was skilled in magic, and Kairos redirected winds to blow away the raincloud, but they were mere [Heroes] struggling against a [Demigod]. The clouds moved back and forth, but more water covered the seafloor.

Within minutes, the water level rose up enough to create ponds for the dried fish. Many had already perished from asphyxia, but some merfolk seemed to regain their strength.

The Cetae had already beaten the royal army into submission and secured the city, but Agron noticed the swirling winds keeping the sea away slowing down. The ritual had linked the earth and the sky, but with water blocking the way...

The dragon made a beeline for the *Foresight*, the rainwater gliding off its scales as if it were a shark on the hunt. It quickly gained ground on the ship, pursuing it back to the palace's ruins, and opened its jaws wide.

"Fire!" Cassandra shouted, this time contributing to the volley with ghostly flames.

However, the fireballs half dissipated from the rainwater before they could even reach their target, with only embers reaching the beast. Arrows and bolts bounced off its regenerated scales.

"Shit," Cassandra cursed, before holding her breath upon noticing Nausicaa reaching the beast's forehead. The mermaid [Rogue] struck the forehead with her spear, probably trying to unearth the trident shard hidden beneath the scales. "Yes!"

Not even noticing the mermaid, the dragon's head lunged at the Foresight with a snake's speed. The movement was so abrupt that Nausicaa's spear snapped in half from the movement and the [Rogue] was propelled away like a flying fish.

Only the *Foresight's* incredible reflexes allowed the ship to leap away at the last second, the dragon's jaws closing on nothing but air. However, though the ship landed on the palace's walls, some ropes holding the crew snapped from the abrupt motion. Three soldiers fell overboard and one human broke his neck against the deck.

Kairos dived down to catch Nausicaa by the hand before she crashed to her death, but had to fly away as the dragon tried to eat him too. The beast's forehead kept glowing, the source of its power out of reach.

... or maybe not.

"How strong is the ballista?" Agron asked, an idea forming in his mind. "How much weight can it launch?"

Cassandra immediately understood, as the minotaur put his lyre around his belt and seized his fiery favorite weapon in one hand and a throwing axe in the other. "This is madness, Agron."

"Only in the method chosen," Andromache replied, raising a tentacle. "I can throw him."

"If you miss, he will die—"

"I won't fail," Andromache insisted.

"You heard her," Agron replied with snort, before cutting the rope anchoring him to the deck with his fire axe. "No glory for the meek."

Andromache's tentacle coiled around his chest, while the witch remained focused on dissipating the magical weather. "You didn't even argue," the Scylla said with an amused look on her face.

"We both knew it would end this way," Agron answered with a shrug. They had found common ground in convincing Kairos to raze this city in the first place. The minotaur and the Scylla had the most in common among the *Foresight's* motley crew, as the same rage fueled them both. "You didn't ask me if I felt confident."

"No." The witch grinned ear to ear. "Because as you said once... you do not have hope, you have certainty."

Agron promised to talk with her more often, after he had committed dragoncide. He had the feeling they might become good friends.

Unfortunately, by now the cyclone around the capital had slowed down enough for seawater to leak from the wind walls, threatening to flood the city once again. Andromache had cast [Water Breathing] and [Water Resistance] spells on the crew before the attack, specifically to help them survive this scenario... but the *Foresight* instinctively started to raise its protective membrane over the deck, to better protect the crew.

It was now or never.

"Now!" Agron shouted, Andromache lifting him like a feather.

Agron ground his teeth as the Scylla swirled, and swirled, the world becoming a blur. The minotaur ground his teeth, and he thanked the New Gods that he had enough wits not to eat before the battle.

And then, the Scylla threw him at the dragon.

It was true what the priests of Persephone said. As Agron flew across the skies like an arrow to his death, he saw his entire life flashing before his eyes. The raindrops falling down on his fur and the [Nemean Cloak] covering him blurred into a forge's embers, the city beneath him into smoke and screams. Agron couldn't hear, couldn't taste, couldn't see where he went, and for the first time since his childhood he feared for his life.

Time slowed down, the forge's flames dissipating into two enormous black eyes looking up at the minotaur. A golden light reflecting on glistening blue scales blinded him.

Agron raised his axes in midair, and did the only thing he could.

He roared.

Agron landed right onto the dragon's left eye, stabbing it with his axes as if they were climbing gear.

The beast's following roar made the minotaur's bones vibrate beneath his skin, and an atrocious agony coursed through his brain. For a moment, Agron thought his head would explode, and the world suddenly snapped from strident noise to pain and silence.

You have been [Deafened]!

Agron's ears bled, but it only enraged him further. The minotaur raised an axe and stabbed at the eyeball's thin coating above his head, lifting himself up.

The dragon shook its head in an attempt to throw the minotaur off, but Agron's weapons were of better quality than an obsidian spear. Though his feet dangled into the void, the warrior continued to climb until he reached the eyelid, and then the forehead.

A metal shard no larger than a spear's tip glowed between two scales, embedded in the beast's flesh. Its light almost blinded the minotaur, forcing him to squint.

The kindling of my flame, Agron thought with triumph as he climbed his way to the shard one wound at a time. He could barely see his own hands with the downpour, and his fire axe's flames turned to steam, but he persevered. A shadow briefly loomed over Agron, but the minotaur only had eyes for the blinding light.

He quickly reached the shard, and started hacking at the soft flesh around it. One strike after another, he unburied the treasure, blood pouring out of the dragon's wounds. At long last, Agron oversaw a crater of flesh, and the little secret beneath.

A merfolk boy's eyes looked up at Agron from beneath the scales, its coral hands and mouth melded with the tip of a golden, shining trident's pointed end. These small, pitiful eyeballs observed the minotaur with terror, and filled the warrior with rage.

I suffered all of my life to get here, Agron thought with bitter envy. To earn the power of a god... while you, a weakling, had it handed over like a toy!

"Mine!" Agron snapped, but no sound seemed to come out of his throat. He tossed away his throwing axe and only kept his fiery one, using his free hand to clutch the shard. But the coral child wouldn't let it let go. "Your [Legend] is mine!"

The shadow above the minotaur grew darker, and the minotaur noticed that the rain no longer fell down on his back. He briefly peeked over his shoulders, and gasped upon seeing scales falling down on him.

The dragon's hand slapped its forehead, smashing Agron like an insect.

The minotaur's ribs snapped inside his chest, as did his knees. The [Nemean Cloak] and his armor absorbed some of the blow's impact, but the shock made the minotaur spit blood and shattered his right horn in two.

But beneath the pain burnt the anger.

[Berserker Rage] Skill activated! [Berserk] ailment!

[Mindfulness] Skill activated! Your mind is clear!

Agron might not have been the sharpest sword in the armory, but he had enough wits to carefully plan his class progression. The warrior felt rage coursing through his veins, empowering him, numbing his pain.

He thought back of his father, of the beatings, of the pain, of the wounds he took on his first raid, of all the scars and humiliations. He thought of all the enemies he had sworn to burn, of his silent wrath at seeing Thales gain a [Legend] while they had fought the same battle, of the envy he felt at Cassandra wielding the power of divine flames.

Agron's fury gave him the strength to live.

And so, the minotaur started to push back. He extended his arms, and though the dragon's palm weighed a mountain, his chest rose, and *rose!* The warrior's muscles strained and his fingers clenched around his fire axe's pommel. King Triton's small eyes cried saltwater tears, while Agron's own were droplets of blood. Freed from the rainwater, his fiery axe ignited and smoke filled the maddened minotaur's nostrils.

Kairos would have hesitated. He would have tried to find another way, to save that child in spite of the consequences. If spared, that whelp would one day grow into a deadly foe, and Travia had enough of them already. The Sellsword King would have felt guilt and shame, for sure.

But Agron wasn't paid to feel.

The minotaur brought down his fire axe, and stained his face with royal blood. He hacked once, then twice, his vision turning red while his free hand clutched the shard.

Then the water hit him.

A torrent of saltwater threw him off the screaming dragon's head, as the wall of wind drying up Orichalcos finally collapsed. The sea reclaimed the city, and carried Agron away.

His fingers clutched his axe and the shard, a sinister red light surging from within himself while he watched the dragon collapse. The pain returned, a blissful agony.

Agron could breathe water thanks to Andromache's spell, but his broken ribs squeezed inside his chest from the oceanic pressure. His broken legs couldn't carry him, and his hands were too busy clutching his axe and the shard to help him swim. The current carried him into the silent abyss, his vision turning dark.

I'm going to drown, Agron thought with bitterness. He had gained the power he had wanted all his life, and he would perish before he could make use of it. He had set the world on fire, and would perish swallowed by water.

He would have laughed if he had enough strength to.

Agron almost didn't notice the strong white hands grabbing him by the shoulders, nor the darkness giving way to the dim light of the night sky. Air felt the same as water when his head emerged, and someone hauled him onto a bed of feathers.

The minotaur spit up blood, and he sensed something removing his helmet and putting something lighter in its place.

[Hydra Crown] granted you [Minor Regeneration]! You are no longer [Deafened]!

The pain vanished, and he felt his bones healing the best they could beneath his flesh. His vision acclimated to the pale moonlight, noticing Rook's wings flapping to his left, as the griffin struggled to carry him and his master above the waves. Nausicaa swam beneath them, the sea tainted with dragon blood.

"That's... your crown..." Agron rasped. He could hear himself again, though his voice sounded meek and raspy.

"But it will heal you," Kairos replied. His eyes looked at his subordinate with respect, as did Nausicaa's, before wandering off to the shard inside the minotaur's hand. "You deserved it."

No, he didn't.

But the minotaur was thankful all the same.

You earned the Legend: [Kingslayer]!

*You upgraded your Personal Rank from [Elite] to [Hero]. You can now progress past level 40, and your Vitality rank has been raised from B+ to A. You earned the Legendary Skill: **[King's Pyre]**.*

You gained six levels (total 46) and 18 Skill points.

***[King's Pyre]:** Legendary Skill, 3 Stars. Any foe you strike with a weapon must succeed a [Vitality] check or spontaneously catch fire. Individuals killed by your [Fire] attacks immediately turn to ash, and cannot be raised from the dead except by [Demigods] and above.*

[Kingslayer].

Infamy was a reward of its own.

"Agron?" Kairos said, his voice breaking. "Was... Do you think there was ever a way to save him?"

"No," Agron lied as easily as he breathed.

His king looked at the minotaur with skepticism, but didn't argue.

At the end of the day, Kairos saw himself as a hero, with a little 'h'. And heroes didn't kill children. He couldn't choose between the path of the diplomat or that of the conqueror, never committing to any side. He didn't want to sully his hands with what had to be done.

So Agron would shoulder that burden for him.

Every king needs a rabid attack hound sometimes, the minotaur thought, as he closed his eyes and the darkness of slumber claimed him at last.

21: The Wages of Victory

The battle was won, and it left a bittersweet taste in Kairos' mouth.

One day ago, a great city had stood beneath the waves, a paragon of wealth and glory. Its history stretched back to before the *Anthropomachia*, and the greatest human empires of the surface had lived in its shadow.

Now, only ruins remained. The trident dragon had flattened whatever buildings the storm didn't destroy first, and the torrential waters finished the job. One disaster after another had leveled the capital to rubble.

These are precious ruins though, Kairos thought, as he sat at the *Foresight's* bow, shielded from the waters outside by a barrier of translucent slime. The trident shard in his hands radiated with a warm glow, and the hydra fang crown had never felt so heavy to bear.

His ship had climbed over the ruins of the palace, overlooking the desolation it helped bring about. Hybris floated in the waters outside the protective dome, while only Rook remained to keep Kairos company.

The Travian's men were scouring the city to take their share of the loot, and make an inventory of what would go back home to fund the colony. The Abyeans had little interest in wealth besides land and magical items, so all the metalwork, the precious stones, pearls, and other wonders would fund Kairos' coffers. The king doubted any other Travian had ever gotten their hands on a hoard of this magnitude. Andromache investigated the palace, to figure out which spells the merfolk had used to amplify the shard's power, and Agron...

The minotaur had come out of the battle as its major victor behind Hybris, claiming a [Legend] of his own at last. Yet instead of claiming gold and silver as Kairos had expected, Agron had asked for a ghastlier trophy.

After its death and separation from the trident's shard, the dragon's corpse had rotted at an accelerated rate. Without the relic to sustain it, the flesh had fallen off the bones and the skeleton had collapsed into what had once been the city's market street. The Abyeans had tried to claim it for themselves, until Hybris decided to let Agron keep what he had killed.

The minotaur had, predictably, decided to make new weapons and armors out of the remains.

The idea of using the dragon's remains sent a chill down Kairos' spine, and he almost forbade it... but didn't.

Kairos had condoned Agron's murder of the merfolk prince, knowing such a thing would happen. The blood had been shed, some of his own crewmates had perished to claim the city and bring the creature down. Refusing to use the remains would just be hypocrisy.

In it for a silver coin, in it for a gold one, the captain thought sourly.

"A shame that your ship would not eat it," Hybris said, his voice echoing through the water. The sea serpent coiled around a sharpened stone; what little remained of the palace's top after Triton had broken out of it. "I shudder to imagine how powerful it would have become."

"I am a [Hero]," Kairos replied. "That creature was a [Demigod]. My ship can't devour something stronger than I am."

"You will have more than enough corpses to feed your vessel." Hybris spat out a white blubber, one that had once belonged to a whale [Demigod]. Kairos couldn't fathom how the Cetus managed to digest his prey so quickly. "And more will come. Now that the capital is ours and the royal family exterminated, the merfolk will fail to form a united front. Generals will proclaim themselves kings, and false princes will sprout like algae. None of them will prove a threat to us, but we will have to bring them to heel."

Hybris' army had crushed the last few pockets of resistance in the city, and though he had promised that all of those who pledged their loyalty to the new *Abyssesean Empire* would be spared, the merfolk population had largely fled. A few others hid, and would probably submit. With the fall of its capital, Orichalcos faced times of chaos.

"And the merfolk?" Kairos asked, slightly worried. The Abysseseans had contained their savagery during the sack, but he wondered if it would last.

"Do you worry about racial purges or pogroms, my friend?" Hybris shrugged. "My allies and I have no desire to rule an ocean of the dead. The merfolks who accept the new order shall be treated no differently than Abysseseans, and they will enjoy the benefits of my protection. Some of them might prosper even more than under the previous administration, for we honor strength and skills above birth. Those who resist us will die. We could use assistance on that front..."

"Are you offering me to join in a prolonged campaign?" Kairos shook his head. "I will have to decline."

"I've been wet enough for a lifetime!" Rook complained, echoing his partner's thoughts. This whole adventure had already lasted far too long to his liking.

"I had a feeling you wouldn't help us further, but I offered you the opportunity anyway... as a friend. It will take years before we fully secure our control of the depths, but we will. A hydra whose heads cannot fight as one is doomed to perish." Hybris' multiple eyes glanced at Kairos. "Your kindred are taking joy in looking for trinkets, but not you."

"Most of the wealth will go to my kingdom," the human replied.

"A strong king should have his own fortune, separate from his realm's. One never knows what the future holds."

"Frankly, it's already too much." Kairos never thought he would say something like this, but that was true. "My second-in-command informed me that we would need ten thousand ships to take everything from this city and we only have one."

"I can send carriers to the surface," Hybris offered. Victory had made him grateful and generous. "It is the least I can do, to repay the favor I owe you."

What a quaint word to describe this slaughter.

Hybris floated in front of the dome, the monster's many eyes glancing at Kairos through the membrane. "You do not shun the spoils of victory out of practical concerns," the sea serpent guessed. "You stay away because you feel tainted."

Yes, Kairos felt guilt.

In truth, the king had sent his men away because he needed a moment alone. Only Rook remained, because the human couldn't keep anything secret from his [Animal Companion]; not even his thoughts.

"Are you going to tell me that they all deserved death?" Kairos asked morosely.

"Some of this battle's casualties were innocent," Hybris conceded, "and though most merfolks did, some did not support their rulers. In an ideal world, they would have lived a long and happy life."

Kairos looked away. "But we don't live in an ideal world."

"No, and this is the only one we have."

"Truth be told, this isn't the first time I sacked a city," Kairos admitted. "Though in today's case, wealth was a secondary motivation. I wanted to destroy an existential threat to my kind."

"You did."

Indeed, and yet somehow Kairos felt less justified in sacking Orichalcos than Beoetia, even though the latter hadn't been a menace. Perhaps it was the sheer magnitude of today's destruction.

No, his morosity ran deeper than this. One sack was a happenstance, two a pattern.

"All I ever wanted was to move my homeland of Travia away from piracy and barbarism," Kairos replied. "Yet I feel like I only perpetuated a cycle."

"Ah, and this where you are wrong," Hybris replied, his lure flickering with a gentle, reassuring light. "For you *have* broken a cycle. You abided by the terms of our agreement, and I shall do the same. My kind shall no longer raid your surface, and I will hunt those who betray our pact. We shall coexist in peace, and perhaps one day, we shall trade together."

True, peace with the Aysseans meant that thousands of ships wouldn't mysteriously sink each year, and coastal settlements would become a lot safer. Many surfacers would thank Kairos for securing this deal, and wouldn't care much about a city beneath the waves. Some would call him a warlord though, and condemn his actions.

But in the end, Kairos had made that choice for his people's greater good. Orichalcos had destroyed islands in the past, and intended to support an Old Gods restoration attempt. One that, if successful, would condemn the surface to oppression again.

I don't want my children to suffer what Andromache went through, Kairos thought. I would rather die than see those events repeat.

He would bear the guilt and the consequences.

"There is however a small matter which we must discuss," Hybris rasped.

Kairos glanced at the trident shard in his hands. "My Skills aren't powerful enough to fully analyze it."

"Mine are," Hybris replied. "Which is why I cannot leave it to you. Its power is too great."

"Then I shall bring it to Orgonos for destruction," Kairos decided.

"Or you might simply give it to him for safekeeping," Hybris suggested. "The old cyclops' twin obsessions are peering into the abyss of magic, and making sure the Old Gods never rise again. The trident will never see the light of day in his hands, and he would certainly prove grateful."

When he put it that way... Kairos expected to give Orgonos the [Rock of Theseus], but a shard of Poseidon's trident would make the former appear like a worthless trinket in comparison.

"Would you let me have that freedom?" Kairos asked Hybris with a frown. "Or do you expect an oath?"

"No need, I trust you. We are family now, and if we have a disagreement, Mother Gaia shall see that we find common ground. In fact, I believe your [Idols] and those of your mate will join mine, once we have rebuilt this city's temple."

Kairos couldn't help but chuckle. "The Cetae are more likely to turn to you. You planned this battle, and you won it."

"True... Perhaps one day, after I have united all creatures of the depths under my leadership, I shall ascend as the deity of the sea," Hybris replied, his lure's light turning into a mighty shade of crimson. Kairos wondered how much his desire for glory had motivated his actions today.

A plan within a plan, the human thought. He had no doubt that today's events had been but the first move in his Cetus ally's long game, one that would either end with godhood or death.

"But some of my kind will find you more to their sensibilities," Hybris said, as he began to move away from the *Foresight*. "Those who straddle the line between the wild and civilization. Others might look up to your minotaur, if you agree to let him in our [Pantheon]. You are a bridge between worlds, Kairos, and this is your strength. Stay true to it, and the world shall become yours."

The human answered with a slow nod, and the Cetus swam away to survey his new realm.

Congratulations, you earned four levels (total fifty-five) and 12 Skill Points.

Conquest paid well, in more ways than one.

Still, Kairos had expected more levels for being involved in such a historic event. He checked his stat screen, and the experience requirement for his next level.

EXP Progression

2,000,000/2,250,000

Kairos remembered being at around one million four hundred thousands in total experience before the battle, meaning he had gained more than half a million points for helping mastermind Orichalcos' fall. Such an amount would have immediately pushed a normal person above level forty.

The experience requirements were getting exponentially harder as Kairos approached the level cap for [Hero] Rank and approached demigodhood. From now on, only legendary exploits would help him get stronger.

"He is right, you know," Rook said, with the simple wisdom of a young bird. "We can't protect the rest of the world's nests. Ours is already a lot of work!"

Kairos raised an eyebrow. "Shouldn't you take a shiny trophy while you still can?"

"Shinies are important, but not as much as your happiness." The griffin moved in front of Kairos, and locked eyes with him. "Let's fly together after we reach the land. Nothing better than fresh air to blow away dark thoughts!"

Kairos couldn't help but smile and pet his friend on the head. The griffin's relentless positivity never failed to cheer him up. "Tell me, Rook... how would you feel about wearing shining armor?"

"How shiny?" The griffin squealed. "I want gold, gold everywhere, and emeralds because they will go well with my eyes! Rubies too, but I don't want them to look better than my feathers!"

"I'll do what I can," Kairos replied. Now that the battle for the depths had concluded, he intended to explore the limits of [Telchine Metalsmithing 3]. It had been a while since Kairos could get away from politics and simply *craft*.

Since he could make Rank 3 weapons, the Travian King could also start outfitting his allies with powerful devices. Agron's axe needed improvements to become worthy of a [Hero], and though Tiberius didn't lack in courage and intelligence, his combat prowess left much to be desired. A magical weapon would help on that front.

And then, there was the newest recruit...

"You hide well," Kairos said, as he glanced at the water beyond the slime dome. "But not from me."

Rook looked at the water with a puzzled expression, until something invisible hit the slime dome. The mermaid Nausicaa had become visible before she even hopped on the deck like a fish out of water, though she seemed as dry as a desert. She glared at Kairos with squinting eyes, holding a new obsidian spear that she probably salvaged somewhere. Her fishtail slammed the ground with irritation.

"How did I notice you?" the human asked with a smile. "It's a secret."

In truth, Kairos had simply made an educated guess and bet that Nausicaa would reveal her presence. He already had experience with sneaking in under the veil of invisibility, and he knew how [Rogues] thought. The mermaid must have been studying him from afar, gathering information on her new allies.

"No fair, you were listening all along?" Rook asked, and to Kairos' surprise, the mermaid nodded. She probably had the [Beast Tongue] Skill.

Kairos had to admit that her stealth skills surpassed even his own. The [Invisibility] spell shouldn't have prevented her from creating perceptible movement in the water, and yet the mermaid hadn't given any hint to her position. Or at least, none that the human could observe.

Come to think of it...

Kairos focused for a moment, and realized that Nausicaa didn't make *any* sound. If she breathed, she did it in complete and utter silence. "I don't suppose you would be interested in assassination missions?" he asked. "I know a king in dire need of a dagger to the heart."

Nausicaa raised a hand, mimicked a human walking with her fingers, and then shook her head.

"Yeah, I figured as much." She couldn't move as well on land as in the water, unlike Andromache. "We might help with that though. My consort has a lot of experience with shapeshifting."

The possibility of walking on land seemed to amuse the mermaid rogue.

"If you want to come with us," Kairos added. "You fought on the winning team, and Hybris would probably welcome an [Assassin] in his retinue."

Nausicaa mimicked a slitting throat motion, and then pointed a finger at her new captain. For a moment, Kairos thought that she wanted to eliminate him one day, before she pointed at herself next.

"You don't owe me anything," Kairos replied, after understanding her meaning. "Let alone your life."

Nausicaa shook her head, and put a fist against her chest. She had already made her choice. "Very well," Kairos said. "Welcome to my crew and kingdom, Nausicaa."

"We could fish together," Rook proposed, immediately making the new recruit feel welcome. "I control the skies, Kairos the earth, and you the sea. No fish shall escape our sight!"

"Few fish walk on land, Rook," Kairos quipped. The *Foresight* let out a sound which its captain took for a mocking laugh. "You are an exception, my friend."

Nausicaa seemed enthusiastic about the proposal, and started making quick signs with her hands. Though Kairos was completely lost, Rook's eyes brightened with interest. "Kairos, she says she can teach me how to hunt better!" the griffin said. "She's very passionate about it!"

"You know sign language?" his human partner asked.

"No, but I understand food language!"

Kairos shrugged, and let these two 'discuss' hunting strategies. The human sat on the deck, in the shadow of his ship's mast, and meditated.

It should be twilight above the sea, and time to make contact with his colony.

After focusing for a few seconds, Kairos's mind left his body and the bottom of the oceans for his [Idol] in Histria's temple. He needed to discuss with Julia about the political fallout of today's conflict.

The fact Mithridates had hired merfolk scouts to spy on their colony bothered Kairos greatly. Orichalcos' fall would probably put an end to this, as the oceanic kingdom's surviving generals would need every pair of hands, but some soldiers might turn to Pergamon for asylum. Mithridates thrived on discord, and the depths would face turmoil for years to come.

To Kairos' surprise, his spirit found Julia facing his [Idol] inside Histria's temple, covered in a red cowl. Her face was pale, twisted into a frown.

'TOOK LONG ENOUGH,' Kairos sent as a short message through his statue, feeling both frustrated and relieved. He hadn't managed to contact his wife in days, and started to worry for her safety.

Their safety, he thought, his gaze wandering to his wife's belly. The thought awakened something primal inside the rogue, an instinct as old as mankind. *I did it for them.*

"I was away, and I just returned," Julia replied. Though her tone remained unapologetic, Kairos detected a hint of worry in her gaze. This surprised him. Julia had always been unflappable, and yet she appeared rather anxious today. "Are you well, my husband? I was told you had gone to war."

Kairos thought about how he should answer that, especially with the limits of their method of communication, and decided to sum it up in one sentence. 'I CAME I SAW I CONQUERED.'

His wife answered with a wolfish grin. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you."

She didn't even seem surprised. *Perhaps it was always bound to end this way*, Kairos thought. "WHAT ABOUT YOU?"

"I have met with Euthenia," his wife explained, immediately catching her husband's full attention. "A most delightful lady, and I am saddened that we left on the wrong foot at my wedding. She told me a great many things."

"SO?"

"So I know what Mithridates is building," Julia explained, her expression darkening. "I have seen it."

22: Lurking Shadows

A mist had risen over Travian waters, and a small boat soundlessly threaded its way down the current.

Her face hidden beneath a crimson hood and a traveling cloak, Julia sat at the back, a gladius dangling from her belt. Though she had two bodyguards rowing the vessel, and Caenis to warn her of impending attacks, the Queen of Histria felt naked without a weapon on herself. As a [Duelist], wielding a sword came as naturally as a cat sharpening its claws.

Her enhanced hearing picked up movement in the dark water, and her eyes a ghostly shape in the heart of the fog.

"Caenis, if you would kindly light the way," Julia asked. Her lover raised a lantern, and the shadow of a galley appeared out of the mist. The larger vessel swung to the small boat's side, pushed by two banks of oars. Its figurehead represented an armored hoplite woman, whom Julia recognized as Cynisca, a famous Orthian chariot rider.

Not very subtle.

Julia rose on her feet, as soldiers on the galley's deck dropped a rope ladder over the rail. "Only you," a voice came from the galley. "Nobody else."

"Milady..." one of her bodyguards said, clearing his throat.

"I will be fine," the queen replied, before glancing at Caenis. "Won't I?"

The seer responded with a nod, but to Julia's surprise, Caenis appeared incredibly nervous. Could it be that she feared for her own life? Caenis might have only foreseen her mistress surviving, and worried about her own safety.

Julia couldn't keep her mouth shut. "Caenis—"

"It's alright," Caenis interrupted her. "It's alright."

Julia frowned, but when the hoplites started to grow impatient she climbed the ladder. Usually, such effort wouldn't even have winded her, but she found herself struggling a bit more than usual.

I will miss this kind of exercise in a few months, Julia thought. She had suffered from nausea yesterday, and it would only take a few weeks before her belly started to harden. The

queen could feel her body changing to accommodate the child growing inside her, her breasts starting to swell. *I hope I won't gain too much weight.*

It might have sounded childish, but Julia was proud of her slim figure, both out of coquetry and martial pride. A duelist lived and died by their dexterity. The werewolf relished the adrenaline rush of intense exercise and intense sword clashes.

She would *hate* spending months sitting at home, waiting to deliver.

A hoplite soldier helped her climb onto the deck, and soon Julia found herself face to face with another ruler. "Queen Euthenia," Julia said, while offering a courtly reverence.

"Lady Marius," Queen Euthenia replied with far less deference. The woman in front of Julia looked little like the foreign diplomat who witnessed her wedding to Kairos. Euthenia had traded her dress and jewels for a hoplite's outfit covering her porcelain skin, while a golden masked helmet protected her entire face except for the eyes. Julia found it exquisitely crafted, and it only added to the intensity of the blue gaze peering through the eye holes. "You dressed better the last time we met."

"A maiden is never as beautiful as on the day of her wedding." Julia couldn't help but leer at the Orthian queen's splendid curves, barely hidden beneath her armor. "You will blind half the witnesses during yours."

"I have no interest in marriage," Euthenia replied with disgust. Her hand instinctively brushed against her sheathed sword. "Males have looked at me like a piece of meat since before I even flowered."

"They did the same with me." *Many women too*, Julia thought with a mischievous smile, *and some did more than look*. "I took it as a compliment."

"I did not."

Julia observed the masked queen for a moment, trying to understand her personality better. *She loathes her own face*, the werewolf thought, her eyes wandering to the Orthian's blade. *She would rather be recognized as a great warrior and leader, than as Thessala's most beautiful queen.*

"First of all, I would like to apologize for what happened during my wedding," Julia said, her thoughts souring at the feast's memory. "If I had known Mithridates' plan, I would have done everything in my power to save your nephew's life."

Euthenia snorted. "Spare me your false sympathy, Lycean. Mithridates might have slain my nephew, but your brother made it possible and your husband slew too many of my kindred. We will *never* be friends."

"No, I suppose not, but we have an enemy in common." Julia walked towards the galley's bow and put a hand on the rail. "One corrupting your city as we speak."

"Do you trust your escort?" Queen Euthenia asked, her own hands behind her back.

"As much as I can trust anyone," Julia replied. Caenis was her bedmate, and she brought bodyguards that had served her family in Lyce for years. She had left her husband's gladiators at home, to look after Aurelia.

"The wiser answer would have been no. Mithridates has spies everywhere, and his shadow looms larger every day." Euthenia glanced through the blowing fog, and Julia noticed the shadow of the Travian coast beyond the barrier of mist. "I am taking a great risk in meeting you, especially so close to enemy territory."

"Who would seek an Orthian queen in Travian waters?" Julia replied. Caenis had identified this location as the safest place possible, largely because only pirates allied with Kairos patrolled these waters. "You brought soldiers with you."

"People loyal to me, and not to my co-rulers. But their numbers are shrinking by the day. Antipater has used his control over the army to initiate a purge in Orthia, and the city intends to support Mithridates as the League's new Strategos."

Just as Julia had worried. "What about Thessala? If they refuse to endorse him, this will delay his ascension to power."

"Mithridates sounds almost unconcerned about the possibility," Euthenia replied. "Antipater seems convinced that the [Demigod] Talos will side with them."

"Why would he?" Julia asked. Talos had sworn an oath of loyalty to the city of Thessala, which he served as a patron and defender. The maker of automatons only took up arms if urged by the citizen assembly and its archons.

"I do not know, but I would be a fool to underestimate Mithridates." Euthenia locked eyes with Julia. "I heard that the cities of Gortyn, Issa, and Apollonia plan to secede from the Thessalan League."

"They will, if Mithridates is elected Strategos," Julia replied. It was already an open secret among Lycean political circles. "These cities have prospered thanks to trade with Lyce, and

Mithridates' ascension would put an end to it. My brother will reinforce them militarily, if needed."

"It won't be an invasion if Lyce only defends its allies," Euthenia said with heavy sarcasm. "You wolves disgust me. You have all the land you would ever need, and yet you still hunger for more."

"My brother will only intervene if they secede and are attacked afterward," Julia pointed out. "If I remember, the Thessalan League's rules allow its cities to leave the alliance."

"True, but Mithridates will never allow it. He wants to unify the League, not see it splinter. No doubt he intends to use that secret weapon of his to bring rebel cities to heel."

"What is he building exactly?" Julia asked. The question had frustrated her for weeks. "I have done my best to infiltrate his arsenal to no avail."

"Arsenals," Euthenia replied. "Plural. The one in Pergamon only builds part of the structure. Others create new components, and they are all assembled in a secret location I have been unable to track down. It is an impressive display of logistics."

What could be so complex as to need multiple workshops to develop? "Do you know the locations of the other arsenals?"

"I can tell that the wood used doesn't come from Pergamon, or any city in the Thessalan League for that matter."

Julia squinted. "Queen Teuta's lands are rich in timber."

"That was my thought as well. You should pay more attention to your countrymen."

Julia didn't bother to answer that jab. She might have married a Travian, but she remained a Lycean to the bone and proud of it. Her loyalties were to her family, husband and child included, then her new kingdom, and finally to Lyce, in that order.

Euthenia's eyes sorrowfully wandered to the dark waters around her ship. One shuddered to think what horrors hid in the depths. "He will be elected after the Olympic Games, pro-Lycean cities will secede, and then war will engulf the Thessalan League. Whoever wins, my city will lose."

"You could join us," Julia pointed out. "Choose the winning side."

"Arrogant, aren't you?"

"Confident, Your Majesty. If you wish to avenge your nephew's poisoning, you should help us take down Mithridates. I am thankful for the information you provided, but swords win wars. I am certain Orthia would prosper better under one queen, rather than three bickering rulers."

"So I would become your puppet, rather than Mithridates'? And let the murder of my brother Lysander and his wife go unavenged?" Euthenia shook her head in disgust. "I want to see Mithridates lose, but I don't want to see your brute of a husband win either. I only help in the hope of seeing them kill each other."

She will never love us, Julia thought. But I sense a vulnerability. "You love your city."

"I do. I must."

"There may come a time when you will have to put your people's wellbeing above your own personal feelings," Julia replied. "When that moment comes, I suggest you take the hand offered to you."

The Orthian Queen straightened up, her eyes as icy as winter. "Is that a threat, Lycean?"

"No, an offer." Julia offered the queen a nod. Though they might not like each other, the werewolf couldn't help but feel some sympathy for Euthenia. The Orthian woman was trapped between a rock and a hard place, with no way out. "Thank you for your honesty, Your Majesty. I shall not forget it."

"What will you do now?" Euthenia asked, with a hint of genuine curiosity.

"As you said," Julia replied while glancing at the Travian coast. "It is time I paid attention to my countrymen."

They peacefully parted ways afterward, though Euthenia didn't bid her fellow queen good luck.

Caenis had much stronger words to offer, when Julia explained her intentions. "Lady Julia, no!" she pleaded. "This is madness."

"All of our spies have failed to gather anything worthwhile so far," Julia replied. Largely because they lacked the necessary Skills and dedication. "I am a [Spymaster], gathering information is what I do. As they say, when you want something done right, do it yourself."

"But the risks—"

"Caenis, when my husband didn't return from Achlys, I dragged a fleet to make him come back. I do not believe in sitting at home." She would spend enough months doing that already.

In truth, Julia wanted to act on the field while she still could. Afterward, she would have to stay in the colony to avoid complications. The werewolf had no problem trading a sword for intrigue, but she refused to return home safely while her husband worked tirelessly to secure her realm's future.

Much like Kairos, Julia didn't believe herself above grunt work when needed.

"Besides, you foresaw that I would live through the evening no?" she asked her seer.

"I did, but..." Caenis nervously bit her lower lip.

"Caenis..."

"There's something around you, milady." The seer gathered her breath. "A shroud of darkness. I... I can't explain it. It's... you are venturing into a red mist, and it follows you. It is with you here, right now."

Julia frowned. Considering oracles, the prophecy was best left for interpretation. "Would this 'shroud' follow me back home too?"

"I... I think so."

"Then whether I act no or not is inconsequential. What you saw will happen anyway."

"Yes. No, but..." Caenis gathered her breath, trying to figure out the right way to say what weighed on her heart. "Milady, there is an evil force at work tonight. I can feel it. A foreboding doom."

Julia listened intently, before taking the seer into her arms. "Caenis, if this cannot be avoided, then it can only be confronted," the werewolf whispered, while her lover breathed long and deep. "We must all face our fate someday."

And she would rather confront it today than bring it back home.

A red wolf ran through the woods, a shadow hiding in the grass.

For once, Julia was thankful for her curse. Though it had ruined her life in Lyce, her nature as a werewolf came with a few perks. An astute canine sense of smell and natural abilities meshing well with her own stealth-related Skills would soon come in handy.

She had to cover her pristine crimson fur with mud to hide better in the wild, and had to regularly stop to catch smells to avoid the presence of men and beasts. This forest belonged to Pirate Queen Teuta, and she clearly didn't believe in letting monsters wander close to her settlements. Dangers abounded in these woods, from bear pits to human patrols.

A normal wolf would have fallen into a trap or been discovered, but Julia combined bestial senses with a keen human mind. A part of her had been reluctant to transform for fear of harming her offspring, even though she intellectually knew it wouldn't affect it.

Julia had asked her mother-in-law about the subject, and Aurelia had reassured her the best she could. Werewolf transformation hadn't prevented the Marius matriarch from giving birth to Kairos and his siblings... nor made them inherit the curse.

But my child will suffer from it, Julia thought grimly. All the scrolls she had read told her that the descendent of a werewolf and a wolfblood always transformed at puberty. Sometimes even earlier.

Maybe she should ask Andromache for help? The werewolf had no love for the Scylla, but she did have great knowledge of curses. Perhaps the witch could use magic to cure the child in the womb? Besides the social problems associated with it, a werewolf had an innate connection to Lycaon, however distant, and Julia didn't want her child bound to that wicked beast of a god.

Her keen ears picked up the sound of flapping wings, and Julia stopped beneath the shadow of a tree. A form flew above her, a winged shadow beneath the crescent moon; and for a moment, the she-wolf thought her husband had returned to her.

The moonlight and the presence of another winged shape corrected her. Two armored warriors rode griffins slightly smaller than Rook, one carrying a bow, the other a spear. A third shape joined them above the forest, the group making circles in the skies before following the north star.

Julia knew that some Travians had successfully trained and rode griffins, her husband first among them, but she had never seen an entire squad of them.

Were they the reason why the werewolf hadn't smelt any monsters so far? She knew that dangerous creatures infested the island, but she had yet to notice anything more dangerous than a sleeping squirrel.

She had to be close. She could already smell the presence of men, and heard the sound of running water.

Julia didn't have to wait long. She followed a river upstream all the way to a sawmill.

The werewolf had to move very, very carefully from that point. She didn't make a sound, avoided the moonlight, and stuck to the shadows. Even then, she couldn't approach any closer than the outskirts, lest she found herself exposed by the guards' torches. Some of the soldiers had dogs, but the mud on Julia's fur covered her smell.

She couldn't observe the full facility, but she saw enough.

A wooden water mill powered an extensive system of gears, cranks, and sliding joints connected to frame saws, allowing them to cut timber into rectangular shapes. A host of engineers worked on the woodwork, protected by guards and assisted by hooded women. Julia watched on as the latter inscribed incantations into planks and wooden rods, chanting spells in the familiar tongue of Achlys.

The Daughters of Circe.

Though Achlys had become neutral with Medea's death, it seemed that the late witch-queen had sent some spellcasters to assist Mithridates from beyond the grave.

A man oversaw the process, though Julia couldn't see his face clearly due to the lack of sunlight. He looked tall and strong, with a mighty poleaxe and an armor of manticore fur. The werewolf managed to use [Observer] on him from afar, gleaning his name at least.

Castor Epulon, the Queen's Axe

Legend: Wicked Twinblade (Hero)

Level: ???

Julia immediately recognized the name as a Travian captain that had been in her husband's employ, before they married. She didn't know he was a [Hero] though.

Had he always been a [Hero] and hid his abilities from her husband? Or did he earn a [Legend] in the meantime?

There is something larger at work, Julia thought. Queen Teuta had been Travia's only [Hero] for years, using this to gather power and followers. And yet in the span of a single year, the number of legendary warriors in Travia's sphere of influence had increased tremendously.

Kairos had gained a [Legend], then Cassandra, Thales too, and now this Castor as well? Julia didn't believe in coincidences.

And if Teuta had a secret [Hero] in her employ, what else did she hide?

The werewolf spent minutes lurking around the sawmill and spying on the workers. It surprised her that they would work at night, which implied suspicious activities. At first glance, the woodcarvers mostly focused on planks and rods, with the witches empowering them with spells.

It took Julia a moment to understand. Though they lacked the emberlike light and warmth of the real deal, the werewolf identified the wands for what they were.

Fire rods, Julia recognized the weapons. Lesser fire rods.

Only Andromache could successfully craft true fire rods, and she was a [Hero]-Ranked Spellcaster. The witches from Achlys shouldn't have the Skills necessary to produce these devices, but they could make a poor man's copy...

But how did they get their hands on the design in the first place?

Julia remembered her husband informing her that he had suspected Captain Castor of being an agent provocateur under Queen Teuta's employ. Though he had left before the colony developed, this pirate had participated in the fateful battle with Beoetia... and witnessed its fiery end. It would have been child's play to take one of the fire rods in the confusion and return to Teuta with it.

Ah, so that was why you joined my husband, Julia thought while glaring at Castor. Your queen was after this magical technology from the very start. She knew it would usher in a new era of ship warfare.

Mithridates had probably allied with her long before he even approached Kairos.

And the more Julia saw, the less she liked it. Though the sawmill mostly produced planks and rods, she noticed woodcarvers work on different components. And though the werewolf was no engineer, she had spent enough time around Thales to identify them.

Oars thicker and longer than any she had ever seen; a steering gear as large as the water wheel powering the mill; and a wooden tower shielded by manticores' hide, meant to support archers and ballistae.

Having seen enough, Julia immediately fled back into the woods while the moon was slowly vanishing behind the horizon. Dawn would spell her doom, and she had to return to her own ship.

Julia fled back into the woods, trying to piece back everything she had learned so far. The werewolf had wondered why Mithridates would go to such lengths to cover up his mystery project's true nature, and now she understood why. Others would have stopped the project long before it reached completion, if they had known.

Even with all the information she had gathered, Julia struggled to accept the conclusion she had come to. Her disdain for Mithridates was only matched by her admiration for his boldness. Nobody would see his ultimate weapon coming.

But most importantly, the increasing number of [Heroes] running around worried Julia, as did the existence of [Pantheons]. She could see a pattern at work.

Prometheus had forewarned her husband of three calamities. Perhaps the increasing number of [Heroes] was meant to deal with these prophesied disasters, the Fate System balancing itself? Was a new heroic age dawning upon the Sunsea?

Julia was halfway back to her ship, when she noticed something wrong.

She didn't smell anything.

Julia should have sensed an animal nearby. A squirrel in a tree, a rat hiding in a hole, even insects eating bark. Yet the forest smelled devoid of life. Where had they all gone?

...

What scared them away?

The werewolf froze among the trees, listening to the wind blowing between the leaves. The grass was cold beneath her feet, the shadows dark and foreboding. Julia couldn't smell or hear anything, but she could sense *something* watching her.

Julia showed her fangs, and prepared to defend herself. *Show yourself*, she thought. *I won't die easily.*

The werewolf heard movement in the trees above her, and raised her head. *There*, she noticed a shape hanging down in the branches, hidden by the leaves. She carefully approached the trunk, her eyes widening in horror as she sensed a new, familiar smell.

A droplet of blood fell down on the grass, the moonlight illuminating the grisly spectacle.

A griffin and its rider had been impaled on a tree's branches, the corpses hidden behind the leaves. A blade had gutted the beast of burden like a fish, while a spear of wood gored the rider's neck, keeping him in place.

Impossible! Julia should have smelt the blood, sensed it—

"I have been *waiting* for you, Flavii."

A black warhorse stepped out of the night's shadows, the hooves making no sound as they hit the ground. Julia looked at the rider, and her skull **burnt**.

No, burning wasn't the right word. Her mind shattered like glass, as his dark will overpowered her own. He was *inside her soul*, forcing her to kneel with a thought, making her eyes gaze at him.

Simply watching the rider felt like agony to Julia. His shadowy, legionary armor crept with eldritch darkness, while his funeral mask appeared like the visage of death itself. Euthenia's helmet had been the apex of charm, but the crimson, bloody eyes of this warrior promised only a painful death.

You have been [Dominated] by Romulus' [King of the Wild Hunt] Legendary Skill.

He had stalked her long before she arrived on the island, waiting for her to leave her bodyguards behind. Caenis—

"The seer saw what I wanted her to see," the warrior said after reading her mind, his hand moved to his belt. Julia noticed a sheath's reflection in the moonlight. "The Wolf-God will not be denied his due."

She had to escape, but her body wouldn't move. The fear, and the wolf within her, refused to let her. This... this creature was the supreme master of all werewolves, the alpha of alphas. The spawn of Lycaon himself, speaking with his authority.

The apostle of the Beast Cult, and the bane of the Senex families.

Her brother had mocked this group as a mere shadow, cowardly rogues who only threatened the weak and the unwary. But the thing in front of Julia was no embittered exile bent on revenge, or a moonlighting assassin.

This... this human-shaped thing was the voice of a **god**.

Julia's canine legs shook, her breath hastened while she unwillingly revealed her exposed throat to this incarnation of death.

"And now," the figure said, his crimson eyes shining in the dark. "You will die."

His hand moved to his pommel, and Julia prepared for the end. She wanted to howl, to bare her fangs, to *fight*, but she couldn't even *blink*. He controlled her mentally, like the curse had ruled her life. She could feel his burning hate simmering beneath the steel, his deep desire to skewer her and watch her blood spill on the grass. But though Julia didn't fear death, her thoughts turned to the other life within her.

Not my baby, please, she thought. Please.

And her silent prayer made him flinch.

Her thoughts traveled through their psychic connection, and she felt his mind recoil as if he had been slapped. The red light in his eyes wavered for an instant, while his vile gaze traveled down to her belly. His fingers trembled on his sword's pommel, as if fighting the urge to draw the blade.

"A son?" The voice that came out of the armored figure had lost its cruel, unshakeable confidence. "Or a daughter?"

The words echoed in Julia's mind, and she sensed invisible hands crawling on her neck to choke it out. She struggled to breathe, as the malicious creature forced her to answer.

I don't know... Julia thought, and the pain ended.

The man, **Romulus**, didn't make a move. The twin holes in his funerary mask had become two black abysses, darker than the night around them. They peered at Julia as if they could skin her mentally, and peered at the seed of life she carried.

He wants to kill me, she realized to her horror, but not the child.

But that made no sense! The Beast Cult had hunted her specifically to make sure she wouldn't give birth to a male heir for the Flavii family, one capable of maintaining Lycaon's seal. If anything, knowing of her pregnancy should have made that monster want to murder Julia on the spot.

And yet... and yet though the warrior's mind remained as impenetrable as the darkness around them, the sword never came out of its sheath. The crimson glow behind the eyeholes returned, but dimmer, and more peaceful.

"Pray for a daughter, woman," the warrior said, his voice deep as his hand moved away from the pommel. "Or you will make a kinslayer out of me."

The words were harsh and the threat real, but beneath the coldness, Julia sensed something else. An undercurrent of...

Doubt?

Hesitation?

Whatever the cause, the armored figure's warhorse vanished between the trees, carrying its rider away. The veil over Julia's mind lifted, allowing her to think for herself. The moment she could act again, the werewolf fled back to her ship as fast as she could without looking back.

She knew better than to chase after death.

"A ship?" Thales asked, as he raised his head from his table. He abandoned the half-finished design of a metal cylinder linked to a furnace, a war machine that he claimed would give a tremendous edge to the colony's military. Julia hoped that it would prove as devastating as Mithridates' own superweapon.

"A ship," the queen replied, before offering him handmade sketches of what she had gleaned in Travia. After leaving at dawn to avoid discovery, Julia had returned to the colony as quickly as she could. A winter storm had nearly fallen upon her ship, but they had managed to return home safely.

Julia hadn't spoken a word to Caenis on the way back, and the seer had looked at her mistress all night with a worried look. She knew that Julia had encountered something vile and dangerous.

The queen would have a serious conversation with her dearest companion, but not right now. The dark figure's words still echoed in her mind.

*Or you will make a **kinslayer** out of me.*

The implications chilled Julia to the bone. She would have to tell Aurelia, and try to find an explanation.

And this... this horror must have stalked her for weeks, waiting for the right opportunity to ambush her. How did he know that Julia would move to Travia? Did the Beast Cult have

spies in the queen's inner circle? Or did their magic allow them to track her down? The fact that this Romulus could interfere with Caenis' visions, granted by the System itself, spoke volumes about his power.

My brother is wrong, Julia thought, her hands moving to her shoulders. This cult is not a minor band of exiles. This is an evil festering in our midst, building its strength.

And this secret force wanted them **dead**.

Not if I kill them first, the queen thought with determination. The Beast Cult threatened her family, and she would use all her resources to *annihilate* them.

Julia needed a [Legend], and a protection against [Domination]. She refused to feel so weak and helpless again, to submit to death rather than fight it.

Enemies everywhere, Julia thought as Thales examined the sketches. And so few trusted friends.

"Milady, these components do look like galley's parts," Thales conceded, before pointing at the size indications which Julia had added beneath the drawings. "But if we take the size ratio into account, the hypothetical ship should crumble under its own weight. It wouldn't be able to navigate."

"They had [Spellcasters] and specialized [Crafters] to reinforce the components," Julia explained, banishing the dark swordsman's memories from her mind. One problem at a time. "They drew spell formulas in the wood."

"Still, I am skeptical." Thales' fingers started fidgeting at high-speeds, an idea crossing his mind. "Unless..."

"Unless?"

"According to Lord Kairos' messages, we know the merfolk needed an entire palace structure to serve as an amplifier for their trident shard. Henceforth, the Poison King could be building something similar." The crafter nodded to himself, before using a feather and ink to build upon Julia's own notes. "Not a ship, but a floating fortress."

One that could channel the trident's power, Julia thought. One that could serve as a moving stable for Mithridates' silver dragon. "How big would it get?"

"If I trust your information, I would say *at least* one hundred and thirty meters in length. Four times the size of a warship." When Thales had finished, Julia noticed that he had

completed her drawing of the wooden tower she had seen at the sawmill. "Definitively a missile weapon platform."

"A nest of fire rod users," the queen said grimly. "Do you have any guesses about how far they are from completing this superweapon?"

As she suspected, Thales' answer was worrying. "If they are currently building tower platforms, then they reached a late stage in the construction process. The fortress should be operational by Spring, I believe."

Euthenia's words came back to Julia.

No doubt he intends to use that secret weapon of his to bring rebel cities to heel.

A second sun rising in the skies and burning the world to ashes.

A colossal beast with oaken scales, sailing a sea of poison.

And a great wolf's jaws closing on the last human's neck.

Julia lived near the first calamity, had found the second, and barely escaped the third.

23: Crafting Days

Dawn rose on the Sunsea, as a colossal ship emerged from the ocean.

When the *Foresight* had descended into the depths, it had been no larger than a trireme galley. But the creature had fed on the dead of both sides of a conflict, and risen again stronger than ever.

Three rows of organic oars pushed the living ship, helped by two, translucent dorsal fin sails and shark scales covering the hull. The hydra-shaped ram roared, the serpentine heads hissing above a colossal fanged maw. A spiral shell tower rose at the back of the structure like a shark's tail, containing nests for archers and private rooms for the captain. All in all, the *Foresight* had almost doubled in size and strength.

The living ship let out a roar as it sailed, while the translucent dome of mucus protecting the deck collapsed into nothing. The crew let out a roar of joy at seeing the sun again, but none louder than Rook the griffin.

"Finally, we're done!" The griffin flew into the skies, while Nausicaa swam in the waters below him. "We're *done* with fishtown and we're never coming back! I'm never getting wet again!"

Kairos watched his partner's antics through a hole in the shell tower. He would have smiled under normal circumstances... but not today.

The *Foresight* had not only grown in size, but also provided more comfort to its crew by giving them additional space. Kairos had received his own private cabin, as did his first mate and officers.

Located near the top of the shell siege tower, his chambers had benefited the most from the Orichalcos plunder. A lavish bed sat near the window, while nacre statues and mosaics adorned the walls alongside nautical maps. The *Foresight* had also proved to be a tasteful decorator, using scales of different colors to create a yellow-blue spiral design in the ceiling and covering the floor with a pearl-like organic substance.

Most importantly, the ship had provided its captain with a workshop, generating egg-shaped containers for poison brewing and a desk of bone to store them. The *Foresight* had even managed to create a makeshift forge, growing an anvil from its own shell and using coiled pipes to evacuate heat and smoke outside.

Since they were days away from reaching the next stop on their journey, the Kingdom of Vali, Kairos had decided to test the limits of his [Telchine Metalsmithing] Skill.

Truthfully, he welcomed the distraction after what he had learned last night.

His hammer hit the molten edge of Agron's fire axe and the silver of Orpheus' lyre, trying to combine them. After hours of effort and rituals, Kairos drenched the heated metal with a flacon of Agron's blood. Instead of drying, the liquid mixed with the silver and turned it red.

"By the ancient power of the Goetia," Kairos uttered the incantation as the hammer fell, "I bind the blood of the earth with the blood of the living!"

The lyre softened as if alive, the metal grafting itself to the axe's edge. The twisted silver spread through the weapon like an infection, transforming it into something new. Something alive.

Reaching the end of the ritual, Kairos drenched the axe with a bucket of water. A cloud of steam erupted from the forge before being evacuated through shell-pipes, followed by a bright crimson flash.

Kairos laid down the hammer, waited for the metal to cool off, and then examined his handiwork.

The double-edged axe before him had a cruel look to it, its metal turned black by the flames and dark magic. Red veins rippled through it, pulsating with heat and warmth. The two blades were sharp and fiery, while eight strings of silver coursed between them. In spite of their metallic nature, they made a wonderful sound when Kairos pinched them.

Congratulations, you successfully crafted the [Songaxe of Agron].

Songaxe of Agron

Rank: Artifact 3

Value: Priceless

A weapon forged by King Kairos on behalf of Agron the Kingslayer. The Songaxe burns with the endless fires of war, which it glorifies with songs and blood.

1 Star Power: The Songaxe boosts all the user's [Fire]-based abilities.

2 Stars Power: The Songaxe's blades naturally produces flames. Every blow from the Songaxe adds additional [Fire] damage.

3 Stars Power: The Songaxe exists to exalt the glory of war. If wielded by a [Skald], the Songaxe can play any magical song which the user knows on its own, allowing the user to both use [Song] abilities and attack at once. Each time the Songaxe strikes a foe dead, the song's range is doubled for five minutes.

As Kairos had guessed, the quality of the blood influenced that of the final weapon. He had tried to reforge these two items with fish blood, but the spells wouldn't take. A [Hero]'s weapon needed a [Hero]'s blood.

Unfortunately, Kairos' attempts to reforge his own personal weapon had been met with failures. Though currently a Rank 3 weapon, the [Anemoi Spear] had been a Rank 5 in the past; the weapon of a [God]. Only someone like the late Hephaestus or Asterius, lord of the minotaurs, could reforge it into something else.

Now, the next item on his list was a weapon for Nausicaa. She had expressed a preference for a hunting spear or a dagger.

The mermaid [Assassin] liked her kills up close and personal.

Kairos knew he could design something that would fit her with time. His early forays confirmed that [Telchine Metalsmithing] and [Poison Brewer] could synergize well, and would allow him to create poisonous weapons. Maybe he should see with Andromache if they could combine their crafting Skills to strengthen her staff.

I like this, Kairos thought with a smile, *creating.*

Was this how Thales felt each time he built a new device? The sheer joy of discovery, of pushing the limits of his imagination? The satisfaction of making an idea take physical shape in the world?

Or maybe he simply wanted to take his mind away from the destruction he had caused, however he could.

Someone knocked on Kairos' door. "You may enter," he said.

As he expected, Agron had come to claim his weapon, though he brought visitors too. "Ooooh, nice my captain!" Nessus whistled as he glanced around the room, while Tiberius closed the door behind the trio. "My cabin is much smaller! But I feel it's a bit too dark."

The *Foresight* took his remark personally.

The ceiling shifted in response to Nessus' observation, an anglerfish's lure the size of an amphora growing out of the scales. A few seconds later, it started producing a vibrant crimson light.

"Sensitive, huh?" Nessus said, scratching his cheek. "Hmm... wouldn't yellow look better?"

"Golden-white," Tiberius disagreed.

The lure's color changed to golden, giving the room a tasteful ambiance of quiet opulence.

"I should feel snubbed," Nessus muttered to himself, "but it does look good."

My ship has grown intelligent enough to answer an artistic challenge without prompting, Kairos thought. Not only did the *Foresight's* power grow with each kill, but also its ability to feel and think for itself. The captain hadn't expected the sudden artistic side though.

"I hope the forging went well, Lord Kairos?" Tiberius asked. "We saw a flash of light outside."

"Looks good to me," Agron said, as he grabbed his new axe's pommel. A human would have needed his two hands to lift it, but the minotaur only used one. Agron swung the blade, listening to the sound of the blade cutting through the air with a smile on his bovine face. "Perfect. Incredible work."

"It will bring the best out of your subclasses," Kairos said, before turning to Tiberius. "What would you like as a weapon?"

Tiberius responded with an embarrassed smile. "Sir, I don't want to bother."

"You don't," Kairos replied.

"In that case, this may sound very silly, but... I feel I am better with a sword."

"Good idea," Nessus said, before patting the young Lycean on the back. "Remember, the key is to penetrate your foes with the pointy end, the longer the better. If they moan in pain, you've halfway succeeded."

The dirty joke made Tiberius redden, but Kairos sensed another source of uneasiness in him. "Why did you come?" the captain asked his men. "Are we reaching Vali earlier than expected?"

"Not yet, Sir," Tiberius replied, as he regained his composure. "The truth is..."

"Andromache sent us," Nessus admitted. "She worries about you, but wasn't sure if she was the right person to give sound advice."

"Is it true?" Tiberius asked with worry. "Was Lady Julia truly attacked by the Beast Cult?"

Kairos clenched his fists so tightly that they started bleeding. "They tried to murder *my wife and child*."

The sheer fury in his words silenced his guests.

Each time he struck the axe's metal with his hammer, Kairos had gritted his teeth and tried to imagine Romulus' head in its place.

The description Julia gave her husband matched that of the vision Kairos had in Achlys, an armored legionnaire with a funeral mask. The Travian king had mistaken this figure for Lycaon, only to be corrected.

*You will make a **kinslayer** out of me.*

The words echoed in Kairos' mind, heavy with meaning. "I knew I descended from a monster," he explained to his men, "but it seems I'm related to another."

"He might have been lying," Agron pointed out.

"Why would he?" Kairos asked with a frown. "That bastard Romulus only faltered when my wife revealed her pregnancy. He would have murdered her otherwise, and came close to doing so anyway."

"Lord Sertorius has no male child yet, unfortunately," Tiberius said. "If his sister were to give birth to a son, he would become the new heir of the Flavii family, and thus help maintain Lycaon's seal with his very existence. It doesn't surprise me that she was attacked."

"Why did her would-be murderer hesitate though?" Nessus asked, crossing his arms. "From what I understood, he wouldn't have minded if our dear Julia gave birth to a girl, rather than a boy."

"The seal's power must *always* find a vessel at any moment," Tiberius explained. "If Lord Sertorius dies, the duty will immediately transfer to a male heir. And if he has none at the moment of his demise, then the binding spell will vanish even if Lady Julia were to give birth to a son in the future."

"You said his name was Romulus?" Agron asked his superior, who nodded in response. "There was a city called Rome that existed before the Anthropomachia, founded by the twin sons of Ares. They were called Remus and Romulus. After the flood, it is said that the Roman survivors intermingled with the sons of Lycaon and founded Lyce."

Nessus nodded. "*Quod erat demonstrandum*, my captain. This Romulus is obviously your hidden brother."

"Taulas is the only brother I had, and he died years ago," Kairos replied with a scowl. Taulas had perished on the verge of ascension, never reaching his full potential. "My mother transferred his remains from Lissala to Histria."

"A hidden bastard brother then?" the satyr asked. "I don't doubt Aurelia's marital faithfulness, but—"

"No," Kairos replied firmly. "But my mother had relatives, though she thought that they had all died during the purge."

"One may have escaped, and inherited the werewolf curse too," Tiberius said, touching his chin with his thumb as he spoke. "Though the Marius line was stricter with proscription, Lord Sertorius should have access to copies of the records. I will send him a message, and ask him to investigate."

"Julia already beat you to it," Kairos replied. "But it might take weeks before Sertorius can find any information."

"Why target your lovely wife though?" Nessus asked. "It will be months before she gives birth to a child, and it will be a coin toss about its gender. Why not strike her brother directly?"

"Because the Beast Cult may have found Lord Sertorius too well-protected and careful to assassinate yet," Tiberius replied wisely. "They probably believe it might take years before they have a chance to strike him down. If they cannot kill him yet, their best option is to deny him heirs."

Kairos thought the same thing. His brother-in-law Sertorius had enormous resources to draw upon, a potent spy network, and awareness of the Beast Cult. An assassination attempt on his sister might have made him more paranoid, but not a harder mark.

And if Lycaon's shadow wasn't dark enough, Mithridates' loomed over the future too.

A ship to fight my own, Kairos thought grimly. One powered by the [Trident of Poseidon]. He is truly my reflection in a mirror.

Mithridates even rode a winged beast of his own, one with scales rather than feathers. The more their conflict escalated, the more Kairos saw the hand of destiny at work.

He had immediately asked Andromache to work on disabling the trident's power, and the witch spent her days in the ship's cargo studying their shard. If she found a way to weaken its power, then perhaps they could stand a chance against Mithridates' superweapon.

The Travians needed more allies though, more strength. The planetary alignment threatening to bring back the Old Gods would arrive soon, the war with Mithridates sooner, and Romulus lurked in the shadows.

At least the three calamities didn't work together. Mithridates had never shown awareness of the Necromanteion's true purpose, Romulus had slain Teuta's men, and Lycaon had waged war on the Old Gods.

Kairos' foes were many and powerful, but their goals didn't align.

"Agron," Kairos said, catching the warrior's attention. "If you are willing, I will try to introduce you to the [Térastheon] Pantheon."

"I will never say no to more power," the minotaur said, putting his new axe on his shoulder. "We need all the strength we can get now."

"Our cargo is filled to the brim with Orichalcos' wealth," Tiberius said. "I know our original plan was to sell it back in Vali for spices, but I suggest we instead use the opportunity to buy more ships, weapons, and mercenaries. Vali has many of them, alongside war elephants and the Myrmidon tribe of ants. There are no better siege engineers in the world. My family has trade contacts in Vali, so I can arrange everything."

"I leave you in charge of managing the sales of our ill-gotten hoard," Kairos said. "Meanwhile, we will offer gifts to Vali's royal family and try to seal an official alliance."

"Well, I hope it will work better than our last diplomatic visit," Nessus quipped. "We can't go around killing every crowned head in our way, my friend."

Agron scoffed. "What about Mithridates?"

"Point taken," Nessus said, putting his hands behind his head. "Just... let's try to be civil this time? I'm all for gaining a [Legend], but I would rather avoid being known as the [Queenslayer]."

"I wouldn't mind," Agron replied with a cruel smile.

"Vali is not Orichalcos," Tiberius pointed out. "They are a young power on the rise, not an ancient and prideful empire. Besides, Lord Sertorius developed very good relationships with King Philip. I suspect he will be far more disposed towards us than the merfolk."

Kairos hoped so as well. He would rather win his battles through words instead of with hurricanes.

The king dismissed his officers, but to his surprise, Tiberius asked for a short audience. "What is it?" Kairos asked.

"Sir, if I may be so bold." Tiberius cleared his throat, and he looked as fearful as someone asking a daughter's hand to the father. Which proved close to the truth. "I have visited Vali once, and I know a beautiful market which... which I thought Lady Cassandra would appreciate visiting, after we deal with the mercenary issue."

For the first time since he had learned of Julia's plight, Kairos laughed. "Are you asking my permission to take Cassandra out on a date, Tiberius? I am not her father."

"I, uh, I know." Tiberius cleared his throat, his cheeks pink. "But you are my commanding officer. I cannot take a break from my duty without your authorization."

"You have my permission, if she accepts your proposal," Kairos replied, locking eyes with his aide. "And if it progresses beyond a mere courtship..."

Tiberius straightened up, his skin now as red as a strawberry. "Y-yes, sir?"

"Treat Cass kindly and respectfully, as if she were your wife. She is the aunt I never had, and once upon a time, I wanted her to become more than that." Andromache and Julia had put an end to that, but even though Kairos had moved on, he wanted to see Cass find love in her life.

"Sir, I..." Tiberius smiled, as he mustered his courage. "I do not want to *treat* Lady Cassandra as my wife. I want her to *be* my wife."

Truth be told, Kairos had the intuition that she wanted it too. "She will be pleased to learn it," the captain informed his aide. "But she has been through failed relationships, and will not take kindly to someone fooling around with her."

"I have thought about it for a while, and made my choice," the Lycean replied. "She is... Lady Cassandra is extremely brave, intelligent, and dutiful. I very much appreciate her company, and I believe we could do well together."

Kairos chuckled. "You make it sound so formal."

"Because it is," Tiberius replied. "My father will never let me marry someone who cannot benefit our family, but he will welcome a [Hero] daughter-in-law. For once... for once I believe my duty aligns with my feelings. I think she feels the same."

Kairos knew first hand that a marriage of interest could develop into genuine affection. Knowing that these two already had a good foundation warmed his heart. "Then you have my blessings," he informed Tiberius. "If you need anything, I will provide."

"Thank you, sir," Tiberius said with a respectful bow. "But I think I will manage."

Kairos watched the Lycean leave the room with a smile, before turning to look at his window and the warm sun in the skies. If this courtship led to a marriage, then it would lead to another Lycean-Travian marriage. An old enmity slowly vanished, as two feuding nations knitted the differences between them... a peace purchased with love rather than blood.

Perhaps one day, all the nations and species would coexist in peace.

It was a good dream, one that couldn't survive in reality.

But Kairos still had to believe in it.

24: The Golden Kingdom

They reached Vali's coast around midday.

Kairos had heard tales of the merchant kingdom and of its capital of Ugarit, but the reality still surprised him. Though nowhere near as splendid or awe-inspiring as Orichalcos before its destruction, the port-city before them was a sight to behold. Almost entirely made of bricks and red stone, the settlement appeared to rise out of an arid desert. Massive walls protected it from attack, while an extensive engineering system drew water from the core of the earth to feed their crops.

The most impressive structure was a ziggurat tower standing at the very center of the capital. Its size trumped even that of Orichalcos' palace, and it wasn't even finished. Strange creatures resembling giant, red ants worked to transport bricks on their back to raise the structure ever higher. Others wielded swords and shields with their forelegs, overseeing human and insectoid workers. The tower cast a black shadow upon the city, obscuring the sun.

"Myrmidons," Kairos said as he identified the giant ants working on the tower. They appeared as big as horses, their chitinous skin red as blood and their black eyes strangely expressive. These creatures were as intelligent as any human.

"Vali was built on an alliance between local human tribes and myrmidon colonies," Cassandra explained the island's history to Kairos, as the *Foresight* made its way to the city's docks. Ugarit's port overflowed with activity, dozens of ships from Lyce, Argos, or Achlys coming to trade along its shores. "The myrmidons extract precious gold deep below the earth and the kingdom's merchants sell it. Vali's monarchy guarantees the safety of this trade."

A kingdom built on the friendship of two species, Kairos thought. He could already tell their stay in Vali would prove very different from their misadventures in Orichalcos.

The whole place seemed as different from Travia as night and day. The air was hot and dry, even with winter's chilly winds descending upon the Sunsea. Kairos struggled against the heat underneath his armor, and would trade it for something more comfortable.

Tiberius had sent a message through a Stymphalian bird to announce their arrival to the king of Vali, and the authorities had sent a welcoming committee. An escort of human and myrmidon soldiers awaited the *Foresight* along the docks, alongside a cadre of diplomats.

Kairos had asked his crew to dress and look as best as they could, and they followed through. Cassandra had traded her armor for the same flowery dress she had worn at her superior's wedding with Julia, and Tiberius looked every bit the Lycean noble in his toga. Nessus had taken a different approach and chosen to dress as a jester, under the pretext that he was too droll for a noble. His outfit included an outlandish cape of scarlet and steely feathers, mostly taken from Rook and the Stymphalian birds.

Agron started playing notes on his Songaxe to announce their arrival, and Andromache joined Kairos on the deck. The Scylla had traded her usual clothes for a splendid red dress and a silver hairnet with emeralds where two strands crossed. She looked every bit like a gracious muse of legends, and Kairos couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Surprised, my love?" The Scylla asked with a raised eyebrow. "You wanted me to dress like a queen."

"You did," Kairos replied, as Rook landed on the deck near them. "I love it."

Andromache smiled at the compliment, her fangs immediately ruining her illusion of a prim and proper lady. "Good," the witch said, "I could tell during our latest union that your mind wasn't with me."

Kairos winced at the reproach. Truth be told, yes, he had spent the evening worrying about Julia and his unborn child. "I'm sorry."

"You worry for your progeny," she said, before kissing him on the cheek. "I would be a poor partner if I blamed you for it."

She was in an awfully good mood today. Kairos wondered if she rejoiced each time she looked at Orichalcos' pilfered wealth.

"It's almost time," Rook said, giddy at the idea of making an entrance.

Cassandra, however, looked far less enthusiastic. "Kairos, look."

She pointed at a ship anchored along the docks, a stripped quinquireme with two masts and hundreds of oars. Though slightly smaller than the improved *Foresight*, the vessel was clearly built for war, with a strong bronze ram shaped like a tiger's head. A blue and golden lioness flag triumphed atop the masts, promising a swift death to anyone challenging her.

The Unconquered.

Teuta's personal flagship.

"We've arrived too late," Kairos said with disappointment. The conflict in Orichalcos had delayed them too much.

"No, we haven't," Cassandra reassured him. "We wouldn't have such a warm welcome otherwise. But it's still worrying."

Kairos looked over the deck, and at the head of Nausicaa peeking out of the waves. "Keep an eye on that ship," he ordered her, "watch and listen. If anything suspicious happens, I want to know it."

The mermaid responded with a nod, and vanished underwater.

When the *Foresight* prepared to land, Kairos climbed on Rook's back, followed by Andromache. The Sellsword King knew that he would make a more impressive entrance this way. Agron immediately followed up with an intense, triumphant melody.

"Did you ask him to sing for our arrival?" Kairos asked Andromache with a smirk.

"I have grown fond of these songs," his concubine admitted, "and of the bull that sings them. I find his company tolerable."

My, had she and Agron started to become friends? War made for strange bedfellows.

Kairos could read between the lines, however. "His songs soothe you?"

"They do," Andromache admitted. "Now that he has become a [Hero] and improved his singing Skills, his music carries true magical powers. I asked him to calm the bestial fury within me... and so far it's working. My mind is clearer than it has been in years."

Kairos made a note to reward Agron for his service, before playfully kissing the witch on the neck. "I know another way to soothe you..."

"You will make up for last night later," Andromache replied with a pleased expression. "I look forward to it."

When the ship docked, Rook leaped from the deck onto a brick floor, while the rest of Kairos' officers followed.

A man and two women welcomed them, all of them around Kairos' own age. From their faces, the pirate assumed they belonged to the same family. Their skin was light brown, and their eyes as blue as the sea.

Each looked fearsome in their own way, though the man at the center struck Kairos as the most dangerous. This warrior was clad in an expensive linethorax armor of gold, steel, and linen stitched together into layers. He had removed his helmet, revealing his handsome aquiline face and short black hair, but kept a sword around his belt. He rode a stallion black as a starless night, one with a few scars on his hide. They clearly had been in a battle of some kind recently.

The women on the man's left and right were both warriors too, but of a different sort. The one on the right was the very picture of a nubile amazon, a graceful athletic creature with long brown hair wielding a spear and shield in her hands, while a bow and quiver rested on her back. Her golden silk outfit was adapted to the desert, leaving her navel, arms, and legs exposed. A single golden crown stood on her head, topped by blue parrot feathers, and she rode a slender brown mare.

The woman on the left was more delicate, dressing in shimmering silk blue robes that left most of her cleavage exposed, and using makeup and jewels to enhance her natural beauty. She had dyed her flowing hair in a light azure hue, and she didn't carry any weapon; for a weapon carried her. Instead of a horse, her mount was a slender black canine with a forked tail, squarish ears, and a long nose with a slight downward curve. The animal rivaled lions in size, and Kairos immediately identified it as a *Sha*, a desert monster capable of summoning sandstorms.

Kairos immediately used his [Observer] to identify the trio.

Prince Hadad of Vali, the Great

Legend: Young Conqueror (Hero).

Pantheon: None.

Race: Human.

Class: Fighter (Epihipparch, General, Heavy Cavalier, Charioteer, Myrmidon, Tactician, Champion).

Level: 45.

Princess Asherah of Vali

Legend: None (Elite).

Race: Human.

Class: Fighter (Mounted Archer, Heavy Cavalier, Archer, Charioteer, Shieldmaiden, Warmaster, Hunter).

Level: 35.

Princess Anat of Vali

Legend: None (Elite).

Race: Human.

Class: Fighter (Shieldmaiden, Raider, Champion, Hunter, Beastmaster).

Level: 35.

"King Kairos," the prince greeted him with a nod. Most impressively, he did so in the *Travian* tongue. "I am Prince Hadad, son of His Majesty King Philip, and these are my younger sisters Asherah and Anat. It is a pleasure to welcome you in Vali."

"Greetings, Prince Hadad," Kairos said while returning the nod. "Thank you for welcoming us in person."

"The honor is all mine. I've wanted to meet the destroyer of Orthia and the *Argo's* slayer in person for a while." Unlike Mithridates, Prince Hadad's smile was warm and genuine. So was the glow in his eyes as his gaze moved from Kairos' [Golden Fleece] cloak to the *Foresight*. "I see the tales of your living ship weren't exaggerated. Is it true that it ate a Cetus?"

"More than one," Kairos replied, making the prince laugh. "You look ready for war, Prince Hadad."

"Our brother returned from another glorious campaign this morning," princess Asherah said with a laugh, her voice as clear as crystal. The sun briefly reflected on her golden

crown, making her appear like a messenger of the heavens for a brief second. "He pacified the tribe of Mot in Vali's name, returning peace to the land."

"I was supposed to enjoy a good rest, but when your messenger bird arrived, I dropped everything to welcome you personally," the prince explained. "I wouldn't have missed your arrival for anything."

"Neither would I," his sister Anat said from atop her sha mount, as she appraised Rook. "[Beastmasters] are so rare, and I haven't met one bonded to a griffin before."

"I'm the biggest griffin there is!" Rook said while showing his chest.

"You have to be, to carry two manlings on your back," Anat's sha mount replied. The hound's voice sounded feminine to Kairos' ears. "One is already a pain."

"I heard that," her rider pointed out with a grin.

"You can't silence the truth," the canine said, before focusing back on the griffin. "I'm Eshmun, nice to meet you birdie."

The two [Animal Companions] quickly started talking - or rather complaining about the weight of their respective riders - but Kairos ignored them to focus on the human entourage.

Prince Hadad greeted Andromache with courtly grace. "And who is this charming creature?" he asked Kairos.

"My paramour, Andromache," the pirate king replied.

"Greetings, prince," Andromache said with a courteous nod, trying to hide her fangs. "We brought you gifts."

"So did we," the prince replied with a laugh. "I hope you will find them agreeable."

The fact that they returned gifts at all delighted Kairos, as it bound both parties to the laws of Xenia. *This is going way better than Orichalcos*, the pirate king thought, as his men unloaded chests from the *Foresight*.

Half of Kairos' gifts came from Histria, and the other from Orichalcos' plunder. They included chests of silver, exquisitely carved weapons, pearls, rare algae spices, a bow made of Cetus bones, and marble statues. To Kairos' surprise, Prince Hadad was mostly interested in a Thales-made compass added to the treasure pile almost as an afterthought.

The Valians' gifts were no less impressive, including pouches of gold dust, painted turtle shells, ivory horns, lion pelts, and philosophy scrolls. "You'll find these books the most precious gifts of them all," Prince Hadad said, while his sister Asherah tried the Cetus bone bow.

Afterward, the prince greeted Kairos' officers, princess Anat whistling at Agron. "My, a [Hero]-Ranked [Skald]!" she said with a sparkle in her eyes. "And a minotaur at that! You must play for me during your stay."

"If you wish," Agron replied gruffly, clearly more at home on a battlefield than in a princess' company.

"My, Tiberius!" Prince Hadad greeted the Lycean. "It is always a pleasure to see you. Will your father join us too?"

"No, Your Majesty," Tiberius replied. "But I will represent him."

"I'm sure the merchants of the city will delight at your coming. Those who favor Lyce over Alexandria at least." Kairos didn't miss the uneasy glance his sisters sent him as he spoke.

Princess Asherah's eyes wandered from Agron to Cassandra, and then finally to Andromache. "You have many heroes in your employ, King Kairos," the Valian lady said with a hint of respect. "People might start to call you the new Argonauts someday."

"We have many [Heroes], but Vali has a [Demigod]," Cassandra said, trying to subtly learn of General Zama's whereabouts.

"We do," Prince Hadad said with a hint of pride. "But I'm afraid my dear mentor won't be joining us today. General Zama is hosting our other Travian guests as we speak."

It took all of Kairos' willpower not to wince at these words, but his distaste must have shown on his face all the same.

"I understand there are tensions between you and Queen Teuta?" Prince Hadad asked.

"You can say that," Kairos replied, "we are rivals."

"You are all guests here, and my father will not have blood shed beneath his roof," Prince Hadad warned. "As your host, I ask that you refrain from violent actions as long as you remain on Vali's soil."

"Of course," Kairos said. "Things haven't escalated to violence between us anyway."

Not yet at least.

"Good," the prince said. Though his smile remained warm, Kairos sensed a hint of calculation in his gaze. Was he trying to figure out how the situation might impact his country? "Vali intends to keep good relationships with Travia and will remain neutral in your dispute. Maybe you and Teuta could use the opportunity to reconcile?"

"Maybe," Kairos replied, though he doubted it. He would rather avoid fighting his countrymen if he could help it, but Teuta was too deeply involved in Mithridates' activities for his taste.

The answer satisfied the prince, who had horses brought to transport Kairos' crew. "You must be exhausted after such a long journey, especially on the onset of winter," Princess Anat said with graceful courtesy. "We will have rooms set for you in the palace. If you would kindly follow us."

Kairos graciously accepted, and the royal escort guided them towards the palace. The prince and his sisters rode at the forefront with the Travian King, showing him the city.

As befitting its reputation as a commercial crossroads, Ugarit overflowed with shops and merchants. The large dusty streets welcomed rows of stands where foreign and local traders showcased their wares from jewelry to exquisite artisan works. Most items appeared either made of goldware or animal parts, such as ivory tusks, pelts, and tortoise shells. The smell of spices filled the air, while veiled whores invited sailors and travelers to taste their charms in seedy brothels and gambling dens.

To Kairos' distaste, he also noticed a few slave pens where men sold their kindred to traveling Lyceans or Alexandrians. By now the pirate king had grown jaded to the industry's omnipresent presence south of Travia, realizing that his people were the exception rather than the rule.

In time, this will change, Kairos thought. Nothing lasting can be founded on people's servitude.

Even Zeus couldn't turn the tide when his slaves decided to rebel.

He tried to ignore the human pens by focusing on the architecture, and to his surprise, he suddenly realized that most houses followed the same model of construction. Their conical shapes rose towards the skies, with chimney holes at the roof's center and tiny windows. The entrances were usually built below ground level, with stairs leading down to a basement rather than a first floor.

The houses reminded Kairos of anthills.

In fact, he noticed quite a few myrmidon workers toiling on houses or checking up on the city's walls. Even the merchants' stands followed a similar appearance, with none deviating much from the other.

"Were all buildings in the city made by myrmidons?" Kairos asked his royal escort.

"All of them," Princess Anat confirmed. "By law, all public works in Vali's cities are overseen by myrmidon colonies. They are the best engineers in the world, and their standards are incredibly high. They will only live in cities that they built themselves."

"They also maintain our wells and canals," Princess Asherah explained. "We provide agricultural services for them in exchange, as they are hopeless at it. This symbiosis is the foundation upon which our civilization rests. Literally. Most myrmidons live in the tunnels under Ugarit."

Kairos looked up at the city's central tower, his eyes widening as its shape suddenly started to become vaguely familiar. "Don't tell me—"

"Indeed!" Prince Hadad chuckled. "We live in the biggest anthill in the world."

Incredible... Even Andromache appeared fascinated by this strange ant kingdom.

"Tell me, King Kairos, what is the most important part of a land army?" Prince Hadad asked his guest, as they traveled through the vast streets of Ugarit. Many merchants gazed at them as they approached, while women and children bowed before the prince. Kairos wondered how many of them were spies reporting to Mithridates. "The cavalry, or the infantry?"

"The air force," Kairos replied, making the prince laugh. His eyes caught a glance of monstrously tall animals with grey skin, an elongated trunk, and powerful tusks waiting at a street corner. The Valian used their elephants to either carry their wares or the litter of rich merchants, and Rook couldn't help but salivate at the sight of the tasty pachyderms.

"And the [Spellcasters], my love," Andromache added with a fox-like grin. "Do not forget us."

"Never," he reassured her. "Nor the humble [Crafters]."

"Forgive my brother, King Kairos," Princess Anat said with amusement. "He asks that question to everyone, and he always expects cavalry as the answer."

"Because it's true," Hadad replied after regaining his composure. "In a fair fight with both armies being equal, a judicious use of the cavalry will prevail every time."

"A fair fight is a defeat in itself," Kairos pointed out. "If you have done your job as a commander, you should have maximized your chances of victory and minimized those of the enemies before a battle even begins. Surprise and preparation will win the day more often than horses."

That was how he had always won his battles. Whenever he had let his foes have the initiative, the Travian had suffered costly defeats.

"Good point," Hadad admitted. "The tribes who gave me the most trouble were those who refused a direct battle, destroying my supplies, harassing my scouts, and scattering when I gave pursuit. I had to lure them into a trap to end the pointless chase."

"We had to lure them into a trap," Princess Asherah replied with a raised eyebrow. "Were it not for Anat and I, you would still be running circles in the desert."

"Nobody denies your contribution, my dear, but it is I who imagined the ambush and led the charge." Prince Hadad blew a kiss to his sisters before focusing back on Kairos. "It is rare for me to talk with a foreign strategist of your caliber. Especially one of my age."

The flattery made Kairos uncomfortable. "I'm not that special, Prince Hadad."

"I disagree. You have won battles with a fraction of the enemy's forces, and you have gathered a host of powerful [Heroes] in a very short time. Perhaps we could discuss tactics over dinner? I feel we have much to learn from each other."

"Certainly," Kairos replied with a smile, "but a good strategist never reveals all his secrets."

Prince Hadad laughed. "I don't expect you to."

Kairos could tell that the two of them would get along *fantastically* well.

"If I may ask," Andromache said with a cold, calculating gaze. "Why is Queen Teuta here?"

"The same reason for your visit," Princess Asherah said with a knowing glance. "They want our support in that future Thessalan war of yours."

So they already knew. "Have you made a choice yet?" Kairos asked.

"No," Prince Hadad replied. "But we will."

"And how will you choose?" Even though he had asked the question, Kairos already suspected the answer.

"My, we'll choose as we always did." Prince Hadad gave the Travian King a playful wink.
"We'll choose the one with the best offer."

25: Dangerous Encounters

True to their word, Vali's royal family afforded their guests every honor possible. Each member of the *Foresight's* crew received quarters of their own, and the king of Vali would receive its captain for a private audience. Kairos barely had the time to leave his belongings in his comfortable chambers before being ushered into the king's own private solar, with Andromache, Tiberius, Agron, and Cassandra as his only company. None were allowed to carry their weapons in the king's presence.

Kairos didn't miss the fact that with the exception of Tiberius, the king only invited people with [Legends] to meet with him. Vali's royalty was clearly interested in currying favors with more [Heroes], perhaps to scout them for recruitment. Or maybe the king simply wanted to size up the strength of potential allies.

Neither had Kairos' crew been invited to a public audience in the throne room. This implied that their host wanted to discuss things that shouldn't reach his court's ears.

Located in the upper levels of the unfinished tower, the king's personal apartments proved to be a breathtaking sight. Massive columns of red marble supported a roof of finely chiseled obsidian with the occasional diamond here and there. The whole design mimicked a night's sky, with the diamonds representing the major constellations. Beautiful hunting tapestries dangled from the walls next to stone statues of ancient kings and generals, while comfy carpets of lion pelts covered the ground. Myrmidon soldiers in heavy armor patrolled the complex and protected tall doors of carved wood.

"Why are there no human guards?" Cassandra asked, courteously holding Tiberius by the arm. The two looked almost married already.

"My father shares his chambers with his sixteen wives," Prince Hadad explained to his guests, as he and his sisters guided them through the king's apartments. "Myrmidon guards cannot impregnate human females in the king's absence, and are a more humane alternative to eunuchs."

"Sixteen?" Kairos almost choked. He regretted Nessus' absence. The satyr would have probably burst out laughing.

"Well, he has fourteen more than you," Princess Asherah replied, though Andromache answered the joke with a scowl. "Truthfully, my sister Anat and I don't share the same mother as our dear brother."

"Vali takes its name from the fallen New God who created it, but the original kingdom collapsed with his demise when he chose Alexandria's side during her war with Lycaon," Tiberius explained. "His empire shattered into countless tribes and successor states, which the current royal family reunified with the help of their myrmidon allies."

Prince Hadad confirmed the story with a nod. "The current kingdom is not as strong as its ancestor, and the king rules with the consent of the tribes. As such, he is expected to take a wife from each clan, and arbitrate disputes between them before they can escalate."

"I suppose the pacification campaign you mentioned earlier was one such 'arbitration'?" Kairos guessed.

"Indeed," the prince of Vali replied with a laugh. "Tribes always feud about some patch of land or some half-forgotten issue, and some even rebel when the monarchy doesn't rule in their favor. Sometimes, diplomacy isn't enough to enforce peace."

"Unlike our royal father, our brother prefers to solve his problems with a sword than with his cock," Princess Anat mused.

"I will have to do both," the prince replied with a sigh. "My father is getting old and some of his wives are younger than me. I might have to marry some of my mothers-in-law when I take the throne."

"I dare not imagine your genealogical tree," Andromache said while tightening her grip on Kairos' arm. The situation probably hit too close to home, considering he had similarly married Julia for political advantages.

The prince and his sisters led them to an audience room facing a door to a terrasse outside, where the king awaited. Unfortunately, he was already granting audience to someone else, and a golden myrmidon waited for his turn before Kairos' delegation. "We will have to leave you here," Prince Hadad declared. "But I would be glad to meet with you tomorrow. I plan to organize a great hunt to celebrate my latest victory, and I hope you could join it."

"It will be a pleasure," Kairos said.

"Great," Princess Anat rejoiced with a smirk. "We've never hunted with a griffin rider before."

Prince Hadad offered the delegation a courtly bow. "I bid you good luck with my father, and I look forward to meeting you tomorrow."

"We as well, Prince Hadad," Kairos said while returning the gesture. The royal family walked out of the waiting chamber, leaving the Travian delegation alone with myrmidon guards and their golden compatriot.

"A hunt?" Agron said with a grin. "Finally a noble activity I can get behind."

"I suspect we will hunt lions or monsters," Tiberius said. "None will be a match for you."

The minotaur responded with a shrug, while the golden myrmidon that they shared the waiting room with observed the group in silence. After a moment of consideration, the insect engaged in conversation.

"Greetings," he said with a buzzing voice in perfect Travian. "I am ambassador Pericles, of the Firespear colony. I assume you are the second Travian delegation?"

"We are the *only* Travian delegation," Tiberius replied, trying to downplay Teuta's importance.

"It is a long story," Cassandra said, "but I doubt a myrmidon would be interested in foreign internal politics."

The giant ant shook his head. "Internal politics affect external ones. Both are interesting."

"You are unlike the rest of your kind," Kairos noticed. Having had the opportunity to observe the myrmidons more closely in Vali's palace, the pirate captain hadn't found them any different than giant-sized ants with one exception: their forearms ended in five chitinous fingers and all too human palms.

This one though looked more like an ant centaur, with a torso and prominent forearms.

"I am a specialized worker, bred for diplomacy," the myrmidon replied in perfect Travian. "Each myrmidon caste is divided into a specific role, with different Skills and Stats at birth. I was born an [Elite], unlike my [Common] cousins, our soldiers have greater [Strength] than [Intelligence] compared to our engineers, and so on."

"Is it true you descend from men?" Cassandra asked curiously.

The diplomat shook his head. "We descend from common ants," he explained. "In ancient times, the goddess Hera punished one of her husband's bastards by ravaging his kingdom with a plague. This antediluvian king prayed to Zeus to help him repopulate his island, and so the god of gods turned the local ants into the first myrmidons."

Andromache snorted. The tale probably sounded very familiar. "Do you worship the old gods then?"

"Do you worship your ancestors? We respect Zeus for creating us, but we do not particularly honor the gods. There is nothing they can give us that we cannot obtain on our own through toil and efforts. Some of our engineers do turn to the worship of Asterius, the master of mazes, but they are a minority."

Andromache relaxed at these words, and they made Kairos all the more curious. "How do your colonies work?" he asked the myrmidon ambassador. "Or maybe you only have one?"

"All colonies are ruled by an independent queen, but we myrmidons do not make war on one another. We have found that competition and warfare are a suboptimal use of our resources, especially since our human partners can provide us with additional food to cover our needs. Each colony minds its own business, trades with its neighbors, and ally against the occasional monster incursion."

"We heard you were hopeless at agriculture," Cassandra said with a frown. "But why is that? You appear as advanced as any human kingdom. Crop farming shouldn't be difficult for you."

"Truth be told, we could always dedicate part of our colony to develop agriculture on the surface," the diplomat admitted. "But why bother? We feel more at home underground, where fungi agriculture is difficult and cannot produce even a thousandth of sun-raised crops' yield. Our human partners are ready to take care of it in exchange for our mineral wastes. This alliance benefits us more than trying to do everything ourselves."

Kairos' [Barter] Skill activated, informing him that the people of Vali had chosen the path of economic specialization to maximize their efficiency. However, he noticed a glaring flaw in the whole set-up.

"You achieved prosperity through trade," he said, "but you put all your eggs in one basket. What if your gold dries up and you can't pay human farmers anymore? What happens if your population grows too much for Vali's crops to cover your basic needs? Importing food from the outside is costly, not to mention risky."

"That is indeed a long-term problem," the diplomat replied. Though his tone remained neutral, Kairos could sense he had hit a sensitive subject. "Which is why our queens are considering alternatives."

Tiberius sensed an opportunity. "Our island is currently underpopulated, very fertile, and rich in unexploited mineral resources," he said, and Kairos thought the same. "You could settle part of your population there."

The diplomat nodded. "Indeed, we are considering moving colonies to other islands to reduce the strain on local resources. However, since our standards for cities vary greatly from humanoid populations, we are looking in priority for unsettled areas. Travia and its colonies are very underpopulated and friendly to non-humanoids, but also dangerous and full of monsters. Some of the queens are interested in emigrating there, but not without support from a strong local government."

Ah, that explained his interest in Travian delegations. Kairos wondered if the ants had already approached Teuta.

"We would gladly welcome a colony to settle on our island," Kairos declared, catching the bug's full attention. "We need new immigrants eager to work with us, no matter where they come from. We have slain or assimilated most monsters in our region, so you could settle safely... as long as you submit to the laws of the land."

The ant diplomat considered the offer carefully, and Kairos regretted that he couldn't read bug facial expressions. "We myrmidons prize ourselves in our autonomy," the ambassador said, "but our queens could accept to pay tribute and fealty to a high king who does not interfere in a hive's day-to-day affairs."

Oh, great. That was pretty much the same deal Kairos had offered to cities interested in joining his Travian federation. "That can be arranged."

"Excellent. I will report your proposal to the queens' assembly for consideration." The doors to the terrace briefly opened, a myrmidon guard slipping through to call his fellow bug for the meeting. "I will contact you again."

The myrmidon diplomat left for the terrace to meet with Vali's king, and the doors closed behind him.

"I hope I did not overstep by making this suggestion, Lord Kairos," Tiberius said to his superior, anxious at his reaction.

"You took the right initiative," the pirate king replied with a shrug. He didn't fault his officers for having good ideas before he did.

"You did great," Cassandra added. "You might have even landed us a deal."

Tiberius responded with a sheepish smile, but his joy—and Kairos'—was short-lived.

For the doors to the terrace opened again, and Queen Teuta walked through.

Having seen her face on the coins she had minted in Travia, Kairos instantly recognized her. He had always imagined this paragon of the Travian people as an imposing force of nature, and somehow the reality exceeded his imagination. He only reached up to her nose, and only Agron exceeded her in height. She was as muscled as an experienced warrior of her caliber could be, a castle on legs with armor to match. Hers was made of hard steel plates lined with gold, topped by a cloak of feathers taken from a dozen monsters. Her long hair was black lined with strands of white, and a scar cracked her tanned skin on her left cheek. A crown of shark fangs rested around her head.

A companion followed her, one whom Kairos recognized from statues in some temples. General Zama of Vali was a [Demigod] of tactics, and thus a popular patron among some Travians warlords. He was smaller than Teuta, but radiated an invisible pressure that dwarfed the pirate queen's. His hair had turned white with age, his skin wrinkled, but he moved like a panther in golden hoplite armor probably inspired by Athena. His right eye had been replaced by a glowing sapphire, while the other glared at Kairos with undiluted hatred.

Teuta Tomyris, Lioness of the Sea

Legend: Pirate Queen (Hero).

Pantheon: Diadochi.

Race: Human.

Class: REDACTED (blocked by [Amulet of Secrecy]).

Level: 60.

General Zama Hanno of Vali, the Master Tactician

Legend: Undefeated General (Demigod).

Pantheon: Diadochi

Level: ???

Diadochi.

Mithridates' [Pantheon].

This didn't bode well.

The two groups faced each other for an awkward moment as the doors closed behind them, the air rife with invisible tension. Andromache appeared ready to cast a spell, Agron flexed his muscles, and Zama's glittering artificial eye seemed to shine with an otherworldly glow. The myrmidon soldiers in the room raised their spears, threatening to intervene.

Thankfully though, Queen Teuta made no hint that she would escalate the standoff to a fight. In fact, she simply appraised Kairos the way he had observed her beforehand. Her grey eyes reminded him of his mother, a cool calculating gaze that hid a natural aptitude for bestial brutality.

"Kairos Marius Remus," Queen Teuta said with a deep, imperious voice. She conveniently forgot the 'king' part. "We met at last."

"Teuta," Kairos replied with the same tone, refusing to call her a queen. "I didn't know you had the audience before ours."

"Nor did I know you would follow after us," she replied with a shrug. "I see Vali's king is careful in weighing his options."

Kairos didn't believe for a second that this encounter was an accident. Vali's king Philip had organized his audiences' timing so that the two Travian groups would cross paths. Much like a merchant, he probably hoped to foster competition between his potential 'partners' to increase concessions.

Agron broke the silence first. "We take it outside or what?" he said, glancing at the myrmidon guards. "They won't let us settle this here."

"I have no desire to shed the blood of my countrymen," Kairos declared. "Not today, nor in the future if possible."

"Neither do I," Queen Teuta replied to his surprise, while Zama squinted in disapproval. "It may not be too late to come to an agreement, especially since we are both under the protection of Xenia. Did you know that the prince intends to organize a hunt tomorrow?"

"So we heard," Cassandra responded, trying to defuse the situation before it escalated.

"Good. We will talk then." The pirate queen glanced at General Zama. "Will you follow?"

"I want a word with him first," the [Demigod] said before glaring at Kairos.

Queen Teuta nodded slowly before taking a step forward, daring anyone to stop her. Nobody did, and she walked out of the apartment escorted by myrmidon guards.

Kairos faced Zama, before gently pushing Andromache aside, to her chagrin. "My other half—" she started.

"It's alright," he interrupted her before facing the [Demigod]. "He can't harm me here. Not under his own king's roof."

"Thankfully for you," the old general replied with bitterness.

Why such animosity? Kairos didn't remember offending the old [Demigod] in any way. Even if he had thrown his lot with Teuta and Mithridates to form a [Pantheon] with them, the dislike in his voice sounded awfully *personal*.

The general led Kairos in the room before the waiting one, with only silent, paranoid myrmidon guards for company. The pirate king exploited the opportunity to analyze Zama's artificial eye with his [Magical Knack] Skill. As he had suspected, it turned out to be an artifact.

Eye of Athena.

Rank: 5 (priceless).

???

Kairos remembered a tale Euryale once told him about the Anthropomachia, about how Vali had killed Athena herself by ripping out her eyes. As it turned out, he also transformed them into divine artifacts.

"I see it now." General Zama examined Kairos from head to toes. "You look *exactly* like your heartless bastard of a father."

Kairos squinted, containing his anger. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I *do*."

"Is that what it is all about?" Kairos asked coldly. "Some unfinished fight with my late father?"

"A fight?" The general looked fit to gag. "Your father didn't *fight* me. He slew my brother and wife before running away back to Travia."

Kairos flinched, not having expected that answer. "I..." He cleared his throat, regaining his composure. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Is that so?" Zama's artificial eye seemed to shine brighter for a moment. Did it allow the general to detect lies? "I guess it is up to me to enlighten you then. Many years ago, political rivals here in Vali hired Travian mercenaries to get rid of me. Your father was one of them, but it wasn't the gold he wanted."

The [Legend]. Kairos' father Chron had been after the general's [Legend], hoping to gain power and glory from it.

"What does it have to do with your family?" Kairos asked, unwilling to face the obvious.

"What do you think? I was surrounded by soldiers, so the pirates abducted my helpless wife to lure me into a trap. My brother Mago and I ambushed him and his allies at sea trying to get her back." Zama clenched his jaw, his gaze turning distant and remorseful. "My wife fell overboard and drowned in the confusion, while my brother took a poisoned Travian arrow to the face meant for me."

"I'm... I'm sorry," Kairos apologized. "For all it was worth."

"Your words are worth *nothing*." The [Demigod] responded with a sneer, telling Kairos where to put his apology. "At the height of the fighting, my flagship faced your father's *Foresight* while my allies surrounded it. He could have boarded us and fought honorably, but instead, he prioritized his own survival over glory. He rammed into my ship, sunk it, and broke through the encirclement."

Kairos remembered what his uncle had told him, when he had narrated that story to his nephew. "My father had a wife and children at home," he replied. "We were poorer than you can even imagine, and my father needed to take any job to keep us fed. That's why he backed out, so we wouldn't be fatherless."

"So it made it justifiable to massacre my family to save his own? My wife never hurt a fly."

Kairos struggled to keep his mouth shut.

"Answer truthfully," Zama all but ordered. "I'll know if you lie."

"Yes," Kairos replied coldly, remembering why he had chosen to sign Orichalcos' death warrant. "If a man is a man, he will do anything to make sure his children are safe and better off than he is."

The general spat on the ground. "Spare me your excuses, your father had none besides ambition. And his caution only granted him a few more years of life. My only regret is that he died before I could kill him myself."

"With all due respect for your losses, General, I had nothing to do with what happened between my father and you," Kairos pointed out. "I am sorry for what happened to your family, but I am not my sire."

"I thought the same once, which is why I let you be."

The general locked eyes with Kairos, his black one ablaze with bitter hatred.

"And then you killed her," he said, his words dripping with cold fury.

Kairos frowned in confusion. "Killed who?"

"You don't even know her name." General Zama's face twisted into a sneer. "You left so many corpses in your wake, you can't even remember them all. Even those you massacred only a few days ago beneath the sea."

Kairos immediately put the two and two together. "Orichalcos..." he whispered. "You had someone there?"

"My Doris saved my life that day. I would have drowned if she hadn't brought me to shore, and I've loved her ever since." The general's scowl deepened into one of pain and sorrow. "I waited for her to show up on the shore, because she had finally agreed to come live with me. But she never came. And when I consulted the [Eye of Athena]... it showed me what you had *done*."

"I did what was necessary for our survival," Kairos replied, standing by his decision. "There was no good way to resolve that situation."

"You sold an entire city to the *Cetae*," Zama accused him. "Your father was a monster, but his crimes pale before yours. My Doris never wished harm against the surface, but your storm killed her all the same. Your throne rests on the ashes and bones of thousands."

Kairos faced the general's glare, unrepentant. He had signed on for the raid, and would shoulder the burden. "I did what I did for the good of my realm. The merfolk wanted to

bring back the Old Gods and enslave us all. You are a general, you know wars are never clean. It was them or us."

"So you don't regret your crimes?"

"I regret the innocent casualties," Kairos admitted, knowing they were past the point of diplomacy. "But at the end of the day, I am a father and a king. My personal feelings don't matter. The safety of my subjects and future children comes above everything."

"Then you're just like your father," Zama replied with contempt. "A greedy pirate cloaking his ambition under a veil of reason."

"And you think Mithridates is any better? He has no allies, only slaves and enemies. Nothing good will come out of allying with him or his agents. If you truly cared for your kingdom, you would understand that too."

"Mithridates hasn't sacked cities beyond his borders," Zama replied. "My duty as a general is to annihilate existential threats to our kingdom, and you're one of them. The *only* reason you are alive right now is that violating Xenia would bring ruin to our kingdom. But make no mistake."

The general pointed a finger at Kairos' heart.

"I swear before the gods old and new," Zama declared, his voice dripping with hateful venom. "I shall never be a friend to Lyce or to you, Griffin King. I will not rest until I have made you expiate for you and your father's crimes against my house with your last breath. I will drag you off from your throne and burn your rotten pirate kingdom to *ashes*."

The air grew thick with tension, as the oath carried a magic of its own. The gods had taken notice of the general's promise, and would hold him up to it.

There was no turning back from this.

"Do you understand what you have done, you fool?" Kairos asked with anger. "You made this a fight to the *death*."

"Yours first."

"Many have tried to kill me," Kairos replied defiantly. "And I'm still here. As I told your friend Mithridates, cut the hydra's heads as many times as you want, it always gets back up."

"You have survived many foes," the general replied, his artificial eye glowing. "But you have never fought *me*. Pray that we do not meet on the battlefield, Kairos of Travia, because this clash will be your last."

"And pray you don't face me either," Kairos returned the threat with one of his own. "Or I'll finish what my father started."

Having said his piece, the general stormed off to rejoin Queen Teuta. Kairos watched him leave with a scowl, knowing that the general would already plot his demise. Only one thought crossed the pirate's mind and formed on his lips.

"Shit," Kairos cursed.

26: King of Gold

Kairos waited for the audience to begin in thoughtful silence, Andromache holding her arm around his own. His companions digested the news, some more worried than others.

"To think he had a lover in Orichalcos..." Cassandra shook her head. "I can't believe our bad luck. That's not good at all."

"There may be time to salvage this," Tiberius stated, immediately trying to find a way out of this disaster. "He threatened one of his king's guests inside their own castle. If this isn't a breach of Xenia—"

"That's the thing, all he did was threaten me," Kairos interrupted him. "It's no different than what Medea did in Achlys. The Furies only threatened to avenge a breach of Xenia when she physically assaulted me. I suppose you need hostile actions, not words, to make it a violation of hospitality."

Tiberius scowled, while Cassandra considered his words. "That also means that while he can plan our demise after we leave Vali, he can't do anything to us as long as we remain in the king's good graces," she pointed out. "So we are safe for now, but we should expect a fight when we leave the island. Worse, he will probably support Mithridates militarily in the long run."

"Only if he lives," Agron replied. "Just let me duel him honorably as your champion, Kairos, and I will dispatch him."

"You would need the king's consent for a duel," Tiberius pointed out. "He's unlikely to let his guests and star general fight. Besides, he is an undefeated [Demigod]."

"He is an undefeated *general* famed for his strategic brilliance, not an undefeated *warrior*," the minotaur explained his reasoning. "He would have died if that mermaid of his hadn't saved him from drowning. I doubt he is as powerful in single combat than at the head of an army. Hence the best shot we have at killing this foe, is by isolating him from his troops. The same way Kairos' father did."

The reasoning made sense, but it didn't convince the others.

"Only a poor general leaves himself open to attacks, and Zama was only a [Hero] when he faced Chron," Cassandra pointed out. "He is undoubtedly stronger now, and with at least one godlike artifact. You might win, but... I'm sorry, Agron, I wouldn't bet on you."

"And most importantly, he is protected by Xenia just like we are," Tiberius said. "The Furies and deities protecting the laws of hospitality will take action if we challenge him to a fight now. We will be cursed, not to mention hunted down."

To his credit, Agron considered the criticism aimed at his plan. "Then we prepare for an ambush after we leave," he suggested. "Let's confront him at sea, where we can deploy our [Assassin]. A targeted strike."

"It might be our best bet," Cassandra admitted.

As things currently stood, both sides were in a deadlock. Neither the *Foresight's* crew nor Zama and his allies could take action against the other side, unless the King of Vali allowed it. A fight would wait for another day.

The general's words had affected Kairos deeply though, and Andromache sensed it. "You shouldn't feel sorry, my love," she tried to reassure him. "What you did was the best, and you couldn't know that it would end this way."

"This situation is my fault," he countered. "I didn't consider the possibility that Orichalcos' people had allies above ground who would try to avenge them. And... he's correct. I did kill innocent citizens, even if indirectly."

"I say someone famed as an undefeated general has more than enough blood on his hands," Andromache said with a snort. "How many screaming widows has he left in his wake?"

Agron nodded in agreement. "He's just condemning us for stuff he does himself. Don't let his words get to you, Kairos. What's done is done, and looking back will make you blind to the threats in front of you."

Kairos couldn't argue with that. In the end, he had made his choice and would own up to them. Facing a [Demigod] greatly worried him, but his crew had already defeated one. Zama was a dangerous foe, but Kairos would face him like any other.

However, Vali's general making a blood oath of revenge against the Travian King didn't bode well politics-wise.

"It's unlikely Vali will side with us now," Kairos said grimly.

"Unfortunately," Tiberius agreed. "But maybe we can lessen the blow. A general's word is not the king's, and perhaps His Majesty Philip will be less hotblooded."

Kairos could only hope so, as the terrace's doors opened and the myrmidon diplomat from before crossed them. "King Philip awaits you," he informed them, before making his way outside. "I wish you good luck."

They would need it.

Myrmidon guards ushered the delegation outside, where the King of Vali awaited them.

A balcony more than thirty meters in diameter, the hanging terrace oversaw most of the city below the palace tower. Sculpted in a mix of Lycean and Alexandrian architectural styles, it included a small but remarkably beautiful flower garden, marble statues of various divinities, and even a vast pool. Four women swam or discussed inside the waters, all more beautiful than the last; Kairos assumed that they were part of the king's harem, as one of them looked very much like an older Princess Anat.

As for the king himself, he awaited the delegation near the terrace's edge, sitting on an exquisite throne of carved wood surrounded by feathered sofas and comfortable, if smaller, seats. Myrmidon guards and servants surrounded the ruler, pouring wine into his cup. A pretty, blue-haired concubine sat on his lap while kissing him on the neck.

"Ah, King Kairos!" King Philip of Vali raised his cup at the Travian with one hand, and fondled his concubine's ass with the other. "Welcome! Have a drink!"

Vali's ruler had the same eyes and easy smile as his son, but that was where the resemblance stopped. Nearly two meters tall and as overweight as a hippopotamus, the middle-aged king went with his chest naked, wearing only a leopard pelt as pants and a golden crown on his whitened hair. His tanned skin had turned red from the alcohol, and grease from his last meal tainted his beard.

In short, he looked more like Nessus' cohort than of the likes of Sertorius.

It was all a sham though. The Valian king's smile didn't reach his ears, and his eyes betrayed a hint of cold calculation behind the drunkenness. The alcohol hadn't dulled his mind in the slightest.

King Philip Hanno II of Vali

Legend: None (Elite).

Race: Human.

Class: Rogue (Duelist, Explorer, Rogue Trader, Spymaster).

Level: 40.

This one is old and shrewd, Kairos thought, *and cautious too*. "Thank you, Your Majesty," the pirate said politely as he and his allies took seats around Philip. Myrmidon servants immediately offered them drinks, a strong wine thick enough to drive a man mad with a single cup. "I hope we didn't interrupt anything."

"Oh, Ariadne?" King Philip looked at his concubine with amusement, before chasing her away with a light slap on the leg. The woman giggled before leaving, and Kairos realized that she was probably no older than sixteen. Her tribe must have married her to the king as soon as she flowered. "She's pretty easy on the eyes, but you aren't so unfortunate yourself. The sight of these fair ladies makes me regret not being born in Travia."

King Philip leered at Andromache and Cassandra with a lustful grin. The former did her best to ignore the man, as if he were an insect unworthy of her attention, while Cassandra kept her cool. Tiberius was quite embarrassed by the king's behavior, while Kairos cleared his throat.

"Your Majesty..." Kairos trailed, making his displeasure known.

"What? You should enjoy the sight of beautiful things, even if you can't touch them." And to Kairos' shock, King Philip's lustful gaze turned to him. "A great shame indeed..."

Kairos remembered Julia's stories about the Valian king's carnal eccentricities, and suddenly realized that she might have undersold them.

Or maybe he was only trying to unsettle Kairos. If so, he failed and quickly lost patience with his game. "You are married to my dear Sertorius' sister, are you not?" Philip asked Kairos, his gaze wandering to Tiberius. "Who is married to *his* sister. Quite the large clan you have formed."

"My brother-in-law served at your court from what I heard," Kairos replied softly, while Andromache looked away at the pool.

"My good friend Sertorius was Lyce's ambassador to Vali for years, and I miss him greatly," the king admitted. "Smartest man I ever met, and his replacement is as dull as a prison door. I exchange letters with my old friend often, but he doesn't return them all."

"I'm afraid his political rivals slandered Lord Sertorius," Tiberius explained. "They said that he and His Majesty were... intimate."

King Philip exploded into laughter, throwing his drink on the stone ground. "Ah! I wish, I tried, I begged, but I never succeeded! That man is made of ice. Neither men nor women can tempt him."

No, because Sertorius only lusts for power, Kairos thought.

"My sister informed me that Lord Sertorius was a vigorous lover," Tiberius replied softly. "She prays to the gods every day for a son."

"Son, or daughter, I will send gifts at the birth either way. I have not forgotten the favors Sertorius did for me with Lyce's government." King Philip waited for a servant to refill his cup. "But you didn't travel all the way to my kingdom to talk about family matters, did you?"

"No," Kairos confirmed. "We came to talk about alliances."

"I heard you made a proposal to the myrmidons to settle in your land," King Philip said casually. "As for alliances, maybe you should have thought of that before infuriating my general. He asked me to cut off your head, you know?"

As Kairos worried. Tension spread among the delegation as its members exchanged glances, but King Philip didn't appear concerned. "Since I still have it on my shoulder, I assume you refused him?" Kairos asked.

"I did. At least for now."

"What did your general tell you, Your Majesty?" Cassandra asked.

"That you allied with the Aysseans to destroy Orichalcos, sacked its capital, massacred the royal family, and formed an alliance with underwater beasts." King Philip sipped his cup, his gaze cold and unreadable. "Is it true?"

Kairos didn't deny it. "We did," he said. "We formed an alliance with the Cetae, offering them our help against Orichalcos if they would leave the surface alone from now on."

Philip almost choked on his drink, finding the answer hilarious. "My general forgot that part," he said after wiping out wine from his beard.

"Of course he did," Agron scoffed.

"We acted in the best interests of the surface kingdoms, including yours, Your Majesty," Tiberius said, trying to present the destruction of Orichalcos in the best possible light. "They supported an Old God restoration plan."

King Philip looked at his own reflection inside his wine. "I once tried to establish a trade treaty with Orichalcos a few years ago. It was a disaster. They asked for my kingdom to become a tributary state, and their ambassadors refused all my demands so long as I asked to be treated as their equal. After six months of being all but ignored, I threw in the towel and turned my attention to less judgmental trading partners."

"You don't mourn them," Andromache said, her voice stone cold.

"No," the king admitted. "But I confess I'm skeptical. The Cetae aren't known for keeping their promises."

"We extracted oaths from their leaders," Kairos replied. "Including Hybris."

"A [Demigod] of deception," King Philip pointed out. "For all you know he has a Skill allowing him to break his oaths."

"I formed a [Pantheon] with him, alongside Andromache here," Kairos said bluntly. "So I trust him as much as I can trust anyone."

For the first time in the entire conversation, the king found himself speechless. He observed Kairos and Andromache as if new heads had sprouted from their shoulders, blinking a few times as he did so. Worse, the Scylla answered with a smile that showed her monstrous fangs, delighting in her host's confusion.

"Most would find this a cause for concern," King Philip said. Clearly, he understood what [Panteons] were. "And judge you a madman for admitting it out loud."

"People will know soon," Kairos replied. "And I'm not ashamed of the truth."

"Confident, eh? I like that. You're bold, but I suppose that's how you managed to gather so many [Heroes] around you." The king regained his composure, and his jovial behavior. "I still think you're naive to trust a Cetus... but if six months go by without an Alyssean attack, I will start considering your words as true."

"You will benefit from the absence of Cetae attacks on ships," Kairos pointed out.

"True, the toll they take makes long-distance trade a hazardous activity. And whatever the case, a man mad enough to ally with the Cetae is not to be trifled with. For that fact and out of respect for my dear Sertorius, you will remain safe so long as you stay in Vali." King Philip observed all the [Heroes] around him with a harsh gaze. "And so long as you don't make a mess."

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, General Zama threatened us first," Tiberius pointed out.

"I don't care," the king said bluntly. "I forbid you to take any action against Zama and your fellow Travians, just as I forbade them from touching you. An incident would taint my kingdom's reputation, so you *will* both bear the other side's presence with grace until you leave my borders."

"And afterward?" Cassandra asked sharply.

King Philip scoffed. "What happens once you leave my protection does not concern me."

Cassandra exchanged a glance with Kairos. As they worried earlier, they would have to prepare for an attack as soon as they left Vali.

"Your Majesty, Queen Teuta came to you as a representative of King Mithridates of Pergamon," Kairos said.

"Maybe," Philip played coy. "What of it?"

"What offer did she make you?"

"Why would I tell you?"

"So I can make you a better one."

The Valian King grinned ear to ear, this time genuinely. "And what if I lie and make an outrageous demand, to squeeze you dry like a fruit?"

"I will know," Kairos explained with a cold tone, "and I will *remember*."

"I won't say," King Philip replied, unimpressed. "But depending on what you propose, I shall announce which side I choose."

Spoken like a cold-hearted mercenary. "What I am about to say now does not leave this room," Kairos said, glancing at the king's concubines.

"They don't speak your language, and my guards keep their mouths shut," the ruler replied with amusement. "Who do you take me for?"

"Your Majesty, we must insist," Cassandra said, knowing what Kairos was about to reveal.

"They stay," the ruler replied harshly. "Now tell me."

As he wished. Kairos locked eyes with the foreign king. "I am part of a large alliance of [Heroes] across the Sunsea, and we plan to carve out the divided Thessalan League between us. But you already guessed that."

King Philip gave his empty cup to a guard, his face unreadable. But still, Kairos had noticed the flash of greed in his eyes. "Carry on."

"Mithridates probably promised you gold and trading benefits," Kairos guessed. "I offer you far more. I offer you Thessalan lands and cities by right of conquest, on top of the gold."

"Conquest is never certain."

"Nothing is certain in this world," Andromache replied dryly.

"You have more to win by allying with us," Tiberius argued. "Mithridates won't promise you Thessalan lands, as he wants them for himself."

"Maybe he promised me Travian lands instead," King Philip pointed out, though Kairos could smell a lie. "You have a beautiful colony."

"I doubt that," Kairos replied, not taking the bait. "Queen Teuta will never let Travian colonies pass to a foreign power, even if they don't belong to her."

King Philip chuckled. "And if I were to accept your offer, how would I make war without Zama? Because he will never fight at your side."

"He's your servant," Andromache snorted. "He's bound to obey you."

"You said it yourself, woman. Nothing is ever certain."

"Then send him elsewhere," Cassandra suggested. "You have other commanders, like your son. I'm sure Prince Hadad would support us."

"My son dreams of glory, yes. But he is young and overambitious, while I haven't reached old age without learning a few things." King Philip slouched on his throne. "What else do you offer?"

"Trade agreements," Kairos said. "Magical items, a military alliance against other threats..."

However, he could tell that the king remained unconvinced. King Philip heard his words, but didn't truly listen. "I see," was all he said, before falling into a deep silence. Kairos could almost see gears turning in his head, as he weighed his options.

Tiberius tensed up. "So? What will Your Majesty do?"

He chuckled. "Nothing."

Kairos blinked, as he thought he had misheard for a moment. Everyone else glanced at Vali's king in surprise, not having expected that answer.

"War is bad for trade," King Philip said. "I admit your proposal is more interesting than Mithridates', and if Zama had not sworn an oath of revenge against you, I would have been tempted. But as it is, neither option satisfies me. If I support you I alienate a local [Demigod] with too much popular support for my liking, and if I support Mithridates I will only earn Lyce's enmity, which will cost my kingdom more in the long term than anything I will get from Pergamon."

Agron scoffed scornfully. "That's a merchant's logic."

"If more kings thought like merchants, the world would be a lot safer," King Philip replied with a shrug. "My duty as a king—the only one some would say—is to make my subjects safe and prosperous. Getting involved in a foreign war does not align with our national interests."

Kairos struggled not to let out a sigh of relief. He would have hoped for an alliance, but this was the least bad outcome. "So you will prevent Zama from going after us?" he asked.

"No," King Philip replied, to Kairos' horror. "*Vali* itself will remain neutral, but I won't prevent volunteers and mercenaries from joining either side. If one of my generals wants to fill his pockets working for the Thessalan League, I will let him. We are at peace after all, and jobless soldiers cause troubles at home."

Tiberius immediately attempted to salvage the situation. "Your Majesty, is letting one of your generals run rampant in another country truly wise?"

"From my point of view? Yes." To his credit, King Philip explained his cold logic. "I owe my throne to my family's alliances and a delicate balance of power. I am no [Demigod]. If Zama wanted to kill me in single combat, he would certainly prove victorious and take the throne by force. Why didn't he launch a coup then?"

"Because you extracted oaths of loyalty before he became a [Demigod]," Andromache guessed.

"Because the kingdom would collapse into a bloody civil war afterward," Cassandra said.

Vali's ruler smirked. "You are both correct. Zama owes me service and loyalty, though it is not absolute, and a conflict between us would prove disastrous for the country as a whole. Thus it is better to let him play at war far away from home, where he doesn't bother me."

"You hope that a conflict abroad will bleed him dry," Kairos guessed, as he started to see the bigger picture. "That your overmighty vassal will exhaust his strength fighting our alliance, and thus be less likely to threaten you."

King Philip winked at him in response.

That bastard. And yet, Kairos couldn't fault him for his decision. It was a cunning move, though there was one flaw in the plan. "And if one of us kills your general?" Agron asked, almost eager to do it.

"I doubt that you will, but if you succeed..." King Philip chuckled. "Then I will be sure to back the winning side."

Kairos left the meeting disappointed, but not truly afraid.

After reasserting his neutrality in the future Thessalan war, King Philip offered to host the Travian delegation for the entire duration of Prince Hadad's week-long hunt and the following festivities. Afterward, he expected his guests to 'carry on with their journey.'

Kairos could read between the lines. The Kingdom of Vali would shelter the delegation for now, but not indefinitely. Afterward, they would have to fend off Zama on their own.

"It's not as bad as I feared," Cassandra said grimly as they exited the king's chambers, "but not as good as I hoped."

"We need to strike this fool of a [Demigod] before he can mobilize," Andromache said bluntly. "Though I would rather kill him, there has to be another way to impair him."

"Agreed," Cassandra nodded. "We can't harm each other, but we can gather information and prepare. Queen Teuta also offered to meet with us, which could be a golden opportunity to sabotage Mithridates' plans from the inside."

"And any mercenary we hire now is someone Zama won't throw at us later," Agron added, an idea forming in his mind. "He said enemies wanted him out of the picture in the past. Maybe they're still alive... and potential allies."

Only Tiberius hadn't spoken a word on the way out. He had remained thoughtful, as if considering an option that had eluded the rest of the group. "Tiberius?" Kairos quizzed him. "Any ideas?"

"Sir, Lord Kairos... we are forgetting something." The Lycean diplomat looked at his superior confidently. "Vali's king rules with a light touch, and clearly gives his commanders a great amount of leeway."

"Unfortunately," Kairos conceded. "What are you getting at?"

"There is another commander with a [Legend] in this kingdom," Tiberius pointed out wisely. "And if Zama can pick a side, he might as well take another. He is, after all, a young conqueror and eager to prove himself."

Kairos' eyes lit up at his friend's plan. Indeed, there might still be a way to turn the situation around.

They had failed to convince the father.

But they might still recruit the son.

27: Matrimonial Matters

It wasn't the first time Kairos participated in a monster hunt on griffinback.

Thankfully, the target wasn't a dangerous Nemean Lion but a pride of serpopards. Kairos had heard of these creatures, but never met one until today. These monsters, as per the name, looked like giant spotted cats with elongated necks and serpentine fangs. Kairos counted around fifteen of them stalking after zebras across the dry Valian northern savannah.

The Travian gave the signal by pointing his [Anemoi Spear] at the skies and clearing out the clouds. The serpopards interrupted their hunt to look up at the griffin and his rider above them, before tensing up as they heard horses approaching. Prince Hadad's hunting party came from the south, a group of forty riders including the finest cavalry of Vali. His sisters led a second group coming from the west, while Tiberius, Agron, and Cassandra struck from the east.

The serpopards must have already learned to fear hunting parties, for they immediately abandoned their own dinner to run away north.

"They're quite fast," Rook said as he followed the felines from above. The serpopards ran twice as fast as the horses and left their pursuers in the dust. "They're getting away!"

"It's fine," Kairos reassured Rook. According to Prince Hadad, serpopards were quick but lacked the endurance for prolonged chases. Eventually, they would tire out. "Truthfully, I'm not all that eager to win this hunt."

Kairos supported monster hunts for food or to gather crafting materials, but these serpopards would probably end up as princely carpets. He wouldn't mind seeing them escape this fate.

"A shame," Teuta's voice said from above, followed by the flapping of wings. "I would have loved to see you in action."

Kairos looked up, as a black griffin hovered to his level while carrying a pirate queen on its back.

Unlike Rook, Teuta's griffin had feathers as black as a starless night and sharp golden eyes. His body was as lean as a panther, his wings as elegant as a raven. Though the winged beasts rivaled each other in size, Teuta's mount lacked Rook's serpentine tail. A claw scar went down his right eye, the remnant of some old battle.

A fighter's griffin, not a rogue's, Kairos thought.

Instead of a spear, Teuta favored a double-edged obsidian waraxe glimmering with veins of silver and shining rubies. Though it radiated a powerful magical aura, Kairos had been unable to read its stats with [Barter] or [Magical Knack]. The same item that shrouded his [Observer] Skill whenever he looked at Teuta also interfered with his other abilities.

She was a lot more cunning than her ferocious appearance suggested.

"I didn't know you were a fellow [Griffin Rider]," Kairos admitted. "I was quite surprised when I saw your mount."

"I feel more at home on land or on a ship's deck," Queen Teuta replied with a smile, "but the world is beautiful from above, wouldn't you agree? Besides, Ebon has been a loyal companion long before I learned to ride him."

"And unlike the silly baby here," the black griffin glared at Rook, "I grew to my size naturally."

"Pff, you're just jealous of my [Legend] swagger!" Rook wagged his serpentine tail at his fellow avian. "Boo! Boo, I said!"

"You are a foolish child!" the black griffin replied, struggling to find a better answer.

Kairos and Teuta watched their mounts mock each other with amusement, before locking eyes with each other. Though both were safe from the other so far, a rift of wariness remained between them.

"Shall we follow after the pride?" Kairos asked, as the other hunters chasing the serpopards became nothing more than shadows on the horizon.

"That can wait," the pirate queen replied. "You wanted to discuss terms, and here I am."

She didn't waste time with pleasantries. Good. Kairos had his fill of court etiquette. "Why do you work with Mithridates? Your dalliance with him is pretty much the only thing that stands between us becoming friends."

"Just like your alliance with Lyce bothers me," she countered. "Perhaps you will remember that our ancestors fled Lyce, rather than the Thessalan League?"

"It happened many years ago, and we have to move on."

"I won't," Teuta replied harshly. "I can't. I have rescued too many slaves bound to Lyce's mines to close my eyes."

"If I remember, Mithridates' galley ships are also rowed by slaves. Yet you allied with him."

"True," Teuta conceded his point, "but his ambitions are limited to his own country. He wants a world of nations powerful enough to defend their borders, but not strong enough to invade others. Lyce wants to expand and one day they will turn their eyes towards us. We have avoided their notice so far because Travia is poor and the Thessalan League is a juicer target, but their greed knows no bound."

"I understand that," Kairos replied. His brother-in-law Sertorius had made no secret that he wanted his family to rule supreme over the Sunsea. "Which is why it is better to form an alliance with them while we still can."

"Alliances last only as long as those who make them. You married a powerful Lycean family and allied with the likes of Dispater, but what will happen in five generations, when these bonds have dimmed?" Teuta shook her head before glancing at the vibrant sun. The strong dry wind had chased all clouds from the Valian skies, turning it into a blue, limitless expanse. "Your grandson might find himself with a powerful Lycean Republic under the influence of another clan at his doorstep."

"It's a possibility," Kairos agreed. "Which is why I'm trying to reinforce Travia now, by conquering more land, gaining more wealth, and developing our army."

"That is my goal as well." Queen Teuta examined her rival closely. "I get the feeling we seek the same end, but we disagree on the methods. You're using Lyce's resources to strengthen yourself, as I am doing with Mithridates' funds."

As Kairos had suspected, her alliance with the Poison King was purely transactional. Teuta assisted him to check Lyce's growing power and so he would fund her campaigns.

The *Foresight's* captain thought this opened possibilities of a reconciliation, but unfortunately, something else stood in the way. "Yet you joined his [Pantheon]," he pointed out. "This implies a closer bond."

Teuta laughed. "Only fools trust Mithridates without guarantees. You learned that to your cost."

Kairos didn't need to be reminded of the Orthia debacle. It still shamed him to think of it. "So you joined his [Pantheon] to avoid a potential betrayal?"

"In a way. The fact his [Pantheon]'s goal stands as an anti-Lyce alliance is a bonus."

"It does make us natural enemies, however."

"Not necessarily." Teuta examined her rival head to toe, like a predator sizing up another. "I have a proposal to make. One that could prevent a conflict between us."

Kairos frowned in skepticism. He did hope to prevent a Travian civil war between them, but though she pretended otherwise, he could tell their long-term interests didn't align all that well. He wanted to form strong alliances with countries like Lyce, while she wanted to pursue a more aggressive approach to international politics.

But still, it cost nothing to listen. "Go ahead," he said.

"Set your Lycean wife aside and let us marry," Teuta declared. "We can unite our claims, set this foreign war aside, and rule Travia together."

Kairos blinked in surprise. He had expected many things, but a marriage proposal wasn't one of them. *Is she serious?* he thought as he examined her. Yet Kairos didn't detect any hint of deception in her grey eyes.

"Do you fancy me?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Since when did attraction have anything to do with politics?" Teuta asked, though she did look at him in a playful way. "You are not unattractive, but it is the king I would marry, not the man. As things stand, we backed different horses in a foreign conflict because we're both looking out for allies and resources. But if we join forces, I believe we can stand on our own."

On the surface, her proposal made sense. They were both powerful [Heroes] close enough in age to have children together, and Travians to the bone. With their resources, a match could unify their country under their rule. They hadn't made inviolable oaths to participate in the inevitable Thessalan war, and though it would cost them alliances, they could in theory sit it out the way Vali's king intended to.

In theory.

"I already have a wife, and a concubine," Kairos pointed out. "And my 'Lycean wife' as you call her, is pregnant with my child."

"Truly?" Teuta frowned. "That's unfortunate, but personal feelings shouldn't matter in a political union."

"It does matter to me," Kairos replied firmly. He had made vows, and though he originally married her for power, he had grown attached to Julia. "Besides, she is protected by a marriage contract. I cannot divorce her as easily as you think."

Teuta didn't hide her disappointment, but Kairos could sense that she had expected such an answer. "I worried as much."

"Though I am allowed to keep concubines," Kairos said, though he had no intention of going through with it. He simply wanted to gauge Teuta's reaction, and she didn't disappoint.

"I will not play second string to a Lycean," Teuta shot the idea down with an angry scowl. "What I suggest is a union of equals, not subordination."

Well, Kairos hadn't truly been serious about it either. Andromache already suffered when he married Julia for a political advantage, and he couldn't bear the thought of putting her through that again.

In truth, Kairos had wanted to see what mattered the most to Teuta, and as he expected, she was as ambitious as he was. Though she cared for her people, she wanted to become their queen just as much. She wouldn't sacrifice everything for peace.

"In any case, I don't think we can truly sit out this war," Kairos replied. "Not at this point, and especially not now that Zama has made a blood oath of revenge against me."

"I can use my [Pantheon] privileges to stop him, if I take you under my protection," Teuta said. "We have methods to resolve conflicts peacefully as fellow members. I can still do so."

If you submit to my rule, was left unsaid.

"An alliance of equals, you said." Kairos considered Teuta's words, trying to gain a better grasp on her motives. "Suppose, hypothetically, that I would set aside my crown and recognize you as Travia's queen so long as you abandon Mithridates."

Her eyes squinted in skepticism. She didn't buy it. "You would do that?"

"Hypothetically, what would happen afterward? What would be your vision of the future in that scenario?"

To her credit, she considered his question thoughtfully rather than brush it off. "I would unify all the free captains of Travia under my command, forming a single fleet," Teuta explained. "With so many ships under my command, I will be able to project real power towards other nations. I will have them open their ports to us for trade by force if necessary, and harass Lyce's shipments."

Kairos knew this would only result in provoking the Republic and a devastating conflict, but let her continue. Teuta saw farther than most Travian warlords in that she wanted to develop trade and alliances with the likes of the Thessalan League, but in the end, she pursued the same politics that drove their nation to poverty: piracy actions against Lyce, taking mercenary jobs on behalf of foreign powers, and sticking to their barren rock of an island rather than colonizing more land.

"And when you die?" Kairos asked. "Supposing you survive all the way to old age?"

"The captains will elect another leader," Teuta replied with a shrug. "This is the foundation of our culture."

"Or more likely your confederation will fracture into rival pirate warlords, as Travian alliances always did in the past," Kairos replied. "And that's my real problem with you, Teuta. You think we pursue the same end through different methods, but you're mistaken. I want to unify Travia under a single, lasting government with a clear line of succession and an assembly. Even if it means sacrificing some of our freedoms for stability."

Teuta glared at him as if he had blasphemed. "Our ancestors founded Travia to become free men and women."

"One's freedom stops where others' begin," Kairos replied. "And currently, the freedom of Travian individuals gets in the way of our common prosperity as a united people. We can't go back to zero each time a charismatic leader isn't here to lead us."

"Loyalty should be earned, Kairos," Teuta replied. "I wouldn't bow down to a leader I don't agree with."

"Then I can't trust you not to put your personal interests above those of the group," Kairos sighed. "I know it's intoxicating, to do whatever you want. But shared prosperity requires compromise."

"I am offering a compromise right now."

"But not one that will last." Kairos shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't get behind your vision."

"Then we are at an impasse." Queen Teuta let out a long, heavy sigh. "A shame. I do appreciate you, Kairos. Few of us Travians have done even half of what you achieved, and I would rather have you at my side than at the vanguard of an enemy army."

"I feel the same," Kairos replied. "But as things stand, one of us will either submit to the other or perish."

"And it won't be me." Realizing that they had each said their piece, Queen Teuta seized her griffin's reins. "I give you until the end of our stay in Vali to reconsider, Kairos. Afterward, we will speak with steel rather than words."

She flew away to catch up with the hunting party, and Kairos followed afterward.

Neither of them spoke a word to the other for the rest of the day.

The chase lasted well into the sunset, until Vali's royal family decided to call it quits for the moment.

The first day of the hunt had gone well, as Cassandra and Prince Hadad each slew one beast. Even better, Princess Anat's sha had briefly glimpsed a white serpopard while scouting the savannah. Vali's nobility considered the appearance of such a rare beast as a good sign, and Prince Hadad swore to claim its pelt for himself.

"Such a shame neither my mentor nor your lady Scylla could join us, King Kairos," Prince Hadad complained, as he and his guest went on a nightly stroll around the camp alongside his sisters. The heir to Vali's crown never moved alone, and always insisted on having his family around whenever Kairos begged for a moment of his time.

"They were busy," Kairos replied, as they passed by Valian servants raising tents on the dry, arid soil. Nessus had remained in Ugarit to recruit mercenaries, while Andromache coordinated with Nausicaa to gather information on Zama. The Travians wanted to know where he lived, what troops he had at his disposal, and at which moment the general would be the most vulnerable.

Kairos was strongly tempted to follow Agron's plan and assassinate the general before he could regroup with Mithridates. The minotaur had been right, Zama was at his most dangerous when leading an army and couldn't be allowed to leave Vali with one.

However... While King Philip was alright with seeing his general perish in a foreign war, he might not take it kindly to seeing him assassinated on his own soil. This would make the monarchy look weak and provoke a strong reaction.

I have to think carefully about this, Kairos pondered the problem at hand. Now is not the right time to strike. Not yet.

He didn't doubt for a second that Zama was planning something similar—his absence at the hunt spoke volumes about his current priorities—and the general had made their feud to

the death. If anything, planning the [Demigod]'s assassination would be preemptive self-defense.

His artifact will be a problem too, Kairos thought. Zama had used the [Eye of Athena] to learn about his involvement in the destruction of Orichalcos, which implied divination powers. Andromache had promised to investigate this particular device, and to figure out its limits.

"At least the [Skald] came," Princess Anat said with a smile, glancing at Agron. The minotaur was busy singing a ballad near the campfire, and had gathered quite the audience. Even Queen Teuta had come to listen, exchanging words with Cassandra. No doubt Kairos' rival was trying to poach his men, but she would be disappointed. He had absolute faith in his crew. "His voice is rough, but he says the words with such passion..."

"I wonder what song he will write by the end of this adventure," her sister said with a grin. "Though I don't think it will rival his ballad about your Nemean Lion hunt."

"Oh?" Kairos raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know he had made one."

"It was delightful," Princess Anat confirmed with a nod. "Is it true you offered yourself as bait for the beast?"

"I did, though Rook did most of the work carrying me."

"Something bothers me though," Prince Hadad said. "Can't you pierce the invulnerability of other [Heroes]? If so, then you should have been capable of slaying the beast yourself."

"You have done your research, Prince Hadad." The man knew more about Kairos than he let on. "I could have, but I wanted my officer Thales to claim the kill and the [Legend]."

Vali's royal family looked at him with newfound respect. "It was extremely noble of you," Princess Asherah said before giving her brother an amused look. "Most would try to hoard the experience and glory for themselves."

"It was an accident," the prince replied with a grin. "Besides, if I hadn't killed that antlion, I would have been one sister short."

"Is that how you gained your [Legend], Prince Hadad?" Kairos asked with curiosity.

The prince shook his head. "I earned it when I conquered the Isfet tribe. They alone hadn't submitted to Vali's authority for generations, and they were led by a powerful sphinx [Hero]. I defeated their troops in battle, bested the beast in a riddle contest—"

"And then she proved a sore loser and tried to kill you anyway?" Kairos guessed with a chuckle.

"It was a male, but yes. He challenged me to single combat using some stupid reasoning about *'death being life's final answer.'* Obviously, I won anyway."

"From your answer, I can tell you had experience with a sphinx," Princess Anat guessed. To Kairos' surprise, she brazenly put her arm around his own. "Tell me more, please. I love riddle stories."

Though Kairos found the physical contact improper—and he was thankful Andromache wasn't here to see it—he didn't push the princess away to avoid alienating her. Strangely, neither Prince Hadad nor his other sister made a comment about that.

"Her name is Aglaonice," Kairos explained with a sigh. "She is... probably the most annoying person I have ever met."

He explained to them how he had met Aglaonice, though he omitted certain details such as the Necromanteion's existence or Euryale's presence on his island. Princess Anat seemed rapturously captivated by his tales, as was Prince Hadad.

A bit too much, in fact.

They're pumping me for information, Kairos realized. For what purpose? Did they plan to repeat everything to Zama? Or did they pursue some other objective?

Whatever the case, Kairos realized he could turn the situation to his advantage. He remained careful to only present the good side of his crew's adventures and colony, to make them look more fearsome than they were. With luck, Vali's royalty would understand that they should ally with Histria rather than Mithridates.

"You have a hydra too?" By now Princess Anat didn't hide her excitement. "My, I have to visit your menagerie one day! Your island sounds like a [Beastmaster]'s paradise."

"A shame your minotaur killed that dragon before you could tame it," Prince Hadad said out of the blue, his smile warm and his eyes calculating.

So he knew. Did his father tell him, or was it Zama? Kairos had begun the day confident that he could make the prince his ally, but now... "Out of everyone on my crew, Agron probably deserves his [Legend] the most. Not everyone is brave enough to climb a giant dragon's back and kill it. And it was an act of mercy. The merfolk turned their own prince into a monster."

Thankfully, Vali's royal family cared more about the *Foresight's* crew slaying a giant dragon than the fact it had been a child transformed into a monstrosity.

"You do have a talent for turning allies into powerful [Heroes]," Princess Asherah observed with a smile. "Would you mind inviting me aboard your ship? I'm sure I would return home a [Demigod]."

Kairos responded with a grin of his own. "I always have space for more friends."

Prince Hadad nodded to himself, before turning to face his sisters. "I'm afraid it's getting late, and I promised our guest a private talk," he declared. "You will have to let him go, Anat."

"For now," the princess replied, before softly releasing her hold on Kairos' arm.

The Travian King politely bade the princesses good night, and they left the boys alone to rejoin the others around the campfire. Kairos expected Prince Hadad to invite him for a chat under his own tent, but instead, Vali's crown heir took him aside outside the camp. The two men sat under a tree and watched the bright night's sky, and Kairos noticed Rook playfully racing against Anat's sha around the tents.

"What was that?" Kairos asked his host. "With your sister?"

Prince Hadad ignored the question, and asked one of his own. "Do you have sisters, my friend?"

My friend? Kairos took it as a good sign, though the question wounded him a little. "I had one," he admitted, his voice heavy with sorrow. "She died."

"Oh, I'm sorry. My condolences." Though the prince sounded genuine, Kairos could tell something else bothered him about the answer. "An aunt then?"

"Cassandra is the closest thing I have to one."

"But she's not of your blood, and I see the glances she and your Tiberius exchange. Are they engaged?"

"Not yet," Kairos said, before raising an eyebrow. "I have a mother, if we're reviewing all my female relatives."

"She must be a powerful and graceful lady. Considering you are an adult, though, I assume she's past her childbearing years."

Kairos locked eyes with the prince. "These are not innocent questions, are they?"

"Of course not." The prince joined his hands together in a pose that his guest found strikingly similar to King Philip's. "I know what you want to talk about, King Kairos."

"I thought your father's concubines couldn't speak our language?"

Prince Hadad blinked in genuine surprise, to Kairos' delight. "How do you know?"

"I didn't. I made an educated guess, and you confirmed my suspicions with your reaction." Kairos looked at the pale crescent moon above them. "I assume your father doesn't know that tidbit either. He wouldn't have let them listen to the audience otherwise."

"You are the perfect [Rogue], King Kairos," Prince Hadad said with a sigh. "Indeed. It is I who fetched my father's youngest concubine, and I selected someone with knowledge of multiple languages without his knowledge."

He had planted a spy right in his father's bedroom. "It's a dangerous game," Kairos noted. "Why is she playing it?"

"My father is old and with health problems," the prince confessed. "When he perishes in a few years, I will take her for myself and rule in favor of her tribe on some matters. They're a cunning lot, my Valians. Always scheming and feuding. It's a delicate balancing act to keep them united for a fortnight."

So he was already preparing his own succession and keeping watch on his sire's decisions. "Then you know what I offered to your father."

"I do. In fact, between us, I was already considering conquering the Thessalan League myself."

Kairos' head snapped in his host's direction. "You are?"

Prince Hadad nodded, his eyes full of cunning. "Vali is nominally at peace, but it is a precarious one. The tribes are always feuding against each other, and I've grown sick of stamping out disputes or managing their egos. So I figured out an alternative."

"Unite them against a common enemy?" Kairos guessed.

"Exactly. Besides gaining access to more fertile lands than the barren soil of our home, the tribes' troops and mercenaries would grow weaker fighting abroad. This would give me more leeway to build a centralized army and bureaucracy."

The more he heard, the more Kairos thought he was listening to a double of himself. His strategy was frighteningly similar to what the Travian King was doing at home. Though Vali was commercially richer than Travia, it suffered from the same problems: lack of arable lands, overpopulation, and too many factions struggling to cooperate effectively.

"I carefully considered potential targets," Hadad explained, "but Lyce and Alexandria are too powerful, Achlys was protected by a powerful curse until recently and might reactivate it..."

"And Travia?" Kairos asked, his voice turning cold.

Hadad exploded in laughter. "Your lands are barely more fertile than ours! And frankly, I wouldn't bet against you. Orthia, Achlys, Orichalcos... you devastated every country who crossed you. Vali won't join that list, if I have a say in it."

"Even if it means alienating your star general?"

Prince Hadad's expression harshened. "General Zama taught me military strategy, and I would rather that we stay friends. However, my throne will never be secure if one of my generals can do whatever he wants. His attempt to influence our international politics and join a foreign power's [Pantheon] bothers me. My father is too overconfident; with Mithridates' support, Zama could make the monarchy his puppet show. That won't happen."

This was going way better than expected. "So you will ally with us against him?" Kairos asked, praying for a yes.

Hadad smiled the way his father Philip did. "I told you back then, King Kairos. I will choose the best offer."

"What more would you want?" Doubt gnawed at Kairos' mind. "What did Mithridates offer your father that I didn't?"

"He proposed to marry one of my sisters to seal a military alliance, and give the other to his Orthian ally Antipater. My father said no military support, true... but the idea of having his grandsons sit on foreign thrones does appeal to him. And why do you think Teuta came by herself to plead her ally's cause? She asked me for a private meeting too."

Kairos clenched his fists.

That cunning little... She had made him a marriage proposal while offering another to a foreign prince? Had Teuta even been genuine, or simply dangled a hook in front of Kairos to try and undermine his alliance with Lyce?

"You do realize Mithridates will use your sisters as hostages the moment they arrive in his court, and force Vali to support him regardless?" Kairos warned the prince. "He has no qualms murdering children or backstabbing allies if he can gain an advantage."

"It's a possibility, but I understand my father's reasoning. I am unmarried, and so are my sisters. Alliances built on gold and shared ambitions don't last half as long as those bound by blood."

"You must have gotten along well with Sertorius, when he was an ambassador."

"I did," Prince Hadad confirmed. "Which is why your proposal of a long-term alliance interests me. We are all young and ambitious men with the will to change things. My father and Mithridates would rather keep things as they are, but the likes of us? We can rule the Sunsea."

"Rule the Sunsea?" Kairos couldn't help but choke at his sheer audacity.

"Why not?" Prince Hadad replied with passion. "If we want to become [Gods] one day, we will have to conquer like gods. If you want to reach the moon, aim for the stars. Maybe we'll fail, or maybe we'll succeed. But the world will remember that we tried."

If anything, Kairos found his boundless optimism refreshing. His offer, though... "What kind of blood alliance are you looking for? We can't exactly marry each other."

Prince Hadad glanced at his sister's sha, who had lost his race against Rook.

"No," the Travian king declared upon putting the two and two together. "I already have a wife, I will not set her aside."

"Why would I ask you to? My father has dozens of concubines, and you have one. Certainly you could have a second." When Kairos refused to answer, Prince Hadad watched his expression closely. "My friend, we are not discussing as fellow human beings. We are two nations negotiating about their future. The desires of a few shouldn't weigh in the balance."

"They do," Kairos said, thinking of Andromache. "I find your sisters good company, Prince, but... I already love someone else, and she won't take it well. She might even kill her romantic rivals."

"I understand this kind of arrangement can be... difficult," Hadad said with a sigh. "My father's harem is a cesspool of intrigue. I imagine an angry Scylla is a terrifying threat, which is why I asked if you had a free female relative. It would have neatly solved the problem, but alas, this is not to be."

He hadn't changed his mind, to Kairos' puzzlement. "You would risk your sisters' life?"

"They would be endangered if they were shipped to Mithridates anyway, and Anat and Asherah are not as defenseless as you think."

This couldn't end well. "Prince Hadad, I'm sorry but no," Kairos refused the proposal.

"There has to be another way. Maybe someone else—"

"I am open to suggestions if you have an alternative proposal, King Kairos, but make no mistake." Vali's crown prince looked at the distant stars, raising a hand as if he could reach them. "If you haven't offered a match I can get behind by the time your stay in Vali ends, you'll find my door closed."

28: Family Planning

The temple of Histria had fallen silent, as Julia digested her husband's message.

She gazed at his statue, his [Idol], and at the Stymphalian birds perched atop it. The night was cold, with only the pale moonlight going through the windows to provide her with some light.

Kairos' [Idol] radiated waves of emotions, using the same system of communication he used to tell her of Prince Hadad's proposal. It was a long and time-consuming process, and his message was short.

"SO?" She translated her husband's message.

"So these upjumped merchants presume too much," Julia replied with coldness.

She should have expected it. Her husband was a rising star, and the fact he had taken a concubine set a dangerous precedent. Polygamy was useful to form alliances in the short term, but it always led to disastrous infighting in the long run by creating factions. No doubt Prince Hadad wanted to see one of his descendants on Travia's throne, and offering his sister as a gift was but the first step towards reaching that goal.

But her husband had thankfully refused the proposal, and Julia was pleased that he valued their marriage enough to seek another solution. She knew Andromache had probably mattered just as much in Kairos' decision, but the fact that his wife was the first person he informed of the negotiations showed that he valued her opinion.

"I could... accept Andromache because I had Caenis, and neither had any political ambitions that could threaten our children's future," Julia admitted. "Our current arrangement will not cause any dynastic or political strife. But a Valian princess is another matter entirely. Her brother is doing the same thing he did with his father, trying to plant an agent in your bedroom."

The princess would do everything to advance her country's interests, and probably scheme to take Julia's position as wife. True, the price of the prince's military support appeared cheap at first glance, but it would prove more expensive than expected.

"On paper, the proposal is interesting in the short-term, but not in the long one," she explained to Kairos. "There can only be one ruler of Histria after you. The moment the Valian princess gives birth to your child, she will scheme to put it above ours in the line of succession. This will cause dynastic instability in the long term. True, we need troops to

defend ourselves now from Mithridates... but there is nothing more vicious than a civil war, especially since each line will be supported by a different country. Do you truly want to see our realm torn apart by power games between Lyce and Vali?"

And then there would be Andromache's reaction. Julia had enough self-control to act with subtlety, but the Scylla could barely resist the urge to incinerate one romantic rival. The presence of another would make her do something stupid, which would cause a lot more problems down the line than simply turning down Hadad's proposal.

"Prince Hadad is more cunning than you think, my husband. He knows you are nervous about Zama, and he exploits your unease to make you blind to the arrangement's long-term consequences. Take a step back, look at this carefully, and try to examine our other options."

The [Idol] remained inactive for a moment, and Julia cursed this method of communication. She could never know if her husband was still alive on the other side. But after a few minutes of silence, the statue radiated more emotions.

"OPTIONS?"

"You have other marriage candidates to offer," Julia pointed out. "Tiberius might be a lesser son of Dispat, but he is still the scion of a powerful Lycean bloodline. Cassandra is a chosen of Persephone and your second-in-command, Agron killed a dragon... you have many [Heroes] in your employ, and Hadad himself is unmarried. While no bachelor can replace you alone, perhaps adding another match could help sway him."

The answer was longer.

"NO THRONE."

It is a throne Prince Hadad wants, Julia guessed. "I agree he will want one... but it does not have to be *yours*. Offer your pledge to carve out a lesser fiefdom for his sister's children in Thessala once we conquer it. Wiser men would prefer the king at hand than a throne they don't have yet... but Hadad is young and hungry for glory. The idea of forging a new vassal kingdom to Vali subordinate to his family will satisfy his ego. His boundless ambition is his strength, but also his weakness. Use it like a hook."

They still had days ahead of them. Time to test the waters, see if Prince Hadad could be mollified. Julia had enough experience to know that a first offer was rarely the best, and that a deal sealed while panicking was never satisfactory.

"BE BACK," Kairos answered through the statue. "BE SAFE."

"I will," Julia said with warmth. "Take care, my husband."

No answer followed this time, leaving Julia alone.

Or so she would have thought, had her sharp, enhanced sense of hearing not picked up sound coming from the temple's window.

"Who is there?" Julia asked. Her bodyguards stood watch over the temple outside, so it shouldn't be anyone dangerous... but she had asked not to be interrupted.

"I can be touched, but I hurt those who touch me," a familiar voice answered, as a flying form entered the temple through the windows. "I love forests but fear the streams. Who am I?"

"A fire," Julia replied with a smile. "My turn. What can still work when broken, snared when touched, and lost but never forever?"

"My, but the heart of course!" Aglaonice the sphinx replied smugly, as she landed right in front of Julia. "This is why I enjoy your company, my dear wolf! Unlike your snake of a husband, you play by the book!"

"When it suits me." Julia crossed her arms. "Why are you here, my lovely sphinx?"

"Excuse you? You sent a messenger bird begging for my expertise, and when I come to enlighten you, I am met with distrust!"

"True, I did call you," Julia conceded. She had expected the sphinx to arrive earlier though. "An urgent matter got in the way."

"I heard. Your dear husband does struggle to keep to one bed." The sphinx slouched on the temple's floor, while Julia let the jab wash over her like seawater on a stone shore. "You should have seen the lustful way he looked at me. He was practically raping me with his gaze!"

"Yet he turned you down." And Julia could tell that it annoyed the arrogant, self-absorbed sphinx to no end. "No matter. I didn't call you for advice on matrimonial politics."

"You didn't?" The sphinx scratched her belly. "A shame, I am very good at making romantic horoscopes. I predicted that you would face both joy and disappointment in your marriage."

"That's awfully vague."

"Love is more fickle and complicated than the movement of stars, stop shaming me! I warn you to be careful in your love life, and this is the thanks I get?" Aglaonice scoffed. "What did you want to consult me on, if not on your husband?"

Julia's hands moved to her belly. "If you can see the future, you should already know."

"Truthfully, I am confused," Aglaonice replied. "I ran divinations, and they said boy or girl at different times. I suspect a greater power than me obscures the results. Maybe even Prometheus."

Caenis had told Julia as much. The Titan of Foresight made a likely suspect, as he had already supported Kairos in the past. If Romulus could interfere with others' divinations, so could Prometheus... and the uncertainty would protect her from Lycaon's gaze.

"All in all," Aglaonice said, "just pray for a girl."

"I cannot rely on uncertainty to live," the queen of Histra said with a frown. "Nor gamble the life of my child on prayers. If this is a boy, Romulus will come for his head, and if this is a girl, he will come for mine."

"A true shame," the sphinx said with a tone that sounded almost sincere. "But you don't expect me to fight him for you, do you? I appreciate your company, but I don't like you enough to die for your pretty face."

"I never expected you to." Julia could use catspaws when needed, but when someone sought to take her life, she would rather take a sword and kill them herself. "I would have fought if I could, but when Romulus came... I was helpless."

This feeling of powerlessness, of submitting before a higher authority... she had resented it as much as the limitations Lycean society had put on her. Julia had let others dictate how her life would go often enough. No more.

"I never want to feel this weak again... or to leave my child at the mercy of a stranger." Julia would rather kill half the world than let anything happen to her blood. "I need something to resist Romulus' [Domination] power, so I don't fall under his influence again."

"I truly sympathize, but what can I do? I am a cat, you are a wolf. I might be worshiped by some, but werewolves belong to one god alone, and he's very jealous of his pack."

"Yet my ancestors imprisoned Lycaon beneath the earth, chaining him to the point he needs some mad prophet to fulfill his will," Julia replied. "Which means his power is not absolute."

"True, but at the end of the day, you are an [Elite] and your tormentor is a [Demigod] from what I gathered. The power gap is simply too large." Aglaonice licked her fur like a cat. "Now, if you were a [Hero], I might have something to keep the wolves at bay..."

"Perfect, because my next demand involves my personal Quest." Julia locked eyes with the sphinx. "Have you found the [Necklace of Harmonia]?"

Aglaonice responded with a smile, which was an answer in itself.

She closed her eyes as he kissed her neck.

His hands explored every inch of her naked skin, pinching her breasts and caressing her thighs. Her own fingers moved to his back, feeling the sweat beneath the fingernails. She couldn't help but groan as he took her beneath the serpopard skin.

It made him hesitate. "Is it too—?"

"No, no, continue," Cassandra whispered in his ear, her breath short. "It's... it's been a while, that's all."

She had had a brief fling with Castor while he had visited Histria, but... that had been many months ago, and different. Her current lover's touch was clumsy, his thrusts abrupt. Cassandra would be surprised if she wasn't his first.

But thankfully, what Tiberius lacked in experience, he more than made up in youth and passion. The Lycean's lips kissed her greedily, and his hunger knew no bounds. She thought he would never run out of endurance, and her tent reeked of sex by the time he slowed down.

Cassandra let out a sigh as Tiberius pulled out of her and rolled to her side. She had sweated so much she might have as well walked naked into the rain. Thankfully, her lover had set a bottle of Valian wine within arm's reach and quickly gave her a cup.

"Can you read my mind?" Cassandra asked, as she sipped the liquid. Valian wine was sweeter than a Thessalan one.

"I am merely observant," he replied with a sheepish smile, and he took a sip too after Cassandra handed him her cup. "Was that... pleasant?"

Obviously, he was afraid of disappointing her... but he didn't need to worry. "Yes, it was," Cassandra said, as she rested her head against his shoulder. "We'll get back at it in the morning."

Tiberius had been very gallant in his courtship. He had invited her to visit a market after their arrival to Vali, buying her a necklace as a mark of his 'esteem.' Cassandra couldn't help but laugh at his words. The young man clearly had never courted another woman in the past, and he tried to mask his lack of experience with diplomacy.

Young women might have been disappointed at his lack of forwardness, but Cassandra had experience on her side. Panos had been passionate and direct, but inconsiderate. If anything, Cassandra found Tiberius' caution and attempts to make her feel at ease refreshing.

And well, she was flattered by his interest too. Cassandra was more than ten years older than the Lycean; a part of her wondered if she still 'had it,' and Tiberius had put her worries to rest.

Still, it had taken until the hunt for him to dare visit her tent, and Cassandra had to drop very strong hints. And even then, he still asked for her hand first *before* kissing her.

A wiser man would have bedded her first and then made his demands, but Tiberius had wanted to do things by the book. Naïve, but kind. Very kind.

"If we were in Lyce, you should have carried me to your house now," Cassandra said. Kairos would have done the same with Julia, if Mithridates hadn't ruined the ceremony.

"I will, once we marry." There was no uncertainty in Tiberius' voice. "You will love our house. My father's villa is almost entirely made of silver and marble. It's... it's even bigger than Lord Sertorius'. There's enough space to accommodate hundreds of guests."

"I don't think I'll bring that many." Besides her crew and the *Foresight's*, Cassandra didn't have many friends nor living family. In fact, Aurelia or Kairos would probably serve as her witness. She hadn't decided which yet. "About the marriage though..."

"Yes?"

"I don't intend to stay at home as a housewife," Cassandra warned him. "I intend to continue working as a captain, to explore more lands. I am not made for domestic life."

"I... forgive me, my lady but—"

"My lady?" Cassandra chuckled. "I am no princess."

"Cassandra," Tiberius said softly, and Cassandra kissed him on the neck as a reward. What better way to learn? "I made my offer because you are an adventurer, not in spite of it. It's... it's a bit embarrassing, but..."

Cassandra listened intently, while Tiberius' skin turned even redder than when he kissed her for the first time.

"To be with a woman as strong as you... stronger than me..." He grinned ear to ear. "I find it exciting."

"Good answer," Cassandra replied, before kissing him on the lips this time. His hands moved to her hair as he pinned her against the bed.

Truth be told, she had almost given up on finding a good partner after how her past relationships went. Cassandra didn't know yet if this match would last, but she was enthusiastic about it; for the first time in many seasons, she started imagining a new future with someone waiting for her at home.

And of course, there was the small matter of children? Cassandra hoped to have one. The thought had always been there, and learning of Julia's pregnancy had awakened something primal in her. Cassandra wanted a child to raise, to give her ship to when she could no longer navigate, and to take care of her in old age. Not now with the war on the horizon, but... someday.

The couple was well on their way to consummate their relationship again, when Kairos and Agron barged into the tent unannounced.

For a moment, Cassandra couldn't help but gasp as neither party uttered a word. Kairos blushed in embarrassment, Agron raised an eyebrow, and Tiberius choked in surprise.

"Lord Kairos!" Tiberius looked ready to die of shame, as he abruptly pulled back from Cassandra. She immediately grabbed the serpopard pelt to protect their nakedness. "I-I didn't know you would come."

"Neither did I know you would," Agron said with a chuckle. He was extraordinarily proud of his wordplay, until Cassandra's deadly glare made him flinch.

"Sorry!" Kairos was almost as embarrassed as his second-in-command. "I... I didn't know."

"What is this about?" Cassandra asked. If he came to her so late at night with Agron, it could only mean something important happened. "Are we under attack?"

"Thankfully not yet," Kairos replied while grinding his teeth. "Do we... do we get out, and come back in when you're dressed?"

Cassandra looked at her former captain with a tired sigh. Did he truly have to use that ambiguous wording?

"It sounded better in my mind," Kairos admitted upon realizing the problem.

Mercifully, he and Agron gave the couple a few minutes of privacy, allowing them to dress. However, Cassandra's tent still reeked of lovemaking when the four gathered inside it to discuss. Kairos had to use his spear's wind mastery to dissipate it and make the meeting a little less awkward.

Thankfully, Cassandra's tent, as befitting of her officer rank, was large enough to accommodate everyone. Tiberius held her hand as Kairos gave them a summary of his meeting with Prince Hadad, and she found the gesture quite heartwarming.

And yet, by the time Kairos finished, the world looked a little colder than before.

"Does Andromache know of the proposal?" Cassandra asked.

"No," Kairos replied. "Not yet. She is still in the capital, far away from all of this."

"Good." Cassandra knew the Scylla well enough to know this proposal would infuriate her like nothing else, even if her lover had refused for now. "This is... Kairos, what are you suggesting?"

"The obvious," Tiberius replied with a displeased frown. "We are currently unmarried, and Lord Kairos is wondering what matches he could arrange."

Kairos remained impassive, but Cassandra knew him enough that Tiberius' response surprised him. The Lycean had always been soft-spoken and respectful towards his superior, but the idea of potentially breaking his betrothal rattled him the wrong way.

Panos would have jumped at the opportunity to marry a princess, Cassandra thought. Her past self would have loved marrying the future heir of Vali, but... not now. Not after having found someone she respected.

"I would have chosen another moment, if I could," Kairos admitted. "But we're running short on time. We aren't the only ones courting Hadad's favor, and his support could either make or break our war effort."

"Lord Kairos, with all due respect," Tiberius said. "He wants you. He wants the King of Travia, and the future conqueror of the Thessalan League. My father is powerful, but I am not the eldest, and neither Cassandra nor me are related to you."

"We could become blood brothers, or adopt you—"

"A vow of brotherhood is not a bloodline," Tiberius replied.

"Maybe suggest Agron as a match instead?" Cassandra proposed while glancing at the minotaur. "Princess Anat seems to have taken a liking to you."

If looks could kill, Agron would have hanged and quartered Cassandra. "Do you want to fuck a cow?" the minotaur asked bluntly.

"Nessus would," Kairos said, trying to lighten up the atmosphere.

"That's such a low bar to set," Cassandra replied with a forced smile. She didn't like where this conversation was going.

"My point stands," Agron said with a snort. "I'm not into humans, and the idea of mating with one disgusts me. More importantly, minotaurs can't impregnate your females, so I ain't a good option."

"Cassandra, Tiberius, I understand that you intended to marry, and I fully supported it," Kairos said. "Nothing is settled for now. All I'm asking is, if I were to offer you as an alternative, and if Prince Hadad accepted the deal... would you follow through?"

Cassandra and Tiberius locked gazes, each almost seeing in the other's mind.

If it were up to them alone, they would have said no. Cassandra could tell from the way Tiberius held her hand, as if he wouldn't let her go under any circumstance.

But it wasn't about them.

It was about their nations' future. An alliance with Vali would make their future war with Mithridates much easier, saving thousands of lives. Even if Tiberius was a Lycean first and foremost, he had already committed to his father's plan and Kairos' ambitions.

The couple looked away from the other, their decision made.

"We will put the welfare of the state before our own," Tiberius said, though it killed him to say it. "But Lord Kairos, what if Prince Hadad says no? What if it's you that he wants, and no one else?"

Kairos sighed. "I don't know. Prince Hadad wants a match, and nothing else we have will satisfy him. The trident's piece might have been a good enough bribe, but I already swore to Hybris that I would have it destroyed or given to Orgonos."

"Then why not agree to the match but within limits?" Tiberius suggested. "Lady Julia is right, her children and her life will be in danger the moment a Valian princess gives you alternate heirs... but only if they are given rights over Travia and Histria."

Kairos frowned. "What are you suggesting?"

"Prince Hadad wants to conquer part of the Thessalan League, but it is very far away from home," Tiberius explained. "The Thessalan League is far closer to Lyce and Travia than his realm, and he already has enough problems in Vali itself. Maybe we could kill two birds with one stone? You would take Princess Anat or Asherah as your concubine, but through a matrilineal union."

"Matrilineal?" Kairos asked. "You mean, kingship would pass by the female line?"

"We could specify in the marriage contract that your children with the Valian princess would have no right over the throne of Travia and Histria," Tiberius said with a nod. "Instead, they would belong to a new house, with authority over a new kingdom built over territories conquered in the Thessalan League. I believe such a compromise would satisfy everyone."

Agron, who had listened without saying much, immediately pointed out the problem.

"Everyone but Andromache," he said. "I remember a story about a man having sworn his love to a powerful sorceress, only to set her aside for a foreign princess to win a war. It went so well we had to exorcise his vengeful corpse centuries later."

Cassandra winced upon remembering their encounter with Medea in Achlys. Indeed, it appeared like history might repeat itself.

"The situation is hardly comparable," Tiberius argued, while Kairos remained silent. "Jason owed everything to Medea, and while I respect Lady Andromache, she is a [Hero] and not irreplaceable."

"She is," Kairos replied harshly. "To me."

Agron shrugged. "Andromache is the most powerful member of our army by far, and you heard the Valian king. Once we kill Zama, he'll crawl back to us and we won't have to pay for anything."

"If we can defeat Zama," Tiberius pointed out. "Which will be all the harder if Vali's prince fully throws his weight behind him. Lord Kairos, I understand your feelings for Lady Andromache, but the greater good of your kingdom calls for an alliance. If we can't satisfy the prince... we will need to make sacrifices."

"What Tiberius is saying, Kairos, is that there is no perfect solution," Cassandra summed it up, when she noticed her former captain's expression turn sour. "Someone will lose in the bargain. The only choice you have is to decide who will."

Kairos considered her words for a moment, his expression unreadable. He took pride in finding new options from unexpected angles, but Cassandra had the feeling that he would fail this time.

They might salvage the situation... but someone would suffer.

"I will take a leave from that hunt and go to the capital, to check on Andromache and Nessus," Kairos declared with grim acceptance. "Afterward..."

"Afterward?" Tiberius asked with worry.

"Afterward, I will make an offer to Prince Hadad on my return... and pray we can reach a compromise."

29: Love & War

Andromache would kill for a true laboratory.

The Valians had given her a workshop adjacent to the bedroom she usually shared with Kairos, in the depths of their palace. An amateur alchemist would have found it adequate, but the equipment her hosts provided left much to be desired. Thales would have had a stroke at the sight of their outdated flasks and boilers.

In the end, Andromache had to send Nessus to fetch her ingredients in between his own missions. But the satyr was busy recruiting mercenaries and spying on General Zama on Kairos' behalf, and couldn't spare the witch much time.

And then there were the spies. Andromache had seen the servants snooping around her lab when they delivered the day's meals, and caught one listening through her door. No doubt that they would report all magical information they could gather back to their masters.

Andromache had to set up privacy wards to avoid a leak, and always kept the trident's shard on her person. The artifact radiated with a faint silver glow on her desk, next to her potions and books.

Andromache had used her time wisely. General Zama had carefully destroyed all the scrolls that could reveal information about his artifact, but he couldn't suppress everything; especially since the cursed Athena had been a popular deity in the old world, with a wealth of literature detailing her deeds. Figuring out what her eyes did hadn't taken long.

Something had eluded Andromache though. Vali, the kingdom's namesake, had ripped out Athena's eyes for his own use before dying in the New Gods' wars. One of these artifacts ended up in Zama's hands, but the other's location remained unknown. Andromache suspected the royal family kept the second eye for themselves, but couldn't prove it.

Someone knocked on her door. Probably another servant, checking if the Scylla 'needed' anything—and using the opportunity to look around. Andromache ignored them, but the visitor insisted.

"Is that you, satyr?" she asked.

"It's me," her Kairos' voice answered from the other side.

The Scylla immediately disabled the wards, allowing her lover to enter her abode. Kairos walked into the room while closing the room behind him, observing her laboratory in

silence. "I see you haven't wasted time," he said while glancing at the chaotic pile of documents and magical items on her desk.

"My love, what are you doing here?" Andromache asked while rushing into his arms. "It's past midnight. Is your hunt over?"

The kiss that followed was brief, full of anxiety. It immediately alarmed the Scylla, even before her lover confirmed her worries. "It's still ongoing," Kairos said, "I came back alone with Rook. I needed to see you."

"Did something happen, my other half? Were you attacked? I knew we couldn't trust the Valians—"

"It's... no, it's different." Kairos put his arms around her waist, looking into her eyes. He looked so dashing, and yet so tired. "It's... I've missed you. It has only been a few days, but it seemed to have lasted weeks to me."

His gallant words warmed Andromache's heart, but she could sense the worry in his voice. *He's afraid of telling me something*, she thought. "It's alright, my love. Nobody can hear or see us."

"Not even Zama?"

"I have learned much about the [Eye of Athena]," Andromache explained, detailing the results of her research. "It grants the user a limited version of Athena's foresight. Not only does it serve as a powerful scrying device, but it also gives the user keen insight into military strategy, troop movements, and even the plans of their enemies. In the hands of a [Demigod], the power will be crippled... but still potent. Enough to bypass all [Demigod]-Ranked protections and below."

Kairos' scowl deepened the longer she spoke. "So he can spy on us from anywhere, and bypass all our protections."

"Except this one," Andromache said while glancing at the trident's shard. "It blocks divination attempts, and even hides us from the New Gods' eyes."

"It still means that Zama might have listened in on..." Kairos bit his tongue. "He cannot see past or future events? Only present ones?"

"Yes."

"So he would have to catch us at a precise moment, when we don't carry the shard around. But he might have..." Kairos didn't finish his sentence, hesitating to say something.

Andromache's hands moved around his neck. "My love, what's on your mind?"

"I had a talk with Prince Hadad," her lover admitted with a long, tired sigh. "He offered me an alliance."

"Why do you make such a face then? This is good news." When her lover avoided her gaze, Andromache understood what price the merchant prince asked. "No."

"His sisters are unmarried," Kairos admitted, filling Andromache's heart with fury. "Since I already took you as my concubine—"

"No," Andromache interrupted him, her tone rising. "No. I refuse. *Never.*"

"I refused too," Kairos said, but the Scylla's relief didn't last long. "I intend to propose Tiberius and Cassandra as alternative matches, but if it doesn't work—"

"Then *nothing*," Andromache interrupted him, as she sensed her hold over her transformation faltering. It took all her willpower not to change back into a Scylla. Her hands moved to her lover's torso, her fists closing and shaking. "His sisters will have to fuck someone else!"

"My heart is yours," he said and sounded sincere. "It will always be yours. This alliance, if it happens, would be political and nothing else."

"Like with your wife?" This time, Andromache outright pushed him away in anger. "I will not go through this again."

"Andromache—"

"Can you fathom how *painful* it is, to see you slip away from my bed to join another's?" she asked with a hiss. "Knowing that you will whisper sweet words into your wife's ear, take her the same way you make love to me? Can you fathom how hard it is to imagine that dirty wolf moaning as you pleasure her, while I sleep alone in my cold, empty bed? You can't, because you don't *share me*."

Kairos had the grace to wince, and to listen to her grievances in silence.

"And now... and now you want to split our time together even further?" Andromache trembled with rage. "With one of these selfish, self-centered whores who are only after your throne?"

"I don't want it," Kairos replied calmly. "But Travia might need it—"

"I don't care about Travia!" By now, she was shouting. "It's you I want, my other half! Nothing else! I would be happy if the world was just the two of us!"

"I know."

"You don't."

"Andromache, I swear—"

She slapped him.

The blow made Kairos flinch, his right cheek turning red. She knew he had seen it coming, that he could have dodged, but didn't. He knew that he deserved it.

It didn't lessen her pain.

"It should have been me!" Andromache snarled, something wet falling down her cheek.

He made me cry, she thought with pain and anger as she wiped the tears with her hand.

"I prayed every night since you got that Golden Fleece that we... that we could..." The Scylla's hands moved to her stomach, to that barren soil Circe cursed her with. "When I... when I learned that your wife was pregnant... it devastated me, do you understand? Because... because it should have been me."

"I don't fault you for this, Andromache." Kairos tried to take her into his arms again, but Andromache refused to let him touch her. If anything, it seemed to hurt him more than the slap. "Once we meet Orgonos and lift your curse, we'll make up for it. I swear, it's just a temporary setback. Don't beat yourself over it."

"If he lifts the curse," Andromache replied with fatalism. "Even then... each time I will see her children, I... they will be a living reminder that another woman could fulfill you better than I did. That you're not mine alone. That I'm not enough."

His expression twisted into one of righteous anger. "Andromache, you are more than enough for me. My marriage with Julia was political, you know that."

"It was, but now?" She locked eyes with him. "I see the way you look at her. Don't you love her too? Be honest."

His silence spoke volumes.

"You feel affection for her too," Andromache said with a tired, defeated sigh. "You can't help it. You're a man. If you were cold to her, maybe... maybe it wouldn't hurt that much. And

then, there's Travia. I can compete with a woman... but how can I compete with a country? With barren rocks and ungrateful people?"

He didn't say a word. Perhaps he had no answer to this.

"I gave you everything, Kairos," Andromache said. "I gave my body, my soul, my magic, my love. What is there left for you to take? All I wanted out of our relationship was your heart, and you gave me half of it. And now, you want to split it into a third?"

Kairos looked at her with sorrow, his eyes staring blankly at the dry tears on her cheeks.

"Say something," she ordered him. "Your silence is unbearable."

Instead of answering with words, his hands silently moved around her waist. Though she flinched at his contact, Andromache didn't push him away this time. Her lover pulled her closer, letting her head rest against his shoulder. The [Golden Fleece] he wore as a cloak felt warm to the touch, as did his hands.

"I feel affection for Julia, but it is you that I love first and foremost," Kairos whispered into her ear, before glancing at the tooth necklace he gave her as proof of his love once. "You don't own half my heart, Andromache. You hold all of it. I told you when we exchanged vows. You're mine, and I am yours."

"Then don't do this to me," Andromache pleaded, her voice breaking with despair. "Not again. I won't survive it."

Kairos held her so tightly, she thought he might snap her in half like a twig. "I won't. I swear."

Her heart skipped a beat, and for a moment she felt hope. "You promise?"

"I do," he replied. "You've said it yourself. You gave me everything you had, and all you asked was for my heart. I won't force you through another marriage again. Even... even if it costs me."

Even if it cost Travia.

"I hope Cassandra and Tiberius will be enough to form an alliance," he said. "If they aren't..."

"We'll make another army, my love," Andromache promised. "I'm a necromancer. I could raise the dead. Or we could call upon our [Pantheon]. We don't need the Valians. We just need each other."

He gazed at her, his lips moving to her own. The kiss was loving and true, if bittersweet. The anger within Andromache died down, and was replaced by a desire that burnt as bright as the sun.

"Prove it to me," she said as their lips parted. "That your heart is mine. Prove it to me, like you did once. I don't want to hear it, as sweet as it sounds. I want to *feel* it. I want to feel you, all of you. Here and now."

He was true to his word.

Andromache had already started removing his armor by the time Kairos wiped away her books and potions off the desk; he removed his own crown while at it. They only kept the [Golden Fleece] for a bedsheet, the trident's shard glowing as they made love on the table. Their union was rough, sweet, and passionate. Andromache felt blood dripping along her thighs as he entered her, her legs and arms tightening around him.

For a brief moment, the rage and the hunger were gone, replaced with pure bliss. For an instant, Andromache knew peace.

When they were done, they remained glued to one another on the table. Andromache's hand trailed against her lover's right cheek, where she slapped him. "Does it hurt?" she asked while he stroked her hair.

"I deserved it," Kairos replied.

"I... I didn't mean it, my love. It's the rage. It's always there, boiling. The instincts. It's a daily struggle."

Her lover looked at her with sadness. "Always?"

"Even now." Andromache looked away in shame. "It's... it's easier with Agron's songs, or after we make love, but... it's always there."

Kairos' fingers touched her chin and gently turned her face, so they would see each other. "It won't last forever," he reassured her. "We'll make things right, I promise."

"I know," she replied. "But the wait is killing me. All the intrigue and these... these bugs trying to drive a wedge between us, they madden me."

"I shouldn't have brought this up," he apologized. "I thought it was my duty."

"I know. You want to be king, to see your people prosper, and... I was alright with making sacrifices so your dream can come true my love. But only so far, you understand? I... I don't want to suffer as Medea did."

"You won't. I will never abandon you, never let you go." He kissed her on the lips, and she knew he would stay true to his promise.

"I'm..." Andromache sighed as their lips parted. "I'm afraid of your wife."

It made him chuckle. "You? Afraid of Julia?"

"I am," Andromache admitted. "I'm afraid you'll love her more. Because she is... she is stabler, and I'm difficult to live with. Her curse only affects her during the full moon, but I... I have to live with my bestial nature all the time. And she loves politics as much as you do. She is your queen, and... I am a lonely witch with fewer friends than fingers."

"Don't say that," he said firmly. "You've been making progress. I've seen you talk with Cassandra, Agron, my mother..."

"I'm improving, yes, but it's hard." She caressed his right cheek. "I don't want to shout or... or to sound so possessive, Kairos. But I can't help it. You were the one good thing that happened to me in centuries and I don't want to lose you. To your wife or to another woman. My curse twists that fear into anger, and I... I feel like a tower that can crumble anytime. Being together with you assuages my torment, but only for a time."

"I will be with you until we solve this curse, and that tower will stand proud for all to see," he promised softly, his lips moving closer to her own. "I love you."

"I love you too."

They could have spent eternity like this, their bodies intertwined in a primal embrace, his warm skin against her cold one. A part of Andromache wanted to stay here until the morning, away from the Valians, Mithridates, the merfolk, and all of these insects who prevented her from enjoying a peaceful marital life.

But someone always got in the way.

"Hey," Nessus' voice came through the lab's door, his hand knocking on the door. "Andromache? Do you know if Rook brought Kairos back?"

The Scylla struggled against the urge to murder the satyr for interrupting her peace, before calming herself. The curse twisted her thoughts, though a part of her resented the interruption. Kairos let out a sigh, as disappointed as she was.

"Can he walk in and find us like this?" he asked softly.

"No," Andromache replied. "The privacy wards prevent him from entering without my permission, or even hearing anything."

It made him chuckle. "What, did you imagine we would find ourselves in this situation?"

"I did," she replied with an amused smile. "Though not in these circumstances."

He gave her a final kiss on the cheek, and they separated to put their clothes back on.

A few minutes later, they welcomed Nessus into the laboratory. The satyr only had to look at Andromache's blood on the table to understand what happened, but didn't comment. *My love gives me as much pain as pleasure*, the Scylla thought as Kairos held her by the waist from behind. *In more ways than one.*

"Glad to see you again, oh my captain," Nessus said. "How are the negotiations going?"

"Not as well as I hoped," Kairos replied without mentioning Hadad's deal. True to his word, he had given up on the idea. Andromache couldn't help but smile in satisfaction. "What about you?"

"Well..." The satyr scratched the back of his head. "He's gone."

"Who?"

"Zama. He's gone."

Kairos' arms tensed up around Andromache.

"I located his villa and sent Nausicaa to investigate," Nessus explained. "He has a whole lake and infrastructure set up for mermaids, so she had an easy time approaching. As it turned out, he had gathered a whole fleet there. Nausicaa kept a watch on the ships, and they left this morning. She tried to give chase, but they almost caught her with nets even though she was invisible. She has no idea how they detected her, and this infuriates our mermaid."

"The general used the [Eye of Athena]," Andromache stated the simple solution.

Nessus' words had made her paramour anxious. "How many ships?" Kairos asked with a frown. "In which direction?"

"Nausicaa counted around one hundred, and I suspect it's half the real number," Nessus explained. "Many of the Valian mercenaries companies I tried to hire were already under contract and preparing to leave. As for the direction, Nausicaa believes they went east."

"What is waiting for him in the east?" Andromache asked, being unfamiliar with modern maps. She knew the Thessalan League was located north, so if Zama wanted to reinforce Mithridates, he had gone in the wrong direction.

"Alexandria," Kairos replied while grinding his teeth. "He thinks our efforts to ally with Vali will fail and since Alexandria was our next step, he will try to sabotage us."

"Or he's laying a trap for when we leave the country," Andromache pointed out, "the same way we planned to ambush him at sea."

"Maybe," her lover conceded.

"There's another thing," Nessus said. "I've asked questions around, and apparently Teuta arrived a few days before us... but she immediately went to the ol' cranky general without asking for an audience with the king or the prince. I think they have been preparing that fleet since the moment they met."

"Perhaps earlier," Kairos replied. "Even with his political clout and responsibilities, Zama should have taken weeks to gather a hundred ships ready to sail at a moment's notice. Nor does one join a [Pantheon] so easily. Mithridates must have been courting Zama for a while now, trying to convince him to join his alliance. Orichalcos' destruction was simply the push he needed."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too, oh my captain. And this might sound like paranoia, but why go to a general rather than the king first? Especially one supposedly loyal to the crown? Unless..."

"Unless they discussed things that they didn't want the king to know," Kairos guessed with a roguish smile. Andromache recognized his expression. He had a plan in mind. "Something that would bother the royal family. And if General Zama has left, then his villa is unoccupied."

"You think he could have left dangerous evidence at home?" Nessus crossed his arms. "If he is wise, he will have destroyed them or laid a trap for us."

"What about Teuta?" Andromache asked. "Cassandra once told me that Mithridates always used catspaws and intermediaries to contact his allies. He might have used her and her men in such a fashion."

Her lover's grin grew wider. "And Teuta boasted that only fools trust Mithridates without insurance."

"Ah, you think she might have kept some dirt on him besides joining his [Pantheon]?"
Nessus started to smile too. "But how do we get it? Would it violate Xenia if we robbed her ship?"

"You are the Old God here," Andromache pointed out, an idea crossing her mind. "Perhaps we could offer you as a husband to the pirate queen? You would get along."

Kairos quickly caught on. "Or to one of Vali's princesses."

"Marry a princess? Please, I would bed two and the father's harem too." Nessus shrugged. "But I doubt they will take a poor satyr as a bedmate."

"You're a god," Kairos pointed out.

"A fallen god, and how do I even prove it besides summoning Gaia? I have interesting stories to tell, but little to offer otherwise." Nessus put his hands on his waist, trying to show his chest. "Do you want me to serve as a honeypot to catch the pirate queen? If so, give the order and I will gladly sacrifice my buttocks for the cause."

"I will consider it," Kairos said, while Andromache responded with a mirthless chuckle.

Nessus glanced at the couple, then at the table. "You fought over this," he guessed. "It wasn't me the princesses wanted."

Sometimes, Andromache forgot that the satyr was sharper than he looked. "You have something to say, Old God?" she rasped.

"Actually, I do," Nessus said while ignoring her glare. "The only reason I exist is that my father couldn't stay faithful to one woman. Zeus gave birth to many heroes and just as many villains. In the end, his own children rose to overthrow him. Some did it because they felt ignored or mistreated, or because of the torments Hera inflicted on them."

"What's your point?" Kairos asked.

"If you fuck the world, eventually the world will fuck you back. Because you will make as many enemies as new friends... and the bitter foe inside your house is worse than ten thousand enemies on the outside. Making a new alliance isn't worth threatening those you already have, Kairos." Nessus shrugged. "Sometimes, you better leave the gambling table with your winnings intact, rather than take one too many risks."

Andromache and Kairos exchanged a glance, none of them willing to break the awkward silence that followed.

30: Cloak & Daggers

The night was cold on the docks and dawn hours away.

Under the cover of darkness, Kairos and Nessus observed Teuta's flagship from afar. The *Unconquered* was a warship whose size rivaled that of the *Foresight* and the veteran of countless raids. Pirates had grown drunk on the tales of its daring attacks against Lycean slave ships, of its adventures across the Sunsea's uncharted waters, of its epic battles against abyssal monsters in the defense of Travian cities. It deeply saddened Kairos that the *Unconquered* and *Foresight* would end up fighting each other, rather than sailing side by side.

But Nessus had been right. If you committed to everyone, you were faithful to none.

Though Teuta participated in Hadad's hunt and her officers had rooms in the palace, the Pirate Queen had left most of her crew with her ship. Dozens of raiders occupied the deck, most of them killing time with gambling and booze. Most of them were [Fighters] and [Rogues], but Kairos noticed a few cowled witches too. They kept their distance from the rest of the crew, instead forming groups of three and offering prayers to the gods. Kairos had already crossed paths with these people in the past, to his dismay.

Achlysian witches.

Though Medea perished, she had already sent sorceresses to support her descendant before her demise. The minions had remained loyal to their witch-queen's last directives, serving Mithridates as magical advisors. The Poison King had loaned a few to Teuta, and their spells suffused the *Unconquered*. Every inch of wood packed a ward, [Water Resistance] buffs, or a magical protection of some kind. It took Kairos minutes to examine them all with his [Magical Knack] Skill, and he probably missed a few.

"That place looks more like a fortress than a ship," Nessus said.

No kidding. Any uninvited guest would trigger an alarm the moment they took a step on the deck. Kairos' [Sneak] allowed him to bypass land-based traps, but it didn't make him undetectable to the wards. *I have something that might help*, Kairos thought, as the trident's shard rested around his belt. The pirate had left most of his magical items with Andromache for the sake of mobility, so he had few ways of defending himself if they were caught.

Nausicaa and Andromache patrolled the waters, ready to intervene if the worst came to pass, though Kairos hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Does it count as a violation of Xenia if I enter their ship uninvited?" Kairos asked.

"I don't think so. I mean, Vali is the one hosting you, not Teuta, and they only asked us to get along with them." Nessus crossed his arms. "If we get into a fight with your rival's men though, we'll have to contend with the Furies."

"I worried as much." If detected, Kairos intended to run away.

It was a risky plan, but at this point, the Travian King had few alternatives. His dalliances were starting to interfere with each other, and as a king, he couldn't separate his public and private life. Andromache had made many sacrifices for the sake of his political ambitions, and unlike him kept to one bed. Now it was his turn to make compromises for her.

Kairos hoped that Prince Hadad would accept an alternative match, but the cynical part of his mind knew better. Vali's heir shared the same dream as Sertorius, to see his dynasty achieve hegemony over the Sunsea. Lesser marriages to Cassandra and Tiberius wouldn't help him achieve his goals.

At this point, the best Kairos could do was to prevent Hadad from allying with Teuta and through her Mithridates.

Wherever Kairos went, he couldn't escape the Poison King's shadow. Romulus might have been a [Demigod] and Circe's posthumous plans more disastrous for the world, but neither had come close to causing Kairos half as many headaches as Pergamon's insidious ruler.

"I don't see any way in except the bridge," Nessus said while pointing at the planks linking the *Unconquered's* main deck to the docks. Unfortunately, a shieldmaiden stood in the way. She looked tired, but vigilant. "You won't slip past her while invisible. I can distract her if you want, give her the full Nessus experience."

"If she recognizes you then Teuta will suspect something." Kairos could charm the guard with his [Telchine Sorcery] gaze, but she would remember the brainwashing the moment the Skill stopped working.

"Shame," the satyr replied. "Then you could try to leap on the deck, but if you miss you'll fall into the water."

"I have a better idea." Kairos bravely pulled down his underwear, and started to disrobe before his officer.

Nessus had to put a hand on his mouth not to laugh at the spectacle. "My, did you refuse the Vali match because you wanted to save yourself for me?" he teased his captain. "Good for you, it was about time you added some variety to your royal harem."

"Oh, shut up," Kairos replied while shuddering. While hot during the day, Vali's wind felt icy at night on his naked skin. "My items don't transform with me when I use [Skinchange]."

"It's a real design flaw if you ask me."

"I didn't make the Skill." Once he was naked as a worm, Kairos activated his [Skinchanger] Skill and started to transform. His body shrank, his skin turned into red scales, his tongue split in half like a fork. His legs fused into a long tail and his arms with his torso.

With the transformation complete, a viper slithered atop a pile of human clothes.

"How does it feel to be a snake?" Nessus asked. From Kairos' point of view, the satyr had turned into a giant capable of smashing his transformed captain under his hoof.

"It's weird." Everything was so much bigger, and while he could hear Nessus' voice the rest of the world had turned silent. He could taste the wetness of the stone and the vibrations with the tip of his tongue, and the loss of his limbs made him feel crippled.

"Wait, aren't snakes deaf or something?" Nessus asked. "How can you hear me?"

"Magic and [Beast Tongue]," Kairos replied with a hiss, before grabbing the trident's shard in his mouth. Damn, it was a lot heavier than it looked. He tried to speak words, but the item between his fangs muffled the sound. "Wish mish lush."

"Of shoursh," Nessus mocked his speech impediment.

Kairos promised himself to bite the satyr after completing his mission. Here goes nothing, he thought as he activated his [Invisibility] spell. The magic covered him and the shard, letting the snake slither unseen on the docks. He would have raised his [Luck] stat to maximize his chances as well if he could, but he was short a few SPs.

It took Kairos a few minutes to get the handle on this method of locomotion, but he eventually slipped between the shieldmaiden's legs. His [Sneak] Skill negated all noise as he slithered, so the guard didn't notice him.

The viper held his breath when he reached the *Unconquered's* deck, preparing to throw himself into the water the moment an alarm sounded.

But none of the magical wards triggered, and the crew remained blissfully unaware of his presence.

Andromache had theorized that the shard's immunity to divination made it invisible to most wards and magical detection systems. Only one's natural sensitivity to magic could

pick up its power. After testing her theory on privacy wards, she had given the shard to Kairos in the hope that it would help with his infiltration.

As he slipped past three pirates playing dice under the moonlight, Kairos' mind wandered to Andromache. Watching her cry had made him feel more ashamed than he was, and he needed to make it up to her somehow. Perhaps he should take her on a romantic trip? Andromache was a private person, and she enjoyed quiet time with her paramour more than social activities. However, the two had been glued to the other since they left Histria.

Maybe he should buy her a ring to go along with her necklace? No, she wasn't materialistic. Gifts meant nothing to her without a romantic gesture attached.

I'll craft her something, Kairos thought, with my own hands. Something that will help soothe her.

A part of him knew that Andromache struggled with her curse, but he hadn't understood how much she fought against her bestial nature until recently. If Agron's songs could calm her violent urges, then Kairos' magic could do the same. And if he could weaken Andromache's curse, he could perhaps do the same with Julia's and his mother's.

Kairos banished these thoughts as he looked for a path leading below deck. It took longer than expected, as he had to zigzag between sleeping crew members and even step out of a raider's path. Though Teuta's men couldn't see the infiltrator, they would certainly sense him if he bumped into them.

As the viper found the stairs leading below the upper deck, Kairos froze as he noticed a coven of witches stop their prayers close to the mast. His heart skipped a beat as one of them looked in his direction, and he wondered if she could notice him. Fortunately, her fellow spellcasters quickly admonished her for interrupting their ritual and her attention turned away from Kairos' location.

Had she sensed the trident's magic? If so, Kairos couldn't waste time.

The invisible infiltrator suppressed a sigh of relief as he slowly descended a sharp set of stairs. The smell of griffins assaulted his nostrils as he entered the cargo hold, and Kairos noticed an unoccupied nest of straw next to arrow chests and shelves full of bladed weapons. Teuta's mount probably slept there under normal circumstances; his absence meant that Kairos didn't have to fear the beast noticing his scent.

Other sailors had gone to bed early, which complicated his task immensely. Kairos counted at least ten warriors snoring in the hold on mats and hammocks, while a few couldn't find

sleep at all. One even read a scroll to the light of a lantern. It halted Kairos' progress, especially once he found himself face to face with the bane of all invisible infiltrators.

A locked door.

One very well-guarded at that. Two soldiers in heavy steel armor kept watch over it, each of them carrying a powerful double-edged axe. Kairos' [Observer] identified them as capped [Elite] warriors, more than enough to repel any intruder. Worse, the door was locked and shielded by stronger wards than the rest of the ship.

Kairos would have bet his kingdom that the door led to Teuta's private cabin. If she kept any evidence against Mithridates, he would find it inside.

But how could he enter the room? The [Rogue] could easily disable the lock with [Lockpick] if he had arms, and the shard would prevent the wards from detecting his intrusion... except the guards would notice the door opening on its own, not to mention the rest of the crew. Transforming back into a human wouldn't disrupt the [Invisibility] spell, but the hold's tight space made discovery inevitable.

He had to find another way in. Ships always had holes or cracks that allowed rats to slip in.

'Rook,' Kairos contacted his [Animal Companion] through their telepathic bond as he scoured the deck for a hole, any hole. *'I'm inside the hold.'*

'Do they keep yummys and shinies?' his partner asked with a hint of interest. Kairos had asked him to discreetly observe the area from afar and to coordinate with the others.

'Mostly arrows and weapons.'

'Nothing golden? We should scold them for their lack of taste!'

'We will,' Kairos promised, as he finally found a crack in a plank behind one of the weapon chests. *'Where are you?'*

'High above. Andro and Nausi are in the waters nearby.' Kairos struggled not to chuckle at the griffin's nicknames. *'Do you need help?'*

'Maybe. Do you see a window south of the ship, near the stern? That's where the captain's cabin should be.'

Kairos had to wait a moment before Rook answered. *'I see a porthole, but it looks locked.'*

As Kairos suspected, Teuta's cabin had a window. But considering how well her soldiers protected the door, opening or shattering the porthole would probably start an alarm. *'Signal Nausicaa to position herself near it and to wait for my signal,'* Kairos said. *'She is to catch anything that falls into the water through it.'*

'Can't we rip a hole in their ship and grab what we need? If they don't have shinies, nobody will miss them.'

'Maybe later,' Kairos replied as he crawled into the hole. It was hard to do so while holding the trident's shard between his fangs, but the rogue was nothing if not persistent.

The *Unconquered* was a powerful ship, but an old one too; perhaps as ancient as the *Foresight*. Small cracks had spread through its woodwork, though thankfully not in the hull. Kairos regretted not having taken a fire rod with him. He could have stashed it in a hole, ready to detonate at a moment's notice in the future. But that would have been too dangerous, even for him.

Nessus had compared this adventure to leaving a gambling table with their winnings still intact, and Kairos had to admit it was an apt metaphor. The captain had pushed for the Vali alliance because he had trouble accepting that this diplomatic visit looked more and more like a net loss. A part of him simply refused to accept defeat, even if it meant taking more and more risks. The Sellsword King needed to reel himself in, lest he lose what he already had.

This is my last roll of the dice for this party, Kairos thought. Carrying the trident's shard was enough of a risk as it was, and he only went through with it because Andromache insisted he carry it for added protection. *Afterward... I'll accept the outcome, however it goes.*

Kairos smelled the presence of rats, and they noticed his scent too. Their instincts made them run away from his approach, so they didn't disturb him. The [Rogue] could only hope that they were savage scavengers rather than a [Beastmaster]'s allies or a witch's familiar. The smell of stolen cheese and grain on his tongue confirmed that the rodents had stashed away stolen rations in a small hole.

It took him a few minutes of crawling between the planks, but Kairos finally found a way into Teuta's cabin. The viper squeezed through a crack in the woodwork and nearly swallowed the shard by accident as he did so.

Teuta's cabin was a spartan place, with the walls covered with the heads of animal trophies, navigational maps, or swords; some magical, others purely ceremonial. The Pirate Queen had no desk or table, while her mattress was no more expensive than that of her men. She

only allowed herself a privy and a chest as luxuries, while the porthole Rook detected let some of the moonlight in.

Kairos landed on the bed without a sound, and looked around for magical traps. One of the trophy heads, that of a Travian lioness, hid a divination ward allowing a specific person to watch through its eyes. The chest was booby-trapped with lightning spells, while wards shielded the porthole. As Kairos suspected, anyone breaking the glass would trigger an alarm.

The transformed [Rogue] didn't immediately shapechange back into a human. The obvious course of action would have been to unlock the chest, but Kairos knew better. Teuta would never put anything truly important in such an obvious place. Kairos wouldn't have done it, and he respected his rival's intelligence enough to assume she had chosen a different hideout.

The viper instead exploited his enhanced snake senses to gather information. He tasted everything in the room with his forked tongue while coiling around the trident shard, interpreting the smell and taste. After a few minutes, Kairos confirmed that Teuta's smell was all over the mattress and the privy, but she hadn't touched the chest in a very, very long time.

A decoy, Kairos thought. But then, where did Teuta keep incriminating documents if she even had them? Beneath the mattress? If not, then where else? What spot would be so beneath notice that nobody would think of examining it?

Kairos glanced at the privy and shuddered.

'Kairos, Kairos, are you alright?' Rook panicked through their telepathic bond. 'I sense much disgust in you! Did something happen?'

'I'm about to get my hands dirty for the cause.'

'Oh, it's fine! Just wash them before you eat anything!'

Kairos let out a long, unhappy sigh. *'I can't be mad at you.'*

'Of course not, I'm your friend!'

Still under the veil of invisibility, Kairos skinchanged back into a naked human. Holding the trident's shard in one hand, he searched the privy with the other. The pirate held his breath as his fingers sank into dried feces and warm mud. *The things I do for love and country*, Kairos thought. *Teuta, I swear, you will pay for this.*

After a minute of wading through the excrements, the infiltrator thought he would find shit... until he sensed something cubic at the bottom. Kairos pulled out a featureless wood box no larger than his palm.

With one of his invisible hands now brown as dirt, the pirate checked the container. It only had a normal lock, probably to reduce the risk of outsiders noticing a magical aura. It was child's play to open it with [Lockpick].

Only then did the device's true nature make itself manifest. For as though the box was so small that Kairos could barely squeeze a hand inside, its bottom appeared far deeper than its outside appearance suggested. A space-alteration spell made the container's interior as large as the trapped chest, allowing it to contain half a dozen sealed scrolls.

As it turned out, Teuta did dare to hide important documents in a toilet. Kairos didn't know whether to feel disgusted by her method or impressed by her resolve. It had to take extraordinary willpower to use such a hideout on a regular basis.

Kairos examined the scrolls. Most of them bore the purple peacock seal of Mithridates, and others an eye symbol that probably belonged to Zama. The former were broken, the latter not. *Mithridates' letters to Zama, and the unopened answers*, Kairos guessed. Had Teuta made copies of the former, to keep incriminating elements against her employer? He would have to read them in-depth, but not here.

One scroll stood out from the rest, in that it was made with high-quality papyrus instead of parchment. It had already been opened, but bore multiple seals; Mithridates', Zama's, the same symbol as Teuta's flag... and the picture of a golden pyramid.

Kairos couldn't resist the urge to examine the content. Instead of a letter, the text detailed the worrying encroachment of Lyce on other countries, the determination of other powers to oppose its expansion, and the means they were willing to use to do so.

It was a defensive pact, written in ancient Greek.

The signatories included Mithridates' Pergamon, Antipater's Orthia, Teuta—who had dared to sign as Travia's queen, multiple city-states, and a certain country that Kairos had intended to visit soon...

'In the name of the goddess, the Priestly Council of Alexandria pledges its support to the alliance.'

Shit.

So Alexandria already signed on with Mithridates, Kairos thought. It made sense. They were the main rivals of Lyce, so Mithridates probably approached them first and kept the alliance a secret. Queen Alexandria hadn't signed herself though, letting her underlings do it for her. Perhaps a pact with Lyce's Senex prevented her from taking part directly.

But that meant the two superpowers of the Sunsea each backed a different side of the coming conflict.

The following lines of the treaty explained in detail the support provided by each party. Pergamon offered to fund a third of the alliance's total budget, and Orthia its phalanxes. Alexandria promised the most with a sum of two-hundred thousand gold coins, two-hundred fifty war galleys, twenty-thousand infantrymen, and three thousand horsemen, chariots, and mounted archers. If a war looked inevitable, they also offered the use of one of their major ports, Isistopia, as a naval base.

At least Kairos knew where Zama went. The general had pledged twenty-thousand troops of his own, though only as a mercenary rather than an official representative of Vali. His signature was the most recent one.

Zama's sudden departure made sense now. He must have gone to Isistopia to join up with the Alexandrian fleet there, and perhaps lay a trap for Kairos. If the [Eye of Athena] had warned him of the *Foresight's* next destination, he must have thought he could ambush the ship in his ally's territory.

We avoided a disaster here, Kairos thought. The absence of other powers in the treaty also warmed his heart. The late Medea had signed on Achlys' behalf a while back, but her seal had been barred by her co-ruler Thalestris; the amazons wouldn't support Mithridates. The city-state of Thessala was also noticeably absent among the signatories.

Though it wouldn't help disrupt Teuta's efforts to win Hadad to her cause, the document was a priceless asset. Not only did he know who supported Mithridates, he had the numbers of soldiers each nation pledged to the war effort. And all the [Heroes] and [Demigods] that signed the document probably belonged to the [Diadochi]. If Kairos' allies could target these members before the war-

"—let me in," Kairos heard a female voice on the other side of the door.

The infiltrator held his breath and listened.

"It's forbidden to go inside the captain's cabin," said another voice, a male one. One of the guards probably.

"The aura comes from here," said the woman. Kairos recognized it as the same witch who had been arguing with the others on the deck. "I sense powerful magic at work inside."

Damn it. The shard might prevent wards from locating him, but it was still a [God]-Ranked artifact and radiated power like a beacon.

"No one gets in without Teuta's orders," the guard insisted, to Kairos' relief.

"No, she's right, I sense it too," said a third voice. "Something is happening behind that door."

"Let us check the area with spells," the witch insisted. "You can watch if you want."

Realizing it was only a matter of time before they annoyed the guards enough to let them in, Kairos put the scrolls back in the box, closed it, and then looked through the porthole. Though it was dark outside, he noticed bubbles rising from the seawater.

Nausicaa.

Staying in the room or the ship was suicide. Now that they had picked up the shard's aura, the witches could probably pinpoint his position even if he transformed back into an invisible animal. At worst, they might get their hands on the trident.

"Alright, alright," the guard said, "but if you touch anything, I'm cutting your head off."

No time to disable the wards.

Seizing the trident's shard with one hand while holding the box with the other, Kairos shattered the porthole's glass with Poseidon's broken weapon.

A high-pitched alarm immediately echoed across the ship, and a guard's axe slashed into the door. Thankfully, the same spells that protected Teuta's cabin also made it difficult to enter by force and the weapon's steel struggled to cut through the wood.

The invisible Kairos tossed the box through the porthole, and though he couldn't see Nausicaa grab it, he didn't hear the container hit the water. Unable to go through the window in human form, the pirate skinchanged back into a snake and slithered through the opening right as a witch blasted the door apart with a lightning bolt.

Holding the trident's shard in his mouth, the translucent reptile changed again the moment he hit the waters. Fins grew out of his scales, his poisoned fangs multiplying into a fearsome jaw of pointed teeth.

And so a shark swam away from the *Unconquered*, delighting while Teuta's followers shouted and screamed behind him.

31: Treason

In the end, Prince Hadad caught his white serpopard and returned to the capital in triumph. Vali's royalty ordered a feast to celebrate their new fur carpet, though it turned out to be a cavalcade of debauchery.

Ugarit's nobility had gathered in a great hall in the depths of the palace to gossip and party to their heart's content. Extravagant merchant lords discussed with lightly clad courtesans while hordes of myrmidon servants delighted them with wine and fine food. Philosophers and thinkers smoked opium on silken pillows, while dancers, singers, snake-charmers, and sword swallows provided entertainment to the guests. Vali's royalty had even raised private boudoirs protected by velvet curtains for more 'raucous' kinds of celebrations. King Philip himself had vanished behind one alongside a noblewoman's daughter, and refused to come out.

Both the *Foresight's* crew and that of the *Unconquered's* had also been invited to the feast, though few members of the latter joined the celebration. News of the robbery had spread, as did rumors about the incident; especially since Teuta's men hadn't dared to reveal what had been stolen exactly. This wasn't the optimal scenario for Kairos, who would rather have taken the documents undetected.

The glares Teuta's guests sent in his direction meant that they suspected him too.

"Let them glare," Andromache said while holding his arm. While Kairos had come to the celebration in his full kingly regalia, his concubine instead selected a splendid red dress. Many men turned to look at her while they walked, though the Scylla paid them no mind. "They cannot prove anything."

"Their witches noticed the shard's aura, and might identify it again." Kairos had the item moved to the depths of the *Foresight*, under close watch. He hoped that his living ship's own magical power could overshadow the artifact's.

Kairos' gaze wandered around while looking out for his allies. Agron and Nessus had joined the musicians, playing delightful songs for the pleasure of Vali's princesses. Cassandra and Tiberius discussed with the myrmidon ambassador they crossed paths with on the first day of their visit, and Rook was watching the snake charmers' performance with fascination.

Prince Hadad wasn't hard to find amidst this crowd. The boastful heir of Vali was busy presenting his white serpopard pelt to local warriors, with Teuta holding his arm. The pirate queen had traded her armor for a manticore fur dress, making her appear like the second coming of the huntress Artemis.

"She didn't waste time after you left," Andromache observed.

"But she feels unsettled," Kairos replied. Teuta might try to look relaxed, but her gaze was hollow, her mannerisms lacking in spontaneity. And when she noticed Kairos, she clenched her teeth in silent anger.

Prince Hadad didn't share his date's fury though. Instead, the flamboyant prince quickly gestured at Kairos and Andromache to join him.

"Ah, my friend!" the prince said as he greeted them, before kissing Andromache's hand. "Your beauty would make any man blind, Lady Andromache."

"Thank you," the Scylla replied icily. She had no patience for political games and hadn't forgiven Hadad for trying to put his sister in Kairos' bed. If the prince had noticed her hostility, he feigned not to.

"I see you managed to catch the beast in my absence," Kairos mused, trying to lighten up the situation.

"An absence that has nothing to do with what happened to my ship," Teuta said harshly.

At least she was honest enough to dispense with the pleasantries.

"Are you implying I have anything to do with this robbery?" Kairos asked with false displeasure, as if he felt truly insulted. "I would never steal from a fellow Travian."

"I thought you hadn't found the culprits yet, Queen Teuta?" Prince Hadad asked.

"I have no proof yet," the pirate queen admitted, "but you must admit his sudden departure from our camp was... suspicious."

Andromache sneered. "My love came to me to discuss a proposal which I found indecent."

Prince Hadad smiled without warmth. "I see," was all he said. "Still, did you accept it?"

"I hoped to discuss the matter with you in private," Kairos pointed out while Andromache looked away. The Scylla struggled to contain her fury, her nails sinking into her lover's arm like claws. "You could tell me the tale of your hunt while at it."

"I don't have much to say," the prince admitted. "Lady Cassandra and my sister Anat did most of the work in locating the beast. I only gave it the final blow."

"The most glorious of all," one of the prince's courtiers interrupted the conversation. His attempt at flattery made Andromache sneer.

The prince accepted the praise in good grace, while Teuta squinted at Kairos. "I would like to hear of this proposal, Prince Hadad," she said. "Future allies have nothing to hide from each other."

"This is a private matter," Kairos pointed out.

But to his surprise, Prince Hadad went along with Teuta's suggestion. "On the contrary, I believe it might become a public one soon. And I would not deprive our fair ladies of our company, my friend."

Kairos felt Andromache's arm tense up around his, as both read between the lines. Having heard the proposals of each Travian party, Hadad intended to settle the conflict with a bidding war.

Kairos hoped that the information he had gathered would prove to be the tipping point.

Dismissing his couriers, Hadad invited his three guests to one of the secluded boudoirs in the room. Mounds of pillows, blankets, and sheets awaited them piled up on the floor behind a velvet curtain, next to opium pipes and plates of delicacies.

The two couples settled comfortably on the pillows, right before a servant closed the curtain behind them. The noise of the celebrations instantly vanished, and an eerie silence settled in the boudoir.

"A sound-negation spell," Andromache observed. "Clever."

"It offers some welcome privacy, wouldn't you agree?" Prince Hadad took a honeyed cake from the nearest food platter. "Do any of you smoke opium?"

"No," Teuta replied firmly.

"I do not take drugs," Kairos added. "They addle the mind."

"Good answer." The prince took a bite out of his cake. "I believe we are past the point of pleasantries anyway."

"Let's cut through the chitchat," Teuta said after losing patience. "Which side will you support?"

Andromache sneered. "Are you that eager to crawl into his bed?"

"At least I would not share it with a Lycean," Teuta replied.

Andromache's lips parted to reveal her fangs, but she managed to keep enough self-control not to tear out the pirate queen's throat. Kairos took his concubine's hand into his own, and the contact soothed her.

Prince Hadad observed the scene in silence as he finished his cake. Once he was done, he joined his hands in a pose that Kairos found eerily similar to his father's. "So," he said. "Do you have an alternative match to propose?"

He knew better than to insist on Kairos marrying his sister while in Andromache's presence.

"My adoptive aunt Cassandra is unmarried, and I believe you would find joy with her," Kairos explained while Teuta and Hadad listened in silence. "My good friend Tiberius is a son of Dispater. I would like to propose a match between him and one of your sisters."

As he worried, Kairos could tell that the proposal didn't satisfy the prince in the slightest.

"I'll be honest," Hadad declared with a sigh. "Your Cassandra would make a magnificent wife, I have no doubt of that. She is powerful, wise, and experienced. But she offers me only one spear. However mighty it is, it cannot compare to a matrimonial alliance that can supply me with an army."

"Which I offer," Teuta added with satisfaction.

"I thought you didn't want to make an enemy of Lyce?" Kairos asked the prince with a frown.

"I do not," Hadad agreed. "But having my future child inherit the thrones of Vali and Travia is a tempting prize. I could forge a new empire."

"With me alive, no child of hers will rule," Kairos replied while glaring at Teuta. "Cassandra is family to me. And Tiberius is a son of Dispater."

"Cassandra is not your blood, and Tiberius is a lesser son," Hadad countered. "Hardly a fitting match for a princess of Vali. I appreciate the offer, but I must ask for more."

"You ask for too much," Andromache replied dryly.

Hadad frowned at the Scylla, unimpressed. "Are you some secret Achlysian princess, or the heir of a god?"

"No."

"Then why do you have a voice in this?" the prince asked, though he sounded more curious than anything.

"Because I love him," Andromache replied simply.

"And because I love her," Kairos added to his concubine's delight.

Their words left Prince Hadad speechless, as he processed them. He looked like an explorer discovering an entirely new culture, or an unknown beast. His mind struggled to make sense out of a foreign reality.

He has never known love, Kairos realized, only power plays. To his surprise, Teuta also looked at the couple with what could pass for respect.

"Sorry," Hadad said after regaining his composure. "I have been surrounded by sycophantic courtiers and power-hungry concubines for so long that I thought your union was political. But King Kairos, do you realize that matters of love have no place in a dance of nations?"

"I have another motive for my refusal," Kairos admitted. "A match between me and your sister would threaten my existing alliances."

"It's the Lyceans, isn't it?" Prince Hadad shook his head. "I warned you, my friend. If you cannot offer me a good match, I will have to close my door to you."

Kairos had expected as much. "So long as you keep it closed to thieves and traitors."

Teuta glared at him. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Kairos put a hand into his armor's breastplate, and brought three scrolls with familiar broken seals. Teuta's eyes lit up in recognition, while Hadad recognized Zama's symbol on them.

"These are letters that I intercepted," Kairos explained as he handed the scrolls to Hadad. "One handwritten by Mithridates, and the second by your own general. They were discussing a coup against the monarchy. The third document is the proof that your general joined a permanent, anti-Lycean alliance with Teuta behind your back."

Hadad's face turned into a blank mask, as he seized the documents and examined them.

The first letter, written by Mithridates, courted Zama by offering him his support in installing Prince Hadad as a puppet king under the general's thumb. King Philip had repeatedly denied Pergamon's overtures to a firmer alliance, and Mithridates not so subtly implied that he thought Zama would make a better leader. The general's letter answered

that he had agreed to join Mithridates' alliance and pledged his support to Pergamon's cause. And of course, the third document showed the defensive pact with all the signatures on it.

Teuta watched on as Prince Hadad's scowled deepened the longer he read. "These are obviously forgeries," she said as he noticed her own seal on the defensive pact.

"Yet I recognize my teacher's handwriting and vocabulary in his letter," Prince Hadad pointed out, his fingers trembling in rage. "Only someone who knew him intimately could forge something like this, though I will have divination specialists verify the authenticity of the magical seals. King Kairos, if this is a ploy—"

"It isn't," Kairos replied. "We checked."

And they already had made copies. Kairos had dispatched a messenger bird to Sertorius with the defensive pact's information, to begin the hunt for the [Diadochi]'s allies across the Sunsea. Some of the letters even mentioned specific Lycean politicians under Mithridates' thumb, paid to prevent the Republic from fully mobilizing in the Thessalan war.

"Where did you get these documents then?" Teuta asked, trying to salvage the situation. "Certainly not through any legitimate means."

"A good spymaster never reveals his sources." Kairos smiled at Teuta. "Unless... you have an idea?"

The pirate queen's eyes widened, as she finally noticed the trap's jaws.

Teuta couldn't accuse Kairos of the theft, as it would mean that she had knowledge of the letters and hid them. This would be tantamount to admitting that she had been planning behind the royal family's back with their head general, while she could at least pretend not to have knowledge of Mithridates' suggested coup in the present situation. Nor could Kairos openly accuse her of being the source of the letters, as it meant he had robbed a fellow guest while their hosts explicitly forbade hostilities.

This was a deadlock.

If looks could kill, Teuta would have beheaded Kairos where he stood. But she couldn't escape the trap he had set. "No, I do not," she lied.

Hadad wasn't a fool. He looked at the two Travians with a displeased gaze. "The two of you should marry," he said, all warmth gone from his voice. "You deserve each other."

Andromache didn't bother to hide her displeasure. "We helped you, princeling, and this is how you respond?"

"I appreciate the gift, but I suspect the means you used to get it did *not* align with Vali's tradition of hospitality," Hadad replied coldly. As Kairos worried, he hadn't taken the heist well; stealing from another guest didn't reflect well on Vali's ability to keep the peace within its borders. "As for you, Queen Teuta, your signature on this defensive pact right next to my old teacher does not speak well of your intentions."

"I swear I had no knowledge of this intrigue," Teuta lied.

"I hope so for you." Prince Hadad folded the scrolls. "In either case, I will reject your proposal as I did with King Kairos'. I have had enough of you. Both of you."

"I did what was best for the good of my realm," Teuta replied. "You played the same game, prince, and you did it out of greed. You do not have the moral high ground here."

"You played us against each other," Andromache added. "What did you expect, princeling?"

"I expected better," Hadad replied. "Vali treated you both fairly and we negotiated in good faith. Yet both of you schemed behind my back."

He's me, Kairos realized, from before Boeotia.

For all of his talent, Hadad was a novice. He had been ruthless enough to try to get one of his sisters into Kairos' bed, even knowing Andromache wouldn't respond well, but was too naive to use more underhanded measures. He hadn't seen Mithridates' hand at work in Vali, nor imagined that Kairos would resort to drastic measures to get his voice heard. Much like Kairos himself had thought himself a player by sacking Boeotia, only to realize he had been the pawn of a better player.

He could see the disturbed glint in Hadad's eyes. The prince only realized what he was up against now, and that getting involved in this international feud might prove more troublesome than he expected.

"If love has no place in politics," Kairos said, "then honor doesn't have one either."

"You are free to play your games, but not in Vali." Prince Hadad rose from his pillow seat. "Your stay in my father's realm was entertaining while it lasted, but you have until tomorrow to leave the country. Both of you."

"And the war?" Teuta asked, her fists clenching.

"Vali will remain neutral, and if his culpability is proven, Zama will be stripped of his rank and banished," the prince replied before walking past the curtain. "When you go to war with snakes, you only get bitten."

How ironic. After disparaging his father's course of action, he finally realized that the old shrewd king had been the wisest one all along.

The prince vanished, leaving the rival Travian factions alone behind the velvet curtain.

"You ruined everything," Teuta rasped once Hadad was well and truly gone.

"Good," Kairos replied. The trip to Vali had been a net loss in his case, but at least he had made sure that the country wouldn't fully mobilize behind Zama and gathered information on his foes.

"You lied to him." Teuta's fists clenched in silent rage. "Mithridates has been trying to convince Zama to launch a coup for years, but the old general always refused out of patriotism. You edited the letters."

Truth be told, Teuta was correct. Zama had refused Mithridates' proposals several times in the past and refused to betray the monarchy out of loyalty to Hadad... but he did agree to join Mithridates' alliance against Lyce in his latest letter, without explicitly refusing to partake in a coup as he did in the others. By only reading these two letters, a cursory reader would assume that Zama had agreed to support a coup... even if he hadn't.

But the prince didn't have to know that. And Teuta couldn't clear things out without admitting to supplying Mithridates' letters to the general behind the prince's back.

"I told Zama that making our rivalry to the death was his mistake," Kairos pointed out.

"As making our disagreement a personal affront was yours," Teuta replied with a cold glare. "I cannot forgive that heist of yours. You broke into my sanctuary and Mithridates will be furious over these letters becoming public."

Andromache responded with a snort. "You can only blame yourself for this defeat, treacherous wench. You made forgeries of them and kept the originals for yourself."

"You didn't trust your allies," Kairos said. "Your alliance was built on shaky grounds, and you're paying the price for your own dishonesty."

"My allies may be difficult, but you certainly enjoy collecting enemies. That move of yours would have made Mithridates proud." Teuta shook her head in regret. "I sincerely didn't

want to make a foe of you, Kairos, and though I advanced my own interests I never sought conflict with you. But we will leave this place as sworn enemies."

"We were bound to fight sooner or later," Kairos replied with a shrug. "I just hastened the schedule."

"I would tell you to tread carefully, but I can see my words cannot reach you." Teuta's gaze radiated with angry determination. "When next we meet, one of us will die."

"As I told Zama..." Kairos locked eyes with his rival. "You first."

The pirate queen rose up like a soldier marching to war, and went after Hadad. Perhaps she intended to salvage the situation, however hopeless it was.

Congratulations, you earned a level (total fifty-six) and 3 Skill Points.

"What do we do now, my love?" Andromache asked once they were alone. She sounded both happy and anxious about the outcome.

"We drill the crew for battle."

Kairos could see the blood on the walls.

Teuta would come for them the moment they left the island.

32: The Line in the Sand

The *Foresight* had received a warm welcome when they reached Vali, and would depart in a cold silence.

There were silver linings to the situation though. The Myrmidons had accepted Kairos' offer to settle a new colony in Histria by sending a fertile queen alongside a retinue of male workers and soldiers to the island. If the first ant settlement proved successful, more Myrmidons would make the journey across the Sunsea.

"How many men did you manage to recruit in the end?" Kairos asked Nessus, as the two walked along the docks to survey their new mercenaries. The Travians had hired merchants to transport the troops to Histria on large galley ships, alongside spices and winter provisions purchased with Orichalcos' loot.

"Only three thousand," Nessus replied, dawn rising beyond the horizon. "But eight hundred camel-riders and thirty elephants among them. Zama hired the rest first."

It wasn't as much as Kairos had hoped, but better than nothing. "Why hire camel riders?" he asked Nessus.

"When the world was less wet, I led an army to conquer the distant land of India," the fallen god explained. "We fought a few skirmishes with eastern tribes, and I noticed something very funny whenever my horsemen confronted camel-riders. The horses panicked and ran away."

"Really?" It had to be a joke. "I would have expected such a reaction if the horses faced lions, but camels?"

Nessus chuckled. "It's the smell, oh my captain, The camels' scent spooks horses unless they grow used to it. Trust me, this tactic is unbelievably effective against cavalry. A skirmish with camel-riders cost me half my expensive mounted archers and nearly ruined my whole campaign."

And no doubt Zama would know that fact too. Having their horses familiarizing themselves with camel scent might prevent a disaster down the line, when Kairos' armies would confront the old general's.

"Would you accept the role of army officer?" he asked Nessus with a smile. What the satyr lacked in raw power, he more than made up in craftiness and experience.

"Only if I get a pay raise, and my own mini-Tiberius to boss around."

"Deal," Kairos replied. He already had a few naive candidates in mind.

"Could I get my own goat banner too?"

"Now, you're asking for too much."

In the end, Kairos was relatively satisfied with the new recruits. Most of them were archers and light cavalry, owing to Vali's style of warfare, but well-equipped and high-leveled. A good fifth of them were [Elites] and the rest capped [Commons]. Valian longbows could punch through most armors, and the recruits had the good sense to invest in high-quality steel weapons.

It was the slinger contingent that impressed Kairos the most. Although Nessus swore that they trumped archers in power, his captain had remained skeptical... until a Valian slinger demonstrated his strength by shattering a stone wall with a well-aimed projectile.

These living rams will shatter unprepared infantry, Kairos thought as he examined the elephant corp. The Valian had armored the beasts and outfitted them with wooden towers on their back, allowing archers to use them as mobile platforms. *Though we'll have to use them wisely.*

Kairos had heard enough stories of panicked elephants shattering their own army's battle lines to remain wary of the creatures. The many [Beast Tongue] users in Histria would reduce the risks, but not erase them completely.

Nessus ended the review with the cherry on the top: two dozen Myrmidon siege specialists he had managed to hire at a high cost. The worker ants swore that they could dismantle any fortress in days, either by digging tunnels or destroying fortifications with the right alchemical elements. Considering almost all of the Thessalan League's major city-states had powerful walls protecting them, Kairos considered it money well-spent.

Having reviewed the mercenary fleet, the Travian King reached a decision about the journey back to Histria. "They will escort our new Myrmidon allies home, while we sail to Orgonos' demesne," Kairos ordered. "They'll take a different, safer winter route."

Zama and his allies wouldn't dare to attack the ant-men's diplomatic mission, as it might risk uniting them behind Kairos.

"So we'll travel alone?" Nessus crossed his arms. "We'll make a tempting target."

Kairos glanced at the open sea. The *Unconquered* had left the port earlier this morning without a word, taking its crew and allies with it. "I'm counting on it."

"I beg your forgiveness, oh my captain, but we can avoid a battle completely by diving down below the sea," Nessus pointed out. "The *Unconquered* didn't look submersible to me."

"But if we can lure out and kill Teuta now, the battle for Travia will be won before it even begins," Kairos explained. "She will be easier to slay on her lonesome than with her fleet at her back."

"True, but you forget one thing." The satyr pointed at his missing eye. "The half-gazing general."

Kairos hadn't forgotten. While Zama should have moved to Alexandria by now, the Travian captain couldn't rule out the possibility that he might have hidden near Vali in an ambush. The fact that he also had ample time to study the *Foresight's* crew with the [Eye of Athena] put Kairos on edge.

"We must assume that Teuta knows all of our abilities, or at least those we had before we reached Vali," Kairos said. "If you have unspent SP, now is the time to take new Skills she won't expect."

"I guess I can always try to improve my sense of humor," Nessus quipped. "Our lovely pirate queen can't fight well if I make her laugh all the time."

Somehow, Teuta didn't strike Kairos as the type to joke around in a fight. The pirate queen was as sharp as her axe; she would go straight for the kill.

The review finished, Kairos and Nessus returned to the *Foresight*. The ship was ready to sail, with Rook excitedly making circles in the skies, but no official from Vali came to bid them goodbye... least of all its prince.

"You know, Kairos," Cassandra told her captain once he climbed on the deck, "I'm noticing a pattern here. Wherever we go, we leave a burning wreck behind."

"We didn't start any fires this time," Kairos pointed out. Except maybe a diplomatic one.

"Give it time," she said while glancing at Agron. The minotaur sharpened his Songaxe near the *Foresight's* ram, quietly preparing for the storm he knew would come soon.

"Andromache has been crafting Fire Rods nonstop since she came back."

Kairos knew it all too well. He had interrupted his efforts to craft a sword for Tiberius and a spear for Nausicaa to build up their stock of long-distance weapons. "And she's been having fun with it," he added.

"I've noticed. She's happy for all of us." Cassandra smiled. "Is it because she anticipates blowing up Teuta?"

"That, and because I made a sacrifice for her happiness," Kairos explained. "I asked a lot from her, so it was time I gave back. Our relationship is stronger for it."

"I see..." Cassandra's smile turned sadder. "I'm sorry, Kairos. I know the alliance meant a lot to you."

"It was my pride talking," Kairos replied with a sigh. "I have a hard time accepting defeat. A part of me wants it all, and gets frustrated when reality enters the fray."

"Your ambition has always been your foremost quality, Kairos," Cassandra reassured him. "Take it from someone who failed at nearly everything. Failing from time to time is natural. The hard part is getting back up without losing enthusiasm."

Kairos' thoughts bitterly turned to Rhadamanthe, his old friend who perished fighting the undead Argonauts in Achlys, and to the fiery battle against the Orthian fleet. Cassandra was right. He had had his share of losses, but the key was keeping the strength to get back up... and have friends to help you lift you up.

"I feel you're underselling yourself," he told his adoptive aunt. "You broke your losing streak a long time ago."

"I still feel strange about it," she admitted. "Less than a year ago, I lived in the shadow of your uncle with no ship, no hope to settle, and no [Legend]. Now, I'm a [Hero] with a ship of my own, and a fiancé."

"And you've earned every part of it."

"Thanks." Cassandra put a hand on her commander's shoulder. "Kairos, if we get through this and I end up marrying Tiberius... I have a favor to ask."

"Sure, what is it?"

"I considered making Aurelia my witness, as she's my best friend, but I can't think of anyone who influenced my life for the better more than you did. And since the marriage will probably take place in Lyce..."

"My mother won't be able to attend." Perhaps one day, Lyce would change its laws and Aurelia could return to her homeland... but it wouldn't be anytime soon. "I would be happy to stand in for her, and I'm honored you chose me."

"Well, I was the witness for your marriage," Cassandra said with a chuckle. "What goes around comes around."

Kairos wished she would find marital bliss... if they made it back home in one piece.

The Travian captain wondered if he should purchase more Skills, but the only ones available to him belonged to the [Moonblood] subclass. After Julia had fallen under Romulus' influence, Kairos knew better than to invest in a werewolf-oriented specialization.

Instead, he decided to raise one of his secondary stats. He had enough to raise either his [Intelligence] or [Luck] to B+.

A part of Kairos wanted to grow smarter and wiser; one could never be too canny. But if his recent adventures had taught him anything, it was that the world was utterly chaotic. Opportunities passed, unforeseen events shattered the best laid plans, and a famed general with the ability to see the future could be blindsided. Even the most innovative strategy fell apart at the whims of Fate.

But one could hedge their cosmic bets.

You sacrificed 25 Skill Points to raise your [Luck] from B to B+.

Your chances of inflicting status ailments, critical hits, and succeeding at crafting attempts have increased. Additionally, you are more likely to receive boons from the Fate System.

Kairos made a note to visit the Moirae when he could. The servants of the Fate System had told him that he needed to strengthen his crew before he could undergo another Quest, but that had been months ago. By now many of his officers had gained [Legends] of their own, the *Foresight* had grown into a powerful entity, and Kairos himself approached the level ceiling of the [Hero]-Rank. Once he reached level 60, he wouldn't be able to progress anymore.

In any case, Kairos was about to give the order to set sail when Rook let out a screech. "Somebody is coming, Kairos!" he warned his partner.

"Who?" the captain asked.

"The princess and her silly hound!"

Kairos moved to the deck's guardrail with Cassandra, his eyes widening in astonishment.

Princess Anat rode on the docks with a small retinue of armed guards, followed by eight camels carrying large bags full of golden powder. The purity of the metal caused the sunlight to reflect on them, illuminating the docks.

"Greetings, King Kairos," the princess said as she unhorsed and walked on the plank leading up to the deck. Her Sha hound followed her around, though he paid more attention to Rook than his mistress. "I'm afraid my father couldn't attend your departure for health reasons, so he sent me in his stead with gifts."

"Gifts?" Kairos could only choke, as soldiers relieved the camels of their bags and deposited them on the *Foresight's* deck.

"I understand it is a very small donation," Princess Anat replied with a knowing smirk. "But my father insisted on repaying you for your help on a national security issue. He wishes you good luck and joy in your own trials."

Kairos could read between the lines.

Though Vali would remain officially neutral, the king had taken heed of Mithridates' schemes and decided to hedge his bets. Who could blame him if his lavish gifts helped fund Zama's enemies? Everybody loved careless generosity.

"I... I am thankful," Kairos said.

"It's unexpected," Cassandra added while squinting. She was looking for the strings attached to this gold delivery. "Will you join us on our trip?"

"I would have loved to, but my brother forbade me from leaving the island," the princess replied with a chuckle. "Don't worry, Hadad has a soft heart. He'll sulk for a few weeks, and then realize you weren't so bad after all. All will be forgiven by the time you return."

"If we return," Kairos replied with skepticism.

"Then I will visit when things clear up on your end." The princess winked at him. "Though my country will remain neutral, my prayers are with your crew... though I have the feeling you won't need them."

Kairos chuckled. "You would rather avoid marrying a Thessalan prince?"

"I would rather visit your island," the princess replied. "As a friend."

"Of course."

Princess Anat gave him a bemused smile. "Is it true you denied my hand out of love?"

"Yes." Though politics took part in Kairos' decision, Andromache had been the key factor.

"Good, I would have been furious if it had been anything else." The princess smiled warmly, and unlike her family, it appeared sincere. "Some will call you a fool for your choice, but as a woman, I hope my future husband will show me the same gallantry. Make your lover happy for the two of us, would you?"

"I will," Kairos replied. "And you will always be welcome in my kingdom. I'm sure Agron will love to have you around."

"I will take you up on your offer someday. You welcomed so many people and creatures from all around the world, I'm sure I would make so many friends." The princess offered him a bow. "Good luck with your war, King Kairos. I pray we meet again."

Kairos had been wrong.

The Valians had been warm hosts until the end.

The *Foresight* sailed on the open ocean, with only the rising sun for guidance.

The skies were growing grayer with the freezing winds and clouds of winter. Though Kairos didn't sense that a winter storm would fall upon them, they had left the warm waters of Vali for more dangerous ones.

And still no sign of Teuta.

"There's enough gold to trigger a price crisis if we spent it all at once," Tiberius informed Kairos, as the captain surveyed the sea. The crew's warriors waited in a line to receive buffs from Andromache. "We could buy ships and provisions for multiple campaigns."

After having struggled so many years with poverty, Kairos had a hard time imagining a world where he wouldn't have to worry about money anytime soon.

We need secondary treasuries, he thought, watching Rook and Stymphalian birds make circles in the skies. Nausicaa hadn't returned from her scouting mission yet either. *Putting all our golden eggs in one place is a bad idea.*

"Sir?" Tiberius asked.

"Is everyone buffed?" Kairos asked, as he noticed a shape in the water. He had used the [Idols] he had left in Orichalcos to call for assistance, but he doubted Hybris would send anyone. He was too busy dealing with the merfolk's remnants.

"Almost," his assistant confirmed. "Everyone received the [Water Breathing] and [Water Resistance] spells, and the Fire Rods are ready."

Kairos nodded in answer before looking over the deck's edge. Nausicaa rose from the waters below, pointing east with her arm.

"How many?" Kairos asked her over the sound of the waves.

The mermaid raised a single finger, before making more gestures.

Only one ship, but more people aboard than before? Kairos translated. "They called reinforcements?"

Nausicaa made more gestures, and Kairos clenched his teeth.

Summoned help.

"Kairos?" Cassandra asked, as she rushed to his side.

"They have summoners onboard," the captain explained, his fingers tightening on his spear. "Everyone, prepare for battle! They outnumber us!"

No sooner did he give the order that his officers started barking commands to the crew. Cassandra distributed the fire rods, Nessus reviewed the archers before taking position behind the ballista, Agron started singing a magical melody, and Andromache tossed Nausicaa a purple scepter.

"This fire rod will work underwater," the Scylla informed the mermaid. "It should stick to wood as well. Spray the symbols with blood and leave."

The mute mermaid nodded as she accepted the device, a cold smile forming on her face.

"Are you ready, my love?" Andromache asked Kairos, as she removed her clothes.

"As much as I can be," he replied, calling Rook down to the deck. "She won't take us by surprise like the *Argo* did, but she knows what we can do."

"She *knows* us, but she doesn't *understand* us." Once naked, Andromache approached her lover for a quick kiss. "I can't wait. I have been waiting for this moment my whole life."

"She won't stop us from reaching Orgonos, no," Kairos replied with confidence as he climbed on Rook's back. "Nothing will."

Andromache smiled ear to ear, before diving into the waters and transforming back into her cursed shape. Rook extended his wings and took flight. Kairos inhaled sharply as he cast his [Invisibility] spell, he and his mount vanishing from sight.

Though he could control the winds with his spear, the [Hero] felt another force pushing against his own. An invisible force challenging him for control of the skies.

"I see them," Rook warned as he looked east.

The *Unconquered's* flag appeared over the horizon, surrounded by small tornados and shielded by a circle of water. A flock of birds darkened the skies, their dreadful song soon revealing their true nature.

Elementals and sirens, Kairos identified the creatures escorting the *Unconquered*. He looked for the shape of Teuta's griffin among them, but couldn't find her. Did she hide among the sirens, or remained on the deck? Kairos knew she led from the front, but she might have known better than exposing herself to his touch.

No matter. Kairos hadn't journeyed across half the ocean to die here in foreign waters. He had faced worse odds, and would survive these ones.

The *Unconquered* chased after the *Foresight*, both ships engaged in a collision course.

The battle for Travia had begun.

33: War of the Pirate Kings

The *Unconquered* chased the *Foresight* across the ocean.

A harsh wind blew behind its sails, fueled by two tornado-shaped wind elementals. Its hundred oars pushed it against the treacherous currents, while a flock of sirens sung above them. Their sweet voice echoed across the waves, soothing Kairos' wrath and telling him to fall into the ocean. Many sailors had fallen prey to this doomsday call, crashing their ship against rocky shores to escape the song's maddening influence.

But Kairos had heard better musicians.

[Siren Song] negated by [Leadership 3].

"Rook?" Kairos called his friend. His griffin had a weakness for songs, and once fell under Orpheus' influence in Achlys.

"I'm alright!" Rook replied while bravely shrugging off the sirens' song. "I won't disappoint you again!"

"You never did." Kairos directed his griffin towards the enemy flock. The veil of [Invisibility] hid their approach. "Let's show them that they messed with the wrong birds."

Hundreds of meters separated the two ships, but the *Unconquered* moved faster than its rival thanks to the elementals' backing. The *Foresight* turned to the left, its crew dropping floating mines in the sea. The *Unconquered* continued its chase, heedless of the danger ahead.

When the waves carried the mines closer to the *Unconquered*, tentacles of water rose from the sea and pushed the traps aside. The devices exploded in blasts of flames and poison, but too far from the *Unconquered* to do any damage.

Water elementals, Kairos thought. Their presence explained why the *Unconquered* ignored the strong currents. Teuta probably brought them to counter Nausicaa and Andromache, and they fulfilled their roles admirably. From above, Kairos witnessed his paramour's tentacles rising above the water surface and clashing with liquid arms.

Knowing Andromache could handle the elementals on her own, Kairos closed the gap with the siren flock enough to see them. Up close, the creatures resembled vile birds of prey with women's heads. They sang to themselves far above both ships, safe from arrow fire.

Agron's own music drowned out the sirens' song and protected the crew from its vile influence, but Kairos couldn't risk him being incapacitated. Rhadamanthe's death in Achlys had left the crew at the mercy of an undead attack, and the *Foresight's* captain had learned his lesson.

Kairos' planned to remove the *Unconquered's* summoning support one foe at a time, as the ship couldn't hope to defy the *Foresight* without assistance. It would force the unseen Teuta to show her hand.

She was the only one who mattered.

Having moved in the flock's midst under the cover of invisibility, Kairos took a deep breath. "[Stygian Curse]!" he cast while revealing his presence, his breath turning into a cloud of purple poison.

The noxious fumes spread in the middle of the siren flock, and their beautiful song was drowned by shrieks of horror. Some of the birds choked to death as they inhaled the poison, while the rest dispersed.

Kairos' actions didn't go unnoticed though. The two tornados pushing the *Unconquered* forward rose to the skies and dissipated the noxious miasma. The air condensed into black clouds shaped like eyes, the howling wind forming swirling hands.

Undisturbed, Kairos raised his [Anemoi Spear] and pointed it at the two wind elementals. The [Hero] had whipped an undersea hurricane into shape, and these two smaller storms were nothing to him in comparison. The howling winds that made up the elementals bent to his will, and dissipated harmlessly.

Was that the best Teuta could do?

"Kairos, above!" Rook shouted a warning.

Kairos quickly raised his eyes as a black shape fell down on him like an eagle on a smaller bird. The [Hero] opened a wind tunnel to help Rook move faster, but though his griffin dodged the incoming attacker, their foe unleashed a wave of blue light while in close proximity.

Kairos winced as a magical force lifted the invisibility veil protecting him and his partner. His hand became visible, and the winds swirling around his spear dissipated. Even the power within his hydra crown weakened.

All your [Hero]-Rank magical buffs and below were dispelled by [Antimagic Wave].

I spoke too soon, Kairos thought as he glared at the responsible party.

"I knew you would use the invisibility trick." Teuta's black griffin snapped its beak at Rook, and her black axe radiated with magic. A steel helmet covered the pirate queen's face, and Kairos detected protective spells on its surface. "How predictable. Now that I have lured you—"

Kairos answered by spitting a poisonous cloud into her face.

Teuta's ebon griffin swiftly flapped his wings to dissipate the miasma, but Rook used his surprise to charge at him. Kairos' spear lunged for his rival's head, and Teuta barely managed to lower her head to avoid a fatal strike.

Her axe clashed against Kairos' spear, while the pirate queen muttered familiar words of power. The *Foresight's* captain and Rook hastily pulled back as bolts of lightning erupted from her axe. Kairos immediately attempted to use his [Warg] Skill to possess the distracted enemy griffin while his own mount dodged the magical barrage, only for his mind to hit an invisible wall. A warding spell protected Teuta and her beast from mental influence.

Zama had given his ally a detailed report about the *Foresight's* crew and its abilities.

Teuta chased after her foes, confident in her victory... only to freeze as Rook swiftly turned around and Kairos struck her again from the left.

The surprised pirate queen raised her axe too high, and Kairos lowered his weapon to strike her in the chest. The [Anemoi Spear] smashed her armor with enough strength to crack the steel, and Teuta had to tighten her hold on her griffin's reins to avoid falling off.

"A feigned retreat?" Teuta cursed while attempting to go back on the offensive, but Kairos didn't give her time to breathe. Rook ran circles around Teuta and her mount, allowing his rider to strike swiftly from all angles. His weapon probed the pirate queen's armor for any sign of weakness, and when it didn't find any, he struck the enemy griffin's flank instead. The beast screeched as the poisoned tip of the [Anemoi Spear] grazed his feathered chest and drew blood.

Kairos remembered his aerial joust with the Boreads in Achlys. Teuta had good instincts and skills, but she was a novice at this kind of battle.

He wouldn't let her live long enough to learn.

Teuta managed to throw Kairos off with magical stormbolts, her griffin immediately flying away rather than keep fighting in close-quarters. "Chicken!" Rook mocked them as he chased after them. "Coot coot coot!"

"Shut up!" Teuta's griffin shouted back as he made circles in the skies in a vain attempt to outpace his pursuer. "It's a tactical retreat!"

Kairos could recognize despair when he saw it. An antidote inoculated before the fight was probably the only reason his poison hadn't killed the bird already.

Kairos remembered watching his sister Histria starving. She had perished before her time, the daughter of a captain starving during the great famine.

*She died because of people like you, Kairos thought angrily while chasing Teuta. Who cling to the old ways that drive us to poverty and self-destruction. The only freedom you defend is that of the strong, while the weak have to eat your scraps. You're holding our people back. And that's why you and your ideas have to **die**.*

Teuta whistled, and the surviving sirens answered her call with a screech.

While the rivals for the throne of Travia jostled in the air, the *Unconquered* had entered the *Foresight's* firing range. The living ship's archers and ballistae unleashed a rain of arrows and bolts at Teuta's vessel, only to be repelled by magical shields. The noise of impact drifted through the air, while Agron's song grew louder and Cassandra barked orders.

When bolts failed, Kairos' crew moved to the fire rods. Incendiary projectiles surged from the *Foresight's* deck, only to crash against the magical wards protecting the *Unconquered*. [Fire Resistance] wards shielded the wood from the flames, while the sea boiled around the two ships.

To Kairos' confusion, another volley of fireballs answered his crew's barrage. The *Unconquered's* crew wielded smaller replicas of the fire rods, and soon the sea seemed to erupt in a cataclysmic series of explosions. But the mighty *Foresight's* scales didn't need magic to shrug off flames, and Andromache's buffs protected the crew from harm.

The *Unconquered* attempted to ram the *Foresight*, but an explosion erupted from below its left side. Oars snapped in half, sailors fell overboard, and the course of Teuta's flagship deviated to the right.

Nausicaa.

She had detonated Andromache's weapon below the *Unconquered*, and though the blast didn't sink it, the loss of its oars turned it into a sitting duck. Maybe the surviving

elementals would have helped it swim out of danger, but Andromache had dragged them to their doom underwater.

The more maneuverable *Foresight* circumvented the enemy ship and opened its fanged maw. The *Unconquered's* panicked crew attempted to drive it away with fireballs, but the monstrous ship zigzagged through the barrage and bit Teuta's flagship in the left flank like a shark. The vessel's wooden hull cracked under the fangs' pressure, Teuta's men scrambling with spears to push back the living ship's jaws.

"Protect the ram!" Cassandra ordered, with Agron being the first to jump on the *Unconquered's* deck. His Songaxe cut through a hoplite's helmet, his weapon letting out a melody as it drank the blood. The *Unconquered's* deck fell into chaos as more warriors jumped to it, covered by Nessus' arrows.

The ambush was turning into a disaster—for the ambushers.

"They're coming, Kairos!" Rook warned his rider as the siren flock regrouped around Teuta.

Kairos silently examined his [Anemoi Spear] and sensed its power slowly returning. Teuta's Skill had a limited duration, and it had failed to affect the [Golden Fleece] too.

Something didn't add up though. The witches of Achlys in Teuta's crew were mere [Elites], but her anti-magic wave could disrupt [Hero]-Ranked abilities. Kairos remembered his infiltration of the *Unconquered*, and the enormous amount of wards protecting it. Some ran deep into the ship's wood, and would have been applied before Teuta's alliance with Mithridates. Her axe's bolts were clearly a spell rather than a magical property of the weapon.

Teuta is not a straight [Fighter], Kairos realized, as the siren flock reformed to attack him again with wings and talons. She's either a brawny [Spellcaster] or a [Fighter] with magical-oriented subclasses.

Keeping that information in mind for later, Kairos skewered the first siren within range with his spear before activating his [Telchine Sorcery] Skill. His eyes oozed malevolence. "Obey!"

Half the siren flock froze as their eyes met with Kairos' ensorcelled gaze. The Telchine's magic traveled through the [Hero]'s vision, crushing the monsters' will.

[Charisma] check successful. [Charm] ailment applied.

While Teuta protected her griffin against mental attacks, the sirens proved less resistant. Kairos suspected that whatever Skill shielded the pirate queen's mount needed close proximity to work.

"Kill each other to the last!" Kairos ordered, and the flock immediately turned on itself. The sirens under his control attacked their sisters loyal to Teuta, scratching eyes with talons and biting feathers with sharp fangs. Those foolish enough to fly in his path, he slew.

Teuta had used the brief window of opportunity to fly upward, her griffin positioning himself above Rook. The pirate queen used the elevation to rain down bolts upon Kairos and his partner, the duo zigzagging among a thunderstorm.

Meanwhile, the *Foresight* had chewed through a good chunk of the *Unconquered's* side. The latter started to slowly sink into the water, while Agron and the other warriors quickly leaped back to their ship.

"You should rename your vessel the *Conquered!*" Kairos taunted Teuta in an attempt to make her slip up. As his words echoed, the [Anemoi Spear] let out a humming sound, winds swirling around its tip. "A good captain goes down with her ship!"

"I have more than one!" Teuta replied wrathfully.

Kairos' joy turned to caution, as he noticed sails on the horizon. Fast liburna galley ships emerged from the east, the west, the north, and the south. They formed a closing circle around the *Foresight* and the *Unconquered*, a noose tightening on their trapped prey.

All twelve of them bore Teuta's flag.

"You weren't confident enough to take us on your own?" Kairos taunted his rival. At least Zama wasn't among their numbers. The old general must have decided to pick a better moment to fight.

Kairos could have attacked Teuta with a wind blast, but decided against it. Better to deceive her into thinking she had fully suppressed his spear's power.

"A [Rogue] condemning me for fighting unfairly?" Teuta replied, as the *Foresight* disengaged from the sinking *Unconquered* and formed a bubble dome above its deck. The living ship would descend into the abyss as soon as his master landed on it, escaping the encircling ships. "Quantity is a quality of its own."

Kairos couldn't help but sneer. So much for caring about the Travian people.

Teuta's griffin responded by diving down at Rook like a falcon on a smaller bird, his rider raising her axe for a fatal strike. "Like a rat on the pavement!" the black griffin snarled angrily.

"Kairos, buckle up!" Rook replied before flying upward. The two griffin riders charged at one another for a final clash.

But only one of them could outspeed the wind itself.

As they approached the final collision, Kairos unleashed the power of his [Anemoi Spear] to create a wind tunnel, surprising Teuta with their increased speed. She attempted to hit her foes with a thunderbolt, but Rook skillfully dodged. Kairos raised his spear, and thrust.

Like a silver arrow, the [Anemoi Spear] pierced Teuta's griffin in the gut and kept flying on its way out. The blow's sheer power snapped the animal in half and forced Teuta to leap from her beast to avoid certain death. For a split second, Kairos saw her furious gaze peering through her helmet.

However, Teuta didn't admit defeat yet. With a hand on an amulet around her neck, she raised her axe and threw it straight at Kairos' face in a final act of defiance.

The [Hero] summoned the winds, and tossed the weapon back at the sender with a blast of air.

Teuta teleported away in a flash of light right before her own axe could split her helmet in half. Her weapon continued its course into the sea, to join the *Unconquered* in its depths.

Now that the skies belonged to him, Kairos glanced down at the ocean. The *Foresight* had vanished underwater, but Teuta's fleet continued the fight. Using the same fire rod replicas as the *Unconquered's* crew, they fired at the water surface, perhaps hoping that their projectile could shake the abysses below.

"Do we swim away too?" Rook asked, as archers on the ships raised their bows at them.

"Teuta disrupted our buffs, and unlike my items, I'm not sure that their power returned." Kairos smiled ear to ear. "Besides, why should *we* run from *them*?"

Rook laughed, and flew at the nearest ship.

The warriors aboard welcomed them with a volley of arrows and fireballs, but Kairos deflected them all with a mighty blast of wind. The projectiles bounced back to their senders, the deck going down in flames as the fire rods detonated.

Without wasting time, Rook immediately flew towards a second ship and shredded its sails with his talons. Kairos unleashed a cloud of stygian poison at the crew, and ordered the survivors to detonate their fire rods with his [Telchine Sorcery].

Now that she had dealt with the water elementals, Andromache joined the fray as well. The invincible Scylla's tentacles grabbed a liburna's ram and smashed the hull, while she rained fire and death with her magical staff. At that moment, she appeared like a goddess of fury, as terrifying as she was beautiful. Arrows bounced off her skin, drowned by the sound of her laughter.

Elsewhere, the *Foresight's* jaw snapped out of the water and crushed a fourth ship in half, the living ship devouring the doomed sailors like a shark. Explosions blasted a fifth vessel apart without warning, the shadow of the saboteur Nausicaa slithering among the waves.

By the time half the fleet had gone down in flames, the others stopped firing fireballs and arrows at the *Foresight's* crew. Instead, they turned around, their oars frantically turning in the opposite direction.

Rook flapped his wings above the smoking wreck of a liburna, as Kairos watched the remaining ships leave in peace. He had taught them a lesson they would never forget, one they would soon spread across the Sunsea.

Travia only had one ruler, and he suffered no competition.

34: The Lord of Magic

The crew celebrated all the way to Argos.

After their victory against Teuta's fleet, the deck had all but transformed into a banquet hall. Nessus had opened some of the Valian wine amphoras they brought, and his honeyed lamb recipe was probably the best Kairos had tasted in his entire life. The crew had gathered around fires to listen to Agron's songs... or sleep peacefully with a full belly in Rook's case. Even Nausicaa had leaped out of the water to play dice with Cassandra and Tiberius; and she won handily.

Another commander would have condemned the lack of discipline, but Kairos felt his crew had earned a moment to breathe. After so many tense battles, it felt good to just stop and enjoy the trip.

"They're beautiful," Andromache said, pressing herself against her lover as they watched the stars. "You can see the Gemini."

"They look better than the ghosts we fought in Achlys," Kairos replied, as he held her against him. The Scylla felt cold to the touch from the waist down in human form, but her hands were as warm and soothing as a hot bath. "Is it true that Zeus turned Castor and Pollux into constellations?"

"So say the bards, my other half," she replied softly. "You would have to ask Nyx the Night for answers."

Andromache rested her head against Kairos' shoulder, and he stroked her hair. His lover had been anxious ever since they started seeing the Cyclopean Islands' rocky coasts on the horizon. Their long journey had reached an end, and it scared her.

The god of magic Orgonos awaited them.

"It's alright," Kairos whispered to his concubine.

"What if he says no?" She replied, her nails sinking into his skin like claws. "What if he takes the gifts and doesn't lift the curse?"

"He will. People would have stopped offering him gifts long ago if he stole them, and the Moira's wording was pretty clear."

"We thought the same with Cassandra's Quest, only to be tricked," Andromache pointed out. "What if there is a hidden meaning? Something we overlooked?"

"Then we will deal with it together." Kairos kissed her on the cheek, and she eased up.

"I'm afraid," Andromache admitted. "I'm afraid of being disappointed. That we traveled all the way here and fought so many enemies for nothing."

Kairos examined her sad, beautiful face for a moment and said, "You're not."

She raised an eyebrow.

"You're not afraid of being disappointed," Kairos said. "You're afraid of what will follow once your curse is lifted. You're afraid of the *unknown*."

"I suppose," she whispered. "I... while cursed, I know where we are going. Namely, nowhere. Once it is lifted, I will have something to lose. Hopes that can be crushed."

"Good." Kairos nuzzled her in the cheek. "It means you will live, truly *live*."

Andromache smiled, and kissed him on the lips.

The *Foresight* silently skidded on the water, with the bright moon illuminating the shores of the Cyclopean Islands. The archipelago was protected by tall, steep cliffs of chalky stone and sharp rocks peeking out of the water like sharp teeth. Dozens of islands existed in the region, all of them settled by the giantfolk. These cyclopes, hecatonchires, and giants had never been conquered by an outside power, but also mostly kept to themselves.

The specific island that they approached looked more like a barren rock than anything, with only one building to speak of... but what a building it was. Standing atop a chalky seacliff, a towering basalt tower loomed over the Sunsea. The structure was larger and greater than Vali's royal palace, its surface covered in carved or painted eye symbols observing all corners of the world. Its sharp peak smoldered with smokeless green fire and spectral runes, its radiance offering comfort to ships traveling in the dark.

They had found the Tower of Orgonos.

You earned a level (total fifty-seven) and 3 Skill Points.

"I miss the old days when destroying a fleet, sending a [Hero] fleeing, and completing a months-long journey gave us multiple levels," Kairos said with a heavy sigh. His ship started making circles around the rocky island, looking for a place to dock safely.

"That's old age talking, oh my captain," Nessus replied, as he lazily cut a piece of lamb and tossed it to Chloris. Kairos had spotted the amazon sitting next to the satyr quite often, and suspected that she liked him. "Soon, you'll rant about disrespectful youngsters and the good ol' times."

Somehow, Kairos had the intuition he wouldn't live long enough to reach old age. Considering his dangerous lifestyle and the near-daily attacks on his person, one of his foes was bound to get lucky one day. Kairos would do his best to survive and reach godhood, but he was wise enough to understand the odds were stacked against him.

I don't have to live forever, he thought while stroking Andromache's cheek, *just long enough*. "Zama didn't show up," Kairos said. His absence had bugged him for a while.

"A good general wouldn't pick a place and time that favored their enemy," Tiberius stated. Cassandra rested against his chest near the fire, much like Andromache with Kairos. "Teuta didn't have any weapon capable of attacking the *Foresight* underwater. The only reason a fight happened at all is because we decided to give battle."

"Perhaps Zama let Teuta fight us alone to probe us," Cassandra added. "To see what we are capable of and prepare accordingly."

Kairos thought as much. Zama would cautiously wait and accumulate resources, before offering battle when the deck was stacked in his favor. Teuta had nothing to show for her excursion besides heavy losses, while the Valian general had gathered a large fleet ready to strike at a moment's notice.

"You're all downers," Nessus said with a shrug. "We won. Let's stop worrying for a few days. We'll have more than enough reasons to when spring comes."

"I have an agreement," Chloris said while biting into her lamb piece. She had grown better at speaking in Travian, but still struggled with grammar. "We got the victory, it won't get away."

"True," Cassandra agreed with a smile. "Once word spreads, Teuta's power in Travia will be shattered. She leads by strength, and defeats kill confidence."

"As long as Teuta lives, the fight continues," Tiberius replied with stoicism. "Besides, how can we prove we defeated her? She might intimidate her troops into lying."

Nausicaa stopped her gambling winning streak long enough to proudly showcase one of her collected trophies: a familiar axe, suffused with magical power.

"Teuta's axe?" Kairos couldn't help but grin ear to ear. "No way, you took it after it fell in the water? Good thinking!"

"Everyone give this woman a round of applause!" Nessus shouted, the crew answering his call with claps and cheers. Nausicaa smiled wickedly, her fangs reflecting the cooking fire's flames as Chloris offered her a wine cup.

"You were saying?" Cassandra asked Tiberius.

"I concede defeat," her future husband replied with a sigh.

After touring the island's coast for minutes, the *Foresight* finally found a narrow, artificial cove on the northern side. The monumental carvings of four cyclopes' faces loomed over the sandy shore, their wise eyes untouched by age and elements. The shore led to a spiraling stairway divided in two halves side by side: a narrow path made for humans, and a larger one with giant stepping stones.

A green barrier of eldritch flames burnt at the stairway's entrance, with a line of skulls and bones occupying the shores.

"Orgonos won't suffer intruders," Cassandra said with apprehension.

Andromache nodded slowly as she observed the barrier. "Anyone who crosses the barrier uninvited will burn with divine flames."

"How do we know we are invited though?" Kairos asked Cassandra, who was more familiar with the region.

"I do not know," she admitted. "Orgonos opens the path to gift-bearers, but I don't know which signs he uses—"

A booming sound interrupted Cassandra, and silenced even Agron's song.

The four carved faces in the cliffs started to animate, their eyes rolling in the *Foresight's* direction, their stone jaw stretching. A green light erupted from their pupils and illuminated the *Foresight's* crew, waking up Rook.

Many crewmates tensed or reached for their weapons, but Kairos stopped them with a raised hand. They had received their sign.

"Welcome," the four faces spoke as one, each with a different voice. Two were female, two male. "Lord Orgonos foresaw your arrival."

Of course he did. "We come bearing gifts," Kairos shouted at the stone faces, hoping their master listened through them.

The giants' eyelights focused on Kairos, Andromache... and Nessus, of all people.

"Only the three of you may pass," the carved faces declared.

"What about me?" Rook insisted as he leapt to Kairos' side. "We're a package deal!"

The faces remained unmoved. "Only the chosen three may pass."

"What?! Why?!" Rook showcased his mighty chest. "Look at me! Look at my feathers! How can't you like my feathers?! You don't need two eyes to see how beautiful I am!"

"Only the chosen three may pass," the stone faces said.

"What if I fly over the barrier? What are you gonna do, huh?"

The barrier flickered for a moment, a green glow surrounding the island's cliffs. The defensive perimeter extended all over Orogonos' dominion, preventing entry from all sides.

"Kairos, they're immune to my bird charm!" Rook panicked. "What do I do? It's never happened before!"

"It's alright, Rook," Kairos scratched him behind the head. "You're too good for them."

"Damn right," the griffin nodded, before glaring at Nessus. "But why is *he* invited? Because he has hooves?"

"I can only see one reason," Nessus replied grimly.

Orogonos knew who he was.

"You can choose not to follow, if you don't want to," Kairos reassured his friend.

"It's been a long time coming," Nessus replied as he looked for his bow. "I'm with you, my friend."

The *Foresight* docked and the crew pulled the [Rock of Theseus] onto the beach. Andromache's left hand tightened around Kairos as they walked, while she held the trident's shard close to her right one.

"How are we supposed to carry that upstairs?" Nessus asked the stone faces while pointing a finger at the [Rock of Theseus]. The boulder needed a whole troop to transport.

The faces looked at the artifact with their glowing eyes, and the rock teleported away.

"Neat," Nessus said. "Can you spare us the ascent then?"

"The chosen must show their determination," the faces replied.

"Well, it was worth a shot."

The trio sent one last glance at the crew, before stepping through the green fire. The flames licked their skin without burning it, though Kairos sensed the weight of ancient magic the moment they reached the other side of the barrier. An invisible pressure that dwarfed even the Necromanteion's dreadful aura.

They had entered a [God]'s domain, and his gaze was upon them.

The trio climbed the stairway in silence, their steps echoing through the empty path. The winds had gone silent, and the radiance of Kairos' spear had dimmed. All forms of magic and even natural forces bent to a single will.

Their ascent stretched on for hours, but finally ended at the tower's bottom. The dreadful monument loomed over them, so tall that Kairos struggled to see the glowing summit from his position. His [Magical Knack] Skill failed to identify the countless spells and arcane rituals woven in the stone's fabric.

"It reminds me of my lighthouse," Andromache said as they stepped on a round platform facing the tower's walls. The building's sheer size and power intimidated her. "But... so much grander."

"I don't see the entrance," Nessus pointed out. The tower lacked a gate of any sort.

They didn't have to look for one. The stone platform beneath them glowed, and teleported them away in a bright flash of green light.

When the radiance receded and Kairos could see again, he opened his eyes inside a vast dome chamber of alien beauty. Sheets of colored, rippling metals covered the ceiling alongside shining crystals meant to enhance divination spells. A kaleidoscopic eye symbol had been carved on the floor, pulsating with energy.

Orgonos awaited them at the center, seated on a colossal throne of marble.

Even seated, the New God of Magic loomed over the mortals in his presence. His height pushed beyond seven meters tall, though his body had withered into a gaunt figure. His

pallid skin was white as a cadaver, and mostly covered in rich black robes. A green crystal glowed beneath his hood in place of an eye, above a noseless face and rotten teeth.

The God of Magic had embraced undeath.

Yet, in spite of his cadaverous appearance, the ancient cyclops radiated an aura of quiet majesty and regal bearing. Kairos had only ever felt the same pressure in Gaia's presence, and much like the mother of the gods, instinctively knelt before the deity alongside Andromache and Nessus. Orgonos' crystal eye observed them in silence, as the cyclops woke up from a long meditation.

Orgonos, God of Magic.

Legend: All-Seeing Eye (God)

Pantheon: New Gods.

Level: ???

The undead cyclops spoke, his voice as heavy and ancient as the world itself.

"Kairos of Travia. Andromache of Scheria." Orgonos marked a short pause as he examined Nessus. "Dionysus."

"Is this the moment where you smite me where I stand?" Nessus asked defiantly, ignoring the glares Kairos sent him. "I must warn you, it won't last."

His response seemed to amuse the ancient cyclops more than anything. "You have suffered more than enough for your past life's crimes, old one," Orgonos declared, his words slow and ponderous. "Who am I to criticize someone brave enough to seek atonement?"

Nessus didn't answer, though he looked relieved at avoiding the executioner's axe.

"I bid you welcome in my hall, mortals," Orgonos said, inviting them to stand with a movement of his hand. A green aura of magic flared as his black nails moved, as if the magic within him could barely resist exploding into life. "I have been awaiting you."

Kairos had met gods and protogenoi before, but the cyclops felt the most divine yet. Prometheus had been a wise old rogue, Heracles a larger than life figure, and Gaia a titanic colossus... but Orgonos' presence dwarfed them all. Each of his words had weight behind

them, and his aura of quiet dignity made the human feel *small*. This was an ancient being who had dared to challenge the Olympians themselves, and emerged victorious.

"Thank you for your welcome, Lord Orgonos," Kairos said with respect. Andromache squeezed his hand so tightly that he worried she might break his fingers. "May I ask you a question?"

"You wonder how I foresaw your arrival, even though this," Orgonos pointed at the trident's shard with his finger, "should have shrouded you from my sight?"

Could he read minds? Kairos winced as Orgonos let out a rattling chuckle, confirming his hypothesis.

"I predicted you would visit my halls long before you got your hands on it, though with fewer crew members and a prince of Vali," Orgonos explained. "Your choice at Orichalcos altered your path. The city's destruction created a new future."

"So we blundered?" Nessus asked, his arms crossed.

"In a way," Orgonos replied. "If you had not destroyed Orichalcos, the General's lover would have rejoined him peacefully and you would have been welcomed as allies. Without his opposition, Vali would have chosen you over the Poison King and formed a treaty with you."

Kairos clenched his jaw in frustration. This trip had been a net loss on all fronts.

"Do not make such a face, young Kairos," Orgonos said with a reassuring tone. "Hybris will stay true to his word, and his kind will no longer attack the surface. In the long run, you will have saved more lives than you took... even if it takes a deity's foresight to see it."

"You know of their prophecy," Andromache guessed with a frown. "And of Circe's wicked plans."

"I do, yes." The God of Magic joined his hands together in a thoughtful pose. "You have my thanks for uncovering the Necromanteion's resting place and spreading word of its location. Its wards shrouded the evil within it from my sight."

Kairos' heart skipped a beat. "Will you help us destroy Circe's plans?"

The god's answer was short and yet so pleasing.

"Yes, I will."

Orgonos snapped his fingers, and a small, floating crystal tablet materialized right in front of Kairos. An eye symbol glowed on its surface, the promise of help to come.

"Powerful defense mechanisms will activate if someone of my stature tries to approach the Necromanteion, but there is another way," Orgonos rasped as Nessus grabbed the tablet.

"Break this device once you reach the dungeon's bottom. It shall summon me to your location while bypassing the wards, and I shall undo Circe's spells. The gates to the Titans' prison will remain forever shut."

"You hate them that much?" Nessus whispered.

"I do." Orgonos' head hung back against his throne, as if the ancient undead re-lived old memories. "I was a seer before the flood, living a humble existence of shepherding, studying, and offering advice to anyone seeking my counsel. The river god Achelous once visited me as you do now, seeking the location of his lost daughter Arsinoe. I told him that she had been taken by the beautiful god Apollo, who had fallen for her charms and taken her to Delphi as his concubine. Achelous thanked me for the service and took his daughter back."

Kairos winced, as he guessed what happened next.

"The furious Apollo took his bow and blinded me," Orgonos said, his voice full of bitterness. "When I appealed to Zeus' divine justice, the philandering father in the skies found no fault in his bastard son. The experience would be a lesson, he said, about never interfering in the affairs of the gods. When I asked Achelous to cure my eye, he refused, for he feared mighty Zeus more than me."

Andromache looked away, the story hitting too close to home.

"Blinded and broken, I swore that these petty gods would never get my worship," Orgonos finished his tale by glancing at Kairos. "The Olympians had decreed that all mortals must die, so I spit on them by embracing unlife... and when your ancestors came to me with a plan to cast the Olympians down, I offered them my full support. Together, we plotted the end of the Age of Gods, and the beginning of a new era. Many of my fellow New Gods have forgotten why we fought in the first place, but my determination never wavered. This fight is but another battle in our long war."

"Why help us though?" Kairos asked with a frown. "You know we joined the [Térastheon]."

"My goals align with Gaia's," the god of magic replied. "Though I do not take part in the duels of nations, I have smothered the old order's embers and ensured that no single [Pantheon] would grow as powerful as the Olympians. The Fate System will always give

rise to new divinities. This is the cycle of our world. But so long as the gods do not oppress mortals like your ancestor Lycaon did, I shall stay my hand."

"You created Lycaon's seal alongside the Senex families," Kairos remembered. "Surely you know his cult hunts the families maintaining it. Can't you do anything to prevent his escape?"

"There are forces struggling to free the wolf-god from his bindings, yes. But Lycaon shields his apostle from my gaze, and I cannot repair the Senex's seal without undoing it first." Orgonos' single eye briefly flared with a red burst of light. "I foresee you will have a role to play in this dance, child. That you will be either Lyce's salvation, or its doom."

"Oddly vague," Nessus mused. "Why can't prophecies be clear?"

"Because the future is not written," Orgonos replied. "The chaos of free will and the Fate System's order clash relentlessly. Sometimes one of them wins a battle, but the war stretches on forever."

Kairos took solace in it, and remembered Prometheus' words. The Titan of Foresight had prophesied three calamities, but they were not inevitable. The future could be changed.

The Travian [Hero] exchanged a glance with his concubine, and Andromache let his hand go. She took a step forward, and bowed before the cyclops god. "Lord Orgonos," she said, pondering every word. "If you are as wise as you say, you know why I came here."

The cyclops nodded slowly. "You seek freedom from Circe's curse."

"I... I need your help." It clearly strained Andromache to admit it, but she did. "I have spent centuries as a beast, and I want my life back. We... We brought gifts. Payment for the service."

"I have seen." The [Rock of Theseus] materialized inside Orgonos' left palm. The boulder looked no bigger than a pebble between his sharp fingers. "You brought two gifts though."

"What will you do with the shard, if we give it to you?" Kairos asked as Andromache's grip on the trident's piece tightened.

"I will make sure no one threatens the world with it again," Orgonos replied. "With time, I could understand its properties and undo the flood. As all gifts deserve a reward, I shall grant you a boon in return. I will bestow my mark on you, and shield you from divinations. Your foes will never predict you. As for the [Rock of Theseus], naiad, it will buy your salvation."

Andromache's eyes lit up with hope. "So it is true... you can free me?"

"I can lift the curse," Orgonos confirmed with a caveat, "but not without your help."

Andromache froze in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"The spell is woven into your soul, child, and though I bested her in battle Circe's sorcery rivals my own. I can loosen the bindings enough for your will to shake them off, but only *you* can fully break your chains. In other words, I can manifest the curse and allow you to fight it off... but I cannot guarantee your victory. If you fail, the curse's hold will only strengthen."

Andromache listened without a word, her expression sharpening. "But if I win, I shall be free from it forever?"

"Yes."

"Can't I help?" Kairos asked. He refused to let Andromache fight this battle alone.

Orgonos shook his head. "The battle will take place inside her soul. In a way, she will fight herself."

"But—"

"It's alright, my other half," Andromache interrupted him. "I have waited centuries for this battle."

The Scylla stood with pride and determination.

"I am ready."

35: The Curse of Freedom

The world was cold and her lover's hands were warm.

Andromache's tentacles coiled on the stone floor, while her hound-heads snapped at both Orgonos and Nessus. Even Kairos' attempts to scratch them behind the ears didn't appease them. Their existence was bound to the curse, and they sensed their doom approaching.

Even after centuries of cohabitation, Andromache still wondered if these creatures had a mind of their own or if they only echoed her buried emotions. Her anger was her anger, but sometimes they acted on their own without discernible reason.

"I will warn you one last time, child," Orgonos said as his single eye shone with a bright eldritch glow. Nessus stood next to his throne, his arms crossed. "If you succeed, you will shed the curse like a snake with their old skin. But if you fail, the beast inside you will grow stronger than ever. You might irreversibly lose your mind. The half-life you have may be harsh, but it is still a life."

"A half-life is a half-death," Andromache replied harshly. "I would rather have a full life or a full death. Either way, I will be free of this burden."

It already infuriated her that she would have to run this ritual while in her Scylla form, instead of her nymph one. She despised this monstrous body, this hideous mockery of nature's beauty.

Andromache was tired. Tired of living like this for centuries, an unchanging beast that belonged neither to the realm of men nor monsters. Tired of this existence of solitude and misery, with only a few moments of joy and respite. Any alternative was better than another century of loneliness.

Even death.

Her Kairos looked up at her with a thoughtful face. Andromache didn't see any hint of worry in his eyes; just quiet confidence and unconditional acceptance.

Even in the face of a god's skepticism, even though the Scylla had made peace with the possibility of failure, her other half never doubted her inevitable success.

Andromache couldn't help but smile, as she lowered her human torso to face her other half. Her hands moved to his cheeks, her forehead touched his own with a gentle touch. He stroked her hair kindly.

"My other half," Andromache whispered. "If I fail..."

"You won't," he said. "You are the strongest person I know, Andromache. You will win this."

"If I fail," Andromache insisted with a hoarse throat. "If I become no better than an animal... I want you to remember me and... and do what you must."

"You can't ask me that, Andromache," he protested. "Even in the remote possibility that we reach that stage, maybe we could still undo it. There's always a way."

"Mayhaps," Andromache agreed. "But how long would it take to find a new cure? Longer than a human's life I imagine, and I would not bear to live as a feral beast for so long. As for you, you have your own wars to fight."

"You are one of those," Kairos insisted. "I will win it, or I will die."

Andromache smiled, her lips touching her fangs. "Thank you, my love," she replied, before whispering into his ear. "Kairos, do you remember our night in Vali?"

"Yes," he whispered back, too low for the others to hear. Orgonos waited politely for them to finish, while Nessus had the grace to look away. "I hurt you."

"I bled when you took me." Andromache let out a sigh. "I am invulnerable, my love. I cannot be harmed. No arrow can pierce my skin, whether they belong to a satyr or Eros himself. My flesh is as strong as steel. No man's caress could give me pain or pleasure, except yours."

Kairos' own hands moved to her cheeks as their gaze locked. They mirrored each other, like two parts of a greater whole.

"Before you came, I was dead," Andromache admitted. "I breathed, but I had perished long ago. When you chained me to my own home, I thought you would kill me."

"I intended to." To his credit, he sounded well and truly ashamed. "If you hadn't taken the oath, I think I would have. I never imagined that... that we would become a *we*. I should never have forced those chains on you, magical or otherwise."

"I would have slain you if you hadn't forced me to make that oath. I would have set your boat and house on fire, even if it meant courting death." Andromache couldn't help but chuckle at the absurdity of their romance. "We were never meant to get together, Kairos."

"No, we weren't," her other half replied, his tone strangely uplifting. "But we did anyway. We conquered our distrust of each other, little by little."

"Yes we did," Andromache whispered, "and I regret none of it. You gave me more than pleasure, my love. You gave me joy, pride, and hope. This battle is mine to fight, but you made it possible."

"I would not be here without you either. We reached this place together, and I won't leave it without you."

"I know. If I do this, it's so we can have a future together. And if I don't come back... I want to say thank you, my other half. For everything."

Their lips brushed against each other, in a kiss that might be their last one. Her hounds fell silent, and Andromache felt as if this moment stretched on for hours. She hoped it could have lasted forever, but all good things had to end.

"I love you," she said upon breaking the kiss.

"I love you," he replied as he slowly let her go. "Win this. For us, but for yourself most of all."

Andromache nodded slowly, and faced the god of magic.

"Are you ready?" Orgonos asked with a slow and ponderous voice.

"Yes," Andromache replied with a firm nod. "But may I ask a question first?"

"You wonder how I defeated Circe, though she was a [God]?" Orgonos glanced at Kairos. "Your lover gained a [Legend] by slaying a [Hero]. There is no difference in power that cannot be overcome. Sometimes, one must use their wits. At other times, one must be lucky and seize the right opportunity."

"Is that all it took?" Kairos asked. "An opportunity?"

"I defeated Circe and Hecate not because I was a better mage, but because I did everything in my power to improve my odds. I chose the place and time with care. I trusted the right ally. And I seized the day when others would have hesitated."

"Did Circe suffer?" Andromache asked. She prayed to all the gods old and new that Circe perished in agony.

"No," Orgonos replied to her immense disappointment. "I needed her out of the way to deal with Hecate, and I had no wish to toy with my food like a cat. One of the main benefits of undeath is freedom from these distracting passions. I took no chance and slew her the moment I could."

Fair enough.

"Go get them, girl," Nessus encouraged Andromache. Though she was never close to the satyr, they shared the camaraderie of old veterans. "Circe is a ghost. Put her down for good."

"I will." Andromache closed her eyes, her hound-heads snapping their jaws. "I am ready."

Orgonos spoke a word, and Andromache's world shattered like glass.

Her body snapped in half like a needle, as if cut from below the waist. For the first time in countless centuries, the beastly rage festering in her waist vanished alongside the coldness of her tentacles. Her body transformed back into her nymph form, but her legs felt numb.

When Andromache opened her eyes again, Orgonos' dome had changed. The god and his throne had vanished from her sight, alongside her Kairos' reassuring presence. Even Nessus had disappeared.

A body of water had appeared where Orgonos used to be, with water as pure as crystal. A ring of verdant grass and flowers had grown at the pool's edge, radiant in its beauty. Even after so many centuries, Andromache immediately recognized it.

"My pond," she whispered. The waters that she had once called her home, before Circe bound her to the phoenix egg. The peaceful haven where suitors came to pay her homage with songs and flattery.

It was long gone. It only existed in her memories now, alongside her old life and joys.

Andromache looked at her legs and waist, and found them all too human. Her feet had five toes. When she licked her teeth with her tongue, she didn't feel any sharp fangs. No beast echoed in the back of her mind, raging at the world.

Andromache should have found peace in this illusion, but she didn't. A void had replaced the hole left by her curse, and her legs felt no more real than this place. She wasn't whole yet.

The witch raised a hand and focused. A scepter appeared in her right hand, bursting with flames and heat. She snapped her fingers and summoned a rain of magical jewels, each as radiant as the sun. It would have taken her a kingdom's budget to craft them all, but it only took an instant in the realm of her imagination.

Yet when she tried to compel her Kairos to appear, her love didn't show up.

This place was an illusion shaped by her will, but still bound to limitations. Andromache could cast her spells and craft in the blink of an eye, but when she tried to collapse the dome with a thought, it stood strong. She could recreate anything her Skills could, but no more.

What was Andromache supposed to do now? Lord Orgonos had warned that she would face her curse, and she had expected Circe's memories to haunt her from beyond the grave. Yet the witch's ghost hadn't shown up.

Andromache approached the pond and looked into its waters. She worried that her reflection would show her hideous Scylla form... but instead, her face was smooth and radiant. The witch's shapeshifting spell was a pale imitation of her old nymph beauty, but here Andromache saw a glimpse of it. Like Narcissus, she couldn't help but stare at her own image with longing and nostalgia.

It took her a moment to notice other forms behind her reflection. Andromache focused and distinguished familiar shapes: her other half with his faithful griffin and his mother Aurelia; Agron, that amusing minotaur; her mentor Euryale; and even Cassandra.

Is this my heart's desire? Andromache thought. The people I love? The few friends I have made?

Then why could she see her reflection so clearly, while her loved ones looked like feeble shadows? Did something cloud her heart? Andromache touched the pool's surface, water rippling with a discordant sound.

And then her curse emerged from the pool.

A black tentacle struck her in the chest like a whip, and unlike the rest of this place, the pain felt all too real. Andromache let out a cry of surprise as the blow broke a rib and sent her flying backward to crash and roll on the cold hard floor. She gasped for breath, and looked up as a monster rose from her pond with a screech.

A tangle of tentacles crowned by a ring of hungry hounds glared at Andromache, with no humanoid torso to give it a thin veneer of intellect. Only a festering wound remained where the nymph half had been, shedding a fountain of blood.

"Finally," Andromache whispered as she rose back to her human feet, her fingers tightening on her scepter. "I waited so long for this."

The monster crawled at her with rage and bestial hunger, eager to devour her flesh. Andromache responded by raising her scepter and summoning a fireball. Her flames hit the creature in the face, burning its skin to crisp.

The monster's howls of pain shook the walls and brought a smile to Andromache's face, but the flames didn't stop it. As its skeletal jaws emerged from the fire to lunge at her, the witch summoned a second staff in her left hand; one forged with the power of storms.

A whirlwind formed beneath her feet and carried her towards the ceiling, and out of the creature's reach. The monster tried to seize the nymph with its tentacles, but its reach was too short.

Andromache watched with contempt as her curse incarnate fruitlessly wailed at her. From above, the beast looked pathetic. "How could I have ever feared you?" she wondered out loud while raising her fiery scepter. "I gave you power where you had none."

This time, Andromache didn't summon a single fireball. She instead rained a river of flames and brimstones, melting the monster's flesh to the bone. Her fire incinerated the lungs it needed to scream, the hounds' screams of pain turning into whimpers. The creature attempted to flee back to the pond and the waters' safety, but its body collapsed beneath the witch's onslaught.

"You will suffer as I suffered!" Andromache's voice brimmed with fury and hatred. "Burn! Burn, burn, *burn!*"

Her searing flames turned the room as bright as the heart of the sun, and when the light died only a pile of ash remained.

Andromache slowly landed on the ground with a breath of relief. In this instant, she finally understood what Agron found so peaceful about arson. Watching the incarnation of her pain disappear had brought her great joy.

The witch felt satisfied and rested... at least until she looked at her pond.

Though the pool of water remained intact, her flames had burnt the flowers around it. The sight left Andromache feeling strangely sad, though she couldn't explain why. These plants had perished centuries ago, long before the Olympians.

"It doesn't matter," Andromache muttered to herself. "It's all a dream. I will make new ones in the waking world."

Her love awaited her on the other side.

And yet, she didn't wake up, to her utter confusion.

Doubt gnawed at Andromache's mind, and she looked into the pool. To her horror, the waters no longer reflected her beautiful nymph face. Her mirrored image had grown fangs and claws, while her loved ones' shadows had blurred.

"Have I done something wrong?" Andromache asked, but no one answered. "Lord Orgonos? Can you hear me?"

All she heard in response was a painful squeal.

The witch's gaze snapped back at the ashes of her curse, to see a hound head emerge from them.

Andromache didn't even utter a word. She simply snapped her scepter at the beast and incinerated it again.

But this time her magic did nothing. The monster regenerated from its own ash and weathered the fire, rising from the dead even bigger than before. The wound on its top extinguished the flames with blood, and its tentacles lunged at Andromache with fury.

The witch hastily flew away with a whirlwind, before switching from flames to thunderbolts. Her lightning blasted the beast's heads left and right, only for two more to grow back like a twisted hydra. The creature pursued her across the dome, gaining more heads and tentacles with each spell.

"Enough!" Andromache summoned chains with the power of imagination, binding the creatures from all sides. She then crafted a rain of fire rods, blasting it away into nothingness.

The chains melted, but the monster grew larger.

Andromache couldn't help but blink at the horror before her. The monster emerged from the smoke not as her separated half, but as a deformed mass of dog heads, tentacles, and festering scars. It screeched with a hundred mouths, and caught its nymph half with a limb as strong as a dragon's grip.

Andromache didn't even have the time to react as a tentacle grabbed her midair and smashed her against the ground. She heard a loud crack and her vision blurred into a sea of stars, but the beast didn't let her go. It slammed her against the ceiling and the ground, making her taste her own blood. Where it had played with her like a toy, it dragged Andromache to its hundred maws to feast on her flesh.

But though her body was broken, the sorceress' will remained as strong as ever. A thought crossed her mind, and a floating ring of gems materialized around her head. They exploded in a bright flash of magical life, vaporizing the tentacle holding her and sending the beast reeling back.

When Andromache fell on the ground, she couldn't even feel her legs anymore. Her broken scepters laid in pieces next to her crooked hands, and blood dripped from her mouth and skull. When the witch raised her head to glare at her monstrous half, she only saw with one eye.

Her beastly curse snarled as it recovered from the blast, but as it grew so did its wounds. Whatever regenerative ability allowed it to survive death couldn't repair his scars. It was stronger than ever, and yet found no reprieve from its pain.

How do I kill this? Andromache wondered with rage. The more I hurt it, the more powerful it gets! Why won't it die?

She looked at this horror, at this pathetic, *odious* ball of agonizing pain and mindless rage. The very sight of it revolted Andromache to the core of her being, and the idea of sharing a soul with it disgusted her. It was a poison in her flesh, a twisted mockery of herself, and an obstacle to her happiness. It stood between her and the family she wanted, the life she craved.

So why couldn't it *go away*?

Andromache's eyes wandered to the pond. The waters were clear, surrounded by a ring of ash. But the witch's reflection had grown even more monstrous, and the shadows...

Only her other half's shade remained, a paltry distant thing. Everyone else had vanished, from Andromache's gorgon mentor to her mother-in-law. Why did they go? Why was the curse getting strong?

Andromache glanced back at her beastly half, at its bleeding wounds and snarling jaws. Why did it recover no matter how much she hurt it? She had all the power in the world, the strength to defeat all her enemies. Why couldn't she destroy this one? This monster already seemed to agonize on its own! It was as broken as she was!

...

Because it was a part of her.

Andromache thought about her snarling reflection in the pond, at her heart's desire. It wasn't the curse that had driven everyone away; it was her anger and fury.

She was a flame. Her wrath gave her strength and fueled her magic, but left nothing in its wake. Andromache only had to take a glance at the burnt flowers around her pool.

"It's not you..." The witch whispered to the monster wriggling before her. "It's me."

Orgonos had warned her. The curse was bound to her soul.

It only had as much strength as Andromache gave it.

Having finally understood the truth, the witch called upon her magic while her beastly half let out a roar of defiance. But this time, Andromache summoned no flames or lightning bolts.

Instead, she crowned the hounds with a hundred hydra crowns. The regalia looked far better on her Kairos' head, but their magic worked just as well. The healing power within the devices flowed through the monster's wounds, closing them.

The beast's jaws snapped at her in a mix of anger and confusion.

"It's alright," Andromache whispered, her voice low and soft. Her throat was dry, and it hurt to even speak. "I won't fight you anymore. You are me, and I am you."

The beast took heed of her words and crawled towards her. Its tentacles coiled around her like snakes, while its hound heads sniffed at her face. The bane of Andromache's existence looked at her with fear and apprehension.

"Circe twisted you into this thing, but you were born from my wrath and it fueled you all these years." Andromache raised her hand, and the creature recoiled in fear... but her fingers only caressed its fur. "The more I hate and reject you, the more I reject myself and others. And once everything has burnt... all that's left is pain."

To heal, she had to let go. Let go of the rage, let go of the bitterness, let go of the self-pity.

The creature whined as the witch's caresses and thoughts soothed it. Its wounds closed, and it shrank back to its original size.

"It's alright," Andromache said, as its tentacles embraced her. Once they had been as cold as seawater, but now felt warm as her lover's skin. "I forgive you."

To accept others into her life, she had to accept herself.

Her beastly half let out a final squeal, and dragged Andromache into the pond.

The nymph closed her eyes as they fell into the waters, their bodies merging into one. The monster's essence filled the hole in her soul; not with pain and anger, but with warmth and peace. The curse's power turned against itself, the beastly magic transforming from shackles into a breeze of freedom.

When Andromache opened her eyes again, it was within Kairos' gentle arms. Her lover looked at her with a relieved look, before kissing her on the forehead.

Andromache answered his love with a smile, but she sensed no sharp fangs beneath her lips. Her legs felt weak and fragile. She touched them with her fingers, delighting at the warm sensation on her skin.

You fulfilled your Quest. You earned 10 Skill Points.

*Your **[Legend]** changed from **[Phoenix Guardian]** to **[Witch of Freedom]**.*

*Your Legendary Skill **[Invulnerable Scylla]** changed to **[Freedom of Form]**. You sacrificed strength and invulnerability for freedom. You can reshape your physical form as you wish, though you cannot alter your body mass; this includes turning your body into unliving material such as stone or mist. Additionally, you are immune to all **[Curses]**, even those cast by **[Gods]**.*

But it was the last line that brought tears to Andromache's face.

Your race changed from Scylla (Naiad) to Nymph (Naiad).

She cried in joy as Kairos held her against his chest.

"It's alright," he whispered into her ear. "It's over."

Yes.

Andromache's nightmare was over, and she had finally woken up.

36: Wrap-Up

Andromache looked so beautiful as the wind brushed against her face.

Kairos could have watched her all day. Her hair and robes floated with the morning breeze and the sunlight reflected on her perfect skin. The nymph looked every bit like Aphrodite after rising from the sea.

But it was her bright smile that Kairos found the most charming. Andromache's joy always had an undercurrent of bittersweetness in the past; her moments of happiness were never more than a temporary reprieve from her terrible existence.

But not today.

Now she was happy, truly happy. She beamed with joy and relief, with no fear of the future.

Andromache had found freedom, and peace.

Orgonos had given the couple access to his tower's top, as he received Nessus for a private audience. Kairos suspected that the satyr wanted answers about his immortality or to consult the ancient cyclops on the Old Gods' fate, but he respected his friend's privacy enough not to ask questions. Instead, the *Foresight's* captain enjoyed his quiet moment with his paramour at the apex of the world.

The tower's magical beacon burnt behind the couple, bathing them in its warmth. They could see the *Foresight* from their location, waiting for their successful return. Rook in particular made circles in the skies, unable to cross the barrier surrounding the island.

'It's alright, Rook,' Kairos contacted him through telepathy. *'I can see you.'*

His griffin did not answer, confirming that the barrier blocked telepathic communications. Kairos hoped that Orgonos' anti-divination boon would prove just as effective.

"How do you feel?" Kairos asked Andromache, as he moved behind her back and put his arms around her.

She looked at him with a smile that showed her perfect teeth. "I feel great."

Andromache, Witch of Histrionia

Legend: Witch of Freedom (Hero)

Pantheon: T rastheon.

Race: Nymph (Naiad)

Class: Spellcaster (Pyromancer, Witch, Storm Caller, Shapeshifter, Necromancer, Telchine)

Level: 60

"I'm a bit jealous that you have more levels than me now," Kairos said, though only jokingly. He was proud of Andromache's achievement.

"I struggled all my life to reach this moment," his concubine replied with a grin. "If it couldn't make me a [Demigod], the System owed me this much."

"Any idea why you didn't ascend?" Kairos knew that Andromache's Quest only mentioned breaking the curse, but still... he had expected his paramour to ascend after breaking a [God]'s hold on her.

"The curse bound my [Legend] and kept me down," the nymph replied. "Now it has evolved, I have gained the potential to ascend further. Maybe I will become a [Demigod] before you, my other half."

"It would be exciting," he replied before kissing her on the neck. "I'm so glad for you. I know how long you waited. I can't say I understand how it felt, but... I can tell the difference. You feel at peace."

"I do," she agreed with a nod, while her fingers brushed against his forearms. "Now... Now my life is truly my own, and I will rebuild it. I will dig a new pond in the woods near my mentor's home, and build a cottage."

"You want to leave the lighthouse?"

"Not for the moment," Andromache replied with gravitas, "but it's not a place to raise a family."

She moved Kairos' hands and guided them to her belly. It felt warm to the touch, beneath the robes.

"It's my body now," Andromache whispered. "Circe no longer has power over it. It's all mine, to do with as I see fit. And what I want, Kairos... is to bear you children."

"Now?"

"Now."

"We have a war on the horizon," he warned her. "One where we'll have to fight. We may even perish. You are no longer invulnerable, and I never was in the first place."

"I know, my other half... and this is why I want to do it now. We never know what the future holds, and we shouldn't live in fear of it." Her fingers caressed his own, a jolt of desire going down Kairos' spine. "Perhaps one of us will die, yes. So I want us to leave something behind in this world. Something that we made together."

She turned her head, her lips so close to Kairos' that he could sense her warm breath.

"I want our love to take physical shape," she whispered. "I want to feel your warmth inside me, until I can hold it in my arms. I want us to make sweet moments in our home, away from politics, from your wars."

"I want it too," Kairos replied. "But I have responsibilities. I told you as much when Euryale wed us."

"I understand," she replied with no hint of anger. "I still haven't made peace with sharing you with your wife, but... I want us to enjoy blissful moments, now, tomorrow, and all days to come. Even if they are brief. Even if we might die. I want to enjoy the life I took back from Circe, and to share it with you."

Kairos slowly turned his concubine around, until they faced each other. He pulled her close to him while she put her arms around his waist, their body so close they might as well be one.

"I want children with you too, Andromache," Kairos whispered as their foreheads touched. "I desired it even before marrying Julia. If you want them now, in spite of the conflicts ahead... then I'm willing to take the risk."

"Take me tonight then," she replied softly. "And each night until we reach the harbor."

"Each night?" Kairos couldn't help but chuckle. "You're insatiable."

"I want to experience everything life has to offer, my love, and I have so much time to catch up on." She caressed his chin with her index finger, a coy look in her eyes. "As for the day... you will teach me how to fly."

"You want me to find you a griffin of your own?"

"Not quite." A layer of feathers grew over the back of Andromache's hands. "I'm experimenting with partial transformations, and I would love to join you and Rook in the skies."

"It's an amazing experience," Kairos confirmed as he glanced at the clouds above them. "The world looks so beautiful from above, with the wind against your face. There are no frontiers up there, no wall. Only the endless sea. You truly feel free, like the wind."

"That's what I wanted to hear." Andromache nodded to herself, as her hands returned to normal. "Free like the wind. Maybe I could become the wind itself, or a cloud. This power offers me so many possibilities, it will take a lifetime to explore them all."

"I can give you pointers for how to transform into a shark."

"I have spent enough time beneath the waves," Andromache replied. "Maybe when I finish building my new pond."

Kairos approached her lips with his own. "And what will we do now, my cruel nymph?"

"Whatever we want, my love," she said while embracing him. "Whatever we want..."

When Orgonos summoned Kairos and Andromache again to his hall, Nessus waited for them in silence.

Kairos immediately noticed something wrong with his friend. The cheerful satyr kept his arms crossed and looked at the floor with a sullen, grim face. He seemed lost in dark thoughts, and didn't even raise his head to greet his friends.

Whatever Orgonos and he had discussed, the satyr didn't like it.

"It is time for us to part ways... until we meet again," Orgonos declared as he sat on his throne, his single eye flaring with a bright flash. "I will wait for the day when we can bring an end to the witch-queen's ambitions once and for all."

"Will you help us with the other Calamities?" Kairos asked, just in case.

As he expected, the cyclops shook his head in denial. "The Old Gods took sides in the Trojan War, and mortals on both sides paid the price. I will have no part in your conflict with the Poison King. And if I intervene against Lycaon, it means the wolf-god will have already escaped. At that point, the damage will have been done."

Orgonos marked a short pause. "However..."

"However?" Kairos asked with a frown.

"Lycaon has chosen his champion on earth, just as you inherited Prometheus' hopes. Though the wolf-god protects his tool from my sight, I have often glimpsed this Romulus in my visions. His soul is dark... but even in the cold night, an ember remains. I suspect your fate is tied to it."

An ember? Of what, humanity?

"He tried to murder my unborn child and wife," Kairos said angrily, while Andromache tensed at his side. "If he could have been sure that Julia carried a boy, both would have died."

"And yet, though his god willed your family to die, his champion stayed his hand." Orgonos' face turned undecipherable. "Who saves a life, saves the world. Remember these words when the fateful moment comes, child."

Save a life? *Romulus'* life? Did Orgonos suggest sparing that monster?

Kairos couldn't even fathom the idea. The Beast Cult had killed hundreds, maybe thousands of people, and Romulus led them. All the blood shed by Lycaon's servants tainted his hands red. Even his moment of mercy towards Julia was only a temporary respite; once she gave birth, whether to a boy or girl, the vile [Demigod] would hunt her down again.

And yet... Orgonos had a point. Romulus had stayed his hand, almost certainly because he shared a family bond with Kairos. While Lycaon infamously served one of his own sons to Zeus as dinner. Romulus had lines he wasn't willing to cross.

Kairos had no idea what to make of this. He needed to learn more about Romulus, to figure out who hid under his mask. What blood tie he and Kairos shared.

Later, the Travian King thought. There is a more imminent problem to deal with first.

Julia wouldn't give birth before many months and Romulus was abroad, while the evil slumbering in the Necromanteion lurked at Kairos' door. Now that their expedition reached its end, the [Monster Reaver] intended to make sure Circe's prophesied second sun would never rise.

"Take this, Lord Orgonos," Andromache said as she offered the trident's shard to the ancient cyclops. "As a gift."

"For the final time, are you certain of your decision?" the deity asked. "You have gone through many trials to secure this tool. Though you know it shall be safe with me, it might help you on your journey."

"The mere fact you will not take this weapon by force proves to me that you can be trusted with it." Andromache offered the deity a profound bow of respect. The sorceress had shown deference to Gaia due to her power, but in this case Kairos saw that his soulmate didn't bow before the god's might.

She bowed before the person.

"Out of all the gods I have crossed paths with, often to my displeasure, you are the only one I will pray to," Andromache declared with sincerity. "You have woken me up from a long nightmare and I shall be forever grateful.

Though the cyclops mage had long lost his lips, Kairos could have sworn that Orgonos' teeth rearranged themselves into a smile. "I did nothing but give you a nudge, child," said the deity. "You are the one who conquered your pain and laid it to rest. As for prayers, I have no need for them. If you want to please me, simply continue gazing into the abyss of magic and become the great sorceress I know you can become. One better and wiser than the witches of old."

"Thank you," the sorceress said with deference. "I shall keep that in mind."

Orgonos snapped his fingers, and the trident's shard floated in the air to the palm of his hand. The cyclops proved as good as his word, and afforded Kairos his protection in exchange for the trident's piece. The ancient cyclops spoke a single word of power, and imbued his guests with his protection.

You have received the [Blinded Eye of Orgonos] Legendary Skill. You are now immune to divination spells and abilities cast by [God]-Rank creatures and below, except those cast by Orgonos himself. This protection also wards your gear. Finally, you can extend this protection to any willing creature that you touch, though they cannot share it with others themselves.

"Your secrets shall remain your own," Orgonos declared. "Neither Protogenoi nor mortals will be able to locate or spy on you. It shall give you an edge in your coming war."

"I would have expected an artifact," Andromache admitted.

"Items can be lost, but skills are with you forever," the deity replied with amusement.

"I will take practical over flashy every time," Kairos said, before bowing before the cyclops. "Thank you for your help, Lord Orgonos."

"My thoughts are with you, dear child." Orgonos joined his hands together, as he offered words of wisdom to his guests one last time. "Your dream is a noble one, Kairos of Travia. Stay true to it. You may stumble on the path, but true defeat only starts in one's mind."

The deity's eye let out a flash of green energy, and when the light died down, the trio found themselves back on the stairs leading up to the tower.

This visit had been a complete success, and a welcome palate cleanser after the mess in Vali. Kairos had not expected Orgonos to prove so reasonable and helpful; the old cyclops had joined the select group of deities that the Travian respected.

Speaking of old deities, Nessus' mood hadn't improved at all.

"What did you talk about?" Kairos asked his satyr friend. "Something that's weighing on your mind, I'm sure."

This time, Nessus finally looked up. His single eye gazed at Kairos with what could pass for grim acceptance. "I asked him if he knew the reason for my immortality."

Kairos froze. "And he did?"

"He had a theory. It sounds plausible, but..." The satyr didn't finish his sentence, shaking his head.

"You did not like it," Andromache guessed with a hint of concern. "What did he say?"

"Something I need to check," Nessus replied while refusing to elaborate. "Maybe he's right, maybe he's wrong. I need to see for myself. And for that... I'll need your help."

"Whatever you need, my friend," Kairos said.

This time, Nessus couldn't help but chuckle. "You don't even know what I'm about to ask, oh my captain."

"Doesn't matter. I would sail to the Underworld if you needed to go there."

"Bold words, and that's exactly what I was about to ask." Nessus crossed his arms. "Take me with you when you assault the Necromanteion. I need to confront Thanatos."

"Are you sure?" Kairos asked with a frown. "He tried to kill you in the past, and we'll be challenging him in his lair."

"He tried to kill me, yes," Nessus agreed. "But it didn't stick."

"He could do worse, like [Petrifying] you," Kairos pointed out. The satyr flinched at the mention of the status ailment. "Thanatos hates you as much as an incarnation of death can hate anyone, and he's had a long time to think how to get around your immortality."

"Maybe you're right... but I can't hide from him forever either." Nessus glanced at the morning sun. "Thanatos and I are two sides of the same coin. One way or another, we'll settle our old rivalry in this era. For better or worse."

Kairos didn't like his tone. "Nothing ominous at all."

"You have committed many crimes, old one," Andromache whispered. "You can't atone if you die."

"You haven't lived more than once," Nessus replied.

"No, but I have existed for centuries beyond count." Andromache put her arm around Kairos. "And there is always something worth living for."

The satyr didn't look convinced, but offered a small nod. "I'll think about it."

"In any case, I'll fulfill your wish," Kairos declared. "I will send a message to Julia to warn her of our return, and we will spend winter preparing to conquer the dungeon."

It was time to return to Travia, and bring a sunset down on the old gods.

37: Home Sweet Home

When the *Foresight* returned home, its crew found snow falling on Histria.

Deep clouds obscured the sun and showered the shores with a thin layer of ice. The smoke of fires rose from the cities' countless chimneys, warming the citizens in their homes. After enjoying the Valian warmth, Kairos had no choice but to put a heavy coat over his armor so as not to shudder.

His entire fleet had returned to port to weather the winter, but the Travian captain noticed many more vessels than expected. Some he recognized as the Valian mercenaries hired to protect the myrmidon ambassadors, but also dozens of transport ships bearing the famous silver wolf flag of Lyce. Kairos counted at least eighty of those, including a very familiar galley.

"Sertorius," Kairos whispered to himself.

Indeed, his brother-in-law awaited on the docks alongside Aurelia and a large escort of Lycean legionaries. Sertorius had changed little since the last time Kairos saw him. He was still the same impeccably groomed Lycean diplomat, his crimson toga covered by a white lion's pelt. He had added a crown of golden laurels onto his short black hair, and stood with the unshakable confidence of a young conqueror.

But his eyes... they had changed from dark brown to pale blue, glittering like stars. When they gazed at Kairos, the captain felt as if they pierced through his body to see the soul inside.

A quick use of [Observer] confirmed Kairos' thoughts.

Julius Flavius Sertorius, the Inexorable Advance

Legend: Lawbringer (Hero)

Race: Human

Class: Spellcaster (Priest, Mage Rider, Pegasus Rider, Judge, Strategist, Inquisitor)

Level: 45

Sertorius had gained a [Legend] of his own.

"Welcome home, my son," Aurelia greeted Kairos as he made landfall. She exchanged a kiss with him, Cassandra, and Andromache. "I have longed for your safe return."

"Was there ever any doubt?" Kairos asked his mother.

"Nothing is ever certain in this world," she replied with a sad smile. "Julia kept me informed of your journeys, but you haven't answered in days."

"We tried, but couldn't." Apparently, Orgonos cloaked his island in powerful protections and no magical messages could get through. Kairos didn't miss Andromache's blank face at the mention of Julia.

And neither did Sertorius. The would-be conqueror observed the nymph with undecipherable eyes. Did he consider her a threat to his sister's position? Or beneath his notice? In any case he greeted his brother-in-law too, though not as warmly as Aurelia. Sertorius was a cold man, even with his family.

"Good to see you again, Kairos," the judge said with a sharp nod. "You too, Tiberius. Your father is very proud of your achievements."

"I have done little," Tiberius replied while Cassandra stood at his side like a shadow.

"Small actions can have far-reaching consequences. You have advised my brother-in-law well enough, and helped him navigate dangerous waters." Sertorius' gaze moved to Cassandra and betrayed a hint of approval. "Congratulations on your engagement by the way."

"My engagement?" Tiberius held his breath while Cassandra tensed. "Father gave me his blessing?"

"Of course he did." The Lycean Judge looked almost bemused. "Lady Cassandra greatly impressed him, and he will gladly welcome her as his daughter-in-law. I will be sure to attend the wedding."

While Tiberius and Cassandra exchanged a pleased smile, Sertorius lost interest in them and glanced at Kairos. "I see your adventures were successful. You have a new [Legend] in your crew, and broke the curse on Lady Andromache."

"You're not so unfortunate yourself," Kairos replied. "When did you become a [Hero]?"

"Recently." This time, Sertorius' blank expression transformed into a genuine smile. "In fact, I have you to thank for it."

"Truly?" Kairos blinked in surprise. "How so?"

"I had been preparing a vast purge of corrupt politicians and conspirators for the last two years," Sertorius explained. "Most took bribes from foreign powers, including Mithridates. Though I had already gathered a pile of evidence, the information you sent me about the Poison King's alliance was the tipping point. I publicly denounced our enemies' plot to destabilize the Republic, and had them all arrested. The trial shook our institutions so much that the System saw fit to reward me, though I had to survive a few assassination attempts in the process."

Kairos couldn't help but chuckle. "Are you telling me that you ascended through the power of the *law*?"

"Power is power, whether it comes from mastery over institutions or skill with a weapon," Sertorius replied. "In a way, I have slain many people with words and due process. The appealing thing about politics is that you can kill your foes more than once before it sticks."

And the fleet in Kairos' port was proof his strategy was just as effective as burning down cities. "So if you removed rival factions, you're now in de facto control of the Republic?" he asked his brother-in-law.

"I wouldn't go that far, Kairos, but Dispat and I are currently the dominant power-players in Lyce." No wonder he gained a [Legend] and ascended to [Hero] in short order. "A throne we will share with you, once we have conquered the Thessalan League and return triumphant."

Speaking of Lyce, Kairos noticed a very important person missing from this gathering. "Where is my wife?" he asked while Andromache looked away at the snowy skies.

"At the Temple of the Fates," his mother answered.

Kairos frowned. "We don't have Fates in Histria."

"We do now," Aurelia replied with a chuckle. "Thales found an entrance while digging our second cistern."

Kairos could see the hand of Fate at work.

"If you have time, I would suggest visiting this temple together," Sertorius told him. "It will be the opportunity to discuss our next moves."

The Travian King answered with a nod, before looking at his crewmates. "You're off-duty for the day," he declared. "You've earned a moment of rest."

His words were welcomed with resounding cheers and applause. The journey across the Sunsea had lasted months, and the crew was more than happy to enjoy some time-off with their families.

"I will set a statue of Orgonos in our temple, next to mine," Andromache said. "I believe he's earned it."

"Allow me to accompany you," Aurelia proposed gracefully, as she took the nymph's hands in her own. "I want you to tell me everything about your adventures at sea."

"I shall," Andromache replied with a grin. Seeing her beaming with joy warmed Kairos' heart.

Sertorius took Kairos aside, and they walked through the snowy streets of Histria under heavy escort. The city had kept growing since its king left, with warehouses and buildings growing like plants. The myrmidons had already started making themselves at home by taking over a patch of land near the southern wall, probably to dig a local embassy.

They had gone a long way since the early days when Histria was nothing but tents on muddy soil. The war camp had grown into a town, and soon it would evolve into a true city where all species could coexist. That was the dream Kairos would die for.

"Your concubine is pregnant," Sertorius stated bluntly as they walked.

Kairos flinched as if he had been slapped. "How do you know that?"

"My gaze has improved since we last met. I can see many things now, including a second strand of fate growing inside the nymph. Congratulations."

Truthfully, Kairos knew this would happen. Andromache had ridden him like a stallion all the way back home with the passion of a newlywed, and even taken fertility potions to help with the process.

Two children, Kairos thought. Two families. The idea made him feel both scared and excited. He was happy to be a father, and he would protect his progeny from anyone who dared to threaten them. *Romulus, Mithridates, let them come. I will slay them all.*

"Does that worry you?" Kairos asked Sertorius.

The judge responded with a shrug. "Julia was born from a concubine too, and she and I remained close all our lives. It all depends on how you raise your children, Kairos. Though I must warn you that I *will* defend my nephew's interests if they ever come to blows with their half-sibling."

"I wouldn't have expected anything else," Kairos admitted. "Did you come to witness the birth? If so, you're early. Your niece or nephew won't be born until late spring at least."

"Considering the attempt on my sister's life, I asked Julia if I could spend the next few months in your domain alongside some of my legions to better protect her," Sertorius admitted. Though his tone remained cold, Kairos detected an undercurrent of worry in his voice. Whatever his flaws and his willingness to marry her off for political gain, the Lycean Judge cared for his sister. "She graciously accepted."

"You are family and always welcome," Kairos replied. "Isn't it risky to leave Lyce for so long though?"

"Dispater defends our interests at home on my behalf. The attempts of a foreign power to interfere in our affairs caused quite an uproar, so our support is secure for now."

"Do as I say, not as I do?" Kairos said, knowing Lyce didn't hesitate to influence lesser nations.

"Power tastes all the better when sweetened with hypocrisy."

"How many men did you bring?"

"Two legions, so around ten thousand men," Sertorius said as they reached an open quarry on the southern side of Histria. Miners had dug out the gates of an ancient marble temple, hidden below ground. "The rest of them await in Lyce with Dispater. Considering the ideal position of your island, I thought it wise to use it as a naval base to transport troops to Thessala. With Zama now aligned with our foes, we will need to strike as soon as we can."

"I have defeated Teuta as well," Kairos added, "and taken her axe as proof."

"You did?" Sertorius didn't hide his joy. "Excellent. Between the increasing number of [Heroes] under your employ and your victories, you should establish your legitimacy as the only true Travian King."

"It depends on whom," Kairos admitted. "Hardliners and Teuta's most dedicated followers will never switch sides."

"It would be a waste to court them anyway. The undecided, the crafty ones eager to be on the winning side, the opportunists, those whose heart wavers... they are the ones you should convince. Most of Teuta's allies follow her because they fear her strength, and defeats kill fear."

He had a point. Most captains threw their support for Teuta because she was the older and more experienced warlord, while Kairos was young and relatively unblooded. The more he advertised his feats, the more people would rally to his cause.

"I will send propagandists to Travia," Kairos decided. Nausicaa couldn't help with exploring the Necromanteion due to being a mermaid, while Tiberius could put his eloquence to good use. "With luck and time, Teuta's support at home will crumble."

"Do not waste time," Sertorius advised. "Teuta won't stay weakened forever. Did Julia inform you that your rival had another [Hero] in her employ?"

"She did." Kairos always knew Castor was an agent provocateur, but he never imagined that the man would ascend into a [Hero]. "When we traded information through my [Idols], Julia informed me of a theory she made. That [Legends] were growing more common, heralding the beginning of a new Age of Myths."

"Her intuition is correct," Sertorius confirmed. "The Senex keeps detailed records of these things. More [Heroes] have popped up this year than in the last century, and groups like the Beast Cult have grown more active."

The mention of Lycaon's cult made Kairos tighten his hands in wrath. "Did you investigate Romulus?"

"I did," Sertorius replied calmly as they descended into the quarry. To think the Moirae kept a temple hidden there for so long... "Your mother confirmed that she had brothers, though she couldn't tell which of them inherited the werewolf curse. They are all listed as deceased in the records, but the cult could have faked their deaths. I have brought all the paperwork to study for the winter."

"You think a dangerous [Demigod] left a paper trail?"

"You underestimate the power of bureaucracy, my friend. Unless you have a better lead?"

Kairos' silence was an answer in itself. Searching through paperwork didn't sound like the best option to identify Romulus, but it was the only one available for the moment. "He will come back for her... and for you."

"I know." Sertorius' jaw clenched in frustration. "I underestimated the cult. I thought they were rabble, and while I heard rumors that they were led by a [Demigod], I remained skeptical. Dispatier in particular dismissed this information as propaganda. The confirmation of Romulus' existence changes everything."

"How did Julia take it?" Kairos had seen her shaken, but his wife was very proud and kept her feelings to herself. He wanted to help her, and wondered if her brother had advice to give.

"Poorly," Sertorius replied. "My sister hates feeling weak above all else, and this vile [Demigod] forced her to acknowledge her limits. Neither does she take her pregnancy well. She does her duty and already loves the child, but the idea of staying at home for months infuriates her."

"I can imagine," Kairos said. "I hate feeling vulnerable too."

"This is something we have in common." For a moment, Sertorius' mask of control briefly slipped to show the man underneath. "My family crafted an impenetrable armor, Kairos. One made of money, connections, and armies. Romulus showed us how vulnerable it truly is."

"[Legends] are the only real power. Everything else follows." Kairos knew that all too well. If he hadn't gotten one, he would have remained a nobody.

"Indeed. My sister is looking into ways to gain one, and I will admit I hoped to use the Thessalan war to become a [Hero] myself. Fate smiled on our family earlier than expected, and when Romulus comes for us, we shall be ready."

"On another note, I have a method to better protect ourselves from assassination attempts."

Sertorius offered a nod. "I have noticed your new Skill. Indeed, I would be grateful if you could share it with me and Julia, though we should test its limits first. If this divine blessing protects us from all divination spells, it might include our own and complicate matters in the future."

The two walked past marble columns and into the temple of the Fates. It was an exact copy of the one in Lissala, where Kairos received his first Quest. The moment felt as if it happened a lifetime ago.

The duo found Julia at the temple's center, talking with one of the Fates in the middle of a ring of marble pillars. Kairos' wife wore a wolf pelt like her mother-in-law, but his gaze immediately noticed her swollen belly. Julia was well past the first trimester now, and it started to show.

"We have been waiting for you, mortals," the Moira said with an inhuman voice. Like her siblings, the ancient hag took the shape of a hunched humanoid figure. Her robes and cowl

were as black as night, while her visage appeared like a reflection of the night sky. A brilliant sun and a moon served as her eyes.

"Husband," Julia smiled upon seeing Kairos again. He immediately moved to hold her in his arms and kiss her on the mouth. His wife's lips weren't as passionate as Andromache's, but they felt warm and welcoming. "How good it feels to hold you in my arms again..."

"I missed you," Kairos replied. Andromache was right; he did develop feelings for her. Not quite the passion he felt for the nymph, but a genuine sense of respect and affection. "I wish I could have returned sooner, but things didn't go as planned."

"The gods make a mockery of our plans," Julia replied with a laugh. "Though I admit I never expected you to ally with Cetae. They even sent an ambassador lurking in the waters near our port."

"Have you set a statue for Hybris in our temple?" Kairos asked, slightly amused.

"Not yet. He's not popular on the surface, though I think we can justify adding one of his [Idols] to our collection if we do it wisely." Julia pinched his cheek gently. "Yours will always be the greatest."

"Will we set another in this temple?" He asked his wife, his hands moving to her back. "Why did you come here?"

"Aglaonice found the location of the [Necklace of Harmonia], but since I am..." Julia glanced at her belly. "Not quite ready for adventures yet, I wanted to know if the Quest would count as fulfilled if I sent agents to recover it. And of course, she answered cryptically."

"There is more than one solution to a Quest," the Moira declared. "It is possible for you to fulfill its conditions indirectly, so long as you were the architect behind the success. It all depends on the circumstances."

"I would have preferred a 'yes' or 'no,'" Julia replied, "but I guess we will see when we cross that bridge."

"How is it that this temple was buried under Histria?" Kairos asked the Moira. "Did you predict a settlement would rise above it?"

"My sister gave you a hint of your destiny when you last met in Orthia," the hag replied. "Those with the potential to become myths will find their way to our temples. You have planted the seeds of many future [Heroes], from men to minotaurs and monsters. One day they shall visit me, and receive their Quest."

"Will I be the first?" Kairos asked. "I intended to visit your sister in Lissala and receive one."

To his welcome surprise, the arbiter of fate assented to his request. "You were not ready, but now you are. By choosing the path of leadership, you bound your destiny to your crew and allies. Their strength is your strength. It is time for you to ascend to a higher level, or perish. Will you accept my trial, and vow to fulfill it?"

"I swear," Kairos said immediately.

"Then I bestow a Quest upon you, Griffin King. May you soar in the skies and conquer the heavens."

A notification immediately appeared before Kairos, full of promises and dangers.

Quest Trial: Sunset on the Old Gods

The fires of the Anthropomachia burned the old gods to cinders, but embers remain. The machinations of Circe and Thanatos have allowed an ancient sun to rise from beyond the horizon. Only by destroying it once and for all will mortals keep their freedom.

*Destroy [**Helios, the Sun that Was**] and prevent him from opening the Gates of Tartarus.*

Reward: 30 Skill Points, and ascension to [Demigod].

Kairos showed his Quest notification to his wife and brother-in-law. Julia couldn't help but gasp, and even the unflappable Sertorius allowed himself to smirk.

The message was clear.

Either Kairos would conquer the Necromanteion and reach even greater heights, or perish with his kingdom.

"A [Demigod]..." Julia whispered. "I know you had the potential to rise high, husband, but to be offered this opportunity at your age... I am impressed."

"There is no time to waste," Sertorius declared. "You need to fulfill this Quest before spring."

"Indeed," Kairos agreed. The planetary alignment would happen soon, and becoming a [Demigod] would put him on an even footing with Zama. "Will you lend us your strength?"

"Of course," his brother-in-law said with a nod. "My legions are eager for a drill."

"I had Thales map out the first and second floors of the Necromanteion, husband," Julia declared. "We have gathered a great deal of information."

Perfect. "Gather everyone tomorrow morning," Kairos decided. "It is time we plan another dungeon expedition."

38: Expedition Preparations

It had been months since Kairos last slept in his own bed.

Though he had grown used to the *Foresight's* cabin and the guest rooms on his journey had been quite comfortable, he felt more at peace in his fortress in Histria. Perhaps he subconsciously associated it with the idea of 'home,' the same way he valued the old family house in Lissala. Or maybe there was something magical about enjoying a warm room with a private fireplace while snow fell against a closed glass window. After spending so many weeks fighting, plotting, and traveling, Kairos could finally rest.

Or he would have, if Julia hadn't joined him beneath the blankets naked.

Kairos thought they would put off sex during her pregnancy, but if anything, his long absence had only made his wife more eager to make up for lost time. Their lovemaking was different from his nights with Andromache, as they had to experiment with new positions due to Julia's condition, but it was no less passionate.

When they finished, Kairos rolled to the side while Julia lay on her back. Her husband's eyes trailed to her belly, and the life growing inside it. "Do you know if it will be a girl or a boy?" he asked softly.

"Not yet," Julia replied while removing sweat from her forehead. "Your Titan protector shields the child from all forms of divination."

"Prometheus?"

"Who else but the Titan of Foresight can ruin divinations from afar? Even Orgonos needed to apply his mark to you first."

Point taken. Kairos made a note to set up a private shrine to the Titan in his home. Prometheus didn't seek worship and preferred to operate in secrecy, but the Travian king thought he deserved tribute. The ancient divinity had protected mankind since time immemorial, and guided Kairos' family from afar through difficult times.

"I missed you, husband," Julia whispered while her fingers trailed against his chest.

"Me too," he replied, though he couldn't suppress a wave of guilt.

Julia immediately noticed. "You're thinking of your nymph."

Kairos wasn't sure how to answer. Yes, he was thinking of Andromache. She had returned to the lighthouse in good grace and tried to respect their arrangement, but leaving her alone right after they finally lifted her curse felt shameful. He had a duty towards his wife and shared some affection with Julia, but his heart was pulled in two directions.

"My brother informed me of her pregnancy," Julia said with a sigh as she rested her head on a pillow. "Now I understand what she felt when she learned of mine."

"I've seen the gazes Caenis sends me when she sees us together," Kairos said. The handmaiden would have killed to stand in his place at Julia's side. "Have you ever wondered what your life would have been, if you could have married her?"

"Probably as many times as you imagined a future where you married Andromache." Julia let out a sigh. "Before our wedding, the thought of eloping with Caenis and leaving everything behind crossed my mind many times. My brother had a shorter reach than the one he has today, and I knew a few places where he wouldn't look for me."

"Travia?"

"No, husband." Julia chuckled. "Don't take it the wrong way, but I didn't think much of your homeland before we met. I intended to go to Achlys instead."

That made sense. "Your mother came from there, didn't she?"

"She did, and I still have distant relatives there. Caenis and I would have lived in peace among the amazons. They always look for seers, and I have many useful talents. It would have been a good life. Resisting this sweet call was probably one of my life's hardest decisions."

"Why didn't you go for it?"

"For the same reason why you didn't marry Andromache, I suppose. I wanted to rule, and leave my footprint in history." Julia looked a little regretful as she said it, but quickly regained her composure. "Would you have sacrificed Travia for love?"

"No," Kairos replied almost immediately. He had been willing to set aside alliances for Andromache's sake, but if he had the choice between never seeing her again and saving his people from destruction, he would always choose his homeland. "Love is sweet, but duty lasts forever."

"Spoken like a king," Julia said with approval. "I love Caenis, but... there is too much to do. I feel a duty to the people of this land too, husband. I want to make sure women have more freedom than I ever enjoyed in Lyce. And once his ambitions are fulfilled, my brother will

reform Lyce for the better; that's why I support him now, besides our family ties. Maybe your mother will see him repeal the werewolf laws in her lifetime."

"Mother would love it," Kairos agreed. In the deepest recesses of her heart, Aurelia had never given up on returning to her homeland one day.

Julia caressed her belly. "I hope our child and their half-sibling will get along. In this treacherous world of ours, you can only truly count on family."

Kairos put his arms around her shoulder, allowing Julia to rest her head against his chest. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For Romulus," Kairos whispered, his wife tensing up. "He is family. I can feel it in my bones, and that's the only thing that makes sense. But, I swear to you... he'll never touch you again."

Julia looked away at the frozen window. "Did I ever tell you why I learned how to swing a sword?"

"Because you wanted to defend yourself?"

"Yes," she whispered back. "Lycean noblewomen are expected to rely on their family and male parents for protection, but I always hated feeling helpless. I wanted a way to assert myself, and where words failed, swords worked."

"Is that why you went alone to scout Teuta's territory?" Though he tried to sound supportive, Kairos couldn't suppress his scolding tone. "You didn't just endanger yourself."

"That was foolish, I know; I have no excuses. I wanted to feel the thrill of freedom one last time before being forced to spend the next few months at home." Julia's expression twisted into a frown. "I think jealousy played a part too."

"Jealousy for Andromache?"

She raised an eyebrow. "How did you guess?"

"Because I'm starting to know you." And because he had a similar discussion with Andromache in Vali. The two women contrasted like night and day on some points, but resembled one another closely on others.

Julia couldn't help but smile, though it looked bittersweet. "I was jealous of your nymph. I still am. Even when she suffered from her curse, she had enough power to do what she wanted. She can blast anyone who dares to threaten her with flames and lightning, while I could only beg for Romulus' mercy."

"You couldn't have done anything else."

"And that's the problem, husband. I want to have options. I feel grateful for your offer to slay Romulus for me, but... I want the ability to defend myself, and our child too. What happens if someone comes for us, and you're not here?"

"I'll help you fulfill your Quest then," he said while kissing her on the cheek. "Just tell me where to find that [Necklace of Harmonia], and I will put it around your neck myself."

Julia caressed his lips with her index finger. "You must be the first man to offer a cursed necklace to his wife. Another woman would worry about your intentions."

"But not you."

"No," she said as her hand moved to stroke his hair. "Do you know the necklace's story?"

"It was made by Hephaestus as a poisoned gift to Aphrodite's bastard daughter by Ares," Kairos said, remembering his mother's stories. "Harmonia passed it down to her daughter Semele, who soon burned giving birth to Dionysus."

Come to think of it, he should ask Nessus if he had any advice about Julia's Quest. The old god's mother died because of the artifact, so he probably understood its inner workings.

"Afterward, it passed on to countless women and ruined each of them," Kairos recounted. "Queen Jocasta, Eriphyle, Arsinoe... and many more with names forgotten to time. I think it was lost after a time?"

"The tyrant Phyllus offered the necklace to his mistress, only for her son to burn her alive alongside her worldly treasures," Julia finished the tale. "I had Aglaonice look into what came of it afterward with divinations, and she provided."

"At least that infuriating sphinx made herself useful." Kairos could barely stand her presence.

"I have grown fond of her. She is treacherous and untrustworthy, but amusing." Julia chuckled to herself, as if laughing at a private joke. "The last victim's son recovered from his madness once the flames consumed his family, and his sin brought him great guilt. For the crime of murdering his own mother, the Furies hounded him relentlessly. The poor

wretch sought atonement, and decided to ask his mother's soul for forgiveness by performing the [Nekyia] ceremony."

Kairos knew of that ritual all too well. Cassandra performed it in Achlys to help lift the undead curse that plagued the *Argo*. Since the events Julia narrated happened before the Anthropomachia, there was only one place where Nekyia could have been performed.

"He went to the Necromanteion," Kairos guessed.

Julia confirmed with a slow nod. "The temple's anti-divination wards prevented Aglaonice from figuring out what happened inside the dungeon... but when our man left it, he no longer carried the necklace and the Furies let him rebuild his life."

Kairos immediately figured out the sequence of events. "He performed the ritual, received absolution from his mother's soul, and left the [Necklace of Harmonia] behind in the dungeon so it wouldn't harm anyone else ever again."

"I thought as much, husband. Which is why I spent the last few weeks supervising forays into the Necromanteion from afar. I would have hunted it myself if I could, but..." She looked at her belly. "Our child takes higher priority."

Nessus' rivalry with Thanatos, Kairos' Quest, Julia's necklace, Andromache's grudge against Circe, and the calamity prophesied by Prometheus... they all led to the Necromanteion. Too many coincidences. Kairos saw Fate's hand at work, weaving the threads of destiny towards a single conflict.

"I will recover it for you," he promised.

His wife smiled, undaunted by the necklace's dangerous reputation. "I pondered what you said to me, husband, when I questioned if finding the necklace was worth the hassle. You pointed out that the curse could be lifted."

"I still think it can." If Orgonos could unmake a curse crafted by the goddess of hexes, then Hephaestus' trap could be disabled. "Quests' summaries can be misleading and we learned that to our cost in Achlys. Maybe finding the necklace is only half the journey, and you will need to purify it afterward."

"I hope I won't have to burn our house for that though."

Julia's hand moved to their bed table, opening a small compartment and bringing out a pair of scrolls. She opened them while still resting against Kairos' chest, letting him see the contents.

Maps.

He immediately recognized the first scroll as a detailed plan of the Necromanteion's first floor, which he and a small party had already explored. The second map however represented some kind of underground lake, fueled by a river and with four major islands. Two more waterways led to an enormous, mostly uncharted blackspot to the left.

"I sent cartographers alongside adventurers to explore the dungeon," Julia explained. "The second level is only accessible by boats or swimming, as it is linked to the first level by an underground river. Considering it is linked to the lava and ice rivers outside the temple, we can assume it is the infamous Acheron."

Kairos couldn't help but chuckle. His return only distracted his wife for a few hours before she decided to jump back to business. "What's the size ratio between the two maps?" he asked her.

Julia pointed at the smallest island on the upper left corner of the map. "This one is as large as all of level one," she explained, before pointing at a larger landmass closer to the center. "And this one was big enough to establish an outpost."

So the second level was over ten times larger than the previous floor, and there were two more to go according to Aglaonice. "Adventurers progressed far," he observed. "How many answered the call?"

"Hundreds," Julia replied. "Most are warriors from Travia eager to win a [Legend] and fortune like you did. You inspired many of your citizens, and even people from Lyce."

That was all Kairos ever hoped for. To show the Travian people that they could rise to something higher than piss-poor pirates struggling for survival. And yet... "Did you check their backgrounds? Some of them could be spies."

Julia squinted at him in silent disapproval.

"[Spymaster]?" Kairos deadpanned.

"I smelled a few rats sent by Teuta and Mithridates," his wife replied. "They're sleeping with the fishes in the ocean. You can interrogate them with your ship if you want."

"I will take you at your word."

"Our trustworthy and vetted adventurers killed a guardian monster here," Julia explained by pointing at a rightmost island, "but our outpost struggles with undead attacks. They

robbed many tombs and gathered many treasures, but found no trace of the necklace... nor of a pathway to the third level."

"Why is the black spot to the left uncharted?" Kairos asked. While the rest of the map was particularly detailed, this part of the floor remained dark and blurry.

"Because all those who enter it suffer from an eternal [Sleep] effect; one that we haven't been able to lift from the victims yet. Anyone who approaches the area falls into a deep slumber without fail. As an automaton, Thales is immune to the ailment and he managed to bring back survivors to safety. They are waiting at the hospital."

Kairos considered it likely that the path to the third level awaited somewhere in this area, but bypassing the effect would prove difficult. "Did Thales explore the area further?" he asked Julia.

"He offered to, but I put down my veto. He might be a [Hero] now, but direct combat isn't his main strength." Kairos couldn't argue with his wife's point. "Instead, he offered to build more automatons to escort him."

"He can do that now?" Kairos asked, suddenly interested. He knew that reproduction was Thales' dream, his Quest.

"He hasn't found a way to imbue his creations with a soul, but he discovered how to create mindless automated machines." Julia gave her husband a coy look. "Didn't you gain a new crafting Skill?"

"I did," he replied with a smirk. He could already see the possibilities.

"Thales brought back some samples of the water from around this area," Julia explained. "Early tests show that it erases the short-term memories of those who drink it."

"The river Lethe," Kairos guessed and connected the dots. "There was a god who made his lair near the river's source."

"Hypnos, the late god of sleep," Julia confirmed. "From what we gathered, we can assume the waterways lead to his old lair, the Cave of Sleep."

"I thought he was gone though?" According to the late Rhadamanthe's tales, Hypnos and the deities of dreams were all subsumed by a new god during the Anthropomachia. This deity, Murmur, was among the most elusive of the Sunsea's deities. The only proof of its existence was the fact it empowered priests and punished those who harmed its cults with deadly nightmares.

However, now that he had learned more about deities, Kairos started to doubt this story. Hypnos was a brother of Thanatos, an aspect of the world and the [Sleep] ailment. As a personification of the Fate System, his [Legend] shouldn't have been stolen.

Could he still be alive?

"Whether Hypnos survived or not, his power remains," Julia replied as she set aside the maps. "I sent a message to Thales, recalling him to Histria. I know you want to attack the dungeon now, husband, but I suggest you take longer to prepare. It is possible you might encounter a point of no return during your descent, with no possibility of further reinforcements."

Kairos couldn't deny the possibility, no. Especially since Thanatos was aware of their forays. If the ancient Protogenoi was half as cunning as Nessus made him out to be, he would have prepared additional obstacles to prevent his foes from reaching the bottom.

In fact... Nessus had been part of Kairos' party during the first foray. There was no way Thanatos didn't recognize his reincarnated foe. The satyr would be targeted the moment he set foot again in the Necromanteion.

"How large is the outpost you established?" Kairos asked.

"Large enough to accommodate a regiment," Julia replied with pride. "I also set enough supplies for you to last weeks."

"You anticipated everything," he noted with a smirk.

"Like it or not, I am my brother's sister, Kairos of Travia. I always try to hedge my bets. The sleep barrier is an obstacle for now, but otherwise I did my best to prepare the terrain for you."

And he loved her for it.

As for the sleep barrier, Kairos' new [Telchine] crafting skills allowed him to create items worthy of [Heroes]. He had focused his efforts on creating legendary weapons for his followers, but with Andromache and Thales' expertise at his back, he didn't doubt that he could create keys for the Cave of Sleep.

At long last, Kairos would get to practice his craft.

39: Cogito Ergo Craft

Thales hadn't wasted time.

He had increased his workshop's size threefold while the Foresight's crew had been abroad, and the already large laboratory had turned into what Kairos could only call a factory. The air was thick with alchemical fumes and the smoke of forges; hammers shaped molten steel into weapons and armors. [Common] and [Elite] Crafters worked together across vast assembly lines churning out magical items, while healing potions boiled in vast glass tanks waiting to be bottled up.

The most impressive addition to the workshop were the automatons. As Julia had warned him, Thales' Skills had improved to the point where he could create more of them. Humanoid machines of wood and steel stood watch over the assembly lines, each of them wielding a polearm. A crystal eye served as their visage, and a bottle full of crackling lightning as their heart. These automatons didn't answer when called and lacked intelligence of any sort, but their existence alone was nothing short of impressive.

Kairos entered Thales' domain with Andromache, Sertorius, and Julia in tow—Andromache for her crafting expertise, Sertorius because he had promised to fund the expenses, and Julia because she had organized the entire workshop complex with Thales. His wife and concubine did their best to stand as far from each other as possible, with Sertorius standing in their midst like an impenetrable bulwark.

"As you can see, we have standardized processes much like a shipyard," Julia explained as they surveyed the assembly lines. Human magicians and satyr workers oversaw the melting of iron while minotaurs hit blazing swords with hammers. "We can produce a full set of hoplite armor every three days, and a sword in one. All for a fraction of a private blacksmith's cost."

"Impressive, my sister," Sertorius commented with approval. Common legionaries usually needed to provide their own equipment, and getting a cheaper source of material would only make them more efficient. "What about enchanted items?"

"They took longer to make obviously, but our choice to hire craftsmen from other nations is starting to pay off." Julia smiled at Kairos. "Our new Myrmidon friends offered to build siege weapons for us."

Friendship had its perks, though most items Kairos saw were Rank 2 and below. They were of good quality by the standards of common footmen and soldiers, but the factory couldn't even reproduce anything like his [Anemoi Spear] or Agron's [Songaxe].

Speaking of Agron, Kairos' group found him talking with Thales at the heart of the factory. The automaton had set up a table covered in various plans, schematics, and bottles of black liquid. Agron had offered his helmet to Thales, letting the automaton examine it. "Sir!" he declared upon seeing Kairos approach. "I am glad to see you are alive and well."

"I love what you have done with the place," Kairos said as the group sat at his and Agron's side. "How did you make these automatons work? I thought they needed a soul to move?"

"Alas, I have been unable to craft a sentient kindred yet," Thales admitted. "But my studies in the field of [Lightning] have shown me that electricity can be used to create movement. Since my batteries alone weren't effective enough, I had mages capture minor [Lightning Elementals] and sealed them as a power source."

"Like coal in a forge?" Agron asked.

"And it worked!" Thales declared with enthusiasm. "I can't make more than a few since [Lightning Elementals] are rare and difficult to catch, but the possibilities! The *possibilities!*"

"We are all proud of your work, Thales," Julia flattered him.

Her brother immediately focused on the military benefits. "The city of Thessala can field entire armies of automatons, and even create living siege engines. Perhaps we shall do the same one day."

"It's pretty far away," Agron said with a snort as he glanced at the soulless automaton guards. "They don't act unless asked to. I would take my crew over a thousand of these mindless soldiers."

"Discipline is a strength in itself," Sertorius argued. "An infantry force that cannot feel fear is one that never breaks."

While the Lycean judge and the minotaur captain argued over the benefits of discipline versus initiative in a war, Kairos focused on the tools Thales had gathered. His Skills identified the bottles' content as water from the river Lethe, but he paid more attention to Agron's helmet.

Horns of Hypnos

Rank: Armor 2.

Value: 8000 gold coins.

This helmet was consecrated for Hypnos, the late god of dreams, which automatically adapts to the wearer's face. The [Horns of Hypnos] grants the wearer [Sleep] Immunity, though they do not protect them from physical and mental fatigue. Additionally, the wearer can cast the [Sleep] spell thrice per day.

"Of course," Kairos whispered as he put the two and two together. "[Sleep] immunity... have you applied this helmet to the victims suffering from eternal slumber?"

Thales answered with a nod. "It instantly dispelled the effect, as I predicted. I suspect this artifact was deliberately put on the first floor as a subtle key to bypass the second floor's defenses."

"Or the tomb we took it from belonged to a servant of Hypnos," Kairos pointed out.

Andromache seized the helmet and examined it carefully. "I can make another, my other half," she declared with confidence. "The [Telchine Metalsmithing] Skill allows me to do so."

"Hypnos is gone though," Julia pointed out. "This item was consecrated in his name, and as far as we know he is no longer here to bless it."

"Even a dead god's rituals can still carry some of its power," Kairos replied. Nessus had lost his godhood, but some of Dionysus' rituals worked just as well. "I can make another as well, though I will need an assistant [Priest] capable of casting the [Sleep] spell and uttering prayers to Hypnos as I forge."

Sertorius stopped his debate with Agron to intervene. "Then I'm overqualified. Since it is a Rank 2 item, can [Elite] craftsmen mass-produce duplicates?"

"I'm afraid not, Lord Sertorius," Thales replied, his fingers fidgeting in frustration. "The enchantments are too complex for our smiths, and the odds of failure are quite high. Any mistake risks downgrading the [Sleep] *immunity* to mere *resistance*, which the Necromanteion's magical effect bypasses."

"Can you give us a report about your latest trip?" Julia asked softly. "I have already recounted earlier information to my husband, but maybe you discovered something else in the meantime."

Andromache's face briefly turned into a blank mask as she heard the word 'husband,' but she quickly adjusted her expression. *It still displeases her, but she's making peace with it,* Kairos thought.

"The situation on the second floor is stable for now, Lady Julia," Thales explained. "Chrysaor has taken over the outpost's defenses. Though shades attack them each night, they're manageable without the Lamia guardian."

"Chrysaor?" Kairos asked.

Julia enlightened him. "A Lycean adventurer who slew the Lamia guardian on the second floor. He earned a [Legend] from her, though he didn't become a [Hero]."

"He started out as a [Common] who got a lucky shot?" Kairos guessed. The story sounded quite familiar to his own.

"I'm sure you will get along," his wife replied with a wide grin. "I heard he is a [Crafter] though. A peasant you inspired to take up arms for coin and glory."

"I would be glad to meet him," Sertorius said with a happy nod. "Lyce needs more [Legends] in these trying times."

"You already have *hundreds*," Kairos pointed out, amazed by his brother-in-law's greed. "More than any other nation."

"You of all people should understand that peace can only be enforced through a monopoly on [Heroes]," Sertorius replied calmly. "An [Elite] with a [Legend] outside our influence could very well become the next Mithridates or Teuta. We need to recruit as many as we can, before they can evolve into future threats."

"I saw Chrysaor first, brother," Julia replied, though her tone remained friendly. Though they were family, she obviously wanted to keep as many potential future [Heroes] under Histria's influence.

Kairos pondered Sertorius' words, as they cast light on his thinking. His brother-in-law wanted his family to rule the Sunsea; in his mind, he could only achieve that goal by either recruiting or eliminating any potential competition.

Sertorius had recruited Kairos by making him family, and would eliminate Mithridates, Teuta, and all their followers. Would he go after the likes of Prince Hadad if he kept sitting on the fence? Kairos didn't wish to go to war with the whole world and rule over a grave.

"You said shades," Agron grunted at Thales. "Are they different from the undead we fought in Achlys?"

"These spirits are incorporeal and are immune to conventional weapons," Thales replied. "Magical weapons and spells affect them normally though. A single blow is enough to cause them to collapse into nothingness. Nor can they cross magical barriers. The outpost was sanctified by [Priests] and [Idols], so they cannot break in."

"They're probably dead shades waiting for Charon to carry them across the Styx to their afterlife," Agron said while nodding to himself. "He has only one skiff, and thousands die each day."

Which means the dungeon's third layer must be located inside the Underworld itself, Kairos thought. He hoped they wouldn't face the likes of Cerberus, Charon, or the Furies. The Underworld housed a dangerous amount of [Demigods], and Thanatos might have allies among them.

"Speaking of skiffs, Lord Kairos, we will need a special boat to travel below the second level." Thales pointed at the bottled waters of the Lethe river. "My experiments show that this substance erases memories on contact. A boat accident... would be perilous."

"You have been traveling normally with standard boats so far," Sertorius pointed out.

"There is a high possibility that we will have to cross other Underworld rivers to reach into the deeper levels, Lord Sertorius."

"The Lethe and the Styx are dangerous enough, but no wooden boat can withstand the fires of the Phlegethon," Agron added. "A shame the *Foresight* is too big to travel underground."

Kairos considered the problem, and seized one of the Lethe water bottles. After a moment of consideration, he opened it and sipped the liquid while ignoring Thales' protests. "Sir, wait!"

The Travian expected something sour and terrible, but instead, it tasted like... nothing.

Nothing at all. The liquid lacked any sensation at all, and seemed to drain the very taste from Kairos' tongue. His lips felt numb and lifeless.

[Oblivion] ailment negated by [Stygian Curse]!

"Sir, do you..." Thales joined his hands in worry. "Do you remember us?"

"Yes, I do. My [Telchine] subclass protects me from the rivers' negative effects." Kairos said as he put the bottle aside. He had to lick his lips to feel anything on them. "I wouldn't recommend drinking this water though. It feels... odd."

"Be thankful, husband," Julia said with a hint of scolding. Had she worried for his health? "The last man who drank from it couldn't remember his own name."

Thales showed more enthusiasm, and looked at his leader as if he were some kind of wonderful curiosity. "I thought the [Telchine] were extinct. I didn't know a human could access this subclass... fascinating."

"The Telchines rowed on the river Styx, if I remember well," Agron noted.

"They used special skiffs based on Charon's," Andromache replied. "The [Telchine Sorcery] Skill gives us insight into the spells they used to master the Underworld's rivers."

"We could create a skiff capable of traveling through them," Kairos said, "but it would be costly."

"Money isn't a problem," Sertorius declared. "Time is. How long will it take to forge a new set of [Horns of Hypnos]?"

Kairos' Skill immediately gave him the answer. "At least a week for each [Horn of Hypnos]. Plus another week for the skiff if we all work together. As Thales stated, [Elite] Crafters can help with the materials, but not the spells nor the assembly process."

"We can all work on a separate helmet to cut time," Andromache suggested. "A priest is only needed in the final stretch of the crafting process."

Sertorius remained unconvinced. "Making six of them will still take two to three weeks, nearly a month if we include the boat. Considering the second level's size, it might take us days if not more to explore the third and fourth. We cannot afford to outfit an army, and we do not need to. A small special force will be enough."

"Agreed," Kairos said. "I suggest we form a party of seven: Andromache, Cass, Nessus, Agron, Thales, me, and you Sertorius. Rook benefits from my protective magical effects thanks to [Animal Companion], so he should be fine if I wear a helmet."

Sertorius raised an eyebrow. "We are all [Heroes] except the satyr. Why invite him?"

"We will need someone specialized in disabling traps."

"You cannot deceive a judge's eyes, Kairos," his brother-in-law declared, more amused than anything. "Why are we bringing the satyr with us?"

Damn it, did he have a truth-reading Skill? "It's not for me to say," Kairos admitted. His friend was entitled to his privacy. "But Nessus' destiny lies with the Necromanteion. He will play an important role in this denouement."

Sertorius' face remained a blank mask, but he offered a sharp nod. "I see," he said with an air of finality.

Andromache squinted at the Lycean, and Kairos immediately wondered if putting these two in the same team might have been a bad idea. They had remained icily polite to each other so far, but civility didn't translate to camaraderie. Thales was part of the crew, now and forever, but Sertorius was an outsider; an in-law.

We'll have to see how this team fares in the field, Kairos thought before focusing on the matter at hand. "This makes a skiff and five [Horns of Hypnos] to make," he declared. "Agron already has one, and Thales won't need one thanks to his racial immunities."

Thales quickly made calculations. "I believe we can be ready within three weeks."

"A month," Agron stated bluntly.

The automaton shifted on his chair. "I am certain we can optimize processes and—"

"A month," Agron repeated himself. "I know you, crafters. When you say three weeks, you mean one month."

In the end, Agron proved to be overly optimistic. They blew his deadline by three days.

For a whole month, Kairos left most of Histria's rulings in Julia's capable hands and dedicated himself to crafting; by the end, he almost considered Thales' workshop a second home. It wasn't as if he could do much otherwise. Winter was a slow season, with everyone staying at home to gather around the fires. Even the over-enthusiastic Rook rarely left his nest.

Truth be told, Kairos enjoyed the peace and monotony. His trip had left him exhausted, and it felt good to simply slow down for once.

The news from Travia bothered him, however.

Kairos had sent Tiberius, Nausicaa, and his mother to his homeland for the winter, to both offer food relief and weaken Teuta's support base. Surviving members of her fleet had already spread the word of her defeat, and though a few warlords remained steadfastly loyal to the pirate queen, others had already withdrawn their support. More and more previously indecisive cities called to join Kairos' federation, as they feared being on the losing side.

However, Teuta's response bothered her rival. Instead of trying to turn the tide, the pirate queen had ordered her fleets to burn their secret factories and prepare to cross to Thessala as soon as she gave the signal.

This could only mean one thing.

Mithridates' weapon was operational, and the Poison King didn't want anyone to figure out how it worked. And Teuta thought its power would cause Travia to fall in line, so she didn't bother trying diplomacy. She only believed in strength.

But to prove his weapon's power, Mithridates needed to make an example.

Julia had tripled sea patrols around their colony to avoid any surprise attack, while Histria's fleets were ready to act at a moment's notice. Her brother's presence made an attack tempting, but somehow Kairos didn't believe Mithridates would go for it; killing Sertorius before he attacked the League first would only harden Lyce's resolve to see the Poison King destroyed.

Thessala is holding the Olympic Games, and Mithridates will be present, Kairos thought. I will need to watch those events carefully. He didn't think the city-state was at risk, not as long as the [Demigod] Talos protected it... but Mithridates had surprised him in the past and might do so again.

Besides weaving spells inside copies of the [Horns of Hypnos] and the wood used for their skiff, the Travian warlord experimented with the river samples collected by Thales. As Kairos suspected, his [Poison Brewer] Skill allowed him to refine the Lethe river's waters into bombs and chemical weapons. The ability to erase people's memories could prove invaluable in the field, if used right. Kairos made a note to set up a water-extraction operation in the second level once they had conquered the dungeon.

In the end, it took a while, but Kairos and his fellow crafters could finally gaze at their masterpiece.

Carved from blackened wood, their skiff would make Charon proud. Made of wood as black as night and covered in fiery glyphs, the boat could house more than seven people at once;

its head ended in a griffin's face, as Kairos knew Rook would sulk otherwise. A long black rod completed the picture.

Telchine Skiff.

Rank: Vehicle 3.

Value: 25000 Gold Coins

A boat used by the extinct Telchine race to travel across the Underworld. The skiff can carry up to eight people and protect them from the five rivers of Hades so long as they remain in contact with it. Additionally, shades of the dead will mistake the passengers for fellow undead and will not attack them.

"Strange," Kairos said. "So far, every Rank 3 item I've seen has been registered as priceless."

"Because they are unique, sir," Thales explained. "So the Fate System usually defaults to 'priceless' when there isn't a market for a particular item."

Which implied that more than one [Telchine Skiff] still existed in the world. Still, twenty-five thousand gold coins was a hefty price; only nations or wealthy investors could buy one. Building this skiff had cost Kairos and his team far less than the marked price, but he was thankful to Sertorius for covering the material fees.

Necromanteion, Kairos thought, here we come.

40: The Darkest Dungeon

The Necromanteion's entrance had changed a great deal since Kairos had left.

A fortified camp had grown at the central mountain's feet, shielded by trenches, spikes, and earth walls. Most 'houses' were temporary amenities like huts and tents, but wooden buildings had risen with Kairos' [Idol] at its center: an inn catering to adventurers, an alehouse, an infirmary...

According to Julia, people nicknamed this new settlement '*Kairos' Gate*' after him. It took days for the Travian King and his escort to reach it, as snow made the colony's few roads difficult to travel. Julia had also insisted on following her husband and brother-in-law to the dungeon's entrance, her heavy pregnancy necessitating a litter carried by two minotaur workers. Agron, Nessus and other warriors carried the [Telchine Skiff] with ropes, while Rook and Andromache flew above the group. The nymph had experimented with her shapeshifting to transform into elementals, becoming as free as the wind... in more ways than one.

"I never imagined I would get a litter one day," Kairos said as he helped his wife climb down from the chair. His [Golden Fleece] kept him warm, while she carried a heavy fur mantle; spellcasters had shielded her with [Frost Resistance] spells all the way to the settlement. "It's a strange experience."

"You have carried the weight of thousands on your shoulders, husband," Julia reminded him. "What goes around, comes around."

Kairos couldn't help but chuckle in response, as he put his arm around his wife's. His [Idol] and the cacodaemon Eurynomos occupied the settlement's center, protected by guards; a trio of Travian adventurers had come to pay homage to the statue, begging it to heal one of their own. The [Idol] shone with a bright light, erasing scars from the skin while its monstrous keeper watched.

However, it was another creature that caught Kairos' attention.

"Manling, there you are!" Aglaonice greeted the king and his entourage from atop a pillow throne. The annoying sphinx was currently engaged in some kind of hourglass-timed board game with a luckless soldier biting his nails in frustration. Three more men were massaging the feline's back, while a woman tended to a campfire to keep her warm. None of them looked happy to serve. "Care to play with me?"

Though Kairos forbade her from playing lethal games, the wily sphinx seemed to have found a loophole. He glanced at her game, which took the shape of multiple tilts; most were turned, but a few revealed colored letters. "What are the rules?"

"So glad you asked," Aglaonice said with a pompous and eminently infuriating expression. "Each tilt on this eight per eight cube hides a colored letter, associated in pairs; together, these letters must be used to form the correct answer to the riddle. You must memorize their location before I turn the tilts, and then write the answer to my riddle. All of this before the hourglass runs out, of course."

"Uh-huh," Kairos replied with a nod. Why were her games getting more and more complicated each time he saw her? "And I suppose they get eaten if they guess wrong?"

"A manling after my own heart, but you are wrong," Aglaonice replied. "If they lose, they must become part of my harem for a year."

Kairos squinted at her.

"My *intellectual* harem." Aglaonice feigned outrage. "Do you take me for a sphinx of loose morals? We have intense mental workouts and board game nights, nothing more."

"What is always in front of you but can't be seen?" one of her servants said with a maddened look. "It's the future, not death..."

"Shush," Aglaonice said. "Trade secrets."

Somehow, Kairos wondered if serving as the sphinx's intellectual sparring partner for a year might not have been worse than torture. "Why would anybody make that wager?"

"If they win, they gain a treasure," Aglaonice said, before looking at her hourglass while her poor sparring partner tried to reveal the right tilts. "Of course nobody did, and that won't change anytime soon."

"You forget yourself," Julia said with a smug smirk. "I won our last match."

Aglaonice responded with a venomous, hypocritical grin. If looks could kill, Julia would have been hanged, quartered, and burnt to a crisp. "One night, we will have a passionate, wild chess game and I will make you eat these words. Alongside other things."

"You're welcome to try," Julia replied while the sphinx's current victim let out a scream of sheer frustration.

"Anyway, manling, do not forget our little pact," Aglaonice said while slouching on her pillows. "I want the rewards promised to me. It's already an annoyance that I can't see your future with all the anti-divination wards protecting you, so I want to hear it from your own mouth."

"You shall have what you were promised," Kairos replied with a shrug. If there was a dungeon left standing when they were done with it.

The escort moved to the dungeon's entrance, to its gates of Underworld miasma. Rook landed on the [Telchine Skiff], while Andromache regained her nymph form next to the boat. "Can't we squeeze the *Foresight* inside?" the griffin asked. "It feels weird to take another boat."

"We can hardly fit a warship through narrow corridors, brave bird," Andromache said with a smile.

"Then we just have to feed it mice! They're small, the ship will shrink! Problem solved!"

"Pure genius," Kairos replied with a chuckle. "I wish I'd thought of it."

"Of course it's smart, I said it," Rook said with innocence. "You should listen to me more often, Kairos."

"I'm not carrying the ship and the bird at once," Agron grunted. "He has legs, he can use them."

"But Kairos got a litter!" Rook protested, clearly understanding the minotaur. One of them must have invested in a new [Beast Tongue]-related Skill. "Why can't I have one? I have my face on your coins!"

Julia gave the scene a bemused smile, before turning to her husband and brother. "I hope you brought everything."

"We did," Sertorius replied, wearing a copy of the [Horns of Hypnos] and Lycean armor. He also carried a weapon of his own, a staff of chiseled blue crystal that Kairos immediately analyzed.

Aeon Staff

Rank: Staff 2.

Value: 5500 gold coins.

A powerful quarterstaff only granted to the greatest of Lyce's magisters as a symbol of authority. Effects can only be activated by a [Spellcaster] with the [Judge] subclass; when the user casts a spell, he can imbue it with a single word at will. If the spell's target fails a [Charisma] check opposite to the Spellcaster's, he must obey the word like a command at the exclusion of any other task. This is a [Mind] effect; [Demigod] and [God] Ranks automatically shrug it off.

"Quite powerful," Kairos commented.

"It won't help against Helios, but it should make our journey easier," Sertorius replied with a shrug. "Otherwise, I work better as support. You have little to fear from ailments so long as I am with you."

"I'll keep that in mind for our party composition." The Travian king had already allocated places for everyone; Nessus at the front to scout for traps, Agron and Kairos himself as the vanguard, the more fragile Thales and Sertorius in the center, Cassandra and Andromache at the rear. "Truth be told, Thales is the one I worry for the most. He doesn't fare well in direct confrontation."

"He has practiced slinging," Julia reassured him. "He promised he would bring you back to me alive. The both of you."

"There is nothing to fear," Sertorius replied with iron confidence.

Though he was less sure, Kairos couldn't help but nod in response. He hadn't fought a Nemean Lion, a dragon, a pirate queen, and prepared for a war with Mithridates only to perish in a dungeon's cave.

"I pray your optimism is not misplaced," Julia replied, her face full of concern. After a moment facing her brother, she suddenly took a step forward... and hugged him.

Sertorius flinched in surprise, his face a blank mask. Clearly, he hadn't expected the gesture, and Kairos suddenly wondered if the two siblings had ever enjoyed a moment of open affection. After a moment where he didn't react, the judge's expression eased up and he embraced his sister back.

Julia wordlessly broke the hug, only to embrace her husband next. "Come back alive," she said, her arms tightened around his waist. "If not for me or your throne, then for the child."

"I will," he promised while returning the hug. He felt Andromache's heavy gaze on his back... and Nessus observing him at the edge of his vision. "I will find the necklace."

"Your life matters more to me than a piece of jewelry, Kairos of Travia. Remember that." Julia broke the embrace. "I would not look well in black, and neither would your mother."

Kairos offered her a nod in response, before gathering with his team. Cassandra raised her bident, its flames melting the snow around her; Nessus readied Atalanta's bow, a glass eye replacing the one he had lost; Agron looked almost giddy, while Thales fidgeted in place from anxiety; Rook wagged his tail in impatience, Sertorius remained an impassable statue, and Andromache carried herself with the majesty of an ancient, powerful witch.

Was a more dangerous party ever assembled since the Argonauts?

Maybe we are their successors, Kairos wondered as he glanced at Cassandra's bident, which had once belonged to Jason of Iolcus. If Fate had a pattern that kept repeating itself, of sons overthrowing their fathers, then maybe his crew had been chosen to fulfill a role older than time. The actors changed, but the dance stayed the same. *But we won't end like them.*

Orgonos and Prometheus had said as much. Destiny could change, and humans had free will. They weren't bound to repeat past mistakes.

"Is everyone ready?" Kairos asked them one last time, everyone nodding at once. All of them carried supplies to last weeks.

"By now, you should know better than to ask," Cassandra said with a smile. "I followed you to the ocean's bottom, Kairos. I won't turn back now."

Rook nodded in appreciation. "I hate caves, but better buried than wet!"

"I feel this journey of ours escalated quite quickly from our friendly pirate adventures, but I did promise I would follow you to the Underworld if you asked," Nessus added. "I'm ready and waiting."

Then came Agron's turn, but instead of offering words of encouragement, the minotaur shrugged, grabbed the ropes holding the [Telchine Skiff], and dragged it through the miasma gates.

"We haven't even entered the dungeon, and someone already broke formation," Sertorius observed with deadpan wit, while Julia clearly struggled not to laugh.

Thales looked at the group in confusion. "Do we... keep the walking order or..."

"Great, now I have to catch up to the bull!" Nessus complained while stepping through gates. Cassandra face-palmed and walked in afterward.

Actions spoke louder than words, indeed.

Kairos shook his head as the party's members walked inside one after another, until he and Andromache closed the march.

"Are you sure you want to come?" Kairos whispered while glancing at her stomach. Andromache's pregnancy was only four weeks in, according to Sertorius, so changes weren't yet visible nor did it impair her performances. And yet...

"Would you rather have me wait for titans to storm out of this mountain?" The nymph shrugged. "Our child will die if we fail, or suffer under the old gods' yoke as I did. The best way to ensure her safety is to lend you my strength, my other half."

Kairos nodded slowly, and both walked into the mist while Julia watched on in silence.

As warned by Julia, adventurers had completely cleared the dungeon's first level. After facing monsters and puzzles during their first dungeon-delving attempt, Kairos found this run refreshing.

But he could tell something had changed in the Necromanteion.

The air was thicker, more oppressive. An invisible presence weighed on the party's shoulders as they carried the skiff all the way to the underground river linking the dungeon's first floor to the second. A ghastly stone face of Thanatos oversaw the buried waterway, its eyes shining with a ghostly green aura.

Eyes that had remained shut on their first visit.

"He's watching," Nessus said, as the group climbed on the boat.

"I shared Orgonos' blessing with everyone," Kairos pointed out.

"It blocks divination, Kairos, but this?" Sertorius pointed at the stone face with his staff. "This is an [Idol]."

Andromache pointed her own scepter at Thanatos' effigy and blasted it with a fireball. The flames licked the stone harmlessly. "Well, it was worth a try." Nessus shrugged.

"It was a message," the nymph replied angrily. For a second, she looked every bit like the hateful Scylla she had once been. "Thanatos has assisted Circe in her cruel schemes and now plots to bring her back. He deserves nothing but my contempt."

"Is it revenge that motivates you?" Sertorius asked, though he didn't sound like he cared for the answer. He was simply curious, like someone talking about the weather. "A grudge to settle?"

"No," the witch replied while shaking her head. "It is justice. I do not want to let anyone else go through what I did, and no one will."

"I will keep that in mind," Sertorius replied.

"As if you could understand," Andromache said as she followed him, a sneer on her face. "You don't have feelings."

"You are wrong. I simply don't let them affect my judgment."

"Will you support her cause though?" Kairos asked.

"Of course I will," his brother-in-law replied without hesitation. "I will help her pass the sentence too."

For the first time since they crossed paths, Andromache smirked at Sertorius; and not just for the wordplay.

Kairos had been wrong. He thought these two would be at odds, but a common foe did wonders for new friendships.

Once everyone had climbed on the skiff, Thales used a long rod to carry them down the current. The boat made no sound as it navigated the blackened waters, and Kairos stood at the ship's front with his [Anemoi Spear] to sense the air ahead. He didn't expect an obstacle yet—there were far better places for an ambush—but caution had never killed anyone.

The skiff glided down an endless cavernous waterway beneath a tall ceiling supported by obsidian pillars. The river went down ever so slightly, its waters as calm and silent as death. There was only darkness ahead, and dust to breathe.

After a while though, Kairos noticed that the waterway corridor wasn't a straight line; it instead coiled and swirled like an underground whirlpool digging ever below into the earth.

"How long is it?" Cassandra asked Thales, who had done the journey more than once.

"Almost one kilometer and a half," the automaton replied. "I suspect a similar length separates each level."

So the bottom reached five to six kilometers underground; to the very bowels of the Underworld.

And it showed. The deeper they descended the more the waters changed. First black and still, they grew more agitated with time. Kairos noticed forms under the surface, larger than fish, yet blurred and without substance.

"Kairos, look," Rook pointed at one of them with his beak. For a brief instant, a white skull reflected below the surface before dissipating into nothingness.

"The shades of the dead." Cassandra's face turned pale, as the place disturbed her. "I was among them once."

"I thought you lost your memories when you came back?" Sertorius asked. While the party was either confused or tense, he alone appeared as imperturbable as stone. Truth be told, Kairos was starting to find his serenity unnerving.

"How do you know that?" Cassandra asked with a frown.

"Lyce keeps records of cases such as yours," the judge replied. "Resurrections, *true* resurrections, are extremely rare but not unheard of. Lycaon himself had that power."

Kairos froze. "How so?"

"He is the god of murder. All of those who die by violent, dishonorable means fall under his purview, and sometimes he stays his hand; he was fond of reviving his victims and forcing them to serve him. Though I concede there hasn't been a case since he was sealed." Sertorius locked eyes with his brother-in-law, having read his mind. "I doubt Romulus is one such living revenant, but I can't exclude the possibility either."

"Are there other cases?" Nessus asked mirthfully. "Like Dionysus rising from the dead?"

"I have not heard of cases involving Dionysus." Sertorius turned to the satyr with an indecipherable gaze. "Should I have?"

"We aren't sure if Hypnos is alive or dead," Nessus shrugged. "And we thought Medea was dead too."

"In any case, I don't remember this place," Cassandra said. "But I *feel* I've been here before."

"Could you recognize areas?" Agron asked with a cunning gaze. "If you traveled from the Underworld back to the surface, maybe you could recognize the way to the bottom."

The more time Kairos spent around Agron, the more amazed he was by his insight. He had mistaken the minotaur for a brute, but his mind was as sharp as his axe.

"I can't say," Cassandra replied with a scowl. "Maybe?"

Soon after she said these words, the skiff finally reached the end of the spiraling waterway. The corridor opened into a vast, underground lake; but though the lighting was dim, it was not nonexistent. Will'o wisps floated high above the waters, forming a night sky of ghostly flames; blue, red, green, dancing in an eternal motion.

The dark waters rippled as the skiff skidded on the lake's surface, and Cassandra raised her bident to light the way better. A barren, rocky island appeared on the horizon, the stone walls of a fortified camp rising above its surface. Though Kairos could see the glow of torches coming from it, he didn't notice any other boat traveling across the waters. The adventurers occupying the second level had retreated to their base, perhaps to avoid the fury of the dead.

Kairos instinctively looked at the supply bag on his back. Somehow, he imagined the tablet Orgonos gave him throbbing in anticipation, waiting to be broken. The god of magic had promised them their help, but only once they reached the bottom; and Kairos had the feeling they wouldn't win without him.

But what had Orgonos promised Nessus?

Kairos glanced at the satyr, who looked at the waters with grim nonchalance. The immortal had never even hinted at his true identity in all his months of traveling with the *Foresight's* crew, and yet he had blatantly done so with Sertorius. Why?

Because he didn't care anymore. Because he thought it wouldn't matter.

Nessus didn't expect to survive the trip.

He didn't *intend* to.

And Kairos had to change his mind.

41: Underground Trade

Reaching the outpost turned out to be harder than expected.

The adventurers had fortified their small island by digging row after row of coiling ditches and pitfall traps around their settlement. After making landfall, Kairos' group had spent minutes following Thales' lead as the automaton navigated them through the defenses which he had apparently helped to design. The pits were full of ancient, brittle bones.

"You know, we could fly over them," Rook said, as he leaped after Kairos. "Walking is so annoying."

"They risk mistaking you for a wandering monster, and splitting up in a dungeon is a terrible idea," his friend replied. "Besides, didn't you complain about growing a little fatter this month?"

"Of course I have, it's winter! Think Kairos, think, what if we run out of food? Better to gorge yourself on yuckies while you still can!"

"But if we all starve, we'll eat the fattest ones first," Agron pointed out. "Or at least, I will."

The griffin looked at the minotaur with a shocked look. "W-why would you want to devour me? I know that I would be delicious, but you're a cow, you eat grass!"

"The first minotaur ate humans," Agron replied with a shrug. "We have changed our diet to fit in socially, but I don't mind taking a bite or two from time to time."

Kairos looked at his ally with suspicion.

"He is joking," Sertorius stated with a slight smirk. By now, Kairos had realized that his humor was as black as his soul. "He has committed countless crimes, but eating human flesh isn't among them."

"You can see a person's crimes when you look at them?" Cassandra asked.

"Crimes against Lycean law, and only if the person is [Hero] Rank or lower," Sertorius explained. "It is a [Judge] Skill."

"Oh my, my list must be sixteen pages long or something," Nessus mused at the party's front, as he uncovered a buried bear trap.

"It is longer than most, I will agree," Sertorius replied cryptically. Kairos suddenly wondered if he could see the crimes of Nessus' past lives. In which case, he would put the two and two together given time.

"While we are on the subject of Skills," Agron said, "Kairos, would it be possible to join your [Pantheon] at last? I wouldn't mind grabbing that [Telchine] subclass."

"You will," Kairos replied. Though he wondered if minotaurs counted as monstrous enough for the [Pantheon]'s purpose, if Andromache could stay in it even after shedding her Scylla curse, Agron should be able to join. "But we need to summon Gaïa to fully introduce someone into the [Térastheon], and I am not sure how to do so."

"I know the rituals to contact her," Sertorius stated. "I am a high [Priest] of Lyce, and I often prayed to the Mother of All. I suspect it will be even easier to summon her attention here, in the bowels of the earth."

Kairos crossed his arms and considered the proposal. "Would it also attract Thanatos' attention?"

"Of course. But then again, we already earned it."

Point taken. "Perhaps you would like to join the [Térastheon] too?" Kairos teased his brother-in-law. "The more, the merrier."

"I'm afraid I cannot," Sertorius replied. "Though it's not technically a [Pantheon], I am bound to the Senex by my stature as the Flavii family's Pater Familia. I am prohibited from doing anything that could run against the assembly's interests, and that includes joining a foreign [Pantheon]. I suppose Julia can fill in for me when she inevitably ascends to [Hero]."

His confidence bordered on arrogance, but Kairos couldn't help but find it somewhat inspiring. In Sertorius' mind, his family's rise to power wasn't a remote possibility, but an inexorable certainty.

The group finally came into sight of the fortified camp's gates, and the people guarding it. Archers pointed their bows atop wooden watchtowers, while spearsmen with torches stood watch behind a tall palisade. "Halt!" one of the archers, a woman, shouted before immediately recognizing the group. "Your Majesty!"

"Quite the defensive perimeter that you have set," Kairos mused out loud. "I wish you had set an easier path."

"I should have designed a secret passage to let visitors in more easily," Thales said in embarrassment.

The gates immediately opened for them, and the party moved inside. The yard was crammed with barrels, amphoras, boxes, and improvised hammocks of manticore pelts. Kairos counted roughly two dozen tents organized in rows next to a dirty, smelly animal pen. Hides strung from wooden posts were used as support to hang dry pieces of manticore meat, while a trio of Travian adventurers nearby roasted a pig over a camping fire.

The camp's locals had gathered a pile of loot at the camp's center for inventory. Most were treasures Kairos expected to find in a dungeon: ancient statuettes, jewels, tusks, and hides from legendary beasts, chests full of pre-Anthropomachia coins, dusty weapons, and armors from age pasts... but the [Rogue]'s Skills noticed a few magical items among them.

However, the sight of some of the locals made Kairos pause in surprise. Agron even grabbed his axe, while Cassandra's fingers clenched around her weapon.

While three-quarters of the forty or so adventurers occupying the camp were living, breathing people... some had no flesh to speak of. Three animated skeletons were playing a game of dice without a care in the world. A shadowy female specter appeared at the edge of a campfire's light, gazing at the flame with a grim vigil. And one of the armored warriors keeping watch over the loot pile had twin, otherworldly flames for eyes.

Even the usually unflappable Sertorius raised an eyebrow at the sight. "I thought this outpost defended itself *against* the undead?"

"This... this is a new development, sir," Thales admitted with anxiety. He was just as surprised as everyone else.

The camp's leader quickly arrived to meet with the party, and made quite the entrance. The man himself was no older than Kairos, a pale youth with long, unkempt black hair and kind blue eyes. His spear looked too big for him, and his armor had clearly been scavenged from what he found in the dungeon.

His mount, however, made quite the impression.

The Travian King had already seen bears in Travia, even hunted a few... but this one was nearly three meters in length, with fur as black as night. Its putrescent ribcage was fully exposed, alongside half of its skull. The beast's left eye, the only one that remained, had taken a pallid white color.

It was an undead horror, no doubt about it. And yet it carried its rider with such a debonair nonchalance that Kairos couldn't help but find it oddly entertaining.

"Welcome!" the bear-rider said with a heavy Lycean accent before climbing down from his beast. He let out a deep breath, before anxiously offering his hand to Kairos. "I, uh... it's a great honor to meet you in person, Your Majesty."

"The pleasure is all mine," Kairos replied while shaking the man's hand. The poor boy's fingers sweated with nervousness.

Chrysaor Galabri, Born-Lucky

Legend: Brave Farmer (Elite)

Race: Human (Wolfblood)

Class: Crafter (Farmer, Bear Rider)

Level: 28

Bear Rider, Kairos thought with amazement. He had no idea that this subclass even existed. I guess there is a Rider variant for each member of the animal kingdom. *And he's a [Wolfblood] too...*

"Aye, Your Honor," Chrysaor adopted a Lycean military salute to Sertorius. The judge didn't shake the youth's hand, but instead offered him a respectful nod. "I didn't expect your presence."

"It was something of a last-minute decision," Sertorius declared before examining their host head to toe. "Congratulations for your [Legend]."

The young man blushed a bit. "It was a lucky shot, Your Honor," he said with embarrassment. "We were seven when we fought the Lamia. I was just the only one fortunate enough to land the killing blow."

"You undersell yourself," Kairos replied. Lamias were dangerous foes, monsters that combined devious cunning, inhuman strength, and magical abilities. "Many would have run away rather than fight in your case. And if the Fate System awarded you with a [Legend], it means you were the decisive factor."

"Out of curiosity, my friend, did you kill the Lamia from atop that bear?" Nessus asked while reaching his hand forward the bear's hide. The bear didn't react as the satyr scratched his black, carrion-infected fur. "The Lamia must have died of fright."

"My friend loves me because I'm pretty," the undead bear said with a deadpan tone, a maggot falling from below his eye.

"I met Grimtooth long afterward," Chrysaor replied with an embarrassed smile. "He was haunting a cave to the west, near the [Sleep] barrier."

"Haunting?" Cassandra raised an eyebrow. "Do all animals have ghosts?"

"They do," Andromache confirmed. She would know, as a [Necromancer].

"Where do you think bears go when they die?" Grimtooth replied dryly. Since he understood human speech, Kairos guessed he had a variant of the [Beast Tongue] Skill. Or maybe it was a benefit of the [Bear Rider] subclass "You thought only twolegs went to the Underworld? We have our own Elysium."

"Oh, is there a bird heaven?" Rook asked while wagging his tail.

The undead bear let out a bellowing sound that could pass for a shrug. "Maybe. I haven't been allowed in. Not since Thanatos started sleeping on the job."

This immediately caught Kairos' attention. "You have met Thanatos, brave beast?"

"No, that's the problem," Grimtooth replied. "Souls come in, but they aren't allowed to fully die. I've been stranded here for over a month, bored to undeath until Chrysaor got the [Beast Tongue] Skill and convinced me to go out of my den."

"I, uh..." Chrysaor appeared very embarrassed all of a sudden. "It's a long story."

"It must be quite the interesting one," Andromache said, as she examined the undead in the camp with curiosity. With the notable exception of Orgonos, the crew's experience with the living dead had been limited to fighting or exorcising them.

"There has been a huge increase in undead activity in the past weeks," Chrysaor explained. "First it was only shades attacking us at night, but now animated corpses and Vrykolakas show up by the dozens. The few priests among us could keep out the lesser undead, but the stronger ones... that was another story."

The situation reminded Kairos of his crew's first disastrous encounter with the *Argo*. They had managed to fend off the lesser undead boarding the *Foresight*, but their resistance collapsed after Jason of Iolcus mortally slew their priest Rhadamanthe. His death still weighed on Kairos' mind.

But in the end, they eventually managed to get through to Jason and convinced him to pass on. Chrysaor had clearly achieved something similar.

"So instead of fighting them, you tried to recruit them?" Nessus asked mirthfully.

"Interesting approach."

"It's... it's Your Majesty who gave me the idea actually." Chrysaor grinned sheepishly while averting Kairos' amused gaze. "I... I mean, you befriend a lot of monsters, so I wondered... Maybe we could do the same with some of the undead haunting us. They couldn't all be out for our blood. And... and I was right."

Kairos examined the undead in the camp, and quickly identified a pattern. "They're all [Elites]," he noticed.

Chrysaor nodded. "Yeah. [Common] shades are driven mad by the presence of the living. They're jealous, to the point of hatred. [Elites], they keep their wits. Enough that you can reason with them. I, uh... I wasn't sure if we're allowed to bring them out of here."

"Every creature is welcome in Histria, no matter their origin," Kairos declared, to Chrysaor's relief. "If they can follow the laws of the land, it doesn't matter if our people are alive or dead."

"Between us, I'm waiting for the path to open again so I can pass on," the undead bear replied. "But I wouldn't mind seeing the sun again."

"Frankly, we were seriously considering cutting our losses and abandoning the outpost before you showed up," Chrysaor admitted while scratching his hair. He clearly hadn't taken a bath in a few days. "We explored the level as far as we could and gathered more loot than we can carry. The [Sleep] barrier, we haven't managed to cross yet."

"We have found a way to do so," Thales replied. "As for the defenses, I can reinforce them."

"Under other circumstances, I would suggest staying to defend this outpost," Sertorius replied with a frown. "But we shouldn't wait. If undead activities increase, the more we delay moving to the third level, the greater the danger."

Kairos nodded before glancing at Nessus. "A month ago," he whispered. "Undead attacks grew more violent right when we came back to Histria. It's not a coincidence."

"No, it isn't," the satyr replied, too low for the others to hear. "Thanatos is a personification, an embodiment of the Fate System. He can't harm us directly, not unless our time has come... but he can scheme. Your brother-in-law is right, the more we delay, the more restless souls will accumulate in this temple and make our descent harder. Honestly, if he

has been doing that for a month, I'm surprised the place isn't crawling with the living dead already. Thousands perish each day."

"Another deity must have noticed his actions. Probably Persephone."

Nessus nodded slowly. "I guess that explains why my half-sister has been silent lately. She often answered when I prayed before her [Idols], but no word from her so far. She must be overburdened, guiding souls to the Underworld."

And even so, the number of undead in the Necromanteion kept increasing. While Chrysaor managed to reason with the [Elites] among them, eventually, the tide of vengeful shades would escape the dungeon; planetary alignment or not.

Thanatos was distracting Persephone, forcing her to deal with the rampant undead plague rather than interfere with his attempt to open the gates of Tartarus.

"Can he do worse?" Kairos asked, trying to estimate their foe's capabilities. "Raise foes we have already slain from the dead? Affect us with ailments? Bring down the ceiling on our heads?"

"I don't know, oh my captain. Heracles and Sisyphus both defeated the old bag of bones through strength and wits, so he's beatable... but I don't know the full extent of his abilities. My encounters with him usually stopped at rubbing my victories in his face."

Kairos wished he had a method of contacting Heracles and questioning him, but they would have to do without him. "We'll stay on the move and try to reach level three as soon as possible," he informed his party. "However, Andromache, Sertorius, please bless the area with protective wards before we leave. It's not much, but it could make all the difference."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Chrysaor offered a deep bow, before smiling awkwardly. "If you want, you can pick some of the loot we gathered. Maybe something will strike your fancy?"

"You sweat and bled to gather these treasures," Kairos replied. "It would be improper to take them from you."

"They might prove helpful though," Sertorius pointed out. "And if we fail, there might not be an island left to defend."

Chrysaor froze. "What do you mean? Are... are the undead going to multiply and break out if nothing is done?"

"Sort of," Kairos replied without elaborating. He didn't want to spread word of Helios' potential return to avoid a panic; though Julia had orders to evacuate the island if they

failed to return to Histria before the planetary alignment. "We need to reach the dungeon's depths as soon as we can."

"Then allow me to accompany you," Chrysaor stated while making a Lycean salute. "I... I may not be as strong as your allies, but I can't stand around and do nothing."

"We cannot afford an extra body with our current resources," Sertorius replied while shooting the idea down. They only had a limited amount of [Horns of Hypnos] to bypass the [Sleep] barrier with, let alone space on the [Telchine Skiff]. "You will be more useful in guiding the people here to safety and secure our exit."

Chrysaor bit his lips, but didn't question the [Judge]'s decision. He was a Lycean to the bone. "Then take our magical items," he argued. "You'll need them more than us."

"We can requisition and give them back once we are done," Cassandra offered as a compromise.

Kairos hesitated. Though he had the right to requisition items as King and might need them, he strongly believed everyone was entitled to their share of the loot; whether it was from a raid or a dungeon expedition. "You're sure you won't need them?"

"Not more than you will." Chrysaor blushed a bit. "Truth be told... you inspired all of us here. When I heard that the son of a Lycean exile, a [Wolfblood] no less, managed to create his own country... I had to try my luck. I would still be toiling in my family's farm if it were not for your example."

Kairos couldn't help but smile. He suddenly wondered if the young man's choice of a mount and spear was an attempt to emulate his idol.

"My greatest hope was to inspire people like you," Kairos admitted. "I wanted to create a place where no one would starve, where the races of the world could coexist. But I never imagined that the living and the dead would fight side-by-side one day. I'm proud you were willing to take the first step."

"I don't think I will feel ever comfortable with the undead," Cassandra said. "But as a chosen of Persephone, I will do my best to help them pass on peacefully."

Afterward, Chrysaor let them examine the loot pile for any magical item they might need. Only a few of them were useful in their current situation, but there were genuine treasures among them. Cassandra found a new, skull-shaped shield granting her [Terror] immunity, and Sertorius grabbed a pair of boots doubling his walking speed.

Nessus' choice, however, was the most unusual. He put on an amulet around his neck, one that seemed made of fossilized green amber.

Amulet of Slime Conversion

Rank: Necklace 2.

Value: 2000 gold coins.

This amulet can be used to convert an inanimate corpse into a [Cairn Jelly] when applied to its bones and flesh. The slime obeys its creator's orders to the best of its abilities for ten minutes, before vanishing without a trace.

"You know, sometimes I wonder what kind of mage would make something like this," Kairos noted as they left the camp.

"Maybe it was a failed necromancer with a slime theme?" Nessus mused. "Maybe I should have asked for dice, in case I join the skeleton party."

Kairos frowned, and took the satyr aside for a private chat. "Maybe you will," he agreed. "But it doesn't have to be tomorrow. You've got a full life ahead of you."

"Is it so obvious?" Nessus let out a shrug. "I had more than one full life, Kairos. I'm tired."

"Too tired to add one more? I'm not the only one who would miss you, if you were to perish."

"Aww, I knew you cared." Nessus gave him a genuine smile. "Our adventures were fun, I will admit."

"We haven't even gotten to the good part," Kairos argued, trying to cheer his friend up. "Nessus, you don't have to do it."

"I have to. It may be the only way to get rid of Thanatos for good." Nessus glanced at the group, to make sure they weren't listening. "We're two sides of the same coin, he and I. One and the same."

Kairos put the two and two together. "You are two avatars of a single entity."

Nessus nodded slowly. "That's what Orgonos theorized. Personifications and Protogenoi don't die, Kairos. They're avatars of a greater concept. But they can split, merge, and change. At the beginning of time, there was no difference between life and death; until the

Fate System created this division. The old bag of bones and my pretty face were once one. And what was separated can be made whole again."

"Is that what happened to Hypnos?" Kairos guessed. "He and the other dream deities fused into a single entity after the Anthropomachia?"

"Possibly." Nessus shrugged. "I won't die, not really. I just... will become something else? I don't want to share a body with Thanatos, but as long as he remains alone and bitter, he will keep scheming to bring death to the world."

"And the thing you will become might continue to do so." Kairos shook his head. "There has to be another solution. You said it yourself, other heroes managed to best Thanatos before. Sisyphus even chained him for a while, if I remember."

"And it caused the living unbearable suffering, as death's mercy was denied to them. Yes, dying sucks, but you don't want to become a ravenous specter either. Those we saw in the camp were a lucky minority." Nessus shrugged. "I appreciate your concern, my friend, but my decision is already made."

Kairos clenched his teeth. "And how do you intend to merge with Thanatos? If he even lets you."

"You will try to stop me if I tell you."

"Of course I will." Kairos shook his head, trying to reason with his friend. "Nessus, you are my crewmate and my friend. You are entitled to your choice... but you have a good life, and people who will mourn you. Don't throw it all away."

"I care, Kairos," Nessus replied with morosity. "But I have only a handful of people on this side of the world, while... while I have thousands on the other. My family, my followers... my number of living friends is dwarfed by the dead."

"But they are gone, Nessus," Kairos argued. "Unless they have been condemned to Tartarus, the dead do not suffer. They live either in gloom or blissful contentment. Their time is done, but not yours. Not yet at least."

"It is, Kairos. And it's better this way." Nessus let out a long, heavy sigh. "My time as a god was a disaster, my friend. Meeting Orgonos, seeing what a deity *should* be, only reminded me of it. I have hurt countless mortals, brought naught but suffering; Thanatos is just as terrible. He hates life, and he will never stop tormenting mortals. If we stop him now and he gets away, he will come back to threaten your descendants in a thousand years."

"Or they will beat him the same way we are about to," Kairos pointed out. "Nessus, you can't guarantee that this merged new god will be better than either component. For all you know, the result could be something monstrous. You're gambling everything on the chance it might turn out well, but you can't guarantee it."

"Isn't that what we've been doing so far? Doing what we can and hoping for the best?"

"You're *not* doing everything you can, Nessus. You're trying to commit suicide with a few more extra steps, when a better option might present itself. You're taking the coward's way out."

"Perhaps, but that's my decision." Nessus looked away. "I hope when the time comes, that you will understand it."

"What is there to *understand*?" This time, Kairos completely lost patience. "You want to become a better god, and make up for what you did? Then climb the ladder and change the world yourself! Don't throw the responsibility to a hypothetical successor that may not even care for mortal life! You want to see your family and followers again? We are literally journeying to the Underworld as we speak, through a place meant to consult the shades of the dead! You can simply visit them!"

While Nessus remained silent as a tomb, the other members of the party looked in their direction, having heard part of the argument. Kairos regained his composure. "Don't do it," he begged Nessus. "As long as you live, there are other ways."

The satyr sighed, shook his head, and walked away without a word.

His mind was set.

42: The Gatekeeper

It was getting darker the further they went.

For the first time since he had started riding Rook, Kairos had to carry a torch in one hand and his spear in the other. It was a struggle, as the flame flickered whenever the griffin flapped his wings, but necessary to see *anything*. The cavern's ceiling had grown high enough that Rook could fly relatively unhindered, but he still struggled to avoid stalactites in the dark.

[Sleep] ailment negated by [Horns of Hypnos].

It felt strange to trade his [Hydra Crown] for another helmet. The [Horns of Hypnos] were heavier to wear, and Kairos had grown used to his regalia's passive regeneration. He found himself getting winded more easily without it.

It was still better than eternal slumber though. Kairos had received dozens of these notifications in the last hour, every two minutes or so. Thales had suggested that the effect worked as a pulse spreading from the island's epicenter at a regular interval. Even if someone managed to resist the effect once or twice through luck, they were only one failed mental resistance check away from defeat.

"We are approaching a powerful source of magic, my love," Andromache whispered at his side, her body a cloud of white mist floating in the air. Her facial features shifted like the wind, and she needed complete concentration to keep a unified, stable form. "A font of necromancy."

And Kairos sensed danger ahead.

"Do you smell that, Kairos?" Rook asked. The griffin turned his head left and right, fearing an attack.

Yes, he smelled it. A strong body odor worthy of a giant bear, or Nemean Lion.

They had entered the den of a dangerous creature.

Kairos looked at the ground below, and the skiff glided on an underwater river. The stone shores of Hypnos' Cave of Sleep surrounded the waterway from both sides, dark and impenetrable. Both Cassandra and Agron used their weapons to create light, while Thales, Nessus, and Sertorius struggled to row against the current.

Though no undead attacked them on the skiff, hungry souls came for them the moment they made forays on the island. Skeletons, insubstantial shades... Thankfully, they were no threat to the party, and *flammable*. Agron seemed quite happy to leave fiery pyres left and right, with Cassandra and Sertorius purifying the remains behind them.

After checking the island's shores and confirming that the [Horns of Hypnos] did protect them from the [Sleep] effect, the group had found the mouth of the river Lethe flowing through it and fueling the second level's lake. Since the water of oblivion flowed from the Underworld's heart, reaching the source seemed like the best strategy to access the third floor

A part of Kairos had wanted to explore the island more in-depth, to look for the treasures buried beyond its shores... but they weren't on a treasure hunt. They only had so many supplies to last with, and so little time left.

Besides, while the descent had been halfway pleasant so far, he couldn't shake the feeling that it wouldn't last long. His [Seamanship] Skill didn't work in this dungeon, even if they used waterways to travel; he would get no warning in advance.

Andromache raised a cloudy hand, and pointed at a red glow in the darkness. "Here. This is the source."

"Careful," Kairos whispered before looking down at his team below and giving out orders. "Time to buff!"

"Finally, some action!" Agron rejoiced below, a hand on his Songaxe's strings. "Do I sing yet?"

"No," Kairos replied. Making noise might attract undead or wake up slumbering monsters. "Only if we engage in battle."

Agron groaned, while Sertorius and Andromache both started spellcasting. Kairos heard his concubine whisper words of power as she enhanced him with magic, the effects spreading to Rook through their [Animal Bond] link. "[Fire Resistance], [Water Breathing], [Firebrand], [Thunderbrand], [Protection from Spells]..."

You gain Resistance to [Fire]. You can now breathe underwater. Your attacks with weapons will now inflict additional [Fire] and [Lightning] damage. You gain a bonus to resist hostile spells—

Kairos lost count of the effects applied to his person. It was the third time Andromache cast them, and he knew the list by heart. "If only we could make these buffs last forever," he whispered, "instead of applying them again every hour."

His complaint amused Andromache. "When I become a [Demigod] and raise my [Magic] stat, my other half. The higher it becomes, the longer my spells will last."

It would explain why the spells cast by a [God] could remain active long after their demise.

The source of the light became clearer as they approached. Kairos had mistaken it for hundreds of torches burning at once, until he began to distinguish the symbols glowing on a surface of thick steel. It didn't take him long to see a familiar shape rising from the darkness.

A gate.

A massive set of doors stood before them, built on the shores of the island. They were so tall, so large, that Kairos wondered if giants built them; even the dragon that his crew fought in Orichalcos would have looked as small as a cat in comparison. Cadaverous, deadly figures were carved on their steely surface; together they formed a fresco of hooded reapers, screaming faces, grim skeletons, and furious daemons. Sharp spikes and burning ancient Greek inscriptions covered the hinges, as if daring anyone to open them by force.

Not that Kairos' team would need to. The doors were half-open, letting the river Lethe flow through them. The Travian expedition could only see a red, glowing veil beyond the threshold; like a barrier of shining blood separating this level of the dungeon from the next.

'Only the dead may pass,' Kairos translated, as he read the symbols. 'Living beware.'

Kairos had Rook hover in front of the doors, waiting for the skiff to reach it. Andromache wouldn't wait however. Overwhelmed by curiosity, the witch floated before the gates, and then attempted to peek through the opening.

Her cloudy face hit an invisible wall when she reached the bloody veil, her body rippling like water.

"Andromache!" Kairos called, as Rook immediately flew to her side. "Are you alright?"

"A magical barrier," Andromache muttered as she regained form and substance. "I cannot get through."

Kairos frowned, raised his [Anemoi Spear], and pushed. His weapon's tip hit an invisible obstacle as it reached the gates' threshold, the crimson veil as impenetrable as a stone wall.

The [Telchine Skiff] below had no more luck. The ship, designed to sail across the Underworld freely, bounced off the invisible obstacle. Sertorius had the crew pull over to the left shore, the group climbing down from the boat.

"Fascinating," Thales whispered as he examined the gates' metal. "This seems to be an alloy of steel and adamantine, combined with orichalcos crystals. I wonder how the builders managed to melt them together."

"I can't pierce through the veil," Kairos said, as Rook landed next to the skiff. Even his Skills couldn't gather any information on these gates. "Andromache, Sertorius, can you dispel it?"

Andromache landed on the ground and transformed back into a nymph. She raised her scepter at the gate, while Sertorius did the same with his own staff. "[Dispel]," they cast as one, trying to breach the barrier.

A blue light erupted from their weapons, but the crimson veil didn't falter before the assault. The gates' glyphs glowed even brighter, briefly illuminating the barren, rocky wasteland of the Cave of Sleep. Kairos didn't notice any movement in the dark, but he hoped the sudden light wouldn't attract a monster's attention.

Of the two magicians in the room, Sertorius was the first to give up. "Too strong," he said while lowering his staff. "The caster's power eclipses mine."

"There is a reaction, however," Andromache replied, as she kept casting [Dispel]. Perhaps she hoped to gain a better understanding of the wards by testing their resistance? Kairos considered telling her to keep her strength for later, but trusted her expertise enough not to interrupt her.

Cassandra grabbed her [Fork of Nemesis] with both hands, and closed her eyes in a silent prayer to Persephone. Perhaps where magic had failed, faith would prevail?

Nessus didn't seem to think so. The satyr observed the gates with somber respect before shaking his head. "It's useless," he said. "The way is shut."

"You know where these gates lead?" Agron asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes. To Hades' Palace. What's left of it after Lycaon broke out anyway." Nessus let out a sigh. "These are the gates to the Underworld, oh my bull, the afterlife's threshold. Maybe the last set left after the flood."

"Is Persephone waiting on the other side?" Kairos asked with a frown. He had thought the entrance to the Underworld was located on the fourth underground level, not the third.

"No," Cassandra replied, as she ended her prayer. "The goddess is silent and far away. She will not help us here."

"The Underworld is made of different layers," Nessus explained. "The upper part is a sorting area, where the three judges of the dead examine souls and Charon transfers them to a specialized afterlife deeper underground. Elysium, for the best. The Asphodel Meadows, for the mediocre..."

"And Tartarus for the worst," Agron finished thoughtfully. "So the dungeon's third level is located in this crossroads, and the fourth closer to Tartarus' entrance."

"That's my guess," Cassandra said. "Nessus is correct, Hades kept his palace near this region of the Underworld... but only ruins remain now. After Lycaon deprived her of her husband and child, she moved to another place, far away from her sorrowful memories."

"You said they were barred?" Sertorius asked Nessus with a suspicious frown. "From which side?"

"Ours," Andromache replied softly, as she finally lowered her staff in defeat. "The energy that fights back my dispel attempts comes from somewhere nearby. Something, or someone fuels that barrier."

"So we need to kill a guardian to progress further?" Agron guessed. "Good. I'm tired of undead thralls who die in one hit."

Kairos didn't share his enthusiasm. He only knew of *one* guardian of the Underworld infamous for keeping its gates shut to the living. The smell in the air suddenly became familiar, as the Travian captain connected the dots.

It was a scent he had lived with for years, in his own home.

This is bad, he thought. The creature was a [Demigod], and a keystone preventing the dead from escaping the Underworld. Killing it would not only be difficult, but make the world more dangerous in the long-term as vicious undead would escape their afterlives. *Then again, Orpheus did bribe him with songs...*

"Thales, could we break the gates by force?" Kairos asked his engineer, even though he already guessed the answer. "Or remove the hinges keeping them up?"

"I'm afraid that is beyond our capabilities, sir," Thales replied. "Even adamantite weapons would only make a dent on the surface at best. As for opening them further, we would need the help of giants. I doubt even Lady Andromache could have moved the gates in her previous form."

Kairos let out a sigh. "Agron, we will need your song."

"I know the one Orpheus played," the minotaur replied. Clearly, he had guessed the guardian's identity too. "Though I suppose we should give him a treat too."

"Don't look at me like that," Rook replied with a suspicious gaze. "Or I'll bite you!"

Kairos half-expected a joke from Nessus, but the satyr hadn't spoken a word. Instead, he looked at the darkness around the group, his body tense. The air was getting cold, in spite of the gates' fiery glow.

"Do you see something?" Kairos whispered to Nessus.

As an answer, the archer wordlessly raised his bow and pointed it at the darkness.

Realizing the danger, the entire group moved into formation. The spellcasters and Thales took cover behind the fighters, while Rook expanded his wings to take flight at the first sign of danger.

"It happens again."

A ghostly figure stepped out of the darkness, so ephemeral that Kairos could barely distinguish its features. Red eyes peered beneath a black cowl, wings of shadow flapping on his back. His voice was low, barely a whisper.

"Many [Heroes] and [Demigods] crossed these doors in ancient times, to seek an audience with Hades," the figure said with heavy contempt. "Orpheus, Heracles... so many foolish mortals dared to descend where only the dead should thrive. How many times have I prayed before these doors, awaiting the day when the worlds on each side would fall silent?"

Nessus fired an arrow.

The projectile went through one side of the figure's head, and continued on the other. The cowled creature didn't even seem to notice.

"You are not welcome here, mortals," Thanatos declared, his voice heavy with hatred as his red eyes glared at Nessus. "And you most of all, my shadow."

"He's not here," Kairos warned as Andromache readied her staff to fire a spell. His [Observer] Skill couldn't analyze the shadow. "It's just a projection."

And truthfully, he was thankful for it. Nessus wordlessly prepared to fire another arrow, his wish for death denied for the time being.

Agron snorted. "Too scared to face us head on?"

"You think yourself beyond my grasp, minotaur? I see the remaining time of all mortals, a number that shifts with the whims of Fate. And when it reaches zero... I can claim their soul." A ghastly, inhuman smile flashed beneath Thanatos' hood. "The more you progress, the lower your count dwindles. Some faster than the others. By treading in this forbidden place, you shorten your lifespan and condemn yourself to my cold embrace. So why do you continue? Why throw away this life you love so much?"

"Why try to stop us, if our fate is already sealed?" Thales asked with curiosity. "Unless... you see *other* people's numbers go up as we descend? Does the probability of our death also increase that of everyone else's surviving?"

Thanatos' smug grin died on his pale face.

Kairos took it as a confirmation that they had a chance of stopping the madman's plans even if they perished in the attempt, which he couldn't tolerate.

"Is that how you are trying to defeat us?" Agron scoffed. "With words and threats? I don't fear death, and I don't fear you."

"Even in the unlikely event we perish, my death will be worth preserving the greatness of Lyce," Sertorius declared calmly. "Go away, ghost."

"Not yet." Flames swirled around Andromache's staff. "Where is Circe's soul?"

"The witch?" Thanatos' eyes flickered in the dark. "She had foreseen her demise, and that of her father Helios. She loved her sire the way only a daughter can, and came to me with a deal. In exchange for a second life for her beloved sun and herself, she would give me a new feast of souls."

"But she didn't know you schemed with Lycaon and her foes," Nessus said, his lone eye cold as ice. "I guess there were cracks in her foresight."

"Death takes no sides. I care not for who prevails, so long as souls flow. It was an interesting offer though, and I accepted it. I fulfilled my end of the bargain..." Thanatos chuckled ominously. "To the letter."

"I will repeat myself more clearly," Andromache said with a threatening tone, the searing flames around her scepter so bright Kairos had to look away from them. "Where is her soul?"

"Underground, beyond your reach. Does it even matter? You will both die. *Everything* dies in time."

"Life bounced back the first time you tried to wipe us out," Nessus said with contempt. "Haven't you learned anything?"

Thanatos shrugged. "Before the last war broke the world, the number of mortals had only increased. A ceaseless tide of life, a cacophony of heartbeats keeping me awake at night. When mortals broke the world, millions dwindled to thousands. The symphony became an ambient noise. For a few centuries, I was..."

Thanatos trailed off his answer, letting out a sigh of blissful pleasure. "At peace."

That cold, hateful thing only found happiness, *true* happiness, in the extinction of life.

Kairos would have found it halfway reassuring if Thanatos had just been doing his job. He could have justified the [Demigod]'s actions as an agent of Fate trying to fulfill his purpose, no different from the Moirae.

But the hateful glee in his voice, the blissful pleasure at the thought of billions perishing... Kairos couldn't help but find it *deeply* unnerving.

The incarnation of death turned his head to face the party again, his eyes shining balefully. "But now, life is on the ascendancy again," he said with pure, *visceral* hatred. "You vermin grow ever more numerous, and more [Heroes] rise to defend mortals from the horrors of the world. This self-sustaining wheel of life drives me mad."

Sertorius didn't look impressed. "If a legionnaire complains about his post, it is customary to lash him. I swear on the Senex, if you had been under my employ, I would have beaten the thought of rebellion from your mind until you learned your proper place."

Thanatos remained silent for a moment. "I will take great pleasure in reaping your soul."

"Perhaps," Sertorius scoffed. "But not today."

Kairos remained silent, as he considered Thanatos' words. The ancient [Demigod] had revealed important information without even noticing. *The number and power of [Legends] are linked to life itself. The more life prospers, the more numerous the myths.*

"Why are you here, Thanatos?" Kairos asked as he pointed his spear at the apparition's head. "If you mean to scare us away, you're wasting your time. Unless you are trying to delay us?"

"I had come to see if the moment to reap your soul had come. Alas, it is not yet to be. But thankfully... There is another way. The guardian of these doors will not let the living pass." The shadow raised his pale hand. "Especially not a *wolfing*."

Realizing what he intended to do, Kairos created a bubble of wind around the projection's head to prevent sound from spreading. But whatever spell Thanatos used to manifest, its power trumped the [Anemoi Spear]'s.

"Your beloved master's slayers have returned!" Thanatos shouted, as he brought his fingers to his teeth. "To kill your mistress!"

Death's shadow whistled, before collapsing into nothingness.

For a few seconds, the noise echoed across the cavern like a resounding call; one that was quickly answered. The sound of heavy footsteps and clinking chains reached Kairos' ears, announcing the arrival of a colossal beast.

"Disperse!" Kairos shouted while Rook immediately took flight. Six red eyes glowed in the darkness, followed by a mighty roar.

A stream of flames erupted from the creature's three mouths, revealing its presence atop a stone hill at the gates' left. The beast was even larger than the Nemean Lion, a nightmarish hound whose back reached as high as ten meters. His black fur smoldered like magma, his claws as big as a man. Helmets identical to the [Horns of Hypnos] covered each of his three heads, while tongues of flames erupted from between his fangs. Strong steel chains dangled from collars around his necks, keeping him bound to the stone hill; but as the beast descended from his promontory to rush at the intruders, Kairos realized they wouldn't be short enough to stop him.

A notification appeared to the Travian King, right as his team began to rain spells and arrows on the guardian.

[Cerberus] burns with rage!

43: God's Best Friend

Cerberus roared and the cavern was set ablaze.

Streams of flames erupted from his three mouths, illuminating the darkness with their bright light. Kairos' party dispersed in all directions, the spot where they had been standing a few seconds ago turned into a smouldering crater.

"Buckle up, Kairos!" Rook warned his rider as he took flight to avoid the flames. No sooner did the duo reach a few meters above ground than a torrent of fire swallowed them. Even though he summoned a cloak of protective wind and benefitted from Andromache's buffing spells, Kairos felt the heat increase around him.

When he and Rook emerged unharmed from the flames, they found Cerberus charging at them with relentless fury. The beast's chains rattled behind him, while the ground shook beneath his feet. "We're not here to harm your mistress!" Kairos shouted as loudly as he could, trying to reason with the beast. "We come to help her!"

"LIAR!" Cerberus' three heads answered with thunderous rage, each with a different voice. "I WILL EAT YOU LIKE YOU DEVOURED THE MASTER!"

Cursing the blood of Lycaon in his veins, Kairos raised his spear in defiance.

"Into the fray!" Agron roared as he charged the beast right back, with Cassandra following after him. Sertorius cast [Agility Up] on the minotaur, quickening his movement, while Nessus and Andromache unleashed a volley of arrows and lightning bolts to cover them. Only Thales retreated towards the skiff, perhaps hoping to have the team evacuate down the river before the hellhound could reach them.

Arrows and lightning bolts bounced off Cerberus' hide as if it were made of steel. The hellhound's three heads roared in outrage as they glared at Agron and Cassandra. "OUT OF MY WAY!"

[Cerberus] used [Hellfire Rage]! [Fire] attacks will bypass [Resistance]!

Agron became a blur and played a sorrowful ballad on his Songaxe. The same that Orpheus once used to lull Cerberus to sleep.

[Orpheus' Lullaby] negated by [Horns of Hypnos].

Unlike the tales, Cerberus didn't fall asleep.

The minotaur reached Cerberus before Cassandra did, leaping in the air with superhuman strength. He intended to climb on a colossus as he did in Orichalcos... but alas, Cerberus was no mindless dragon. Showing surprising agility and reflexes for his tremendous size, the hellhound swept Agron away with his paw while the minotaur was in midair, throwing him against the gate as if he were a mere fly.

Wincing as he heard his ally crash against the door's steel, Kairos descended on the beast from above with Rook. He briefly considered using [Warg] to possess Cerberus, but his misadventure with the Nemean Lion had taught him such attempts were useless against divine beasts.

Instead, he breathed a cloud of poison straight at Cerberus' heads. The hellhound let out a roar of annoyance as the miasma infected his eyes and retaliated with his fiery breath, though Rook skillfully dodged every attack.

[Cerberus] is immune to the [Poison] ailment!

But from his bloodshot eyes, the hellhound was not immune to raw [Poison] *damage*.

The miasma briefly blinded Cerberus and allowed Kairos to strike from above, just as Cassandra did the same from below. Both their weapons managed to pierce the creature's hide, but they might have as well hit a wall of stone; the [Anemoi Spear] barely grazed Cerberus' back, while the [Fork of Nemesis] bounced off the hellhound's leg.

He's not magically invulnerable like the Nemean Lion, Kairos thought while clenching his teeth. But his skin is thicker than armor!

Cerberus rotated on himself, swiping away the poison and unleashing flames in all directions. Cassandra ducked to cover, while Rook was forced to retreat to avoid the hellhound's blazing breath.

Kairos prepared to blast the beast with wind, only for Cerberus to leap in the air in an attempt to reach him. Rook let out a cry of surprise as he barely managed to avoid the hellhound's snapping jaws. "My second best friend is your great-great grandchild!" the griffin loudly complained. "Can't we talk this out?!"

In response, Cerberus leaped at the flying duo again with his claws out. Kairos hastily shaped a tunnel of wind to let his griffin move faster, both swiftly getting out of the beast's reach. The ground shook when the giant hellhound landed, the entire cavern trembling. Shades of the dead floating beneath the river Lethe fled downstream in abject fear.

Heracles manhandled that thing with his bare hands on his own, Kairos thought. The feat sounded all the more impressive after experiencing Cerberus' power firsthand. "Away, Rook!" the Travian King ordered, as he noticed Andromache hastily cast a healing spell on the wounded Agron in the corner of his eye. They needed to distract the beast away from their allies. "Downstream!"

Rook obeyed his command, flying above the river Lethe. As Kairos expected, Cerberus went right after them and ignored the rest of the group. His desire for revenge against Lycaon's brood trumped everything else, his footsteps heavy with fury.

As Rook flew above the river's shores with Cerberus in hot pursuit, Kairos' allies on the ground attacked the hellhound from the flank. "[Agility Down]," Sertorius cast as Nessus fired an arrow, before adding a command. "Stop!"

While Nessus' projectile bounced off one of Cerberus' helmets, Sertorius' spell traveled from his staff to the beast in the form of a blast. His weapon turned his single word into an irresistible command.

Kairos expected Cerberus to shrug the spell off, as a [Demigod] should... but to his surprise, it did have an effect. Though the hellhound didn't slow at all, his left head appeared to freeze in place; the central and right one roared and breathed flames as if nothing happened.

The left head isn't immune to mental effects, Kairos realized. The fact the two others ignored the command, however, meant that each of them had separate abilities, immunities, and could direct the body even if one of them was disabled. *We'll need to neutralize them individually.*

That was why each had a copy of the [Horns of Hypnos]. Agron's insight had been correct, the beast was probably vulnerable to [Sleep] effects, whether they came from the enchanted cave or songs. If they could destroy the three helmets, Cerberus might fall asleep.

But Sertorius' [Aeon Staff] shouldn't affect [Demigods] at all. Why did it work on one head?

Kairos looked over his shoulder to glance at his team, noticing Cassandra and Nessus pursuing Cerberus on foot while Andromache followed in cloud form. The rest of his team

had moved to the [Telchine Skiff], intending to descend the river the old-fashioned way. Only the fires started by Cerberus made the gates of the Underworld visible in the background.

Once again, Cerberus leapt at Rook in an attempt to eat the griffin. Thankfully though, his iron leash was not infinite in its length; the hellhound's chain held and stopped him in midair. The beast let out a roar of frustration, flames erupting from his three maws.

"The helmets!" Kairos shouted to his party as Rook dodged fireball after fireball. Cassandra raised her fork as she ran, preparing to make a leap, while Nessus stopped and aimed with his bow.

Having failed to break his chains, Cerberus stood on his back legs, his three foreheads reaching the ceiling. Each head's eyes brightened with a different color, blue for the right, green for the left, and red for the central one.

[Cerberus] used [Elemental Shift]! Each head will gain a different elemental attack!

Kairos had Rook turn around to strike first. The Travian warlord set his gaze on Cerberus, locking eyes with it before it could unleash its breath attack. "[Telchine Sorcery: Charm]."

The left head fell under his spell as it had with Sertorius, the eyes turning from furious to obedient. The others, however, shrugged off the effect. The right one unleashed a cold, freezing wind, while the central one spat out a sphere of magma.

Rook had to dive down to avoid the fiery projectile, but the stream of cold proved harder to dodge. It came closer and closer, and the griffin entered the range of Cerberus' claws in an attempt to evade the breath attack.

Andromache came to their rescue. Flying in the air in cloud form, she spoke ancient words of power and unleashed a fireball at Cerberus; though the flames didn't harm the hellhound, the blast knocked back the right head and made it snap its jaw in surprise. Free from the icy breath's relentless pursuit, Rook dived down between Cerberus' legs and then flew upward behind his back.

Cassandra finally reached them and made her move. Pointing down her fork, she called upon its fiery powers as she used it to throw herself up in the air. A burst of flame erupted from the tip mid-movement, propelling the Lady of Cinders upward.

Jason of Iolcus had used the same technique in Achlys, and it lived on in his successor.

Cassandra's high jump reached its end on the back of Cerberus' right head. The beast unfortunately noticed and attempted to swipe at her with his paw before she could land a blow.

Having waited for the right moment, Nessus fired an arrow right in the right head's eye. The projectile struck from an unexpected angle, the impact making Cerberus howl in pain. The hellhound stopped his attempt at killing Cassandra to instinctively cover his wound with his paw, which proved a disastrous mistake. Pivoting her fork in midair, she hit the beast's right helmet and unleashed a mighty fire burst at its joints.

Kairos had to raise his hand to protect himself from the resulting blast's flash, but what he saw made him grin. The right head's [Horns of Hypnos] cracked as its joints shattered, the steel snapping in half.

Cassandra paid the price for her stunt though, with her own blast propelling her backward. "Rook!" Kairos shouted, as his companion fell from a deadly height. His griffin immediately turned towards Cassandra, while the Travian warlord summoned the winds below her. This slowed down her fall long enough for her to land safely on Rook's back.

"Nice jump," Kairos congratulated Cassandra, as she adjusted position behind him.

"Thanks," she replied with a smile. "I invested a bit in my [Strength]."

The pain snapped Cerberus' left head out of its trance, all three of his mouths howling in rage. "I'm sorry," Kairos apologized as Rook flew in circles around the giant beast. He felt no malice for Cerberus; he was only doing his job as a guard dog.

"Well, I'm not!" Rook replied, holding a grudge. "Serves him right for trying to eat us!"

To Kairos' delight, the right head's roar weakened. Its strength left it, its jaws closing as it became dizzy. Though she hadn't fully destroyed it, Cassandra had damaged its helmet enough to make it useless. The central head attempted to keep its neighbor awake by nuzzling it, but couldn't prevent the right head from falling into deep slumber.

Two more to go.

Rook gained altitude again, before attacking Cerberus from the left while Andromache did the same from the right. This time, the hellhound realized the danger the entire party posed and split his attention; the left head turned in the griffin's direction, while the central one matched Andromache's fiery projectiles with its own.

Facing the left head, Kairos attempted to charm it again... only for Cerberus to find the perfect defense.

The left head closed its eyes and avoided the enchanted gaze.

Now I know how Euryale felt the first time we met, Kairos thought with annoyance.

Cassandra unleashed a burst of ghostly flames in an attempt to damage the helmet, but Cerberus' left head answered with a breath of poisonous smog. Rook pulled back to avoid the attack, the venomous cloud melting the stone ceiling's stone while Cassandra's flames harmlessly dissipated.

Unfortunately, Andromache didn't fare any better. Her gaseous body allowed her to easily dodge Cerberus' jaws and flames, but her projectiles bounced off its helmet without damaging it.

"Why isn't it working?" Cassandra wondered as she observed Andromache's fruitless efforts.

"Because Cerberus' heads changed elemental affinities," Kairos guessed. "The central head must be immune to fire, and it extends to the helmet. The right one used cold-based attacks."

"Let's see if poison trumps fire then," Cassandra said as she raised her fork at the left head. "Nessus, distract him!"

"I'm trying!" the satyr shouted from the ground as he attempted to find the right angle to hit Cerberus' eyes. The [Horns of Hypnos] helmets made it difficult, as did Cerberus' frantic movements. The hellhound's paws swept the air in wide motions to catch the flyers harassing him.

Rook made a circle motion around Cerberus, with Kairos suppressing all sound and smell in the air by redirecting the wind. As he suspected, by closing its eyes to avoid being [Charmed], the left head relied on sound and smell to locate the griffin; Rook and his riders had become invisible to its senses.

Cassandra raised her fork to strike the left head's helmet from behind with a fireball, but Cerberus anticipated the attack. The beast hit the ground with his back legs and threw a volley of dirt and stone in the air, the same way a dog dug into the ground to bury a bone.

"Rook, beware-"

Kairos never finished his sentence, as a flying stone hit his best friend right in the chest at high velocity.

Rook let out a screech as he fell backward with both of his riders, losing control of his flight. Cassandra fell off, but quickly used her fork's fiery burst to slow down her fall and land safely near Nessus.

Kairos could have leapt off Rook's back and done the same, but his griffin would have hit the ground at full speed. Instead he attempted to create a cushion of wind beneath the both of them, to negate the impact.

He only weakened it.

Kairos saw stars as he and Rook hit the cold hard ground of the cavern, the impact tossing him off his griffin's back. He heard the sickening noise of his friend's wing snapping as his vision blurred, before rolling on the ground and tasting dirt. The Travian king's sense of hearing briefly left him, and everything became a distant echo.

*You have been **[Stunned]**.*

Kairos slowly managed to rise to his feet by using his spear as a crutch. His [Hydra Crown] would have helped him recover, but without it, his vision remained blurry. Rook whined not so far from him, his left wing broken.

"I'm here..." Kairos said as he almost stumbled, his vision blurring again. The Travian warlord cursed the Fate System for status ailments, as he struggled to walk straight. "I'm coming..."

"Kairos, run!" he heard Cassandra shout at him. He noticed Andromache and Nessus both desperately trying to distract Cerberus with projectiles, as the towering hellhound turned around to face Kairos. "Run!"

Kairos looked up, his vision blurring as Cerberus' central head took a deep breath and prepared to burn him alive.

But what the Travian lacked in strength, he more than made up for in friends.

A projectile cloud of black miasma suddenly exploded right in Cerberus' face, making the hellhound cough smoke. Another explosion followed and then a third, obscuring the central head with alchemical fumes.

***[Cerberus]** has been **[Stunned]**.*

Andromache floated down next to Kairos, and regained her nymph form as she cast a healing spell on him. His mind cleared like the skies, and his vision returned to normal.

[Stunned] ailment lifted!

Kairos' eyes widened as he regained control of himself, his head turning to glance at the Lethe river.

The [Telchine Skiff] floated down the stream not so far from the battlefield. Agron rowed alone, while Sertorius cast spells on Thales as the automated loaded spherical projectiles on a sling. "[Perception Up]!" Kairos heard his brother-in-law shout. "Hit!"

Thales' aim was true. His projectile shattered upon hitting Cerberus, the smoke making the giant hellhound's central head sluggish and unfocused; and when the next bomb missed, Nessus detonated it in midair with a well-placed arrow.

Kairos finally guessed what Thales had been trying to do when he ran back to the skiff.

The automaton had hastily crafted makeshift bombs using the Lethe river's water, heightening their potency by mixing it with potions. Cerberus was resistant to the liquid's amnesia effect, but Thales' substance repeatedly [Stunned] the central head and locked him in place.

Realizing it might not last forever, Kairos immediately used the distraction to rush at his griffin's side. "Rook, are you alright!"

"I'm okay..." his best friend replied while sluggishly rising back to his feet, miserably trailing his damaged left wing. "I'm okay..."

He looked just as [Stunned] as Kairos himself. "Andromache, heal him please," Kairos asked as he raised his spear. Though Cerberus' central head had grown sluggish and no longer threatened to incinerate or crush them, the left one was trying to locate the group by smell.

"Do not move, brave bird," Andromache whispered as she cast healing spells on Rook.

"Kairos, above!" Cassandra shouted a warning, as she attempted to gather momentum for another jump.

Cerberus' paw fell down on Kairos' group in an attempt to squash them like insects. Kairos repelled it with a blast of focused wind, only for the left head to unleash a cloud of poison in retribution.

Just as the Travian King was counting on.

Using his [Anemoi Spear], Kairos created a current of wind and redirected the attack. As he suspected, just as his own poisonous miasma had slightly harmed Cerberus' eyes, the beast's own cloud proved effective against it. The wind redirected the corrosive substance to the central head's helmet, melting the steel. Without this protection, another of Cerberus' maw closed in deep slumber.

Standing at the prow of the [Telchine Skiff], Sertorius raised his staff and cast a spell at Cerberus. Kairos didn't understand its meaning, but he heard the order that came with it.

"Look," Sertorius said, his spell turning into an absolute command.

The left head's eyes snapped open and met Kairos' gaze, sealing Cerberus' fate.

"Sit!" the Travian warlord ordered as he activated his [Telchine Sorcery] Skill. "Now!"

Cerberus' butt hit the ground so fast that the cavern trembled.

You [Charmed] [Cerberus]!

Kairos raised his hand, his men lowering their weapons. Cerberus' left head, the only one left awake, stuck out its tongue and breathed heavily. "Good boy," he said.

As long as Cerberus wouldn't suffer any damage, he would remain [Charmed].

Congratulations, you have earned one level (total fifty-eight) and 3 Skill Points.

The group gathered around the tamed hellhound, with Kairos comforting Rook as Thales swiftly put back his wing in place with surgical precision. "Ouch," the griffin complained.

"Brave bird, it will be over soon," Andromache said as she reinforced his bones with a spell.

"You're the bravest bird of all, Rook," Kairos reminded him. "It's just a bruise."

"I think you should be the one getting healing, Kairos," Rook replied with kindness. "My feathers are soft and strong, but you only have skin. The fall must have hurt you more than me!"

As an answer, Kairos simply petted his griffin with a smile.

"I wouldn't mind some help as well," Agron grunted. Even though Andromache cast spells to patch him up, he still bore bruises from Cerberus' blow. "That dog hit me harder than the dragon ever did."

"I thought [Demigods] automatically shrugged off the effects of your staff?" Cassandra asked Sertorius with a frown. Truthfully, that question had bugged Kairos all fight long as well. "How did you affect him?"

"Look at the hound more closely," Sertorius replied calmly.

Kairos followed his advice, using [Observer] on the central head.

Cerberus, Hound of Hades

Legend: Loyal Gatekeeper (Demigod)

Pantheon: Psychopompós.

Level: ???

The Travian King didn't understand what his brother-in-law was getting at... until he examined the left and right heads.

Cerberus, Hound of Hades

Legend: Kind Dog of Hell (Hero)

Pantheon: Psychopompós.

Race: Hellhound (Progenitor)

Class: Monster (Divine Beast, Dungeon Guardian, Behemoth)

Level: 60

Cerberus, Hound of Hades

Legend: Haunter of the Dead (Hero)

Pantheon: Psychopompós.

Race: Hellhound (Progenitor)

Class: Monster (Divine Beast, Dungeon Guardian, Behemoth)

Level: 60

"That's how it is," Kairos muttered to himself. "Unlike a hydra or even his own descendants, Cerberus is three souls sharing one body, each with a different [Legend]. Like conjoined twins."

"That explains the different set of immunities," Cassandra whispered.

His brother-in-law nodded. "I realized that Orpheus was a mere [Hero], yet he put all three of these heads to sleep... and for a spawn of Typhon and Echidna, Cerberus was tamable. It seemed very odd that he would need to wear these helmets to stay awake, unless..."

"Unless he was naturally vulnerable to [Mind] effects," Kairos guessed.

"One of the perks of being a [Tactician] is complete battlefield awareness. I sensed you pull the head under your spell once, and I figured you could do it again." Sertorius crossed his arms as he examined Cerberus. "Now, what do we do with him? Do we put the last head to sleep? Or can you command him to lift the barrier, Kairos?"

"Letting him fall asleep entirely would be unwise, sir," Thales said. "Without any means to repair the helmets and with Persephone occupied, he might never wake up on his own."

Cassandra nodded in agreement. "This would let undead escape the Underworld."

Kairos smiled kindly at Cerberus. "Can you lift the barrier for us?"

"Yes, young master!" the left head said with a calm, gentle voice that reminded Kairos of his mother's dog. Cerberus' eyes flared with light, and the crimson veil beyond the great gates' threshold turned translucent. "Will Cerberus be punished for harming the young master?"

"You should return to your doghouse for the crime of breaking my wing!" Rook complained.

Cerberus whined with a guilty look in his eyes, and although the hellhound was a colossal behemoth of mass destruction... Kairos couldn't help but find him cute. "Just watch the

door after we're gone," he asked Cerberus. "Don't let any dead soul pass, and we'll ask your mistress for a treat. One for each head."

Cerberus barked in happiness, his tail wagging behind him.

44: The Boatman

Each level of the Necromanteion was more ominous than the last.

The first layer had been a standard temple, not so different from the many shrines Kairos had visited in his lifetime; the second floor had been a cavern with mysterious magical properties, but somewhat familiar all the same.

The third, however, was unlike anything existing on the surface.

The party held their breath as their skiff traveled against the current and entered a new cavern, brighter and wider than any other before. Funeral pyres and candelabras on isolated stone islands banished the darkness, alongside burning magma pits erupting from the riverbank. The air was thick with volcanic fumes and the smell of sulfur, and the impossibly tall ceiling shimmered like the flames of Tartarus itself.

The Lethe river flowed from this level, but it was only one of many. Fiery Phlegethon and icy Cocytus had both found their way to this floor alongside the pure waters of the Acheron. It was the fifth river that Kairos found the most ominous though; its waters were grey, lifeless, and oozed a purple miasma fouler than any poison. Corpses and screaming souls floated beneath its surface, struggling to escape the current.

This was the river of hatred.

This was the River Styx, and its sisters revolved around it like courtiers around a queen.

Together, the various waterways formed a complex circuit that Kairos could only glimpse from the prow of his skiff; a maze of crossroads where the flames of Phlegethon melted the ice of Cocytus, where the dead souls carried by the Styx floated into the Lethe's embrace to forget their earthly existence. Kairos noticed hundreds of tunnels hidden in the giant cavern's walls. Perhaps they led to different afterlives or to hidden vaults where no mortal had ever ventured.

As for the riverbanks...

"So many of them," Cassandra whispered, a hand on her mouth.

Countless shadows waited on the banks of a hundred barren islands. Heroes and villains, kings and commoners, they all looked the same in death. They had become silent shades without substance, transparent specters flickering in and out of existence. Most of them carried a coin in their blurred hands, the price to pay to reach the afterlife. But they were so numerous that it would take years, if not centuries, for their turn to come.

Many of them glanced in silence at the [Telchine Skiff], pleading to be taken across the rivers to their righteous afterlife. But their words turned into muffled whispers, their voices as dead as this entire place.

The sight of this desperate crowd filled Kairos with melancholia. Were his father and siblings among these faceless souls trapped in limbo, condemned to wait years until they could take a trip on Charon's skiff? Or had they already moved on to their respective afterlife? Had they earned entry into the Elysian Fields, or the Asphodel Meadows? His father and uncle had been relentless pirates as well as family men; though Kairos hoped otherwise, they might have been condemned to Tartarus for their crimes.

Rook sensed his worry and nuzzled his cheek against his friend's thigh. "I'm sure they're in a good place," his griffin said with a reassuring tone. "Your siblings were sweet and kind from what you told me. I'm sure they're playing with bird heroes in the Elysian Fields."

"I hope so as well." Histria had died before her time, but she had been a kind soul; while Taulas perished in an attempt to become a [Hero]. Hopefully the gods had rewarded his bravery. "Maybe they're playing with your trueborn siblings."

"If I had any," Rook replied with a shrug. Kairos' father Chron had found his egg during one of his raids, but never learned where it came from. "We're clutchmates, you and I. I can't wait to be your kids' birdfather."

Kairos chuckled. "Please don't give them worms to eat."

"Nah. But maybe you could make a cradle from my feathers? It'll be so soft, they will never cry in their sleep. And when I'm old enough to have a clutch of my own, we'll use your hair for the nest."

"Has any ladybird caught your eagle eye?" Kairos asked playfully. Though he remained a child at heart, Rook had grown into a mighty griffin.

"I get a lot of proposals, you know? Ever since you put my face on your coins, every female griffin wants to ruffle my feathers. But I don't want to put my eggs everywhere, or I will never find them!"

After the tense encounter with Cerberus and Thanatos, Rook's joyful words were a breath of fresh air. "Is your wing better?" Kairos asked his friend with concern.

"Give it a few more hours, and I'll carry you all the way to the ceiling." Rook wagged his tail. "Are we there yet?"

That was the question. Where were they going? The maze seemed to go on and on, and entering the wrong waterway would lead them astray.

Kairos glanced at the rest of his team, who shared the tight space of the skiff the best they could. Thales was gathering river samples in bottles with one pair of hands and writing down a rough map of the waterways with the other, while Andromache meditated at the boat's back to recover her magical strength. Cassandra looked at the riverbanks with melancholia as Sertorius listened to Agron and Nessus arguing. The minotaur glanced at the River Styx's waters with barely concealed lust for power.

"Don't," Nessus said, trying to dissuade him. "That's a terrible idea."

"It worked for Achilles," Agron replied with enthusiasm. "And he was a baby, while I am a grown man."

"You want to dive into the Styx?" Kairos guessed. He had to admit that the idea had merit. Achilles bathing in its waters as a child had made him invulnerable, to the point Paris only slew him with a god's guidance.

Nessus didn't share Agron's enthusiasm though. "This would be foolish," he said. "There is a reason why no [Hero] who ever visited the Underworld attempted to bathe in the Styx's waters. Only [Demigods] can hope to survive a dive in the river of hatred, and never without the river's favor. You are more likely to join the souls at the bottom than gain Achilles' invulnerability, my horned friend."

"And how would you know that?" Sertorius asked with skepticism, having listened to the argument in silence. The judge had grown suspicious of Nessus, picking up on the hints about his true identity and foreign knowledge.

"You can take a dive if you want," the satyr replied with a shrug. "Don't blame me for the results."

Agron frowned as he considered the satyr's words, before looking at his king. "What about you, Kairos?" he asked with curiosity. "Want to take a bath? You have a Skill that protects you from the river's negative effects, right?"

"Immunity to the Styx's grasp doesn't mean I will gain invulnerability," Kairos pointed out.

"But you have nothing to lose from making an attempt," his brother-in-law said. "The minotaur has a point. It will cost you nothing to try and it may grant you enormous power."

After weighing the risks, Kairos decided to give it a try. His allies guided the [Telchine Skiff] to a waterway crossroad where the river Lethe met the Styx. After glancing at the damned souls beneath the surface, the Travian King quickly put his left hand into the water.

The River Styx felt cold to the touch; not the cold of ice and snow, but the chill of death itself. His fingers became numb, the blood beneath his skin coalescing.

[Instadeath] negated by [Stygian Curse 3].

[Instadeath]. It was the most fearsome of all status ailments, for it killed mortals instantly.

The undead shades swimming beneath the surface gathered around his hand like sharks around a bloody corpse. The smell of life drove them mad with envy and hunger, so Kairos hastily removed his hand before they could drag him underwater. The undead circled around the [Telchine Skiff] for a few seconds before fleeing, unable to attack the enchanted boat.

Kairos glanced at his hand with apprehension. His fingers had lost all color and turned into a pallid white. He bit his thumb hard enough to draw blood, but didn't feel any pain.

Agron didn't hide his disappointment. "So much for invulnerability," he complained.

"The river instantly kills you if you fall into it," Kairos warned his comrades. His fingers started to regain their original color, the skin warmed up by the blood flowing underneath. "The [Telchine Skiff] will protect us so long as you remain onboard, but be careful when we reach the shores."

"Which shores?" Sertorius asked with a frown. "We have been navigating for half an hour now, with no destination in sight."

"The Phlegethon River goes through Tartarus according to Plato," Agron pointed out as he remembered the ancient philosopher's tales. "If we travel to the source, we'll reach the entrance and the skiff should survive the lava."

That didn't sound like a bad plan, but Cassandra had another idea. "We need to go this way," she said while pointing at the River Styx. "If we swim against the current, it will lead us to our destination."

Kairos frowned. "You remember the way from your past death?"

"Yes and no," she replied, though her gaze remained determined. "This path feels familiar. Something pulls me in that direction, like a gut feeling. I can't describe it. I *need* to go this way."

"Can we rely on a gut feeling?" Sertorius asked with skepticism. "I understand you alone have returned from the dead among us, but if your intuition is wrong then we will lose valuable time."

As it turned out, Thales had insight to offer. "According to my observations about the waterways' position, I suspect they encircle a single location."

"Hades' old palace," Nessus guessed. "That's where we must go."

"Would the Lord of the Dead build his house over a door to Tartarus?" Sertorius asked. "This seems unwise."

"Only because you don't know him," the satyr replied. "Hades was duty incarnate. Zeus had given him the task of watching over Tartarus' denizens and he died trying to prevent them from escaping during the Anthropomachia."

Seeing things this way, building his fortress over his jail's entrance made sense. Tartarus was no different than a castle's dungeons, its prisoners forced to fight their jailers on the way out.

"I trust myself," Cassandra declared before pointing the [Fork of Nemesis] at the River Styx. "We must go this way."

Kairos glanced at Nessus, the satyr offering a nod of confirmation. Though he didn't fully recognize the area after so many centuries, the old god agreed with Cassandra's proposal.

Kairos suddenly wondered about Persephone's influence. It struck him as odd that she would let Cassandra remember a few facts about her brief stint in the Underworld, although no soul should; memories that came in handy when Kairos' group needed it the most.

Had she anticipated Thanatos' machinations and let Cassandra remember just enough from her brief stay in the afterlife so she could serve as a guide later? This seemed a bit too far-fetched even for a [God]... but divination did exist, with both Prometheus and Orgonos foreseeing Kairos would visit them. Maybe the Queen of the Underworld had predicted that Cassandra might one day play a pivotal role? Nessus had also joined their crew while on a mission from Persephone.

Hades' widow had chosen her champions.

Kairos wondered if Thanatos had done the same.

Following Cassandra's advice, the crew traveled against the River Styx's current and progressed deeper into the third level's cavern. And as Nessus suspected, the looming shadow of a fortress soon came into sight.

Standing proud on a barren island larger than the city of Histria, Hades' lost palace was a marvel of architecture. Tall marble columns supported four floors piled up atop one another like a Valian ziggurat. The ceiling, floor and walls were made of the purest obsidian stone, so black that they appeared to devour light itself. A paved road expanded from the island's shore to a ruby archway serving as the palace's entrance, all overseen by statues of sphinxes, manticores, dragons and cerberi. This place dwarfed even Prometheus' villa in its grim grandiosity; it was so large that a whole city's population could have lived within its walls.

And yet, the place was as dead as the shades on the riverbanks.

An army had rampaged through this palace's halls, leaving only dusty bones and rusted weapons beneath the broken walls. A quarter of the columns were shattered and part of the roof had crumbled. Kairos noticed empty terraces that must have once been gardens, the plants turned to stone, the fountains dried and lifeless.

Even looking at this open tomb made the Travian King uneasy. The air felt colder the closer they approached it, the warmth of Phlegethon sucked into the obsidian walls. As for the skeletons surrounding it... most belonged to men and giants, but a few skulls had wolfish canines.

Some of my ancestors are among them, Kairos thought grimly. He couldn't even begin to make up for the atrocities Lycaon and his sons committed, but he hoped stopping Thanatos would at least prevent more death and suffering.

"Beware," Andromache said as she emerged from her meditation. "I sense a powerful magical force coming our way."

"Undead?" Kairos asked his concubine, who shook her head. "Everyone, draw your weapons and buff."

They didn't have the time to do so.

The shadow of another skiff emerged from a dark tunnel, its wood the color of rust. It was a miracle that this ancient boat didn't sink, for it had small holes everywhere. Its design closely matched that of the [Telchine Skiff], but older, more fearsome. Kairos' Skills couldn't

identify its magical properties, and it skidded on the water without making waves. The boat and the river moved as one.

A sordid figure stood on the boat. His eyes were hollow furnaces on fire, his skin grey as a corpse. An unkempt beard covered his mouth, and a foul garb hid his manly parts. The old man looked haggard, his back hunched, his fingers bent crooked. But his hands held his long pole with sinister strength and experience.

Kairos immediately recognized the figure even before he used [Observer].

Charon the Boatman

Legend: Ferryman of the Dead (Demigod)

Pantheon: Psychopompós.

Level: ???

"I knew I heard Cerberus howl in the night," Charon grumbled gruffly as he guided his skiff closer to Kairos' own. "Using a skiff modeled on mine too... are you here to steal my job, my hard-won coins?"

All the Travians onboard bowed before the ancient [Demigod], to whom they had all prayed at least once. Even Andromache and Sertorius appraised the boatman with caution.

He wasn't alone either. Kairos noticed movement and glittering scales beneath the waters around the two skiffs. The boatman had attendants, ready to drown the intruders at the first provocation.

"No, Lord Charon," Kairos said with profound respect, hoping to avoid a fight. "We come in peace."

"Then fuck off," the boatman replied while spitting in the River Styx. "Get out of my river! It's already too noisy upstairs, I won't suffer watching the living use my canals!"

Kairos opened his mouth to argue, but the boatman raised his pole towards him as the two skiffs crossed paths. "Out!" Charon shouted, his eyes burning with immortal annoyance. "Out, I said! Go back the way you came! You can return when you die of old age, but these waters are mine! Out!"

Cassandra covered her mouth to suppress a chuckle, while the rest of the party didn't say a word. Kairos couldn't say if it was out of astonishment or fear. They had faced godly beings both wise and arrogant...

But never one so cranky.

"I... I'm afraid that we cannot, Lord Charon," the Travian King apologized. "We have been tasked to keep the Gates of Tartarus shut."

"Ain't no lord of anything," Charon replied with a sneer, though he lowered his pole. "Wait, I recognize your voice. You prayed to me many times, child."

"I did," Kairos confirmed. Charon was a popular [Demigod] in Travia, for he embodied both death and seamanship; the Foresight's crew had personally prayed to him after his uncle Panos' untimely demise.

"Many of our raids were done in your name," Agron added gruffly while squinting at the boatman. Clearly the minotaur wasn't so impressed with Charon after meeting him in the flesh.

And yet it would be foolish to challenge him. Charon was a [Demigod] as powerful as Cerberus and the Underworld's waterways were his. From the way his skiff moved, Kairos wondered if he could control the River Styx at will.

"How did you even get in?" the boatman asked with a suspicious frown. He was no longer yelling at the party though, which Kairos took as a good sign. Meeting worshippers, even casual ones, had mollified him somewhat. "You didn't kill Cerberus, I hope? Or is he sleeping on the job again?"

"We managed to slip past him, old man," Nessus replied with a casual smile, drawing glares from some of his teammates. By now, the [Charm] effect keeping the giant hound docile had probably worn off. "None of your precious coin-bearers will escape the underworld."

"Old man?" Charon gritted his teeth in rage at the lack of respect, before paying more attention to Nessus. The boatman's eyes lost some of their fiery glow, his eyebrows furrowing.

He knows, Kairos guessed. "He has worms in his beard," Rook said as he observed the boatman, focusing on what truly mattered. "I wonder how they taste?"

"Mine," Charon replied gruffly, his gaze wandering from Nessus to a confused Cassandra. "I see... you have the Queen's smell all over you. You're here to beat some sense into Thanatos' head?"

"Yes," Nessus replied, a grim glow in his eyes.

"Good. I would have done it myself if not for these pesky [Pantheon] rules. Come to think of it, the Queen asked me to let her champions pass if I ever encountered them."

Sertorius' head perked up. "Do champions fall outside the rules of your [Pantheon]?"

As Kairos had suspected, Persephone couldn't strike directly against Thanatos. But like the reaper of souls had sicced Cerberus on them, nothing prevented her from sending mortals after him.

"Don't get cocky, youngsters. If you try to pick a fight with me then no one will protect you, and I brawled with Heracles in his heyday." Charon raised his pole threateningly. "Well then, what are you waiting for to do your job? Do you expect me to do it for you? I'm paid to ferry souls to their rightful place, not to clean after Thanatos' mess!"

Good. Kairos wasn't certain they could survive fighting multiple [Demigods] in a row without heavy casualties. "Lord Charon, before we go," the Travian King asked, "may you give us some advice?"

"Haven't you heard a word of what I said? I'm *busy*." Charon pointed his pole at the souls waiting on the shores. "I've got thousands to ferry through, no time for—"

"How much?" Nessus asked abruptly.

Charon squinted at him. "How much?"

The satyr revealed a full purse. "How much do you want?"

Kairos blinked at his friend, trying to understand the purpose of carrying coins in an underground expedition. *Did... did he bring money to a dungeon specifically to bribe Charon, in case we encountered him?*

Whatever the case, Nessus' foresight paid off. Charon's eyes blazed with greed, and he swiftly grabbed the satyr's purse. Apparently, ferrying souls to the afterlife could wait until the boatman finished counting his coins.

Kairos suddenly wondered why he even needed money in the Underworld, since he couldn't buy anything. It probably boiled down to sheer greed. In any case, he immediately seized the opportunity offered to him. "We are looking for the Gates to Tartarus, and prevent them from opening," Kairos said. "Do they wait beneath the palace?"

"Sure," Charon replied as he tasted one of Nessus' coins. "But the whole place belongs to Thanatos now. Queen Persephone hasn't set foot in this cursed place since Lycaon widowed her. She can still hear her son's screams in the walls..."

Kairos looked away in shame.

"So the old ghost made it his haunt," Charon said. "He doesn't like to see anyone, and we scorn him back."

So they could expect traps and guardians. Worrying, but not unexpected. "We are also looking for the [Necklace of Harmonia]," Sertorius said, not having forgotten his sister. "Have you seen it?"

"That trinket?" Charon scoffed in scorn. "Some foolish young man offered it to Queen Persephone as a tribute back when old Hades still breathed, but I never saw her wear it."

"Did the Queen take it with her when she moved on?" Sertorius probed the old boatman. "Or did she leave it in the palace?"

"How should I know? Do I look like a jeweler to you?" Charon hid the purse beneath his barb and prepared to move on. "Unless you have more stupid questions, I'll leave and go back to work."

"Wait!" Cassandra asked. "Have you ferried a soul called Rhadamanthe? Our crewmate? He was a minotaur, wise among the wise. He perished a few months ago, and we prayed for you to accept his soul."

"Why would you want to know?" Sertorius asked with incomprehension. "How will it help us?"

Cassandra's face turned somber. "I want to know in which afterlife he went."

Kairos' heart skipped a beat. True, Charon had ferried all mortal souls across the Underworld. Including those of his family.

"I ferry thousands of minotaurs' shades, but I remember the name of everyone I transported on my skiff," Charon replied with a shrug. "I have had no passengers with that name in the last five years. He's probably waiting on the riverbanks in line with all the others."

"Is there any way to make the application process faster?" Thales asked with concern, having been friends with the minotaur. "I could repair your skiff in return, sir."

Charon remained inflexible. "It's the same for everyone, and my skiff is fine. Death doesn't discriminate. Everyone pays the same fee; heroes or monsters, rich or poor, they all wait their turn."

"What about my sister, Histria?" Kairos asked, his voice breaking. "Histria Marius? She was a young girl who died during the last Travian famine. I prayed to you to... to accept her soul at the wake, even though she had the wolfblood."

"Histria Marius, Histria Marius, wolfblood..." Charon nodded to himself and filled Kairos' heart with hope. "Yes, that one I remember. The judges sent her to the Elysian Fields. She was a pious and kind little girl, with no sin to her name. Kids always make noise at the judgment, but she didn't say a word. Not once."

Kairos let out a sigh of relief, knowing his sister rested in peace. "What about my brother Taulas?" he asked. "My father Chron?"

"His uncle, Panos," Cassandra added with sorrow. Though she had moved on from her old companion, she had shared his life for years.

"Prince Critias?" Kairos added to the list. He still felt guilt over his murder, and hoped that he at least passed on to a good afterlife. "Eos?"

Even Agron had a name to provide. "My old captain, Periphetes? Did he go to Tartarus?"

"Will you name the entire Underworld?" Charon replied in annoyance, before grudgingly asking for more details. Thankfully, he recalled meeting most of the group's family members; one of his Skills marked each soul he ever ferried on his skiff.

Kairos' father and uncle both went to the Asphodel Meadows alongside Eos, the realm of the mediocre neither vile enough for Tartarus nor worthy of the Elysian Fields. The Travian King took some solace in the knowledge that they had avoided the worst of the Underworld's tortures, but lamented the fact they had gone to a different afterlife than Histria. *Even in death, my family will be broken*, he thought grimly.

At least Prince Critias had gone to the Elysian Fields. Kairos wondered if he and Histria would get along.

As for Periphetes, Agron's old mentor, he went straight to Tartarus for his countless crimes. The minotaur took the news with quiet stoicism, though he tightened his hold on his Songaxe. Perhaps he feared that he would suffer the same fate.

There was one name that Charon didn't remember however. "I know of no Taulas Marius," he rasped, though he recalled ferrying other crewmates who perished with him.

"Maybe you missed him?" Cassandra asked, while Kairos clenched his fists in anger.

"I don't miss *anybody*," Charon snorted. "If I didn't ferry him, then he's either alive, undead, or another god got to his spirit first. Ask Thanatos when you scold him. It wouldn't be the first time the old ghost hoards a few lost souls to himself."

No. Not Thanatos. He hadn't snatched any other soul but Circe's as far as they knew, and Taulas perished long before his family started opposing his nefarious designs.

Andromache put a hand on Kairos' arm as Charon moved his skiff away from their own, cursing the mortals for wasting his precious time. Her fingers felt warm and reassuring, but the Travian King barely noticed. "He could be waiting on the riverbanks," she whispered.

"He ferried my uncle, who died years after," Kairos replied with skepticism. He noticed Sertorius' gaze and locked eyes with him. No doubt his brother-in-law suspected the same thing he did.

He is the god of murder. All of those who die by violent, dishonorable means fall under his purview, and sometimes he stays his hand.

Taulas had perished in battle as a true wolfblood.

And Lycaon always had his due.

45: Jaws of the Wolf God

The entrance of Hades' palace laid open like the maw of a great beast. The rubies adorning the archway shone with bright light as Andromache cast spells on them, lifting one protection ward after another. Nessus and Thales assisted her by inspecting the doorway for non-magical traps, clearing the path ahead before the party could walk inside.

Kairos himself observed the scene from the shore, but he couldn't focus on it for the life of him. His mind wandered off back to his brother's gravestone in Histria, while his eyes glanced at the River Styx. Charon had long vanished from sight, busy gathering souls to transport deeper into the Underworld and collecting their coins.

Could he have been wrong? He ferried thousands of shades each day, and even gods made mistakes...

"Kairos," Cassandra said softly at his side, while Rook looked at his best friend with concern. "Don't beat yourself up over it."

"How can't I?" he asked his former second-in-command. "Lycaon has my brother's soul."

Out of the party, only Agron looked as frustrated as Kairos. The minotaur hadn't taken the news of his adoptive father's fate well, and now sulked near the [Telchine Skiff].

"Maybe, maybe not," Cassandra replied, though she didn't sound like she truly believed it. "It could have been another god."

Kairos shook his head. "Who else, Cass?"

"It would fit," Sertorius said with cold certainty. "Remus, Romulus... It strikes me as Lycaon's idea of a joke."

"My brother's bones are in Histria," Kairos replied harshly. "Mother had his remains transferred from Lissala to the colony months ago. We have prayed before his grave for years, and he hasn't stirred inside it. Rhadamanthe purified his body, and as Julia can attest, Romulus is very much a physical being."

He refused to accept that his brother and that maddened legate of Lycaon were one and the same. It didn't fit.

"Maybe there is no one underneath Romulus' armor," Sertorius pointed out. "An insane shadow animating an empty suit of steel and iron."

"Why would Lycaon even raise my brother from the dead?" Kairos asked. He worried, rightfully, that the wolf-god had captured his brother's soul; but to conclude that he was Romulus was a large jump. There were other, more likely suspects such as some of his mother's uncles, cousins, or brothers.

"Good question." Sertorius crossed his arms. "Who was your brother as a person? I never heard of his exploits."

Kairos remained sullenly silent, so Cassandra answered for him. "When Captain Chron perished in a raid on Vali's merchant fleet, his brother and my previous companion Panos took over the *Foresight*. Taulas was a young [Fighter] then, but a talented one."

"How talented?" Sertorius asked with a raised eyebrow.

"A prodigy," Kairos answered softly, still remembering all the bruises his brother gave him during training.

Cassandra nodded, a certain fondness in her gaze. Though she hadn't been as close to Taulas as Kairos, he had been a comrade to her. "He was born with better stats than most, and mastering weapons came easily to him. We all thought he might become Travia's newest [Hero]."

"What went wrong then?" Sertorius asked.

"He took a Quest to hunt a sea monster near the Eye of Typhon," Cassandra replied, her gaze haunted as she remembered that fateful day. "A spawn of Echidna who harassed merchant galleys in the north. We hunted it alongside foreign mercenaries after its bounty, but when the beast was near-death—"

"Your alliance collapsed as everyone attempted to land the killing blow," Sertorius guessed, with Cassandra nodding in sorrow. "Discipline broke down as each fighter attempted to gain the creature's [Legend]. Typical."

"A costly mistake," Cassandra said with a sigh. "When the beast was dead, so were Taulas and a dozen others. I like to think he landed the killing blow as the creature sank its teeth into his chest."

"It didn't matter," Kairos replied with anger. "He died all the same."

The Travian King still remembered his mother's expression after Panos brought back the bloated, dismembered corpse. She had cried when Histris perished, and took his father's death with quiet dignity. But when she saw Taulas... Aurelia had looked as dead inside as her son on the outside.

Sertorius considered the tale. "True, I can see dozens of would-be champions of the wolf-god with greater feats than your brother. But if we assume he isn't Romulus but that Lycaon still claimed his soul, then for what purpose?"

"Probably a necromantic ritual," Cassandra said. "Souls have a metaphysical weight that they accumulate with time and memories. This is why they need to go through the River Lethe and forget their old lives before reincarnating. Ancient souls are usually too much for a newborn body to handle."

"You have done your research well," Sertorius complimented her.

"I descend from a priestess of Persephone," Cassandra replied with a smile. "I have done my best to catch up to my heritage."

And yet, she had missed the elephant in the room. Kairos glanced at Nessus, who had for some reason stopped examining the entrance to examine the werewolf corpses outside the palace. He had lived many lives, yet his body survived.

He might have been the exception that proved the rule though, as an incarnation of life.

Speaking of necromancy, Andromache had abandoned the archway to raise bones from the dead. "Are you discussing the dead without me?" the nymph asked as she rejoined Kairos, a werewolf skeleton rising behind her protectively. The creature lacked any will of its own, and yet it appeared quite fearsome. "I am offended."

"I often forgot you gained the [Necromancer] subclass," Kairos admitted with a smile as Andromache put an arm around his own. She glanced at Sertorius as if expecting him to argue, but the judge remained unflappable. "How is the entrance?"

"Booby-trapped, but I removed the magical wards. I leave the hidden trap doors to Thales' capable hands." The nymph caressed her animated undead's skull with her fingers, as if it were a loyal pet. "Souls are precious indeed. Even as a [Hero]-Rank [Necromancer], I can hardly manipulate them."

"What kind of ritual could they be used for?" Cassandra asked. "I learned that ancient [Necromancers] used them to predict the future or to create shadowy assassins, but maybe you know of others."

"My mentor Euryale can bind them to craft powerful items, or as fuel to summon powerful daemons." Andromache glanced at Kairos, noticing his foul mood. "I am sorry, my love, but I do not know what Lycaon intends to do with your brother's spirit. He is not a

[Necromancer] or even a [Spellcaster], so his abilities must differ from mine. I know, however, that Lycaon can hold souls in his stomach indefinitely."

Kairos didn't find that reassuring.

Agron chose that moment to emerge from his sullen reverie. "There's one thing you haven't considered. The worst case scenario."

"I fail to see what could be worse," Kairos replied with a snort. "But do tell."

"That your brother wasn't special," Agron replied grimly. "That all wolfbloods' souls go back to their progenitor when they die."

The mere thought chilled Kairos to the bone, but thankfully Rook immediately found a counterargument. "Kairos' sister passed on peacefully, and she was a wolfblood too!" the griffin pointed out, trying to cheer his best friend up.

"He's right," Kairos said, quickly banishing the subject. "If Lycaon grabbed the souls of all his descendants, Charon wouldn't have transported Histria's soul."

But to the Travian King's surprise, Sertorius' eyes widened in a new emotion that his brother-in-law had never seen. A raw, primal emotion that he had thought the judge incapable of.

Fear.

"Not the Wolfbloods," Sertorius whispered. "The werewolves."

Kairos froze. "What are you implying?"

"Your brother was born as a wolfblood with exceptional stats," Sertorius stated, his fists clenching. "It's usually a telltale sign that the werewolf curse would have manifested in him in adulthood. That, or your sister avoided his grasp because she died of famine rather than violence since Lycaon's divine portfolio covers death by murder or hunting."

Ride with me, blood of my blood! Romulus' terrible voice echoed in his mind with a terrible memory. This is our time, this is our moment! This is the last call to answer, the final hunt!

All who carried Lycaon's blood were part of his pack, in life or death.

He will get Julia's soul, and Mother's too, Kairos realized in horror before glancing at Andromache. The nymph's skin had turned pale, as the same dark thought crossed both of their minds.

Maybe even our children.

"And you didn't notice?" Cassandra asked Sertorius in anger as she realized the ghastly implications.

"How should we have done so?" The judge shook his head, unsettled. "The dead have been silent since Queen Persephone retired from the land of the living, and [Necromancers] like the nymph are few and far between. If anything, Cassandra, I believe you are the only person among us who can check this theory."

Cassandra's eyes squinted in determination. "I can run a [Nekyia] ritual and try to interrogate the souls of wolfbloods and werewolves, if you have a list."

"I will help," Andromache said with a dark scowl on her face. She had escaped one curse, only to risk seeing her child suffer from another.

"But even if you are correct, Lycaon can't have done that on a mass scale," Cassandra argued. "Queen Persephone would have noticed a large number of souls failing to reach her realm, and she hates Lycaon more than anyone else for what he did to her family. That or the seal restricts him."

The seal...

Kairos shivered as he put the two and two together. "Sertorius, stop me if I'm wrong," he said. "The Senex maintain the seal binding Lycaon by acting as an artificial [God], whose existence is fueled by Lyce's noble families. This way, the collective metaphysical weight of the assembly trumps Lycaon's."

The Lycean Judge nodded, his body as tense as a bowstring. He had already reached the same conclusion as his brother-in-law.

"Now, let's imagine a situation where Lycaon slowly gathers souls inside his prison, their weight adding up to his," Kairos continued, his allies tensing up. "How many would he need until he can 'outweigh' the Senex and break out?"

"Countless," Sertorius replied, though his tone remained somber. "But the extinction of each family line weakens the assembly's power, and his Beast Cult has culled more than a quarter of us across the centuries. Even if Lycaon needs specific conditions to claim a soul and can only snatch a few at once, we must assume he has had a steady supply since his imprisonment."

Orgonos had warned Kairos that he couldn't recreate the seal without breaking it first. The Senex could only grow weaker with time, while Lycaon's power slowly increased. Even if

they somehow prevented the wolf-god from claiming more souls, he might have accumulated so many over the centuries that it wouldn't change anything. His Cult only had to get lucky often enough by extinguishing select Senex family lines, and the wolf-god would break his chains.

A heavy silence settled as the group digested the awful truth.

Lycaon's escape wasn't merely possible.

It was inevitable.

And considering Prometheus' warnings, it would happen in Kairos' lifetime.

This is the coming age, the last age, Romulus had said, when he visited the Travian King in his dreams months ago. The Age of Wolves! The wolf god shall break his chains and rise again! His pack shall roam the earth!

Andromache was the first to break the silence, her eyes blazing with rage. "Never."

A cold determination filled Kairos' heart, winds swirling around his spear's tip. "My wife and mother's souls won't join Hades and his son inside Lycaon's stomach," he declared, "nor will any of my children's spirits."

"Agreed," Sertorius assented with determination. "But what do you suggest? That we should find a way to reinforce the seal? Even I, a member of the Senex, do not know how."

"Personally, I say we deal with Lycaon like all of our other foes." Agron raised his Songaxe over his shoulder. "We kill him when he gets out."

"Yes, exactly!" Rook agreed with a furious nod while Andromache flashed a predatory smile. "We kick his ass and then send him back to his doghouse!"

Though the challenge was great and Kairos preferred to talk rather than kill, the Travian King couldn't agree more in this case. He would make Lycaon spit out his brother's soul, and Hades' son too while he was at it.

Cassandra was more down-to-earth, and far less enthusiastic. "Lycaon is a *[God]*," she pointed out. "One so powerful that Orgonos had to seal him because none of the New Gods could land a fatal blow. Even if we call upon his help and Queen Persephone's, letting him escape would be a disaster."

"It would destroy Lyce's capital for a start," Sertorius said. "Lycaon is buried underneath it. Though we have taken precautions in preparation for this day, hundreds of thousands will be at his nonexistent mercy."

Agron scoffed. "Then we evacuate them before breaking the seal ourselves. If the wolf-god will escape on his own anyway, we better pick the moment he does rather than be taken unaware."

"I haven't said otherwise. Lyce has never been more unified under my influence and that of Dispatēr, but the fact remains that we are not powerful enough to face him... at least yet." Sertorius glanced at his brother-in-law. "To defeat a [God], we need a party of [Demigods]."

Kairos gave a short nod. Their resources were stretched thin and arrayed against Mithridates in the east. As much as he wanted to free his brother's soul... he would have only one attempt at it, and he needed to pick it carefully.

They also had other allies to call. Heracles had retired, but would relish the opportunity of fighting Lycaon if he ever escaped. Orgonos had sealed Lycaon once, and might join the battle if forewarned. Even Prometheus might have insight to offer.

Kairos was many things, but friendless wasn't one of them.

"Would the Senex agree to undo the seal if we gather enough allies to defeat Lycaon?" Kairos asked his brother-in-law.

"Yes," Sertorius replied. "The minotaur is right. If Lycaon will escape on his own whatever we do, the best option is damage control and keeping the initiative. Gather allies, secure our rear, lay a trap, and then spring it at the right moment."

"Until then, Andromache and I can study the method Lycaon uses to claim souls," Cassandra said, the nymph agreeing with a nod. "If we can prevent him from gathering more, we will have more leeway."

Agron didn't hide his excitement at the thought of fighting a [God], but Kairos noticed a hint of anxiety in his movements. The minotaur had committed many crimes, and his lifestyle had earned his mentor a one-way trip to Tartarus. Becoming an immortal divinity could be one of the few ways for Agron to dodge his inevitable punishment.

But... What if the award of slaying Lycaon went to someone else?

Kairos was no fool. Lycaon had slain Hades and many other deities during the Anthropomachia, his power growing until the New Gods allied with his own descendants to seal him away. The *Foresight's* crew had barely survived their few encounters with

[Demigods]; and in Rhadamanthe's case not without casualties. Kairos' chances of prevailing in the battle with his monstrous ancestor, let alone slay him, were small.

And yet, the world was trapped in a cycle. Sons overthrowing their fathers, younger generations casting down the old from their thrones.

Was this the next iteration of this endless play? The Fate System had heralded a new age of myths, giving birth to [Heroes] to replace those lost in the Anthropomachia. Two of the Calamities that Prometheus foretold were remnants of the Old World, and even Mithridates intended to make use of a relic Poseidon left behind.

In the end, it didn't matter. Kairos wouldn't fight Lycaon because he hoped to take his place.

He would fight him for the sake of his family. To free his brother's soul, and make sure none of his loved ones ever ended up in that foul deity's jaws.

And... maybe it would finally cleanse away the shame of his lineage.

Kairos glanced at Andromache. His mother Aurelia had fled her homeland to avoid persecution for the crime of being born with the werewolf curse. Countless others had suffered from the dark legacy Lycaon left them with. Destroying him would finally free new generations from his dark shadow.

Without Lycaon, his children wouldn't face prejudice while growing up.

That was reason enough to fight.

"Hey!" Nessus called out to the rest of the group. "Are you done talking? We're ready to move in!"

Kairos glanced at the satyr and Thales, noticing two blobs of grey goo crawling after him; he must have used his [**Amulet of Slime Conversion**] to create them. "Sweet, new minions," Rook said. "Kairos, can I eat one? Just to see how it tastes?"

"Another time, brave bird," Andromache said with a smile as the party regrouped. "We will need these bodies to throw at the defenses."

"Well, sir, we detected the presence of traps inside the corridors," Thales explained. "So many that it would take hours to progress. Considering our limited time and resources, I suggested we use an... alternative method to clear the path."

Kairos couldn't help but laugh. "You want to let animated puppets trigger them?"

"Forget the sacrificial lambs," Nessus said as he snapped his fingers, his summoned jellys hopping through the palace's archway. "Goos are the new fashion."

"Usually, I would be mad at seeing someone mistreat corpses this way," Cassandra said before smiling at Andromache's undead creation. "But these remains belong to Lycaon's sons."

This was certainly a novel approach to trap-finding... and Kairos was thankful to be on the other side of an undead assault for once. "Alright, send the minions first," he said.

"Everyone, get into formation and prepare for a fight."

Death awaited.

46: Doom of Thanatos

It had been countless centuries since Nessus had last set foot in his late uncle's palace.

Or did he ever visit it in the first place? Maybe he was mistaking it for another castle, one of the many fortresses he had conquered or explored in his glory days? The dark obsidian corridors felt awfully familiar, and yet the fallen god didn't remember the way in. The memories of his past lives blurred together into a chaotic mess; sometimes he noticed the shadows of Indian tigers in a corner, or the tail of a Nile crocodile. *Even the animals haunt me now*, he thought. *As if the people weren't enough.*

Mortals called it the *fog of age*, but in Nessus' case, the *zoo of memories* may have been a more appropriate term.

The menagerie that Kairos called his party walked through finely furnished halls, each more splendid than the last; for Hades had been a god of wealth as well as the dead. The marble floor had withstood the test of time, as did exquisite gold frescoes and mosaics representing the Titanomachia. Tasteful ensembles of gems and diamonds covered the ceiling, forming visions of comets and constellations. Each door was made of a precious metal, each wall raised with rare and unique stones.

But it was the statues that left Nessus breathless. The group couldn't take a step without finding a marble copy of Persephone and Cerberus, each more glorious and lovely than the last. Occasionally they crossed paths with representations of Orpheus and Eurydice, whose love had charmed even the Lord of the Underworld, or of Menippe and Metioche, twin sisters who willingly offered their lives to the god to lift a plague. They even found a shrine of white marble trees and silver mint plants in an isolated corner, a final tribute to the women who once competed with Persephone for her husband's heart.

The wealth held in this palace could bankroll a hundred kingdoms and now gathered dust, a silent memento of the fallen Lord of the Dead. Even Agron, never one to ignore easy money, seemed reluctant to grab any of it. Each piece of precious metal, each stone, served to honor someone else's memory.

Nessus remembered Hades as a dour and grim figure, as cold as a corpse. Father once joked that his brother was born dead, he remembered, but though he only cared for a few, his love had been genuine.

A part of Nessus hoped to live long enough to see Lycaon perish and his uncle's soul freed. Hopefully, Kairos would follow in Zeus' footsteps and bring his ancestor down. The satyr

imagined himself at his captain's back, raising a bow at a werewolf the size of Cerberus. Such a glorious picture, almost worth living for.

Who am I kidding? Nessus thought as he banished the images from his mind. *As if Kairos needs my help.*

The satyr glanced at the future King of Travia. He and Rook occupied the middle of the party's formation, leaving Cassandra and Agron at the front, while Sertorius, Andromache, and Thales formed the rear guard behind Nessus. The way Kairos walked reminded the fallen god of Perseus, a wise ruler with an unshakable will.

He had delved into this deathtrap to protect his people, while Nessus had come to perish.

The world will be in better hands than mine, the satyr thought until he sensed a heavy gaze on his back. Some of them at least.

The so-called Judge Sertorius had been observing him from the moment they met, his enchanted eyes peering into Nessus' soul and laying his sins bare. The satyr had felt a similar effect once in the old world, the first time he walked through the doors of Olympus. The goddess Themis, deity of justice, law, and fairness, had put Dionysus on trial and deemed him worthy of entering Olympus. The fact his ascension cost countless mortals their life had never factored into her decision.

Justice was never blind.

Themis' enchanted gaze and Sertorius' felt so similar that Nessus was convinced that the latter inherited the former's [Legend]. The divine spark of absolute law had wandered across the centuries before finding a new vessel, one even more ruthless than the first.

And where Themis had deemed Nessus' behavior acceptable in the first case, Sertorius found him wanting in the appeal. The satyr already knew the verdict the judge had rehearsed in his head.

You don't belong in the world I'm creating.

Sertorius desired to replace the Olympians with his own kin, and for that, all traces of the old order had to perish. And while Nessus had come to agree with the last part, he couldn't help but find the judge's ambitions a bit *too* familiar.

Hopefully it wasn't too late for him to see reason and change his mind. Unlike Themis, Sertorius struck him as the kind of person who held *everyone* to the same high standards; himself included. If he ever ascended, [Gods] would be no safer from his judgement than the mortals they once oppressed.

"Beware," Agron said as he used his burning Songaxe as an improvised torch to light the way. The fair ladies of the party had done something similar, while both Cassandra and Andromache summoned flames to light the way. "I see a pit."

Indeed, the minotaur stopped in the middle of a corridor right before an empty space. Nessus peeked over his ally's shoulder and into the void, noticing one of his summoned jellies impaled on poisoned spikes at the bottom. The weapons hadn't damaged the creature, but it couldn't crawl back to the surface on its own.

Oh well, it would have expired in one minute or so anyway. At least it sacrificed itself to spare them a nasty fall.

"You didn't feel any feedback through the amulet?" Cassandra asked Nessus.

"I'm afraid not, oh lovely lady." The satyr still couldn't believe that Tiberius had managed to woo her. "Our captain cornered the [Beastmaster] subclass before I could."

His remark amused Kairos. "Would slimes even count as a [Animal Companion]?" he asked.

"Pfft, of course not! They can't even fly!" Rook complained as he looked into the pit. "I can demonstrate!"

Kairos shook his head. "First rule of a dungeon, Rook. We don't split up, ever."

"We sent the undead ahead," Nessus pointed out as he glanced at Andromache. "What about them, dear nymph? Did all of them find a hole their size?"

"Most are still in movement," Andromache replied as she closed her eyes to focus. Though she couldn't see through the eyes of her reanimated thralls, she could sense their presence and location. "One has moved up; through a staircase I presume."

Thales immediately offered her a scroll and a feather pen, the sorceress scribbling lines on it as she recorded her thralls' movements.

The automaton's plan to explore the palace had been a stroke of genius. When the road forward split into multiple directions, he had the party send their summoned minions in all of them and then asked the creatures to always turn right. Since Andromache could sense her undead's presence, Thales had swiftly recorded the movements of each undead through the maze to form a rough map of it.

It would have been even better if Nessus shared the same affinity with his summoned slimes, but he had quickly noticed that while his amulet allowed him to command these

creatures, it didn't create a psychic link with them. The party had thus settled on sending them ahead to scout for traps while they followed closely behind.

After giving Thales time to review and adjust Andromache's additions, the group gathered around him to look at his map. As Nessus expected, his uncle's palace dwarfed many towns in sheer size. Each wing could probably hold all of Kairos' keep in Histria.

Worse, the place was a true maze. If Thales' map could be trusted—and Nessus was tempted to do so, as the automaton had [Architect] as a subclass—then the right-wing alone contained more than a dozen rooms linked together by twisted corridors... and the undead scouts within hadn't toured it all yet.

"We are here," Thales said as he pointed at a corridor on the map's southwest. "Right after the art gallery. According to Lady Andromache's information, the southern wing is the smallest of them and circles back on itself. Has any undead in the area descended?"

"No," Andromache replied. "I ordered them to take pathways down in order of priority."

"So we can assume this wing of the palace will not lead us to the fourth level," Thales said before pointing at various points on the northeast part of the map. "We lost two undead in these spots, so we must assume the presence of traps or defenders."

"Defenders mean something to defend," Agron pointed out.

"Or bait to lure us into a trap," Sertorius replied with less enthusiasm. "We have avoided many traps so far, but faced no ambush."

"I wish I could know the way," Cassandra said with a sigh. "But I never stepped foot in this place, neither in life or death."

"Thales, can your Skills fill the holes in the design?" Kairos asked the only [Crafter] on the team.

"I'm afraid not, sir," the automaton admitted with a hint of shame. "This palace has none of the amenities that mortal homes revolve around. There is no cistern, no kitchen, no furnace."

"The [Gods] and the dead don't need these things," Andromache shrugged. "Magic fulfilled all their needs."

Thales nodded slowly. "I would need to map out at least half of the floor to make an estimation, and my Skills inform me that we have mapped less than twenty percent of it."

Kairos scowled and glanced at Nessus. "What do you think?"

The satyr could read the real question between the lines: *do you recognize this layout?*

Nessus crossed his arms and paid the map a long, hard look. Truthfully, it did feel vaguely familiar, but he didn't recognize the wings' shapes. He tried to dig up the memory in question and came up short.

Maybe he shouldn't remember the palace, but its previous owner. Did Hades have a particular art style? He knew that the fortress predated his abduction of Persephone, and that he created beautiful gardens in an attempt to win her heart. Did he also redecorate the interior to please her?

Athena said that Hades always lived in his brother's shadow, Nessus remembered. His kingdom was great and mighty, but it was a pale reflection of Olympus.

How ironic that not even dust remained of Olympus, and yet Hades' palace still stood. Even centuries after his kingdom crumbled, mortals still held the Lord of the Underworld's tomb in quiet reverence. For a goddess of wisdom and strategy, Athena had failed to see many things.

What good is foresight to those who blind themselves? Nessus thought. The gods of Olympus had spurned the Lord of the Underworld, considering his kingdom undesirable, mocked his dourness and inflexible sense of justice. And yet while Zeus and his children had been forgotten by time, mortals were still willing to fight Lycaon to free Hades' soul. Nessus doubted anyone would honor the name Dionysus by the next century.

The satyr held his breath as an idea crossed his mind. "Dear Andromache, you said one of your undead found a way to the floors above?" he asked. "Could you tell me where?"

The nymph snorted. "Why bother? It went the wrong way. Unless you want us to circle the world and attack Thanatos from the other side?"

"He will never see it coming," Nessus pointed out. Andromache rolled her eyes and pointed at a northern point on the map. "As I thought."

"Do you have an idea?" Kairos asked, his eyes lighting up in hope.

"My kingdom for a pen, please," Nessus asked.

"You don't have a kingdom," Cassandra chuckled. "Come to think of it, do you even have a house? I don't remember ever visiting yours."

"He has taken permanent residence in one of our guest rooms," Kairos said with a smirk. "I don't mind."

"Of course you don't, life would be dull without me," Nessus quipped, only for his captain's smirk to falter. *Damn it, he still hasn't seen reason.*

Andromache granted the satyr his wish, and he instantly moved to complete the map one room at a time. His hand did not hesitate, for he remembered these halls perfectly.

After all, he had spent half his godhood walking among them.

A shadow of Olympus indeed, Nessus thought as he completed the map. Hades, not one to be outdone, had modeled his domain's layout on his younger brother Zeus' kingdom. Each room, each promenade, each corridor had been copied to perfection. In fact, Andromache's lost thralls had vanished in the area where he would have resided. He wondered who or what had made its lair inside these rooms.

...

His deadly shadow.

Nessus did his best to keep a straight face, his mind working furiously on a plan. "This all fits," Thales said with joy as he reviewed his alterations. "Amazing. Which Skill did you use?"

"None," Nessus then lied through his teeth. "I already visited a dungeon with a similar layout."

"Of course," Sertorius said with a sarcastic tone. He knew; the bastard.

"It's not my fault if the gods lacked imagination." Nessus shrugged. "They all tried to mimic Zeus' home, and Hades was no different."

"You didn't note stairways though," Kairos pointed out with a suspicious frown.

Nessus considered his next words carefully.

Olympus did have an underground floor of a sort: the forge-quarters of his half-brother Hephaestus. Considering Hades had built his palace over the entrance to Tartarus, Nessus didn't need to think twice to guess what he kept in his basement.

However, while both were located east of the group's current position, the entrance to the fourth level and his shadow Thanatos' lair were in different wings entirely; with no

connection to the other. Nessus didn't doubt for a second that the bitter [Demigod] had set defenses around the floor access, but he would never risk himself in a direct confrontation. Even if his plan failed, Thanatos would slip back in the shadows for a few centuries and wait for the next opportunity.

But he didn't know that Nessus had figured out his location inside the palace. This could be the satyr's only chance in eons to catch his shadow by surprise.

But Kairos would never let him near Thanatos.

Nessus could see it in the Travian King's eyes. Kairos thought he should live, as if his mortal existence meant anything. Even though the archer kept telling his friend that his self-sacrifice would be for the best, that it would destroy a threat to the world and help atone for his mistakes, he would never let Nessus give his life for the cause.

Even if the satyr ran away, Kairos would pursue and stop him.

Nessus had had companions in his first life, friends and lovers who sacrificed their existence to save him during the Anthropomachia. Watching Kairos try to take up their duty felt nostalgic... and dreadful.

So many had died so Nessus could live, and for what? Better people had given their lives for someone who didn't deserve it. He couldn't let Kairos follow in their footsteps.

A part of Nessus advised him to lie about the way forward, to trick his party towards Thanatos' location so he could finally force this long-delayed confrontation. That was what Dionysus would have done. Put his desires above those of others.

But though it had taken many deaths, Nessus had learned the virtue of responsibility.

"The entrance to Tartarus is here," he said, as he pointed at the right path.

He couldn't put the whole world at risk, even for the sake of ending his immortal penance. Too many lives depended on it.

"Are you certain?" Kairos asked. "It is quite far from our position."

"I would bet my life on it," Nessus replied.

"This sounds like an elaborate guess," Cassandra admitted with skepticism. "But it's not like I have a better suggestion."

"Out of curiosity, would you know of any treasure room?" Sertorius asked. "A location where Queen Persephone could have hidden the [Necklace of Harmonia]?"

Mmm... maybe in Aphrodite's bedroom? Harmonia was her illegitimate daughter after all.

Kairos shot the idea down before Nessus could answer. "We can always find the relic *after* we defeat Thanatos, put an end to Helios, and save the island."

"Point taken," Sertorius admitted.

"The shortest path to the basement would be for us to turn back, go left until this crossroad, turn right, and then reach these chambers," Thales said as traced a way on the map. "Unless parts of the structure have collapsed."

"Let's go then," Rook chirped with impatience. "I want to stretch my wings again!"

After some consideration, Kairos gave his consent. "Very well," he said. "Nessus, you move to the front with Agron and Cassandra. You guide us and—"

A chilling cold traveled through the corridor; the frosty embrace of death.

Nessus' hands moved to grab his bow in alarm, though his nemesis didn't show his face. Only his voice echoed through the hallway, nothing more than a raspy whisper.

"Turn back now," Thanatos ordered. "Go back to your pointless lives. Return to the world of the living, and stop disturbing my stillness."

"Uhm," Agron grunted, unimpressed. "If you're trying to talk us out of continuing now, it means that the satyr is right. The way down is in this direction."

"You can still save your families from what is to come," Thanatos whispered, ignoring Agron's jab. "Live short yet longer lives. Go, and I shall stay my hand. But if you venture forth, your destiny shall be set in stone. You will meet your demise in the Kingdom of Death as I reap the last breath from your lungs, as predetermined by the Fate System. This is your final warning."

"As far as threats go, I have heard better," Cassandra replied with a shrug. "You failed to stop us with Cerberus, and we won't turn back now."

Sertorius snorted. "Will you dare to face us at last, cowardly reaper?"

Only silence answered.

"I thought so," Sertorius taunted Thanatos with supreme arrogance.

"Let us go, my other half," Andromache told Kairos while hitting the ground with her staff.
"I have enough of this place—"

The cold breath of Death incarnate flowed through the corridor, and his answer with it.

"So be it. [Doomsday]."

Nessus gasped, as his heart froze in his chest for a brief second. Invisible fingers coiled around his soul, squeezing it like a rotten fruit.

[Doom] ailment resisted!

Thanatos' grasp failed to hang on to this prize... but he claimed many others.

Nessus could only watch on in horror as fiery numbers appeared over his allies' heads. Not all, for Thales and Cassandra had been spared from the spell's effects; the first because he was an automaton, the latter for she had died once before.

But everyone else, from Kairos to Rook, were marked by death. The number five hundred materialized above them in ghostly flames, immediately going down to four ninety-nine, then four ninety-eight...

As for Andromache... the nymph gasped in sheer terror, as a second, smaller number floated in front of her stomach. A system notification appeared before all the victims, with even the unflappable Sertorius paling in dread as he read.

[Doom] ailment.

If you fail to destroy [Thanatos] before the timer runs out...

YOU WILL DIE.

Nessus exchanged a heavy glance with Kairos.

However things went from now on, somebody would perish tonight.

47: A Harvest of Souls

The clock struck and the timer went down.

They had spent a minute rushing through the corridors, but they couldn't outrun time.

"This way!" Nessus shouted as he guided his group through the halls of the palace towards the northeast wing, his bow ready for a fight. Agron sang a song to empower the group as they followed in a mad rush. "His lair is in this direction!"

"He can listen, you fool!" Sertorius replied, frustration breaking through his stoicism. "Don't warn him!"

"You said you had something against ailments," his brother-in-law said as he ran at the party's front alongside Rook and the other warriors. [Dispel] and other spells hadn't worked, nor did Thales' elixirs. "Now is the time to use it!"

"My Legendary Skill will disrupt all our buffs too!" Sertorius warned. "It will make us vulnerable!"

"Try it!" Andromache snapped angrily. The witch had taken Thanatos' spell the hardest, her faith shaken by fear. "I can apply the spells again later!"

Sertorius' jaw clenched as he raised his scepter. "[Balanced State]."

A blue aura flared around him and expanded like a pulse. When it touched Nessus, the satyr sensed the weight of his crimes and centuries of life shackling him. The impartial, almighty power of the law suffused Sertorius' magic, forcing all things to return to their natural state. The various enhancements Nessus benefited from his gears and protective spells vanished, brushed away like straw in the wind.

All status ailments, buffs, and debuffs have been removed.

Nessus let out a breath of relief as he watched his friends' timers freeze for a few seconds. The phantom clocks above their heads stopped at four hundred twenty-one.

The group's relief only lasted for a few seconds as the timer began to go down again, much to Sertorius' chagrin. "Thanatos' is the natural law of death," he said. "I can disrupt his [Doom] ailment timer for a few seconds, but I can't lift the effect."

"Better than nothing," Cassandra said. "How many times can you cast it?"

"As many times as I want," the judge replied. "But it takes a few seconds to set it up."

Kairos nodded in appreciation. "Use that Skill constantly and buy us more time then. The more you extend the timer, the greater our odds of reaching Thanatos within the limit."

But the Travian King had tempted fate, and it answered the provocation.

"This place will be your tomb," Thanatos' voice echoed through the corridors, brimming with magical power. *"[Dying Land]."*

Nessus covered his mouth to avoid breathing in a cloud of dust. The obsidian corridor they were in trembled as cracks spread through the walls and gemstones fell from the ceiling. Statues of Persephone lost their noses and ears, the march of time eroding their features.

"Sir, he's bringing down the palace on us!" Thales warned. "We need to reach a hall! The foundations will be stabler there!"

Remembering his friendly races with Artemis and Apollo inside the sprawling rooms of Olympus, Nessus took the lead again and guided his allies. Sertorius kept casting his unique [Balanced State] spell as they ran, keeping the timer frozen above four hundred.

The group managed to reach the northeast region of the palace when the ceiling started collapsing on them. A huge chunk of the roof fell down on Nessus' head, nearly crushing him.

“Beware!” Kairos raised his spear and summoned a powerful blast of wind. The sheer power behind his attack shattered the falling stones into harmless dust.

“Thanks—” Nessus started but didn’t finish as the floor partly collapsed beneath Agron. The minotaur’s left feet fell through a hole, making him stumble.

Another chunk of the ceiling fell on the minotaur’s head. Andromache, using her shapeshifting abilities, turned herself to stone and raised her hands. Like a living pillar, she supported the obsidian roof before it could crush everywhere underneath. “Free him now!” she snapped. “There is no time!”

“Go!” Cassandra said as she helped Agron unstick his leg from the hole. “Go, go, go!”

“I’m fine!” Agron snapped, more angry at the humiliation than hurt by it. The moment he managed to free himself and the rest of the group escaped the collapsing area, Andromache turned herself to living water to escape the falling stones.

The group’s mad dash ended in a cavernous hall that Nessus recognized as a copy of Olympus’ colossal dancing room. Hades had made adjustments to it, raising two rows of gemstone pillars to lift the ten meters tall marble ceiling. Although part of it had collapsed into small stone piles all around the room, as Thales suspected, the room’s improved foundations had better resisted Thanatos’ spell than the rest. A deep, empty fire pit occupied the hall’s center, surrounded by old dusty rugs made from the pelts of Nemean Lions.

Ghostly will’o wisps provided a meager light, showcasing faceless woman statues in the corners and defaced frescos on the cracked walls. Two doors led to different parts of the palace on the opposite end of the hall; one would lead them to Tartarus’ entrance, the other to Thanatos’ room.

And both were buried in rubble.

Damn it, Nessus thought while Kairos checked up on Andromache behind him and Sertorius cast his spell again. The timer wavered around four hundred seconds like a broken clock, but the judge only delayed the inevitable.

“Is there another path?” Cassandra asked as she used her bident’s ghostly flames to illuminate the hall. It was too large for that; Nessus couldn’t see the fire pit’s bottom, nor past the shadows between the pillars.

His long experience with ambushes kicked in and raised all kinds of alarms; especially since he should have been able to see through them with his [Dark Vision] Skill. This implied magical darkness of some kind.

“Only through the southern wing,” Nessus warned as he looked over his shoulder. Thanatos’ spell had ended, but the exit had collapsed behind them. “The way back is buried and we will have to go through the entire palace again.”

They would never make it in time.

“Let’s dig then!” Rook said as he hurriedly rushed at the two exits on the other side of the room. “Spot does it all the time, it can’t be that hard!”

“Do you have any spell that could open the way?” Kairos asked Andromache.

“Let me think,” she said, her face tensing. Nessus guessed that she struggled to think clearly under pressure.

It’s where we lost contact with her undead thralls, Nessus realized as he glanced at the firepit. Did they fall inside, believing it to be a way to the fourth level? Or did it contain some foul creature that Thanatos would unleash on them now?

Nessus tensed up as he glanced at the shadows around the group. Agron too expected an ambush, grabbing his ax and preparing himself for a surprise attack. The flames of his weapon flared up, dispelling the shadows.

Most of them.

The attacker ran so fast that Nessus’ eye almost didn’t follow his movements; his hoplite armor seemed wreathed in darkness, making it near-indistinguishable from his surroundings. He rushed past the surprised Agron and Cassandra, his spear aimed at Kairos’ head.

Reacting quicker, Nessus fired an arrow at the assassin. The shadowy warrior deflected the projectile with his spear, but Kairos noticed the movement in the air. His own [Anemoi Spear] clashed with his attacker's, the parry pushing the undead back. Yet the assassin swiftly prepared another thrust, bloodthirsty lights flaring beneath his helmet.

"Begone!" Andromache immediately cast a stream of flames at the attacker, with Kairos strengthening it with a blast of air. Their combined magic swallowed the assassin in a torrent of flame and briefly illuminated the darkness around them, revealing the other assassins waiting among the pillars.

Dozens of shadowy figures attacked the party from all sides. Whether they were hoplites with swords, warriors with bows, or rogues with daggers, their bodies were crafted from the very essence of darkness itself. Some of the shadows didn't even belong to humans; one shadow reminded Nessus of a merfolk, and another of a giant crab.

An archer spoke to Nessus in Indian as he fired an arrow, confirming his suspicions.

"Die, Dionysus!"

The words startled Nessus, but not enough to let him take the projectile. He dodged by leaping to the side and fired an arrow of his own as the entire room erupted in chaos.

"Kill the priest first and then the witch," Thanatos' voice ordered over the sound of clashing blades. *"Succeed, and I shall return you to life."*

"He's lying!" Nessus snarled over the chaos of the melee, but none listened.

Not all of Thanatos' soldiers obeyed the order though. The spearman who attacked Kairos emerged from the flames unscathed, his spear shining with lightning, but he focused entirely on the Travian King. "You won't take me by treachery this time!" he snarled with a ghastly voice as he attempted to impale Kairos. "That spear belongs to me!"

Nessus briefly used [Observer] on the attacker, confirming his suspicions.

Pelopidas the Relentless

Legend: Spear of Thanatos (Hero)

Level: ???

And as he noticed the shadow of King Lysander parrying Cassandra's sword with an iron shield, Nessus wasn't the only one being haunted.

His own victims didn't even have the decency to focus on him though. Indian archers who Nessus slew during his own campaigns raised their weapons at Sertorius, targeting him as he prepared to cast [Balanced State] to delay the [Doom] timer again. Nessus immediately targeted them with arrows of his own, while Thales threw bomb devices at the enemies.

Cassandra deflected projectiles aiming for Sertorius with her fork, acting as his bodyguard. Agron let out a roar of berserk rage as he charged into the melee fighters, single-handedly breaking their line apart while Kairos and Andromache double-teamed Pelopidas. Rook, who had gone ahead of the group to dig a path outside the room, rushed back into the melee and shredded the closest undead with his talons.

The shadows had hoped to take the group unaware, only to face a well-oiled machine.

But they don't need to win, Nessus thought as he glanced at the frozen timers. The ambush had delayed Sertorius' spellcasting, allowing the [Doom] counter to go down to three-hundred and eighty. *Only to stall.*

"You burned me at the stake, Agron!" A hoplite called out the minotaur before attempting to impale him with his spear. Agron lazily grabbed the weapon with one hand, shattering it with his mere strength.

“Personally?” Agron flashed a frightening smile before splitting a shadowy hoplite with his ax. “I relish the pleasure of killing you again.”

If Thanatos had hoped to make the minotaur doubt himself, the gambit had failed spectacularly. No sooner did Agron hit the shadow than the undead burst out in fiery flames. The Songaxe’s music grew louder, its power magnified by death.

All stats raised by one stage!

With newfound strength coursing through his veins, Nessus slew an Indian archer by firing an arrow straight into his eyes. Thales’ bombs caused a pillar to explode nearby and crush the shadow of a giant crab and Orichalcos soldiers under its weight, their bodies disappearing into purple smoke.

While most of the undead were not truly threatening, Pelopidas proved a harder foe to deal with. The dead [Hero] unleashed a lightning bolt from his shadowy spear at Kairos, forcing the rogue to stay on the move. Andromache assisted her lover with fireballs and spells, but the undead warrior proved as agile as his nemesis. He leaped among flames with speed contrasting his heavy armor, before dispelling a blast of wind with his spear.

“The spear is mine, you Travian thief!” Pelopidas snarled as he failed to impale Kairos with a strike to the chest.

“I made better use of it than you ever did,” Kairos replied while dancing around his foe. Much like Agron, he felt nothing at facing the people he had slain... or if he did, he didn’t show it in the middle of battle. “Rook!”

“On it, Kairos!” The griffin replied before moving behind Pelopidas, ready to strike him from behind.

And as always, Thanatos screwed it all up.

“[Shadow Wall],” his words echoed in the hall as a curved veil of darkness rose up in the middle of Kairos’ party.

The room was split in half in one second. Kairos, Nessus, Cassandra, and Sertorius were trapped on the fire pit side alongside Pelopidas; Andromache, Agron, Thales, Rook, and the shadows on the other. The arrows flying in the room crashed against the barrier as if it were made of unbreakable stone, and Nessus could barely see anything through it.

“The Romans had a saying,” Thanatos mocked them as the black barrier turned Agron’s music into background noise. *“Divide et impera. Divide and conquer.”*

“In this case, that applies to you,” Nessus pointed out, as Pelopidas was the only shadow on their side of the wall. The satyr swiftly raised his bow to attack the spearman while Cassandra and Kairos surrounded him. “When will you get tired of cowering behind others, you chicken?”

“Why would I risk myself?” Thanatos replied as Pelopidas retreated to avoid being surrounded, deflecting one of Nessus’ arrows while at it. *“Each time I danced with mortal [Heroes], it cost me. I shan’t bother this time. So long as I remain out of your reach, your friends will die.”*

“The [Shadow Wall] spell has a short range though,” Sertorius pointed out, as he prepared to cast [Balanced State] again. “Kairos, can you sense him with your spear?”

“I detect movement in the air coming from the fire pit,” the rogue replied as he parried a thrust from Pelopidas’ spear. “But it’s bigger than Thanatos.”

Reinforcements? Nessus turned around to look at the fire pit, bow ready to kill whatever would crawl out of it.

“I know what you want, my foolish shadow,” Thanatos mocked him. *“You want to destroy us both.”*

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” Nessus replied with a shrug, as he heard spears clash behind him. “The bliss of oblivion? Or does the thought of reuniting with me fill you with such revulsion?”

“There will be no reunion, my immortal half. Not before I silence this world.”

“Who’s going to stop our match?” Nessus replied as Sertorius’ aura once again flared around him, though it couldn’t breach the shadowy veil. The buffs from Agron’s song were disrupted for a few seconds, but immediately reapplied as music echoed through the barrier. “These second stringers? Where’s Jason of Iolcus? The Giants? The Nemean Lion? The *dragon*? After all the enemies we made over the last year, this is the best you can throw at us?”

“I could only steal so many souls without arousing Persephone’s attention, those she found beneath her notice.” Thanatos let out a dark chuckle. *“But there is one soul that I spirited away centuries ago, specifically for you.”*

Nessus heard the hissing of snakes coming from the fire pit.

His lone remaining eye widened in horror. *No*, the satyr panicked, his heart accelerating in his chest, his breathing shortening. A dreadful memory he had suppressed came flooding back, as it did when he saw Euryale’s statues around the marsh.

Only one of the sisters had died.

“Medusa!” Nessus shouted in alarm as a clawed hand of living shadows grabbed the edge of the pit. He lowered his gaze to avoid facing the monster’s eyes as her crown of snake hair emerged, avoiding the fate that befell him so long ago. “Gorgon!”

Kairos and Cassandra reacted quickly enough to lower their gazes, but Sertorius and Pelopidas were not as lucky. In an ironic twist, neither the living judge nor the undead warrior proved immune to Medusa’s cursed glare. Sertorius turned to stone, while Pelopidas’ shadowy body crumbled to dust.

And without the judge’s spell, Kairos’ counter started to go down unimpeded.

Medusa leaped out of the firepit, though Nessus couldn’t witness her full, ghastly glory. His eye only saw a serpentlike tail two meters long and a pair of clawed arms, alongside the reflection of a necklace on a scaled chest. The vengeful ghost only let out a bestial shriek as she slithered towards Nessus, her mind long crushed by centuries of undeath.

How long had Thanatos held onto her soul? Did she end up in Tartarus as per the will of Athena, only for the reaper to free her as a weapon against immortal foes?

Whatever the case, Nessus could only leap away close to the fire pit's edge, as Medusa's snake hair attempted to bite him. *I can't aim well while keeping my eyes down!* the satyr thought angrily as he raised his bow in the gorgon's direction and fired an arrow. His projectile hit a pillar, completely missing his target.

Thankfully, Kairos and Cassandra proved better at it. The former unleashed a burst of wind from his spear and the latter ghostly flames from her bident, the two elemental attacks incinerating Medusa in a torrent of fire. The gorgon let out a howl of rage as she stopped paying Nessus attention and turned around to attack his allies.

"It is a mercy," Thanatos said. *"I have watched your steps across history. Felt your pain. You have lived too long, my immortal half."*

"On that, we agree," Nessus replied as he mustered the courage to look up. Medusa had her back turned on him and attempted to whip Cassandra with her snake tail. She protected herself with her shield, while Kairos struck the gorgon from the left with his spear. "But you first."

"The stone will be a kindness. Mercy. The closest thing to oblivion that you will ever experience."

Nessus ignored the taunt as he tried to find a way out of this situation. He noticed flashes of light behind the shadowy wall separating them from the others; probably Andromache trying to bring it down with fireballs. But above all, the satyr's eye wandered to Kairos' [Doom] counter.

Two-hundred fifty.

Less than five minutes, and Thanatos wouldn't show up even if they won.

No way around it.

"Kairos!" Nessus shouted to his captain, fully aware he was about to reveal their plan to Thanatos. "Summon Orgonos!"

“He said only at the temple’s bottom!” The Travian King snarled back, his spear tearing off a piece of Medusa’s shadowy flesh.

“Take your chance!” Nessus insisted as he raised his bow at Medusa’s back. “We’ll keep her busy.”

Kairos clenched his jaw and prepared to refuse his ally’s suggestion... until he locked his gaze with Nessus.

They had been adventuring together for so long, they didn’t even need to speak. One look was enough for them to understand each other’s thoughts. Kairos’ gaze turned to shock, then to denial, and finally to sorrow.

Leaving Cassandra to occupy Medusa’s attention, even as she ignored the arrows Nessus shot in her back, the Travian King hand mimicked reaching out for something beneath his [Golden Fleece] cloak. While he kept his bow raised at Medusa’s back, Nessus’ eye kept an eye on his captain like a parent on a child.

And when Thanatos’ scythe descended through the ceiling in an attempt to cut off Kairos’ hand, the satyr threw his bow away and rushed at them.

“*What were two, now made one,*” Nessus whispered the prayer Orgonos taught him in ancient Greek. “*By the will of Ananke, the certainty. Death, an ending; life, a beginning.*”

His hands shone with bright light as they lunged for Thanatos.

Kairos reacted swiftly, parrying the scythe with a thrust of his spear and attempting to impale the [Demigod]. But though his scythe was solid steel, the reaper’s body was as incorporeal as a ghost. The [Anemoi Spear] went through Thanatos without inflicting any damage.

He had hidden himself in the hall’s stone walls and ceiling, lurking out of reach while he could cast spells on the party undetected. Thanatos immediately attempted to retreat by phasing through the floor, but Nessus didn’t let him.

The satyr’s glowing hands grabbed the shadow by the neck, the incorporeal being unable to escape his grasp.

“Got you,” Nessus said with a smirk.

He had to admit that Thanatos’ panicked expression made all the effort worth it. Unable to escape his foe’s grip, the reaper let out a screech as he attempted to strike the satyr with his scythe. A thrust of Kairos’ spear sent the weapon flying against a wall.

“No wonder Sisyphus managed to restrain you,” the satyr mocked his shadow as he held Thanatos by the arms. For all of his power, the [Demigod] was no fighter. “You’re way out of shape.”

“Release me at once!” Thanatos hissed, his eyes blazing with hatred while Medusa screeched in the background as Cassandra burnt her face with ghostly flames. “Let me go!”

“After all the effort we went through to get back together, my shadow? I think not.”

Nessus knew he couldn’t let the group summon Orgonos, as it would wreck his plan beyond belief. It was an all-or-nothing gamble, but they managed to get the cowardly [Demigod] to panic.

And now, Nessus couldn’t let Thanatos go even if he wanted. The [Demigod]’s feet started to merge with the satyr’s shadow, his power flowing into a new vessel. Nessus felt a chilling cold fill his flesh... and a sense of peace too.

Soon.

It would be all over soon.

Kairos’ spear struck Thanatos in the head, wind swirling around its tip. The weapon phased through the specter harmlessly.

Nessus glanced at his friend with his lone remaining eye. “It’s useless,” he warned.

Kairos’ expression turned to sorrow. “There has to be another way. Maybe you can subsume his mind, take the power for yourself. Fight it!”

“There is no other way,” Nessus replied with a sigh. “And if you ask me... it was worth it.”

His friend's counter had fallen below one-hundred and fifty.

But it would never reach zero.

After causing so much destruction across the centuries, Nessus had finally saved someone.

"You are death itself, Thanatos," the satyr told his counterpart, as the cold infused every fiber of his being. "You've given its kiss to countless mortals across centuries. And maybe, just maybe... that's why you fear it so much."

Thanatos could only glare in response. His shadowy wall was already faltering, its power waning.

"I'm already offering annihilation through reunification," Nessus whispered, his thoughts slipping as he sensed Thanatos' fear and hatred resonated in his own mind. "Yet you tried to hide and run. You hate humans so much, but you weren't so different from them in the end."

How ironic.

The embodiment of life wanted to die at long last, while death refused to perish first.

"Release me now," Thanatos rasped. "Or I'll kill them all right here."

"We are beyond the bargaining stage," Nessus taunted him back, Kairos' counter reaching one hundred. "Now is the time for acceptance."

"Fool, I shall cast it!" Thanatos said, his left hand's fingers rubbing together. Shadows danced around them. "At this distance, they will not survive!"

Nessus' eye widened in horror.

The [Death] spell.

"You can't!" Nessus shouted in disbelief. "Their time is not up yet! The Fate System won't let you kill them, your restrictions—"

"What have I to lose by trying?" Thanatos' mouth morphed into a hideous grin. "Free me, now!"

“I can’t!” Nessus said, his body refusing to answer. The fusion was already halfway through, with Thanatos’ lower half having merged the satyr’s body. “It’s too late! Kairos, stop him!”

But his friend’s weapon phased through Thanatos’ hand. Nessus attempted to restrain it, but the [Demigod] fought him off. Their powers were merging, but not fast enough.

“[Telchine Sorcery: Charm],” Kairos said through his clenched teeth as he attempted to crush Thanatos’ will, only for his power to crash against the hardened fortress of the [Demigod]’s mind.

Thanatos’ eyes let out a flash of fiery anger, quickly replaced with grim resignation. “This is the fate that not even gods can escape,” he whispered. “The last breath that brings decay. The fingersnap that snuffs out life like candlelight.”

Faster, Nessus thought, trying to swallow Thanatos into himself before the fatal moment. Kairos paled as his counter fell below twenty, his eyes closing as he prepared himself for the fateful instant.

“[Death] to all!”

The finger-snap echoed across the hall.

48: Amor Fati

There was light and then numbers.

A veil was lifted off Nessus' lone remaining eye as he absorbed his other half into himself, and for the first time in his life he was no longer blind. His piercing gaze cut through the illusion of forms and colors to witness the true, underlying structure of all things.

$$\mathbf{Life} [1d20 + Health + (Vitality/2) + (Luck/4)] \geq \mathbf{Death} [1d20 + Magic + (Luck/2)]$$

= *Survival*

In this universe ruled by the Fate System, all things were decided not by concepts, but by *numbers*.

Complex formulas floated all around him as they calculated the hardness of walls, the remaining lifeforce of his companions, the degree of protection granted by the ambient darkness. He noticed twenty-faced dice rolling above his allies, each of them completing strange equations determining their fate.

The only thing separating life from death was a single mathematical threshold.

$$\mathbf{Life} [1d20 + Health + (Vitality/2) + (Luck/4)] < \mathbf{Death} [1d20 + Magic + (Luck/2)]$$

= *Permadeath*

Even the letters used to measure stats were no more than fluctuating values hidden from mortals, giving them with the illusion of stability in a constantly changing world. Probabilities ruled weather patterns and determined the effectiveness of spells. Magic was a subset of mathematics too complex for even talented [Spellcasters] to grasp.

And who was he? He who could see the numbers of all things?

He was Nessus but also someone else. A door opened inside his heads as he absorbed Thanatos into himself and subsumed his spirit. Information flowed through it like water through a canal and filled his mind with cosmic knowledge from eons past.

He thought that Thanatos' mind would become one with his and that the fusion would erase everything he had been; that he would be finally free of his humanity, of his guilt and the weight of countless lives.

He had been wrong.

For the satyr once known as Dionysus was created with a purpose in mind and he had fulfilled it. He knew, deep within himself, that he had somehow done everything right; that all his actions had served a mission whose parameters escaped him. He hadn't deviated from the orders given to him before he was even born.

Thanatos had strayed from his mission, letting his subjective decisions affect his judgment. He had abused what little freedom he had been granted. And for that, he had been punished with erasure.

Nessus was Life and Death, but he was not Thanatos. His other half's hate and memories would not influence him; they would not lead him astray.

Instead, he had become someone else.

*Welcome back [**Ananké**].*

*You have regained your [**Personification**] privileges. Legend portfolio:*

*[**Inevitable Necessity**].*

*You inherited a quota deficit of [**75764**] souls from your predecessor. If you do not correct your quota before the next System update, you shall be [**Reformatted**].*

Nessus knew what an update was before he even asked. The Fate System enlightened him directly, teaching him about data, the laws of statistics, the subtle calculations determining the consequences of all actions.

He was [Ananké]. He was certainty and predetermination, birth and death. Once a [Goddess] split in two, now a [God] made one.

Nessus couldn't help but laugh at the bitter irony.

He had defeated his shadow, but he couldn't win his freedom in the bargain.

And as his laughter echoed across the room, so did his power. The shadows raised by [Thanatos] collapsed into nothingness, their delinquent souls returned to the cycle. Only dust remained of Pelopidas' shadow while the [Shadow Wall] vanished.

The terrible Medusa, whose sisters Nessus had feared so much, let out a cry of joy as her undead existence came to an abrupt end; Sertorius let out a breath of relief as he was freed from his prison of stone. Only a jeweled necklace remained from the gorgon, both beautiful and terrible. Nessus didn't even pay it attention.

His allies had triumphed.

That was all that mattered.

“Nessus?” Kairos asked him, a number fluctuating above his head. The countdown to his demise, as determined by Fate. Sometimes it had three digits, then four the next instant. “Is that you?”

Nessus wasn't sure what he meant... until he realized that he watched his captain with two eyes instead of one.

The satyr looked at his hands, only to realize he was a satyr no more. He had the void between worlds for skin and numbers for scars. A balanced equation flared to life on his chest, bringing structure to his humanoid shape.

He was a [God] now.

A shackled [God] though. Nessus was more powerful and knowledgeable than he had been as [Dionysus], but his power was no longer his own. He had become a cog in the great machine known as the Fate System like the [Moirae], one of the countless hands of a larger entity bringing order and stability to the promordial chaos.

But his mind remained his own alone.

“Who else, oh my captain?” Nessus mused, his voice unchanged. “Thanatos? The old jackass is gone.”

He would rather have gone down with him, but... as he watched Andromache cross the room to embrace Kairos with a cheerful Rook following closely behind, Nessus realized that this was an outcome he could accept.

Everyone had survived his shadow's [Death] spell.

Even Agron, that cold-blooded son of a bull. The [Doom] counters had vanished, Thanatos' last grudge gone with them.

“So this is over?” Cassandra asked as she joined Nessus, examining him with a smile of relief on her face. “We've won?”

“Complete victory,” Nessus replied as he showed off his new abilities, floating a few centimeters above the ground. He looked in his reflection on Cassandra's shield, finding

himself face to face with a satyr-shaped incarnation of the cosmos. “Damn, I’ll miss my beard.”

“And I can’t see your level,” Cass replied as she squinted, her confusion replaced with shock. “No way... you are...”

“A [God],” Agron whispered in shock. Such was his surprise that he dropped his ax. Even Judge Sertorius remained speechless, his stoic mask breaking into genuine astonishment.

Only Thales kept some modicum of calmness, and he still dropped everything to scribble notes on a scroll. “Incredible!” he said. “All data gathered indicate that it is impossible to skip a Rank step, and yet you went straight from [Elite] to [God]!”

“I am a very special case,” Nessus replied as he looked into himself.

Though he had lost his [Legend] as [Dionysus], his nature had never changed; he had always been a [Personification], one half of a larger entity more powerful than any Olympian. His ‘father’ Zeus had been a long-lived and powerful mortal, but he was an aspect of reality. When Nessus dared to look at his status screen, the Fate System answered with only one word.

Irrelevant.

Stats and levels meant nothing to him anymore. He was no longer the mortal avatar of a concept, but the concept itself in its purest form. Life and death were his to command, within the bounds set by destiny.

But now... where should he go from here?

The phoenix at the dungeon’s bottom would be no match for Nessus. A snap of his fingers would extinguish his immortal life and return Circe’s soul to the hell she so richly deserved. But when he tried, something crushed the very thought in the back of his mind.

A voice told him that he could save the world, but that he wasn’t allowed to.

Gravity did not choose who it affected. The laws of the Fate System weren't like those of mortals, fallible and easily broken. This great machine didn't need to punish anyone, because nobody could disrupt it in the first place. His agents could neglect their duties for a time, but they could be easily replaced.

Was that what drove Thanatos mad? The knowledge that he possessed limitless power, but not the right to exercise it?

"Andromache?"

Kairos' panicked voice brought Nessus back to earth. The former satyr glanced at his favorite couple, only to see Andromache turning deathly pale in her lover's arms.

"Andro, is something wrong?" Rook asked in concern as he looked at the nymph.

"I don't feel well..." the nymph admitted with a sick voice, hands on her stomach.

"Not..."

She collapsed on the floor without warning.

"Andromache!" Kairos shouted as he caught her in her arms, with Thales immediately rushing to their side.

"Lay her on the ground, sir!" The whole group hastily gathered around them as Kairos obeyed Thales' suggested, the automaton ripping the nymph's robes to better examine the witch's naked body. Cassandra immediately covered her mouth at the sight, while Rook let out a screech of horror.

Andromache's stomach was *rotting*.

Nessus and his allies could only watch, powerless, as a vile magic turned her pristine skin black. Kairos' face lost all color as his concubine lost consciousness, her head resting on his thighs. Thales immediately grabbed a knife and potions from his supplies, preparing to operate on the nymph to save her life.

But though Nessus saw through his divine vision that Andromache had still years to live... he couldn't say the same for someone else.

"The child had a [Doom] counter," Sertorius whispered grimly.

Thanatos had not gone quietly into the night.

Kairos took Andromache's hand into his own and immediately looked at Nessus in panic. "Do something!" he snarled. "Undo this spell!"

"You are a [God]!" Agron added with surprising concern as he played a buffing song in a vain attempt to delay the inevitable.

"I am!" Nessus replied as he quickly raised his hand above Andromache's chest. He called upon the same power he once wielded as Dionysus, to breathe life back into the rotting corpse inside the nymph's womb.

Action denied.

Nessus' confidence turned to panic, as he once again tried to weave the string of destiny in his favor, to alter the cosmic life equation. He saw the newborn soul escaping the vessel, a small thing that didn't have a name yet.

A girl, Nessus thought. She would have been a girl.

But no matter how many times he attempted to undo Thanatos' crime, the result remained the same.

Fate refused to change.

*You do not possess the necessary privileges to execute the
[Resurrection] routine on a [Permaded] individual.*

What? But he could revive the dead as Dionysus, to the point of infuriating Thanatos!
Why couldn't he do it now, after becoming more powerful than ever?

*These privileges were granted to you as part of a previous experiment.
This experiment has since concluded.*

Nessus looked into himself, at the knowledge of his own birth. And as he remembered his first moments not as a child but as an outside observer, he gained a better understanding of his nature.

Dionysus, child of Zeus and Semele, had been nothing more than an empty shell; a [Demigod] vessel imbued with a divine spark inherited from the king of Olympus, inhabited by an indestructible [Personification]. His inherited [Legend] had been influenced by his soul's true nature, gaining the power to alter life, but it had remained apart from it.

Just as Queen Alexandria claimed the divine spark of Dionysus, she couldn't usurp dominion over the cycle of life and death. This power, which Nessus embodied, was *never* for mortals to wield. Many liberties could be granted to them, including the possibility to disrupt the cycle of souls in isolated cases... but not all of them.

But why? Why let him wield a mortal [Legend] and give him a taste of freedom once, but not now?

And at long last, the Fate System finally answered his questions and Nessus learned his life's purpose.

You and [**Thanatos**] were separated halves of the [**Ananké**] [**Personification**]. [**Ananké**] is [**Certainty**] of [**Life**] and [**Death**]. The [**Personification**] of the lifetime cycle of [**Players**].

[**Reformatting**] into different avatars was part of a test-run attempt to optimize the cycle of souls.

One incarnation would follow the reincarnation process of [**Players**] to accumulate information over multiple lives and identify potential ways to improve the System's operations.

Another would guide souls to the [**Afterlife**], while being allowed to make minor subjective decisions in order to improve the harvesting process.

The Fate System had given Thanatos enough free will to do his job better, and instead drove him mad. Not even by malice or intent, but by sheer *indifference*.

Only then did Nessus realize the frightening nature of the Fate System he served. It was a machine larger than any automaton, a set of self-sustaining laws more complex than the Senex, an omniscient mind whose insight surpassed even Orgonos.

But it was the coldest of all cold monsters.

Happiness, pain, joy, and sadness were meaningless to this cosmic machinery.

Thanatos' despair and descent into insanity didn't matter to the Fate System; only that the late reaper had failed to meet an arbitrary quota. It didn't care that the law of life and death would cause suffering to mortals, only that this rule remained inviolate and the world kept turning.

Wait, every law has a loophole! Nessus thought, as he realized he had been doing it wrong. Instead of trying to break the cosmic rules that bound his powers, he only had to

bend them! Thanatos had made the wrong decision; it was up to his successor to make things right by returning a life wrongfully taken away!

*For the purpose of maintaining continuity of operations, you cannot overturn a previous **[Personification]**'s decision unless they violate the **[Fate System]**'s guidelines.*

“But he cheated!” Nessus snarled loudly in frustration, oblivious to the glances his friends sent him. “The old gnat said so himself!”

*The **[Permadedad]** status of **[Player] [???**] was determined based on probabilities, equations, and a random number factor; based on biological incompatibilities between the mother's **[Nymph]** race and the father's **[Wolfling]** nature, the probability of death by stillbirth was estimated at a stable 52.35 percent with minimal chance of completing a **[Quest]** or achieving a **[Legend]**.*

*While the decision of the previous **[Personification]** to cause a stillbirth early was based on a subjective judgment, it did not violate universal guidelines. **[Player] [???**] was considered insignificant enough that an early stillbirth would not meaningfully affect the world's destiny.*

Nessus clenched his fists in fury. Though it used elaborate words, the System's meaning was simple enough to grasp.

The child wasn't important enough to make an exception.

"You can't save them," Kairos whispered with a crestfallen face. "Why?"

"The phoenix," Cassandra said, clinging to hope. "He's down there. If we claim a feather in time, we can... we can bring the child back!"

Yes, of course! Maybe Nessus couldn't change the outcome, but his party could!

*The previous **[Personification]** has applied the **[Permadeath]** status to this soul; it is not eligible for **[Resurrection]** whether by any **[Personification]** or **[Player]**.*

But Thanatos had fucked them from beyond deletion.

Nessus looked at Kairos' hopeful face and found himself unable to crush it. There had to be another solution.

*The **[Player]** [???'s soul must be claimed for immediate **[Afterlife]** transfer and eventual **[Reincarnation]**.*

That or undeath. A half-life that would drive the unborn soul mad, as it did with Jason of Iolcus and so many others.

Couldn't Nessus remove the [Permadeath] status? Maybe he couldn't revive the child himself, but make it *possible*.

*For the purpose of maintaining continuity of operations, you cannot overturn a previous **[Personification]**'s dec—*

“Then who can?!” Nessus snarled as he watched Cassandra help Thales pour a potion down Andromache’s throat. “If I, a **[God]**, can’t, then who?”

*You are a **[Personification]**. Your role is to execute key subroutines for the continued preservation of the **[Fate System]** and the integrity of the **[Anima Mundi]** universe. Failure to maintain System integrity will result in a **[Chaos Hazard]** and the destruction of this reality.*

*Only the **[Fate System]** or an **[Administrator]** may overturn a **[Personification]**'s decision.*

“Who is an **[Administrator]**?”

*The **[Elder Wyrms]** and the **[Eldest]** are the co-administrators of the **[Fate System]**.*

The Elder Wyrms and the Eldest? Nessus had never heard of them. Were they ancient primordials who existed before Gaia, before Chaos itself? Or secretive New Gods who had gained limitless power after the Anthropomachia? “How may I contact them?”

Status of [Administrators]: Unavailable. The [Fate System] has been deemed self-sustaining and capable of maintaining its operations and cosmic harmony without continued oversight from its creators.

You can however make requests that will be examined by the [Fate System], and validated if they improve operations.

Nessus glanced at Sertorius, though for once the judge ignored him. Instead, he had put a hand on Kairos’ shoulder and was trying to reassure his brother-in-law the best he could.

If only he could be the one rules-lawyering this mess...

“Then let me make my case,” Nessus said as an idea crossed his mind. “If all souls can achieve a [Legend], however minimal their chances, then you should let everyone be born to try their luck. By robbing the unborn of their chance, you make the whole system unfair!”

Analyzing proposal...

Proposal rejected.

Based on the last 500 hundred cycles, an average of 2479 [Human] [Players] are born each day against an average death toll of 1981; each new [Player] [Race] added to the calculation increases these numbers exponentially.

Only a handful of these people have the potential to develop [Legends] and achieve great feats worthy of myths; the death of a small percentage [Players] before their birth will not threaten the balance of souls or System integrity, especially as they may try again in their next life. The resources needed to successfully ensure the birth of all living creatures will not be compensated.

“I can save her,” Thales told Kairos with grim resignation. “But the fetus... I am sorry, sir. This is beyond me.”

“My life for her,” Nessus offered.

Analyzing proposal...

Clarify proposal.

“I had a satyr's lifetime left,” Nessus said as Kairos glanced in his direction with a confused look. “Give her whatever bloody years I should have lived through.”

Analyzing proposal...

Proposal denied. Unless you gained an independent [Legend] or terminated the reincarnation experiment, your existence as a [Satyr] [Player] was expected to end at

the hands of [Helios, the Sun that Was] within the next three hours.

Useless to the end...

No, he shouldn't give up. Not until he had exhausted all his options. "How about I make her an assistant deity to help me in my work?" Nessus asked. "My mini-reaper or life-giver apprentice? Wouldn't that be a good idea? Look at the mess the last Death made because he had no one to share his burden with!"

It wouldn't be a good life... but at least she would have one.

Analyzing proposal...

Proposal denied. A [Personification] is more than capable of fulfilling its duties alone, unless they actively neglect them; nor can privileges be transferred to a [Player]. A [Personification] may only be [Reformatted] into a new one.

If you find your duties incompatible with your subjective judgment and emotional capabilities, you may request a [Reformatting].

Nessus froze as he processed the answer. A... a reformatting?

*If you are [**Reformatted**], you shall return to the Fate System, where all your accumulated memories and data shall be consumed. You shall forget everything and be reborn into a new [**Personification**]. Your current identity will be erased.*

Is that what you desire?

Oblivion and a fresh start.

The Fate System offered him the same deal as all mortal souls, to forget his previous life and be reborn without carrying the memories of his previous existence. Freedom from the self.

Is that what [Hypnos] chose? When faced with the terror and sorrow of the Anthropomachia, watching the nightmares of a world gone mad, had he and his fellow dream deities sought an escape from their duties in a new form?

“Will...” Nessus struggled to find the right words to articulate his question. “If I have an idea of what the new me should be, will it be taken into account?”

*Your suggestions will be taken into consideration, if they will improve the [**Fate System**]'s operations.*

Nessus could offload his duties to a new, better him.

After his failures as a deity, he could participate in the creation of a [God] who would help for mortals from the get-go. An entity kinder than Thanatos and more selfless than

Dionysus. Someone who would improve life and death for millions of mortals for centuries to come.

A [God] who cared.

And at long last, Nessus would shed his shame and past mistakes like a snake with his old-worn scales.

Maybe he wouldn't save Kairos' first daughter with Andromache, but... she would reincarnate anyway. Surely they would have more children in the future, sons and daughters who would benefit from a wiser [God] of life and death's guidance. It would be a tragic loss, but the net gains in the long-term...

And if he looked at the bigger picture, beyond his personal affinities and affection for his crewmates... how many people suffered now around the world? How many restless souls languished because of Thanatos' misdeeds and Nessus' own neglect? Surely their happiness mattered more than one little girl.

I could help reincarnate her before asking for a reformatting, Nessus thought, as he examined the dying soul struggling in Andromache's rotten womb. I'll make her the princess of a peaceful land, where she will grow with everything her father never had. A full family, wealth, and food aplenty.

It would be mercy. If she lived now, she risked dying anyway if her mother perished fighting Helios. And if everyone survived, only war awaited their fledging kingdom. Wouldn't it be better to let her move into a new, better life? One where she wouldn't remember anything?

This was a good outcome for everyone.

An ending. An escape from his past, his guilt, a measure of redemption.

But as Nessus prepared to take the child's soul and return her to the cycle... a doubt crossed his mind. He glanced at his allies, seeing their fate, the destiny they claimed for themselves.

A pirate king who bounced back from defeat to defeat without ever losing hope of making his land a better place; and the griffin who shared his joys and sorrows.

A woman who came back from death like he did, only to find purpose and happiness in her second life.

A cursed witch who fought tooth and nail to win her freedom, and eventually did so.

A minotaur who dared to fight a dragon in the name of everlasting glory.

A cowardly automaton who found his courage when he defeated a lion.

A judge with unquenchable ambitions and a relentless drive to conquer.

All of these people had earned a [Legend] before invading his dungeon, while Nessus never earned one on his own.

Why? he asked, both to himself and the Fate System.

*Outside of [**Protogenoi**] and [**Personifications**], [**Legends**] are divine myths created either when a [**Player**] fulfills a great destiny, either by virtue of their birth or deed; or when a [**Player**] surpasses the [**Fate System**]'s expectations by forging their own path and altering the world's future.*

All the people here had gained their [Legends] through the second method.

They weren't the children of [Gods] born powerful, nor did they have an ancient destiny to fulfill. Even those who had completed [Quests] earned their [Legend] from other means, whether by killing foes far stronger than them or overcoming their fate.

Cassandra's mere existence was a violation of the natural order, a destiny that should have been cut short.

And yet among all these people, only the immortal among them had languished as an [Elite] until now.

Because he had stopped striving for anything.

Because he had wasted his life wishing for death.

And now, a girl would die before she even had the chance to fight.

Nessus looked at his hand and all the power he wielded. Shackles or not, Orgonos only wielded a fraction of it; and yet he had done far more good in the world than Dionysus ever did. He had freed mortals from oppression, sealed monsters like Lycaon and Typhon, helped a cursed nymph get her life back, and promised to help against a reborn Titan.

And instead of following his example, Nessus considered giving up and running away. To transfer his burden to someone else, hoping it would get better, without taking responsibility for his present actions.

All this power, and Nessus still looked for the coward's way out. All while Kairos and Andromache desperately needed a divine miracle.

No more, the satyr who had once been called Dionysus thought with determination. I won't run away from my divine duties this time.

This was his moment to act like how a true [God] *should*: by making life better for mortals *now*.

Even if it would cost him.

Cerberus had multiple heads, Nessus thought, one last idea crossing his mind. Multiple souls into an avatar body.

"Let me share this soul's burden," he offered the Fate System, Kairos' eyes widening as he put two and two together. "I shall share the life taken from her, see through her eyes as she lives her years to the fullest. If all you wish for is untainted information about the life of mortals to better improve your stats and numbers, you'll get it."

Analyzing proposal...

*The benefits of the proposal are unclear. You have already lived multiple lives as a de facto **[Player]**, with the ability to make your own decisions for the purpose of analyzing the mortal condition. How will sharing an existing **[Player]**'s lifecycle improve the continued operations of the **[Fate System]**?*

“Because...”

Because it was the right thing to do.

Because it would make mortals happier.

Because it would make his *friends* happier.

But as he caught a cold glance from the cunning Sertorius, Nessus realized appealing to emotion wouldn't work. Only cold logic would sway the Fate System.

“Because all my decisions up to this point were influenced by my previous lives' memories,” Nessus said, blurting out his secret to all who could hear him. “Mortals don't remember a single existence; they aren't burdened by a past inherited from before their birth. They are born free to make old and new mistakes, to explore paths no one else ever did. By letting me make decisions but allowing me to carry information from one life to another, you biased the experiment's results. Only by experiencing the life of another mortal, ordinary or otherwise, can I truly understand the mortal condition and improve the cycle of souls.”

Nessus chuckled to himself, as he delivered the final blow. “This child, the first daughter of a pirate king and a cursed witch, is a unique occurrence that may never happen again; a wonderfully perfect oddity. It is the only opportunity to gather information on what she represents. The study will be incomplete without her.”

Analyzing proposal...

Proposal deemed acceptable, with modifications.

You shall be transferred into the [???] vessel and share it with the original soul until the end of the [Player]'s lifespan for the purpose of accumulating data on the mortal condition; you will keep all the data accumulated so far, and the [??]'s [Permadeath] status shall be delayed until the vessel's expiration.

However, based on your performance review, your ability to make subjective judgments on [Life] and [Death] has been deemed detrimental to your duties and shall be taken away. You will become like the [Moirae], a neutral observer unable to affect the outcome of the Fate System's decisions. You will process souls whether you want it or not; and though you will be able to offer advice to your [Player] host at their demand, you will not be able to interfere with their decisions even if you disagree with them. You shall be no more than a passenger.

If this [Player]'s cycle is deemed insufficient for the experimentation's purpose, you shall be transferred to another newborn [Player] as many times as the [Fate System] needs it. Only when the experiment has been deemed completed will you be eligible for [Reformatting].

Do you accept this new routine?

“If the first experiment works, how many more lives will I have to observe?”

Analysis...

*If the first test is deemed a success, 100 [**Players**] randomly selected from all available [**Races**] should be a sufficient sample to gather the necessary data. This number may increase with the addition of new [**Races**] in the future.*

Do you accept this new routine?

The Fate System promised Nessus a Tartarus not out of vengeance or justice, but in the name of bureaucratic efficiency.

It would be a greater agony than his past lives. Whether the mortal he shared a life with would grow into a hero or villain, he would only be along for the ride until the System saw fit to release him.

If it ever did.

And yet...

And yet to his surprise, Nessus wasn't scared. He felt neither fear nor regret. Only a quiet sense of content acceptance.

For his pain was no longer meaningless.

This time, it would serve a greater purpose and help others.

"Can I at least snap Mithridates to dust beforehand?" the former satyr asked, as he moved a hand above Andromache's stomach. "Maybe Lycaon too while I'm at it?"

*You may not. Probabilities remain in flux and have not stabilized. The world's destiny will depend on the confrontation between multiple **[Legend]** wielders, including **[Helios, the Sun that Was]**, **[Mithridates IV Hegemon]**, and **[Kairos Marius Remus]**, with multiple outcomes possible at this stage.*

For the first time in centuries, Nessus found himself having sympathy for Thanatos. He wondered how many times the reaper had asked this question and met with denial, only able to take souls whose fate was set in stone.

“Don’t do it,” Kairos whispered. “The phoenix—”

“It won’t work,” Nessus replied. “And I’m not one for last words, my captain.”

He heard Cassandra protest, Agron too, but their words became a buzzing sound he couldn’t fully understand. The world’s equations changed all around him, the Fate System adjusting reality itself to account for such a small but momentous change. The numbers forming his body dissipated as the formula of life and death took a new shape. Kairos’ eyes looked at him with sorrow and Sertorius’ with a hint of respect.

“I have no regrets, my friends,” Nessus whispered as his celestial body returned to nothingness. “I had fun.”

His soul entered Andromache’s womb to join with another.

The last curse of Thanatos receded, and the cold rotting touch of death was swiftly replaced by warm life. A vessel of flesh returned to life, while the childlike soul of Kairos’ daughter was spared from an early grave.

To Nessus’ eye, she looked no bigger than a speck of light in the darkness; a seed of infinite possibilities. Maybe she would flower into a queen or a witch, a heroine craving adventure, or a humble farmer. It didn’t matter. He would be with her all the way.

I'll be your guardian daemon, the little voice of your imaginary friend, Nessus mused, though I'm not sure you should listen to my advice.

...

Hmm?

The child's soul suddenly burned with a new radiance, the spark of divine potential. The seed of a newborn myth that could shake the world's destiny.

A [Legend].

She hadn't been so insignificant after all.

Then again, Cass got one from the same circumstances and she didn't have a [God] giving up his death for her pretty eyes, Nessus thought as he closed his eyes and went to sleep; at least until the child's birth. This is my penance. Being condemned to live.

But he didn't care.

He had acted as a true [God] should and made a few mortals happier.

That was all that mattered.

49: Sunset on the Old Gods

Everyone must die one day. Even the gods.

This was a law of nature as unbreakable as gravity. Not even Thanatos, the incarnation of death itself, could escape this fate.

Nor could life incarnate.

No, Kairos thought as he held Andromache against his chest. Nessus hadn't sacrificed his current life because Fate caught up to him or because he had sought death for so long, but because he chose to save someone else. He could have ran or refused to lift a finger.

Instead he had chosen to answer a parent's desperate prayer. After a lifetime of demanding worship as Dionysus, Nessus had decided to earn it.

He will, Kairos thought. He would have statues of his old friend raised in his cities' temples to honor his memory. Maybe he could even hear prayers in his new state and fulfill some of them.

The group had set a campfire on the battle's site to sleep a few hours before they fought the creature lurking at the dungeon's bottom. Though Thanatos' [Death] spell had been lifted off her daughter and Thales provided medical treatment, Andromache still needed to rest. They all did.

Only Agron's soothing music broke the silence. Cassandra sharpened her spear with a grim look on her face while Sertorius and Thales examined the magical necklace left behind by Medusa. Only Rook had fallen asleep, snoring lightly against Andromache and Kairos; his feathers warmed them more than the fire.

Nothing remained of Nessus but his bow and amulet. None of his allies had dared to claim his items for themselves, though Cassandra agreed to carry them. Maybe the

satyr's possessions would be laid in a tomb for their fallen friend, or they would wait for him to claim them in another life.

Sertorius assured him that Nessus' divine soul now coexisted with that of Kairos' child, allowing her to hang on to life. It wasn't quite reincarnation from what the judge had gathered with his Legendary Skills, but a lesser form of possession. Nessus had become a guardian spirit who would follow Kairos' child like a shadow until her own demise.

The Travian King could scarcely believe it at first. Nessus had fused back with Thanatos in the hope of escaping his cycle of rebirth, not to perpetuate it. "It's called a sacrifice, Kairos," Cassandra had said as she offered a prayer to Persephone, asking her to alleviate Nessus' burden. "You heard him yourself. You were his friend and captain."

"He had no regrets," Agron had added with respectfulness. "To mourn his sacrifice is to disrespect it, Kairos. All you should feel is gratefulness."

And he did, alongside sorrow.

Kairos would rather have everyone live. He had lost so many people over his life, why couldn't the gods spare one more? Nessus was making progress about enjoying life again, even if he denied it. He had made friends, forged a new existence for himself. If only they had had more time...

"I have no regrets, my friends," Nessus' last words echoed in his mind. *"I had fun."*

Agron was right, remorse only sullied their friend's sacrifice. The satyr had no regrets and they shouldn't either.

"It will be a girl," Kairos told his concubine. *"My life for her,"* he said.

"Nessia," Andromache whispered back with a thoughtful face. "Her name will be Nessia."

Kairos nodded slowly. The Fate System took note of their decision, and when the Travian King glanced at Andromache's stomach with [Observer], a new screen appeared before his eyes.

Nessia Marius

Legend: Fateloved (Elite)

Race: Human (Nymphblooded)

Class: Unchosen.

Level: 0

She had a [Legend] even though she was months away from birth.

Her uncle Nessus had spoiled her rotten. He had given her the gift of life.

Andromache pulled at the [Golden Fleece] the couple used for a blanket. Somehow, it always managed to remain clean. "I never thought much of the satyr," she admitted. "Even after he told us of his history. I distrusted that mocking smirk on his face. It always made me wonder if he would betray us."

"I always saw the sadness behind the smile," Kairos replied. "He found it easier to laugh than to cry."

"I was wrong," Andromache admitted as she put a hand on her womb. "His sacrifice will not be wasted, my love. Our daughter will live. Not even death itself could take her away from us, and neither will the sun. You must kill him, Kairos. For us."

Kairos thought back to Thanatos and Nessus. He had seen first-hand the might of [Demigods], and the power that awaited would-be [Gods]. Power over life and death, to change Fate itself.

If Kairos became a [Demigod], he could protect his homeland from Lycaon, Mithridates, and all the foes who would threaten his family. And if he ascended to godhood... maybe he could free Nessus from his cycle of rebirth.

Kairos glanced at his brother-in-law and the necklace in his hands. Made of solid gold, it was the most beautiful piece of jewelry that the Travian King had ever seen; resplendent yet not ostentatious. Seven gemstones of different colors were arranged on its surface like a rainbow, from a bloody ruby to a purple amethyst. The artisan had crafted them in the shape of eyes and the style of peacock's feathers.

Necklace of Harmonia

Rank: Artifact 4 (treated as Artifact 3)

Value: Priceless

A cursed necklace forged by Hephaestus for the bastard daughter of his wife Aphrodite. Only women can use the Necklace's powers and suffer from its curse.

1 Star Power: The first woman who wears the necklace is recognized as its master; ownership of the Necklace can only be transferred either if the current owner dies, or if they give it to someone else. The recipient of the gift must accept ownership of the necklace out of their own free-will. The Necklace's owner will not age as long as they carry the necklace; they are immune to all [Aging] effects, magical or otherwise, except those caused by a [God]. The owner can still be killed by other things than age.

2 Stars Power: The Necklace now actively restores youth. Whenever the owner puts it on, the Necklace restores them to the prime of their youth.

3 Stars Power: *The Necklace grants the owner a fragment of Aphrodite's beauty. The wearer has their [Charisma] treated as if it were one letter higher (maximum A+).*

4 Stars Power: *[Need Demigod Rank].*

Curse: *The Necklace of Harmonia punishes women for making fools of men. The Necklace's owner will have her Luck stat downgraded to E and will thus attract misfortune; this effect remains even when the owner does not wear the necklace. Additionally, the Necklace will find its way back to its owner even if separated.*

It would look good on Julia, even if Kairos doubted that his wife would ever wear it before they found a way to break the curse. Even Andromache thought something similar, if her jealous gaze was any indication.

Sertorius noticed their wandering looks. "Your crafter found something," he said.

"You did?" Kairos frowned at Thales.

"My Skills allow me to craft minor [Cursed] items," the automaton said. "Lady Julia asked me to run tests in order to better understand them. From my experiments, I gathered that all curses must include an escape clause."

"This teaches us nothing," Andromache said with a snort. "We already knew that from our travels."

"Agreed." Thales nodded. "But the escape clause is always linked to the nature of the curse. Only a god of magic can lift a witch-goddess' spell. A sword hungry for blood must save as many lives as it has taken. Considering the necklace's curse, I suspect the purification has something to do with either faithfulness or womanhood."

“Maybe we must right the wrong that led to the curse in the first place?” Kairos guessed with a frown. “Like symbolically undoing Aphrodite’s unfaithfulness?”

Cassandra chuckled upon hearing the discussion. “An impossible task.”

“We were bouncing off theories,” Sertorius admitted. “But these questions can wait until we return to my sister victorious.”

Kairos glanced at the tablet among his belongings. They only had to bring it to the dungeon’s bottom and summon Orgonos to end this war of the dead once and for all. With Thanatos gone, Queen Persephone would soon bring balance back to the Underworld; and the creature at the dungeon’s bottom couldn’t hope to fight against a true [God].

The descent had cost the party dearly, but the worst was behind them. Or at least, Kairos hoped so.

“Do not...”

The voice was old, nothing more than a whisper; and yet clear as water.

Everyone immediately glanced at the campfire as it brightened. The flames swirled and danced as a divine will manifested through it.

“Kairos Marius Remus, you who once offered pity to the woman that now shares your life...” The fire flickered as if each word was a pain to say. *“I ask that you show the same mercy I saw back then. Cassandra Bato, stay your hand on the life you owe me.”*

The life she owed him?

“The phoenix,” Cassandra whispered in recognition. “You are the phoenix.”

“Helios,” Andromache said with far less warmth.

The flames seemed to oscillate for a moment, but quickly regained their brightness.

“That was my name once. I am but an ember now... a single flame struggling inside a lantern.”

“But an ember can still ignite a fire,” Agron said with a wide grin. His eyes burnt with a mania that deeply disturbed Kairos.

The minotaur had shown himself to be far more than a brute in the past months. He was wise in a way, cunning, and got along with his crewmates perfectly. Andromache in particular had grown fond of him.

But while Kairos thought the minotaur had let go of his pyromaniac tendencies, he realized that they had just been sleeping. Now that the phoenix was close, old habits kicked in.

“What do you want, old ghost?” Sertorius asked with a snort. “It is too late for mercy.”

“Is it?” the fire asked back. “When Heracles begged for water, I granted it to him. When Thyestes stole his brother’s throne, I made the sun rise in the west and set in the east to reveal his treachery. When Orion the hunter came to me, I healed his blindness; and when my son Phaeton took my chariot against my wishes, I could only watch as Zeus struck him down to save the world from its flames. I never bore your kind ill-will, and only punished those who shamed me first.”

“That was then,” Sertorius replied with coldness. “This is now.”

“And you watched as your daughter made a monster out of me,” Andromache hissed through her teeth, tensing up against her partner’s chest. “Is her soul with you too?”

“Yes, but... I had nothing to do with my daughter’s whims or Thanatos’.” The fire’s voice faltered. *“Please. Let us settle this with words rather than swords.”*

The voice died and the flames with it.

It didn’t take them long to find the stairway to level four.

Nessus’ insight had been correct. It took Andromache’s magic and Agron’s strength to dig a way out of the hall where Thanatos had trapped them, but afterward, they only had to follow the late satyr’s directions.

His additions to Thales' map led the party to an underground passageway. No undead came to attack them this time. Perhaps they had all passed on with Thanatos' demise or they figured out that they couldn't hope to defeat the living. Or maybe they awaited them in an ambush at the dungeon's bottom.

Kairos would know soon enough.

"This is a mistake," Sertorius said as they walked down the steps of the stairs. "What if this is a trap?"

"Helios is an honorable deity," Agron said, a dangerous glint in his eyes. He had grown more joyful and excited the further they descended, like a child entering a toy store. Kairos hoped that he could maintain control once they met the phoenix in the flesh. "So the tales say."

"Whatever he offers, it will not make up for the devastation his kindred will unleash when they escape Tartarus," Cassandra said, her hand tightening on her fork. "We were given a mission. We must fulfill it."

"I understand," Kairos replied, carrying his [Anemoi Spear] in one hand and Orgonos' tablet in the other. *But if there is a battle, more of my friends will die... and I have filled enough graves already.*

Though he doubted it, Kairos hoped that they could find a compromise with Helios. The doors to Tartarus would remain shut no matter what, but perhaps the sun-god could be convinced to abandon his daughter's mad plan against a concession of some sort. The phoenix meant to house his soul had once given Kairos a feather out of kindness, and Cassandra only breathed today because of this mercy.

Maybe they could even trade for more. Maybe they could even revive Nessus with a phoenix feather. With the planetary alignment many days ahead, Kairos was in a strong position to negotiate.

And if they couldn't reach a compromise... then he would fulfill his kingly duties and protect his land. No matter what it cost him.

The fourth level was the smallest of the dungeon's floors, but perhaps the most awe-inspiring yet. The stairway led to a large cavern with a stone altar taller than a hill occupying its center. A winged flame burnt at its summit, awaiting the mortals' visit.

On the wall opposing the stairs stood a great gate similar in height and shape to the one between the second and third layers. But where the door to the Underworld had been made of cold metal and austere in its aesthetic, this one had embraced the macabre. The bones of giants and monsters made up its structure alongside blackened stone. Spikes protruded from it like the fangs of a great beast's open jaw.

And a woman's soul worked as its lock.

A female ghost had merged with the gate's center, her ephemeral form mixed with the bones. Time and undeath had reduced her to a shadowy silhouette, but Andromache recognized it all the same. Her eyes blazed with cold disdain as she uttered her cursed name.

"Circe."

Kairos had expected to feel fury and anger at the sight of his lover's tormentor. Though it didn't burn as intensely as Andromache's desire for vengeance, the witch-queen needed to face justice for her crimes.

And yet... as he watched this pitiful thing, moaning in pain, the Travian King couldn't help but pity the sorceress. From the way she writhed in agony bound to the gates she worked so hard to unlock, her deal with Thanatos hadn't gone well.

"Such are the wages of dealing with death," an ancient voice echoed in the cavern as the party faced the altar. "Thanatos' gifts are all poisoned."

Kairos and his allies looked at the flames on the altar's summit as they transformed into the familiar shape of a great winged beast. A giant of fire that the Travian King had seen hatch in Travia and whose blazing path that had led them to Histrina in the first place.

The phoenix let out a cry, his wings illuminating the cavern. "So pretty," Rook whispered, while Agron's eyes burnt with a ghastly desire and Thales fell silent in sheer

awe. Cassandra herself observed the creature with respect, for she owed his feather her life.

Had there been an entity more beautiful? The flaming feathers glittered like the sun while its eyes blazed with the wisdom of immortals. This was a different gaze than the hatchling, older than the world.

“Has your soul returned to its vessel?” Kairos asked softly. “Helios?”

“Not yet.” The phoenix closed its wings as he looked down on the mortals below his rookery. “It awaits beyond these gates, but the frontier between the afterlives has thinned enough to let me speak through.”

Sertorius clenched his jaw and glanced at Andromache. “I thought he needed the planetary alignment to return to the world of the living?”

“He should,” the nymph replied as she glared at Circe’s soul. “But she weakened the barrier on her own.”

“The ritual was for a godly soul to thin the gates to Tartarus, until they grew weak enough for me to shatter them from both sides and let the old gods through when the planets aligned,” Helios said with a sad sigh. “My daughter thought the soul would belong to one of the Anthropomachia’s victims, but Thanatos twisted their deal. I have been waiting for the path to open so I might rescue her from this agony.”

Her mind is gone, Kairos realized as he observed the witch-queen’s ghost. The torturous experience had destroyed her.

Even Andromache seemed to realize it. Her fingers clenched around her staff, and while she took some pleasure in her nemesis’ punishment... she seemed almost disgusted by it.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sertorius said as he glanced at his brother-in-law. “Orgonos will surely repair the damage and send the witch’s soul to the abyss where it belongs.”

“It might even be a mercy,” Andromache said with surprising gravitas.

The phoenix flapped its wings, sending embers falling from the altar. The party raised their weapons in turn, though the beast didn't attack. "Do not," Helios asked, his voice grim and powerful. "This is for the best."

"Whose?" Andromache hissed. "Yours?"

"The mortals too," Helios insisted.

"Sir?" Thales hesitated while raising his hand, slightly intimidated by the phoenix's presence. "May I ask you a question?"

"This is not a classroom, automaton," Andromache snorted at him.

"What do you wish to know, crafter?" Helios asked more warmly.

"Why are you doing this, even knowing it will result in your demise?" Thales asked. "It has been bothering me for a while. You are not truly a Titan, only the child of two. You fought against them alongside the Olympians."

"I fought to overthrow a tyrant who ate his own children." Helios looked away. "I thought Zeus would be a better ruler than his father. He was, in a way... but the cure was as terrible as the illness. My kindred were chained, mankind's conditions degraded, and Zeus grew drunk with power. I was not aware of the cycle and its implications back then."

"But even if you free the Titans trapped in Tartarus and unleash them on the world, they will not be grateful to you," Thales pointed out. "You will be free, but hunted by the Old and New Gods alike."

"I know," Helios replied sadly, to Kairos' surprise. "This is beyond me."

"Is this for your daughter?" Kairos asked, glancing at her ghost. "Are you ready to engulf the world in war to bring her back to life?"

"How can you ask me that after watching your friend sacrifice his life to bring back your daughter from the dead?" Helios brightened with determination. "For my family, I will do *anything*. But while I desire to save her, the Titans' freedom is an end in itself. Even if it

will cause destruction in the short-term, it will leave the world a better place in the long run.”

Cassandra almost choked. “How could a cosmic war help anyone?”

“By breaking the shackles of fate and undoing the cycle,” Helios declared. “Don’t you see? Each age, each revolution of the young killing the old, leaves the world diminished. The last iteration ended with the flooding of the earth. What will be left with the next conflict? Rubble?”

“You would have us be slaves to the Old Gods again,” Kairos said with a glare.

“Is that so wrong?” Helios asked as he reminisced about old times. “I was born in the golden age when Kronos ruled this world. Under the Titans, your kind was happy. They lived a life of plenty from the bounty of Mother Gaïa. And although Zeus was not an ideal ruler, your mortals enjoyed more luxury under him than you do now. What freedom is there in Travia? The liberty to die young?”

Kairos winced as the death of his sister came to mind. Though he had heard the argument before, it still hurt as hard as ever. “We are improving,” he replied. “The old world may have more resources, but its divine rulers toyed with mortals at their leisure. The New Gods rule with a light touch. I prefer this status quo, even with its downsides.”

“Whatever you hope to accomplish, you offer nothing that would benefit us in our lifetime,” Sertorius said with cold pragmatism. “You can’t give us more than empty promises.”

“And I *cannot* let your foul daughter return,” Andromache warned, her staff blazing with power.

“I swear to you, my daughter will not threaten your family again,” Helios argued. “I will extract an oath from her. She will leave you in peace, you have my word.”

“You misunderstand, dead sun. It is not revenge I seek.” Andromache put a hand on her belly. “I will not let her, or any other woman, go through what your daughter made me endure out of jealousy. She may spare us, but unless she has changed she will bring suffering to countless others. So will the creatures beyond this door.”

“She’s right!” Rook chirped. “Kairos, don’t listen to him. The old ones will break our nest on their way out!”

“I will extract an oath from them and make one myself,” Helios argued. “The Old Gods beyond this door will leave your island alone as we wage war against Lycaon, Orgonos, and those who have taken our thrones. Ask your people to migrate here, and no harm shall come to them. I will revive the dead myself if needed.”

Kairos couldn’t help but glance at the phoenix’s shining feathers. *The power to revive the dead*, he thought. *How I lusted for it.*

“I cannot raise those who have already been judged and sent to their righteous afterlife,” Helios explained as he looked at Kairos, having sensed his desire. “But your brother’s soul, and all those unrighteously taken by Lycaon... I can bring them back. Same as your friend Rhadamanthe, whose soul languishes on the Styx’s shores, and the many people who died in your wake.”

“Why even negotiate?” Agron asked with a disturbing grin, after having been silent so far. By now, he looked almost maniacal. “Kairos, you just have to kill him, ascend to [Demigod], and feed the corpse to your ship. We’ll get a sun of our own. Or at worst, we take the feathers by force.”

“My gift is mine alone to give, bridgeburner,” Helios warned with disgust at Agron’s ruthless proposal. “It is linked to my [Legend], not to my body. These feathers only raise the dead if I allow it, and feeding them to your ship will not grant your vessel this power. As for killing me, Kairos of Travia... by the fate that binds us, you would become a [Demigod]. But you would not inherit my [Legend] and unique powers. The dead will only return through me.”

Kairos’ thoughts turned to his brother’s soul, either bound to Lycaon’s service or rotting in the monster’s stomach. He remembered all the crewmates he had lost, all the innocent lives his campaigns had left in their wake.

Maybe we could bring back General Zama's lover too, the Travian King thought. He made an oath to avenge her, but her return would free him from it. How many would be saved then? "What about Nessus? Could you bring him back too?"

The phoenix hesitated, but eventually shook his head. "That is beyond my power," he admitted as his eyes settled on Andromache. "The Fate System itself bound his soul to the child. I am not a [Personification] or a [Protogenoi]; even at my peak, I doubt I could do anything. I am sorry, Kairos."

It would have been wiser to lie, but the Travian King couldn't help but respect Helios for his honesty. Even if he fought for the wrong cause, the old deity sounded honorable. *No wonder so many called upon the sun's blessings in ancient times.*

"All of you have dead loved ones," Helios argued as he observed the party. "I can bring them back. I can reward you too, grant you my blessing. You will live forever young with your loved ones."

"That's the carrot," Cassandra whispered, "what's the stick?"

"If we cannot reach a compromise..." The phoenix hesitated, as if reluctant to reach such extremes. "Then I will force my soul through the weakened door. It will damage it, perhaps not to let my kindred through without the planetary alignment... but it will cause harm to your island and I have nothing to lose."

There would be a fight.

Once upon a time... once upon a time, Kairos would have listened to Helios' offer. Maybe even accepted it, if he could spare his homeland. The possibility of raising his lost loved ones would have appealed to his greed, the offer of power to his ambition. When the phoenix first appeared before him at the beginning of his journey, he didn't have children to protect, a kingdom to rule, or allies across the sea to defend.

Kairos had grown to despise the old gods. He had seen the consequence of their rule, the suffering of Andromache, the gorgons, Orgonos, and all the ancient deities oppressed. He had witnessed the arrogance bred by their followers in Orichalcos,

gotten a glimpse of how the world would look like under their rule; beautiful and grand, but built on slavery, fear, and exploitation.

Even if he could extort oaths protecting his native land of Travia and Histris, Kairos couldn't let the rest of the world go through another Anthropomachia. All the cities of the Sunsea would look like Orichalcos and countless people would die. Helios believed the destruction would eventually lead to a paradise, but he couldn't guarantee it.

Kairos could see between the lines. For all of his bluster, Helios simply couldn't accept that his sun had set.

Now?

It was Kairos' day.

The Travian King threw Orgonos' tablet at the ground and unleashed its power.

At this signal, the group attacked Helios as one without warning. Spells and wind blasts flew at the surprised phoenix while the fighters rushed at the altar. Smoke erupted from the broken tablet, runes floating in the air as they prepared to summon Orgonos.

The fiery bird let out a screech and bathed the room in divine light. Kairos had to cover his eyes not to go blind, but he saw enough; the gates of Tartarus shook with a mighty quake, a crack spreading through their surface. A burning ray of light pierced through it, carrying Circe's soul with it as it rejoined with the phoenix.

The fiery avian repelled all the spells thrown his way, his form shifting. His wings expanded not to reveal a bird's body, but that of a humanoid form of blinding light. A System notification appeared as Kairos struggled to see the creature, the air heating up.

Helios, the Sun that Was

Legend: Sun of the Dead (Demigod)

Pantheon: None (formerly Dodekatheon).

Level: ???

“Let’s go!” Rook shouted as Kairos leaped on his back, spear in hand.

The twilight of the gods awaited.

50: Travian Dawn

The altar crumbled as a sun was born anew.

Rook and Kairos had already taken flight by the time Helios' light dimmed, allowing them to perceive him. The handsome, five-meter tall figure that arose from the altar's flames looked every bit like a god. His skin was the color of brass, his armor made of gold, and his helmet crowned with flames. Two burning wings of light carried him in the air.

However, a few elements revealed the rot beneath the glamour. The face of a screaming woman grew out of his chest; Circe's soul intertwined with her progenitor's body. And Helios' eyes, instead of shining with the light of dawn, oozed only darkness.

A fallen god, Kairos thought, the shadow of lost glory.

A true deity was manifesting from the fragments of Orgonos' summoning tablet, smokes and shadows gathering in the form of a great cyclops.

But the damage was already done. A crack spread in the Gate of Tartarus and a giant red eye peeked through it. Kairos could only hope that Orgonos would manifest fast enough to prevent anyone from passing through.

Agron was the first to reach the altar's summit even as it crumbled, followed closely by Cassandra. Though Andromache and Sertorius had unleashed a barrage of lightning bolts at Helios, Circe's face let out a shriek and quickly dispelled the spells.

"Mine!" Agron shouted with a mad zeal, his eyes burning with berserk rage and his Songaxe humming thundering beats. "Your fire is mine!"

"Be cursed!" Helios replied before manifesting a whip of flames in his left hand and a sword of light in his right. His sword clashed with Agron's axe, the former sun deity using his bigger size and reach to force the minotaur on the defensive.

Cassandra attempted to flank Helios while Kairos had Rook make circles around the altar, intending to cover the front-liners with wind blasts. However, the [Demigod] was no fool. His whip entangled around Agron's neck and swiftly tossed the minotaur at Kairos. The Travian King dodged and redirected the winds to soften his ally's fall, allowing Agron to land next to Thales at the altar's feet. The crafter was grabbing bombs and calculated the right angle to throw them.

"You dare raise your weapon against me, Cassandra?" Helios asked with indignation as he raised his sword. "I, who granted you the gift of a second life?"

"I shall forever be grateful for it," she replied, blocking the fallen deity's blade with her shield and retaliating with thrusts of her fork. Helios opened his mouth to breathe divine fire on Cassandra, his flames licking her flesh without bypassing her [Fire] immunity. "But my gratitude only extends so far."

Kairos prepared to assist her when a powerful voice howled from the other side of the Gate of Tartarus. To his horror, a giant grey hand with fingers thicker than an adult man went through the crack and tried to widen it further.

A Titan was trying to break through and Orgonos hadn't yet fully manifested.

"Andromache, Sertorius, protect the gate!" Kairos ordered as he activated his [Invisibility] Skill, the effect extending to Rook. "Hold the line!"

The mages immediately launched lightning bolts at the titan's hand, and though they were no more effective than insect stings, Kairos hoped that they could buy a few precious seconds.

Damaged by the titanic clashes of weapons and quakes, Helios' altar fully collapsed. Cassandra leaped into the air to avoid being buried alive, unleashing flames from her fork to better control her fall. Helios himself took flight and expanded his wings, only to receive a bomb to the face.

Each of Thales' four hands had grabbed a projectile and a bag full of them lay at his feet. He threw them at the fallen deity in quick succession, with Helios having to cover his face to protect himself. The [Demigod] attempted to fly out of the automaton's line of

fire, but the invisible Kairos created an artificial wind current to pin him in place. Rogue and crafter proved more effective at keeping Helios immobilized than the fighters.

Unable to fly, Cassandra and Agron switched tactics. The former assisted the mages by burning the titan's hand with flames, while the latter grabbed some of Thales' bombs and tossed them at Helios.

It's too easy, Kairos thought, as their foe wrapped himself in his wings to resist the onslaught. Was Helios saving his strength for Orgonos? Or was he preparing some kind of attack?

"Father..."

The voice's whispers were barely audible but they chilled Kairos to the bone all the same. Andromache froze too, her head snapping in Helios' direction.

Incantations echoed in the cavern and a red spherical barrier surrounded Helios. Thales' projectiles bounced off it as the [Demigod] unfurled his wings, the face on his armor having regained some lucidity.

"My daughter?" Helios asked with fatherly warmth as he glanced at Circe's face. "Have you recovered?"

"Yes, father." Kairos thought that the witch-queen had lost all reasons, but he had clearly underestimated her mental strength. "I sense my killer... he is coming... my heart burns with revenge..."

"Not for long!" Andromache said as she turned her attention from the titan to her former tormentor. "[Dispel]!"

She unleashed a wave of energy from her staff, but failed to disrupt the barrier. It did, however, bring Circe's attention to the nymph.

"Do you recognize me?" Andromache asked. There was no anger in her voice, no fury built over centuries, but her tone was cold all the same. "The woman you cursed into a beast? I was but one of your many victims. Do you *remember*?"

Circe's answer was short and to the point.

“No,” Circe replied dismissively. Kairos couldn’t tell if the witch-queen had forgotten either because of her torment or because she had ruined so many lives that she had lost count. Andromache didn’t even look surprised, having expected that answer. The witch-queen hadn’t changed one bit. “But if a beast you were... a beast you shall remain. [Animal Curse].”

Kairos sensed a dark force spreading through the cavern and trying to take root in his body, only to miss him utterly.

[Luck] check successful.

But not all of his allies proved as fortunate.

Agron, who was already half a bull, became one in full. His Songaxe dropped from his hands as they turned into hooves, while Cassandra’s armor cracked as her body transformed into that of a lean lioness. Sertorius looked as if he would be affected for a moment, but one of his Skills seemed to repel the curse.

Only Thales and Andromache completely ignored the spell; the former because of his automaton nature, the latter because of her immunities. The nymph looked horrified at Cassandra’s transformed state before focusing back on Circe.

“[Exorcism]!” Andromache shouted as she pointed her staff at the witch-queen. No wave of magic came out of her weapon but the effect quickly became clear all the same: Circe let out a scream of pain and surprise, to her father’s horror.

“As I thought,” Andromache said as she prepared to cast the spell again. Her eyes burnt not with the fires of anger, but a fierce desire to bring Circe to justice. “Your father may be alive, but you remain a paltry undead in your state... and I am a [Necromancer].”

“My will is stronger... than yours,” Circe replied as she prepared to cast another offensive spell. Kairos immediately attacked with wind blasts and Thales with bombs,

but only the Travian King's [Legend Slayer]-enhanced attacks bypassed the shield. Helios used a wing to cover his daughter from the sharpened wind. "I shall smite you..."

"No, my daughter," Helios said as light flared from the darkness of his eyes. "We must widen the gate before Orgonos arrives. Let my servants deal with them. [Summon Sun Horses]."

No sooner did he utter these words that monsters appeared on the ground in bursts of smoke. Four horses wreathed in flames and shining light attacked Kairos' allies, two charging at Thales and the others assaulting the mages.

The transformed Cassandra and Agron immediately entered the melee to protect their allies even in their transformed states, but claws and horns proved far less effective than forks and axes. Cassandra let out a roar as she forcefully backed down with burned paws, while the maddened Agron disemboweled the closest sun-horse even as his skin caught flame. He seemed to enjoy it.

Thales quickly switched his focus from Helios to his minions and blasted one to dust. The mages, however, found their focus disrupted. One of the fire horses unleashed a stream of flames at them, forcing Sertorius to abandon his attacks on the Titan's hand to take cover. Andromache turned her skin to steel to survive the flames and turned her attention against Helios' minions rather than his daughter.

Kairos ordered Rook to take Helios from behind, the Travian King hitting the [Demigod]'s shield with his spear. His weapon pierced through the magical defenses like butter, but Helios quickly turned around while unleashing his fire whip. Rook had to pull back to avoid being caught while Circe continued to spellcast.

To Kairos' horror, the crack in the Gate of Tartarus grew slightly wider as the witch's magic unraveled its protections. The Titan took his hand back into the darkness beyond the doors... only for his head to butt through the growing rift. A hideous, red-eyes visage of grey stone peeked through the gates, trying to force his way through while Kairos' allies were too busy dealing with Helios' minions to interrupt.

Kairos immediately had Rook move towards the gate in a last-ditch attempt to prevent the Titan's escape. His [Legend Slayer] shouldn't work on a [God]-Rank foe, but they had no other choice. The Travian King raised his spear as the Titan roared in triumph...

And Orgonos' hand pushed the prisoner right back into Hell.

The Cyclops god had finally manifested out of smoke and lightning, towering over everyone present. His single eye shone with bright red light as he spoke ancient incantations, the doors reacting to his will while he forced the titan back into his hole.

"Orgonos!" Circe interrupted her incantation in her fury. The shield around her father faltered as the sight of her killer disrupted her concentration. "Face me, cyclops! I want to see your rotting eye before I blind you again... the same way Apollo did!"

Orgonos looked over his shoulder, his shining eye glancing at Circe's face with a look of utter *contempt*. Helios attempted to use the opportunity to attack the cyclops with his whip, only for his fiery weapon to bounce off the New God.

[Helios, the Sun that Was] couldn't bypass [Fire] Immunity.

The God of Magic had come prepared.

"Return to dust," Orgonos told Circe with the same dismissive tone she had used with Andromache only a few minutes ago. "You do not matter anymore."

Circe let out a gasp of shock and surprise, her crimson shield breaking into multiple pieces; the sheer dismissiveness of the response had shattered her confidence. Then she let out a roar of rage while her father tried to calm her down. "My daughter, do not—"

"[Exorcism]!"

Another voice drowned the witch-queen's and turned Circe's furious screams into a howl of despair. Kairos looked at his allies while smiling ear to ear. Sertorius had repelled Helios' summoned minions with a barrier, allowing his teammate to get to work. *She trained a long time for it.*

"He broke your concentration, you fool," Andromache explained as her staff burnt with magical power. She had waited centuries for this moment and her patience was finally being rewarded. "You may not remember your victims, but we certainly never forgot. I speak for all of them when I say these words..."

"No!" Helios snarled, but his plea was in vain.

"Be cursed!" Andromache ordered. "Leave us alone!"

Circe's face let out a scream before turning silent, a ghostly light exiting from her mouth. The soul only enjoyed its freedom for a few seconds before an invisible force pulled her through the crack in the Gate of Tartarus.

The witch-queen, tormentor of Andromache and countless others, had joined her forefathers in imprisonment.

A look of utter despair passed over Helios' eyes, and for a second Kairos pitied the deity... albeit not enough to pull his punches. The Travian King unleashed another wind blast at the fallen sun god's back, making him flinch.

The pain broke Helios from his sadness. Anger swelled in his heart as he flew straight at Orgonos with his weapons raised. Now he didn't only fight to free his kindred, but to save his daughter from the eternal torment she richly deserved.

But his sun had long set.

Orgonos' eye unleashed a blast of pure, focused magic. A green ray of light swallowed Helios and returned him to the dust from which he came, before melting the wall on the opposite side of the cavern.

A [Demigod], slain in the blink of an eye. Kairos couldn't help but freeze in awe at seeing a New God's power at work.

But no sooner did Helios perish that his corpse erupted in a burning pyre, a bright light illuminating the cavern. Kairos and Rook covered their eyes to avoid going blind, but they distinguished the shadow of a winged man at the center of the flames.

Helios had returned to life like a phoenix.

Orgonos focused his attention back on the Gate of Tartarus and his incantations bore fruit. The rift started to close, the doors repairing themselves. Without the planetary alignment to give Circe's spell the power to fully shatter the frontier between afterlives, Orgonos only had to put a bandage on a wound.

Helios had lost.

His plans in ruins, the [Demigod] let out a roar of fury and flew upward at a speed that matched Rook at his best. Kairos and his griffin barely had the time to fly out of Helios' way before he hit the ceiling like an arrow. The stone shattered at the impact with boulders raining down on the people below.

"Take cover!" Kairos shouted as Rook swiftly dodged the falling rocks, his rider destroying a few with his spear. Thales, Sertorius, and Andromache attempted to protect their allies by either destroying the boulder with bombs or spells, but the whole ceiling started collapsing on their heads.

Still keeping the Gates closed with one hand, Orgonos summoned a barrier with the other. A sphere of green fire protected him and Kairos' allies on the ground, the boulders turning to cinders when they touched it. Only Rook and his rider remained outside it, while Helios vanished through the hole he had made.

"Go, Kairos," Orgonos all but ordered, his barriers protecting Kairos' allies on the ground but also preventing them from following their leader. "I cannot deal with him and repair the barrier. Only you among the people here can extinguish this fire permanently."

Only me? Kairos wondered before putting the two and two together. If Helios' resurrective immortality counted as a magical defense, then [Legend Slayer] would bypass it. The Travian King sent one last glance at Andromache, Cassandra, and his companions; all of them answering his gaze with silent support.

This was his Quest.

This was his destiny.

With a final nod, Kairos faced the hole in the ceiling with newfound resolve. "Rook."

His griffin responded with a roar of triumph as they followed Helios in his ascent. The cave collapsed behind them, burying Orgonos and his allies underneath tons of rubble.

The griffin rider and his mount followed after Helios as he opened a blazing path through the ruins of Hades' palace. Kairos created an air tunnel to help them gain ground on the escaping [Demigod], following him through the blazing path he had opened between the dungeon's third and second level.

Is he trying to escape? Kairos wondered as Rook dodged falling stones. Helios forced his way through every floor the party had worked so hard to descend through. *I took him for the kind of warrior that fights to the bitter end.*

After minutes of continuous ascent through Helios' molten tunnel, Kairos and Rook finally emerged from the Necromanteion's mountain. They flew underneath a starry sky and a new moon, briefly enjoying the feeling of a fresh breeze on their face.

Besides letting his allies rest, Kairos had chosen to delay the confrontation with Helios specifically until nightfall. He thought the [Demigod] might still draw strength from the sun outside and that darkness would weaken him.

Kairos couldn't say if Helios had lost a measure of strength, but the night made him very visible. The [Demigod] had a large head start on his pursuers and used it to fly south, completely ignoring the camp at the dungeon's entrance. By now Helios looked like the burning beacon of a lighthouse.

And from his flight's direction...

"Kairos, he's going after our nest!" Rook panicked.

Helios was moving towards Histria at full speed.

Kairos' heart skipped a beat as he realized what the former sun god had in mind. "Rook, quick!" he ordered, bending the winds to create an air tunnel and erase friction. "He's going to burn our city in revenge!"

Rook flew as swiftly as the winds his best friend commanded. A mad dash began as they pursued Helios across the whole island. At their speed, the world below became a blur and the trees on the ground looked no taller than grass.

Had Julia returned to Histria? Had his mother? These were Kairos' only thoughts as he desperately clung to his spear.

Helios reached his sleeping capital city first.

The [Demigod] had moved high above the city among the clouds; too far for arrows and ballistae to even reach him. His light shone upon Histria like a new dawn, but one that promised only destruction. The fallen sun glanced at the Travian-Lycean fleet anchored at the port, the *Foresight* among them, before his eyes examined Kairos' keep and the houses around it.

Having chosen his target, Helios opened his mouth.

A colossal ray of light descended upon Kairos' fortress to incinerate it.

The Travian King thought time froze as he watched divine fire descend upon his home, with his wife and unborn child perhaps still inside.

But the countless wards set up inside his keep's walls activated. Barriers and [Fire Protection] spells triggered all at once and shielded the building. The light of heaven glided off the magical defenses like water on a rock.

Kairos' relief lasted only a second, as the furious Helios turned his attention to the rest of the city. His ray of light fell on the district closest to the keep and set houses ablaze. Stymphalian birds sounded the alarm and the city woke up in a panic as flames spread.

"Rook," Kairos whispered. "If death faces us today, we answer."

If they failed, hundreds of thousands would pay the price. They had to stop Helios now, even if it cost them their lives.

“Silly Kairos, when death calls you can only tell her one thing,” Rook replied with determination. “*Not today!*”

Kairos couldn't help but smile. *Watch us, Nessus*, he thought as his griffin silently moved above Helios. Thanks to the cover of [Invisibility] and Kairos' erasing all sound around them, the rampaging [Demigod] didn't notice them; he was too occupied burning down people who couldn't defend themselves.

“[Spellblade],” Kairos said as his griffin dived towards Helios below, his Skill empowering his spear. [Heartseeker] informed the Travian that their foe's only vital areas were the armored heart and the small gap in his helmet.

The griffin rider and his mount fell upon the [Demigod] like a bird of prey on a dove, their speed so great that they could probably outpace an arrow. But even without being able to hear or see them, Helios sensed their presence somehow. The fallen sun god interrupted his assault to look up right as Kairos prepared to impale his foul heart.

Helios' wings flapped and pushed him to the right; early enough to save his miserable life, but too late to avoid a collision. Kairos' spear hit him in the left shoulder and tore it apart, cutting off the arm while at it. The griffin rider continued his descent as Helios' wound showered him with his warm golden blood, the severed limb turning to ash.

Helios let out a roar of rage, his eyes and wings burning with sunlight. “Let there be light!”

A perfect fireball with black spots erupted behind Helios and soon grew as big as an ox. The sphere hovered in the air, its divine light dispelling Kairos and Rook's invisibility. The night became as bright as day.

*Helios has summoned a **[Sun]**.*

***[Fire]** and **[Light]** Resistance will be ignored. The light of truth shall dispel **[Invisibility]** and **[Illusions]**!*

The second sun heralded in Prometheus' prophecies, Kairos thought as the star grew larger and larger. If it reaches a certain size, it might engulf all of Hestia.

"You have taken my daughter from me, and so I shall burn your kingdom to cinders in return," Helios said with cold rage while raising his remaining arm. Smaller fireballs formed around his sun like burning moons, each of them the size of Rook. "This is divine justice."

"Your *'justice'* makes me nauseous!" Kairos replied with disdain as he and Rook circled the [Demigod] from a respectable distance, looking for an opening. "You could have burnt my fleet and crushed my ambitions, but instead you turned your gaze to helpless civilians! How is that justice?"

"We are the light that paves the way for mortals and burns sinners who stray from the path," Helios declared with godly arrogance. "All we do is righteous."

His fireballs swirled around Helios' new sun, before throwing themselves as Kairos and Rook. The duo dodged them all and danced around the flames. From below, the battle probably looked like a rain of shooting stars around a second sun; Kairos wondered if Julia watched it from their home's balcony, praying for his safety.

"You cannot live without divine order," Helios declared, producing more and more flames as his sun grew to eclipse him in size. "You live short lives without learning from your mistakes. Only us immortals can grant you the heaven you seek."

And now he shows his true face, Kairos thought in disdain. It seemed the fallen sun god was only honorable when it didn't cost him anything. "Look around you, Helios. Look at what we built without you."

"The shiniest nest there is!" Rook added as he skillfully dived underneath a fireball.

"At the heart of your words is fear!" Kairos continued as he dispelled Helios' flames with his winds. "Your fear of being *wrong!* Fear of being *unnecessary!* You are the one who hasn't learned anything!"

Nessus had used his immortality to grow wise and protect the future; Helios squandered it trying to recapture his glorious past, and Kairos would bury him with it.

The griffin rider sensed an opening and went back on the offensive. Rook danced around the projectiles and flew straight at Helios, his rider raising his [Anemoi Spear] while meeting his foe's gaze. The light of the new sun hurt Kairos' eyes, but he didn't falter.

"[Telchine Sorcery]!" he said while trying to [Blind] Helios.

[Charisma] insufficient!

Helios let out a roar, a beam of light erupting from his sun and targeting Rook. The griffin narrowly managed to avoid a deadly blow by diving down, aborting the attack.

Though he was too far away to hit Helios with his spear, Kairos was close enough to activate [Stygian Curse]. He breathed a cloud of poison at the [Demigod] and had the winds blow it straight in his face. The surprised Helios could only wince as the Underworld's miasma swallowed him whole, the poison seeping into his shoulder's stump. His golden flesh turned purple as the curse of the Telchine took root.

You have [Poisoned] Helios.

"If you are so mighty, why would something as quaint as [Poison] affect you?" Kairos asked mockingly as Rook ran circles around the [Demigod]. On the ground, while many

houses had caught fire, the blaze didn't spread far; the city's magical defenses and its fire brigade had quickly reacted to extinguish it.

Helios' body briefly shone with the same glow as a healing spell. Kairos' [Magical Knack] told him he was attempting to call upon his phoenix immortality, to immolate himself and be reborn free from wounds and poison.

But he couldn't. The light died inside Helios, his stump and rotting flesh remaining.

With [Legend Slayer] bypassing all magical defenses, nothing could purge the poison coursing in his veins.

Helios, former herald of the sun itself, would perish from an ailment. The [Demigod]'s confident expression turned to grim despair as he realized that the end had come.

"You have ruined everything, Kairos. All my daughter's work has been reduced to cinders. My life is forfeit. The Golden Age will never return. Only ashes will remain..."

Helios raised his last arm, his sun vibrating behind him. The artificial star had now grown as large as the *Foresight*. "Starting with yours."

Helios lowered his hand.

His second sun started slowly falling down on the city below, with Kairos' own keep as the main target.

The Travian king's smugness turned to fear and then fury. They had to kill Helios *now*, in the hope it would destroy his conjured sun. "Rook!" he shouted. "All in!"

His griffin shrieked with determination as he made a circle in the skies, gathering momentum while the winds swirled around them. Helios positioned himself above his own sun to protect it from interference. A sword of light as long as the *Foresight's* mast appeared in his hand.

This was the last joust.

Once he had become a blur, Rook charged straight at Helios while Kairos raised his spear for the fatal blow. They crossed the distance separating them from the [Demigod] in an instant, a boom echoing across the skies.

Helios let out a roar as he swung his sword, the weapon turning into an arc of fire and light cutting clouds in half. The wall of fire advanced to meet the griffin and his rider while the artificial sun bathed them in its radiance.

At the last second, Kairos turned his spear down and unleashed a burst of wind.

The blow tossed him off Rook's back as his griffin dived down, the flames cutting only the empty space between them.

Helios looked up in panic as Kairos descended on him with his spear raised. The [Demigod] opened his mouth, and the same flames that burnt Histria swallowed its king.

There was no word to describe the pain that followed. Even though the winds swirled around him and deflected the worst of the fire, no barrier of air could stop the burning sunlight. Kairos felt his armor and clothes melt. His fingers burnt until only bones held his silvery spear. His hair caught fire, his skin was flayed off his smoldering flesh, and his eyes whitened. His entire body burnt while even his crown of hydra fangs failed to help him regenerate. Only his [Golden Fleece] cloak and his spear remained untouched by the divine fire, enduring even as their wielder melted alive.

It took all of Kairos' strength not to scream. The pain eclipsed even that of the wounds he received from Jason of Iolcus. He became a burning corpse with barely a layer of flesh covering his bones and the struggling organs underneath. Death would have been a mercy, a release.

But Kairos endured. He kept his jaw shut even as his lips burnt off, refusing to *scream*, refusing to *die*. His subjects, his family, needed him to win. Nessus had given his life and dreams of oblivion to make sure Kairos would get his happy ending; and the captain refused to let his friend's sacrifice go to waste.

When Kairos emerged from the flames, he only saw the dark shadow of Helios and the blinding light of the sun behind him. He no longer had eyelids to protect his eyes, but even as his vision weakened, he still noticed the fear in his foe's gaze. One thought crossed Kairos' mind as he gathered whatever strength remained in his melting muscle.

For Travia.

Kairos rammed the [Anemoi Spear] in the helmet's gap and impaled Helios between the eyes.

The sheer power behind the blow tore off the [Demigod]'s head from his shoulders. The beheaded corpse and the mortally wounded Kairos both fell into the sun below them; the solar flames swallowed the Travian King, with the panicked shouts of Rook echoing in the background.

Was this how Kairos would die? On the verge of ascension, like his brother Taulas before him?

But as the light consumed him, Kairos didn't feel pain. He felt warmth, yes, but not the burning inferno of Helios' attack. It wasn't the unforgiving light of the desert sun drying out the lands and rivers.

It was the sunlight that gave life to the world.

Kairos felt the light fill his bones, his very soul. A power surged inside him, regrowing his flesh and skin, infusing his body with new strength. The sun had turned into an egg gestating a new being.

Helios had lost most of his former glory, but an ember of his divinity remained. This flame found a new vessel in Kairos and ignited once more. It was more intoxicating than wine, more arousing than sex, more pleasurable than conquest.

Kairos felt like a god.

The sun imploded, its light and warmth absorbed into the Travian King's body. Rook descended below him and Kairos safely on his back as the feeling of overwhelming power receded.

He was naked, wearing only his [Golden Fleece] and fanged crown. Everything else had melted or burnt away. His iris had turned golden and glowed in the dark. Though the winter air was chill, he felt naturally warm, his body healthier than ever.

His [Anemoi Spear] too had changed. The silver had turned to gold, the ancient artifact regaining a sliver of its lost power. Or maybe the strength of Kairos' [Legend] had subsumed that of the weapon and fully bent it to his will.

Kairos had transcended humanity and became closer to the gods.

*Congratulations. You have completed a Quest and achieved the rank of **[Demigod]**. You gained 30 Skill points and strengthened your Legend!*

*Your Legend evolved into **[Sunslayer King]**!*

*You upgraded your Personal Rank from **[Hero]** to **[Demigod]**. You can now progress up to level 80, and rank-up your stats all the way to the maximum S-Rank if you have sufficient SP. You earned the Legendary Skill: **[Sun of War]** and upgraded your other Legendary Skills.*

You gained ten levels (total 68) and 40 Skill points.

***[Sun of War]**: Legendary Skill, 4 Stars. You have slain an old sun and taken its light for yourself. You are immune to hostile **[Fire]** and **[Light]** effects, and can see perfectly through **[Invisibility]** and **[Illusions]**. Additionally, you can imbue your weapons with solar energy at will, making them shine with sunlight and inflict additional **[Light]** and **[Fire]** damage; if hit by a solar weapon, any creature vulnerable to sunlight is instantly incinerated.*

***[Monster Lure]** has been upgraded to **[Monster King]**: Legendary Skill, 4 Stars. You gain a degree of authority over monsters. Any **[Hero]** or lesser unintelligent monster with a lesser **[Charisma]** than yours instantly recognizes you as a powerful alpha and will submit to your will. Intelligent monsters with lower **[Charisma]** are not instantly dominated, but will be well-disposed towards you and stricken with **[Terror]** if they try to act*

against you. Finally, you can decide to activate an aura attracting local monsters to your location or turn it off at will.

[Legend Slayer] has been upgraded to **[Godslayer]**: Legendary Skill, 4 Stars. If you attack **[Hero]**, **[Demigod]**, or **[God]** rank enemies, you ignore their magical defenses and damage resistance.

[Shipbound: Foresight, Monstrous Ship] has been upgraded to **[Shipbound: Foresight, Monstrous Admiral]**: Legendary Skill, 4 Stars. When the **[Foresight]** sinks another ship, that vessel instantly rises from beneath the waves as a living ship with the same abilities as the **[Foresight, Monstrous Ship]**; these lesser ships are counted as a Three Stars Legendary Item, and can be 'loaned' to another captain of your choice (you can retract this loan at will). If the **[Foresight, Monstrous Admiral]** is destroyed, all its tributary ships will follow.

The **[Foresight, Monstrous Admiral]** is now a Four Stars Legendary Item. Once per day, it can utter a call that will instantly summon Cetae to its location. The number of sea monsters summoned and the speed at which they arrive depends on the circumstances.

Rook had also changed. His feathers had turned golden... no, into true gold. His eyes shone like twin stars and every movement of his wings left a trail of stardust behind.

"I have collected so many shinies that I became one!" Rook gloated as he extended his wings, light reflecting on his feathers. "Praise my brightness!"

Rook, Winged Sun

Legend: Sunslayer's Dawn (Demigod).

Race: Solar Griffin (Mythic).

Class: Monster (Animal Companion, Divine Beast, Sunsteed).

Level: 67.

As they flew above Histria and watched the citizens extinguish the flames, Kairos glanced at the horizon. The sun—the true sun—was rising beyond the ocean, filling the winter air with its warmth.

The dawn belonged to him.

51: Nightfall

The New Gods rarely visited mortal cities nowadays.

A New God and an Old One making an appearance at the same time was unheard of, and yet here they were on Histria's shore facing the heroes of the day.

Only a few hours after Helios' public defeat and Kairos' ascension to [Demigod], Orgonos teleported into the city with a crowd in tow. The Travian King's party was among them, with Cassandra and Agron freed from Circe's animal curse and returned to their original forms, but the New God of magic had also given a lift to the other adventurers on the second floor.

However, another giant had shown up with Orgonos. A lady wreathed in shadows, her lustrous black hair covered in a widow's veil. Her face was mostly hidden in darkness, though Kairos could see hints of lustrous white skin and pale red eyes underneath her hood. The cold of winter followed in her wake alongside the whispers of the dead.

Queen Persephone had made her first appearance outside the Underworld in centuries.

Though he had gained the power of a [Demigod], Kairos felt uneasy in the deities' presence. His wife had provided him with a kingly red tunic to replace his melted armor, one that went along well with his magical items. "You look every bit like Heracles, my husband," Julia had reassured him with a coy smile. "And I find it quite arousing."

Having seen the actual Heracles in the flesh, Kairos couldn't compare himself to the legendary warrior... but he had to admit he had changed. He felt stronger, more confident. A sun burnt inside his heart, filling him with strength.

If this was how being a [Demigod] felt, he shuddered to imagine how godhood would be.

"You have my most sincere thanks," Persephone declared, her voice radiating the stern authority of a queen of the dead. She and Orgonos stood side by side on the shore, facing Kairos' party, his crew, Julia, and all of Histria's representatives. "With the Gate

of Tartarus sealed and Thanatos defeated, the flow of souls will return to normal. The worlds of the dead and the living shall remain separate.”

Kairos and his allies could only answer with a short bow; though none of them did so as deeply as Cassandra.

Thankfully, Aglaonice had partly foreseen an attack on Histria and helped Julia coordinate the city’s response when Helios attempted to incinerate it. Only a few hundred people had perished in the attack and damage had been minimal.

Even a treacherous cat can have its uses, Kairos thought as he glanced at the sphinx. Aglaonice had come with a golden box filled to the brim with scrolls whose origin escaped the Travian King. She looked satisfied with the outcome, like everyone else.

It had cost many lives, but the future had changed. The first Calamity had been averted, and Helios’ sun wouldn’t rise again.

The bones of the fallen deity—what remained of them anyway—had been laid to rest in a coffin on the sand right in front of the *Foresight* and the Travian-Lycean fleet anchored in the port. Kairos had plans for them, but they would wait until after the gods’ departures.

Persephone’s eyes wandered to Andromache’s stomach. “Though I wished my half-brother would be among you, I see that his spirit still endures.”

“We shall build a statue for him in our temple,” Kairos said. Nausicaa and Chloris, who had both somewhat grown fond of the satyr, had offered to sculpt it from pearl and seastone. “His sacrifice shall not be forgotten.”

Persephone only answered with a short nod, her eyes turning to Cassandra next. Kairos’ former second-in-command fidgeted, slightly embarrassed by the goddess’ attention. “Your Majesty?” Cass asked as she dared to meet the dark queen’s eyes.

“Long before evil desecrated it, the Necromanteion was a place where the living could consult the dead for their wisdom,” Persephone explained. “With Thanatos’ influence gone, it may serve its original purpose once more. You have served dutifully Cassandra,

both as my priestess and as a champion of the dead; thus I offer you dominion over the Necromanteion... and membership into my [Pantheon].”

Cassandra’s eyes bulged, while whispers spread among the assembly. “You would make me a [Psychopompós]?”

“If you so desire.” Persephone glanced at Kairos, the weight of her ancient gaze difficult to bear. “Will it be alright, Sunslayer King?”

The simple fact that she asked for permission spoke volumes. *She is talking to me, not as a mortal, but an equal,* Kairos realized. *A new god in the making.*

“I see no problem with it,” he replied. Cassandra couldn’t join the [Térastheon] due to lacking monstrous attributes anyway, and he trusted her completely. Her efforts deserved recognition. “She has my support and my blessing.”

“Thank you, Kairos,” Cassandra said with a pleased smile. For one who thought herself undeserving of glory only a few months ago, receiving such an important charge was an honor beyond words. “Your Majesty, Lady Persephone, I swear I shall not disappoint you.”

“You never have,” the Queen of the Dead replied. Though her voice remained cold, Kairos thought he detected a furtive glint of fondness in her eyes. “Though you did scare Cerberus.”

“As we should,” Rook complained, the golden griffin slouching on the sand like a confident lion. “He attacked us first!”

“Did he recover?” Kairos couldn’t help but ask. He was quite fond of dogs and never wished Cerberus harm.

“He is safe, but feels guilty about letting people through the gates,” Persephone said before looking at the sun high above the sea. “Until my husband finds peace, he will never stop blaming himself.”

“Do you still hate us?” Orgonos asked Persephone. After having remained silent for a moment to observe the discussion, the cyclops had finally decided to take the lead.

“Although I did not wage war on you, I participated in the uprising that cost your husband and son their lives.”

“We will never be allies, cyclops,” Persephone replied bluntly. “But you were entitled to your revenge against Apollo, as I am to mine. It is Lycaon that I despise and whose death I await.”

“A time that might come soon,” Sertorius whispered at Kairos’ side. “Will you help us against him?”

Even in the presence of gods, the Judge never turned down an occasion to make allies.

Orgonos nodded slowly. “If your theory is correct, then the wolf-god’s liberation cannot be avoided. As I warned you, I cannot recreate the seal without undoing it first. In both cases, Lycaon will have an opportunity to escape.”

“But when that day comes, I will lend you my strength,” Persephone said with the cold voice of winter.

“As will I,” Orgonos declared. “But that moment may be years away, and other enemies will target you sooner.”

He didn’t offer help against Mithridates, nor did Persephone. The gods of the Sunsea took no part in petty squabbles, for good or ill.

Kairos was at peace with it. That was what he had fought Helios for; a future where mortals could decide their destiny without the gods choosing for them.

“This is goodbye, at least for now,” Persephone declared as shadows swirled around her. “We shall meet again... whether in life or death.”

“Before you go,” Kairos dared to ask, “I have a request.”

“You want me to revive friends and family that you have lost.” Persephone let out a sigh while Cassandra cleared her throat. “Exceptions can often be made, but if they become the rule then order collapses. I may have more freedom than Thanatos, but it does not excuse me from my duties. Even if I wanted to help, my powers are not limitless. If I

could not free my own son's soul from Lycaon's jaws, how can I hope to release your brother's?"

Kairos winced, but couldn't find a fault in her argument. Maybe Helios had lied about being able to free his brother's soul or his powers were unique to him. The opportunity had passed. *I shouldn't think that*, Kairos decided. *I made that choice knowing the results.*

Queen Persephone looked at him with sympathy. "Our loved ones will find rest, Kairos of Travia. I have sworn so, and one day Fate shall smile on us."

She disappeared on these words, returning to her domain in a cloud of darkness.

Orgonos remained behind for a moment, his single eye examining the people assembled before him. Though their ancestors had claimed power by striking down gods, nobody dared to make an attempt on the cyclops' life; partly out of respect, and mostly out of fear.

"Do you enjoy the power, Kairos?" Orgonos asked, his expression unreadable.

The Travian King didn't deny it. "It's exhilarating."

"Contrary to what mortals believe, power doesn't corrupt. It only magnifies what lurks inside the heart. Greed, love, ambition... sometimes to the point of self-destruction. Always remain humble, Kairos, lest your own pride bring you down."

"I have witnessed the price of arrogance, Lord Orgonos," Kairos replied while Helios' bones shone under the sunlight. "I have learned from my mistakes and that of others."

"I shall pray that you stay true to your words." Orgonos offered a final, respectful nod. "You do not have my support in your incoming war... but you have my blessing. I bid you good luck in your struggles to come."

The god of magic whispered a few words of power and teleported away.

The crowd remained silent a moment, before Kairos turned to face his friends and soldiers. He felt the weight of hundreds of eyes looking at him with hope and anxiety. The Travian King knew his words would carry more weight than ever. Hundreds of

thousands had seen him duel a former god for the sake of his kingdom, and this brought him worship and admiration. If anyone still had doubts about his leadership, they had been thoroughly squashed.

“Today is a new dawn,” Kairos declared, Julia and Andromache each on one side of him. “Not only for Travia, but Lyce and all nations of the Sunsea.”

Sertorius offered a short nod, his arms crossed and his eyes calculating. No doubt he already considered how to exploit his brother-in-law’s new status for political gain. Once news of Kairos’ ascension to [Demigod] reached Travia, the country would certainly fully mobilize behind him.

But so long as Teuta lived, his rule would never be fully secured.

“The last embers of the Old Gods’ rule have been extinguished, their final champion slain by my hand,” Kairos continued. “But although we are now free of the past, the future remains ours to fight for. The new spring heralds a bloody war that will determine the fate of the world for centuries to come. New would-be deities rise everywhere, hungry for power and control. Some will be our allies, others our foes. The fights ahead of us will be difficult, and I cannot promise that we shall all live to see the peace I know will follow.”

He glanced at his weapon as it glittered in the sunlight. The silver had turned to gold, reflecting Travia’s growing brilliance.

Dawnspear

Rank: Artifact 4 (formerly Artifact 5)

Value: Priceless

A spear originally crafted by the Anemoi, the old gods of the four winds, as a symbol of rulership. After its power declined following the

Anthropomachia, Kairos the Sunslayer anointed it again with the blood of Helios. Only Kairos the Sunslayer or his killer may use this spear's abilities.

1 Star Power: The Anemoi Spear is the source of Four Winds, and naturally boosts the user's [Wind] spells.

2 Stars Power: The spear can unleash sustained gusts, whose power depends on the user's will; from a breeze to a blast.

3 Stars Power: The spear's user can manipulate the four winds around his person, using the spear as he would a conductor's baton. This can be used to start miniature tornados, shred trees, or redirect winds.

4 Stars Power: The Dawnspear can conjure abnormal weather over an area of three-hundred kilometers around it. The available effects are [Flaming Hail] (only during a summer day), [Heat Wave] (unavailable in winter), [Blizzard] (Only in winter), [Hurricane], [Rain], [Thunderstorm], or [Hail]. The weather conditions last for seven hours. Additionally, Kairos the Sunslayer may teleport it to his hand at will.

"But so long as we stand as one, our victory is assured," Kairos declared as he glanced at the *Foresight*. "As I claimed the spear of the four winds as my own, so shall the embers of the fallen order fuel our army's might!"

The *Foresight* opened its fanged maw and devoured Helios' remains.

As the bones of the old sun were consumed by his slayer's ship, the vessel shared in its power. A set of four translucent golden wings, similar to a dragonfly, formed above the fin-oars and blew sand as they flapped. Summoning the winds to protect his allies from the cloud, Kairos watched as the shadow of the *Foresight* loomed over him and its

monstrous maw let out a spray of flames. Rook let out a squeal of happiness as he took flight, joining the ship in the heavens above.

At long last, the *Foresight* had learned to fly.

“This is the ship that will lead us to victory!” Kairos declared while raising his spear. “The first of a great fleet that shall bring Mithridates and all our enemies to their knees! Who shall sail with me?! Who shall dare to rule the Sunsea?!”

His allies and armies answered with a loud shout, their hearts galvanized by his words.

“But now is not the time to fear for the future, or think of the wars to come,” Kairos declared as he hit the sand with his weapon. “Though my friend Nessus gave his life for this victory, I know what he would have said. That winter is a time for rest, but also celebrations. And you, my friends and soldiers, deserve both.”

Kairos smiled before unleashing a blast of wind into the air, clearing the clouds above the *Foresight*. “Who is up for a banquet?!”

The crowd answered his question with a joyful chorus, and even cold Sertorius cracked a smile.

Only a few months ago, Kairos had held a banquet to celebrate a successful hunt. The Nemean Lion had long been eaten, his fur cut to make armor, but somehow the new festivities were even more extravagant.

The wealth gathered by the *Foresight* on its trip around the world was put to good use, and Sertorius added funds from his own pocket. All of Histria could celebrate on Lycean wine, Travian music, and dishes from all around the world. Once more, Kairos’ crew, close allies, and officers enjoyed a private reception inside his fortress’ walls, warmed up by conjured flames.

History had repeated itself, but with key differences. There were new faces among the guests, and a few missing.

He would have loved it, Kairos thought as he heard Agron play one of Nessus' favorite songs. Thales had joined the minotaur's orchestra with a new type of drum, while Nausicaa played with an *oud*. Though mute and out of the water, the mermaid had turned out to be a surprisingly good musician. Cassandra had even agreed to sing out of respect for her fallen friend while Caenis danced for the audience's pleasure and amusement. Rook was trying to imitate the latter's movements on the dance floor, but his attempts were more comical than anything. *I hope he can hear it.*

He should. For once, Andromache had agreed to join the festivities... and to everyone's shock, Julia had given her a place of honor.

"I am surprised you let me sit here, wolfling," Andromache admitted. "I thought you believed a kingdom couldn't have two queens."

As usual, Kairos occupied a dais overseeing the festivities... but this time, his wife sat at his right and his concubine at his left. The Travian King himself thought he had misheard when Julia proposed the arrangement.

"I still believe it," Julia replied calmly. Due to her late stage of pregnancy, she had been forced to trade away wine for water. "Considering all you went through in this dungeon, Andromache, I believe you deserve some recognition for your efforts. I daresay, I am glad you and your daughter survived the trip."

Andromache answered her words with a puzzled look of genuine surprise. "Why such a face?" Julia asked with an amused smile. "Despite our differences, I never wished for your death or that of your child."

"I did," Andromache admitted bluntly, to Kairos' silent disapproval. To her credit, his concubine appeared a little ashamed. "Once, at least. Back when you enjoyed everything I was denied."

Julia let out a shrug, taking Andromache's honesty in stride. "Did your anger cool down since?"

"It did, but I still wonder what you have in mind. This is unlike you, wolf—" Andromache stopped herself before clearing her throat. "Julia."

Kairos couldn't help but chuckle. "Was it so hard to say?" he teased Andromache.

"It was," the nymph replied with a devious smirk, hands on her chest. "I still feel jealous about sharing you, but I am more confident about our relationship... and where it will lead us."

Julia played with her glass of water with one hand, and kept the other on her womb.

"Our children's future is why I want to have this conversation," she admitted.

"Because Nessia will have a [Legend]?" Kairos asked with a frown.

"Neither she nor I will want your throne," Andromache told Julia with a snort. "You have nothing to fear."

"It's not about me, but *them*." Julia sighed. "I know we will never be friends, Andromache. But though my brother and I didn't share a mother, we still became a close family. I hope our children will grow close too... for they may not survive otherwise. Our foes' ranks will only grow, and they will each need people they can count on through thick and thin."

Andromache didn't answer, her expression turning thoughtful. It seemed Julia's words had struck a nerve in the nymph, who had long struggled to make friends and allies.

"You fear someone will try to turn our children against each other," she guessed. "And through them, us."

"I will suffer no infighting," Kairos said firmly.

"Not even the gods live forever, Kairos, they only live longer than most," Julia replied wisely. "My brother showed me the [Necklace of Harmonia]. A beautiful piece of jewelry."

"Did you love it?" Kairos asked.

"I do, though I will delay wearing it until we break its curse," Julia replied with a smile while glancing at Andromache's own tooth necklace. "We shall have both received a necklace from your own hands."

“Mine was made by his hands,” Andromache replied with pride and a hint of competitiveness. Her hand moved to Kairos’ arm, openly challenging Julia. The werewolf chuckled in amusement, before putting her glass aside and imitating her rival.

Many would have enjoyed having a woman on each arm, but Kairos found the situation *incredibly* uncomfortable. “I will not be a battlefield,” he said in annoyance, “Julia, what are you getting at?”

“Between your [Golden Fleece], the [Necklace of Harmonia], and your eternal youth, our generation may very well live for centuries,” Julia explained with a serious tone, “but our foes will not wait that long. Now that your unborn daughter will gain a [Legend], fools and ambitious ‘friends’ will try to make use of her. Many men tried to turn me against my brother too, telling me I should inherit his wealth and birthright. And I suppose idiots will whisper in my children’s ears, trying to convince them that Nessia is a threat to their throne.”

Kairos considered her words thoughtfully while a frown appeared on Andromache’s face. The nymph had admitted she had wished for Julia’s death, but the Travian King wondered if she had simply expected Julia to eventually perish of old age while the two of them remained forever young. The possibility of breaking the curse of Harmonia’s necklace would make this hope moot.

And the more he dwelled on Julia’s words, the more Kairos realized that she had a point. There was a real possibility that enemies would try to set his children against each others; power struggles were a fact of human life, and even siblings sharing the same parents had murdered each other over inheritance. The tales of Rome’s foundation were but one example among many.

It’s worse than that, Kairos realized with grim horror. *Nessia has a [Legend]*.

Though he tried not to, he couldn’t help but remember his vision of Hades’ death in the Necromanteion. How Lycaon’s sons had devoured young Zagreus to steal his power for themselves.

His daughter would never be fully safe until she grew old enough to defend herself. Ambitious social climbers and monsters would try to take her power for themselves; and familial conflicts would only make it worse.

“Julia,” Kairos said. “When you become a [Hero], you should join the [Térastheon]. Its rules prevent infighting and they will help keep peace inside this family.”

He hoped that the full support of a [Pantheon] would help deter attacks too. Some fools would try anyway, but many would think twice about crossing the likes of Hybris and Gaïa.

Julia nodded. “I considered the same thing, husband. For once, my curse might prove beneficial.”

A flash of sympathy passed on Andromache’s face, her eyes examining Julia from head to toe. For perhaps the first time since they met, she saw a little of herself in her rival.

The old Andromache, who suffered from rage and a heartbreaking curse, would have reacted with anger. Maybe she would have even plotted to sabotage her rival to ensure her daughter’s safety.

But the new Andromache, who had made peace with herself and could look forward to a brighter future, kept a cool head and considered Julia’s words. Eventually, she came to see the wisdom in them.

“It will do us or our children no good if we are at each other’s throat, true,” Andromache conceded as she released Kairos’ arm. “And they will be safer by supporting each other. I would prefer another state of affairs... but I will try to make peace with this one.”

“So will I,” Julia replied with a small smile as she let Kairos go, allowing him to breathe easy once more. “I wonder if we could get our children into the [Pantheon] eventually.”

“So long as I live, nothing will happen to them,” Kairos swore. He would not let any of his children lose a sibling like he did. “We need people we can trust to care for them.”

“Agreed,” Julia said with a nod. “Your seed is strong, my husband, but I doubt your sons and daughters can strangle snakes in the crib like Heracles. Perhaps mindless

automatons would work well? They wouldn't be tempted by the lure of a [Legend] or glory."

"I can raise undead," Andromache suggested.

"They might frighten the children," Julia pointed out.

"But they will scare assassins better than machines," the nymph replied.

Julia chuckled. "I concede your point."

Nothing could bring people together better than ensuring their descendants' safety. "At this rate, we will recreate the Olympians," Kairos mused. "This is what your brother wants, Julia, and he may even succeed."

Neither a heavy drinker nor interested in the food, Sertorius had declined to join his sister and brother-in-law on the Dais. Instead, he had used the opportunity to speak with Myrmidon dignitaries and representatives of the Lycean diaspora in Histria. *This man never relaxes, Kairos thought. He's always recruiting allies and followers.*

"May?" Julia scoffed. "My brother always gets what he wants, but you are mistaken. With the new Age of Myths upon us, he understands one [Pantheon] ruling over everything is no longer possible... much like it is impossible for one family to rule the Senex."

"And yet he and Dispater now lead Lyce," Kairos said as he put the two and two together. "Ah, I see. He's applying this logic on an international level."

"It is not about being the only family of gods, Kairos," Julia said with a wicked smirk.

"But about being the first among equals. Even in our [Pantheon], we will have to share power with the likes of Hybris. Our rule will never be truly absolute, and that's for the better. We have seen where unchecked authority led the Olympians."

Kairos couldn't help but agree. Being all from the same family had encouraged an 'us versus everyone' mentality in the Old Gods. Having a diversity of points of views and origins would go a great way to check a [Pantheon]'s excesses. Maybe that was what

Gaïa envisioned when she intended to bring all monstrous gods into a single organization. *Strength through difference.*

"I have no desire to rule," Andromache said. "But I do find the idea of having a clan I can rely on for help appealing. You were right, my other half. So long as we stand as one, our victory is assured."

Kairos knew she and Julia would never get along, but he had the feeling tonight would be a step forward in making their relationship cordial. Whatever the case, they wouldn't let their descendants carry grudges.

"There is a potential snake in our midst already," Kairos said as he glanced at Aglaonice. The sphinx played a board game against three men while reading a scroll at the same time. "I have the feeling she played us somehow."

"I figured it out," Julia said. "She served Circe in exchange for all of her accumulated research, but she figured that she might not deliver on her end of the deal. So when word of the Necromanteion's existence reached Orgonos' ears..."

"She helped him figure out a way past the wards in exchange for *his* knowledge?" Kairos guessed, his jaws clenching. "She was plotting this outcome from the start."

"Her treachery knows no bounds," Andromache sneered.

"Which is why we should add her to the [Térastheon] too," Julia replied with a chuckle. "Though I do believe I have her under control for now. We will need her power in the conflict to come."

"Speaking of conflict," Andromache said as she turned to Kairos. "What will you do now? You can make more *Foresights* by sinking ships, and we have a fleet outside."

"I would be wary of it," Julia warned Kairos. "While unlikely, your death or ship's destruction would destroy the fleet. It would be safer to create a special squadron rather than replace our entire fleet. Besides, we don't know if seeking any ship will do or if you must do it in battle."

“I intended to use winter to figure out how my Legendary Skills work and upgrade the others,” Kairos explained before opening a status screen. “Look.”

*As your key stat, you may sacrifice 35 SP to raise your [**Charisma**] from A to A+.*

*Additionally, as a [**Demigod**], you may now access the ultimate Rank of S by upgrading an A+ Stat with 100 SP.*

Julia’s eyes bulged. “*One hundred Special Points?*”

“You would need nearly twenty levels to reach that amount, if we add the extra 35 SP into account,” Andromache said with a frown. “I understand why no other god matched Heracles’ strength now.”

“I’m more interested in ranking up other stats like [Luck] or [Intelligence] while improving my other Skills,” Kairos admitted. His strength never came from specializing in one field, but his flexibility. “I will upgrade my [Charisma] to A+, improve all my key Skills to the fourth Rank, and keep hoarding the leftover points to improve my secondary stats later.”

“Tonight?” Julia asked.

“Later,” Kairos replied with a smile, as he glanced at his friends enjoying themselves and listening to the music. “Work will wait for the new dawn.”

First, he would spend time with his wife and Andromache, raise a statue of Nessus to honor his sacrifice, and take a few days to enjoy a well-deserved rest.

Only then would he start training in his new Skills and master them. At the same time, he would plan the spring campaign in the Thessalan League, the destruction of the Beast Cult, and the expansion of his own religion.

The road to godhood was open to him and many trials awaited.

Spring came to the city-state of Thessala, and with it, the Olympic Games.

All cities of the Thessalan League lived in the shadow of its founding member. Its streets shimmered with marble while ships traveled all along its countless canals. Opulent villas and temples, brought with the coin of trade, stood side by side with great stone towers, arenas, and gardens. Mighty white walls manned by armies of automatons protected the city on land while a fleet of half a thousand ships waited in its harbor, ready to crush any power who dared to intrude in its waters. Thessala was a city of explorers and merchants, of philosophers and artists. Its people were the first to colonize the archipelago, and neither Pergamon nor Orthia ever managed to rival it in power and influence.

None of this would have been possible without the city's protector; the first automaton and [Demigod] Talos. Created in the form of the Titan Helios, the giant machine watched over the city below from the top of its tallest hill, the Acropolis. Also known as the Cradle, this maze of forges never slept. Armies of automatons toiled inside its steel halls and assembly lines to help Talos create more of their kind. The machine [Demigod] only left his abode to defend his city, and the recent death of Helios had only made him more reclusive. Perhaps he had shared a sympathetic relationship with the deity whose image Hephaestus used as a model. Perhaps he was worried that the fearsome pirate king of Travia would target him next.

This bothered the ruling Archons of Thessala, but not too much. These human magistrates, elected by the people, knew Talos was bound to defend the city. Though their nation had lost some of its luster, they wouldn't let anyone replace them.

Their families could trace back their ancestry to the city of Athens, which once ruled a vast empire in the Old World. The likes of Theseus, Solon, and the ancient sages of Greece counted among their honored ancestors. Their knowledge and brilliance had been passed on to their descendants. When the Old Gods fell, their civilization endured

in a new form and gave birth to a new nation. Dozens of lesser cities paid them homage and their writ extended as far as their ships could sail.

Who would dare challenge them?

The Olympic Games were an occasion to show their power, and so they did. They spared no expenses, and all agreed that the ordeals were the most spectacular seen in the League's history. Horse chariots raced along Thessala's walls while Pegasus riders did the same in the skies. Athletes from all across the League competed in a spirit of peace and unity... barely hiding the cracks underneath.

Mithridates had won the election as Strategos of the League, as everyone expected... but Thessala would not follow his lead. They had invited smaller cities who had threatened to leave the League and join Lyce rather than accept Pergamon's influence; even after the Poison King demanded that they be excluded from the games.

The Archons didn't want to break apart the League they had helped create. But they would send Mithridates a message; that though he had bribed or threatened other cities into supporting him, he wouldn't make any decision without Thessala's leave.

Mithridates refused to show up at the games, though he sent a delegation of athletes. They did well, but Thessala's people proved better. In the Poison King's absence, tongues untied and conspiracies formed. They would wait until after the Games of course. Violence between the Thessalan League's cities was strictly forbidden during that period. The national identity of the League rested on this illusion of unity.

But all these plots would come for naught.

On the last day of the Olympic Games, the Pergamonian athletes and delegation failed to show up. The Orthians had vanished as well, as did all the cities who supported Mithridates' election as Strategos.

Only the delegations of secessionist towns showed up to the closing ceremony, oblivious to what would follow. Thousands had gathered in the city's colosseum, but many were suspiciously absent.

The wisest among the Archons immediately realized the danger, but when they tried to rise from their seats, their own automaton guards pointed their spears at them.

“Please stay calm,” the machine soldiers all said, speaking in the same voice as their progenitor spoke through them. “The transition of power will be short and painless.”

“Unhand us,” Archon Miletus ordered. “By the laws of Thessala, you are bound to obey!”

“Objection overridden,” the automatons answered.

“By whom?” Archon Truclydes asked fearfully, though he already knew the answer.

Talos said only four words through his countless children, their eyes red as blood.

“Mithridates IV Pergamon.”

Only the few occupying the highest stands in the arena saw death approaching. Only they saw most of the automatons retreating to their Cradle above the city.

A single ship had appeared on the horizon... but so large it might as well have been an island. Countless oars propelled it on the waves, while entire legions of griffin riders waited on its deck.

And as it approached Thessala and called upon ancient magic from the Old World, waters receded all around the shore. Galleys and armored vessels crashed on the emptied port, while others broke as they hit each other. The sea retreated for kilometers, leaving fish stranded and gasping.

But it didn't go far.

A wall of water appeared over the horizon, whipped into existence by Mithridates' ultimate weapon. It was taller than Thessala's fortifications and thicker than the city's length. It was a sinister echo of the past, when the god Poseidon ruled the oceans.

And the wall advanced.

Neither wood nor stone could stop it as it crashed against Thessala's fortifications, shattering them. Gardens, statues, streets, and buildings all folded before the sea's relentless advance. Centuries of civilization were annihilated in an instant, their heirs

crushed before the might of nature. Their screams were drowned by the waters alongside their hopes.

Talos' Cradle alone remained high enough above to avoid the ocean's fury, its machines watching on as the city they had sworn to defend fell in less than five minutes. There was no horror in their empty eyes nor regrets; their will had been stripped away, their thoughts crushed by their new master's orders. Tools they had been, and tools they remained.

The waters claimed everything and hundreds of thousands drowned beneath the waves. Archons and foreigners, nobles and commoners, it did not matter. The ocean would claim them all and let the gods sort them out.

The opening shot of the *Thessalan War* had been fired.

It would be far from the last.

From his throne atop the Thalassocrator, Poison King Mithridates enjoyed his bloody work.

His dragon mount rested behind him, while his allies and officers watched the devastation. Dignitaries from all the Thessalan League had gathered on the bridge, forcefully or not, to witness the fate of rebels and secessionists.

From now on, no one would sit on the fence. The cities would unite under one vision, one Strategos; and those who clung to the old ways would only face annihilation.

When he had asked the Moirae for a Quest years ago and they tasked him to conquer Thessala in return, Mithridates didn't second-guess himself. Though he had considered occupying the city and repurposing its arsenals, in the end, Talos' forges were its only truly irreplaceable parts; and they were safely built on the Acropolis. Maintaining a military presence in the face of constant uprisings would have been costly to Mithridates, and Thessala's 'democratic' citizens would have kept plotting against him.

Besides, a superweapon's true strength wasn't its power but the fear it inspired. And for that, he needed a demonstration. Mithridates thought his [Pantheon]'s patron Pontus would also be quite pleased with this 'sacrificial offering.'

The Poison King glanced at his guests to observe their reactions. Mithridates paid more attention to his key allies, the cornerstone of his alliance, and the cogs of his new [Pantheon].

His loyal assistant Absyrtus nodded to himself, quite pleased with the weapon's power, while Teuta and her lieutenants kept a blank face. The pirate queen had grown less useful to Mithridates since Kairos ascended to [Demigod], with most of Travia flocking to him; but she still had her own fleet and could take back her homeland once her rival perished. For Mithridates didn't doubt for a second that he and Kairos of Travia would soon come to blows one day, and that only one of them would walk away.

General Zama looked slightly disturbed at the sheer destruction for a moment, before immediately discussing the tactical applications of the Thalassocrator with Alexandrian representatives. The famed strategist was nothing if not pragmatic. Mithridates had given him complete command of his alliance's ground forces, knowing he would make short work of Lyce's armies.

King Antipater smiled with a grin of absolute bliss, delighting in seeing his city's old regional rival annihilated in a flood; his co-ruler, Euthenia, seemed about to weep in fear and terror at his side. No doubt she imagined Thessala's fate befalling her own homeland.

Mithridates thought that she needed to see this demonstration the most out of everyone here; especially after her attempts to plot with Kairos' Lycean whore behind his back. This time, she would understand that treachery would be answered with overwhelming force.

She would fight for the Thessalan League or watch her beloved lands sink beneath the oceans.

When the waters calmed themselves, only ruins and the intact acropolis remained of the great city-state of Thessala. Its fleets had been shattered, its walls broken, its people drowned. Talos hadn't come out to defend the city who had grown arrogantly reliant on his help, and his forges would fuel Pergamon's war machine.

The Poison King glanced at the golden rod next to his throne, which had made this incredible victory possible. Some said Athena had been the most cunning among the Olympians, but it was Hephaestus that Mithridates admired the most. His devices had won more wars than his brother Ares ever did.

So Mithridates had always wondered how the god could have let a creation as powerful as Talos run around unsupervised. Surely Hephaestus had to know children always strived to upstage their parents. How could he expect to avoid suffering the same fate as Kronos and Ouranos before him?

Unless he had secret insurance?

It had been a mere hunch at first, then a certainty; although many disbelieved Mithridates, he knew deep within himself that old Talos had a weakness of some kind. One that the automaton [Demigod] wasn't even aware of.

And the Poison King had guessed correctly. Unknown to most, Hephaestus had always taken into account the possibility of his creations turning against him. All the automatons he ever built had a control device associated with them, allowing the owner to override their free will.

Even the mighty Talos had a leash.

Mithridates had gone to great lengths to locate the [Rod of Talos] and keep his discovery a secret; even slitting the throat of the archeologists who found the artifact for him. He couldn't tip his hand until the Thalassocrator was finished and all his enemies inside the League gathered in one place. He had spent years plotting, gathering allies, building up his arsenal, securing technological superiority over Lyce, hiring mercenaries, and planning his campaign.

His patience had paid off.

Now was the time for action.

“How do you feel?” Teuta asked him, slightly disturbed by his outward lack of reaction.

“You have just committed sacrilege,” Euthenia said with a hint of disgust. “You have spit on everything the League was built on by starting a war during the Olympic Games. And Lyce... you killed dignitaries allied with the Republic. They will never forget.”

“Good,” Mithridates said, his soft voice cutting through the needless chatter. All eyes turned to him as he rose from his throne. “Let them remember what we have all done today.”

Euthenia choked. “*We?*”

“You could have warned the Archons of my attack,” Mithridates said before glancing at the crowd. “Each of you could have blown the whistle. Even if you didn’t know the true extent of the Thalassocrator’s power, you *knew* that I intended to destroy this city today. To commit the greatest crime against the Thessalan League’s ‘unity’: shedding blood during the Olympic Games. But you did *nothing*.”

Only silence answered. But with the exception of the likes of Zama, Mithridates saw a single emotion in the eyes of his compatriots.

Fear.

They were all afraid of him. And they were right to be. Only fear could keep a man alive in this cruel, treacherous world. Mithridates had learned that lesson well-enough, when his own mother poured poison down his cup to ensure his brother would inherit the throne of Pergamon. He had danced with death that day and never forgot.

Only fear and military might could unite the Thessalan League into the powerful, independent nation Mithridates dreamed of.

“Do you know why you all became accomplices in this daring scheme?” The Poison King asked rhetorically. “Because the Thessalan League was built on *trust*, and trust is a *lie*. When the day of reckoning came, you prioritized your city’s safety over the alliance. As you have *always* done.”

A few looked at him in shame, Euthenia among them. The likes of Antipater, though, listened with interest in their eyes. They knew that a new order was the order of the day, and that they would come out as its beneficiaries.

“And this is natural. This is human. This was the mistake of the Thessalan League, to try building a house on new foundations.” Mithridates marked a short pause. “But our nation will have better ones. The Thessalan *League* died with its founding member today, but from its ruins will rise a *new* nation! One forged with blood and strength! One where disunity will never be tolerated! One where its elected Strategos is not a mere figurehead, but a powerful leader who can protect its people!”

His men showed up on the bridge with a new flag Mithridates had drawn himself. It represented a mighty silver dragon on a purple field surrounded by shooting stars; one for each city in the fallen Thessalan League.

“Yes, Lyce will never forget what happened today,” the Poison King declared. “By joining me, my friends, you have drawn a line in the sand between the old and the new, the wolf and the dragon! Today, we have started a war where the only options are victory or annihilation! Lyce and its allies will try to subjugate us, to enslave our children and destroy our culture! And they will *fail!*”

His dragon woke up and let out a roar, as if to echo his declaration.

“For we have the power to protect our borders!” Mithridates shouted, as he raised the [Rod of Talos] above his head. “We have the power to sink their islands, to raise armies of implacable machines and gather allies from all across the world! And we shall endure! The Thessalan League is dead... but long live the *Thessalan Empire!*”

“Long live the Empire!” His fellow countrymen echoed his shout, all of them raising their hands. Some because they believed in his words, and others because they knew they had no other choice. With Thessala destroyed and the leadership of its allied cities wiped out in one blow, no one could stand against the new alliance until Lyce’s mobilization. “Long live the Empire!”

Zama and Teuta joined in, the former with a smile on her face, the other with an unreadable look. Even Euthenia raised up her hand, although her eyes looked down. “Long live the Empire.”

And as the Poison King felt the power dwell inside him, he understood that this slaughter was just the beginning.

The sea around the Thalassocrator turned purple as far as the eye could see, drowning the ruins and hopes of a broken city in a tide of poison. The death of thousands empowered the King of Pergamon, like sacrificial lambs slaughtered on the altar of his ascension. Today’s conquest was a feat of infamy born of cunning and treachery, but it was also one that altered the world’s destiny.

Few could boast about killing a centuries-old nation.

And as a notification appeared before Mithridates’ eyes, he knew Fate had smiled on him.

Congratulations. You have completed a Quest and achieved the rank of [Demigod]. You gained 30 Skill points and strengthened your Legend!

Your Legend evolved into [Poison Emperor]!

Kairos of Travia had become a [Demigod] by protecting a city, and Mithridates ascended by destroying one. The irony wasn’t lost on the King of Pergamon as he watched the devastation.

He couldn’t care less.

Kairos, Lyce, Sertorius... let them come, Mithridates thought, I will destroy them all.

Yesterday was dead, and tomorrow belonged to him.

End of Book II

Author's Notes

That was a book and a half. Didn't add the Skill upgrades yet because it feels a bit strange to have all the Skills upgraded now but then wait for the next volume to explore them; Book 3 will show Demigod Kairos in action, in all of his glory ;)

One of my intents during that book was to build up on the setting's worldbuilding, show more nations, hints about the past of the world... all building up to Kairos' ascension to Demigod and the inevitable war of the Pantheons. Volume III will have its highest stakes yet: which family/group of gods will emerge as the dominant power of the world for the years to come. Two more Calamities will follow, family secrets will be revealed, and an epic conclusion awaits.

I confirm the next book will also be Kairos' last. I hope you enjoyed this volume, and I will see you for the last entry in the saga.

Best regards,

Voidy.

Thanks to my patrons on [Patreon](#):

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Grosbilljunior Abhichon chandrasen Matt Labrum Vega Loki Jay Eskew Josh Delgado42
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Tarun Elankath Christian Matthew Michael Frankford Athur3s Brent Derrick McDowell
Orion BB King Adrian Engel Bieu Massgamer Clayton Carson afgang adgast T T Deinos
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Volume II Kairos Stats

Name	Kairos Marius Remus
Rank	Demigod
Legend	Sunslayer King
Pantheon	Térastheon
Race	Human (Wolfblood)
Class	Rogue (Raider, Cutthroat, Arcane Dabbler, Beastmaster, Griffin Rider, Moonblood, Telchine)
Level	68
Skill Points	76
EXP Progression	6,200,000/6,830,000

Health	C+
Magic	C
Strength	C+
Perception	C+
Vitality	C
Agility	C+
Intelligence	B
Charisma	A

Luck	B+
------	----

Legendary Skills	Skills
Godslayer (4 Stars)	Beast Tongue 3
Shipbound: Foresight, Monstrous Admiral (4 Stars)	Brawler 1
Monster King (4 Stars)	Knife Fighting 1
Cult (Hero) (3 Stars)	Spear Fighting 3
Empathy Link (Idol) (3 Stars)	Archery 2
Healing Altar (3 Stars)	Raider 3
Henosis (Hero) (3 Stars)	Seamanship 3
Animated Idol (3 Stars)	Poison Brewer 3
Enthralling Image (3 Stars)	Lycean Education 3
Sun of War (4 Stars)	Speech 3
	Sneak 3
	Lockpick 3
	Barter 3
	Observer 3
	Leadership 3
	Heartseeker 3
	Spellblade 3
	Magical Knack 3

	Invisibility 3
	Animal Companion 3
	Turncoat 3
	Warg 3
	Skinchanger 3
	Avianship 3
	Air Superiority 3
	Stygian Curse 3
	Telchine Metalsmithing 3
	Telchine Sorcery 3

Legendary Skills:

- **[Monster King]:** Legendary Skill, 4 Stars. You gain a degree of authority over monsters. Any **[Hero]** or lesser unintelligent monster with a lesser **[Charisma]** than yours instantly recognizes you as a powerful alpha and will submit to your will. Intelligent monsters with lower **[Charisma]** are not instantly dominated, but will be well-disposed towards you and stricken with **[Terror]** if they try to act against you. Finally, you can decide to activate an aura attracting local monsters to your locations or turn it off at will.
- **[Godslayer]:** Legendary Skill, 4 Stars. If you attack **[Hero]**, **[Demigod]**, or **[God]** rank enemies, you ignore their magical defenses and damage resistance.
- **[Shipbound: Foresight, Monstrous Ship]** has been upgraded to **[Shipbound: Foresight, Monstrous Admiral]:** Legendary Skill, 4 Stars. When the **[Foresight]** sinks another ship, that vessel instantly rises from beneath the waves as a living ship with the same abilities as the **[Foresight, Monstrous Ship]**; these lesser ships are counted as a Three Stars Legendary Item, and can be 'loaned' to another captain of your choice (you can retract this loan at will). If the **[Foresight, Monstrous Admiral]** is destroyed, all its tributary ships will follow.
- **Cult (Hero):** Physical representations of yourself, such as statues, altars, or paintings will now gain the **[Idol]** property. Your **[Idols]** serve as relays for your divine power, which grants them unique magical properties. Additionally, your **[Idols]** will passively attract a single **[Elite]** monster to serve as its keeper. The monster gains the ability to understand and be understood in all languages as long

as it remains close to the [Idol], and will work to further your interests by advising or leading your followers.

- **[Empathic Link (Idol)]**. By focusing, you can see and hear everything within a ten meter radius of your [Idols], and empathically communicate with creatures within that radius. You can only focus on one [Idol] at a time, and your body is reduced to a deep torpor while your mind possesses an idol.
- **[Healing Altar]**. Your [Idols] can now provide magical healing three times per day. The healing spell will cure minor wounds, remove fatigue, and purge minor illnesses; it cannot cure mental damage nor regrow limbs, nor will it work against powerful plagues or poisons.
- **[Henosis (Hero)]**. You can now access racial Class Specialization regardless of your species, so long as you meet the other requirements such as Stats, necessary Skills, achievements, or Character Rank. Additionally, you can identify an individual's [Pantheon] with [Observer] or similar Skills.
- **[Animated Idol]**. Your [Idols] can move and act on their own like mindless automatons. You can set the activation conditions at will, though the [Idol] will automatically animate to defend itself from attacks. You cannot directly control the animated [Idol], and they can only complete simple tasks.
- **[Enthralling Image]**. Your [Idols] generate a pleasant feeling of joy in those who look at them. Additionally, your worshipers gain a morale boost around your [Idols], including resistance to mind-affecting effects such as [Terror]. Due to your [Legend], this will also affect monsters.
- **[Sun of War]**: Legendary Skill, 4 Stars. You have slain an old sun and taken its light for yourself. You are immune to all hostile **[Fire]** and **[Light]** effects, and can see perfectly through **[Invisibility]** and **[Illusions]**. Additionally, you can imbue your weapons with solar energy at will, making them shine with sunlight and inflict additional **[Light]** and **[Fire]** damage; if hit by a solar weapon, any creature vulnerable to sunlight is instantly incinerated.

Normal Skills:

- **[Brawler 1]**. You use basic hand-to-hand techniques.
- **[Knife Fighting 1]**. You can use basic knife fighting techniques. This also applies to daggers and short blades.
- **[Lockpick 3]**. You have mastered the art of lockpicking. You can overcome any non-magical lock, even if they include traps in their structure.
- **[Archery 2]**. You can use advanced bow techniques.
- **[Sneak 3]**. You make no sound while you walk, and you do not trigger non-magical, land-based traps.
- **[Barter 3]**. You can now intuitively guess the monetary value of objects and glean part of their history. Additionally, you intuitively understand business and logistics.
- **[Lycean Education 3]**. You gain intuitive knowledge of the Lycean Republic's political institutions, laws, and tongue, alongside a solid understanding of its geography and poetic tradition. Additionally, Lycean citizens will be more well-

disposed towards your person, and your Charisma is treated as one rank higher than it is when you interact with them.

- **[Beast Tongue 3]**. You can now perfectly understand, and be understood, by any animal.
- **[Heartseeker 3]**. You gain an intuitive knack for targeting living creatures' vitals, from humanoids to beasts. This improves your chances of performing critical hits.
- **[Observer 3]**. You can now glean system information of creatures up to [Hero] rank unless they possess a Skill or item capable of falsifying their abilities.
- **[Leadership 3]**. Your leadership has improved. You are more likely to attract followers, and your allies will gain resistance to mind-affecting ailments (like [Terror] or [Enthrall]) when fighting under your command.
- **[Spear Fighting 3]**. You have become a true master of the spear. You can now use all non-magical spear techniques known to mortalkind.
- **[Poison Brewer 3]**. You gain intuitive knowledge of magical poisonous plants and animals, including how to brew poisons and antidotes.
- **[Speech 3]**. You have mastered the art of rhetoric. Your words are naturally compelling and are always perfectly clear. Your voice can be heard normally no matter the noise, and you gain Resistance to [Silence].
- **[Seamanship 3]**. Your knowledge of ships, swimming, and navigation has reached perfection; additionally, you can intuitively sense maritime hazards like incoming storms and undersea monsters.
- **[Raider 3]**. In addition to the [Terror] ailment, your enemies may suffer from minor stat debuffs when they witness you assaulting their holdings.
- **[Spellblade 3]**. You can enchant a single weapon you carry with magical energy. So long as it remains in contact with your body, it will inflict 60 percent additional magical damage. This effect also applies to projectiles thrown by ranged weapons, like bows.
- **[Magical Knack 3]**. You can deduce the nature of spells, magical skills, and enchanted items up to rank 3 when you see them.
- **[Invisibility 3]**. You can become invisible, and the effect extends to your gear. Items dropped or put down will become visible, while those you pick up and put under your clothes will vanish. You can selectively exclude some elements from your spell.
- **[Animal Companion 3]**. You may select a willing animal as your soulbound partner, but they must be of lower level than you. Though they will no longer gain experience by themselves, your partner's level will always be set as yours minus 1, and if you have a [Legend], they will gain a connection to your myth. You can only have one animal companion at once, and only death will break the link. You can intuitively sense your companion's presence, and if you are targeted by a beneficial magical effect or buff, your companion will also benefit from it. You can see and hear through your animal companion's eyes and ears, and communicate with them telepathically.
- **[Turncoat 3]**. [Hero] Ranks and below will be unable to read your class information either with spells or Skills. Otherwise, you can choose to present false information of your choosing.

- **[Avianship 3]**. You have become a master of riding winged creatures. You can now fight on the back of birds, griffins, and pegasi as if you were born on the saddle.
- **[Warg 3]**. You can possess a beast or monster with a lower [Charisma] stat than yours. The creature must be in close proximity to you and within your line of sight. When you possess a beast, your true body is comatose, and if it slain your soul is sent to the Underworld; if your host body is slain, you are instantly returned to your true one. You control the host's body and senses, but you do not have access to their Skills unless you have them in common. The effect lasts until you relinquish control or are magically expelled from the host.
- **[Skinchanger 3]**. You can magically shapeshift into any beast whose blood you tasted and biology you studied in depth, although the beast's weight cannot exceed five times your own. You cannot shapeshift into a beast with magical properties, such as griffons, hydras, or cetae. Current forms: Snake, Shark, Spider, Wolf, Owl.
- **[Air Superiority 3]**. Your chances to avoid attacks or hit targets while you are in the air increase by thirty percent. The bonus also applies to flying mounts you are currently riding. Your flying mount and yourself can also see through non-magical weather conditions such as fog and blizzards without penalty.
- **[Stygian Curse 3]**. You can summon a cloud of toxic miasma produced by the river Styx from your mouth. This miasma is [Poisonous] to the living, though you are immune to its effects. Additionally, you are immune to the negative effects of the five Underworld Rivers.
- **[Telchine Metalsmithing 3]**. You have mastered Telchine metal-working. You can craft magical weapons, armors, and shields by infusing them with blood and secret spell formulas during the creation process. You can create items up to Rank 3. The more powerful an item, the greater its fabrication cost and the longer its crafting time.
- **[Telchine Sorcery 3]**. You have adopted the Telchine's goetic magical traditions. You have learned how to empower your gaze with the Evil Eye to inflict the following ailments: [Charm], [Blind], and [Drain]. The target must have a lower Charisma than yours and see your eyes to be affected, but the ailment is permanent unless magically removed.